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When I Paint My Masterpiece:

Giotto's *Last Judgement* and its Twelfth Century Cultural Foundations

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Located on the grounds that once housed an ancient Roman arena, the Scrovegni Chapel - named after the family who bought and redeveloped the land in the early fourteenth century - is a small, unsuspecting church in Padua, Italy, free of ornament or decoration, but houses one of the finest examples of early Renaissance painting.¹ Commissioned in 1304 by Enrico Scrovegni (d. 1336), an affluent Paduan banker, Giotto di Bondone's *Last Judgement* (Fig. 1) is only one of a multitude of the artist's brilliant frescoes filling the walls of the Arena Chapel, but serves as an iconographic centerpiece to the church and a defining feature of the early Italian Renaissance as a whole. According to Douglas Lackey, "when Giotto began painting the Arena Chapel in 1304, it was an undistinguished building of little cultural importance. When he finished... it was one of the wonders of the world."²

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¹ For further information on the chapel's construction, see James Stubblebine, ed., *Giotto: The Arena Chapel Frescoes* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1969). Cited in Douglas P. Lackey, "Giotto in Padua: A New Geography of the Human Soul," *The Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 551-72.

² Lackey, 551.

Already an accomplished painter by the time of the Last Judgement's creation, Giotto (d. 1337) has been identified by many scholars as "the father of European painting," serving as a comprehensive benchmark for the transition between medieval and Renaissance art; but while "oceans of ink have been devoted to the painter, we are still without a comprehensive publication" of primary sources attributed to Giotto himself.³ This presents a substantial gap in the study of this early Renaissance master.

Similarly, while the scholarship surrounding various Last Judgement paintings and sculptures in the middle ages is vast, the lack of in-depth, thematic analysis once again presents a large hole in our understanding of these works. As outlined by Jan Van Der Muelen's article on Gothic sculpture in Joseph Strayer's *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, iconography, i.e., the study of symbols and figures in art and the implications thereof, has traditionally "been neglected in favor of stylistic studies; thus purely narrative interpretations have hidden the deeper iconologic implications of the images."⁴ This is a criticism that can be expanded to Giotto's *Last Judgement* specifically, as few sources on its thematic significance exist and even fewer exist in English. Each of these perceived gaps in the established scholarship may present a worrying lack of information on both art and artist, but they also present a unique opportunity to draw a number of conclusions based on critical analysis and the iconographic methods utilized by scholars of the past.

While depictions of the Last Judgement episode from the Book of Revelation can be traced back to the Byzantine Empire, the development of its numerous figures, themes, framings

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³ Hayden B.J. Maginnis, "The Giotto," *Notes in the History of Art* 20 (2001): 15-17. For more on Giotto's early work and legacy, see Peter J. Murray, "Giotto," *Britannica.com* (2020).

⁴ Jan Van Der Muelen, "Gothic Architecture," in Joseph Strayer, ed., *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York: Scribner, 1982): 601.

and mediums can be seen across the middle ages throughout much of Europe. I argue that the Padua *Last Judgement* is unique, however, in its ability to draw inspiration from its predecessors, while still being endowed with Giotto's own artistic signature. Therefore, as the understanding of this work is contingent on the examination of both the composition itself and the world that helped shape it, this essay will first examine a few preceding sculptures in France that had a direct impact on the Scrovegni Chapel fresco in terms of its stylistic, compositional, and thematic elements. Next, I will explore various aspects of Giotto's work that helped establish his unprecedented individuality as an artist. Both of these examinations will serve my broader assertion that Giotto's *Last Judgement* can be seen as the culmination of Romanesque and Gothic art and an artistic bridge between the high middle ages and the beginning of the Renaissance.

