

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

Giotto

Edited by

Anne Derbes

Hood College, Frederick, Maryland

Mark Sandona

Hood College, Frederick, Maryland



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1 Giotto Past and Present: An Introduction

Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona

The richest man in Padua, the king of Naples, powerful bankers of Florence, a member of the Papal curia, perhaps even a pope, seek him out. During his lifetime, Dante, in the *Purgatorio* (XI, 94–6; c. 1315), cites him as an example of the transience of temporal fame. Only a few years after his death in 1336, the chronicler Giovanni Villani celebrates him as “the most sovereign master of painting in his time” (c. 1340). For Boccaccio, he assumes a nearly mythic stature: he “brought back to light an art which had been buried for centuries” (*Decameron* VI, 5).¹ Similar sentiments, crediting him with the rebirth of painting itself, recur throughout the quattrocento. By the sixteenth century, Vasari’s assessment is both a culmination of praise and a guarantee of his position among the elite of the Italian Parnassus.² Even through much of the twentieth century, appraisals have often echoed the Romantic cult of genius epitomized by Ruskin’s adulation.³ Giotto, or we should say the idea of “Giotto,” has traveled a great distance from trecento Italy. Would Giotto di Bondone (c. 1266–1336) recognize any of the portraits we have painted of him?

Scholars today tend to resist the sort of grand proclamations we have just quoted. Postmodern sensibilities find litanies of admiration suspect; we are more comfortable referring to the “myth” of Giotto than to the dazzling accomplishments of a single genius. The problem is not merely that the entire premise of the individual genius can seem to be tainted with the commercialism of the marketplace, but that the question of authorship may seem, increasingly, irrelevant. For historians who are concerned with other issues in visual culture – such as the interpretation of images and their reception by diverse audiences – debates about the precise attribution of a given work may seem to be of little import.

Even scholars who are not ready to jettison traditional concerns about style and authorship question the notion of Giotto as a single-handed

resuscitator of a moribund past. The painters of the late duecento, so long relegated to the margins of Italian art, were in fact less wedded to tradition than they have seemed. Late medieval Roman painting, in particular, is leading many scholars to reevaluate old assumptions. With recently discovered or rediscovered works coming to light – among them the frescoes of the Sancta Sanctorum in the Lateran and those in S. Maria in Aracoeli⁴ – we are learning more about the complexities of late duecento painting. “Innovations” that had long been credited to Giotto are now understood to appear earlier in the work of Roman artists. Further, as scholars increasingly recognize, the collaborative nature of a medieval workshop complicates – and at times defeats – attempts to separate “autograph” works from those of the shop; the head of a workshop strove to suppress particular artistic personalities in favor of visual consistency and uniformity.⁵

And yet, for all our misgivings about perpetuating the cult of the genius, Giotto’s contemporaries clearly did not hesitate to name and celebrate the artists they judged to be the most highly skilled of the day. Whatever the accomplishments of Roman painters, it is Giotto who is hailed by commentators in his own day – and whereas much of the early testimony comes from Florentine writers who are eager to extol the achievements of a native son, not all does. Perhaps most fundamentally, despite our skepticism about the hyperbolic claims of Giotto’s admirers, even the most cautious scholar today would not deny his brilliance. The startling freshness of his observations, the economy and empathy of his narratives, the profound dignity and humanity of his figures all set Giotto apart from his contemporaries. Giotto’s distinctiveness is, we believe, most evident in the Arena Chapel (Plates 2–23, Figs. 40–6).⁶ Any careful observer can compile example upon example of extraordinary little touches. Giotto was obviously keenly attuned to the world around him and supremely gifted in integrating his observations of multiple phenomena, from the botanical (the many species of tiny plants in the *Noli me Tangere*) to the astronomical (Halley’s Comet in the *Adoration of the Magi* [Plate 16]), into his work. A particular case in point is his meticulous renderings of human hair, which he uses to chart the passage of time over weeks or years, or even to capture a precise moment. Not only does the infant Christ, almost hairless at birth (Plate 15), rapidly sprout a cap of light brown hair (Plate 16), but the high priest whose hairline is beginning to recede when he welcomes the young Virgin to the Temple (Plate 11) is nearly bald when her suitors pray over their rods ten years later (Plate 13). And in the *Baptism*, Christ’s usually wavy hair clings, nearly straight, to his neck – clearly soaked through by the waters of the Jordan (Plate 17). Indeed,

