

# The World of St. Francis of Assisi

*Essays in Honor of William R. Cook*

*Edited by*

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## The Wolf of Gubbio in Context: The Igreja da Pampulha, Brazil\*

Mary R. McHugh

When Jesuit Jorge Mario Bergoglio, formerly cardinal of Buenos Aires, Argentina, took Francis as his papal name, it provided a powerful example of the continued influence of St. Francis of Assisi. In fact, evidence of Francis's legacy can be found seemingly everywhere, from the fresco cycle in the Upper Church of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi to the work of late nineteenth-century Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, and in the lives touched by Franciscan friars and nuns in every corner of the modern world. Yet, as the scholarship of William R. Cook has demonstrated, the ways in which Francis, his life, and his ideas have been understood have changed significantly over the past eight hundred years. In particular, artistic depictions of Francis's life have varied in important ways based on the needs of the societies in which they were created and the values that the artists or commissioners wished to highlight. This is true of the frescoes in Assisi, and as this essay will show, it is true for the artistic cycle found in Brazil's Igreja da Pampulha. In particular, this essay will examine Cândido Portinari's depiction of the Wolf of Gubbio on the façade of the Igreja da Pampulha. It will suggest that this unusual story was so prominently depicted on the church in Brazil because it highlights key Franciscan themes, specifically peacemaking and social justice, which spoke profoundly to societal needs

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\* The topic of this paper emerged from my participation in the 2008 NEH Summer Seminar, *St. Francis and the Thirteenth Century*, led by Prof. William R. Cook and capably assisted by Dr. Bradley Franco. Thanks to the generous hospitality of Dr. Maria Cecília de Miranda Nogueira Coelho, organizer of the 2012 *11 Congresso Brasileiro de Retórica* at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil, I was able to visit and learn more about the Igreja São Francisco de Assis, Lagoa da Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil. Dr. Nogueira Coelho's insights, her generous assistance in checking Brazilian Portuguese-language sources, and her consultation of the Portinari archives in Rio de Janeiro were invaluable in the final stages of writing this essay. Much of the research conducted for this paper took place during my sabbatical year 2012–13 at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., which allowed me access to resources I would have been unable to consult otherwise. Special thanks are due, too, to the librarians and staff there, who were adversely affected, as were all federal employees termed “non-essential,” by the federal government shutdown in October 2013. Some of the final edits to this paper took place at the American Academy in Rome in late January 2014, and my conversations with two of the Fellows, Mari Yoko Hara and Irene San Pietro, helped me to think through Portinari's depiction of the “Wolf.”

in mid-twentieth-century Brazil. And as we will see, the story of the Wolf of Gubbio and its promise of peace through social justice continue to resonate up to the present day.

The story of the Wolf of Gubbio first appeared in the *Fioretti di San Francesco*, a compilation of stories about St. Francis circulating in the mid-fourteenth century and attributed to Ugolino Brunforte.<sup>1</sup> According to this account, published nearly a century and a half after the death of St. Francis, a fierce wolf terrorized the city of Gubbio and attacked and killed their flocks in the countryside before developing a preference for human flesh. The wolf would lurk outside the walls of the city, lying in wait to attack and kill anyone who dared to emerge. The citizens of Gubbio warn St. Francis not to leave the city, but he, wishing to resolve the situation peacefully, goes out to seek the wolf anyway. He rebukes the wolf for its wicked behavior, but he also offers an opportunity for the wolf to repent, to turn away from its evil habits, and be forgiven, as St. Francis understands that the wolf's savagery has been motivated by its hunger. He offers a practical solution as well: should the wolf promise not to attack either flocks or people ever again, the townspeople promise to feed the wolf daily. The wolf agrees to this bargain with St. Francis, and then, later, with the townspeople as well. And so the wolf becomes the pet of Gubbio until its death of natural causes two years later.<sup>2</sup> According to Cook, "the story is genuinely Franciscan although I do not know to what extent it is historical."<sup>3</sup>

Given the story's late origin, the Wolf of Gubbio is not found in Bonaventure's *Legenda Maior* nor is it represented in the fresco cycle in the Upper Church at Assisi.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, themes endemic to the story are present in a number of the stories depicted in the Assisi fresco cycle. In order to understand the

- 1 "The Little Flowers of Saint Francis," in *Early Documents*, III, 601–604. Also available as: *Little Flowers of Francis of Assisi*, trans., Robert H. Hopcke and Paul A. Schwartz (Boston: New Seeds, 2006), 66–70.
- 2 The late nineteenth-century Nicaraguan poet, Rubén Darío, gives a different twist to the end of the story in his poem based on the story of the Wolf of Gubbio, "Los Motivos del Lobo." Ruben Dario, *Poesias Completas*, ed. Alfonso Mendez Plancarte (Madrid: Aguilar, 1967), 833–837. Submitting for a time to the social contract with the citizens of Gubbio organized by St. Francis, the wolf witnesses first-hand the envy, anger, hate, lust, dishonor, and lies endemic in human society and, also experiencing human maltreatment, decides to revert to his savage state to again defend and feed himself. See Weston L. Kennison's essay (Chapter 8), also in this volume.
- 3 William R. Cook, "Finding Francis: An Invitation," in *Finding Saint Francis in Literature and Art*, ed. Cynthia Ho, Beth A. Mulvaney, and John K. Downey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 17.
- 4 The earliest artistic representation of the Wolf of Gubbio in Italy is a fresco inside the Church of San Francisco at Pienza, dated to the second half of the fourteenth century and painted by artists of the Siennese school, Cristofano di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero. Of the seven scenes of the life of St. Francis on the Borgo San Sepolcro altarpiece by Sasseta (1437–44), the Wolf scene is the only narrative not found in St. Bonaventure's *Legenda Maior*.

origins and significance of these themes, it is useful to first examine some of the frescoes in Assisi.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the fresco depicting St. Francis and Friar Sylvester bringing peace to Arezzo is one of the stories portrayed in the Upper Church that seems to directly contribute to the form of the later story of the Wolf of Gubbio (Fig. 9.1). According to Bonaventure's *Legenda Maior*:

