A DISCERNING EYE

Essays on Early Italian Painting

by Richard Offner

Edited by Andrew Ladis

With Essays on Richard Offner

by Andrew Ladis, Hayden B. J. Maginnis, and Craig Hugh Smyth

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Giotto, non-Giotto

The 1937 exhibition in Florence\(^1\) held in Giotto’s memory has served to raise the problem of this master to a peak of interest, from which a less distorted view of the artistic panorama and of Giotto’s place in it should have been possible. That the prevalent notion of Giotto has wanted revising may be gathered from the conflicting attributions made to him, but chiefly from the recent revival of two, as of crucial importance—the St. Francis cycle in Assisi\(^2\) and the Sta. Maria Novella Cross. It is with these two that I shall concern myself here. The imputation of these works to Giotto arises in a misconception of the structure of Florentine evolution in the fourteenth century encouraged by early sources\(^3\) in themselves open to question; but above all in an inadequate reading of the works themselves on the part of writers who, urged on by the irrelevant force of usage or patriotism, have been taking too much for granted.\(^4\) Hence, while their ardor is fierce, their arguments are feeble. They have dug up the corpses, but have shrunk from the uneasy task of unshrouding them.

In pursuing this enquiry, it is well to recall at the outset that the artistic identity of Giotto rests securely upon interrupted and undisputed tradition of his artistic supremacy, which agrees with a stylistically harmonious group of unimpeachable works always ascribed to him; and second, upon the confirmation of his traditional greatness and his authorship of certain of these works by early authority. So secure, indeed, is this combined testimony as to justify the confident assumption that he and none other painted: the frescoes in the Arena Chapel, Padua; the cross in the same chapel; the frescoes of the Bardi Chapel, Sta. Croce (with assistance); the Uffizi Madonna; the frescoes of the Peruzzi Chapel, Sta. Croce.\(^5\)

While there is a small number of works apart from these executed under his immediate influence that might help us to envisage the master more completely, the foregoing series adequately measures Giotto’s range and his evolution from his ripe manhood to the end. But what is more to the point, they harbor a constant among them and disclose the variable in his output. From first to last a certain method of shaping and ordering the forms runs through these paintings, revealing the same radical intention, the same power and organization, modified only by the normal change of human development.

I think the majority of students would agree that Giotto’s qualities appear for the first time in their maturity, range and purity in the Paduan frescoes, which may safely be regarded also
the earliest unquestionable work by him left to us. The initial condition of narrative lucidity apart, Giotto’s concern here was with establishing the dignity of human fate through the material significance of the human figure (Fig. 1). This receives confirmation by being locked in an organic composition in which each by its predominant verticality and simplified contour, instantly relates itself, alone and in groups, to the lateral limits of the compartment. By the same principle the figures are deployed across its width in a continuity that brings them into harmony with the horizontal limits as well. The composition thus approximates a regular geometric pattern, which assures its assimilation within the rectangular frame. At the same time, the figures are massed solidly below—and more generally at the extreme ends of the lowest zone—to afford the upper parts of the composition support and resolution in a total
mass of interrelated parts built up like a façade (Fig. 2). Adhering generally to this scheme throughout the Arena Chapel, Giotto modifies his arrangement and his perspective from scene to scene to give each its proper graduation of accents, which, while it serves a narrative and dramatic clearness, ultimately achieves a remarkable elasticity through a constant tightening and loosening of the thread of his story, a constant focusing and diffusion of the attention. Within the closely woven organization of the individual episode the figures announce the broad intent in their advance from left to right, or in a symmetry that arrests it. The composition moves and stops as the narrative progresses and pauses; its rhythms contract and expand, its masses rise, fall and incline as much in obedience to the requirements of the evolving story as to satisfy the plan of the individual picture. At the same time the figures and the events in their course respect the integrity of the surface, rarely taking the eye beyond the
depth of the foremost plane. Thus there is no rivalry between background and figure. And indeed, where the space is not cut off by rock or architecture, it remains abstract and merely suggestive.

