

GIOTTO

AND HIS WORKS IN PADUA

1. TOWARDS the close of the thirteenth century,¹ Enrico Scrovegno, a noble Paduan, purchased, in his native city, the remains of the Roman Amphitheatre or Arena from the family of the Dalesmanini, to whom those remains had been granted by the Emperor Henry III. of Germany in 1090. For the power of making this purchase, Scrovegno was in all probability indebted to his father, Reginald, who, for his avarice, is placed by Dante in the seventh circle of the *Inferno*, and regarded apparently as the chief of the usurers there, since he is the only one who addresses Dante.* The son, having possessed himself of the Roman ruin, or of the site which it had occupied, built himself a

* “ Noting the visages of some who lay
 Beneath the pelting of that dolorous fire,
 One of them all I knew not; but perceived
 That pendent from his neck each bore a pouch,
 With colours and with emblems various marked,
 On which it seemed as if their eye did feed.
 And when amongst them looking round I came,
 A yellow purse I saw, with azure wrought,
 That wore a lion’s countenance and port.
 Then, still my sight pursuing its career,
 Another I beheld, than blood more red,
 A goose display of whiter wing than curd.
 And one who bore a fat and azure swine
 Pictured on his white scrip, addressed me thus:
 What dost thou in this deep? Go now and know,
 Since yet thou livest, that my neighbour here,

¹ [The exact date is A.D. 1300.]

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fortified palace upon the ground, and a chapel dedicated to the Annunciate Virgin.

2. This chapel, built in or about the year 1303,* appears

Vitaliano, on my left shall sit.

A Paduan with these Florentines am I.

Ofttimes they thunder in mine ears, exclaiming,

Oh! haste that noble knight, he who the pouch

With the three goats will bring. This said, he writhed

The mouth, and lolled the tongue out, like an ox

That licks his nostrils."

—Canto xvii.

This passage of Cary's Dante is not quite so clear as that translator's work usually is. "One of them all I knew not" is an awkward periphrasis for "I knew none of them." Dante's indignant expression of the effect of avarice in withering away distinctions of character, and the prophecy of Scrovegno, that his neighbour Vitaliano, then living, should soon be with him, to sit on his left hand, is rendered a little obscure by the transposition of the word "here." Cary has also been afraid of the excessive homeliness of Dante's imagery; "whiter wing than curd" being in the original "whiter than butter." The attachment of the purse to the neck,¹ as a badge of shame, in the *Inferno*, is found before Dante's time; as, for instance, in the windows of Bourges cathedral (see Plate iii. of MM. Martin and Cahier's beautiful work²). And the building of the Arena Chapel by the son, as a kind of atonement for the avarice of the father,³ is very characteristic of the period, in which the use of money for the building of churches was considered just as meritorious as its unjust accumulation was criminal. I have seen, in a MS. Church-service of the thirteenth century, an illumination representing Church-Consecration, illustrating the words, "Fundata est domus Domini supra verticem montium,"⁴ surrounded, for the purpose of contrast, by a grotesque, consisting of a picture of a miser's death-bed, a demon drawing his soul out of his mouth, while his attendants are searching in his chests for his treasures.

* For these historical details I am chiefly indebted to the very careful treatise of Selvatico, *Sulla Cappellina degli Scrovegni nell' Arena di Padova*. Padua, 1836.⁵

¹ [Compare Vol. XVI. p. 17.]

² [*Monographie de la cathédrale de Bourges*, par les PP. Arthur Martin et Charles Cahier, de la Compagnie de Jésus, 1841-1844.]

³ [Enrico built the chapel, says an old chronicler, "pro eripienda patris anima a pœnis purgationis et ad illius expianda peccata" (Scardeone: *De antiquitate urbis Patavii*, Basilea, 1560, p. 322).]

⁴ [See Isaiah ii. 2: "in vertice montium."]

⁵ [In a subsequent edition of his book Selvatico gave a later date. It appears now to be established that the building and decoration of the chapel were completed between the Festival of the Annunciation in 1303 and that in 1305. See Moschetti: *La Capella degli Scrovegni e gli affreschi di Giotto in essa dipinti*, Firenze, 1904, pp. 15-19.]

