

GIOTTO di Bondone c. 1267-1337

GiOTTO is considered to be the father of Renaissance painting. He is credited as being the first painter to break with the Byzantine style and to introduce a sense of realism and human emotion into painting.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BYZANTINE ART

During the middle ages, the most dominant style of painting was the Byzantine style. This originated from Byzantium (which is now part of modern-day Turkey). The very earliest Christian paintings were made in this Byzantine style, and, as the religion of Christianity spread throughout Europe, so also, this style of art spread too.

Even as far west as Ireland, the earliest pictures of Christ and the saints are made in this style (eg - The Book of Kells - 8th C). In modern times, this Byzantine tradition is still used in the icon paintings of the Eastern Christian Churches (eg - Greek + Russian Orthodox).

Byzantine Art is highly stylised and decorative. The human figure is not portrayed in a realistic manner. The faces are always oval, the eyes also are oval, the noses must be long and thin and the mouths small. The human body is painted in a very flat style, with no sense of weight or volume. There is no use of foreshortening. In Byzantine Art the backgrounds are usually just painted gold.

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GIOTTO di BONDONE was born in a village near Florence (Italy) in 1267. As a boy, he became an apprentice to the artist Cimabue, from whom, he learned the traditions of Byzantine painting. By the time Giotto was twenty years old, he had already acquired a reputation as a great artist.

The majority of Giotto's works are frescoes or wall paintings (so called because they are painted on the wall while the plaster is still wet). Frescoes were slow and difficult to make and Giotto, like most other artists of that time would have had a team of assistants and apprentices to help him. Giotto worked on many commissions during his life, at several towns and cities in Italy, however, his most important work is to be found at the Arena Chapel in Padua. In the Arena Chapel, Giotto painted a series of frescoes which shows the stories of the life of the Virgin Mary and then the life of Christ, from his birth to his crucifixion. By the time of Giotto's death in Florence in 1337, he had become the most renowned artist in Italy, Giotto was acclaimed for releasing the flat Byzantine figures from their golden backgrounds and infusing them with a true sense of human expression and emotion. After Giotto's death, there was very little real development of painting for about one hundred years, this seems very strange, that no artist was able to continue on the innovations which Giotto had started, but perhaps, we can think of Giotto as being a man before his time, whose beautiful frescoes were to change the direction of European painting.

Shortly after Giotto's death, the poet Boccaccio described the painter as a founder of a new art. From this point onwards, the legend of Giotto grew. He became known as the man who brought painting to life, the father of Renaissance painting.

Giotto's achievement had been to return to the forms of nature. Abandoning the stiff, conventional forms of Byzantine Art, he had captured the appearance of the world - as it was, painting with a new directness and spontaneity. In doing so, he had revived the realism of classical (Roman + Greek) Art, which had been lost during the middle ages.

Today, this view of Giotto as a 'natural' or realistic painter may seem surprising. In many respects Giotto's art may strike us as somewhat primitive or naive. His simple block-like figures and rudimentary landscapes do not appear particularly realistic when compared to later European painting, but we must remember that Giotto was the first to break away from icon painting and to attempt such realism. What we must admire is Giotto's ability to extract from nature its essential forms



1 CIMABUE *Madonna and Child*

and to reproduce them in a simple expressive way. This applies particularly to Giotto's handling of figures. Giotto did not attempt to paint his figures in detail, he reduced them to their most basic forms, painting them as a series of simple shapes which were uncannily expressive of the emotion within.

It is the frescoes in the Arena Chapel which express most clearly the unique quality of Giotto's Art. In each of the scenes in the chapel, Giotto reduces his figures to their most simplest and most dramatic forms.



The Vision of Joachim (left) As a painter of narrative sequences, Giotto reduced his scenes to a few essential components. Here, the rocky ledge not only echoes the figure of the angel but leads us to the sleeping Joachim. Similarly, the pyramidal figure of Joachim – the epitome of sleep – is further emphasized by the shape of the roof of the hut and of the rock immediately behind.

The descending angel (detail right) As swift and direct as an arrow, the angel swoops down to appear as a vision in Joachim's dream. The angel's beauty and grace are in keeping with the message he brings.

