Power of Patrons: The Franciscan Influence on Pietro Lorenzetti's Passion Cycle at Assisi

By Jennifer Summers

The *Passion Cycle* is a fresco created for the Lower Church of the Assisi Basilica, serving as décor for religious purposes. The Assisi Basilica is the burial site of a holy figure, St. Francis of Assisi, [a prominent saint/religious figure], entombed in the Lower Church of the Basilica. As a result the Assisi Basilica has been a pilgrimage site since its completion in 1230. However, after the completion of the frescoes in both the Upper and Lower Churches, it has become a pilgrimage site for both religious and art appreciation.[1] Because of its rich cultural history, Renaissance art and architecture, the Assisi Basilica was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site by the United Nations.

Pietro Lorenzetti's personal life is as vague as the records of his work in the Trecento Renaissance period. Lorenzetti was born in Siena in 1280 or 1290 and was an active painter in the Renaissance from 1306 to 1340. Lorenzetti only signed five of his works and his name was often misspelled, leading historians to surmise that Pietro did not read or write Latin.[2] Historians have also debated whether he was the older or younger brother of Ambrogio Lorenzetti, another well-known Sienese Trecento artist. More academic scholarship appears to be available on Ambrogio than Pietro. Both Pietro and Ambrogio died during the first wave of the Black Plague in 1348 when it hit Siena.

This essay will discuss Pietro Lorenzetti's *Passion Cycle* fresco at the Lower Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, Italy, and the importance of its patron, the Franciscan Order, on Lorenzetti's artistic choices when executing this masterpiece. By analyzing the artistic choices Lorenzetti made when executing the *Passion Cycle* through the chronology of completion of

[1] William R. Cook, ed., *Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 60.
[2] Hayden B.J. Maginnis, "Pietro Lorenzetti: A Chronology," *Art Bulletin* 66, no. 2 (June 1984), 183.

other artists frescoes in the Lower Church, the influence of his patrons presents itself. The Franciscan influence is also present in the artistic choices Lorenzetti made in the portrayal of Judas, the apostle of Christ that betrayed him. And lastly, we see the Franciscan influence in how Lorenzetti placed specific scenes of *Passion Cycle* with their matching panels on the Life of St. Francis in the north transept. This paper will include discussions of four of the *Passion Cycle* scenes, *Entry to Jerusalem*, *The Last Supper*, *The Crucifixion*, and *The Death of Judas*.

Renaissance works of the Trecento period suffer from a lack of documentation. There is a lack of surviving papers from the period that record patronage, dates of creation and completion, or even in some cases, the artist that created the work. The frescoes of the Basilica at San Francesco of Assisi are no stranger to this phenomenon. When looking at the works of the Lower Basilica specifically, there was much debate amongst art historians as to the artist(s) of the *Passion Cycle* and the dates these frescoes were created and completed. In 1864, Art Historian G.B. Cavalcaselle properly credited Pietro Lorenzetti as the creator of the *Passion Cycle* of the Lower Church at the Assisi Basilica with an estimated completion date of 1320. Before Cavalcaselle had determined Lorenzetti as the artist of the *Passion Cycle*, other art historians surmised that the *Passion Cycle* was the work of other artists like Giotto, Pietro Cavallini, or Puccio Capanna. A further century and a half would pass before Art Historians like Hayden B. J. Maginnis and Robin Simon came to the consensus that Lorenzetti's *Passion Cycle* began in 1316-1317 and was completed in 1319.[3] This is important to the history of the work as we now

[3] Hayden B.J. Maginnis worked towards establishing 1317-1319 as the completion dates for Pietro Lorenzetti's Passion Cycle at Assisi in his Ph.D. dissertation. Lorenzetti and Simone Martini would have completed their frescoes in the lower church by the time the Ghibellines occupied Assisi in 1319. Historian Robin Simon's work further confirms Maginnis in the estimation of a timeline and provides detailed photographic evidence in the changes to the ribs of the transept crossings and how they interact with the Lorenzetti and Martini frescoes. Hayden B.J. Maginnis, "Pietro Lorenzetti and the Assisi Passion Cycle : A Dissertation" (Princeton University, 1975). Robin Simon, "Towards a Relative Chronology of the Frescoes in the Lower Church of San Francesco at Assisi," *The Burlington Magazine* 118, no. 879 (1976), 361.

know the order of completion for all of the Lower Church frescoes and how Lorenzetti was able to make artistic decisions that provide a cohesive look and narrative to the entire Lower Church.

