

# Giotto as the first renaissance painter essay

[Art & Culture](#), [Renaissance](#)



During the Dark Ages, there was emergence of various types of arts following civilization in Europe. Medieval period of art covers a span of over a 1000 years ranging from about 2nd Century to 16th century, marking great development in the history of art. After series of evolution of arts during this period, Gothic art emerged in 12th century marking a significance period that led to the development of Italian Renaissance.

Behind Italian Renaissance was a great painter and architect, Giotto di Bondone, who existed in the 13th and 14th century. “ The Renaissance was a period of artistic and cultural achievement in Europe from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. It was characterized by a number of distinctive ideas about life, specifically secularism, individualism, humanism, and materialism.”[1]

Renaissance art revolutionized the history of art in Italy and the entire Europe. Pietro Cavallini, an Italian mosaic designer and a painter, is a contemporary of Giotto di Bondone. He made significant contribution to the Renaissance in Rome and expansive parts of Europe. Since they were contemporaries of Renaissance period, how does the work of Pietro Cavallini challenge the idea of Giotto as the first Renaissance painter?

Giotto di Bondone was an Italian architect and a painter who lived from 1267 to 1337. Since he was a Roman Catholic, his paintings and mosaics reflected his religious beliefs. His contemporaries credited him as an expert artist during the Italian Renaissance because he was a brilliant sculptor and painter, as well as an astonishing architect. Giotto di Bondone gained prominence in arts during late 13th and early 14th century when people were

transforming their lifestyles and traditions from medieval period to Renaissance period.

During the time of transformation, Giotto di Bondone emerged as a great painter for he received more credit from his contemporary artists, religious leaders, and politicians.[2] Due to his immense contribution to Renaissance, particularly great Italian paintings, many people considered him the father of European painting. His artistic works and medieval art formed foundation of the Renaissance that led to revolution of arts in Europe.

Although Giotto di Bondone had humble background, Comune of Florence did employ him and this gave him an opportunity to expand his artistic talents thus making him a great painter in Italy. Giotto di Bondone was very talented in arts because art historians acknowledge that he did not have any knowledge about arts yet he was able to depict his paintings in three-dimension.

During medieval period, artists were only able to paint in two-dimension but Giotto's paintings made significant transformation in painting styles by introducing three-dimensional painting style.[3] Giotto di Bondone biography shows that he got his early education from Cimabue, a Florentine painter.

Many artists believe that Cimabue took Giotto di Bondone when he was a boy and taught him varied artistic skills that shaped his talent in arts. Thus, great painting and architect skills that Giotto di Bondone had came from the teachings of Cimabue. His paintings depict that Giotto di Bondone liked natural and religious objects as he depicted saints and religious icons in

diverse frescoes, common in cathedrals. Therefore, Giotto's inclination to nature and religion made him a naturalist painter during Renaissance.

Great works of paintings made Giotto di Bondone become a prominent painter during Renaissance. His works included embellishments of cathedrals and chapels in places such as Assisi, Padua, Naples, Italy, and Florence. The masterworks of Giotto include the decorations done on the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua in about 1305, generally called as the Arena Chapel. His work in the Arena chapel is a strong depiction of Roman naturalism that is an unambiguously the key to the Florentine Renaissance artists[4].

The work marked Giotto's existence as a Renaissance artist and therefore gained enough fame on it because it entails lives of the Virgin Mary and the Christ. Frescoes that he created made him so popular that the church of Florentine assigned him another noble task of designing the bell tower, Campanile, in 1334. These two works, the Florence cathedral and the Arena Chapel, are the works that Giotto di Bondone claims complete authenticity and makes him the great painter of Renaissance.

As aforementioned, the significant frescoes and paintings of Giotto di Bondone are Arena Chapel in Padua, Basilica in Assisi, San Francesco monastery in Assisi, and Santana Croce in Florence and Oganissanti Madonna in Florence. These works portray his excellence in painting, which has earned him great fame in the history and development of arts during Renaissance.

