

Chapter 19

FROM GOTHIC TO RENAISSANCE

14th-Century Italian Art

Summary:

This chapter introduces the student to Italy. At this time Italy was a country, not unified, but a compilation of small city-states with surrounding territories. These areas were dominated by a city, for example the Duchy of Milan, the Republic of Venice, and the Republic of Florence.

■ The political character of these cities or governments was an oligarchy, ruled by selected aristocrats. Rome existed as a papal state and as a secular state. The Pope was not only the spiritual leader of Europe; he was also a secular ruler.

■ The special nature of Italy at this time allowed these small independent city-states to evolve into very powerful commercial and trading giants. Genoa, Pisa and Venice controlled the maritime lanes between Europe and the very rich East. The guilds emerged in twelfth century France as powerful entities, so the same occurred in Italy.

■ *The guilds* became major patrons of the arts as well as setting regulations, which controlled the operations within the guilds. This is the century that saw *the Black Death devastate Europe*, estimations of the death toll range from 25% to 50% of population died as a result of this disease which now historians say originated in China and came to Europe as a consequence of trade. The peripheral disasters that the **Black Death (bubonic plague)** caused may have been responsible for the malnutrition, which was pervasive.

■ The devastating loss of population and a calamitous series of weather conditions caused a wide spread famine. *The disease was non-discriminatory; no segment of the population was exempt.* From the very poorest peasant to the highest aristocrat to the highly placed Churchmen, no one was safe from this virulent infection and deadly killer.

■ The response in Italy was a commissioning of devotional works and images. Religious orders became major health benefactors, constructing hospitals and caring for the sick and dying.

■ Another *consequence* of this plague was an economic one lack of population led to a *labor shortage* and an already *tense and frightened society* exacerbated the tensions between the aristocracy and the peasants.

■ Into this strained atmosphere another dilemma occurred, the College of Cardinals elected a French pope and he moved the papacy from Rome to Avignon causing a schism.

■ The conflict between the Italians and the French eventually led to the election of two popes at the same time. This situation was resolved by an election of a pope (Martin V) acceptable to all.

■ In spite of this upheaval Italy was developing, in fact, the rise of the vernacular language (*Latin remained the official language*) allowed for the further and rapid

evolution of philosophy and intellectual conceptual thinking to be disseminated to a broader base.

■ *As a consequence humanism became a focus of interest.*

■ This *interest* led to a resurgence of interest in the *writings of Antiquity*, and this, in turn, *led to recognition of scholarship.*

■ **Petrarch and Boccaccio** were famous and highly sought **poets and scholars** of the *fourteenth century* and they became *exemplars of the importance of creative individuals.*

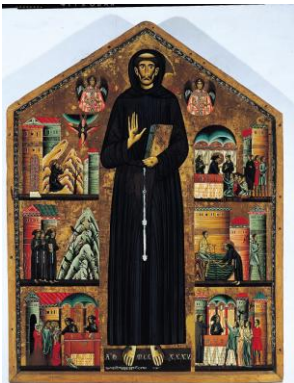
■ This is *fourteenth century Italy*, these changes and upheavals allowed for the artistic development that went into new channels, different from the Gothic world of the rest of Europe.

■ Scholars today differ on the exact reference for 14th century Italy, some call this period **Late Gothic** while others refer to this century as the “**Proto-Renaissance**” using the definitions stemming from France and Italy and both meaning “**rebirth**”.

■ *There existed in Italy* at this time a *duality of meanings*, Late Gothic and Proto-Renaissance conventions *coexisted*, but the Italian artist was making definitive attempts to break away from the medieval protocols.

I. Lecture Model

The social and iconographic methodologies can be useful in gaining an understanding of the work commissioned. These approaches can help to establish the importance of the religious commissions and the alignment of the secular patron with the religious interpretation as a tool to fix political authority.



Berlinghieri's *St. Francis Altarpiece* 1235

1) The late Gothic sense can be seen in the Berlinghieri's *St. Francis Altarpiece* 1235 (19-1) the monumental figure of Francis centers the panel. He is surrounded by scenes from his life. Berlinghieri has presented the saint flanked by two angels in the *maniera greca* or Byzantine style. An elongated figure placed on a gold background, reminiscent of *Justinian and Attendants* c.547



(12-10) or of a manuscript leaf such as St. Peter 1054, holding a scroll in his left hand, representing his epistles. Another possible example could be an icon of St. Demetrios, cloisonné enamel c. 1000- 50. Berlinghieri could have been familiar with these representations or similar ones. The presentation of Francis displaying the stigmata, a sign of God's love for Francis, and holding a gospel in his left hand is similar to Peter displaying his epistles. The gospel and the epistles reference the "spreading of the Word" a function of the Franciscans. The change in medieval convention can, in part, be attributed to St. Francis, one of the great moving forces of the latter part of the twelfth century and the early thirteenth century. He expressed a new feeling for nature. He considered God's love as a blessing and help in focusing on daily life. The altarpiece does focus on the life of St. Francis and his contributions to society. Perhaps Berlinghieri sought to reinforce the personal relationship to God that Francis preached. The scenes depicted do emphasize the ministry Francis preached. The ideal of personal commitment and service were hallmarks for Francis and the order he founded, the Franciscans. The Franciscans served the poor, spreading the God's word and ministering to the sick and dying. A later work by the Siennese artist Duccio di Buoninsegna, the *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints* from the *Maestà* 1308-11 (19-10) shows the influences of not only the *maniera greca* but also the Late Gothic. The enthroned Madonna and Child bear a resemblance to the *Theotokos* from Hagia Sophia, Constantinople 867 (12-17).