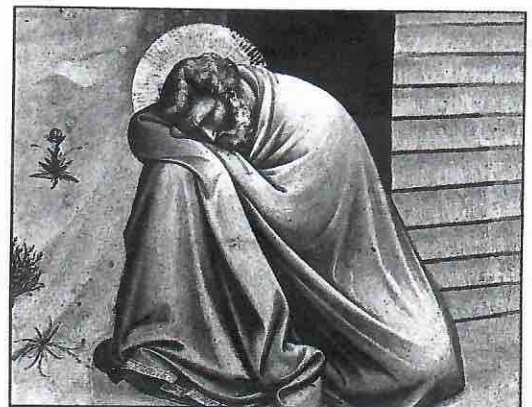
Arena Chapel, Padua



TRADEMARKS

Solid Form

Giotto's figures are easily distinguishable by their solid, block-like forms, clearly shown here. The apparent solidity of his figures is emphasized by the bold, simple lines of their drapery. The drapery in Giotto's works is often stretched fairly tightly across the body. This gives the forms a powerful sense of volume.



Giotto's Power of Expression

One of Giotto's greatest powers in his narrative cycles was his extraordinary ability to convey human emotion. Joy, grief, anger, fear, and also the innermost thoughts of his subjects are all rendered with an intensity of expression that was unprecedented in his time. Giotto's teacher, Cimabue, for example, had succeeded in portraying figures with much greater naturalism than his predecessors, but never embraced the complexity of human emotions conveyed in the work of his gifted pupil.

One of the devices frequently used by Giotto to intensify his expressive effect is to make two faces confront one another. This helps to focus attention on the centre of the drama. He also portrays his figures in simple, basic shapes which makes his images very easy to read. The best examples of Giotto's great expressive powers are those scenes which mark a climax to the narrative sequence. The illustrations shown here vividly demonstrate the range of his abilities.



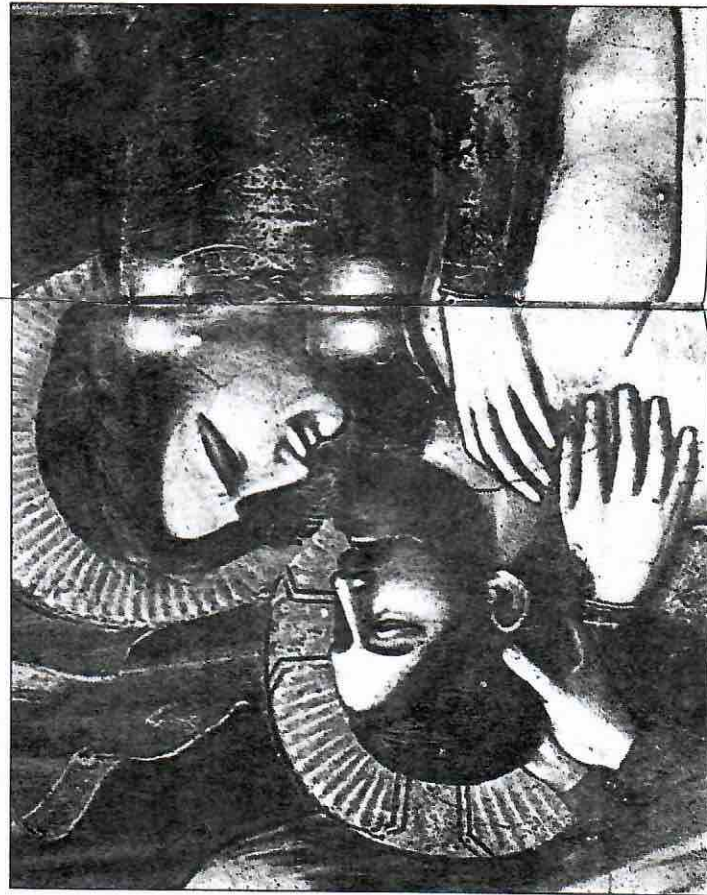
Detail: The Meeting at the Golden Gate/Arena Chapel, Padua

A tender embrace (left) This detail showing the meeting of the Virgin's parents, Joachim and Anna, at the Golden Gate is a striking example of the way in which Giotto simplifies forms for emotional effect. The embracing couple are enclosed in a circle, formed by the writhing of their two halos and the hands of Anna as she gently clasps her husband's head. This greatly enhances the sense of intimacy. The rendition is made all the more moving as the reason for the embrace is that the previously barren couple have just learned that they will soon have a child.



