Lectures in Renaissance, Mannerist and Baroque Art

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Giotto and Trecento Painting

In my last lecture I discussed the impact of the Gothic style in sculpture and architecture of Italy during the thirteenth century, or the Dugento (the two hundreds). We noted how in the second half of the thirteenth century Nicola Pisano developed a new and original style of sculpture compounded out of classical and gothic elements; and how, in the work of his son Giovanni, an artist of great originality, the Gothic element tended to predominate. We saw, too, how the Cistercian form of Gothic architecture was introduced into Italy and finally how the painter Cimabue towards the end of the thirteenth century, in the 1280s, began to create a new type of painting from the existing Byzantine and Gothic painting of his time.

Summing the matter up, we may say that despite these new stirrings of originality in Italy, Italian thirteenth century architecture, sculpture and painting, is still dominated by the Gothic style. France remained at this time the art centre of the world; and the current of influence still swept from north to south, from France and Germany into Italy.

During the first half of the fourteenth century, however, that is, during the Trecento, Italy saw daring innovations and developments in the art of painting and in painting became the most advanced country of the west; so that for painting, at least, the current of influence, after many centuries, changed and began to flow from Italy to the north.

It is with this great change that I want to deal this morning. It was already foreshadow, as I pointed out in my previous lecture, in the painting of Cimabue but was only made possible by the genius of the two great painters which followed him Giotto and Duccio.

Giotto was born in 1266 or 1267 in a village near Florence and died in Florence in 1337. He was therefore an exact contemporary of the poet Dante who was born in
1265 and died in 1321. Giotto’s originality and genius was recognized by his own contemporaries. Indeed in the Divine Comedy, which was written in Giotto’s lifetime, Dante already refers to the fact that Giotto’s fame has eclipsed that of Cimabue. In painting, Cimabue thought to hold the Field; now Giotto is acclaimed by all. So that he has obscured the former’s fame.

And Boccaccio in the *Decameron*, which was written about 30 years after Giotto’s death the narrator of the fifth tale of the sixth day Panfilo confirmed Giotto’s undisputed reputation. ‘Giotto’s genius, Panfilo wrote, was of such excellence that there was no thing in nature, mother of all and prime mover of the heavens continuous circling, that he with his stylus and with pen or with brush could not paint so that it seemed, not like unto it, bit rather that very thing itself; so that man times men’s visual sense as deceived by the things he made, believing real that which was painted. And he therefore, having bought to light that art which had been buried for many centuries under the error of those who had painted more to delight the eye of the ignorant than to please the intellect of the wise, may be truly called one of the lights of Florentine glory’. At the end of the 14th century, Cennino Cennini, who wrote the first technical treatise on painting, still felt that Giotto’s greatness was unquestionable ‘his art,’ Cennini wrote, ‘was the most accomplished that anyone has ever had’, ‘he translated the art of painting from Greek to Latin and made it modern’. And the sculptor Ghiberti, writing in the middle of the 15th century confirmed this view ‘He brought into being the new art and with it grace, keeping within the true measure’. And Vasari, writing a hundred years later in the middle of the 16th century notes how Giotto ‘banished that awkward Greek manner, and revived the modern and good art of painting, introducing the natural portrayal of living persons’.

Giotto’s reputation as an originator has remained secure even in the twentieth century; which has seen a considerable turning away from the ideals of the High Renaissance of the 16th century. Giotto’s art, therefore, as much as any artist’s, poses the question: what is the nature of originality in art? Many answers have been given to the question: in what does the originality of Giotto’s art consist? In order to approach Giotto’s art let us first consider one of the best known and most influential answers of the twentieth century. This is the answer given by Bernard Berenson in his book the *Florentine Painters*, first published in 1896. Berenson’s answer to the reason or Giotto’s greatness is summed up in the phrase ‘tactile values’.

Let us consider Berenson’s theory while looking at detail of one of Giotto’s paintings, Joachim and the Shepherds, from the Scrovengi Chapel in Padua, also known as the Arena chapel.

Berenson pointed out that sight alone gave no accurate sense of the third dimension. In our infancy the sense of touch, and muscular sensations of movement each us to appreciate depth, the third dimension, both in objects and in space; and in our infancy,
too, Berenson asserted, we learn to make of touch, the true test of reality. The thing is real if we can touch or grasp it. And later, though we forget this basic test of infancy; every time we recognize or endow visible things with reality we are in fact, says Berenson, giving tactile values to our retinal impressions. Now to the extent to which the painter aims at giving an abiding sense of reality with only to dimensions, he must learn to do consciously what we all do unconsciously—construct third dimension. His first business therefore is to arouse the tactile sense for I must have, writes Berenson, the illusion of being able to touch a figure, of varying muscular sensations inside my palm and fingers corresponding to the various projections of this figure, before I shall take it for granted as real.

