A close study of the first chapel along the devotional path of the Sacro Monte di Orta, “The Birth of Francis” allows us to see the Franciscan and Tridentine epistemological agenda in action: carefully controlled art which facilitates the pilgrim’s encounter with Christ through Francis.

The exterior of Chapel I, constructed between 1592 and 1604, was once decorated with portraits of Francis and Giulio, the patron saints of the lake, as well as a topographical landscape of the region painted by Stefano Maria Legnani. Only traces of the paintings are left, but there are still landscapes on the inner walls of the chapel surrounding the doorway. These landscapes create the “image and place” required by Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises, while also reflecting Federico Borromeo’s desire to glorify nature (see Chapter 1). The square chapel has only one entrance, which leads into an interior space equally divided into two parts: a vestibule with frescoed walls and the nativity scene behind a wooden screen. A local artist named Giacomo Filippo Monti, with assistance from his brother Bernardo, was responsible for the frescos. The workshop of sculptor Christoforo Prestinari executed the diorama. The artists created naturalistic representations so as to enhance the pilgrim’s affective experience of the event. In the tableau area, for example, the ceiling painting imitates wood, the walls simulate stone, and a hayloft hangs on the back wall. While there is no hay there now, it seems probable that there once was. The initial impression of exterior combined with interior is that this place is Orta, it is Assisi, it is Bethlehem, it is everywhere.

The audience’s view of the diorama is controlled by a seven-foot carved wooden screen with four oval openings (see Catalogue of Chapels, Fig. 4). The addition of grilles was a profound physical alteration in the fabric of the Sacro Monte and represents a significant change in both its intended purpose and its function. The original chapels incorporated the viewer as participant, creating an enhanced liminality, but the Tridentine focus on didacticism and authority necessitated a change in the way the sites operated. The grilles supported the authority of the church by delimiting the place of the pilgrim, dissolving any potential ambiguity. That being said, the actual experience of gazing through the portholes is not very limiting and the goal of such focused looking—a contemplative union with the divine—is not inhibited.

While thirteenth-century biographies provide few details of the saint’s birth, beyond noting that his father was away on a business trip, and that the baby originally had two names (first John and then Francis), fourteenth-century biographies amplify the story surrounding his birth. Francis’ nativity becomes a product of biographers who aggressively began to portray Francis as a saint who lived in perfect conformity with Christ in all the moments of his life. Typically, these
later versions of Francis’ birth have three narrative parts. First, a wide variety of people foretell the importance of Francis and his birth; second, Francis’ mother, because of problems with her labor, gives birth in the stable; and third, a pilgrim comes to the house. With an unusual assertiveness, this beggar/pilgrim demands to see the newborn baby. When Lady Pica (the nickname for Francis’ mother, because she was supposedly from Picardy) allows this, he proclaims Francis’ greatness in contrast to another Assisi-born boy (never named) who won’t turn out so well.

Arnald of Sarrant’s *The Kinship of Saint Francis* (written in 1365) is probably the source for the first motif, prophecy. Arnald’s entire work illustrates that Francis’ life is in direct conformity in nine points of the life of Jesus. While Bonaventure’s *Major Legend*
articulated the nine primary virtues of Francis’ life, Arnald nuances this idea further and shows that Christ’s life became a form to which Francis was called to conform. In his story of the birth, he includes predictions by Abbot Joachim, Saint Dominic, Innocent III, Brother Elias, Brother Pacifico, an unnamed abbot in “regions over the seas,” and an unnamed devout man of Assisi. In his De Conformitate, Bartolomew of Pisa then takes Arnald’s nine autobiographical parallels and spins them into eighty: forty events from Jesus and forty from Francis, the foretelling of Francis’ birth included.3