The paintings and frescoes depict three-dimensional icons of catholic saints and apostles, and this represented the highest point of his paintings. However, the fresco cycle of the life of San Francesco depicted on the upper church at Assisi by Giotto di Bondone was an attribution. Some of the German art historians, who supported Giotto di Bondone, have received criticism because there were a number of artists who contributed to the fresco paintings in Assisi.

One of his early works of around 1290 includes the Dominicans at Santa Maria Novella, which depicts the frescoes of Annunciation and Oganissanti Madonna.[5] Giotto had enormous fame in his time as Padua for the Scrovegni Chapel and various cathedrals invited him to limn the life of Virgin Mary and Christ. Thus, great paintings and frescoes made Giotto di Bondone the first Renaissance painter.

Pietro Cavallini is an Italian mosaic designer and a painter who lived between 1259 and 1330 in Rome. Like Giotto di Bondone, he was born in Rome and became a Roman Catholic, thus his paintings carried religious figures and icons as well. He was a mosaic designer and worked during the period of Renaissance where many artists credited him as a leading artist of his time.

Other artists consider Pietro Cavallini a painter who actually transformed from the Byzantine style towards classical forms of art when dealing with the elements of space, illusion, and naturalism in his work. He made masterpieces in fresco and mosaics, which presented three-dimensional forms, precluding stagnant and static paintings and enhancing the areas that portrayed reality in forms and illustrating figures that were influential.

His work gained prominence in painting because he was an expert in mosaic designing. Pietro Cavallini first legitimate work is fresco cycles for the Basilica di San Paolo Fuori le Mura, which illustrated the stories of the Old and New Testament in the Bible.[6] Fresco cycles were Cavallini's masterpieces as they depicted individuality in style and a cosmos that was yet unknown in the medieval art. Like Giotto's tendency of naturalism, fresco cycles portrayed the elements of naturalism in his artistic skills.

Apart from fresco cycles, Pietro Cavallini also portrayed naturalism in his paintings of Basilica of San Francesco d' Assisi in Assisi, which was in honor of St. Francis late in the 13 century. Being a Roman Catholic, he did the paintings to reflect religious icons and saints. Due to great deal of similarity between the works in San Francisco and that of the Florentine artist Giotto, he received much credit from some of the fresco paintings, although many of the art historians believe it to be a false claim.

Despite many criticisms that tend to degrade artistic ability of Pietro Cavallini, apse mosaics and fresco cycles are the major works that have managed to stand the test of time.[7] The apse of mosaics in the church of Santa Maria Trastevere illustrated the scenes of Virgin Mary and her baby. Since this illustration forms central part of Catholic beliefs, Pietro Cavallini gained prominence in religious spheres, which made him continue in making religious paintings as well as mosaics.

Moreover, fresco cycles in the church of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere portrayed the history of the church including its destiny and judgment of Christians. Such delineations depicted a great message for many Christians

and enhanced Cavallini's prominence during Renaissance. Pietro Cavallini used incredible solid of drawings, contemporary styles of art, subtle colors, and emphatic space, as rendered in uniform placement of the apostles or other religious icons.

Although most of his works hardly survived, art historians preserved his works in pristine conditions, which attests his great contribution to the revolution of art in Renaissance. Art historians have saved and preserved various pieces of work such as the artifacts of the last judgment and fresco cycles as significant work of Pietro Cavallini that contributed to the emergence of Renaissance in Rome and Europe during 14th to 16th centuries.

Apse mosaics and fresco paintings are great works of Pietro Cavallini that made him prominent during Renaissance and in modern art. Fresco paintings identify him as one of the renaissance painters who transformed the nature of paintings in Renaissance by introducing three-dimensional painting and naturalism. Pietro Cavallini learned great deal of artistic skills in painting from his contemporary, Giotto di Bondone, and incorporated the concept of naturalism.