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to have been intended to replace one which had long existed on the spot; and in which, from the year 1278, an annual festival had been held on Lady-day, in which the Annunciation was represented in the manner of our English mysteries (and under the same title: “una sacra rappresentazione di quel *mistero*”), with dialogue, and music both vocal and instrumental. Scrovegno’s purchase of the ground could not be allowed to interfere with the national custom; but he is reported by some writers to have rebuilt the chapel with greater costliness, in order, as far as possible, to efface the memory of his father’s unhappy life. But Federici, in his history of the Cavalieri Godenti,¹ supposes that Scrovegno was a member of that body, and was assisted by them in decorating the new edifice. The order of Cavalieri Godenti was instituted in the beginning of the thirteenth century, to defend the “existence,” as Selvatico states it, but more accurately the dignity, of the Virgin, against the various heretics by whom it was beginning to be assailed. Her knights were first called Cavaliers of St. Mary; but soon increased in power and riches to such a degree, that, from their general habits of life, they received the nickname of the “Merry Brothers.” Federici gives forcible reasons for his opinion that the Arena Chapel was employed in the ceremonies of their order; and Lord Lindsay observes,² that the fulness with which the history of the Virgin is recounted on its walls, adds to the plausibility of his supposition.

3. Enrico Scrovegno was, however, towards the close of his life, driven into exile, and died at Venice in 1320. But he was buried in the chapel he had built; and has one small monument in the sacristy, as the founder of the building, in which he is represented under a Gothic niche, standing, with his hands clasped and his eyes raised; while behind the altar is his tomb, on which, as usual at the period, is a recumbent statue of him. The chapel itself

¹ [*Istoria dei Cavalieri Gaudenti*, Venezia, 1787. For another reference to the “Merry Brothers,” see *Val d’Arno*, § 259 (Vol. XXIII. p. 152).]

² [*Sketches of the History of Christian Art*, 1847, vol. ii. p. 184.]

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may not unwarrantably be considered as one of the first efforts of Popery in resistance of the Reformation: for the Reformation, though not victorious till the sixteenth, began in reality in the thirteenth century; and the remonstrances of such bishops as our own Grosseteste, the martyrdoms of the Albigenses in the Dominican crusades,¹ and the murmurs of those “heretics” against whose aspersions of the majesty of the Virgin this chivalrous order of the Cavalieri Godenti was instituted, were as truly the signs of the approach of a new era in religion, as the opponent work of Giotto on the walls of the Arena was a sign of the approach of a new era in art.

4. The chapel having been founded, as stated above, in 1303, Giotto appears to have been summoned to decorate its interior walls about the year 1306,—summoned, as being at that time the acknowledged master of painting in Italy. By what steps he had risen to this unquestioned eminence it is difficult to trace; for the records of his life, strictly examined, and freed from the verbiage and conjecture of artistical history, nearly reduce themselves to a list of the cities of Italy where he painted, and to a few anecdotes, of little meaning in themselves, and doubly pointless in the fact of most of them being inheritances of the whole race of painters, and related successively of all in whose biographies the public have deigned to take an interest. There is even question as to the date of his birth;² Vasari stating

¹ [Robert Grosseteste (died 1253), Bishop of Lincoln; preached against Papal abuses; suspended by the Pope, 1251. For the martyrdoms of the Albigenses, see Vol. XXIII. p. 142 *n.*]

² [The date of Giotto's birth is still one of the unsettled questions of art-history. The date of his work at the Arena Chapel (1305–1306) is fixed by early evidence, and bears upon the other question. Benvenuto Rambaldi da Imola (1331–1380) in his commentary upon Dante appends this note to the passage in which the poet refers to the eclipse of Cimabue's fame by Giotto: “. . . Now it once happened that while Giotto, still fairly young, was painting at Padua a chapel in the place where was once the theatre or arena, Dante came to the place. And Giotto received him with honour and took him to his house. . . . This Giotto lived afterwards for a long time, for he died in 1336.” A Paduan record states that Dante was at Padua in 1306 (see *Novelle Letterarie*, Florence, 1748, col. 361). A contemporary Florentine writer states that Giotto was seventy when he died: Antonio Pucci (died 1398) in his *Centiloquio*. If Giotto was born in 1276, he would have died at sixty; but if in 1266, he would have been forty when Benvenuto describes him as “adhuc satis juvenis.”]