The second event, the birth of Francis in a stable, is one of the latest medieval Franciscan legends. The first surviving evidence for this story is an inscription on the archway above the entrance to the oratory San Francesco Piccolino which reads “Hoc oratorium fuit bovis: et asini stabulum in quo natus est sanctus Franciscus mundi speculum” (“This oratory was the stable of the ox and ass in which was born Saint Francis, the mirror of the world”). According to the Franciscan scholar Giuseppe Abate, this inscription dates from the mid-fourteenth-century.4 Meanwhile, H.W. van Os identifies the earliest literary account of this story as the late-fourteenth-century Vita Bruxellensis.5 The story was well enough established to be part of Benozzo Gozzoli’s painting “Scenes from the Life of Saint Francis” (1452). Accompanying the fresco, which cleverly shows the three narrative units in one artistic frame, is the inscription: Qualiter b. F. Fuit denuo(i)tatus a xro i(n) forma per - egrini quod debeat nasi sicut ips(e) in stab(u) lo qualit(er) quida(m) fatu(u)s p(ro)ste(r)nebat b. F. Vestime(n)tu(m) in via (“How St. Francis was announced by Christ in the form of a pilgrim, and that he, like Christ himself, had to be born in a stable. And how a certain simple man spread his clothes out where St. Francis was walking.”)6

The third event, a prophet-pilgrim who appears after the birth of Francis, seems to appear first in A Book of Exemplary Stories (1280–1310) attributed to a report by Brother Nicholas of Assisi, whose family home was next door to the Bernardones.7 Arnald, in The Kinship of Saint Francis, explains the typological meaning: “As we read that Christ was carried by Simeon in his arms and that he also prophesied many things about Christ, thus, on the same day Francis was born, a pilgrim made his way to the door of his family’s house.”8

In Chapel I, the story of Francis’ birth is told by seven human and three animal statuary figures of this early, fairly simple chapel. In a group of three on the left (see Fig. 1), the immediately post-partum mother of Francis, dressed in a simple rose dress and greenish-blue cloak, reclines against the older and seemingly wise midwife. Another female helper reaches out to her, as do the painted female attendants who appear on the left wall. Pica gazes heavenward with a supernatural calmness that expresses her foreknowledge of the meaning of the event. Francis’ mother is clearly imitatio Mariae in both her serene gaze and symbolic clothing. The medieval Virgin Mary often wears a dark blue mantle, blue having replaced purple as the color of royalty in the Western European art.9 Beginning in the tenth-century Mary also wears red, symbolic of nobility, suffering and passion. From these two evolved the classic representation of the Blessed Virgin Mary with a red robe and a blue mantle. The simplicity of Lady Pica’s clothing and hair is particularly noteworthy when compared to the strikingly elaborate costumes and coiffures of the other women.

In the middle group, a kneeling woman holds the baby Francis (see Fig. 2). The baby gazes directly at the viewer. Naked, except for swaddling across the genitals, Francis holds his hands in a benediction: left hand across the heart, and right hand raised in blessing. This evocative hand gesture, called a moti in Gian Paolo Lomazzo’s Trattato dell’arte (1584), indicates Francis’ saintly character and creates the central gesture of the group.10 To the right, one elaborately dressed woman moves toward the baby, folding down her bodice to
expose her breast. Her hair is in an elaborate coiffure intertwined with ribbons and a medallion. Her costume, which includes a broad red girdle and an intricate apron of seemingly expensive material over a full dark skirt is clearly a fine garment. The careful detail with which it is painted certainly suggests that a popular style is being referenced: it resembles those in near-contemporary bourgeois portraits recorded by Racinet as well as surviving local antique costumes of the Ossolano valley. As such, these material objects bring home the meaning to the female viewer—that she, too, can affectively imagine motherly attentions to the baby. Here, the explicit exhortation to venerate Francis, and through him Jesus, is made in the relationship among the particulars of the story, the general truth it illustrates, and the devotional response of the audience. This chapel makes the birth real in an almost photographic evocation of the past reality.

