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## 'Giotto, l'Italia' Review: The Artist Who Baptized the Renaissance

A rare assemblage of works by an artist who changed the purpose of religious painting.



Part of the Stefaneschi Polyptych, which depicts the enthroned St. Peter on one side and the crucifixion of St. Peter and the beheading of St. Paul on the other. PHOTO: CITTÀ DEL VATICANO, MUSEI VATICANI

By **CAMMY BROTHERS**

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*Milan*

When did the Middle Ages end and the Renaissance begin? Somewhere around Giotto di Bondone (1266/67-1337) seems about right. Though he's hardly a household name outside of Italy, it is fair to say that without him we would not have Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael or many others.

Giotto's paintings bristle with acute observation of human behavior, gestures and movements. Yet an exhibition on Giotto seems bound to fail, given that his greatest works were frescoes—paintings on walls. To sense the magnitude of his achievement, you have to travel: to San Francesco in Assisi, to Santa Croce in Florence, and most of all to the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua—which easily matches anything in the Sistine Chapel.

Still, the exhibition "Giotto, l'Italia" now on view in the Palazzo Reale in Milan

surprises. It gathers a range of important altarpieces from the Uffizi in Florence, the Vatican Museums in Rome, and a range of regional collections and churches large and small. This is in part the exhibition as testament to the prowess of the curators in obtaining prestigious loans. Given the fragility and historic significance of these objects, what larger purpose is served by subjecting them to the risks inherent in travel?

The title of the show, "Giotto, l'Italia," provides a hint of what is at stake for the curators, Pietro Petrarola and Serena Romano, a purpose not far from that of the great Renaissance biographer Giorgio Vasari in his "Lives of the Artists," first published in 1550. Timed to coincide with the Milan Expo 2015, the latest version of the Great Exhibitions begun in 1851 by Prince Albert, "Giotto e l'Italia" continues the tradition of using works of art to represent a nation's highest achievements. Here the curators imply Giotto is Italy, Italy is Giotto. Vasari cast Giotto in a similar role, with a Tuscan slant: as the local hero who ushered in the Renaissance.

It is precisely this characterization of Giotto as hero that gives rise to a problem. In the insistence on Giotto's authorship of the panels on display, the curators have missed an opportunity to share significant and fascinating information about the composition of a painter's workshop during the Renaissance, the distinction between what components of a large panel painting are made by the master or the apprentice, not to mention Giotto's relationship to his teacher Cimabue, his contemporaries, and his later followers. These topics are discussed in some catalog essays but excluded from the exhibition labels and wall text.

Yet much can be learned from the exhibition even within its narrow goals. It presents an introduction to an important category of medieval art: the polyptych, a painting on wood consisting of four or more panels, occasionally double-sided, and often with hinged, foldable sections. They were often kept closed, to be opened on feast and saint days. Pictorially, they have the advantage of being able to represent a range of interrelated scenes, both adjoining and vertically stacked, with small panels below, called the predella. On one side of the Stefaneschi Polyptych from the Vatican Museums, Giotto shows an array of saints surrounding the enthroned St. Peter. This stately array contrasts with the vivid, violent scenes on the reverse, depicting the crucifixion of St. Peter and the beheading of St. Paul.

Cloaked in blue and surrounded by gold ground, the Madonna at the center of the Badia Polyptych from the Uffizi lightly holds the hand of the Christ child as he clutches the neck of her dress. In the Santa Reparata altarpiece, the child cradles his mother's chin while gazing into her eyes. Depicting these familiar, tender moments, Giotto allows us to see the human element of the sacred figures.

Giotto reveals, with great economy, the emotional content of biblical stories. How did the Virgin respond when she received the news that she would bear the son of God? In



Part of the Stefaneschi Polyptych. PHOTO: CITTA DEL VATICANO, MUSEI VATICANI

the Annunciation scene of the Santa Reparata altarpiece, she tilts her body back and lifts her hand, betraying her reluctance and worry.

With these interpretations, Giotto essentially changed the purpose of religious painting. Prior to Giotto, one might say that paintings of biblical scenes served as symbolic

reminders of them. But Giotto demonstrated that painters could add substantial layers of meaning through the power of representation, enhancing the viewer's capacity to empathize and even understand the biblical narrative, no matter how familiar it seemed.

The exhibition design by Milan architect Mario Bellini adheres to a recent Italian taste for theatrical lighting, with black walls, low light, and art in the spotlight, literally. It is a disorienting effect, making it easy to walk into people and things. It has the sole virtue of making photography impossible, so that people actually look at the art.

This is an exhibition that requires adjusting one's eyes in more ways than one: not only to the darkness of the rooms, but to the minor differences between panels that may superficially appear repetitive, as so many variations on a theme.

In this sense, "Giotto, l'Italia" offers a fine lesson in observation, showing the ways Giotto and his workshop created a world of possibilities working with stock biblical scenes and characters. In our world of shock, spectacle and infinite distraction, it is a lesson worth savoring.

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