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# THE ORIGINS OF FLORENTINE PAINTING

**F**lorentine art, like all European art, was ultimately rooted in ancient Rome. But a Florentine living in the 1100s would not have known this, nor would he have known that Caesar had founded the city as a colony in 59 BC. And were he willing to venture to the Holy City (the rigors of such a trip would have been formidable) he would have been shocked to see how little of the ancient monuments was left.

Rome still dominated its vast frontiers when Constantine the Great came to power in AD 312 and imposed on history one of its defining moments: an edict that legitimized Christianity. A decade later he commissioned Saint Peter's to be built on state property where its renovated version still stands. But once the Emperor moved the imperial seat of power to Constantinople, site of the ancient Greek city of Byzantium (present-day Istanbul) in 330, Roman influence began to decline on the Italian peninsula. In the ensuing centuries, the ancient city's architectural and sculptural wonders crumbled to ruins, and its naturalistic wall paintings, like the charming scene of a woman playing a lyre (fig. 1), lay buried beneath centuries of accumulated earth.

1. *The Concert*, frescoed wall painting from Pompeii, AD 30, National Archeological Museum of Naples. Covered by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79; not unearthed until mid-1700s.



Roman frescoes of the first century are remarkable for depicting fully rounded figures sitting and standing in easy postures within a credible space. Each form is rendered impressionistically in loose brush strokes that leave no trace of an outline.

But if our Florentine had stood before one of the few intact monuments left in Rome, the Arch of Constantine (315), he would have been perplexed. Above the two side arches were (and still are) two pairs of roundels containing sculpted reliefs that had been scavenged from imperial monuments of two centuries earlier and patched in place by Constantine's own craftsmen (figs. 2 and 3).



2. Arch of Constantine, 315 AD.

Emperor Hadrian and his hunting companions are standing over a dead lion.



3. *Imperial Lion Hunt*, roundel scavenged from one of Emperor Hadrian's monuments, mid-second century, Arch of Constantine.

Within each roundel, well-proportioned figures stand freely in open space (fig. 3). Such stylistic features, along with the individualistic portraits and great wealth of descriptive detail, date the carving near to the time of the wall painting from Pompeii. Below the roundels is a long frieze, expressly sculpted for the Arch of Constantine (fig. 4). In the center section of the frieze, arranged in two compact rows, the citizens of Rome are depicted receiving largess from Constantine. Their repetitive sameness forms a jarring geometric pattern in violent contrast to the realism of the older roundels. Linked en masse, these flat hard-edge abstractions would have proclaimed raw imperial power to Roman subjects of Constantine's day.

4. Detail of the arch's frieze, 315 AD.



Constantine, his head missing, sits in the center on a throne with his court seated to either side. His subjects are kneeling below with out-stretched hands. Suffice it to compare the naturalistic, looping folds in the tunics of the roundels with the schematic patterns in the folds of Constantine's frieze.

In a single stroke (and a broad one as we shall see) Roman artisans had reshaped the human figure, which had been so naturalistically portrayed two centuries earlier. (Much the same occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century when Picasso rejected the naturalism conveyed in French Impressionism by reassembling the human face.) What is telling, however, is that the Florentine could have related to Constantine's figures, which were not so dissimilar in style from paintings then in Florentine churches (fig. 5). But the same cannot be said of the naturalistic renderings in the roundels. These would have simply been unfamiliar.

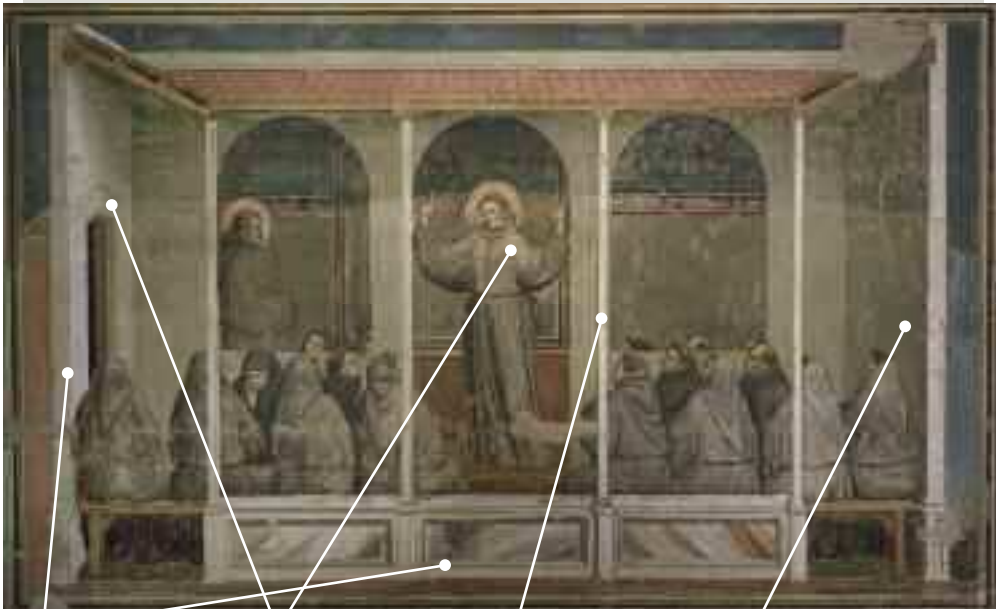
Although it is clear that the level of skill required to produce a figure in Constantine's frieze is less than what was required for the earlier roundels, skill alone is not sufficient to account for the radical reversal of aesthetic values. Indeed, the reason for the differences is far more complex. As Rome began to expand its empire over the known world—over Gaul, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Persia—the art of its outlying provinces opened up starkly appealing alternatives to artistic expression.