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him to have been born in 1276, while Baldinucci,¹ on the internal evidence derived from Vasari's own narrative, throws the date back ten years.* I believe, however, that Vasari is most probably accurate in his first main statement; and that his errors, always numerous, are in the subsequent and minor particulars. It is at least undoubted truth that Giotto was born, and passed the years of childhood, at Vespignano, about fourteen miles north of Florence, on the road to Bologna. Few travellers can forget the peculiar landscape of that district of the Apennine. As they ascend the hill which rises from Florence to the lowest break in the ridge at Fiesole, they pass continually beneath the walls of villas bright in perfect luxury, and beside cypress-hedges, enclosing fair terraced gardens, where the masses of oleander and magnolia, motionless as leaves in a picture, inlay alternately upon the blue sky their branching lightness of pale rose-colour, and deep green breadth of shade, studded with balls of budding silver, and showing at intervals through their framework of rich leaf and rubied flower, the far-away bends of the Arno beneath its slopes of olive, and the purple peaks of the Carrara mountains, tossing themselves against the western distance, where the streaks of motionless clouds burn above the Pisan sea. The traveller passes the Fiesolan ridge, and all is changed. The country is on a sudden lonely. Here and there indeed are seen the scattered houses of a farm grouped gracefully upon the hillsides,— here and there a fragment of tower upon a distant rock; but neither gardens, nor flowers, nor glittering palace walls, only a grey extent of mountain ground, tufted irregularly with ilex and olive: a scene not sublime, for its forms are subdued and low; not desolate, for its valleys are full of sown fields and tended pastures; not rich nor lovely, but sunburnt and sorrowful; becoming wilder every instant as

* Lord Lindsay, *Christian Art*, vol. ii. p. 166.

¹ [*Notizie de Professori del Disegno*, vol. i. pp. 103 seq. (ed. 1845).]
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the road winds into its recesses, ascending still, until the higher woods, now partly oak and partly pine, drooping back from the central crest of the Apennine, leave a pastoral wilderness of scathed rock and arid grass, withered away here by frost, and there by strange lambent tongues of earth-fed fire.* Giotto passed the first ten years of his life, a shepherd boy, among these hills; was found by Cimabue, near his native village, drawing one of his sheep upon a smooth stone;¹ was yielded up by his father, “a simple person, a labourer of the earth,”² to the guardianship of the painter, who, by his own work, had already made the streets of Florence ring with joy;³ attended him to Florence, and became his disciple.

We may fancy the glance of the boy, when he and Cimabue stood side by side on the ridge of Fiesole, and for the first time he saw the flowering thickets of the Val d’Arno; and deep beneath, the innumerable towers of the City of the Lily,⁴ the depths of his own heart yet hiding the fairest of them all. Another ten years passed over him, and he was chosen from among the painters of Italy to decorate the Vatican.⁵

5. The account given us by Vasari of the mode of his competition on this occasion, is one of the few anecdotes of him which seem to be authentic (especially as having

* At Pietra Mala. The flames rise two or three feet above the stony ground out of which they spring, white and fierce enough to be visible in the intense rays even of the morning sun.

¹ [Or scratching it, as Ruskin elsewhere suggests: see Vol. XXIII. p. 267.]

² [Vasari: “lavoratore di terra e naturale persona.”]

³ [See Vol. XXIII. p. 202.]

⁴ [For the many towns of Florence (the City of the Lily, Vol. XXIII. p. 68), see *ibid.*, p. 65.]

