

Saint Peter Martyr: The Iconography

St. Peter Martyr or (St Peter Verona) or (of Milan), of the Order of Preachers. On April 6 he suffered martyrdom for the catholic faith. – Roman Martyrology for April 29

In portraits this saint can be recognized by his Dominican habit and a sword or bloody gash in his skull. This refers to the manner of his assassination in 1252. In Caxton's translation of the Golden Legend, "a man of the heretics, which was hired thereto, ran upon him and smote him with his falchion on the head."



The ultimate source of the "falchion" detail is not the Legend but the inquest that followed Peter's death.

It said the gash was caused by "the force of the impact of a falchion, whose blade ends in two horns, like the moon."

We see just such a weapon in the second picture at right.



The description in the inquest led some artists to picture something more like a bill-hook, as in the third picture, and by the time statues of the saint got to Mexico it had become more like a broad-axe, as in the fourth. It is rare for him to be pictured without either a weapon or a gash in his head (exception).

The "heretics" in question were Cathars, a sect that was then gaining strength in northern Italy and against whom Peter had been preaching. The Legend and the decree of canonization speak as if only one of the Cathars did the deed, but the inquest names two.² It also speaks of a second blow to the saint, a dagger thrust into his shoulder, and of a second victim, a friar named Dominic. The second blow and the second friar are included in this painting. Some images picture the assailants as soldiers; others make them desperadoes in tattered clothing.



Many narrative images portray miracles performed through the saint's prayers during and after his lifetime (example - the severed foot). Two narrative cycles are in the chapel in Milan that houses Peter's remains. One is a set of frescos Vincenzo Foppa painted in 1468 in which we see the saint restoring a severed foot, exposing a fake apparition, making a cloud cover his hearers to keep them cool on a summer's day, and writing Credo ("I believe") in the dirt as falls from the assassin's blow. On the elaborate sarcophagus containing the remains, eight panels of relief sculpture follow his story from the preaching and miracles to his assassination and the development of his cult.



Most images of St. Peter Martyr make him a man in middle age, but in a few he is quite young, and some others give him a gray beard. He is often seen grouped with other Dominicans in the Order's churches .

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Often Peter is identified by a gash in the head, as in this detail from a Fra Angelico Nativity.

1141-43 Fresco

Convent of San Marco, Florence, Italy

Apparently friars in convents need to be shushed too, not just kids in libraries. St. Peter Martyr is identified by the knife in his back and the gash in his skull, received when he was murdered by "a man of the heretics" in 1252. As in other Fra Angelico frescos in the convent, his Dominican habit is blue and white, not the usual black and white. The book and palm branch in his left hand are also seen in many of his portraits. His fame is not as a writer, so the book is most likely intended as a sign of his orthodoxy.



MORE IMAGES

1270-80: In this manuscript illumination, the sword has three points, as if a combination of a falchion and a bill-hook.

15th century: A della Robbia Lunette with the Madonna and other Dominican saints.

1440: Pietro di Sano's narrative cycle celebrating miracles of St. Peter Martyr.

1440s: Fra Angelico's frescos of St. Peter Martyr adoring the Cross and scourging himself in the friars' cells in the convent of San Marco, Florence.

1441-43: Fra Angelico's portrait of St. Peter Martyr "shooshing" the monks hangs over the entrance from the convent to the church of San Marco in Florence.

1441-43: The saint appears at the far right in Fra Angelico's The Crucifixion.

DATES

Feast day: April 29

Born 1205 in Verona

Died 1252, entombed in Milan

Canonized one year later, in 1253

Also known as Peter of Verona, less often as Peter of Milan

Acta Sanctorum, April vol. 3, 678-719. Thomas of Lentino's Vita is on pages 686-719, Innocent IV's decree of canonization on pages 700-702, excerpts from the inquest on pages 680-82.

NOTES

1 Acta Sanctorum, April vol. 3, 681.

2 Acta Sanctorum, April vol. 3, 701 (for the decree of canonization) and 681 (for the inquest).