## ART AND THE VISIBLE WORLD

### Giotto, c. 1267-1337, *Life of Saint Francis*, Bardi Chapel, c. 1315-20

In *A Room with a View*, E.M. Forster's 1908 novel, a group of English tourists tail a strutting Anglican pastor from chapel to chapel through the church of Santa Croce, craning their necks as he points out the Giotto's. These frescoes had been discovered under a layer of whitewash only a few decades earlier, and it was as hard to imagine then as it is now how Florence's earliest wall paintings could have succumbed to the whims of taste.

19. Giotto, *Apparition of Saint Francis*, c. 1315-20, Bardi Chapel, left wall.



The forward walls have been removed and the building has been pushed back into the scene, just as it is in the *Funeral of Saint Francis* (fig. 20).

Note that the light that illuminates the figures and the left wall of the building corresponds to the natural light streaming in from the chapel's window as shown in fig. 18.

The spindly columns have been shifted to the right to account for our oblique view standing in the entrance to the left.

The far wall is wider than the wall on the opposite side.

Giotto, who is often called the father of Western painting, has embodied a remarkable array of different talents to different people: storyteller, Christian spiritualist, psychologist, naturalist painter, dramatist. Where he learned to paint isn't certain, though it's likely that in the 1290s he vis-



ited the basilica in Assisi, where he would have studied the techniques employed in Rome's ancient fresco tradition.

The first observation to note is that Giotto confronts the problem of depicting the three-dimensional world on a flat surface by relating the scenes to architecture. All but one of the structures depicted are interiors, with forward walls sliced off to show us characters anchored to a clearly defined space. Indeed, the creation of plausible space is one of Giotto's great contributions to Western painting. Space provided Giotto the means to delineate the human figure, his overriding focus, as an isolated mass with breathing room around it. This is a dramatic departure from the simple stacking of flat figures that characterizes the scenes in the Saint Francis painting (fig. 17).

Giotto's use of space is still primitive. None of these frescoes depicts a space governed by true perspective, which became an obsession with Renaissance artists of the next century. And unlike those painters, who create a space contiguous with the viewer's space, Giotto pushes his interiors some distance inside the scene. We stand outside his little doll-houses, gazing in.

Giotto intends for the frescoes to be seen from an oblique viewpoint that corresponds to the chapel's entrance as in the *Apparition* (but also in the *Funeral*, fig. 20).

20. Giotto, *Funeral of Saint Francis*, c. 1315-20, Bardi Chapel, left wall.



Where the paintings are disfigured tombs were at one time attached to the walls.



Notice how he shows us a greater expanse of the far right wall of the room more than of the near wall, and shifts the spindly forward columns off center. In other words, Giotto sets us obliquely to and simultaneously dead center in front of the building. The attention Giotto gives to the role of light in defining the shape of objects—for example, those lumpish monks sitting in the refectory—is even more critical for future painting than his demonstration of space.

21. Giotto, detail of fig. 19.



We perceive the massiveness of the monks not only because of their silhouettes, but also because of the way Giotto's directed light shapes their volume. The parts that protrude toward us are bathed in *highlights*, while the opposite, receding sides are *darkened* by shadow.

Giotto directs his light from an overhead angle that corresponds to natural light emanating from the window. This light bleaches color on the figure's illuminated side, while its absence deepens color on its back-side. Since our eye perceives that pale colors on a flat wall visually jump forward and darker ones recede, the graduated transition of pale to dark simulates a figure's rounded mass. (Pale colors come forward because they reflect light back to the eye.)

Giotto's treatment of space and light is unquestionably a supreme technical achievement, but what puts him in the company of the finest painters of any century is his intuitive ability to strip a story to its bare essentials. He paints expressive faces in scenes depicting despair but prefers gesture as a means to focus on the moment. For example, in the *Apparition of Saint Francis* the neatly ordered architecture imparts a sense of calm that accents the mysterious apparition of Francis to his fellow friars. His arms, raised in salutation, complete the circle begun by the arch overhead; interaction with the architecture directs our eye to Francis.



22. Giotto, *Francis's Renunciation of His Possessions*, c. 1315-20, Bardi Chapel, left wall

The corner of the masterfully foreshortened building accents Francis, while the receding wall underlines the father's outstretched arm.

The *Renunciation* captures the moment when young Francis, whose body is draped by the bishop behind him, renounces his possessions before his father. The father rushes forward to rebuke Francis, but is restrained by his respectable colleagues. Again, Giotto uses architecture for dramatic effect: the strong vertical of the imposing building marks Francis and a telling space separates father from son, implying the isolation of the humiliated parent.

Note that Giotto marks the father in yellow, a color by convention reserved for morally weak adversaries. Yellow is normally a bright color that pops forward, especially as its paler version moves toward white, but Giotto deepens it with shades of umber brown to match the richness of the other colors. Thus, we read all colors as having the same muted midrange intensity.

*Trial by Fire* is the simplest of the Bardi frescoes structurally, but the most sophisticated psychologically and chromatically. Francis traveled to Egypt to convert the sultan and to prove the truth of Christianity. Here, he is about to step into the bonfire. Opposite Francis, the monarch's attendants, resplendently robed in deep yellow, white, blue and red, their faces and dark complexion drawn from life, shrink back in disbelief. Our eye goes first to the sultan, next to the attendants and then to Francis, back and forth and back in taut suspense.