The *Passion Cycle* at Assisi is considered Lorenzetti's masterpiece. Art Historian Joseph Polzer stated,

> "the Assisiate *Passion* was highly original, drawing on many kinds of sources modern and conservative… in the realm of Sienese painting of the early Trecento his brand of realism was extremely precocious constituting a principal facet in the vital artistic developments then taking place in Tuscany."[4]

Though Lorenzetti was known for naturalism in his works as the faces that he painted were more lifelike and realistic than any of those in his predecessors' works in the Duecento. Polzer also credits Lorenzetti for drawing upon modern and conservative techniques that allow his work to seamlessly blend in with the other works present in the Lower Church. Lorenzetti drew upon multiple influences when creating the *Passion Cycle* for the Lower Church, however, none appear more important than the influence of its patron, the Franciscans. The Assisi *Passion Cycle* would not be the last time that Lorenzetti would paint these images or other scenes from the Bible. Lorenzetti's last major work completed was a triptych altarpiece for the Siena Cathedral in 1342, tempera on panel, *The Birth of a Virgin*.

St. Francis and the Franciscan Order

St. Francis, the founder of the Franciscan order, died on October 3, 1226. Two days before his canonization in 1228, the Pope laid the first stones for the double basilica of San Francesco.[5] St. Francis became a saint on July 16, 1228, because of the purported miracles surrounding his life and legacy. One of the many miracles of St. Francis was that he received the stigmata, the same as Christ. The stigmata is the appearance of wounds on the hands, wrists, or

[4] Joseph Polzer, "Pietro Lorenzetti's Artistic Origin and His Place in Trecento Sienese Painting," *Jahrbuch Der Berliner Museen* 35 (1993), 110.

[5] Cook, *Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy*, 6.

feet that occur from the process of crucifixion. St. Francis was never crucified, which is why his followers believed this to be one of his many miracles. A primary reason as to why the *Passion Cycle* is so important to the Franciscan Order is "[h]is stigmata are much more than an identifying attribute: they are the guarantee of his power as an advocate of the faithful."[6] St. Francis and his life drew parallels to Christ and the critical events of Christ's life, like Judas and his betrayal of Christ. St. Francis took a vow of poverty, a vow that the Franciscan Order holds in the highest regard and another commonality with Christ. Judas is also critical to the story of Christ in the Franciscan order; he represents the opposite of Christ and is likened to greed and avarice. Judas chose worldly wealth over the life of Christ, with his betrayal being critical to the story of Christ, represented as despair versus hope in Franciscan Art.[7]

Both St. Francis and the Franciscans had a profound interest and passion for the Holy Land, Jerusalem. According to Maginnis, "Given this interest in the East, the tenor of Franciscan devotion, and the character of the Saint Francis Legend, it is not surprising to find references to Jerusalem in Pietro's frescoes."[8] Lorenzetti's *Entry to Jerusalem* (figure 2) vaguely references the Valley of Jehoshaphat, however, it clearly shows the Temple and its relative position to the Golden Gate. Lorenzetti's treatment of *the Last Supper* and *Washing of the Feet* as two different locations also coincides with pilgrims' experiences in Jerusalem, who would have visited two different sites for these two biblical events.[9] The Franciscans valued the similarities between Christ's life and that of St. Francis. Including the Temple where Christ

[6] Rona Goffen, "Nostra Conversatio in Caelis Est: Observations on the Sacra Conversazione in the Trecento," *The Art Bulletin* 61, no. 2 (1979), 216.

[7] Janet Robson, "Judas and the Franciscans: Perfidy Pictured in Lorenzetti's Passion Cycle at Assisi," *Art Bulletin* 86, no. 1 (March 2004), 31–57.

[8] Hayden B.J. Maginnis, "Places Beyond the Seas: Trecento Images of Jerusalem," *Notes in the History of Art* 13, no. 2 (1994), 6.

[9] Ibid., 4–6.

expelled the money changers and merchants further coincides with the Franciscans values of poverty and devotion to worship.