The folds of the draperies also indicate the influence of the Late Gothic,



18-34



18-32

the draperies flow across the figures in a similar fashion as seen in the *Psalter of St. Louis* 1253-70 (18-34) and the *Virgin of Paris* early 14th century (18-32). Yet a change can be seen in the presentation of the theme itself. Even with the gold backgrounds and gold halos, the figures are more substantive than the earlier Berlinghieri *St. Francis* is.

Duccio is moving toward a more natural presentation of the physicality of the body. The figures are occupying space more clearly. No longer do they float in space. The commission of the work itself is also a political statement. The Sienese victory over the Florentines (1260) brought about a retention of the city's importance and continued economic good health. The Virgin was credited with this victory and the population, by way of thanksgiving commissioned the altarpiece. The political overtone was the fact that now the other city-states, also understood this relationship between Siena and the Queen of Heaven, she made a powerful patron and a symbol to be reckoned with, enemies, perhaps would have second thoughts before they invaded Siena. On the reverse side of the altarpiece, are depictions of the life of Christ. The main panel depicts the Passion.



19-11

In the *Betrayal* (19-11), the gradual change from the formal presentation so favored by the Byzantine tradition is more evident. The scene shows the betrayal of Christ by Judas and the subsequent actions of the players. Duccio has created a small narrative of the event showing the viewer the moment of importance centralized by the clustering soldiers and apostles in the background and the important figures in the foreground, Christ and Judas. Christ stands face forward and Judas appears in profile offering the kiss of betrayal. To the left and right of the principal drama, the central scene, is Peter cutting the servant's ear in anger and the terrified apostles fleeing from the soldiers.

Duccio has shown more natural human emotions and the drama the event had. This is a change from late Gothic conventions; the artist is presenting a human drama fraught with violence and fear, yet depicted in a real and believable fashion. The religious figures are taking on a more real and human character. This does reflect the teachings of St. Francis; he defined God as a truly loving God. This work does present kinder and more convincing image for the people to see. The narrative value of this scene is more persuasive in spreading the teachings of the Church. The late Gothic period sought to change the focus of the teachings from damnation to salvation and this period emphasized the humanity of the religion more precisely.



19-5

Pietro Cavallini represents the Roman school of painting. In his *Seated Apostles* from the fresco of the *Last Judgment* c.1291 from Sta. Cecilia in Trastevere (19-5), the artist is moving more clearly toward a natural presentation of figures in a spatial context. The seated figures are not the stylized presentations of the *maniera greca*. They sit in judgment and present themselves as real people. The artist has shown the humanity of these larger than life figures, Cavallini has brought them back as real people. It could be suggested that in keeping with the crisis, the plague, and the political tensions in the Church, the Schism, the Roman school actively sought to illustrate these religious figures as more human, in fact, emphasizing their humanity. This also supports the teachings of St. Francis.

The contributions of Giotto di Bondone present a truly radical departure from the late Gothic conventions. Along with the artist's interest in revealing nature and presenting a substantive, physical body, he created, perhaps for the first time in the Arena Chapel, a truly integrated narrative of Christian themes.



19-18

In figure **19-8**, the interior of the chapel allows the viewer to see the presentation of the stories and to perhaps gain an understanding of the remarkable contribution Giotto made to Western pictorial expression. The chapel itself represents a private commission and the patronage of the artist by a private individual, Enrico Scrovegni. This also points to the individualization of the not only the artist but also of the patron. Both are assuming places of importance. The uniqueness of the Arena Chapel is that it was not connected to a church, but rather, it was an independent structure placed next to the family home (now destroyed). The chapel program creates in narrative the Lives of the Virgin and Christ and his Passion.



19-19

In a scene from the Passion, the *Lamentation* c.1305 (**19-9**), the viewer is given an intimate view into this drama. Certain figures, their backs to us, the viewers, are seated on the groundline, witnessing the event. Mary, grieving over her dead son's body, tenderly holds his head in her arms. Giotto has given us, the viewers, a real look at a moment that is profoundly sad. The standing figures also bear witness to this event. Giotto presents them as vertical figures who break the monotony of the long horizontal figure of the dead Christ. The diagonal rock ledge creates a gentle upward movement to the tree, possibly a reference to the Tree of Life, symbolized by the dead Christ. This tree creates a terminus.

