

St. Francis and Giotto: the saint and the artist who started the environmental movement

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From antiquity to the Middle Ages, man had always had a conflictual relationship with Nature, seeing it as either associated with divine or satanic forces. On the vanguard of a change in perspective toward the natural world was St. Francis of Assisi (c.1181-1226) who is now patron of the environment. He set forth the revolutionary philosophy that the Earth and all living creatures should be respected as creations of the Almighty. He lived in Umbria, a region of Italy which is still today, green, fertile and infused with a palpable spirituality. He constructed a series of monasteries which were one day's walk away from each other, situated in forests or snuggled up against the sides of mountains. His own cell and bed were carved out of rock. The grotto of the monastery at La Verna was the place at which he received the stigmata of Christ in 1224. After his death, the Franciscans continued to promote mountains as being vital in the sacred ritual, promulgating the idea that they would provide a nearness to God and a source of divine inspiration. Indeed, the clefts in the mountain were evocative of the wounds in St. Francis' hands and caused a wave of the faithful to make a pilgrimage to the grotto at La Verna to view the sacred recesses.

St. Francis' affinity for Earthly elements influenced the artist Giotto (c.1270-1337) as he revolutionized art history by depicting the newly popular idea of natural philosophy in his works. Giotto lets the sacred images come down to Earth, separating them definitively from their abstract representation as seen in Byzantine art. They are different because they penetrate daily life, and demonstrate that the difference between the sacred and profane is minimal.

This method of disseminating the new ideas of St. Francis was very effective as the general populace was illiterate. Seeing frescoes reflecting their everyday lives in landscapes that were familiar, changed their way of thinking. The trees, plants, animals and rocky landscapes were suddenly items which were gifts from the Creator to be used, enjoyed and respected.

The power of this visual representation of nature was much more powerful than the written word, as texts available for study were for the most part, ancient or ecclesiastical. Aristotle, Pliny and others formed the basis of natural thought and their ideas had not been altered or challenged in 1,500 years. With the dawn of the Renaissance however, a shift in thinking resulted in massive changes in many areas, and nature was one of them. Texts on nature started to be written, but the ideas they set forth were very late in arriving, for the environmental ideas of St. Francis as represented artistically by Giotto had already been absorbed into the psyche of the common man for over 200 years.