It happened once that [St. Francis] came to Arezzo at a time when the whole city was shaken by a civil war that threatened its destruction. From the outskirts he saw demons over the city leaping for joy and arousing the troubled citizens to mutual slaughter. In order to put to flight those seditious evil spirits, he sent Brother Sylvester, a man of dove-like simplicity, before him as a herald, telling him, "Go in front of the city gate and, on behalf of Almighty God, command the devils to leave at once." The man obediently hurried to carry out his Father's orders and, caught up in praise before the face of the Lord, he began to cry out boldly in front of the city gate, "In the name of Almighty God and by the command of his servant Francis, get away from here, all you demons." At once the city returned to tranquility and the citizens reformed their civil law peaceably.<sup>6</sup>

Whether the demons are metaphorical or actual, the results for human society are the same—mutual hatred and resentment only give rise to an endless regress of destructive behavior.<sup>7</sup> Although the agents of mutual destruction in this case are human, the situation in the town of Arezzo is quite similar to that at Gubbio. The message of the fearful townspeople is the same—don't speak to or engage the Other, for he will only attack and harm or kill you. It is the age-old story of Us versus Them. There is no attempt at mutual understanding, forgiveness, or reconciliation. And yet, in both the story at Arezzo and at Gubbio, Francis or one of his friars engage the Other outside the city walls, rebuke the evil doers, and call all parties to repentance and reconciliation. The story makes clear that it is only true modesty, humility, and an understanding of and respect for the needs of the Other that will achieve a lasting peace.

Additional scenes from the Assisi cycle emphasize other themes central to the story of the Wolf of Gubbio, specifically, the *Miracle of Water from the Rock* and the *Sermon to the Birds at Bevagna*. Unlike the other twenty-six frescoes

5 The narrative is depicted in a wood carving on the portal of the Lower Church, dated to 1594. "Auf dem Portal der Unterkirche von San Francesco (1594) sehen wir diese Darstellung." <http://www.citypastoral-bonn.de/fastenzeit2008/tage/woche5/52montag.htm> accessed on 08/05/13; photograph captioned "Franziskus zähmt den Wolf. Fotograf: P. Gerhard OFM Conv Ruf, Assisi © assisi.de.

6 Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, "The Major Legend of Saint Francis," in *Early Documents*, II, 574–575.

7 P. Gerard Ruf, *S. Francesco e S. Bonaventura* (Assisi: Casa Franciscana Editrice, 1974), 159–162.



FIGURE 9.1 *Master of St. Francis, St. Francis Driving the Demons from Arezzo, detail from the Legend of St. Francis, c.1290s. Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi, Italy*  
PHOTO CREDIT: ASSISI.DE (STEFAN DILLER)

depicting scenes from the life of St. Francis, which echo architectural elements (some from the city of Assisi), these two frescoes, located on the counter-façade of the Upper Church, represent the natural landscape immediately visible outside the Basilica, the mountains to the left and the plain to the right.<sup>8</sup> Both scenes show St. Francis in relationship with God's creation, both inanimate and animate. While nature is the addressee of St. Francis's actions and words, both stories can be understood as allegories for man's relationship with God and his creation, including fellow human beings, other creatures, and non-living things. Let's now turn to these two scenes individually.

The *Miracle of Water from the Rock* (Fig. 9.2) recalls two episodes in the Old Testament, where God commands Moses to strike a rock with his staff to produce water for his people (Exodus 17:6), and then later, when God instructs Moses to speak to the rock to bring forth water for his people and their flocks (Numbers 20:8–12). In the second instance, Moses again strikes the rock, twice, instead of merely speaking to it. Because of this grandstanding, disobedience, lack of trust in God's providence, and/or violence against nature, God tells Moses and Aaron (his brother, also present) that they will not lead his chosen people into the Promised Land. The Assisi fresco equates St. Francis with the patriarch and prophet Moses; and yet St. Francis corrects Moses's error.<sup>9</sup> St. Francis's miracle occurs because of his prayer and trust in God. As Bonaventure relates,

Another time as the man of God wanted to go to a hermitage to spend more time in contemplation, because he was weak, he rode on a donkey belonging to a certain poor man. As it was summertime, that man climbed up the mountain following Christ's servant. Worn out from the long and grueling journey, and weakened by a burning thirst, he began to cry out urgently after the saint: "Look, I'll die of thirst if I don't get a drink immediately!" Without delay the man of God leaped down from the donkey, knelt on the ground, raised his hands to heaven and prayed unceasingly until he understood that he had been heard. After he had finished his prayer, he told the man: "Hurry over there to the rock and you will find living water which at this very hour Christ has mercifully brought forth water from the rock for you to drink."<sup>10</sup>

The fresco of St. Francis's *Sermon to the Birds at Bevagna* (Fig. 9.3) continues this theme of divine providence, but this time within the context of Christ's preaching in the New Testament. According to Bonaventure,

8 William R. Cook, *Images of St. Francis of Assisi: In Painting, Stone, and Glass: From the Earliest Images to ca. 1320 in Italy. A Catalogue* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1999), 58.