Detail: The Massacre of the Innocents/Arena Chapel, Padua

The Massacre of the Innocents (above) In this scene Giotto portrays two clearly opposing groups of figures to emphasize the violence and the horror. On the left are the brutal attackers, Herod's soldiers, from whose blows the terrified women victims try desperately to protect their children.



Detail: The Lamentation/Arena Chapel, Padua



Detail: The Lamentation/Arena Chapel, Padua

Grieving angels (above) These extraordinary angels hover above the mourners in the Lamentation scene and mirror the tragedy taking place below. Their bodies twist and turn in postures of grief, some weep into their hands and others wail aloud. Never before had heavenly beings shown such a dramatic display of human sadness.

The Lamentation (detail right) The overwhelming despair expressed by the Virgin Mary as she clasps the dead body of Christ to her is plainly that of a mother. The closeness of their two heads and the way in which the grief-stricken Virgin encircles her lifeless son with her arms, highlights the deep tragedy of this scene executed by Giotto.



Detail: The Betrayal of Christ/Arena Chapel, Padua

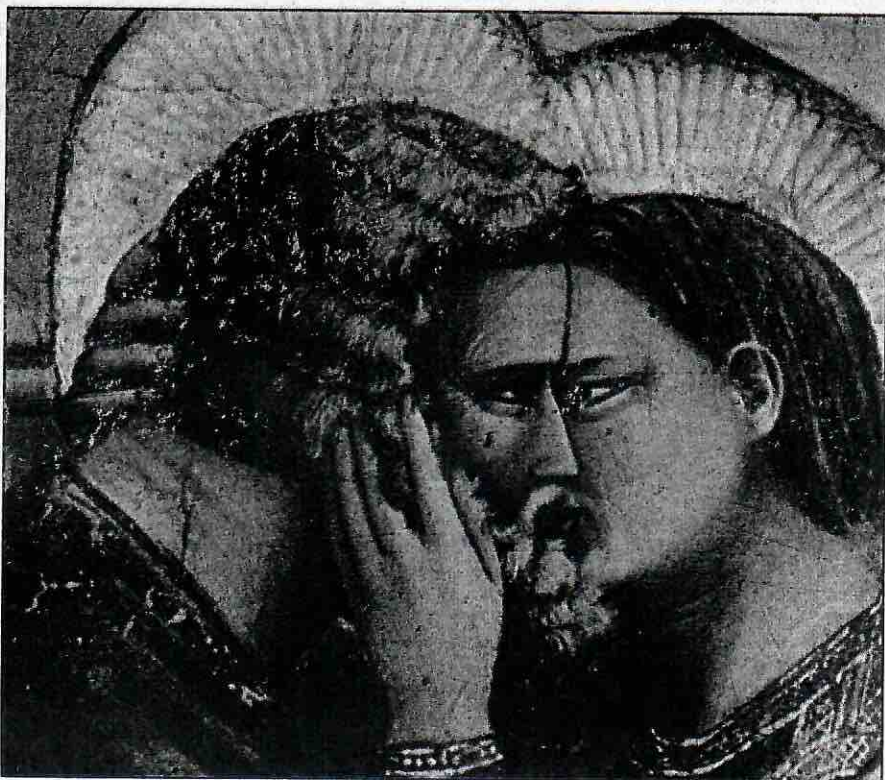
The moment of truth (right) In this detail from The Betrayal of Christ, Giotto chose to depict the most psychologically dramatic moment. Instead of showing the actual kiss of Judas, he portrays the split second before. Judas, his lips drawn into a kiss, recoils in horror as he realizes that Christ knows of his intended betrayal. Christ, resigned to his fate and encircled by his betrayer's huge yellow cloak, stares calmly into Judas's guilty eyes.