Giovanni Villani's praise of Giotto as "the one who more than any other drew each figure and action to the life" seems less hyperbole than judicious assessment.⁷ Equally astute is the comment by Benevenuto da Imola, in his commentary on the *Divine Comedy* (c. 1376): "And note that Giotto still holds the field, since no one has yet surpassed him in subtlety."⁸

But if Giotto's genius cannot be questioned, much about him remains elusive. Even the basic facts of his life are still debated: he was probably, but not certainly, born c. 1266–67; and he was probably, but not certainly, the son of a Florentine blacksmith rather than an impoverished peasant from the village of Vespignano, as has been claimed.⁹ Perhaps most vexing is the scope of his artistic production. In the case of Giotto – unlike virtually any other artist of his stature – there exists no scholarly consensus about the body of work attributed to him. Only a few works of the dozens ascribed to him – the frescoes of the Arena Chapel in Padua and of the Bardi Chapel in S. Croce, Florence (Plates 37–44), and the *Ognissanti Madonna* in the Uffizi, Florence (Plate 36) – are universally accepted, and none of these is signed or directly documented as his. The debate is especially heated about the authorship of the Life of St. Francis cycle in the Upper Church of S. Francesco, Assisi (Plates 25–32), which is seen as fundamental in most Italian studies of Giotto, but usually rejected from Giotto's oeuvre by English-speaking scholars (though the geographic borders of the debate are increasingly permeable).¹⁰ Even the three signed panel paintings that might seem securely Giotto's (cf. Plate 35, Fig. 34) are often thought to be products of Giotto's workshop only, with little participation by the master himself. This apparent paradox, at least, may be clarified by remarks in Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Commentari*. Ghiberti draws an interesting distinction between work "by Giotto" and work "by the hand of Giotto" (*di sua mano*), using the latter to describe only six works of the forty he assigns to the painter. Clearly, then, work produced in an artist's shop could be described as "by" that artist, because regardless of his actual degree of participation, he took responsibility for the final product.¹¹

Closely tied to problems of authorship are problems of chronology. Our understanding of Giotto's life and work is drawn from a number of sources: archival records, statements of commentators from his lifetime and later, and visual evidence, such as dated work by another artist that clearly depends on a composition by Giotto. Perhaps most useful to scholars sifting through these various sorts of evidence is concordance among them, which occurs, for example, when documents or surviving Giottesque works seem to confirm a reference by a contemporary observer. The documents themselves (a number of which are listed, along with the early written sources, in this

volume)¹² shed more light on his real estate holdings and related financial ventures than on his artistic production: he buys and rents property, leases out looms, guarantees loans, pays debts, and pursues debtors. These records do give us some idea of his travels beyond Florence; for example, they imply his presence in Assisi (before 1309) and in Rome (before December, 1313). These two notices are particularly intriguing because they intersect with other kinds of evidence: early commentators tell us Giotto worked in both Assisi and Rome. Moreover, in both sites, significant works still exist that can be associated with Giotto: in Assisi, four strongly Giottesque fresco cycles in the Lower Church of S. Francesco (Plates 33, 34), usually dated to the first and second decades of the trecento,¹³ as well as the much-disputed Upper Church frescoes (Plates 24–32); and in Rome, two works for St. Peter's – an altarpiece and the *Navicella* mosaic once on the façade of the church. But, although a document in St. Peter's refers to both the altarpiece and the mosaic as work by Giotto for Cardinal Giacomo Gaetano Stefaneschi, the dates these works were produced is much debated, and it is possible that neither was made during that particular visit to Rome.¹⁴