9 Ruf, *S. Francesco e S. Bonaventura*, 172–175.

10 Bonaventure, "The Major Legend of Saint Francis," in *Early Documents*, II, 584–585.





FIGURE 9.2 *Master of St. Francis, Miracle of the Spring, detail from the Legend of St. Francis, c.1290s. Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi, Italy*

PHOTO CREDIT: ASSISI.DE (STEFAN DILLER)



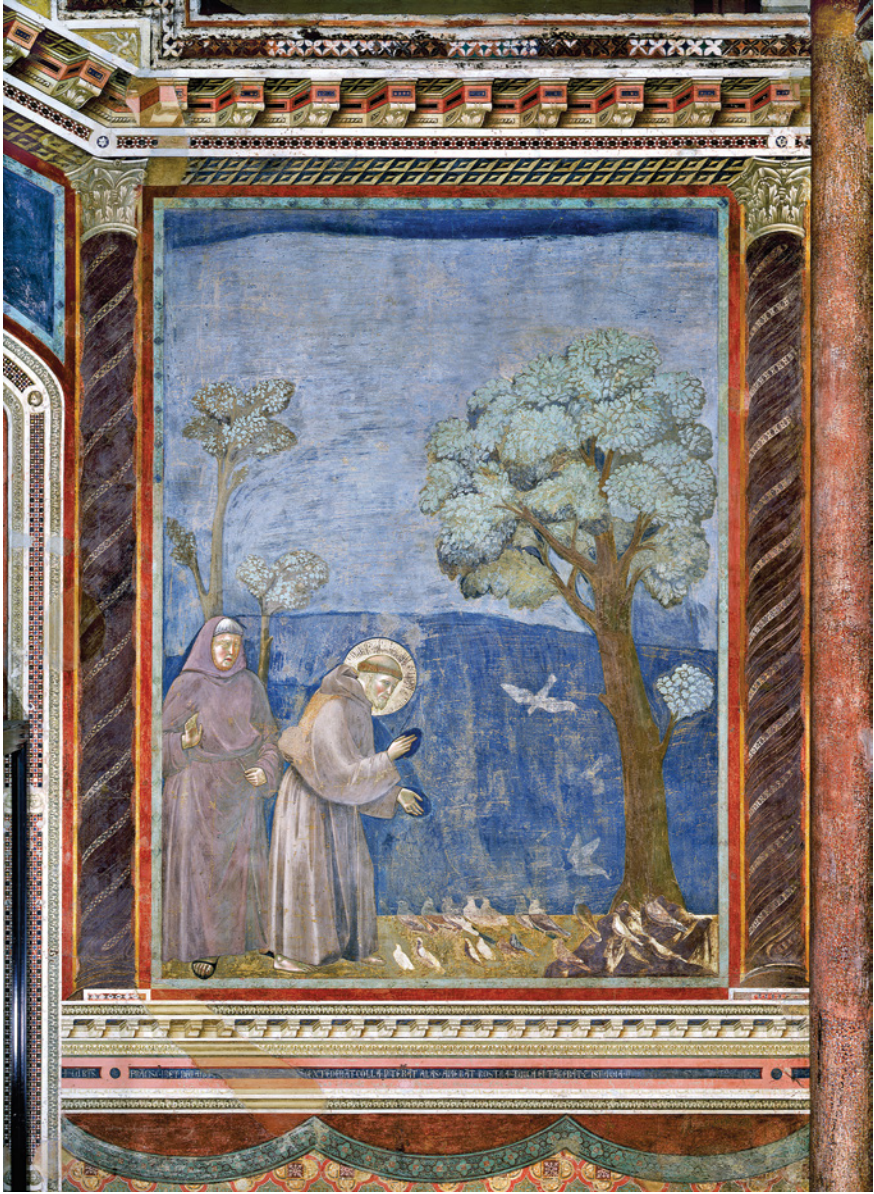


FIGURE 9.3 *Master of St. Francis, Preaching to the Birds at Bevagna, detail from the Legend of St. Francis, c.1290s. Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi, Italy*  
 PHOTO CREDIT: ASSISI.DE (STEFAN DILLER)

When [St. Francis] was approaching Bevagna, he came upon a place where a large flock of birds of various kinds had gathered. When the holy one of God saw them, he swiftly ran to the spot and greeted them as though they had human reason. They all became alert and turned towards him, and those perched in the trees bent their heads as he approached them and in an uncommon way directed their attention to him. He approached them and intently encouraged them all to hear the word of God, saying: "My brother birds, you should greatly praise your Creator, who clothed you with feathers, gave you wings for flight, confided to you the purity of the air and governs you without your least care." While he was saying this and similar things to them, the birds fluttered about in a wonderful way. They began to stretch their necks, spread their wings, open their beaks, and look at him .... None of them left the place until the man of God made the sign of the cross and gave them a blessing and permission to leave; then they all flew away together. Upon returning to [his companions], the simple man began to accuse himself of negligence because he had not previously preached to the birds.<sup>11</sup>

There are many similar stories about St. Francis's conversations with birds and various other creatures in the Franciscan hagiographical tradition. This particular instance, however, recalls Jesus's preaching, as reported in the gospels of the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> There, in the Sermon on the Mount, we hear of God's providence for all of his creatures, reported in the gospels of Matthew 6:25–34 and Luke 12:22–32.<sup>13</sup> A similar expression appears at Matthew 10:29–31: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: better are you than many sparrows." These gospel passages were undoubtedly St. Francis's inspiration for his preaching to the birds, but also, and perhaps more directly, lessons for his own followers.

11 Bonaventure, "The Major Legend of Saint Francis," in *Early Documents*, II, 624.

12 Ruf, *S. Francesco e S. Bonaventura*, 179–184.

13 "Therefore I say to you, be not solicitous for your life, what you shall eat, nor for your body, what you shall put on. Is not the life more than the meat: and the body more than the raiment? Behold the birds of the air, for they neither sow, nor do they reap, nor gather into barns: and your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you of much more value than they? And which of you by taking thought, can add to his stature one cubit? And for raiment why are you solicitous?" Matthew 6:25–27, Vulgate, English transl.

