

*Giotto's Arena Chapel and*  
THE TRIUMPH OF HUMILITY



In this book, Henrike Lange takes the reader on a tour through one of the most beloved and celebrated monuments in the world – Giotto's Arena Chapel. Paying close attention to previously overlooked details, Lange offers an entirely new reading of the stunning frescoes in their spatial configuration. The author also asks fundamental questions that define the chapel's place in Western art history. Why did Giotto choose an ancient Roman architectural frame for his vision of Salvation? What is the role of painted reliefs in the representation of personal integrity, passion, and the human struggle between pride and humility familiar from Dante's *Divine Comedy*? How can a new interpretation regarding the influence of ancient reliefs and architecture inform the famous "Assisi controversy" and cast new light on the debate around Giotto's authorship of the Saint Francis cycle?

Illustrated with almost 200 color plates, including individual images of each scene in the narrative cycle, this volume invites scholars and students to rediscover a key monument of art and architecture history and to see it with fresh eyes.

Henrike Christiane Lange is Associate Professor in History of Art and Italian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Lange completed her Magister Artium at Universität Hamburg, Germany, before earning her PhD at Yale University. The present book is the culmination of two decades of research at sites, archives, and collections across Europe.



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**THE TRIUMPH  
OF HUMILITY**

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*Für Hinrich und Annegret,  
für Anni und Martin.*

*A lever.  
We lower when we want to lift.  
In the same way, 'He who humbleth himself shall be exalted.'*  
SIMONE WEIL, *GRAVITY AND GRACE*

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# PREFACE

## Giotto's Triumph

SPE DE FUGA SURGENS DURA  
 DESIGNATUR QUOD MENS PURA  
 SPE FULCITA NON CUM CURA  
 TER FERRUM CLARIDITUR.  
 SET A CRISTO CORONANDA  
 SURSUM UOLAT' SIC BEANDA  
 ET IN CELIS SUBLIMANDA / FORE FIRMA REDDITUR.

Hope, from taxing flight ascending,  
 Pure of mind by God's designing –  
 Hope sustains her; never doubting,  
 Triply her endurance burns.  
 Ready now for joyful crowning,  
 Up she soars to win Christ's blessing.  
 Exalted, heaven now attaining, / Resolute, she soon returns.

INSCRIPTION UNDER GIOTTO'S *HOPE* IN THE ARENA CHAPEL  
 (VERSE TRANSLATION BY ANDREW STEWART)

Since its rediscovery in the nineteenth century, Giotto's Arena Chapel (Figs. P.1–P.8) has sparked fervent responses by artists, poets, and scholars.<sup>1</sup> Following in the footsteps of a wide-ranging historiography that has discussed “Giotto's Wit,”<sup>2</sup> “Giotto's Profundity,”<sup>3</sup> “Giotto's



## xx } PREFACE: GIOTTO'S TRIUMPH



Fig. P.1 Giotto di Bondone, Santa Maria della Carità (Scrovegni Chapel / Arena Chapel), Padua, interior east. Scala / Art Resource, NY.





**Fig. P.2** Arena Chapel, interior north-east. Courtesy of the UC Berkeley Historical Slide Library (est. 1938–2018), Baxandall & Partridge Collection, Doe Memorial Library in Berkeley, California, USA.

Eloquence,”<sup>4</sup> “Giotto’s Harmony,”<sup>5</sup> and “Giotto’s Circumspection,”<sup>6</sup> this book is about “Giotto’s Triumph” – a theme with many implications for this unique space of transformative painting. Building on widely accepted accounts of the Arena Chapel’s form and content, this study offers a new way of looking at its shape, frescoes, program, and place in history by considering its connection to ancient Roman triumphal arches (Figs. P.9 and P.10). The historical stage is set by the Roman Jubilee of 1300 and by a practice focused on triumphal themes and monuments such as the urban Roman honorific arches of Constantine and of Titus – the medieval procession tracing the route of the ancient triumph, connecting stations of Christian worship along the way from the papal Lateran to the Forum Romanum (Fig. P.11).