The composition being conceived as a system of interdependent elements, each figure is accommodated to the whole by being contoured and modelled large in order not to draw too much attention to itself by individualization or description of its physical character. To the same end it needs must be immobilized. The composition thus subjugates the individual form to a corporate order and equilibrium, which it brings into predominating evidence. This implies a non-naturalistic treatment of the figure.

As there is no naturalism in the representation, so there is no effort to catch the action on the wing. If there were, it would tend to restrict the interest to the moment given, recalling at the same time those immediately preceding and foreshadowing those to follow, thus localizing it in a series. Similarly the master avoids sharpening the action to a climax. We find progressive emotion arrested at the stage at which it is consistent with deeper preoccupation, when the need or the impulse to act has been removed so as not to dim the great inherent issues. Thus the recognizable units and limits of time tend to fade, and the latent drama emerges in its spiritual implications.

For the same reason individual expression is moderated: it becomes the projection of an abiding inner state rather than that of a momentary impulse (Fig. 1). But by the same principle such expression is not confined to any single part of the figure. It may be said to pervade it. Expression resides to the same extent in gesture as in physiognomy, in the mass, posture, pattern and line as in grimace or pantomime, and by a rule of occupancy analogous to that evolved and professed by Leonardo. For with Giotto all expression seems to issue out of the depth of an inner necessity—a necessity that is assumed to penetrate all things—and remains, accordingly, implicit in every part of the body. This way of presenting the figure accords with Giotto's radical system of generalization and has the same end in view, namely to lay bare the larger spiritual idea personified by the figure, action and psychology being regarded primarily as a means of spiritual self-revelation.

It follows that the individual expression is, by reason of such a system, more readily resolved in the collective conduct of the personages. And so, while setting forth an actual occurrence, the figures are joined in a thought and a motive, and a force beyond their visible shapes. What the single figure does, seems, accordingly, dictated by the will of a larger economy, while the total action reflects an ideal order, heralded and prefigured in the visible structure of the composition. So closely are the content and the form involved in each other, that the organic correlation of the physical terms induces a sense of a more comprehensive stability: a stability directly symbolic of an eternal, unshakeable world. Thus being is emphasized over doing, eternity over the moment, idea over fact.

Nor is it, considering Giotto's system of balancing of shapes and forces, astonishing that plasticity is not boldly urged for its own sake. For Giotto's works show the master with sensitively operating instinct tempering plasticity in the interest of the larger unit. Thus, just as the spiritual analogies are tacitly communicated by the reciprocal adjustment of material shapes in composition, the physical weight of the figure serves to establish and to confirm its moral weight. Plasticity in Giotto, instinct with ideal suggestions, is ideal in its effect and
meaning. Never absent from Giotto’s statement, it attains to a pitch of refinement in the Paduan Cross that makes it felt essentially as a manifestation of the immaterial.

As the underlying tone in Giotto is moderation, so the predominant virtue is temperance. Man is neither as troubled nor as rebellious as he is in Cimabue, nor as susceptible to emotion as in Simone Martini. Perhaps the distinguishing trait of Giotto’s man is a deep humility of spirit. He avoids violent or frenzied action. His gesture is not confused by a tension or struggle of the will, and the figure shows no sign of maceration. And the scale being in all respects human, there is an absence of heroic suggestion. There is no trace of pride, grandeur or self-exaltation. The atmosphere is accordingly one of unworldliness; man stands detached from earthly things and interests. Nowhere is human frailty so frankly postulated and so graciously condoned, and nowhere the doctrine of brotherly love so nobly affirmed.

The binding sentiment in the action is sympathy. The figures respond to the situation and to each other with inward participation.

But while the main expression is that of humble self-submission to a higher law, we are persuaded also that the figures are moved by positive qualities of sincerity and benevolence. Man represents the essence of virtue in an ideal world wherein Christ personifies the sum of goodness.

When we now shift our attention from the Arena to the Bardi Chapel, we find that not only their problems but their aesthetics vary. The story in the Bardi Chapel does not, as in Padua, unfold in a narrative moving progressively in a frieze-like continuity across the surface. The vertical form of the chapel in Sta. Croce better suited a system of superimposed scenes. This allows a greater width to the compartment, the story thereby becoming less fluid. These altered factors accord with Giotto’s advancing interests, which give greater compass to the scene. For he comes to be concerned not so much as formerly with a concise, progressive disclosure of the fortunes of the protagonist, but rather with a symbolic presentation of the typical moments in his life.