### Igreja São Francisco de Assis, Lagoa da Pampulha (1940–1944)

Now that we have established some of the key themes of the frescoes in the Upper Church in Assisi, including Francis's emphasis on peacemaking and his relationship with God's creation, let us turn our attention to the Igreja São Francisco de Assis at Pampulha. For as we will see, this cycle contains many of the same themes but in a very different context. The initiative for this monument emerged from civil authorities, rather than from the Franciscans themselves or any other clerics. It was the mayor of Belo Horizonte, the physician Juscelino Kubitschek (later president of Brazil), who, in 1940, commissioned the architect Oscar Niemeyer to design a complex of small, public buildings, including the Igreja da Pampulha, around a new manmade lake in this wealthy new suburb of Belo Horizonte, the capital of Brazil's mineral-rich state, Minas Gerais.<sup>14</sup> Cândido Portinari, who had received his earliest artistic training from a group of itinerant Italian artists who restored religious art in churches throughout Brazil, was commissioned to decorate the church.<sup>15</sup>

#### Niemeyer's Architecture

Niemeyer's church featured a lateral line-up of four parabolas, formed from thin concrete shells and faced, on the street side, with Portinari's tile mural of scenes from the life of St. Francis (Figs. 9.4, 9.5, and 9.6). The façade on the opposite side is completely transparent, although partly offset by brise-soleil, and faces directly onto the lake (Figs. 9.4 and 9.7). If the frescoes of the life of St. Francis on the counter-façade of the Basilica at Assisi were figurative

14 Martin Filler, "The Sensual Vision of Oscar Niemeyer," *The New York Review of Books* LX/6 (April 4, 2013), 32.

15 "On September 11 [1943], writer Lúcia Machado de Almeida, a friend of the Portinaris, first mentions in a letter the painter's invitation to do the interior of the Pampulha Church, located in Belo Horizonte in the state of Minas Gerais and recently designed by Oscar Niemeyer: 'With great joy I received the news from our mayor, Dr. Juscelino Kubitschek, that you will paint the Pampulha chapel. I showed him the photographs you gave me of the saints in Brodowski (in 1941, Portinari had painted the 'Capelinha da *Nonna*', a small chapel built in his parents' garden at Brodowski for Portinari's grandmother, who was no longer physically able to go out to church. The life-size saints that decorated the walls were likenesses of members of Portinari's family) and he was extremely enthusiastic. Besides our pride at knowing we will have a church with your work, it is a joy to have the promise of your company.'" Portinari, Cândido, et al., *Guerra e Paz* (Rio De Janeiro: Projecto Portinari, 2007), 183.

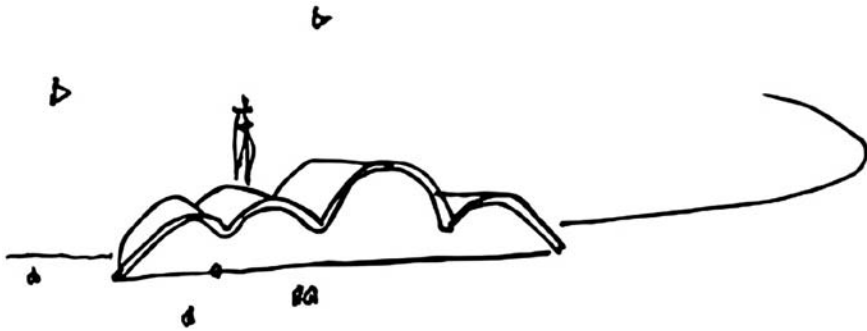


FIGURE 9.4 *Oscar Niemeyer, Line drawing, Igreja de São Francisco, Pampulha, 1942*  
 PHOTO CREDIT: OSCAR NIEMEYER, *CURVES OF TIME: THE MEMOIRS OF OSCAR NIEMEYER* (NEW YORK: PHAIDON, 2000), FRONTISPICE



FIGURE 9.5 *Cândido Portinari, glazed tile exterior, 750 × 2120 cm, 1944. Oscar Niemeyer (architect), Igreja São Francisco de Assis, Lagoa da Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil*  
 PHOTO CREDIT: PROJETO PORTINARI



FIGURE 9.6 *Cândido Portinari, Wolf of Gubbio, 1944. Detail of scene from Igreja São Francisco de Assis, Lagoa da Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil*  
 PHOTO CREDIT: PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR



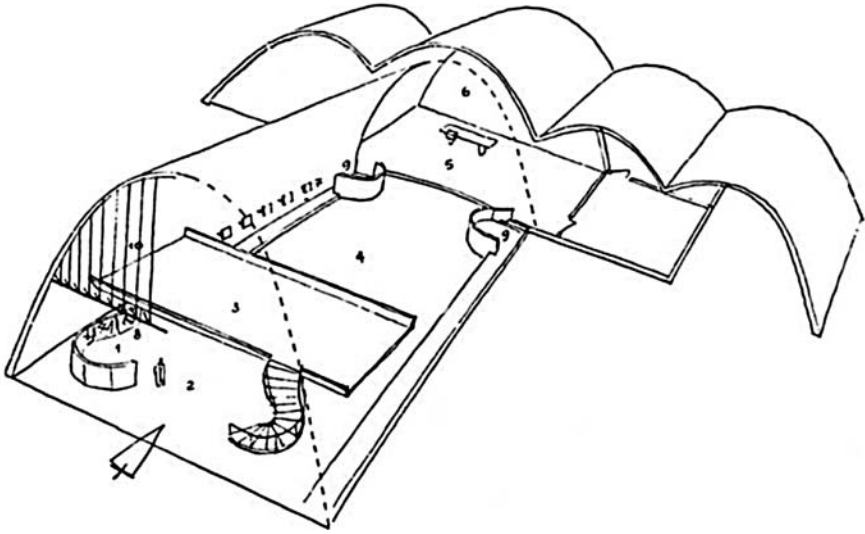


FIGURE 9.7 *Oscar Niemeyer, Axonometric perspective of "Tau"-shaped design of the Church from lagoon side Igreja de São Francisco, Pampulha, 1942*

PHOTO CREDIT: ILUSTRAÇÃO 32 - IGREJA DE SÃO FRANCISCO - PAMPULHA - 1942 - PERSPECTIVA DISPONÍVEL EM: [HTTP://WWW.VITRUVIUS.COM.BR/ARQUITEXTOS](http://www.vitruvius.com.br/arquitextos) - ACESSO EM 15 AGO. 2006. IN PINTO JÚNIOR, RAFAEL ALVES, *OS AZULEJOS DE PORTINARI COMO ELEMENTOS VISUAIS DA ARQUITETURA MODERNISTA NO BRASIL*, 2006 M.A. DISSERTATION, UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE GOIÁS, FACULDADE DE ARTES VISUAIS

windows onto the natural landscape outside the church, at Pampulha, the waterscape outside is literally a continuum of the interior space.<sup>16</sup>