Stylistic and Thematic Predecessors

Most of the earliest depictions of the Last Judgement episode in western Europe survive in sculpture, usually in the form of a tympanum above a cathedral's great portal. The earliest of these that presents a significant similarity to Giotto's work is the *Last Judgement* (c. 1130) tympanum on the Autun Cathedral in modern day France. Possessing a number of major features that harken back to the earliest Byzantine miniatures and mosaics, Autun's *Last Judgement* (Fig. 2) also introduces many themes and arrangements removed from tradition that had a lasting impact on succeeding portrayals in France and abroad.⁵

Autun keeps to tradition in some of the Last Judgement's most basic formal designs. The left and right hand of Christ indicate damnation and salvation respectively; hosts of angels and

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⁵ Don Denny, "The Last Judgement Tympanum at Autun: Its Sources and Meaning," *Speculum* 57 (1982): 532.

demons aid in the transportation of souls into the afterlife; and the entire composition stays true to the vertical and somewhat compartmentalized structure present in even the earliest of Last Judgements. However, some of the major departures from Byzantine tradition are outlined by Don Denny in his study of the tympanum. Here, he lists the choices to move the entrances of heaven and hell to the respective bottom left and right corners rather than leave them asymmetrical as seen in early Byzantine gospel books (Fig. 3). He also notes the choice to eliminate the upper register and move the figures occupying it (i.e. Christ, the apostles, and the intercessors) down into the middle register. This area had traditionally been reserved for narrative figures of less importance, but with this choice, we see a consolidation of significant figures in a smaller space. Finally, Denny shows how the Autun tympanum moved the icon of Jesus himself to occupy the traditionally empty *etimasia*: the empty throne of Christ that, in earlier Byzantine compositions, signified his omnipotence and indicated his ascension into heaven.⁶

We can see comparable choices in later Last Judgments, specifically at the Abbey-church of Sainte Foy in Conques and in the Arena Chapel in Padua where figures that were once sprawled across a canvass in small groups are brought in tighter. This could have been due to technical constraints or changing views of the subjects themselves as, in Giotto's work, we see the same changes. The entrances to heaven and hell are in their respective corners, the upper register is moved down towards the middle, and Christ occupies the *etimasia*; but we can also see some similarities to Byzantine structure in its verticality and dark contrast between the vignette of hell and the brighter rest of the painting.

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⁶ Ibid, 538.

The choices made by Gislebertus (active 12th cen.), the sculptor of the Autun *Last Judgement*, and Giotto are much more than stylistic, however, as both compositions are constructed in a “three-tier arrangement... [implying] a potential chronological sequence as well as ascending degrees of spirituality.”⁷ At the bottom of both works, we see the resurrected humans being judged on the bottom with a symmetrical division between saved and damned, the judges in the middle, and the heavenly host awaiting them at the top. Each of these features also possess implications for the fate of souls through anecdotal similarities. In both, the souls of the damned and saved are in the process of being judged where in other Last Judgements, they are already separated to their respective fates.⁸ Similarly, the hosts of angels and demons awaiting the souls each have a role to play and participate in the herding of souls to the afterlife.

The greatest distinction between the Autun example and Giotto's later work is evident in the Arena Chapel fresco's minimization of Christ to almost equal standing to the apostles. Where Autun depicts an omnipotent Christ occupying almost one third of the entire composition with both arms outstretched in a weighing motion, Giotto seems to relegate Christ to a small portion of the central register, acting with authority with his right and left hands designating salvation and damnation, but tempered by his disciples. Such mitigation can be seen as a signifier of theological differences regarding Christ's role at the apocalypse. For the Autun *Last Judgement*, Denny asserts Christ's role as sole arbiter of judgement, weighing the fate of souls based on a separation of “the deserving and the criminal” rather than “inherent qualities of the soul,” and as a result, is also able to craft an argument for an ulterior function of the cathedral as a location

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⁷ Ibid, 540.

⁸ M. F. Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture: The Revival of Monumental Stone Sculpture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981): 178.

used to hold trials of ordeal.⁹ Christ's role here can be seen as a result of the overwhelming dominance of the medieval church over judicial proceedings: a theme that does not translate as directly to Giotto's time and place.