Lower Church of the Assisi Basilica

Assisi's Lower Church is the site where the body of St. Francis lies. Within the Lower Church, there are two transepts, a nave, and multiple chapels. These chapels were not part of the original construction of the Lower Church, they were built at the end of the thirteenth century. The North or Right Transept is where we find Giotto's frescoes of the *Infancy of Christ Cycle*, the *Miracles of St. Francis*, and two unconnected frescoes of the *Crucifixion* and the *Madonna and Child Enthroned*. In the South or Left Transept is where we find Lorenzetti's *Passion Cycle* fresco (Figure 1) and the *Stigmata of St. Francis.* Six of the *Passion Cycle* scenes are arranged two scenes per register with three registers extending across the ceiling of the transept, culminating in the large *Crucifixion* scene. The *Crucifixion*, one of the scenes of the overall *Passion Cycle*, the total size of this scene amounts to about four of the smaller scenes put together. Directly across from Lorenzetti's *Crucifixion* on the opposite wall is his *Stigmata of St. Francis*. Lorenzetti did this purposely, by putting the two largest frescoes in opposition, the *Crucifixion* and *Stigmata of St. Francis*, he is drawing attention to the parallels between Christ's life and St. Francis. In the dado of the south transept, Lorenzetti created frescoes of the *Madonna and Child with St. Francis* as well as the fictive bench. Art Historian Hayden B.J. Maginnis believed that Lorenzetti completed the frescoes of the south transept between 1316/17-1319. Giotto completed his frescoes in the north transept in 1315 and Simone Martini completed the altarpiece fresco in 1319.[10] This chronology tells us that Lorenzetti worked side by side with Simone Martini, however, Giotto and his workshop completed their work a few

[10] Diana Norman, "Sanctity, Kingship and Succession: Art and Dynastic Politics in the Lower Church at Assisi," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 73, no. 3 (2010), 325; Maginnis, "Pietro Lorenzetti"; Cook, *Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy*, 42.

years beforehand. Because the frescoes of the entire Lower Church are in conversation with one another, Lorenzetti carefully planned his works to compliment and not compete with Giotto's frescoes of the northern transept.

Completing the Frescoes of the Lower Church

Lorenzetti was the perfect match for the Franciscans to complete the *Passion Cycle* in the south transept. According to Hayden B.J. Maginnis,

> "We cannot know whether it was a matter of good fortune or considered judgement, but with his arrival, the Franciscans, concerned as they were with the human aspect of sacred history, found themselves with a master whose outlook was perfectly suited to a discursive and emotive treatment of his subject."[11]

While most of the works of the Lower Church were already completed, it was up to Lorenzetti to find a way to bring all of those works together, while somehow finding a way to set his work of the *Passion Cycle* apart, carrying the emotion to match the beliefs and wishes of the Franciscan Order to fruition.

Franciscans are an order that observes asceticism, so it is of no surprise that controversy arose when the Basilica's frescoes and altarpieces began to adorn its barren walls and altars at the end of the thirteenth century. Pope Nicholas IV, was the first Franciscan pope and reigned from 1288 to 1292, and ordered the renewal of Assisi. Pope Nicholas' order included the decoration of the Upper Basilica and Lower Basilica, as well as expanding the Lower Basilica through his papal bull, *Reducentes ad sedulae*.[12] In his bull, Pope Nicholas advised the Franciscans that it was permissible for them to use lay funds to complete the decoration and expansion of this important church. This order was not without controversy as other religious groups connected

[11] Maginnis, "Pietro Lorenzetti," 209.

[12] Cooper and Robson both uncovered evidence that the Franciscans either misread or took liberties with Nicholas IV papal bull. It is speculated that Nicholas only wanted the upper basilica decorated and the lower basilica expanded but not decorated. Donal Cooper and Janet Robson, "'A Great Sumptuousness of Paintings': Frescos and Franciscan Poverty at Assisi in 1288 and 1312," *The Burlington Magazine* 151, no. 1279 (2009): 656; Angiola Maria. Romanini, *Assisi : The Frescoes in the Basilica of St. Francis* (New York : Rizzoli, 1998), 62.

with the Franciscan Order questioned their vow of poverty and the elaborate and expensive decoration of their primary church. Lorenzetti worked to produce the frescoes in a way that would unite the various factions of the Franciscan Order, such as the Spirituals and Fraticelli[13], by choosing to portray Judas serves as a reminder of their vows of poverty and the consequences of choosing not to obey. According to Robson, it is also believed that Lorenzetti's linkage of the scenes of his *Passion Cycle* to the Franciscan allegories of Chastity, Obedience and Poverty in the north transept were also designed to appease the Spirituals.[14]

