

Giotto di bondone: art style analysis



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Giotto di Bondone (c. 1277-1337) was a Florentine painter who is widely celebrated as one of the most revolutionary and influential artists in the Trecento Italy. The 16th century art historian Giorgio Vasari praises Giotto's gifted artistic talent, intellectual acumen, and pictorial precision: " He became such an excellent imitator of Nature that he completely banished that crude Greek style and revived the modern and excellent art of painting." Giotto transformed the flat Byzantine approach by pursuing the naturalistic style that had been neglected by his artistic predecessors. Through close observation of nature, Giotto gave life to forms on a two-dimensional surface. Arguably, his most renowned work is the fresco cycle in Arena Chapel, Padua. Completed around 1305, the fresco paintings in the interior of Arena Chapel were commissioned by Enrico Scrovegni, who dedicated the chapel to the Virgin of Charity in order to repent his and his father Reginaldo's sins of usury. In the thirty-eight scenes of the cycle, Giotto employed a dramatic narrative program. The episodes not only serve as a visual language showing the lives of the Virgin and Christ, but also reveal a sense of drama and display human interiority that demand the viewers' intellectual and psychological engagement. How was Giotto able to convey drama and achieve communicative potential? This paper attempts to answer the question by analyzing his artistic style.

Before embarking on our discussion of how Giotto's artistic elements are dictated in Arena Chapel, we should first look at the organization of the fresco cycle. The thirty-eight episodes are arranged in three registers; the lives of Mary and her parents, Joachim and Anna, begin on the top level, the life and the mission of Christ are depicted on the middle level, and the

Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Christ are on the lower level. The base level below has grisaille paintings alternating with the Virtues and Vices, which are painted in shades of gray in order to mimic marble and sculpture. The Last Judgment, perhaps the climax of the narrative cycle, fills up the majority of the west entrance wall. The barrel-vaulted nave of the chapel is executed in blue—the color that is echoed in all of the backgrounds of the panels, thus enhancing coherence. Each fresco section is surrounded has ornamental borders that not only function as dividing frames but also serve to heighten the realistic quality of the painted scenes.

Emotionalism in Giotto's narrative is strengthened by his technique of averting some of his figures from the viewers' eyes. He does this consciously by positioning his figures on their backs to the viewers or showing figures only in their profiles. His treatment of figures shows his interest in revealing stories and portraying emotions by concealing some forms. Lamentation in the lower register of the left wall from the chapel's entrance shows the essence of his technique. The two mourners who are seen from their backs are not incidental in their positions but play an important role in communicating human drama. The mourning figure in the left corner is holding the head of Christ while the other is holding his right hand. Although we as viewers are not able to witness their facial expressions, we are able to feel the presence of their grief in absence. Through 'inexplicit' images, Giotto is allowing the viewers to internally create an image and feel their silent mournings. Perhaps the reason that the seated mourners are so simple and voluminous is that Giotto expects the viewers to add details through our own imagining. A similar technique can be seen in Giotto's Kiss of Judas,

where a relatively small sized figure in a hooded cloak is turning his back to the viewers. Right in front of the figure is Peter stretching his right hand to cut Malchus' ear. Giotto included the anonymous figure to let the viewers contemplate and imagine the face of a tormentor who participates in the atrocity. In this way, onlookers can experience deeper emotional responses and relate to the biblical narrative in a much more empathetic way.

Baxandall calls such experience a “visualizing meditation” and states that by omitting details, an artist “complements the beholder’s interior vision.”

Giotto renders psychological drama through striking gestures and facial expressions on his figures. These elements are the most evident in Lamentation. The ten angels above the body of Christ are frantically flying and thrusting their bodies toward the viewers. They are moving with such great speed and energy that their robes seem to melt into the sky as they dart through the air. Their ghastly expressions of grief allow viewers to empathize. It is also crucial to note that none of them looks the same; each is individualistic in his or her poses and expressions. The angel on the lower right side is wrenching her hair with her two hands while another has her arms outstretched. The one in the middle is dashing toward the viewers with his mouth half open while another covers his face with his drapery. The motions, contortions, and foreshortening of their bodies are so powerfully depicted that their agony and despair are almost palpable. The movement of Saint John the Evangelist is also dramatically represented. He is standing up and bending his body to look down at Christ while throwing his arms back as if in utter shock and disbelief. The pain is apparent in his contorted face. His posture is evocative of the cross, which symbolizes the suffering of Christ.

The gesture of Saint John the Evangelist not only heightens the psychological drama but also tells us that he has the room to do it. Thus, it creates an illusionistic space, depth and perspective that make the narrative panel much more true to life. Through a combination of different gestures and expressions, Giotto offers a range of sadness that provokes a powerful emotional response.

Giotto's narrative is much more dramatized by its sensory impact. Giotto is successful in not only communicating emotions visually but also is effective in appealing to the tactile and olfactory senses. In Giotto's Meeting at the Golden Gate, viewers can feel the affinity through the touch of Joachim and Anna at the bridge in front of the Golden Gate. Anna is wrapping her hand around the neck of Joachim and her other hand is embracing his cheek while Joachim is drawing Anna toward him. Giotto positioned them so close to each other that their bodies and faces seem to merge in to "one flesh". It is the touch that intensifies the old couple's blissful emotion. By stimulating the tactile perception of the viewers, Giotto is able to communicate with the psychology of the viewers' minds. As Gombrich writes, it is touch that "enable[s] us to reconstitute the three-dimensional form in our minds." Giotto has also captured the drama of human interaction in Raising of Lazarus. Here, Giotto included two figures on the right who stand directly beside Lazarus. Both have covered their mouths and noses with their cloaks and one of them is even turning away from the scene as if the odor emanating from the decayed body of Lazarus was too sickening to tolerate. Their reactions to the smell add a depth of reality and signal the interaction among the characters portrayed. Through the presence of the two covered figures,

Giotto has captured the feeling of unpleasantness. In fact, by appealing to the olfactory senses, Giotto allowed the viewers to become active participants rather than passive observers.

Giotto's series of fresco paintings in Arena Chapel are the culmination of his artistic skills. Various techniques are combined to communicate with the viewers. Through the concealment, gestures, expressions and tactility of his figures, Giotto provokes a strong emotional response from the viewers who are led to meditate upon his paintings. He has consciously employed his intelligence, ability and precision to suffuse his narrative scenes with human drama, interaction and emotions. Indeed, they are not merely well crafted mural paintings to be passively enjoyed but are combinations of powerful narratives to be actively interpreted. Ultimately, Giotto's interest in human experience and naturalism has made the narrative cycle in Arena Chapel so profound and communicative.