Berenson claimed that the power to stimulate the tactile imagination was the essential aim of painting, and Giotto possessed this power above all others. Indeed his ability to stimulate the tactile imagination was greater than the capacity possessed by the objects themselves in nature, so that to his contemporaries Berenson justly observes they conveyed a keener sense of reality than the objects themselves’.

Now although it would be unwise to use Berenson’s tactile imagination as a measure of all paintings: does it help us to understand a painting by Kandinsky say or by El Greco; it does help us surely to understand better the timeless and universal appeal of Giotto’s art. Hi figures possess plastic reality. For one thing, he has learnt how to stand them firmly on the ground. Look how firmly the shepherds stand upon the ground in this fresco of Joachim’s Dream from the Arena Chapel. Compare it with the way in which figures stand upon the tips of their toes in Byzantine Art such as the Justinian mosaic at S. Vitale, in any typical gothic manuscript.*

The solid, tactile, plastic quality Giotto’s paintings are achieved in part by his original treatment of space. If we examine his Lamentation fresco* in the Arena Chapel, we will notice that he does suggest a real but nevertheless shallow stage it is upon this sallow foreground stage that his dramatic narratives are enacted like actors playing before a proscenium curtain. We might compare Giotto’s space in this regard, with the deeper space which came into painting following upon the discovery of the laws of centralized perspective in the following century. This deeper space in which depth is logically articulated by diminution is to be seen in Perugino’s painting of he delivery of the keys to Peer painted in 1482; or we might yet again compare Giotto’s shallow space with those deep vortexes of colored light which romantic painters like Turner made use of in such paintings as Rain Storm and Speed, * in which space is established by subtle transitions of atmospheric colour.

Giotto’s treatment of space has rightly been described as sculptural; that is to say he carves out his space from the wall surface by defining the physical reality of his figures with superb draughtsmanship, which cuts out the volume, instead of moving rhythmically over the sculpture as in Gothic drawing.
Note in the Lamentation,* for example, that both of the figures nearest to the spectator have their backs turned to us. These broad backs define the picture plane but also lead our eye past it to the figure of Christ and the three mourners, behind this group again are the standing mourners, and behind them again the massive diagonal of the shelf of rock. Note that this shallow space is carved out, so to speak by the successive overlapping of solidly defined bodies; bodies drawn with monumental simplicity.

Now Giotto gives this swallowed and sculptured space a heightened reality by making it appear an extension of the spectators own space. If we turn for a moment to Cimabue’s Madonna Enthroned* in the Uffizi, it will be noted that he paints his saints and doctors one level, and his virgin and angels on another. If we consider ourselves as spectators at the level of doctors, it would not be possible for us to see the throne foreshortened upwards as it is. Cimabue uses a birds eye view, or an angel’s eye view; and we should have to view it as from a height in order to see it as a logical definition of space; and even then the frontal arms and legs of the throne would have to be foreshortened away from us, rather than painted flatly and frontally without recession as in fact they are.

Giotto, however, dispenses with the bird’s eye view and introduces a normal eye-level in the lower half of his picture plane, so that standing before the picture we see the figures at the angle of vision at which we would view a real tableau of actors, acting on the floor on which we ourselves are standing.

Now it would follow that if the plastic realism of the overlapping figures carve out a coherent but confined space and the events are acted out at an eye level natural to the viewer a new spatial reality is asserted in which only one event can happen at one time. In Roman narrative friezes, for all their episodic realism,* no frame separates the depiction of one event from another; and a dugento sculptor like Niccola Pisano can quite happily present a relief of the Nativity* in a formal language which is naturalistic enough in a Roman-Gothic fashion, but in which events which succeed one another in time like he Annunciation the Birth, the washing of the Child and the Visitation of the Shepherds can be shown in one spatial continuum. But in Giotto, space acquires a reality which demands that only one event can be enacted within the frame which defines it, at the one time. The framing edge of Giotto’s pictures, that is to say, to define a unity of time, place and action: the ideal of tragedy.