⁵ [The date of Giotto’s summons to Rome is fixed by good evidence. Balducci, quoting from documents recorded in the Vatican archives, shows that in 1298 Cardinal Giacomo Gaetani de’ Stefaneschi ordered the Navicella of S. Peter (now in the vestibule of St. Peter’s, over the main door) to be made in mosaic “by the hand of Giotto,” “a very celebrated painter,” and also an altar-piece for the high altar (now in the Sagrestia dei Canonici), “which cost 800 florins of gold.” The fact that Giotto was in 1298 so celebrated is held by many to support 1266 as the year of his birth.]

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given rise to an Italian proverb), and it has also great point and value. I translate Vasari's words literally:—

“This work (his paintings in the Campo Santo of Pisa) acquired for him, both in the city and externally, so much fame, that the Pope Benedict IX. sent a certain one of his courtiers into Tuscany, to see what sort of a man Giotto was, and what was the quality of his works, he (the pope) intending to have some paintings executed in St. Peter's; which courtier, coming to see Giotto, and hearing that there were other masters in Florence who excelled in painting and in mosaic, spoke, in Siena, to many masters; then, having received drawings from them, he came to Florence; and having gone one morning into Giotto's shop as he was at work, explained the pope's mind to him, and in what way he wished to avail himself of his powers, and finally requested from him a little piece of drawing to send to his Holiness. Giotto, who was most courteous, took a leaf (of vellum?), and upon this, with a brush dipped in red, fixing his arm to his side, to make it as the limb of a pair of compasses, and turning his hand, made a circle so perfect in measure and outline, that it was a wonder to see: which having done, he said to the courtier, with a smile, ‘There is the drawing.’ He, thinking himself mocked, said, ‘Shall I have no other drawing than this?’ ‘This is enough, and too much,’ answered Giotto; ‘send it with the others: you will see if it will be understood.’ The ambassador, seeing that he could not get anything else, took his leave with small satisfaction, doubting whether he had not been made a jest of. However, when he sent to the pope the other drawings, and the names of those who had made them, he sent also that of Giotto, relating the way in which he had held himself in drawing his circle, without moving his arm, and without compasses. Whence the pope, and many intelligent courtiers, knew how much Giotto overpassed in excellence all the other painters of his time. Afterwards, the thing becoming known, the proverb arose from it: ‘Thou art rounder than the O of Giotto;’ which it is still in custom to say to men of the grosser clay; for the proverb is pretty, not only on account of the accident of its origin, but because it has a double meaning, ‘round’ being taken in Tuscany to express not only circular form, but slowness and grossness of wit.”

6. Such is the account of Vasari, which, at the first reading, might be gravely called into question, seeing that the paintings at Pisa, to which he ascribes the sudden extent of Giotto's reputation, have been proved to be the work of Francesco da Volterra; * and since, moreover, Vasari has even mistaken the name of the pope, and written Benedict IX.

* At least Lord Lindsay seems to consider the evidence collected by Förster on this subject conclusive. *Christian Art*, vol. ii. p. 168.¹

¹ [Compare the “Review of Lord Lindsay,” § 45 (Vol. XII. p. 213).]

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for Boniface VIII. But the story itself must, I think, be true; and, rightly understood, it is singularly interesting. I say, rightly understood; for Lord Lindsay supposes the circle to have been mechanically drawn by turning the sheet of vellum under the hand, as now constantly done for the sake of speed at schools. But neither do Vasari's words bear this construction, nor would the drawing so made have borne the slightest testimony to Giotto's power. Vasari says distinctly, "and turning his hand" (or, as I should rather read it, "with a sweep of his hand"¹), not "turning the vellum"; neither would a circle produced in so mechanical a manner have borne distinct witness to anything except the draughtsman's mechanical ingenuity; and Giotto had too much common-sense, and too much courtesy, to send the pope a drawing which did not really contain the evidence he required. Lord Lindsay has been misled also by his own careless translation of "pennello tinto di roffo" ("a *brush* dipped in red") by the word "crayon." It is easy to draw the mechanical circle with a crayon, but by no means easy with a brush. I have not the slightest doubt that Giotto drew the circle as a painter naturally would draw it; that is to say, that he set the vellum upright on the wall or panel before him, and then steadying his arm firmly against his side, drew the circular line with one sweeping but firm revolution of his hand, holding the brush long. Such a feat as this is completely possible to a well-disciplined painter's hand, but utterly impossible to any other; and the circle so drawn was the most convincing proof Giotto could give of his decision of eye and perfectness of practice.²

7. Still, even when thus understood, there is much in the anecdote very curious. Here is a painter requested by the head of the Church to execute certain religious paintings, and the only qualification for the task of which he

¹ [The Italian is "e girato la mano."]