This is not to say that the roles of Christ and the apostles in Giotto's work are without precedent, however, as evidenced by its similarities to the above mentioned *Last Judgement* tympanum in Conques (Fig. 4) and the *Second Coming* tympanum on the Abbey Church of St. Pierre in Beaulieu, France (Fig. 5). In Conques, we see the same minimized Christ "enthroned, with auriole and Evangelists" and with his hands designating the fate of the resurrected, as seen in Giotto's later work, but with the apostles arranged in a manner similar to Autun.¹⁰

As discussed in Mickey Abel's *Open Access*, "the syntax linking the various components of the sculpted program is dependent on the clearly delineated action of the subject at the center."¹¹ In other words, the significance of Christ's smaller presence and differing actions can be attributed to the difference in the overall messages of these works. In the case of Autun, his overwhelming presence and outstretched arms can be understood as indicative of his omnipotence and ascension, with his role of judge being that of final authority as seen in Denny's previous argument. This contrasts the Conques and Padua Last Judgements as the small,

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⁹ Denny, 542. For more information on trials of ordeal and their function within the catholic church, see Peter T. Lesson, "Ordeals," *The Journal of Law and Economics* 55 (2012).

¹⁰ Hearn, 180. It should also be noted that while the date of construction for the Conques *Last Judgement* has been debated, most scholars understand it to succeed Autun by approximately 10 years. For more information, see Don Denny, "The Date of the Conques Last Judgement and It's Compositional Analogues," *The Art Bulletin* 66 (1984): 7-14.

¹¹ Mickey Abel, *Open Access: Contextualizing the Archivolted Portals of Northern Spain and Western France within the Theology and Politics of Entry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012): 40.

encircled framing and designation between blessed and damned show him as a more human subject, carrying out his judicial function in tandem with the disciples he promised would be at his side on the final day.

Similarly, in the *Second Coming* in Beaulieu, we see a somewhat larger Christ with arms outstretched, but with the apostles flanking him as in Giotto's fresco, rather than standing off to the side as in Conques. Here, they are engaged in discussion, active participants in the judgement to come. Giotto uses this same framing for his *Last Judgement* where the apostles sit level with Christ in accordance with their various roles. For example, Saint Peter sits at the right hand of Christ where souls will ascend to heaven indicating his role as the holder of keys to the heavenly kingdom.

In this way, the apostles' centrality presented in Beaulieu, combined with the diminishing omnipotence of Christ in Conques seem to indicate a growing theological shift in favor of the authority of the apostles, holy fathers, and other human leaders in the high to late middle ages. Whether a result of broad changes in the Church's relationship to art and secular authority, or smaller regional differences in theology, these themes seemed to have translated well to Giotto's work and the sensibilities of early Renaissance Italy. At a time of unprecedented independence from papal authority in Venice and the surrounding areas where Giotto was active, it is not difficult to see that such ideals evolved and diffused from as far away as France and Byzantium, and eventually found a place within the final work in the Scrovegni chapel.

Influences of Individuality

Giotto was not just the product of his artistic predecessors, but also possessed one of the first instances of true individuality in art coming out of the late Middle Ages. Where medieval art had largely been produced by a group of artists or an uncredited individual, Giotto made a name for himself throughout Italy for his unique interpretations of various religious scenes, developing his style throughout his travels to Assisi, Rome, and eventually Padua. His unique use of space and structure, reimagined depictions of subjects like demons, and his connection to a changing landscape of transformative works of literature all lend themselves to Giotto's cementation as the father of the Renaissance.

Though the *Last Judgement* in the Scrovegni Chapel borrows subjects and themes from Romanesque and Gothic sculptures of the past, its style and use of space and structure present a nuanced and unique take on the traditional Byzantine works. Given the substantial differences between the media of sculpture and painting, Giotto relied heavily on the original Byzantine works for framing and spacing aspects that he would later manipulate with his own style, but also relied on the sculptural precedents for the mood, structure, and movement of his finished masterpiece.

Once described by art historian Bernard Berenson as the master of "form and movement... the two most essential elements in the figure arts," Giotto's work does not so much depict a narrative in static, blocked off scenes so common in medieval art, but favors a flowing style where each element blends into the other, giving his paintings depth and movement, without sacrificing structural integrity or creating chaos.¹² This can be seen in the constant movement of every subject depicted in the Padua *Last Judgement*, from the procession of the blessed, to the image of the prostrated Enrico Scrovegni offering his church shown in the lower-

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¹² Bernard Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon Press, 1897): 97.

middle register, but most notably in the bright red stream of damned souls as they descend into hell, awaiting torture from Giotto's distinctive demons. Flowing from the bottom right corner of the auriole encircling Christ and pushed downward by His left hand, the souls appear in various states of panic and agony as they move deeper into the darkened lower-right register of hell. The stream's geometric quality and depth almost create the illusion of a rip in the painting's otherwise seamless structure, drawing the viewer's eye to the fate of the cursed at first glance and only relenting as we move our gaze up the stream to the judging Christ.