Finally it must be stressed that Giotto’s art is a narrative art. The desire to tell a story, to narrate an historical event not timeless like a sacred icon but occurring in time, promoted naturalism in 14th century Italy just as the desire to narrate the stories of the gods had promoted naturalism in the art of late archaic Greece in the 6th century BC.*
Now, in order to endow his scenes with dramatic coherence, Giotto chooses a moment at the high point of the action, the moment of the betrayal of Christ for example, the soldiers gathered on either side, the fatal kiss.* The selection of his moment provides his scenes with a psychological and dramatic unity. To sum up then, we may say that in Giotto, we meet a new feeling for the substantial plastic reality of objects, a new way of organizing space and a new coherence of time, event and action.

I want now to turn to a very brief consideration of the three main cycles of painting with which Giotto is traditionally associated.

First, the paintings in the Upper Church of St Francesca at Assissi.

Second, the paintings in the Scrovegni or Arena Chapel at Padua.

Third, the paintings in the Bardi and Peruzzi chapels in Sta Croce, Florence.

A considerable debate has developed among Renaissance art historians as to whether Giotto was responsible for the paintings depicting the lie of St Francis in the Upper Church at Assisi. But there is sufficient evidence to support the traditional view, first voiced by Vasari, that Giotto painted a series of 32 scenes in fresco of the lie of St Francis here. The painting of the Church, as I mentioned in my previous lecture, began with Cimabue and a team of artists, about 1280. The cycle depicting the life of St Francis was begun about 1296; and depicted episode by episode the legend of St Francis according to the Life of the saint written by Saint Bonaventura.

It is in these early works that we may glimpse the emergence of Giotto’s originality. Vasari tells that Giotto was a pupil of Cimabue, this is likely although not proven. The young Giotto probably worked in Rome where he came under the influence of the painter Pietro Cavallini.

We may compare fine paintings of two apostles in S. Cecilia, Rome, with Giotto’s the *Deposition*, one of his earliest works at Assisi.

Heavy woolen draperies, deep broad folds, recall classical painting and sculpture.

Another influence on Giotto at this time as that of the architect and sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio.

Virgin and Child c 1296.* The large massive solidity, the movement away from Gothic linearism and grace.

The Dormition of the Virgin.* Simple massing but effective integration of the two figures, a characteristic of Giotto’s art.
The popular religious sentiment spread by the Franciscan order, with its direct appeal to the common people, probably helped to inspire Giotto to produce an art which directed its appeal to the common people.

An early scene in the series depicts St Francis giving away his cloak to a poor knight. The story is told with a touching simplicity in the foreground, and it is to be noted that at this stage the feet are not yet firmly set upon the ground. But note the foreshortening of the houses on the hill. These are depicted not frontally but in oblique perspective, and both sides of the cube are foreshortened. This was an important new development, and is a step in advance of the foreshortened frontal perspective of this detail, from St Francis ordeal by fire. Here the front plane is not foreshortened at all, but a foreshortened side view is provided. This type of foreshortened frontal perspective was common enough in antiquity in Hellenistic vase painting and Pompeian wall painting of the third and fourth styles.

It is quite possible that during his sojourn in Rome, the wall paintings of antiquity exercised a direct influence upon his style. Compare for example this early scene in the St Francis Legend to this Roman wall painting.

In St Francis leaving his Parents* we may note how Giotto relates his groups of figures to his architectural groups, making of them two confronting architectonic masses. Note the simple expressive gestures; the interrelation of the heads, and the interest in solving the problems of oblique perspective.

Let us turn now to Giotto’s second important commission the area Chapel at Padua. Giotto had been called to Padua by Franciscans to decorate the church of San Antonio, when he was commissioned by the Scrovegni family to decorate their chapel next to their palace. It is likely that the great pictorial cycle which Giotto painted therein was conceived after the chapel itself was built.

Here is a view of the interior of the chapel: a plain hall with a barrel vaulted roof. A last judgment is painted on the end of the wall, with niches in grisailles along the base and above panels containing scenes from the life of Christ and the Life of the Virgin. It is at Padua that Giotto’s style s we have already discussed it fully asserts itself Consider the massive solidity, the magnificent relationship of the figures to their architectural settings in the Meeting of Anna Joachim at the Golden Gate.*

The frescoes in the Peruzzi and Bardi Chapels represent the last phase in Giotto’s development. In these later works there is a new sense of refinement, harmony and beauty. Consider this detail from the funeral of St Francis in the Bardi Chapel. The drawing still carves out the space with splendid surety, but the touch is lighter, the colour reduced to pale tones, and the expression asserted with a splendid economy of
means. Here is a detail of a monk’s head:* and here a tonsured monk kissing the
dying hand of St Francis, a superb drawing in which plastic and expressive values are
brilliantly integrated.