The architecture is still largely bilateral, hypaethral and often gracile (Fig. 3). It remains arbitrary, stage-like and symmetrical, with the two-fold purpose of confining the figure-composition and the space to the foreground, and of affording an abstract background to the plastic figures. The setting is thus virtually as subordinate to the figures as in Padua.

The figures are still maintained at a relative immobility to the end of being instantly integrated in a façade-like composition. The regularity of this and its deployment from left to right across a wider area than in Padua offset the depth now contrived more consistently by overlapping and isocephaly (as, e.g., in the Saint Francis at Arles, Fig. 3).

So far, then, and in all radical respects, the artistic laws remain the same as in the Paduan cycle. But they are relaxed towards a somewhat altered taste in the later frescoes. The binding principle, which in Padua kept the figures locked in a solidly and tightly organized fabric, has been stretched to admit spatial implication in the Bardi Chapel. The void has now become more deeply recessed and wider across from side to side. And the figures follow each other inward in a line that adheres to the perspective of the lateral limits of the setting by a rule already anticipated in Padua. By this means the forms at once create the void and cumulatively fill it. But above all the eye is now maintained at the level of the central zone of the composition, a device which implies a more deliberate isocephaly, and an overlapping
stratification of the figures as they recede into space (contrast the Last Supper and the Descent of the Holy Ghost (Fig. 4) in Padua with St. Francis’ Appearance at Arles in the Bardi Chapel (Fig. 3).

In these changes are implied at once the permanence of the principles inherent in the Paduan frescoes and the chronological relation between the two cycles. At the same time, the persistence in the Peruzzi cycle of the tendency of these changes proves beyond a doubt that the painting of the Bardi preceded that of the Peruzzi Chapel. For while the Bardi Chapel still clings to the compactness of the Paduan composition, it already allows the figure more than the space necessary to carry its cubic volume to a fulfilment, pointing the way to the Peruzzi frescoes, in which we find not only a resolution of the earlier tendencies, but, as we shall see, new departures in space-composition as well.

Although the restored condition of the Peruzzi Chapel frescoes disguises the minor forms, the broader aesthetic intention is manifest at the first glance (Fig. 5). There is a greater plastic swell in the figure, a fuller space, and a larger amplitude in the total effect.

But this effect implies a modification in the main principles as we saw them in Padua, and the tight composition of the figures becomes relaxed in a distribution partly less regular, partly less evident. The composition tends to conceal the central axis, and eschews the earlier stabilization through obvious symmetry still prevailing in the Bardi Chapel. The figures, in whom the proportion has been increased by having been furnished smaller heads, win additional breadth through movement. Yet this, far from serving merely to reveal the structure,
generates sweeping line-rhythms from figure to figure in a continuous flow throughout the composition. The close organization of the Arena, which held the figures in a collective immobility, having relaxed, the resulting intervals provide room for the resolution of the gesture of the figure.

On the other hand, the intervals so created carry connotations of space—connotations conditioned by the rhythms communicated to these intervals by the figures. Thus the whole scene becomes replete with spatial implications. With the same purpose Giotto now avails himself of the wide compartment by reducing the scale of the figures, by drawing out both the figure-composition and the architecture from side to side, and by increasing the tangibility of the somewhat deeper space-limits. He introduces greater gaps between overlapping masses, and interposes air between them.

The insistent balance of the stage-like setting, which in Padua and the Bardi Chapel cuts
off the ulterior space and by its symmetry immobilizes the composition while confining the space by its spread to the foreground, is uniformly avoided in the Peruzzi Chapel. The architecture becomes larger, less symmetrical, and its reach deeper (Figs. 5 and 6). Giotto’s trick of swinging it inward at a sharp angle to the plane of the wall (Fig. 4) is now used with clearer effect (Fig. 6). Its lines and masses move independently of the figure to a greater depth, suggesting a void beyond what we see. Forfeiting its former discreet passivity, it becomes a more active agent in the generation of space.\(^8\)

Thus, as movement pervades all the compositional elements, does Giotto’s space for the first time become less measurable and less determinate.