The architectural form of the church represents a bold departure from the traditional, linear Baroque church architecture most commonly found in Brazil and in South America more generally. And yet, as Filler notes, the vaulted nave in the interior of the Igreja da Pampulha "telescopes into the arch of the high altar like the stem of the letter T(au), reiterat[ing] the traditional format of Baroque churches in Minas Gerais."<sup>17</sup> Niemeyer's inspiration for this design reportedly came from the French poet Paul Claudel's statement: "A church is God's hangar on earth."<sup>18</sup> Litterateur Paulo Mendes Campos reports an anecdote in a similar vein:

Portinari said something to us, more or less like this: "Poetry is not something that remains, but rather poetry is something that arrives and then

16 Frederico Holanda, "Of Glass and Concrete: Internal versus External Space Relations in Oscar Niemeyer's Architecture," in *Proceedings of the 7th International Space Syntax Symposium* 043 (2009): 4.

17 Filler, "The Sensual Vision of Oscar Niemeyer," 33.

18 Unsigned article, "Fit for Prayer," *Time Magazine* 73/17 (April 27, 1959): 60.

leaves. It leaves like a bird. Poetry is a very rare bird. It leaves quickly. We want to hold it, but it flies away. Today, when I was painting the arm of Saint Francis, there near his head, I felt—swoosh—a graze of poetry.” And he fell into the smile of an angel just created by the Lord, a smile that I imagine was the same as the one that illuminated, with that grazing of poetry, the faces of Giotto and Fra Angelico.<sup>19</sup>

This and the other buildings around the lagoon at Pampulha “caught the architect at the very peak of his powers.”<sup>20</sup> Representative of his early, organic stage, the curves in the architecture recall an often-quoted expression of Niemeyer:

It is not the right angle that attracts me, neither straight line, tough, inflexible, created by man. What attracts me is the free and sensual curve, in the course of its winding rivers, in the waves of the sea, in the clouds of the sky, in the body of the preferred woman. From curves is done throughout the universe. The curved universe of Einstein.<sup>21</sup>

### Portinari's Azulejos Façade

Populating the background of the Igreja façade, in vibrant shades of blue, white, and a barely detectable brown, are a variety of birds and fishes, echoing Torriti's *Creation of the World* (Fig. 9.8) and St. Francis's *Sermon to the Birds* (Fig. 9.3), both frescoes in the Upper Church at Assisi. In Portinari's design, seemingly abstract lines and shadings in varying tones of blue effectively create impressions of three-dimensionality, of landscape and lines of architecture, and a sense that one is in the mountains or perhaps even in the hills and the city of Assisi. The setting and location of the scenes from the life of St. Francis is simultaneously Assisi, Italy and Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The colors of the *azulejos* perhaps evoke the similar lapis lazuli blue and white of the Della Robbia glazed terracotta altarpieces (1475–1490) at La Verna, St. Francis's isolated mountain sanctuary located seventy-five miles northwest of Assisi.<sup>22</sup> These same colors also appear in Portinari's 1942 *azulejos* mural for a secular building, the

19 Portinari, et. al., *Guerra e Paz*, 186.

20 Filler, “The Sensual Vision of Oscar Niemeyer,” 32–33.

21 Oscar Niemeyer, *Curves of Time: the Memoirs of Oscar Niemeyer* (New York: Phaidon, 2000), 62–64.

22 For this observation, I am grateful to Mari Yoko Hara, who pointed this similarity out to me in conversation.



FIGURE 9.8 *Jacopo Torriti, Creation, detail from the Old Testament cycle. Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi, Italy, c.1290*

PHOTO CREDIT: ASSISI.DE (STEFAN DILLER)

Palácio Gustavo Capanema, home to the Ministry of Education and Health, Rio de Janeiro, and are typical colors in Brazilian colonial *azulejos*.<sup>23</sup>

23 Rafael Alves Pinto Júnior, *Os Azulejos de Portinari como Elementos Visuais da Arquitetura Modernista no Brasil* (M.A. diss., Universidade Federal de Goiás, Faculdade de Artes





FIGURE 9.9 Cândido Portinari, *St. Francis Honored by the Simple Man*, 1944. Detail of façade, far left, first two arches. Igreja São Francisco de Assis, Lagoa da Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil

PHOTO CREDIT: PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR

The four curves of the Igreja da Pampulha façade contain at least four scenes from the life of St. Francis. Moving from left to right, the theme in the first two arches is clearly *St. Francis Honored by the Simple Man* (Fig. 9.9), also the first of the scenes in the fresco cycle at Assisi. St. Francis, arms outstretched, approaches from the left as a kneeling figure on the right, face obscured, unrolls a piece of cloth or a carpet, upon which he invites St. Francis to tread.

The third, and largest arch, contains two scenes. On a diagonal, moving from the lower left corner to the upper right curve, is a scene that portrays a clothed figure, with long, light-colored hair, running, arms outstretched, towards another figure, this one hooded, but also with arms outstretched to embrace the approaching figure (Fig. 9.10).<sup>24</sup> The meaning of this scene appears to have been left deliberately ambiguous, allowing the viewer to supply the

Visuais, 2006), 62–76. Hanna Deinhard, “Modern Tile-Murals in Brazil,” *Craft Horizons* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1950): 6–10.

24 An article which appeared in the Sept. 21, 1946 publication of *Belas Artes*—Gustavo Forte, entitled, “A S. Francisco da Pampulha significa a hipertrofia de uma política artística derrotista,” identifies itself as the transcription of Vicente de Andrade Racioppi’s attack of Portinari’s design of the murals for the Pampulha church, published shortly after an interview with the archbishop of Belo Horizonte, who condemned the church. The article, perhaps not to be taken seriously, given its invective, identifies the hooded figure in this scene as “Nossa Senhora dos Aflitos” or Our Lady of the Afflicted.