In fact, Giotto traveled extensively for much of his life. Writers living in Giotto's lifetime tell us that he worked all over Italy – in Florence, Pisa, Assisi, Rimini, Rome, Padua, Milan, and Naples; one even refers to work by Giotto in Avignon, home of the papacy from 1305. One chronicler with particular claim to credibility as a source is Riccobaldo Ferrarese: he would have no obvious reason to inflate the reputation of a Florentine painter; he wrote early (c. 1313) in Giotto's career. Furthermore, he may have actually known Giotto, for the chronicler lived in Padua from 1303 until 1308 – at the very time that Giotto was at work on the Arena Chapel (c. 1303–5).¹⁵ Riccobaldo, who characterizes Giotto as “an excellent Florentine painter,” continues: “What kind of art he made is testified to by works done by him in the Franciscan churches at Assisi, Rimini, Padua, and in those works that he painted in the Palace of the Commune of Padua [that is, the Palazzo della Ragione] and in the Arena church in Padua.”¹⁶ Riccobaldo's remarks are credible, too, because they can be at least partially corroborated – both by work that still exists and by other early writers. For example, the reference to Rimini may be confirmed by the cross that still hangs there, in the Tempio Malatestiano, which was formerly the Church of S. Francesco. Similarly, Giovanni da Nono, a Paduan chronicler writing c. 1320, describes Giotto's frescoes in the vault of the Palazzo della Ragione, and dates the project 1306–9, which presumably refers both to the construction of the great keel-shaped wooden roof and to its decoration.¹⁷

Riccobaldo thus seems to be a reliable guide to Giotto's work until c. 1313.¹⁸ It has been suggested that Riccobaldo even lists Giotto's work sites in the approximate order of execution.¹⁹ We can imagine that Giotto moved from Assisi (c. 1300) to Rimini (c. 1301) to S. Antonio (known as the Santo) in Padua about 1302 to the Arena Chapel from 1303–5; after completing the chapel, he may have worked first on the fresco program of the Palazzo della Ragione, leaving associates to execute his design, and then returned to Assisi. He was definitely in Florence by 1311, for he guaranteed a loan in December of that year, and again in September, 1312, when he rented out a loom (at a usurious rate).²⁰ These two documents and many of the others through 1326 refer to his residence in the parish of S. Maria Novella, where he is recorded early as a homeowner, and where other family members lived as well.²¹ At some point, still another commission brought him to Rome, for in December of 1313 he dispatched an agent to recover property he had left there.

What is striking is the number of different commissions Giotto must have been juggling in these years, moving from one site to another in rapid succession. If all of this is correct, we can only marvel at Giotto's ability to coordinate a substantial body of work at different sites in a remarkably compressed period – clearly with the help of sizeable workshops to whom he must have often delegated the actual painting.

Giotto's extraordinary productivity during these years, when he was in his thirties and early forties, brought him increasing fame. Writers – all of whom had visited Padua or lived there – took notice. In a span of five years, Pietro d'Abano referred to him as an accomplished portraitist (1310); Francesco da Barberino praised his *Envy* in the Arena Chapel (c. 1313; Plate 23); and Riccobaldo singled him out and described his early career (also c. 1313).²² When Dante (also a resident of Padua in the early trecento) wrote his famous lines, probably around 1315, Giotto's reputation was secure. Perhaps not coincidentally, around this time Giotto seems to have been less inclined to take on commissions far from home; from the mid-teens until 1328, although he probably continued to oversee work by his team elsewhere, he was apparently based primarily in Florence. In these years, the most prominent citizens of the commune – the Bardi and Peruzzi families, both bankers to the pope – engaged him to paint their funerary chapels in S. Croce (Plates 37–46). At the same time, his financial dealings, especially in real estate, increasingly occupied him; in particular, he began to purchase land in the Mugello, the countryside north of Florence (one of Boccaccio's tales describes Giotto returning to Florence after a visit to his property in that region [*Decameron*

VI, 5]). Family matters occupied him as well, for several records refer to his children, now young adults.