Moreover, he painted the apse fresco in St. Giorgio in Velabro, which was a ravishing piece of art done with beautified technique of fresco and made reforms in the area of dignified and linear arts. Sharing his contemporary knowledge and contributing to Renaissance, Pietro Cavallini created masterpieces in fresco painting and mosaic. As a proof of his contribution to

the Renaissance and modern art, there are some remains of his work from 1320s in the church of St. Maria Donna Regina in Naples.

Historians believe that medieval art formed the foundation of the Renaissance art, which spread across Europe between 14th and 16th centuries. Among other great artists, Giotto di Bondone and Pietro Cavallini are prominent painters who revolutionized the history of arts in Europe. Although Giotto di Bondone seemed to be more prominent during the Renaissance period, the artistic works of Pietro Cavallini were very competitive and thus he was equally famous in some Roman cities.

Since Giotto di Bondone was prominent in Rome and Europe as a painter and architect, Comune of Florence employed him and this offered him an opportunity to explore his artistic talents relative to Pietro Cavallini. Giotto di Bondone “ is famous for his frescoes such as St. Francis Preaching to the Birds. His realistic paintings replaced the artificial two-dimensional art represented in the Middle Ages and designed a bell tower, usually called Giotto’s Tower, for the Cathedral of Florence.”[8]

He specialized in religious frescoes that were in cathedrals, which increased his fame during Renaissance period. Many of his contemporaries like Pietro Cavallini learned from his paintings and employed skills gained in development of novel artistic styles that revolutionized history of art.

Critical analysis of the contributions that Pietro Cavallini made to the Renaissance period challenge the idea that Giotto di Bondone was the first



Renaissance painter. The work of Pietro Cavallini includes Santa Maria mosaics and Santa Cecilia paintings that dominated cathedrals in Rome.

“ The mosaics and paintings of the Life of the Virgin in the apse in Santa Maria in Trastevere are still typically attributed to Cavallini because of the remains of his name in an inscription found in the seventh-century watercolor copy of the mosaics.”[9] Following his artistic works, Pietro Cavallini was a great mosaic designer and a painter who worked for the kings. Since he did make great arts, many people have credited his work to other artists thus affecting his prominence and contribution to the Renaissance art.

Revolution of art during 13th century in Northern Italy stemmed from metaphysical swing, a crevice that was eventually going to separate and define religion and science. Medieval artists have been grappling with religious issues during the late antique period that ended about 11th century paving way for the emergence of Renaissance.

At the transition of medieval art and Renaissance art are two great artists that marked significant contributions, which marked revolution in art. “ Although at a crucial time of transformation in Europe, the early fourteenth-century court in Naples defies definition as either medieval or Renaissance,”[10] thus making it a transition period.

This means that Giotto di Bondone and Pietro Cavallini existed in the transition of medieval and Renaissance that saw revolution of art. Since both artists were contemporaries, Giotto di Bondone became more prominent as a

Renaissance painter for he concentrated in paintings while Pietro did both painting and mosaic design. Moreover, given that introduction of three-dimensional paintings improved clarity and emotional depiction of objects, Giotto di Bondone earned much credit and fame.

During the 13th century, everyone questioned philosophy of medieval painting because it had elements of barbaric art, late antique art and classical art. The philosophy of art at that time dictated that direct experience was the only way of understanding complexity of the world, which prohibited medieval wisdom and initiated revolution in art.

During this period, there were tremendous changes that include application of scientific, reawakening of classical age new ways of rationalism and defining self-identity. From general perspective of Renaissance, "...historians have shown that the Medieval Era, or middle Ages, did produce art, architecture, literature, and other ideas in law, languages, and economics that influenced Europe in the fourteenth century and provided the foundation for the Renaissance." [11]

During the period of transition, many factors of civilization such as politics, society, religion, education, and arts played critical role as integral elements of Renaissance. This means that Giotto di Bondone and Pietro Cavallini made their own unique contribution to the Renaissance of art though at various capacities.