FIGURE 9.10 *Cândido Portinari, Welcome/Reconciliation/Conversion, St. Francis receives the Stigmata, or St. Francis welcomes Clare?, 1944. Detail of façade, left side of third arch (to immediate left of central Wolf of Gubbio scene), Igreja São Francisco de Assis, Lagoa da Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil*  
 PHOTO CREDIT: PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR

identification that suits best. The welcoming embrace offered and anticipated could represent generically a welcome, a conversion, a reconciliation, or, more specifically, St. Francis's call to his vocation as a young man, his receiving the stigmata, or his welcome to St. Clare.<sup>25</sup> There are no specific details to aid in identifying this scene definitively. Immediately to the right of the "Welcome," is the Wolf of Gubbio scene (Fig. 9.6), occupying the central ground line and the right side of this arch. The two scenes are related in theme: St. Francis's welcoming acceptance and understanding of the Wolf of Gubbio led to its conversion and to the end of its reign of terror at Gubbio.<sup>26</sup> The fourth scene, in the fourth arch on the far right, is St. Francis preaching to the birds under a tree (Fig. 9.11), a schema that clearly evokes the fresco in Assisi of Francis preaching to the birds.<sup>27</sup>

### Portinari's "Wolf"

Of these four images, the most arresting image on the Pampulha façade is that of St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio (Fig. 9.6). The wolf appears simultaneously capable of great ferocity and yet also loveable and in need of help. Its eyes are big and soulful in its appeal to the observer, as if to remind Brazilians of their social and religious obligation to help the less fortunate and the dire social consequences that potentially arise from a failure to do so.

Portinari was a true artist-intellectual, deeply spiritual with a thorough-grounding in religious art and yet with a conscientious approach to literary sources that informed his artistic projects. While planning his design for the panels in the Hispanic Foundation at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., he thoroughly researched his topic. For instance, he notes in his own writings that:

25 Teixeira offers the possible identification that this is St. Francis welcoming St. Clare. Teixeira, *Igreja de São Francisco de Assis*, 44.

26 Teixeira also identifies the theme of this scene as the Wolf of Gubbio. Teixeira, *Igreja de São Francisco de Assis*, 44.

27 However, there are only three birds in the Pampulha scene, and they are much larger in scale than those in the Assisi fresco. I have tried to identify what type of birds these are, as they are quite large and their tail feathers are elaborate. Initially, I thought they might be turkeys, and Teixeira identifies them as peacocks, see Teixeira, *Igreja de São Francisco de Assis*, 44. Again, the ambiguity may be intentional. However, I am persuaded by Dr. Nogueira Coelho's extensive comparison of Portinari's artistic depictions of birds (specifically turkeys, cocks, chickens, and peacocks), made possible through the Portinari archives, that these birds are chickens, specifically roosters, as Portinari tends to adorn his cocks with the same ostentatious tail feathers. If these birds are chickens, Portinari has transported this scene from the life of St. Francis to the local streets of Brazil, as the humble chicken was virtually ubiquitous in Brazilian yards and streets until very recently.





FIGURE 9.11 Cândido Portinari, St. Francis Preaches to the Birds. *Detail of façade, far right. Igreja São Francisco de Assis, Lagoa da Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil*  
 PHOTO CREDIT: PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR

Before painting *Teaching of the Indians*, I read all the Jesuit letters. Anchieta, Nóbrega, Manuel de Paiva and Luiz da Grã were men who suffered, who struggled. The Jesuits went into the fierce jungle and lived among the Indians. Their hands, like those of the *Bandeirantes*, reflected heavy labor, large and deformed. The feet that walked on the rocks and shards had to be tough and flat.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Portinari, et.al., *Guerra e Paz*, 181.

This anecdote helps to explain, too, his decision to depict Francis's hands and feet on the tiled façade as disproportionately large. Moreover, if this level of intellectual immersion in his artistic projects was customary for Portinari, it is virtually certain that in preparing the cards that would serve as a blueprint for the tiles at the Igreja da Pampulha, Portinari also read sources on the life of St. Francis; he was certainly familiar with the story of the Wolf of Gubbio and its larger meaning.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, his original sketches for the facade (Fig. 9.12) show several wolves, or perhaps the same wolf at different moments in the narrative. Both are standing, and one faces the spectator, its teeth bared in a snarl, while the other presents its back to the viewer, looking attentively at St. Francis. That his original drawings were controversial, if not baldly confrontational, is borne out by Portinari's artistic collaborators' reactions to this initial design. In January 1945, the architect Oscar Niemeyer wrote to Portinari and asked him to modify this particular element of the *azulejos* façade as both Niemeyer and the mayor Kubitschek feared an angry reaction from the archbishop.<sup>30</sup> The finished design which one sees on the façade of the Pampulha church, in which the proud and angry wolves are replaced by a scabrous, flea-infested canine, either a mongrel dog, or, perhaps still a wolf, which cowers penitently at the feet of St. Francis,

29 "Early in the year (1944), Portinari spends three months in Petrópolis at a friend's house in Valparaíso .... One of the first works completed during this period is the set of cards that will serve as a blueprint for the ceramic work in Pampulha; they are sent to (the ceramist) Paulo Rossi Osir in São Paulo." Portinari, et. al., *Guerra e Paz*, 183.

