

How Can We Recognise Saints in Paintings?

When we stand before an image depicting the birth of Jesus, or the moment when the Archangel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear a child, it is easy to recognise the figures represented. However, identifying the subjects of other religious scenes is not always so straightforward.

Fortunately, if we know the so-called *iconographic attributes* — the identifying features of the various sacred figures such as their clothing, facial characteristics, the objects they hold, or the animals that accompany them — then everything becomes much clearer.

In the past, only a small portion of the population could read and write. To help the poor and the illiterate recognise the saints depicted in religious art, artists associated each one with *special symbols* that made it possible to identify them quickly and easily.

At the **Civic Museum – Palazzo dei Consoli**, we can see many saints represented with their characteristic iconographic symbols in **panel paintings** (on wood), **canvases**, **frescoes** (paintings made directly on walls), and **sculptures**. These symbols often refer to significant episodes from their lives.

In this itinerary, we will explore the **saints of the Franciscan Order**, who appear both in the museum's permanent collections and in the temporary exhibition "*Francis and Brother Wolf*", dedicated to **Saint Francis of Assisi** and the **Wolf of Gubbio**. We will also look at **Saint John the Baptist** and **Saint Ubaldo Baldassini**, the patron saints of Gubbio, who frequently appear alongside Saint Francis in many works of art.

Starting in the **Sala dell'Arengo**, continuing through the **ceramic collection**, and finally reaching the **picture gallery**, visitors can admire many works executed in different materials that depict the famous encounter between Saint Francis and the wolf, or Saint Francis in the company of other saints.

Saint Francis of Assisi

Saint Francis of Assisi is one of the most famous saints in the world. Born in **1182** to **Pietro di Bernardone**, a wealthy cloth merchant, and **Madonna Pica**, he lived a carefree and adventurous youth. He fought in the war between **Assisi and Perugia**, during which he was imprisoned for a year — an experience that led him to a profound spiritual transformation. Upon his release, Francis renounced all worldly wealth, even stripping himself of his fine clothes.

From that moment on, his only concern was to follow the teachings of Jesus on poverty and humility, spreading this message wherever he went.

After leaving Assisi, Francis was welcomed in **Gubbio** by the wealthy merchant **Federico Spadalunga**, with whom he had shared imprisonment in Perugia. In the Spadalunga workshop, the **first rough woollen habit** (made of "bigello" cloth) was created — the humble garment that would become the symbol of Francis and his followers. This episode is depicted in two scenes of a fresco by **Federico Brunori**, displayed in one of the museum's galleries.

Francis also devoted himself to caring for the poor and for lepers. During a visit to the **leper hospital of Gubbio**, he encountered the **ferocious wolf** that had long terrorised the town. Approaching it fearlessly, he offered his hand in peace, and the wolf placed its paw in his — a sign of friendship.

This famous episode, recounted in *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, is represented in numerous works of art both within the museum and throughout the Gubbio area, where the saint is often shown beside the tamed wolf.

In **September 1224**, while praying on **Mount La Verna**, Francis received the **stigmata** — the wounds of Christ on his hands, feet, and side — one of his most recognisable iconographic symbols.

Saint Francis was proclaimed **Patron Saint of Italy** by **Pope Pius XII** in **1939**, alongside **Saint Catherine of Siena**, because the Pope saw in him an example of holiness and profound love for his country. Francis is also the **patron saint of animals**, for whom he felt deep affection and respect, calling them his *brothers and sisters*.

Attributes: the Franciscan habit, the stigmata, the tonsure (a circular haircut at the crown of the head symbolising humility), birds, or the wolf.

Following Francis's visit to Gubbio, a church bearing his name was built there in **1256**, on the site of the **Spadalonga family home**, whose small terrace can still be seen today at the far right of the church.

The followers of Francis, who came to be known as **friars** (from the Latin *fratres*, meaning "brothers"), spread throughout the world, founding new monasteries and missions.

One of the most renowned Franciscan friars — and among the few who personally met Saint Francis — was **Saint Anthony of Padua**. Born in **Lisbon, Portugal**, around **1190**, he studied theology in **Coimbra**, where he decided to join the **Order of Friars Minor**, taking the name *Anthony*.

In **1223**, Saint Francis called him to **Bologna** and later to **Padua** to teach theology and the knowledge of God. According to legend, Francis appeared to him in a vision while Anthony was preaching.

Saint Anthony is the **patron saint of Portugal, Lisbon, and Padua**, as well as of **orphans** and **prisoners**, whom he often helped during his lifetime. He is also the **patron of travellers and messengers**, reflecting his missionary work.

Moreover, he is famously invoked for finding **lost objects**, a tradition linked to the Latin prayer *Si quaeris miracula* ("If you seek miracles"). According to popular belief, the invocation should be recited **thirteen times** in succession to obtain the saint's intercession.