Judas

Lorenzetti paid particular attention to Judas in the first five scenes of Lorenzetti's *Passion Cycle,* which speaks directly to the Franciscan Order and their vow of poverty. The iconography of Judas at this point in the Renaissance is that he held the purse, and his actions were driven by money. The Franciscans viewed Judas as the antithesis to Christ, he chose to accept money from the Romans for betraying Christ. The Franciscans believed that those who followed in Judas' footsteps would fall from the grace of God. At the time that Lorenzetti created these frescoes, there was a dispute amongst the Franciscans about their interpretation of poverty within the order. Lorenzetti's inclusion of Judas in his frescoes transmits key messaging for the Franciscans about poverty and obedience to God. In the frescoes of the Upper and Lower Basilica of Assisi, Judas appears eleven times total, eight times in the Lower Church, and only three times in the Upper Basilica, with three of the images dating to the Duecento and the balance being produced in the Trecento period.

Judas and his appearances at the Assisi Basilica represent a smaller scale version of what occurred overall in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries in Italy. As Franciscan

[13] S. Maureen Burke and Ambrogio Lorenzetti, "The 'Martyrdom of the Franciscans' by Ambrogio Lorenzetti," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 65, no. 4 (2002), 465, https://doi.org/10.2307/4150672.

[14] Cook, *Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy*, 44.

influence increased, so did the number of times Judas was included in these biblical frescoes. In the twelfth century only 37 images of Judas were produced, 65 in the thirteenth, and the fourteenth (or Trecento) century, we see 201 images produced. There are multiple factors for this phenomenon according to art historian Janet Robson, but it is "the demand created by the new mendicant orders and their rapidly increasing number of churches."[15] This may explain Lorenzetti's choice to include Judas in the *Passion Cycle* for five of the twelve scenes, including scenes like the *Entry to Jerusalem* (Figure 2) where earlier artists may not have included him. In Lorenzetti's Entry to Jerusalem, Judas is the first figure directly behind Christ on his donkey. Whereas in earlier works like Duccio's *Entry to Jerusalem* 1310-11, (Figure 3) does not include Judas.[16] Duccio's *Entry to Jerusalem* is one of the 26 scenes of the *Passion Cycle* that can be found on the back of his masterpiece, the *Maesta*. Duccio includes only eleven of the twelve apostles in the lower-left corner of the scene, flanking Christ upon his entry into Jerusalem. Lorenzetti chose to include Judas where earlier artists had purposefully excluded him from their works.

Inspired by Franciscan ideology is Lorenzetti's portrayal of the suicide of Judas. One of Lorenzetti's known artistic influences, Giotto, chose to portray Judas hanging from a tree in his *Last Judgement: Death of Judas*, ca 1302-05, Padua, Arena Chapel. When painting *The Death of Judas* (Figure 7), Lorenzetti veered from the generally accepted interpretation that Judas hung himself from a fig tree in the valley of Jehoshaphat and chose to paint him hanging from a beam within a stone arch. According to Hayden B. J. Maginnis, there are two stories relating to the suicide of Judas, one that he hangs himself from a fig tree, the other according to a thirteenth-century visitor is that there is a street in Jerusalem called "the street of the arch of

[15] Robson, "Judas and the Franciscans," 31.
[16] Duccio's *Entry to Jerusalem* 1310-11, tempera and gold on wood, Museo dell 'Opera del Duomo, Siena

Judas"[17] and that is where he supposedly hanged himself. The latter story is one that the Franciscans' would have been familiar with as St. Francis founded the Order of the Friar's Minor in Jerusalem in 1209. Within the Order of the Friar's Minor exists a custodian priory known as the Custody of the Holy Land who is charged to protect Jerusalem and the holy land. The Franciscans have been present in Jerusalem since 1217 and would have had knowledge of the street with the arch where Judas had hanged himself.

Narrative Scenes in Opposition

With an accurate timeline in place for the various expansions and decorations of the Lower Church in place, it is critical to note that Pietro Lorenzetti would be working on the South Transept after all other artists and artisans (except for Simone Martini) had completed their work in the church. Lorenzetti placed specific scenes of the *Passion Cycle* in certain locations so that it would correspond with the imagery in the opposite transept.[18] The *Passion Cycle* corresponds with the allegory of Obedience.[19] Cooper notes in his chapter of Cook's *Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy*, that "these cycles were created in dialogue with the tomb."[20] St. Francis viewed himself as an obedient and loyal servant to God and the Franciscans valued that trait. Lorenzetti purposely aligned the subject matter of the frescoes to emphasize the life of St. Francis and create cohesion amongst other artists' works in the narrative of the entire Lower Church.