Contrast this level of movement and spatial awareness to other contemporary works such as Duccio's *The Entry into Jerusalem* (1308-11) in which we see a complex urban scene with an undeniable amount of movement, structure, and depth. But where Giotto seems to have complete control over the space occupied by his subjects, Duccio (d. 1319) appears to have filled his scene with small vignettes, blocking off various subjects through the use of walls, crowds, and a heavy upper register (Fig. 6). While critics praise this work for such complexity, and it may be argued that its purpose was not necessarily to capture movement, but "to suggest... a fleeting action miraculously captured in paint," the scene still comes off as cramped and disjointed, similar to the enclosed structure of its Gothic predecessors.¹³ Instead of translating this structure into his own work, however, Giotto breaks down the dividing walls in favor of a more subtle, open concept, and demonstrates his unique ability to expand on the works of his predecessors rather than just adhere to them.

Keeping with the theme of drawing the viewer directly towards the evil in his art, Giotto's artistic signature extends not only to the formal aspects of hell and the fate of the

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¹³ Keith Christiansen, "Duccio and the Origins of Western Painting," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 66 (2008): 24.

damned, but to the graphic horror of the demons themselves and their complex role throughout Giotto's work. Where sculptural predecessors like Autun relied on serpent-like creatures devoid of any humanity, Giotto's distinctive approach to the depiction of demons includes "heavy fur that covers the body, a pointy beard and crest of fur on top of the head and a furry tail."¹⁴ This implies an animalistic nature combined with a perversion of the human form reminiscent of the Roman satyr. The implications herein are best described by Andrea Begel in her article, "Giotto's Demons," where she states that,

Demons exhibit both an unnatural combination of human and animal parts and a departure from the perfect form of their "parents" - that is, angels. And yet that departure is not complete, since demons in literature and art often reflect some aspect of the angelic form... This quality of the demonic form makes them more compelling and repellant, as we recognize our own characteristics, but distorted.¹⁵

This speaks to the wider reason for Giotto's graphic portrayal of demons in Padua as well as previous works like *Exorcism of the Demons at Arezzo* (c. 1300) in Assisi (Fig. 7). We are meant to be drawn towards them so they may, in turn, frighten us into a panic, forcing us to search for a way by which we may escape their perverse attraction. In the Scrovegni Chapel *Last Judgement*, we only find this escape by following the stream of souls back towards Christ's damning left hand, implying the broader narrative of salvation.

Here, it is understood that Giotto's masterful depiction of such subjects adds a psychological element to the work that aids in the painting's captivating nature and emphasizes the artist's unprecedented ability to control both the structure and form of his art and the overall perception of it by the viewer. This pure control emphasizes what Julian Gardner identifies as

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¹⁴ Andrea A. Begel, "Giotto's Demons," *Notes in the History of Art* 29 (2010): 3-9. Begel also argues Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a possible influence. These claims will be dismissed later.

¹⁵ Begel, 8.

“sublime passages of technical virtuosity in the service of that grave moral seriousness which characterized the Arena Chapel,” further cementing Giotto’s individuality as an artist and establishing him as the face of a transitional period in the world of art as a whole.¹⁶

Though Giotto’s mastery of style, movement, and form did much to popularize his work and distinguish him from his other contemporaries, his status as a household name might have also been a direct result of his presence in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. One of the most impactful poets of the late middle ages, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) is often credited with jumpstarting the literary elements of the Renaissance, but in doing so, he also brought Giotto with him. Dante places the Florentine artist and his master, Cimabue (1240-1302), in purgatory, characterizing him as the epitome of vanity responsible for the beginning of a new age where pride is celebrated as a virtue. Dante writes:

O thou vain glory of the human powers,
How little green upon thy summit lingers,
If ‘t be not followed by an age of grossness!