The other important innovator of the early 14th century in Italy was Duccio of Siena. Duccio
stands closer to the Byzantine style than Giotto. But if we compare Cimabue’s
Madonna Enthroned of 1280* with Duccio’s Madonna Enthroned* of 1308, painted
for the Cathedral of Siena, we note a general softening of the Byzantine style. The
stiff angular folds become rounder and looser, the faces are beginning to take on a
sweet and fleshy character. This sweeter and softer style is characteristic of Sienese
Trencento painting and was carried on in the work of Duccio’s leading disciple,
Simone Martini.*

Simone Martini’s work is characterized by a heightening of colour, a greater interest
in observational detail, such as the variety of costumes and physical types. Human
incident, everyday reality, becomes incorporated in elaborate surface patterning. The
movement is one away from the architectural grandeur, and heroic pathos of Giotto,
towards detailed observation and decoration.

The great artistic achievements of the first fort years of the fourteenth century in Italy
accompanied a period of economic advance and political stability. This period of
economic advance and political stability. This period came to an end with the Black
Death of 1348 which wiped out more than half of the urban population. The perils of
the tie are moralized for us in Fracesco Traini’s Triumph of Death painted about 1355,
in which a group of young courtiers come suddenly upon some rotting corpse and
proceed to hold their noses and draw the moral. The confined space and rocky
landspects remind us of Giotto’s achievement but the interest in detail, the dogs and
plants, and the carefully curled manes of the horses reveal that the central artistic
interests of the second half of the 14th century have now set in quite another direction.

One direction in which it set was a refreshing interest in rural and country life. We see
this in the frescoed scenes which Simone Martini made in the Palace of the Popes at
Avignon, in southern France, in which plants are drawn with fidelity to nature.
Already the Sienese painters had begun to exploit a deeper space than Giotto's, as may
be seen in a detail by the painter Ambrogio Lorenzeti,* a fresco in the Palazzo
Publicco, Siena, entitled Good Government, painted about 130 which provides a view
of the Sienese countryside busy with rural occupations.

In Northern Europe the gothic style persisted in manuscript illumination, wall painting,
but absorbed many of the new ideas initiated by Giotto and Duccio. Out next slide,
shows something of this synthesis of the north and south. It is an Annunciation Scene
from the Book of hours of Jeanne d’Evruex by the French artist Jean Purcell of about
1325. The figures are effectively housed in a centrally foreshortened room which
reveals the spatial innovations of Duccio and Giotto. But the linear and playful motifs surrounding the central scene belong to the older and more two dimensional and more rhythmical linear Gothic tradition.

By the year 1400 the northern and southern traditions had given rise to a single style throughout western Europe, the late and courtly Gothic style known as International Gothic. The spirit of this International Gothic style is delightfully expressed in book illumination, notably in the Tres Riches Heures of the Duke of Berry painted by the Limbourg brothers between 1413 and 1416. The book was a luxury production produced by two Flemish artists for the bother of the French king and one of the richest at patrons of his day. The Limbourg brothers developed the well-known Gothic iconographic cycle of the months familiar since Romanesque times into panoramas of seasonal activities in nature.

The February miniature. The earliest snow landscape in the history of western art.

October miniature, sowing the winter grain. The foreground figures cast shadows on the ground. Wealth of realistic detail. Scarecrows, footprints in the solid. The castle a portrait of the old Gothic louver. Some similarities to the existing castle at Vincennes.


The Tres Riches Heures of the Brothers Limbourg leads us directly to the work of the most important artist working the international gothic style, Gentile da Fabriano, who worked in Venice, Florence, Siena and Rome. His masterpiece is his Adoration of the Magi now in the Uffizi painted in 1423. The painting has become gay, intricate, highly colourful and highly decorative pageant. Despite the incorporation of spatial innovations of Giotto the painting has become flat, decorative and essentially Gothic in feeling again. Hat we have traced then in the hundred years or more which separate Giotto from Gentile is the capacity of the Gothic style to absorb the most daring innovations in drawing and spatial construction and, as it were, revert to type.
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