While the historiographic record of the chapel is characterized by long phases of silence between the fourteenth century and the nineteenth century, a few themes emerge as constants in certain phases of its discussion and analysis since the age of Giotto (†1337) himself. Writings on Giotto’s art first celebrated, in contemporary and early modern literature, its astonishing representation of “nature”; next, in the nineteenth century, its “humanity” and “morality”; and then, in the early twentieth century, its “plasticity.” Integrating all of these themes – nature, humanity, morality, and plasticity – the proposal put forward here is that the chapel purposefully plays with the idea and painterly representation of Roman triumphal relief sculpture in order to transform itself into a monument to the Christian triumph of



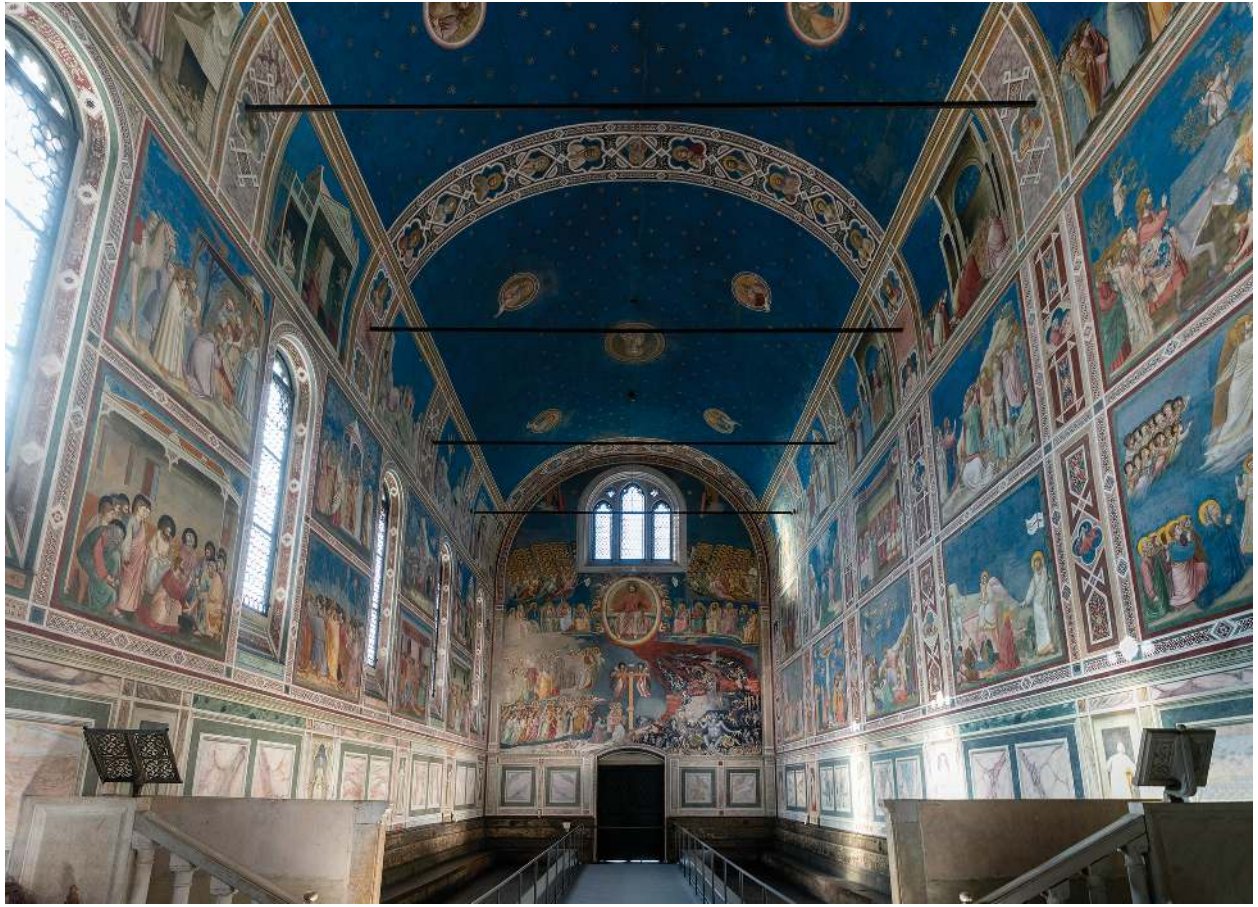


Fig. P.3 Arena Chapel, interior west. Courtesy of Steven Zucker.

humility – and, given that it was planned as a place of burial, to celebrate an eventual triumphal entry of the donor Enrico Scrovegni into the afterlife (Fig. P.12). This reading of the chapel – as embodying the idea of the triumph of humility primarily via relief effects created by Giotto in painting – integrates all of these perennially quoted qualities (the chapel's astonishing representation of nature, its humanity, its plasticity) in fulfillment of the ambitious promise of Alpatoff's famous dictum that Giotto "succeeded in showing the moral basis of the legend, and the spiritual significance of its events; and at the same time he sought to emphasize their visual resemblances."<sup>7</sup> In short, this book aims to explore how Giotto succeeded in contextualizing and negotiating his heritage of art and theological-political context of classical antiquity, Roman Christianity, Byzantium,

and the theology of Augustine in order to visualize the invisible mysteries of the story of Christ. His medium – painted relief – is the message.