Lorenzetti also made a powerful link in iconography within the south transept. Opposite *The Crucifixion* in the south transept is the *Stigmata of St. Francis* fresco. Many changes were made to the layout of the Lower Church over time because of the popularity as a pilgrimage site,

[17] Maginnis, "Places Beyond the Seas," 6.
[18] Hayden B.J. Maginnis, "Assisi Revisited: Notes on Recent Observations," *The Burlington Magazine* 117, no. 869 (1975), 512.
[19] Cook, *Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy*, 44.
[20] Ibid., 36.

which most likely led to the removal of an altar that damaged *The Crucifixion* scene of the *Passion Cycle* (see Figure 5 with damage shown). Despite the damage, the monumental scene beckons appreciation and its meaning remains when viewed against the Stigmata of St. Francis. Maginnis notes, "[T]he lower central part of the Crucifixion was damaged by the installation of an altar in 1607, but from a sixteenth-century source we know that soldiers casting lots for Christ's robes were depicted at the foot of his cross."[21] By placing these two monumental scenes opposite one another in the south transept indelibly links the two stories of Christ's crucifixion and St. Francis receiving the stigmata.

The *Crucifixion* scene of the *Passion Cycle* at Assisi is not the only time that Lorenzetti would paint this particular scene of Christ's life. When painting the *Crucifixion*, Lorenzetti relied on the four gospel accounts in the Holy Bible. However, according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which owns Lorenzetti's *The Crucifixion*, 1340s, tempera and gold leaf on wood (Figure 6), in addition to relying on the bible for inspiration, he also used "contemporary devotional literature."[22] Devotional literature were books or other forms of printed materials that contained prayers, psalms or gospels. Lorenzetti would have had access to any of the devotional literature that the Franciscans used at the time. The Franciscans continued to influence Lorenzetti long after he completed the *Passion Cycle* at Assisi.

Conclusion

Though influenced by other artistic styles of European cultures and other Italian Renaissance artists like Duccio and Giotto, the most important artistic influence on Lorenzetti

[21] Maginnis, "Pietro Lorenzetti," 200–201.

[22] The Metropolitan Museum of Art states that Lorenzetti was influenced by Saint Bonaventura's "Meditations on the Life of Christ." Historians like Sarah McNamer have debated and come to the consensus that it was not Saint Bonaventura that wrote the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, nor do we know who wrote them and have settled on pseudo-Bonaventura as the author. McNamer's research also positions the dates of *Meditationes Vitae Christi* authorship between 1336 to 1360. Sarah McNamer, "Further Evidence for the Date of the Pseudo-Bonaventuran Meditationes Vitae Christi," *Franciscan Institute Publications* 50 (1990): 235–61. "The Crucifixion, Pietro Lorenzetti, 1340s.," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.

with respect to the *Passion Cycle* at Assisi were the Franciscans. The Franciscan Order and their beliefs inspired Lorenzetti, not only in the Assisi *Passion Cycle* but in his later works like *The Crucifixion* completed in the 1340s. Lorenzetti's ability to link the scenes of the frescoes from the south transept to the north proved monumental in appeasing the detractors of the Assisi frescoes. Lorenzetti painted new interpretations of biblical scenes that had not been seen before. His portrayal of Judas and the inclusion of Judas in the scenes of the *Passion Cycle* were meant to appeal to the Franciscan Order. Yet, these choices spoke to a larger audience and evoked a stream of religious pilgrimages and eventually art appreciation pilgrimages that would visit the Lower Church.

Figure 1. Pietro Lorenzetti, *Passion Cycle*, fresco, 1416/17-1419, south transept of the Lower Church at the Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi, Italy.

Figure 2. Pietro Lorenzetti, *Entry to Jerusalem*, fresco, 1416/17-1419, south transept of the Lower Church at the Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi, Italy.

Figure 3. Duccio, *Entry to Jerusalem*, tempera and gold on wood, 1311, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena.

Figure 4. Pietro Lorenzetti, *The Last Supper*, fresco, 1416/17-1419, south transept of the Lower Church at the Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi, Italy.

