

Giotto's famed fresco cycle depicting St. Francis of Assisi restored in Florence.

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A masterpiece by Italian Renaissance master Giotto has been unveiled in Florence after a four-year restoration. The restored frescoes, depicting the life of Saint Francis, offer experts fresh insights into Giotto's revolutionary techniques. (AP video: Isaia Montelione)

By FRANCESCO SPORTELLI Updated 5:03 AM GMT+1, September 13, 2026

FLORENCE, Italy (AP) — A cycle of frescoes by Italian 14th-century master Giotto, depicting key moments in the life of St. Francis of Assisi, has been unveiled after a four-year restoration. The newly vibrant “Stories of St. Francis” were shown to the public last week in the Basilica of Santa Croce, just in time for the 800th anniversary of the saint's death on Oct. 4. Giotto, who died in Florence in 1337, is considered by many to be the greatest Italian painter of his time and is considered the father of European painting. His artistic innovations informed the Renaissance style that developed after he died. Painted between 1317-1325 and adorning a side chapel in the basilica, the St. Francis frescos have regained their richness following the restoration and offer new insights into Giotto's revolutionary techniques and style, restorers said. Emanuela Daffra, superintendent of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, said the restoration removed layers of film and subsequent additions to the frescoes that had obscured Giotto's original vision and now show his “profound capacity for expression.” “Today, we can clearly interpret the gazes,” of the various figures in the scenes, she said. “He knew how to orchestrate them within spaces that emphasized the meaning of the scenes,” with a high degree of detail. The frescoes had been covered by several layers of lime whitewash that had been applied in the 18th century, a common fate for frescoes considered outdated at the time. In 1851, while preparations were underway for a new decoration of the chapel, some of the whitewash was removed, but the process also damaged the works. The frescoes underwent further interventions in the 1950s, before the latest restoration began in 2022. The restoration project consolidated the most fragile parts of the cycle, reduced signs of deterioration, removed deposits and altered materials, and replaced much of the old synthetic grouting from previous restorations with mixtures more compatible with the original plasterwork, restorers said.

During the project, restorers used an innovative no-touch device for ground-penetrating radar analysis of the works, thermal imaging cameras and a laser scanner, used to create a 3D model of the chapel. The Basilica of Santa Croce is one of the largest Franciscan churches in the world and houses the tombs of Michelangelo, Galileo and Machiavelli. The frescoes cover some 180 square meters (nearly 2,000 square feet) within the Bardi Chapel, to the right of the central altar, and recount seven key episodes in the life of Francis. Among them are scenes depicting Francis' renunciation of worldly goods, the approval of the Franciscan Rule, and the trial by fire, in which Francis offers to walk through fire to convert the Sultan of Egypt. The Bardi family – among the wealthiest and most powerful bankers in Europe – acquired the patronage of the chapel and commissioned Giotto to paint its frescoes. Today, that tradition of patronage has evolved into a collective effort to fund the restoration. Some 250 private donors contributed 700,000 euros toward the total restoration cost of 1.3 million euros, according to the Opera di Santa Croce, the organization that cares for and manages the basilica.