30 I cite here, in its entirety, the postcard sent from Niemeyer to Portinari [the italics are mine for emphasis]: "Caro Portinari, Recebi o croqui dos azulejos. Estive em B. Horizonte e conversei com o Juscelino. Ele gostou muito dos croquis e pediu que lhe escrevesse adiantando a maior urgência possível no desenho definitivo para ele poder providenciar a execução com o Rossi. A idéia do prefeito é inaugurar a igreja ainda em Dezembro e seria preciso correr muito para ter nessa data tudo em ordem. *Ele pediu-me também para consultar você sobre a possibilidade de fazer uma pequena modificação nos azulejos. Ele queria evitar os lobos que lhe pareceram muito grandes e iriam chocar o arcebispo.* Ele gostaria se você pudesse aproveitar faixas por exemplo, ele acha que teria uma certa ligação com a localização da Igreja na beira da represa. Eu coloquei então que o croqui será um ponto de partida e que transmitirei a você o pensamento dele para que organizasse o desenho final. Assim você pode preparar o desenho de execução como achar conveniente. Quanto aos painéis já mandei cal e estou aguardando os croquis. Eu pela minha parte, peço também a você enviar com urgência possível o desenho dos azulejos pois a execução será demorada e estou nervoso para ver a fachada revestida," Oscar Niemeyer, [Carta, 1945 an.], Rio de Janeiro, RJ [para] Cândido Portinari, [Brodowski, SP]. Júnior, *Os Azulejos de Portinari*, 2006, 86.



FIGURE 9.12 Cândido Portinari, detail, First Study for the Azulejos, 1944. *Façade, Igreja de São Francisco, Pampulha, Minas Gerais. Pencil drawing on paper, 17 × 42 cm*  
 PHOTO CREDIT: PROJETO PORTINARI

seeking the compassion of the onlooker with its big, soulful eyes, demonstrates that Portinari took their advice seriously.

Despite its adaptation, the message of the Wolf of Gubbio story is still present and discernible in the tiled façade of the Pampulha church. The Brazilian journalist Mauro Santayana relates:

My relationship to the painter's life and work is of a very personal nature. In Belo Horizonte I always return to my first and captivating encounter with Portinari: St. Francis and his dog, who witnessed it from the walls of the Pampulha Chapel. I saw them, still a teenager and knew I was re-seeing them; I already knew that Saint Francis and that dog. They were creatures from my world, which was made of country people, civil construction workers, hopeless vagrants, sad boys and transient animals. Later I would discover that this face *del poverello* was not the only one in the painter's work. The rebellious rich youth from Assisi, who had chosen to witness poverty from within it, was cousin to the poor faces on the canvases of Cândido Portinari. I suspect that Portinari's Saint Francis did not attract the painter because he was a rich man living in poverty. There was another reason: astutely, the painter could place within the holy garments all the poverty-stricken of his time. As I see it, he did not draw Francesco di Pietro di Bernardone on the walls that Oscar offered him. He painted any Franciscan: a Franciscan stonemason, blacksmith, poor, undernourished, perhaps toothless, accompanied by his no-name mongrel, in a society where dogs, like men, are born either pedigree or worm-infested.<sup>31</sup>

31 C. Portinari, et. al., *Guerra e Paz*, 135–136.

Portinari's façade represents a clever departure from the artistic program of Assisi, in that his scenes from the life of St. Francis appear on the exterior, rather than the interior of the church. In so doing, Portinari proclaims St. Francis's message to the world at large, to secular society, to any passerby, not just to the faithful and the pilgrims who enter a sacred space.

### **Identification of the "Wolf" in Modern Brazil—Sandro Rosa do Nascimento**

To highlight the relevance of the Wolf of Gubbio story for twentieth- (and twenty-first-) century Brazil, its theme of compassion as a form of social justice, and its haunting reminder to both secular and religious individuals to act as agents of divine providence, I cite the story of Sandro Rosa do Nascimento. In 2000, Sandro hijacked a bus in Jardim Botânico in Rio de Janeiro, and the story of the violent hijacking, filmed live, made Rio television news and caught the attention of viewers all around the world. Aware of this singular opportunity to reach a worldwide audience, Sandro used the hostage situation to protest the social injustices endemic in Brazilian society. The neglect of the poor and the homeless, and the tendency to ignore their very existence, denies even a basic humanity to these most vulnerable members of society.

The 2008 Brazilian film directed by Bruno Barreto, "Last Stop 174" relates a fictionalized account of Sandro's life. The film's themes of peace (through religion and/or family) vs. violence (committed by both the street kids from the favelas and the police) are relevant to this essay. Sandro is the Brazilian Wolf of Gubbio but without St. Francis's redeeming intervention. The circumstances of Sandro's life are tragic—abandoned by his mother as an infant, he grew up on the streets of Rio and survived the Candelária massacre in 1993. The local church and its grounds shelter hundreds of homeless street children, many of whom are involved in the illegal drug trade and prostitution. The church's personnel do what they can to provide food, shelter, and advice to the kids. Because the transient population here is so large, the police presence is proportionate. On July 23, 1993, several of the children had thrown rocks at police cars, and the police responded with threats of revenge. At midnight, the police and others returned and fired on kids near the Candelária church—eight young people were killed and others wounded. Although the international community condemned the incident, only two of the police officers involved were convicted. Sandro witnessed this violence and no doubt this episode and others in his difficult and tragic life hardened him against the police and against the possibility of any justice and compassion in society. However, there

were individuals who tried to help him along the way, and the story highlights, too, how complicated the salvation of the Wolf can be. The immediacy of the message of the story of the Wolf of Gubbio still has not changed, even though the Igreja da Pampulha is now nearly seventy years old.

