

Giotto's *The Stigmatisation of St Francis*



Fig.1, Giotto, *The Stigmatisation of St Francis*, Fresco, c.1317-25, Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence

It is clear that Giotto revolutionised art and his work heralded the beginning of the Renaissance. In fact, Giovanni Boccaccio argued that his innovativeness ‘restored light to the art of painting by resurrecting it from the grave’, “it” being the naturalism associated with classical art.<sup>1</sup> Giotto’s use of naturalism can be seen in his fresco *The Stigmatisation of St Francis*, featured in the Bardi Chapel programme of the Santa Croce Basilica. However, this naturalism is offset by a sense of supernaturalism, due to Giotto’s skilful harnessing of artistic techniques. His expert techniques, and the consequently clear communication with the viewer, ensure we are fully immersed. It is a deeply absorbing piece of artwork.

The muted colour palette of *The Stigmatisation of St Francis* grounds the piece in reality. However, it is the golden haloes and lines of the stigmata that glow most brightly, highlighting their supernaturalism and disconnect to the earthly world. St Francis’ halo is rimmed with dark black to push it forward, making it the focal point, and to rob it of some realism; it looks almost cartoonish. His halo contrasts with the organic drabness of his brown robes, which emphasises the duality of his character. He, like the viewer, is connected to the earth, exemplified by the trees and barren cliffs which surround him; but in this moment he has also been promoted to a divine status. The sky is an unsettling black colour, suggesting atmospheric thunder, and is made intimidatingly solid by the smooth application of

<sup>1</sup> Laurie Schneider Adams, *Italian Renaissance Art* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 25, <https://www.taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/pdfviewer/>

brushstrokes. We can argue that this is a far more realistic background than the flat golds seen in Byzantine iconography, permanently suspending figures in a radiant, “static” heaven, yet the ominous black sky seems to press upon and enclose St Francis and Christ, isolating them from the outside world, and thus reality.

The figures’ forms highlight Giotto’s naturalism. There is a sense of weight and solidity to St Francis, his robe’s detailed vertical folds pulling him to the ground. His facial expressions clearly convey his awe and shock: his mouth agape, his eyes and head upturned to gaze upon Christ with reverence. The figures’ movement adds to Giotto’s naturalism. Christ’s vivid red wings are pushed forwards, his loincloth pulled taut against his skin, which conveys a feeling of thrust, rapidly approaching Francis and thus bridging the space between humanity and heaven at the centre of the fresco. St Francis has a *contrapposto* figure, which both relates to the naturalism of statues of classical art which heavily influenced Giotto, whilst creating a ‘strong impression of narrative’.<sup>2</sup> His figure implies what he was doing before, praying, and the way his neck is bent and arms are upturned highlights his twisting around in surprise. Thus, ‘the viewers must conceptualise the circumstances leading up to and following this scene’ as it is ‘not an isolated incident, but one action of many occurring in the flux of time’, and so, we are absorbed in, and convinced by, the realistic unfolding of action in the fresco.<sup>3</sup>

Giotto’s composition increases and diminishes naturalism. In the framing the church and cliff are cut off, as if we are stumbling upon the event and peering through a window, further immersing the viewer, and replicating reality. However, because of the large amount of space dominated by the building and cliff on either side, ‘the capacity for describing distance and depth is greatly reduced’.<sup>4</sup> The small trees in the background, with their bristling, realistic leaves, made by stippled brushstrokes, convey a sense of distance, but this is undone by the presence of the falcon atop the cliff that is slightly too large. Giotto has purposefully disregarded naturalism by creating a distortion of perspective and depth to convey the supernatural, dream-like quality of the event far more effectively. The positioning of St Francis in the bottom left and Christ in the upper right, however, restores a feeling of harmony and grounded balance to the warped background and details. The lines are parallel from Christ’s limbs to St Francis’, showing how they are an exact reflection of one another, *and* how Giotto was still focused on showing the ‘physical reality of the action’, so much so

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<sup>2</sup> Jane C. Long, “The Program of Giotto’s St Francis Cycle at Santa Croce in Florence”, *Franciscan Studies* 52 (1992): 116

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 116

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hagioannu, “Giotto’s Bardi Chapel Frescoes and Chaucer’s ‘House of Fame’: Influence, Evidence and Interpretations”, *The Chaucer Review* 36, no. 1 (2001): 31

that he paints one line passing behind St Francis' head to strike his right palm.<sup>5</sup> Giotto's fresco is a true trompe l'oeil, tricking the viewer into believing that what we see is a realistic piece of work, then unsettling us with odd depths and distortions to remind us of the mysticism and magic surrounding St Francis' stigmatisation.