² [For other references by Ruskin to the O of Giotto, see Vol. XV. p. 39; Vol. XIX. pp. 63, 120; Vol. XXIII. p. 433.]

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deigns to demonstrate his possession is executive skill. Nothing is said, and nothing appears to be thought, of expression, or invention, or devotional sentiment. Nothing is required but firmness of hand. And here arises the important question: Did Giotto know that this was all that was looked for by his religious patrons? and is there occult satire in the example of his art which he sends them?—or does the founder of sacred painting mean to tell us that he holds his own power to consist merely in firmness of hand, secured by long practice? I cannot satisfy myself on this point: but yet it seems to me that we may safely gather two conclusions from the words of the master, “It is enough, and more than enough.” The first, that Giotto had indeed a profound feeling of the value of *precision* in all art; and that we may use the full force of his authority to press the truth, of which it is so difficult to persuade the hasty workmen of modern times, that the difference between right and wrong lies within the breadth of a line; and that the most perfect power and genius are shown by the accuracy which disdains error, and the faithfulness which fears it.

8. And the second conclusion is, that whatever Giotto’s imaginative powers might be, he was proud to be a good *workman*, and willing to be considered by others only as such. There might lurk, as has been suggested, some satire in the message to the pope, and some consciousness in his own mind of faculties higher than those of draughtsmanship. I cannot tell how far these hidden feelings existed; but the more I see of living artists, and learn of departed ones, the more I am convinced that the highest strength of genius is generally marked by strange unconsciousness of its own modes of operation, and often by no small scorn of the best results of its exertion.¹ The inferior mind intently watches its own processes, and dearly values its own produce; the master-mind is intent on other things

¹ [Compare, for the unconsciousness of genius, below, p. 160, and Vol. V. p. 122; and, for the “scorn,” Vol. VII. p. 299, and Vol. XXIII. p. 341.]

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than itself, and cares little for the fruits of a toil which it is apt to undertake rather as a law of life than a means of immortality. It will sing at a feast, or retouch an old play, or paint a dark wall, for its daily bread, anxious only to be honest in its fulfilment of its pledges or its duty, and careless that future ages will rank it among the gods.

9. I think it unnecessary to repeat here any other of the anecdotes commonly related of Giotto, as, separately taken, they are quite valueless. Yet much may be gathered from their general *tone*. It is remarkable that they are, almost without exception, records of good-humoured jests, involving or illustrating some point of practical good sense:¹ and by comparing this general colour of the reputation of Giotto with the actual character of his designs, there cannot remain the smallest doubt that his mind was one of the most healthy, kind, and active, that ever informed a human frame. His love of beauty was entirely free from weakness; his love of truth untinged by severity; his industry constant, without impatience; his workmanship accurate, without formalism; his temper serene, and yet playful; his imagination exhaustless, without extravagance; and his faith firm, without superstition. I do not know, in the annals of art, such another example of happy, practical, unerring, and benevolent power.

I am certain that this is the estimate of his character which must be arrived at by an attentive study of his works, and of the few data which remain respecting his life; but I shall not here endeavour to give proof of its truth, because I believe the subject has been exhaustively treated by Rumohr and Förster,² whose essays on the works

¹ ["Giotto had always a jest ready, and was never at a loss for a witty reply, so that he amused the king (of Naples) with his hand while he painted, and also by the acuteness of his pleasant conversation," etc. (see Vasari, vol. i. pp. 108, 119-121, Bohn's edition).]

² [Rumohr's *Italienische Forschungen* (1827) contains notices of Giotto. Neither his essays nor those of Ernest Förster (author of *Geschichte der Italienischen Kunst* and many kindred works) have been translated into English. For reference to another book by Förster, see Vol. XII. p. 213.]