At the right, a servant woman simply holds a bowl of water. Next to her, another woman gazes at the scene and thus directs the viewer’s sight. She holds linens and is not really a necessary member of the ensemble except that she provides meta-narrative guidance. Her gaze confirms the didactic stability of Truth of the historical event and its artistic representation. Acting as an embedded interpreter, she reads on behalf of the viewers, who are also engaged in the effort to understand the correlations of the tableau.

Three animals make important appearances as well. Directly behind Francis is an ass with a rope tied around his neck (see Catalogue of Chapels, Fig. 5). He seems hidden, until the viewer looks through one of the ovals in the screen, and then the ass gazes di-
rectly at the viewer with what must have been intended to be a look of compassion. Francis’ frequent reference to the body as “Brother Ass” makes this an obvious iconic connection, and the rope foretells Chapel XIII when Francis is lead through the streets with a noose around his own “Brother Ass.” Tucked in next to the ass is a horned ram, also gazing at the viewer and also iconographically linked with the saint. Francis especially loved sheep throughout his life for the simplicity of their way of life. By grazing and eating from the hands of their owners, the sheep reflect the Franciscans’ alms-based economy. And of course Christ is the Lamb of God, and in loving sheep Francis expresses his love of Him. In a circle of reciprocal references, Christ is like a lamb, the lamb is like Francis, and thus Francis is like Christ. Looking over the servant’s shoulder is a large horse. He, too, gazes at the baby Francis with an anthropomorphic grin and adoring eye. In the traditions (but not biblical texts) of Christ’s nativity, the ass, ox, and the sheep keep watch. “Rather than an ox, here the more courtly horse is present, perhaps reflecting Francis’ later acclaim as “soldier of Christ.”

In the vestibule area of the chapel, where the viewer stands, the walls are decorated with frescos outside the invented space of the faux-crèche. On the viewer’s right Lady Pica gives bread to the visiting pilgrim (identified by his staff and pilgrim badges), and two servants carry the pregnant Lady Pica into the stable (see Fig. 3). The implication here is that the angel/pilgrim is the one who tells Francis’ mother to forsake her wealthy bedchamber and deliver her baby in the stable. On the viewer’s left the pilgrim, now with the wings of an angel, holds the naked baby Fran-

Fig. 3. Fresco of Lady Pica giving bread to the prophesying pilgrim (right), and Lady Pica is escorted to the stable for the birth of Francis (left). Chapel I, Sacro Monte di Orta.
sacred views of saint francis

At one time an oil painting of the “Birth of Christ” executed by Camillo Procaccini (c. 1618) hung overhead; it is now in the Church of San Nicolao (also on the Sacred Mount), on the right side of the presbytery. Procaccini is famous for his adoration of the shepherds’ motif, which he employs here as well. This early master of the Baroque evokes a reality of the experience in a way expressly encouraged by Federico Borromeo. In Chapel I, the painting originally served to underscore one of the parallels between the lives of Christ and Francis.

Viewers knowledgeable in the life of Francis might be surprised that there is no chapel at Orta dedicated to one of the most memorable events in Francis’ life, his creation of the Christmas nativity scene at Greccio. Both Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure relate that Francis created a living nativity scene to celebrate Christmas Eve in 1223. In the woods of Greccio he arranged hay, an ox, an ass, a manger, and a baby (perhaps a doll, perhaps a real sleeping child). Francis’ “tableau vivant” re-created the real atmosphere of the stable in Bethlehem and movingly touched the emotions of the audience. Thomas of Celano, in one of his interesting tense shifts, exclaims: “out of this is made a new Bethlehem.” Celano probably means that Francis popularized an already existing tradition which is now re-enacted each year; he certainly also means that Francis has created a scene to demonstrate a new distinctly “Franciscan,” affective viewing practice. But, Chapel One at Orta is the Greccio scene, as the baby Francis in a stable again recreates the birth of Christ and remakes Assisi a new Bethlehem as well. In another loop of self-referentiality, Francis’ own birth recalls the nativity scene at Greccio, the nativity scene remembers the first Christmas, and Christ’s nativity provides the foundation for Francis’ imitatio Christi.
Endnotes