### *Controversial Reception of the Igreja da Pampulha*

Portinari's and Niemeyer's training, skill, research, and innovation did not save them from the vicious reactions to the design and decoration of the Igreja da Pampulha. According to Belo Horizonte's Roman Catholic archbishop, Dom Antônio dos Santos Cabral, "Niemeyer's hangar looked more like the devil's bomb shelter—a parabolic vault of glass and stucco, with an emaciated Christ glaring from a huge fresco by Painter Cândido Portinari."<sup>32</sup> The archbishop, perhaps on purely aesthetic grounds, declared the structure "unfit for religious purposes."<sup>33</sup> However, the Catholic Church's refusal to consecrate the Igreja da Pampulha until fifteen years later may also stem from the fact that, in 1945, Portinari and Niemeyer became members of the newly-formed Communist party in the hopes of promoting democratic reforms after the defeat of Fascism in Brazil.<sup>34</sup>

Mendes Campos remembers Belo Horizonte at that time:

The city in Minas Gerais had vicious prejudices against the arts and literature, and it was precisely this that caused the presence of Portinari and his assistants to ignite spiritual revelry in our young rebel hearts, a mental euphoria the likes of which I think I've never felt otherwise. We owed this to one person alone, a provincial one who, for having come from an old, traditional city would not appear to be an appropriate candidate to stir up the listlessness of the new capital to sow the seeds of modern styles. I am referring to Juscelino Kubitschek, raised in the sleepy beauty of Diamantina, the young and restless mayor of Belo Horizonte, responsible for penetrating the borders of Minas with the contraband of renovating matrixes of painting, sculpture and architecture.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> "Fit for Prayer," 1959, 60.

<sup>33</sup> "Fit for Prayer," 1959, 60.

<sup>34</sup> Portinari, et. al., *Guerra e Paz*, 186.

<sup>35</sup> Portinari, et. al., *Guerra e Paz*, 186.



Interviewed at length in 1953 by his friend, the poet Vinicius de Moraes (excerpted here), Portinari spoke of his childhood and discussed painting issues and politics:

Portinari: I was the “little Italian” who played right alongside the black kids. The poverty left an impression, but I never felt hate or bitterness toward anyone because of it. Rather, I felt a sense of solidarity with everyone. This political thing of “class hate” was never my experience.

Vinicius: How did you come to your political position?

Portinari: I don’t intend to understand politics. My convictions, and they are deep, are based on my poor childhood, my life of work and struggle, and because I am an artist. I pity those who suffer, and I would like to help remedy social injustice. Any conscientious artist feels the same way.<sup>36</sup>

Although Portinari, Niemeyer, and other South American artist-intellectuals suffered censure and exile for their political views, by the time the Igreja da Pampulha was consecrated in 1959, Juscelino Kubitschek was President of Brazil, Oscar Niemeyer had become a national culture hero, and the Igreja da Pampulha was recognized as a national monument and “a milestone in modern religious architecture.”<sup>37</sup> A news story reports that the Auxiliary Archbishop Dom João Rezende Costa, who consecrated the Igreja da Pampulha agreed that the church has “great artistic significance and a spiritual atmosphere” and remarked “Now we can feel the wonderful art created here in homage to the Creator.”<sup>38</sup>

In an article published in 1944, the year that the Igreja da Pampulha was completed, the author, de Sousa-Leão, discusses the history of Portuguese tiles (*azulejos*), their origin in Islamic art, and the use of *azulejos* in Brazilian architecture. He describes these tiles as suitable for decoration in both the homes of the rich and the poor, “much in the same way as Italians used frescoes or Northern Italians used tapestries.”<sup>39</sup> At the end of the article, he concludes, “There is yet to be evolved a design that will relate (*azulejos*) to modern architecture. But this is only a beginning, and the efforts of our architects, when seeking inspiration from the past, should be encouraged, since tiles are ideally

36 Portinari, et. al., *Guerra e Paz*, 199, 201–202.

37 “Fit for Prayer,” 19.

38 “Fit for Prayer,” 60.

39 J. de Sousa-Leão, “Portuguese Tiles in Brazilian Architecture,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 84/493 (1944): 83.

suited for our climate.”<sup>40</sup> And further, “It is strange that Brazil should have depended in the past on the importation of these tiles. Only recently has the *azulejo* become a national industry, and it is along these lines that we hope to see it contribute to the vitality of the movement.”<sup>41</sup> I believe that de Sousa-Leão would have been pleased, on all counts, with Portinari’s use of Brazilian *azulejos* in both the interior and exterior of the Igreja da Pampulha. And Hanna Deinhard, in her 1950 article, “Modern Tile-Murals in Brazil” proclaims Niemeyer’s and Portinari’s success, despite their apparent rejection of conventional norms.<sup>42</sup>

Both Niemeyer and Portinari were—and still are—bitterly attacked for not having respected any “traditional” form, either in the structure of the church or in the representation of the scenes of the life of St. Francis. However, the passionate traditionalist critics do not seem to be aware of the fact that without the bold experiments of the modern architect and painter, the tradition of the (*azulejos*) decoration would have been completely lost in Brazil.<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

Although the Wolf of Gubbio is not represented in the Upper Church at Assisi, elements basic to this story are nonetheless present in the themes of the fresco cycle there. St. Francis’s care and concern for all of creation, not just humanity, his ability to communicate with animals, his and his friars’ involvement in the promotion of peace through successful conflict resolution, and his awareness of the need for human agency and the exercise of charity in order to facilitate the design of divine providence are the kernels that form the later story of the Wolf of Gubbio. The frescoes of the life of St. Francis in the Basilica at Assisi situate his legacy and that of the Franciscans within the context of both Old and New Testaments and the political, religious, and economic context of thirteenth-century Italy. Clearly informed by lessons learned from the life of St. Francis at Assisi and the decoration of the Basilica at Assisi, the tiled façade of the Igreja da Pampulha including the Wolf of Gubbio at its center is yet more immediate and direct in its message, not just to believers, but also to a

40 Sousa-Leão, “Portuguese Tiles in Brazilian Architecture,” 87.

41 Sousa-Leão, “Portuguese Tiles in Brazilian Architecture,” 87.

42 Deinhard, “Modern Tile-Murals in Brazil,” 6–10.

43 Deinhard, “Modern Tile-Murals in Brazil,” 7.

simultaneously secular and yet deeply spiritual society. This church, too, mirrors the contexts in which it was built, from its construction with Brazilian media designed by Brazilian artists and intellectuals, the simplicity and accessibility of its iconography, its reflection on its own natural and man-made environments, and the religious, political, and economic realities surrounding its genesis in the mid-twentieth century.