Giotto's Power of Expression

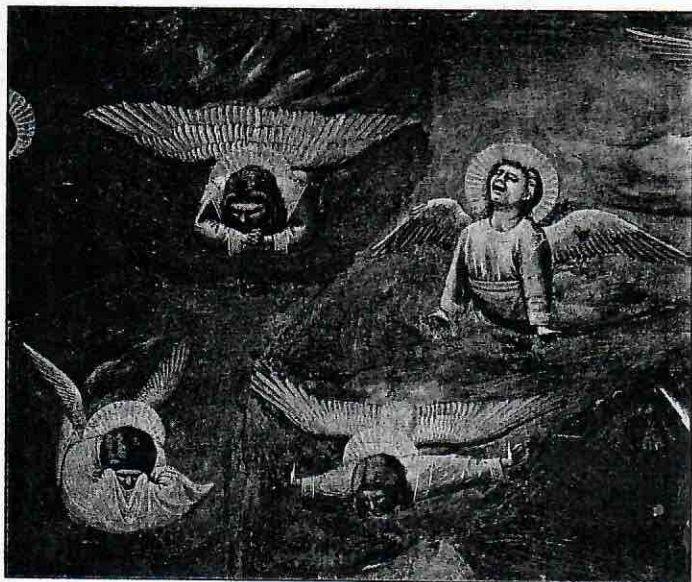
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Scala



Detail: The Meeting at the Golden Gate/Arena Chapel, Padua



Detail: The Lamentation/Arena Chapel, Padua

Grieving angels

(above) These extraordinary angels hover above the mourners in The Lamentation scene and mirror the tragedy taking place below. Their bodies twist and turn in postures of grief, some weep into their hands and others wail aloud. Never before had heavenly beings shown such a dramatic display of human sadness.

The Lamentation

(detail right) The overwhelming despair expressed by the Virgin Mary as she clasps the dead body of Christ to her is plainly that of a mother. The closeness of their two heads and the way in which the grief-stricken Virgin encircles her lifeless son with her arms, highlights the deep tragedy of this scene executed by Giotto.

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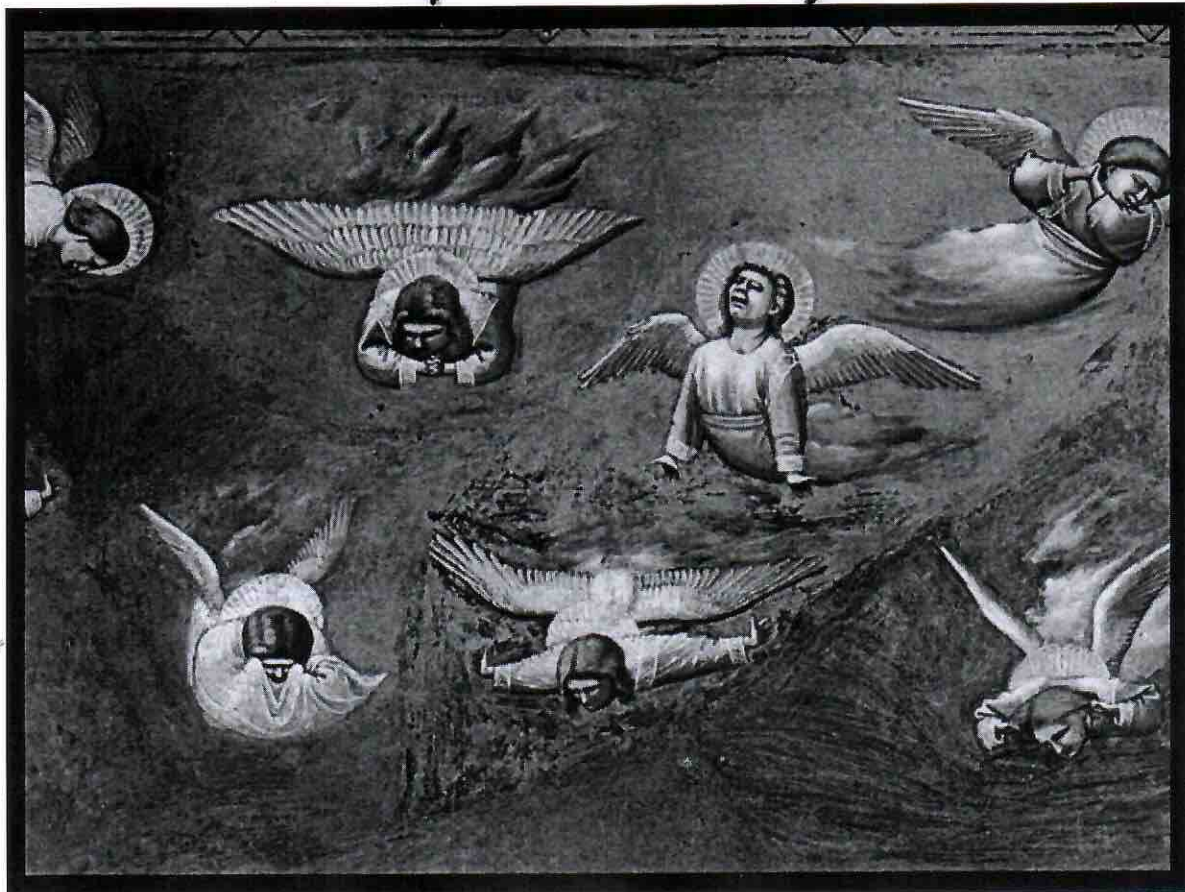