One common denominator unites diverse writings on Giotto. As Laurie Schneider puts it: "Perhaps the most constant theme in Giotto's *fortuna critica* is the feeling that he has in one way or another made an important contribution to the representation and perception of reality."<sup>8</sup> This perception of reality in a work of art, its recognition, and its rational and emotional assessment, is always the job of the individual viewer. Giotto's process of perception is one that merges identification of a form and its individuation for the viewer, making his figures seem in some way relevant to the observer, who can recognize in them a sense of shared experience that establishes connections across the multiple





Fig. P.4 Arena Chapel, the *Last Judgment* in context. Courtesy of Steven Zucker.

kinds of otherness inherent in great historical distance. That said, the present study is about the potential of this Chapel's transformative offerings to the viewer, about its highest aspirations rather than a claim that any of these envisioned connections were broadly successful in terms of creating a more just society. To the contrary, we will see that Scrovegni's own life, Dante's exile, and the crisis of the papacy shortly after the Jubilee of 1300, are all indications of an age marked by profound collective and individual suffering. Cardinal Giacomo Caetani Stefaneschi, counsellor to Pope Boniface VIII, recalls in his treatise on the first Christian Jubilee how the years before it were defined by war and plague.<sup>9</sup> Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy* precisely in response to these crises, and Giotto can similarly be thought of as having painted the chapel in order to oppose the ugliness of the conditions of

its time – like the *Comedia*, the chapel is not an illustration of a reality but a space in which a spiritual battle between virtues and vices unfolds. *Hope* appears in the most prominent and final position under the *Last Judgment*, a pioneer among the virtues as Giotto paints them. While the historical political reality of the Middle Ages was marked by violence and social injustice, the chapel hosts a constellation of creative possibilities for any viewer who might want to contemplate its commentary on the world of the here and now.

Giotto's triumph rejects triumphalism. As a self-conscious and self-deconstructing work of art that reflects its own making and unmaking, the chapel might even be seen as a remedy against the hazards of human nature. Humility is central to the Hebrew Bible, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and Christian liturgy and theology.



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Fig. P.5 The *Last Judgment*. Scala / Art Resource, NY.





**Fig. P.6** Arena Chapel, the barrel vault. Courtesy of the UC Berkeley Historical Slide Library (est. 1938–2018), Baxandall & Partridge Collection, Doe Memorial Library in Berkeley, California, USA.



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Fig. P.7 Arena Chapel, detail from the north wall (east). Courtesy of Steven Zucker.



Fig. P.8 Arena Chapel, detail from the north wall (west). Courtesy of Steven Zucker.





**Fig. P.9** Arch of Titus, Rome, interior of the bay. Courtesy of the UC Berkeley Historical Slide Library (est. 1938–2018), Baxandall & Partridge Collection, Doe Memorial Library in Berkeley, California, USA.





Fig. P.10 Arch of Titus, interior of the bay seen from a distance (2018). Photo by the author.

The triumph of humility through the models of Mary and Jesus is so central to Christian belief that the chapel has never been an exclusive space of “high iconography” available only to a few elite scholars and theologians.<sup>10</sup> Its core theme, identical with the central thoughts of the New Testament and Christian liturgy, could be understood not only by pilgrims returning from Rome in the early 1300s but also by everyone familiar with the basic story of Mary’s humility expressed in her response to the Annunciation and of Christ’s self-sacrifice for the Salvation of humankind. The chapel is also universally accessible on a basic human level, engaging with unconditional love, grief, the pursuit of virtues that lead to a

more just and peaceful society, and the hope for reunion, peace, and eternal joy beyond this world. The chapel, in other words, was devised as a narrative sequence about the lives of Mary and Jesus; as a psychomachia and remedy against moral dilemmas on the level of the virtues and the vices; and as an all-encompassing creed, representing the entire cosmos as working towards a victory of the transcendent spirit over matter and death through the optics of faux relief represented on frescoed flat walls.

This book explores Giotto’s Arena Chapel in the light of the dynamics between the Christian reframing of ancient triumphal arch reliefs as a triumph of humility and relief as a pictorial