The historical context is as multifaceted and rich as the piece itself. The patrons of the chapel were the influential, affluent Bardi banking family of Florence, specifically Ridolfo de Bardi.<sup>6</sup> Their wealth, and the extravagance of the chapel contrasted deeply with the asceticism of St Francis, and his followers, the Franciscans. Ubertino da Casale, leader of the Spiritual Franciscans, condemned these hypocritical churches dedicated to St Francis: "[...] they are not dwelling places of the poor but look like the palaces of kings".<sup>7</sup> There thus existed a strained relationship between patron and Franciscan recipient. This is compounded by their competing involvement in the chapel's decoration, with both attempting to politicise it for their own benefit. The Franciscans were able to convey their disregard for Pope John XXII (who had dismissed their belief in 'absolute apostolic poverty') through dictating which images appeared in the cycle.<sup>8</sup> Bar the obligatory inclusion of *Approval of the Rule*, 'all other papal scenes are omitted'.<sup>9</sup> The figure of St Louis of Toulouse bordering the lancet window, 'the red and white stripes of the Angevin heraldic tinctures' surrounding him, signifies the Bardi's allegiance to the Angevin royal house.<sup>10</sup> The Bardi arms are featured in the stained-glass windows, reminding us of their power and patronage.<sup>11</sup> We realise that despite its realism *The Stigmatisation of St Francis* is distinctly separate to the very human side of these political implications, highlighted by its 'heavy billet moulding' framing.<sup>12</sup> There is no insidious message of power buried in this piece, meaning it remains virtuous, and thus convincingly pious.

The Trecento and Giotto's appreciation for naturalism in classical antiquity can be seen in this fresco's figures' plasticity and vivacity. Long argues against conventional views that Francis is made to appear Christ-like in this fresco, emphasising that there are 'no typological references in this cycle' and his depiction as 'clean-shaven, neat, and tidy, a humble but not impoverished saint' unravels any concrete bond to the stereotypical image of

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<sup>5</sup> Long, "The Program", 115-116

<sup>6</sup> Julian Gardner, *Giotto and His Publics: Three Paradigms of Patronage* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 54

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 52

<sup>8</sup> Long, "The Program", 124

<sup>9</sup> Gardner, *Giotto and His Publics*, 62

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 74

<sup>11</sup> Long, "The Program", 119

<sup>12</sup> Gardner, *Giotto and His Publics*, 68

the bearded (and bedraggled) Christ.<sup>13</sup> Rather than a ‘transcendent icon’ akin to Christ, Francis is decidedly human, thus linking back to naturalism.<sup>14</sup> However, his disconnection from Christ and poverty is also used to carefully evade the contentious argument between the Spirituals and Conventuals over what Franciscan ideology truly was: the former branch hermetically retreated into total poverty to simulate Francis’ experiences and Christ’s suffering, whilst the latter sought missionary work within society, in personal poverty.<sup>15</sup> The fresco’s meaning, through avoidance of iconising Francis and bringing up poverty, is to simply value ‘the Franciscan way of life’, and to appreciate the saint’s obeying of Christ rather than emulation of him.<sup>16</sup> This is a realistic, clear message, connecting with the viewer more deeply.

Overall, *The Stigmatisation of St Francis* seems to exist as a pure expression of the saint and his beliefs, with no surreptitious insertion of secular or religious bias, in contrast with the rest of the chapel. Because of its integrity it seems more sacred, accentuated by its high elevation in the chapel; it is closer to Heaven. The directness of communication to the viewer from Giotto’s paintings is attributed to his ‘primitive simplicity’.<sup>17</sup> The fresco’s clear messaging and also its placement as frontispiece above the chapel entrance meant it was accessible to a large audience, many of whom would be illiterate and unable to enter.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the confusing blurring of naturalism and supernaturalism, and the complex historical context, it is undoubtable that Giotto’s skill at communicating clearly through art thoroughly immerses the viewer, even to this day. He *chooses* to layer naturalism and supernaturalism to convey the earthliness of St Francis and the miraculousness of the Stigmatisation, creating a spiritual atmosphere that absorbs us. His painting style is as direct and clear as the Franciscan message it transmits. We cannot help but be immersed in his storytelling and in awe of his innovative skill.

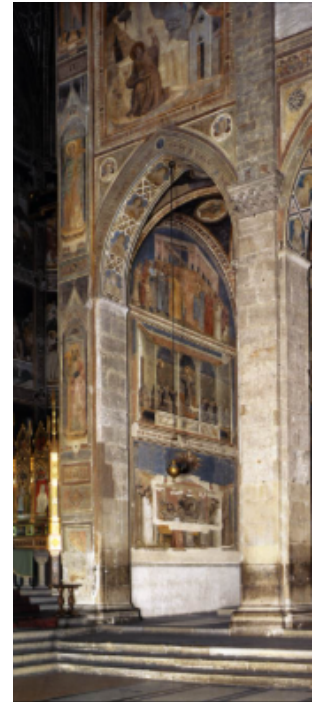


Fig.2, Giotto, *The Stigmatisation of St Francis*, Fresco, c.1317-25, Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence. View of entrance arch.

<sup>13</sup> Long, “The Program”, 121-122

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 121

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 122

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 124

<sup>17</sup> Rossiter Howard, “Giotto in Spite of His Times: A Philosophy of Decoration More Suitable to the Twentieth Century than to the Renaissance”, *Art and Progress* 5, no. 11 (1914): 379

<sup>18</sup> Gardner, *Giotto and His Publics*, 68

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