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# The heart in the art

## The Miser's heart miracle

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A famous miracle of Saint Antonio from Padua, the miracle of the Miser's heart (or the miracle of the Usurer's heart) has inspired several artists across the centuries.

In "The life of Saint Antonio", Sicco Polentone narrates that Saint Antonio stood up against the fact that after his funeral, a very rich man was buried in consecrated ground, saying he had to be buried outside the city's walls. The reason was that his soul was destined to Hell, according to the passage in Saint Luke's Gospel in the Mountain Speech (Lc, 6, 45): "Where's your treasure, your heart is there too". At this injunction people remained uncertain; some surgeons were called and they opened the corpse's chest, but to their great astonishment they could not find his heart. According to the Saint's prediction, in fact, the

cardiac muscle was found in the strongbox where the Miser kept all his money.

There are two sculptures representing that episode, both in Padua in Saint Antonio's Basilica. One by Tullio Lombardo dated 1525 and a previous and much more famous one by Donatello (1425), a bas-relief characterized by an absolute perspective and architectonic perfection.

With regard to the Miser's Heart Miracle in Saint Antonio's Basilica, there is another painting dated 1515 attributed to Francesco Vecellio, Tiziano's brother, but the most famous representation is in Florence, inside the Uffizi Gallery, in Filippo Lippi's hall. The author is Francesco di Stefano from Florence, called "Il Pesellino": the platform, a small part of the Noviziato altar, can be dated around 1450 (Fig. 1). According to



**Figure 1.** Francesco di Stefano, called "Il Pesellino". From Predella with Stories of Saints: the Miser's heart miracle. Florence, Uffizi Gallery.

tradition, the two surgeons in the painting and extracting the heart from the chest are the Saints Cosma and Damiano Medici, the doctors' protectors represented in the elegant suite usually worn by the Renaissance doctors: red cloth dress, wide cloak and a cylindrical cap or hood. On

the right of the painting, Saint Antonio witnesses the extraction of the heart from a small pulpit; on the left a servant of the dead Miser finds the heart in his owner's strongbox. Some women in soft dresses watch the scene and listen to the Saint's sermon.