Renaissance marked line of contrast between medieval art and modern art. In painting art, it was a transformation from flat and flat Byzantine images to

more naturalistic depiction in three-dimension. In three-dimensional delineations, the artists incorporate emotional aspect of the painting thus enhancing attraction to the eyes of observers.

Giotto di Bondone and Pietro Cavallini employed three-dimensional skills in their paintings, which increased their prominence during Renaissance making them the leading artists of the revolution. Pietro Cavallini, being a student and contemporary artist of Giotto di Bondone, gained enough experience in arts to warrant recognition as one of the Renaissance painter as well.

Art historians acknowledge that both Giotto and Cavallini worked together making “ St. Francis cycles of frescoes in the Upper Church at San Francesco at Assisi ... also worked in Rome on the projects associated with ecclesiastical and papal patrons, which Vasari noted and later scholars have thus studied.” [12] Thus, Pietro Cavallini had equal ability in paintings as Giotto di Bondone, and deserved credit as one of the Renaissance painters.

Giotto’s paintings in the Arena Chapel in Padua, which were commissioned by the Scrovegni family and completed between 1304 and 1306, are extraordinary.

However, it is debatable with the altarpiece for the Florentine Church of the Ognissanti, finished about 1310, that he first attains the realism we associate with the Renaissance. Here we see a Madonna sculpted in lustrous light, her underlying figure and ravenous shape revealed, rather than

covered, by her clothing, the essence of full-breasted motherhood, which contemplates and stares directly at us with all-knowing tranquility.

The Oganissanti altarpiece is now in Florence cathedral where it sits between two altarpieces with the same theme, done late 13th century, by Duccio and Cimabue. The Oganissanti altarpiece was a great work of Pietro Cavallini that boosted his prominence as a painter who made significant contribution to the revolution of the arts during Renaissance.

Rich patrons were responsible for the revolution of Renaissance for they mobilized resources and employed artists who could make arts that suit their political and religious interests. Bardi and Peruzzi were two patrons who commissioned chapels ornamented by Giotto in Santa Croce in Florence. Due to religious and political patronage of the paintings, Giotto di Bondone had an upper hand for the patrons favored him relative to Pietro Cavallini.

Giotto di Bondone gained patronage when “ he painted the chapels of the Bardi and Peruzzi in Santa Croce in Florence before leaving for Naples, so perhaps the artist came to Robert’s attention through those families.”[13] On the other hand, Pietro Cavallini arts did not attract much political and religious patronage, hence did not gain much prominence as a great Renaissance painter.

Giotto di Bondone and Pietro Cavallini were great artists who made significant contribution to the revolution of art during the Renaissance. The Renaissance occurred due to cumulative knowledge of arts of the medieval period that lasted for over 1000 years. The two artists lived in 13th and 14th

centuries where there was transition of medieval art and Renaissance art, thus they participated actively in the revolution of art.

Although Giotto di Bondone appeared to have gained great prominence as a Renaissance painter, Pietro Cavallini also had equal capacity. The prominence of Giotto di Bondone was due to religious and political patronage that he received, thus enhancing his competitive advantage and drowning Pietro Cavallini's fame during the Renaissance.

Fleck, Cathleen. The Rise of the Court Artist: Cavallini and Giotto in Fourteenth-Century Naples. *Art History* 31, no. 4, (September 2008): 460-483.

Hetherington, Paul. Pietro Cavallini, Artistic Style, and Patronage in Late Medieval Rome. *The Burlington Magazine* 114, no. 2 (January 1972): 826-38.

Ross, Leslie. Artistic Achievement of the Renaissance 1350-1550. *The Journal of Art* 45, no. 11, (May 1996): 33-46.

Smart, Alastair. *The dawn of Italian painting, 1250-1400*. Ithaca. New York: Cornell University, 1978.

Zanardi, Bruno, and Donal Cooper. Book Reviews: Giotto e Pietro Cavallini. *La Questione di Assisi e il Cantiere Medievale Della Pittura a Fresco*. *The Burlington Magazine* 146, no. 1220, (November 2004): 764