

Giotto di Bondone

Late Medieval/Gothic/ Proto-Renaissance
“The Father of Western Painting”

b. c. 1267, Near Florence

d. 8 January 1331, Florence Italy

Giotto was likely a student of Cenni di Pipo (1240-1302), who was better known as “Cimabue”, which means “Ox-Head” or “Bull-headed”. The nickname may refer to his appearance (said to be very ugly!), or the fact that he was famously stubborn and perfectionistic.

Besides painting, Giotto was famous for his ugliness and his sense of humor!



One of Giotto’s good friends was the author and poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), who is famous for his work “Divine Comedy”, which includes the chapter best-known as “Dante’s Inferno”. Dante wrote about his friend Giotto’s humility in the Purgatory section as a warning against prideful artists (like Cimabue!)

Giotto and his wife, Ricevuta di Lapo dela Pela, had eight children. One of their sons also became a painter.

One of his last commissions was the bell tower, or Campanile, for Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence’s now-iconic cathedral. When he died, he was buried with honor within the cathedral’s walls, which were still under construction.

Because of the passage of time, many of Giotto’s works have been lost; some were deliberately destroyed (like those lost when the current St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome was built) Others were destroyed in earthquakes, wars, and normal wear and tear.

During Giotto’s day, artists were not highly regarded as “artists”. They were “artisans”, a person trained in a specific craft who could be hired to complete a specific job. Artists would often belong to the same guilds as doctors and pharmacists (because their pigments were also ground into medications for doctors!) and their workshops would be in the same districts as barrel-makers, masons, carpenters, weavers, and other such work-for-hire craftsmen.

Why is Giotto important?

During the Medieval period, many artists worked from patterns and symbols, not from life. Drawings were designed to show the internal or eternal truth of the subject, rather than how a subject looked in real life. This type of symbol-over-reality style of art is often called “Late Antiquity”¹ style, and originated in the late 2nd to early 3rd century AD.

Because they worked from patterns and symbols, many artists created sketchbooks full of patterns to use in their work or in their workshops. (See right) This is how art ideas spread across Europe and from master to apprentice. These pattern books, known as Exemplums², are very rare today, mainly because they were used so often. This style often pushed images into a super-stylistic form that looked almost two-dimensional.



Cimabue, Giotto’s teacher, was one of the first to start adding shadows to figures and begin to add realistic details. Possibly because Giotto spent his early years drawing from life, he pushed past the “Late Antiquity” style and began to make figures which showed emotion, and used highlights and shadow (not sharp lines) to show the form of flesh, and folds of clothing. (see left) According to the first European art historian, Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), Giotto preferred to draw from life and models if he could, not the pre-existing patterns. This is one thing that made Giotto’s work so different from what came before. It opened the door to the concept of the artist painting what he or she saw in real life, a concept which would flower 100 years later in the Renaissance.

¹ Other names for this style includes “Byzantine”, “Greek”, and “Medieval”. 15th century art technique and art history books by Cennino Cennini and Giorgio Vasari called this style “Greek” or “Byzantine”. “Late Antiquity” and ‘Medieval’ are more modern terms for this time period and art style.

² Exemplum is Latin for “example”. Exemplum also refers to stories told to illustrate a point, or examples of calligraphy for scribes. When you study the Medieval Period, you’ll find many types of “Exemplums”. The Exemplum page depicted here is from Frenchman Villard de Honnecourt, created ca. 1240-1250.



Adoration of the Magi, 1304-1306

Giotto di Bondone (1267 – 1331)

Fresco

Scarvigni Chapel, Venio, Italy



Madonna e il Bambino [Madonna and the Child]; ca. 1320-c1330

Giotto di Bondone (1276-1331)