The Lamentation of Christ / The deposition of Christ / The mourning of Christ. - Giotto - ARENA Chapel (Scrovegni chapel) in PADUA, Italy (1303-5)

"this is justly one of the most famous frescos in the Arena Chapel, for few representations of this subject have approached its feelings of heartrending grief. Once again, as in the Betrayal / arrest of Christ - Giotto has used almost eyeball to eyeball conjunction of two faces to intensely dramatic effect. Here it is the Virgin, her face contorted with pain, who stares into her son's unseeing eyes. The other figures vary in their reactions to the tragedy - some look on stoically, but the angels are unable to contain their anguish and rend the sky with their wails" - Giotto in Great Artist Series "

Hands being wrung
or clasped together

Features of face
are contorted
to show agony
being felt.



← hands
are clasped
and brought
to face to
combine
and add
more
grief to
the sobbing
Angel.

↑ ↑ ↑
Arms + hands cast out - as if to reject

Hand
gathers
up gown to use as
a tissue to dry tears

The sobbing Angels that hover above the scene of the dead Christ below acts to mirror what is happening below - i.e. the grief of Mary, but it does so in a way that magnifies it. Giotto uses hand gestures and facial expressions that echo's the sorrow on earth being felt in heaven by the death of Christ.

In the Lamentation of Christ Giotto uses bold outlines to depict the expression of grief in a way that is more direct and powerful than any words in the bible can explain

GIOTTO PAINTS A CROWDED SCENE IN WHICH HE CAPTURES AND FREEZES A MOMENT IN TIME BETWEEN 2 INDIVIDUALS THAT CHANGE THE COURSE OF HISTORY

This club or baton directs our gaze to the scene of Judas and Jesus, eyeball to eyeball - just before

Here there are 8 rods/spears being held in the air behind Jesus & Judas. This is Giotto creating a focal point for our eyes to be drawn to the face to face interaction of Jesus with Judas

The arm of St Peter and his knife

points us to the ear of the soldier that he is about to cut-off, but also points us to the encounter between Jesus and Judas.



Hands here point us to the faces of Judas and Jesus

" THE ARREST OF CHRIST / THE KISS OF JUDAS " GIOTTO DI BONDONE

In this fresco, Giotto depicts an event in which Christ is being captured by Roman soldiers. Judas, a follower of Christ had been paid to identify Jesus in the crowd. Judas had explained to the Romans that the person whom I will kiss is Judas. Giotto shows us the scene at the point where Judas is about to kiss Jesus and betray him.

The sweep of Judas' cloak draws our eyes to the face to face scene of him with Christ at the moment when he is about to betray him