In 1328, when Giotto was in his early sixties, he received a request too tempting to decline: an invitation from the King of Naples, Robert of Anjou. He remained in the royal household for more than five years, and clearly impressed the king; Robert praised him for “brilliantly perform[ing] honest acts and fruitful services” and granted him the title of *familiaris*.²³ Giotto’s prolonged absence from Florence – especially at the height of his fame – seems to have nettled local sensibilities; in 1334 civic officials persuaded him to return, naming him *capomaestro* (head of works) for the Commune and for the Cathedral of S. Reparata. The document of April, 1334, is startling as an encomium: “There is no one in the whole world more qualified in these and many other matters than Giotto di Bondone of Florence, painter, who should be welcomed as a great master in his native land and should be held dear in the said city; and so that he might have the wherewithal there to accomplish a long sojourn, from which sojourn many people will profit from his learning and instruction, and a noteworthy honor will result in the aforesaid city.”²⁴ Giotto’s work in his new position proceeded apace, for by July 1334, according to the chronicler Giovanni Villani, the foundations of the *campanile*, or bell tower, were laid (Fig. 24). Villani is also our source for the last years of Giotto’s life: the chronicler tells us that the commune of Florence then sent Giotto to work “in the service of the Duke of Milan” (Azzo Visconti), and that on his return to Florence, he died, in January 1337, and was buried in the Cathedral – further attesting to his exalted position in the commune.

The documents and sources thus trace a portrait of Giotto first as a young man, eager to build a career, who traveled widely in pursuit of work; then as an entrepreneur who directed artistic projects all over Italy and pursued financial ventures in Florence and beyond; finally as an artist with the status of a celebrity, “familiaris” to the King of Naples, lionized by his countrymen. Despite his engagement in the world of commerce, and his eventual status as painter to royalty, he also worked closely, and repeatedly, with members of the Franciscan order. Riccobaldo suggests that the order was perhaps Giotto’s most important patron early in his career, and he continued this association throughout his working life, in S. Francesco in Assisi, in S. Croce in Florence, and in S. Chiara in Naples. There is even reason to think that he felt some kinship with the order’s ideals, for he named two of his children Francesco and Chiara. In some ways, then, he emerges as a paradoxical figure, at once engaging in capitalist enterprise, even in virtual usury, while

embracing the ideals of St. Francis. But such behavior is familiar to students of late medieval Italy, where piety and wealth coexisted routinely; Giotto merely embodies the tensions and contradictions of his age.

The essays in this collection expand on this sketch, enlarging our understanding of the artist, his major works, the methods of his workshop and those of his contemporaries, his patrons, and his critical reception in his own day and beyond. The collection should demonstrate that Giotto scholarship today is far from monolithic; our authors pursue widely varied methods, approaches, and challenges to received opinion. They differ in their own assessments of many matters, from the scope of Giotto's *oeuvre* (not surprisingly, his work in Assisi is especially controversial) to the motivations of one of his most important patrons, Enrico Scrovegni. What this collection does *not* do is to present a tidy picture of Giotto, delineating a clear path of his artistic origins and stylistic development, or a definitive interpretation of any work; the lacunae in the historical record, scholarly differences of opinion, and the complexity of the work and its reception make such a seamless portrait impossible (and perhaps suspect). Instead, the essays offer the reader the opportunity to confront a wide range of issues in late medieval art that extend beyond any one artist and into the very heart of the artistic enterprise in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. The collection opens with an essay by Hayden Maginnis, who provides an overview of the critical debates surrounding Giotto scholarship from the trecento until today. He goes on to present his own analysis of the most important works by Giotto and his circle, laying a foundation for the essays that follow. Among the works Maginnis considers, perhaps most controversial are the frescoes of S. Francesco, Assisi – a topic to which many of our contributors return. No one, however, has been as intimately engaged with S. Francesco as Bruno Zanardi, who has worked for many years, both as a conservator and as an art historian, on the frescoes of the Upper Church. He offers an authoritative guide to the organization and methods of a fresco workshop in late medieval Italy, a close analysis of the techniques of three distinct shops responsible for the scenes from the life of St. Francis in the Upper Church, and a critique of what he terms the “art history of names” – a preoccupation with the individual artist, perhaps an indictment of the very premise of this *Companion* series.

