

CHURCH OF SANT'AGOSTINO

The Church of the Eremitani, lying just outside the city walls in the district of Sant'Agostino, is, perhaps, the place best suited to observe the popular aspect in Nelli's narrative and expressive style. The frescoes of the Final Judgement on the triumphal arch (for the execution of which Ottaviano Nelli had recourse to the prestigious collaboration of Jacopo Salimbeni, an important painter at that time) were painted around 1420 as were those depicting the Life of St. Augustine located in the choir. These were one of the first and most complete narrations of the Saint's life, which were destined to have an influence on the Augustinian iconography going forward. Particularly full of character are the scenes depicting Augustine's sea voyages, as well as those showing towns full of turreted buildings and animated by crowds of people. The cycle also features a highly diversified gallery of distinctive faces and this is especially true in the scenes showing the Death of St. Augustine and the Transfer of the Saint's Body to Pavia, in which it is possible to discern the faces of contemporary townsfolk of Gubbio including nobles, merchants, ordinary people and also the self-portrait of the artist.



CHURCH OF SAN DOMENICO

In the Church of San Domenico there is a late cycle of frescoes depicting the Life of St. Peter the Martyr which is not well-known and is still undervalued as it is in need of restoration. Ottaviano Nelli and his workshop carried out this work in 1445 when he was about seventy-five years old. The paintings depict nine episodes from the life of Pietro da Verona, prophet, Doctor of the Church and Dominican martyr who was canonized in Perugia in 1253 and whose veneration was immediately promoted and supported by the Order of Preaching Friars. Nelli's narration

concentrates on the most spectacular events, such as the wonders and miracles performed by the Saint and, of course, the dramatic martyrdom which occupies the central area of the chapel in full sight of the nave, a choice dictated by the devotional character of the work. The scene is set in a minutely described landscape where rural activities are being carried out: particularly striking is the detail of the newly-felled trees which are bleeding sap on the very spot where the martyrdom takes place.



CHURCH OF SAN FRANCESCO

In the left apse of The Church of San Francesco is the cycle with Stories from the Life of Mary painted in the second decade of the 15th century. The narrative sequence begins at the top and proceeds from left to right comprising the numbering of the scenes which continue on through the various levels on the wall. The numbering made it easier to read the scenes depicted and was a functional way of appreciating the sacred images which was in use in female religious communities in the 14th and 15th centuries. In fact, the frescoes were more than likely commissioned by a confraternity of devout women, Tertiary Franciscans or a lay sisterhood who used the chapel for worship and who are represented in the scene of the Nativity of Jesus by the kneeling figure in the foreground dressed in a black cloak and white veil. Another significant scene is the one depicting the Nativity of Mary, which offers a real glimpse into fifteenth-century life showing, in great detail, a room in a private residence just after the baby has been delivered with the serving women busily attending to the new-born child and the mother lying at rest in the bed.



An unusual and original invention was the use of the Caryatids at the base of the cycle which seem to be supporting the weight of the scenes above: the only remaining figure is depicted from the rear.

CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA NUOVA

The Church of Santa Maria Nuova, in Gubbio, contains a number of works by the artist, including a Crucifixion, a Madonna del Latte and, most importantly, his artistic masterpiece, the celebrated Madonna del Belvedere. The latter work dates from 1403 and depicts the Madonna of Humility who is seated on a cushion wearing a crown and surrounded by Angels, Saints and the donors. The painting, so beautiful that it seems like a precious miniature which has been transferred onto the wall, has always attracted great attention and constitutes the visual and devotional fulcrum of the entire church. It emanates a fairy-tale and Courtly atmosphere due to its intricately decorated blue background, the refinement and elegance of the garments enhanced by the diffuse use of gilding and the presence of angel musicians. The fresco was once surrounded by a specially designed pictorial architecture intended to create an illusion of depth and give bring the image of Mary into greater prominence: traces of this remain in the little twisted columns which provide a frame for the scene and are inhabited by curious anthropomorphic figures. The wealthy client who commissioned the work, Antonio di Muccio Angelucci, undoubtedly aspired to Courtly ostentation and fashion. He was a dyer by trade who therefore belonged to the Wool-workers Guild which provided the principal economic engine at that time in Gubbio. He is portrayed in the votive fresco dressed in mourning by the side of his name Saint, St. Anthony Abbot, while praying for the departed soul of a loved one, maybe for his wife, who is depicted on the opposite side of the painting accompanied by her Guardian Angel.



OTTAVIANO NELLI

GUBBIO CITY TOUR



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