But it is augmented by the stooping figure of one of the Holy Women, as she examines the wounds her back presents a gentle curve forward to align our eye on the head of the Virgin and focus our attention on her grief. Her stooping figure is also balanced by the gesturing St. John, the thrust forward of his body is offset by his arms pulling back in despair. Giotto has created a scene, which is at once emotional, yet not overly emotional.

The angels above circling this scene also gesture in sorrow and sympathy. The placement of the figures and the gesturing allow the viewer to invest the scene with the pathos of empathy. One can compare this *Lamentation* with an earlier rendition and it is possible to see the differences.



In the Nerezi wall painting of the same theme (12-27), the similarities are apparent; however, Giotto has removed the stylized conventions of the drapery and replaced them with the physicality of the body. The two-seated figures, looking not at us, but rather as witnesses to the event, present mass in pyramidal shapes.

Giotto has reconciled the spiritual and the secular worlds. He has created a narrative that is both balanced and cohesive in religious imagery. Giotto has also created a private devotional work for a patron not affiliated in an official capacity with the Church. Unlike the earlier work of Duccio's *Maestà*, this chapel was for the private devotional use of the Scrovegni family.

In response to the growing power of the city-states, the ruling bodies were commissioning works, which would and could present their cities in the best possible light.

Duccio's *Maestà* was a public commission, but the theme was one of thanksgiving and possibly also a warning to other city-states. The Virgin was designated official patroness of Siena. The commercial success of Siena rivaled Florence.

The city fathers now wanted that success to be memorialized and they commissioned **Ambrogio Lorenzetti** to create in the town hall such a tribute to the city.



19-15



19-16

This fresco was a secular work not aligned to any religious imagery. *Peaceful City and Peaceful Country* both from the *Effects of Good Government in the City and the Country* 1338-39 (19-15 & 19-16) create visual representations of the function of civic government.

Lorenzetti created a cityscape and a countryside detailing the effects of what a good government could accomplish. We see bustling activity in the city: commercial enterprise, social activity, the dancing maidens, and successful markets overflowing with goods. The countryside is peaceful and productive. Merchants go forth without armed guards; farmers are working their fields unhindered by soldiers or robbers. The countryside is a calm and restful place peopled by industrious workers, intent on productive labor, this atmosphere is created by the flowing curve of the road in the upper foreground and the rounded slopes of the hills.

Lorenzetti has also attempted to give the viewer a look at the Tuscan landscape around Siena and Siena itself. It is noteworthy to point out that this commission appeared in the city hall. It was a visual document that pointed out to the population and to the city fathers the benefits to be realized from good government minus violent party struggles for power and equally the civic obligations of its citizenry.

This work details what an effective administration can do and how the citizens can also perform their roles. This work also focuses on the slowly changing perception of Italian society. They are seeing themselves as individuals working within a community. The role of the artist assisted in presenting this view, the artist created works that reflected the religious fervor but also now mirrored the growing need of the period to reconcile its humanity with this fervor

2) *The classical past can be considered as a great reservoir of ideas and forms into which later artists continually dipped and reinterpreted according to their own needs.*



19-2



19-3

In the great pulpit that **Nicola Pisano** created for the baptistery of Pisa Cathedral c.1259-60 (**19-2**), the detail (**19-3**) he borrowed heavily from the solid relief tradition of Late Roman sarcophagi and from the late Gothic period as well as the Byzantine tradition.

This scene, which combines the Annunciation with the Nativity, presents Mary as a Roman matron. The temple facade in the background harkens back to Imperial Rome, the baby being bathed by the two mid-wives below is reminiscent of the Byzantine tradition of depicting the First Bath, and the columns themselves, seen in the pulpit is an inheritance from the Gothic. Although Giovanni carried on his father's interest in naturalistic details, he did not continue the interest in classical forms in his work.



19-4



18-35

He shifted from heavy classicism to an animated style (**19-4**) whose slender figures show the influence of the curving line of Gothic art (**18-35**). This switch does indicate the dialogues between Italy and European partners. There was an interchange between these city-states and the countries outside Italy. This shift also shows the interest in both the classical past and in naturalism.

Resources:

Videotapes

Giotto: the Arena Chapel 50 min. BVL30614 \$149.95

The Beginning: The Emergence of the Renaissance 60 min. BVL11326 \$149.95

An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance 29 min. BVL9055 \$89.98

Films for the Humanities

1-800-257-5126

<http://www.films.com>

Books

Basile, Giovanni ed. Giotto: The Arena Chapel Frescoes. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993.

Chelazzi Dini, Giuletta. Sieneese Painting: From Duccio to the Birth of the Baroque. New

York: H. N. Abrams, 1998.

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Richards, John. Altichiero: An Artist and his Patrons in the Italian Trecento. New York:

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Starn, Randolph. Ambrogio Lorenzetti: The Palazzo Pubblico, Siena. New York: George

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Web Resources

<http://www.chistrex.org>

<http://gallery.euroweb.hu/tours/giotto/arena.html>

<http://www.christusrex.org/www1/francis/index.html>