Egg Tempera on Panel,

National Gallery of Art, Washington DC USA



Lamentation of Christ 1304-1305

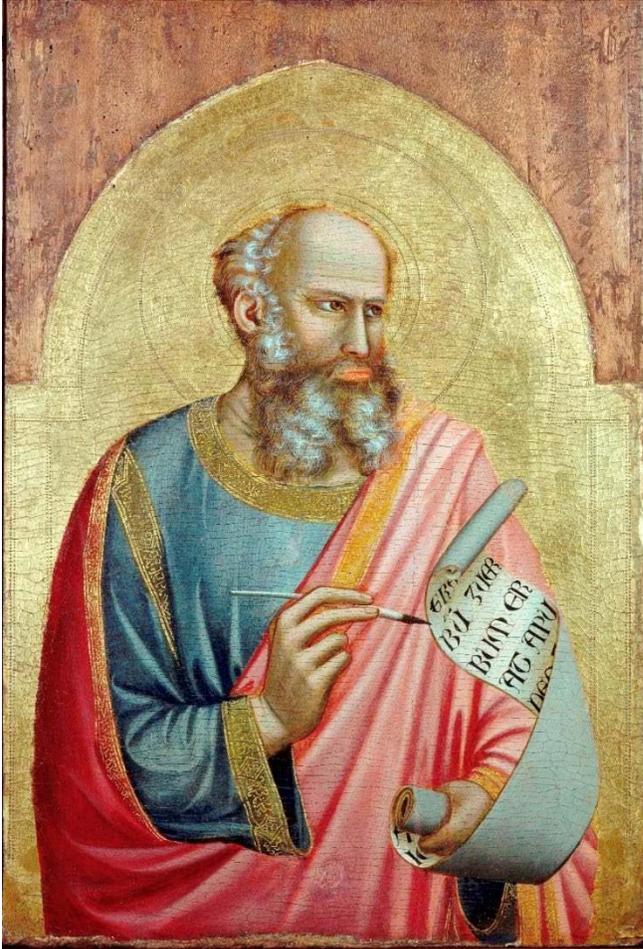
Giotto di Bondone, (1267-1331)

Fresco

Scrovegni Chapel, Veneto, Italy

The Student and the Teacher: Giotto and Cimabue

These images of some of Cimabue and Giotto's works show us how different the styles of these two painters were: This example is of St. John / The Apostle John.



GIOTTO

St. John the Evangelist; Tempera on Wood
Musée Jacquemart-André à Chaalis, France;
Ca. 1320-1325

What do you notice about the details of these two images of the same person?

(Incidentally, Cimabue's St. John is the final piece he created. He was hired to complete this apse after the artist who created the central figure of Christ died. Cimabue worked on St. John for 94 days-then died himself. A third artist was hired twenty years later to complete the mosaic.)



CIMABUE

San Giovanni (St. John [the Evangelist]);
(Detail within the Mosaic "Christ Enthroned
with the Virgin [Mary] and St. John"); Mosaic
Pisa Cathedral, Italy; created 1301-1321

The Student and the Teacher: Giotto and Cimabue



GIOTTO

Ognissanti Madonna, Egg Tempera on Wood Panel

Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy; completed ca. 1306-1310



CIMABUE

Madonna Enthroned; Egg Tempera on Panel

Musée de Louvre, Paris, France; 1290-1295

What do you notice about these similar compositions?

Interesting note: In Giotto's composition, the overlapping halos of the saints and angels in the backgrounds caused controversy when it was completed. Previous compositions arranged background characters in ranks, so each face was easily seen, like Cimabue's composition. Giotto had every-one standing on a floor, which meant naturally, faces behind other faces would be partially obscured, halos or not. Also, Mary and Jesus's size are a reflection of the ancient idea that the most important person(s) in a composition should be larger than others; this forces a focal point. This size difference, called "Hieratic Art", is as old as the Egyptians: (Look at the size of Pharaoh vs. others in a tomb painting.)

What is “Paint”?

Paint (n)

A substance which is applied to a surface in order to add color. It is made of **pigment** and a **vehicle**, which will include a **binder**.

***Etymology:** entered English in the early 13th century; from the Old French Peintier, which came from the Latin verb Pingere, meaning “to paint, stain, embroider, or tattoo.”*

Pigment (n)

A colored substance (usually powder) derived from somewhere in the natural or chemical world which is used to color an object. Giotto used many natural pigments (and a few synthetic ones!) and had a limited number of colors. Today, artists have nearly unlimited pigments, most of which are produced in a lab. The pigment defines what color the artist is using.



***Etymology:** From the Latin word Pigmentum, which means colored powder one paints with. Pigmentum also derives from Pingere.*

Binder (n)

The glue within the paint which sticks the pigment powder to the surface.

Vehicle (n)

The thing added to the pigment to make paint, instead of colored powder. The vehicle includes the binder, and can include other things to make the paint more usable.

Sometimes, the vehicle and binder are one and the same substance, such as egg tempera paints. Other times, the vehicle includes all the other stuff that ISN'T pigment or binder, including extra water, honey, essential oils, or other items which increases a paint's usability. The type of vehicle and binder define the type of paint you are using.