William Tronzo, in his essay on Giotto's figures, also considers the working methods of medieval and early Renaissance painters, but his focus is their relationship with ancient sources. Although Giotto's use of ancient sculpture is well known, Tronzo argues that Giotto was the first to engage

those artifacts critically: whereas his predecessors merely inserted ancient figures into their compositions, Giotto reworked and reshaped them to produce something new.

A third essay, by Gary Radke, examines still another facet of Giotto as a practitioner of the arts: the contested question of Giotto's work as an architect. Beginning with an analysis of the structure of the Arena Chapel, which is sometimes thought to be designed by Giotto, he then turns to the organizational scheme of the chapel and next to Giotto's frescoes – first in the Arena Chapel, then at S. Croce – for a close analysis of Giotto's architectural sensibilities. He concludes, appropriately, with the design for the Florentine campanile, or bell tower – the last commission of Giotto's life that survives.

The next four essays examine the religious and civic contexts in which Giotto worked, and issues of patronage and reception. Joanna Cannon, who has written extensively on the mendicant orders, first offers an overview of the Franciscan and Dominican orders, which played a decisive role in the artistic production of late medieval Italy; she examines their origins, their functions and institutional structures, and the architecture and furnishings of their churches, in particular the monumental crosses that figured conspicuously in their decorative programs. She then turns to Giotto's work for the friars, considering both the panel paintings and the fresco programs ascribed to him and his workshop, and in the process addresses some of the contested issues of attribution first raised in Hayden Maginnis's essay.

William Cook, a historian of late medieval Italy known especially for his work on St. Francis of Assisi, considers a specific aspect of Franciscan patronage: the images of Francis most closely associated with Giotto and his workshop. He examines in particular the panel of the Stigmatization in the Louvre and the frescoes in the Bardi Chapel of S. Croce, comparing both with the corresponding scenes in the Upper Church of S. Francesco. Far less familiar than the Franciscans and Dominicans, but critically important for Giotto studies, is the shadowy Humiliati order. In a fresh analysis of the greatest of Giotto's panel paintings, the *Ognissanti Madonna*, Julia Miller and Laurie Taylor-Mitchell call attention to several unusual features of this renowned work and associate them with the Humiliati, who commissioned it. After surveying the early history, devotional practices, and commercial activities of this curious order, whose lucrative business ventures threatened to undermine their ascetic ideals, they map the ways in which the order's ideology informs Giotto's panel.

Issues of patronage also concern the historian Benjamin Kohl, who takes as his subject Giotto's lay patrons, especially those from the merchant and banking families of Padua and Florence. Kohl, who is well known for his work on late medieval and Renaissance Padua, devotes particular attention to the Scrovegni family, revealing much that had been overlooked about the family.

Whereas many of our contributors examine aspects of Giotto's most celebrated monument, the frescoes in the Arena Chapel, the last two essays take the chapel as their primary focus. In our essay on the chapel, we argue that its program invites multiple readings, and that it is the chancel arch, the liturgical center of the chapel and Enrico Scrovegni's burial place, where the most important themes of the program are set forth. The collection concludes with Andrew Ladis's now-classic essay, "The Legend of Giotto's Wit and the Arena Chapel." Ladis mines trecento literature for anecdotes about the playful behavior of late medieval artists – the "jokes, antics, prat-falls, put-downs, double-entendres, tricks, deceptions, impersonations, and teasing of painters." He then considers Giotto's reputation as a wit and finds it well-founded, for the Arena Chapel reveals a sly sense of humor that was rarely noted in other studies of the frescoes. A fitting final essay for the collection, it yields new insight into the multifaceted genius of this singular artist.