In painting Cimabue thought that he
Should hold the field, now Giotto has the cry,
So that the other’s fame is growing dim.¹⁷

This intentional condemnation of the artist’s perceived ego and pride almost seems counterintuitive since, by distinguishing him from all other artists of his day, Dante has given Giotto the same fame and vanity that placed him in purgatory in the first place. In addition, the poet is even thought to have taken inspiration from Giotto’s artwork when describing the

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¹⁶ Julian Gardner, *Giotto and His Publics: Three Paradigms of Patronage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011): 75.

¹⁷ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy - Purgatorio*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Neeland Media, 2017): 71-2.

numerous named demons in the *Divine Comedy*.¹⁸ Therefore, not only did Giotto's individuality aid in popularizing his work - which was enough to merit his presence in purgatory - but it ultimately transcended such criticism and helped craft the clawed, furred, and pointed-tailed demons occupying Dante's inferno.¹⁹ This is further affirmed by Paul Barlosky in his essay entitled, "Dante and the Modern Cult of the Artist," in which he asserts that the poet, through his enumeration of Giotto, Cimabue, and others in *The Divine Comedy*, assisted in the creation of our modern perception of artists and their place in society as distinct and praiseworthy.²⁰ Unlike much of the medieval era, where the artist was seen as ancillary to their creation, Giotto consistently asserted himself as an inseparable component of his work, expressing his mastery over the medium and shaping the popular perception of artists in general.

Conclusion

Overall, it was Giotto's ability to walk the line between traditions of the past and his own individuality as a painter that establishes him as a figure of transition between the middle ages and the Renaissance. His references to the narratives, framings, and figures of Romanesque and Gothic predecessors come to a head in his work with the most prevalent and powerful iconographic elements appearing while also omitting other elements that may not have translated

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¹⁸ As mentioned above, some scholars assert Giotto's demonic inspiration came from Dante, but considering *The Divine Comedy* was written nearly 15 years after the completion of the Scrovegni Chapel fresco, it seems more appropriate to argue an inverse relationship.

¹⁹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy - Inferno*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Neeland Media, 2011): 139-40. Dante uses a few names for demons interchangeably, including Malebranche (evil-claws) and Malacoda (evil-tail).

²⁰ Paul Barlosky, "Dante and the Modern Cult of the Artist," *A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 12 (2004): 1-15.

as well into his contemporary society. This speaks to his ability to feel the pulse of a changing worldview in Padua and Venice that was less beholden to the rigid papal control of the middle ages and would soon become the cosmopolitan metropolis known to many as the epicenter of the artistic Renaissance, producing the likes of Titian (1490-1576), Bellini (1430-1516), and Veronese (1528-1588).

Similarly, his individuality and ability to know when to divorce his work from examples of the past influenced his status as one of the first celebrated and unique artists of the early Italian Renaissance. Aided by Dante's criticism of what medieval society considered an example of vanity and pride, Giotto turned individuality and fame into a virtue, crafting the archetype of the Renaissance artist and our modern perception of artists as a whole. Such a change in attitude towards the very nature of art helps elucidate the traditionally ambiguous shift between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; and at risk of overinflating an already renowned artist, we might conclude that Giotto drove that shift. By constantly pushing boundaries and creating works that dragged the stale carcass of religious art into the early modern era, Giotto laid the foundation for a world of expression that sifted through the traditional to find the valuable and produced the divine from the individual.

Appendix

Fig. 1. Giotto di Bondone, *The Last Judgement*, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy (1306).

Fig. 2. Gislebertus. *The Last Judgement Tympanum*. Entrance to the nave of St. Lazare, Autun (c. 1130).

Fig. 3. *The Last Judgement*. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (c. 1050-1100).

Fig. 4. *Last Judgment Tympanum*. Church of Sainte-Foy, Conques (c. 1050).

Fig. 5. *Second Coming Tympanum*. Abbey Church of St. Pierre, Beaulieu, France (c. 12th century).

Fig. 6. Duccio, *Entry Into Jerusalem*. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena, Italy (1311).

Fig. 7. Giotto, *Exorcism of the Demons at Arezzo*. Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, Assisi, Italy (c. 1300).

About the author

Zach Graham is a rising senior at Georgia Southern University (Armstrong Campus). He is majoring in History with a minor in philosophy and intends to pursue a graduate degree with a specialization in either American Cultural History or medieval Europe. After graduate school, he intends to pursue a career in museum curation, archaeology, or writing.

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