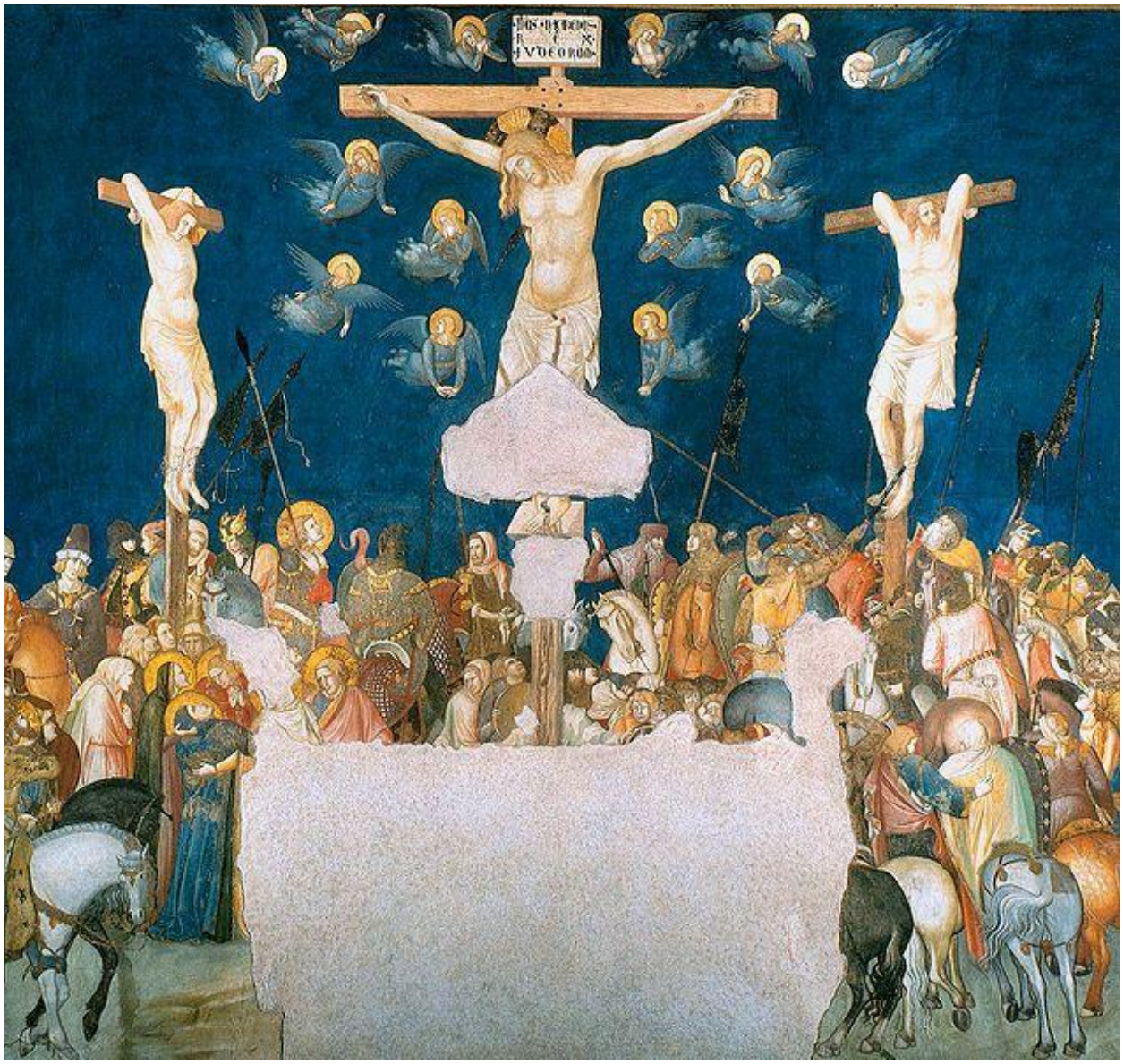

Figure 5. Pietro Lorenzetti, *The Crucifixion*, fresco, 1416/17-1419, south transept of the Lower Church at the Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi, Italy.

Figure 6. Pietro Lorenzetti, The Crucifixion, tempera and gold leaf on wood, 1340s, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 7. Pietro Lorenzetti, *The Death of Judas,*[23] fresco, 1416/17-1419, south transept of the Lower Church at the Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi, Italy.

[23] Luciano Bellosi, *Pietro Lorenzetti at Assisi* (Assisi, Italy: Daca Publication, 1982).

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