Along with these changes and implicit in them is a perspective visually easier to justify. For the first time in Giotto’s works the composition is now seen from its own level as in actual experience, establishing a recognizable relation between spectator and space. The floor slopes more markedly upward, the roof downward, and the central zone, the zone of the figures, is fixed in sharp foreshortening. And the heads adhere to an isocephaly, even where the interval between the overlapping figures is considerable, as notably in the Banquet of Herod (Fig. 6). The three zones of the composition from lowest to uppermost are brought into an optical synthesis in order to approximate the experience of reality. Every architectural element suberves the same spatial purpose. How much more effectively the device of overlapping columns, for instance, is used than ever before may be realized by comparing this scene with the Descent of the Holy Ghost (Fig. 4) in the Arena Chapel or the Appearance of St. Francis at Arles (Fig. 3) in the Bardi Chapel. Whereas the early left-to-right evolution of figures now becomes
complicated by a movement inward, their placing at greater distances in depth by this illusionistic law dramatizes spatial representation.

The Peruzzi frescoes thus receive the highest degree of compositional and spatial expansion known within Giotto's work, and reach the limit of his aims or at least of his achievement. The spiritual tone remains radically unaltered. It is as if the solemn hush and the implicit reverence in Padua had advanced to a more dramatic stage of the same action. The change is from a deeper to a rounder note. Yet none of the earlier gravity and moral significance has been sacrificed, and the ultimate postulates of conduct and of fate latent in the Arena Chapel have in no way diminished. The Peruzzi Chapel bears witness to the persistence of artistic principles first evident in Padua, thus confirming the singleness and permanence of an artistic purpose and personality fundamentally unchangeable.

But the question that now confronts us is whether the St. Francis cycle in Assisi contains the characteristics and the character inherent in the constant and implied in the variable of Giotto's genius; whether, given the universal laws of human and the special ones of artistic personality, its change and its growth, it is possible that the master of the Paduan and the Florentine frescoes could also have painted those in Assisi.  

The narrative of the St. Francis cycle (Fig. 8) is set forth in a series of scenes beheld through a painted architectural framework consisting of an architrave, which runs in a continuous course around the nave, and rests upon twisted columns that separate the individual scenes. The intention, immediately perceived and sustained, is that this architectural framework
Fig. 7. Interior of the Arena Chapel at Padua
Fig. 8. Interior of the Upper Church of S. Francesco at Assisi
should produce the illusory effect of actual architecture. It is therefore painted in perspective and in plastic simulation of stone, the trompe-l'œil being carried out in a course of corbels below and in another above it. But this effect is abetted and continued by the actual architecture, by the advancing lower part of the lateral wall upon which the St. Francis series is painted, and especially by the stone mass of clustered columns that rhythmically divide the wall into bays. The same columns separate the scenes into three groups of three on either side of the nave and one group of four at the west end.

What the projecting lower wall achieves is first of all an emphatic detachment of the cycle from its rival claimants to the spectator's attention. But columns and framework in their architectural character, separated from the scenes themselves, become united in a rhythmic continuity, which instead of arresting the eye propels it along its course around the nave. On the other hand, within this continuity, which joins the cycle to the church as a whole, the subdivisions of the bays command our attention and direct it to the three scenes contained in each.

This is accomplished not only by the clustered columns, which effectively articulate the sequence of scenes, but by the feigned perspective of the painted coffered soffit of the architrave and of the bases of the columns. The perspective converging on the center of each bay places the spectator directly opposite, equidistant from its lateral limits. But the perspective is calculated also to feign its actual height from the spectator's eye. He is by this means immobilized periodically in his progressive reading of the wall.

At the same time it is the perspective of the projecting wall and of the protruding columns that begins to tempt the eye inward, while the simulated perspective of the painted framework carries out the same intention. But it goes further. By specifying the relation between spectator and perspective, the painted frame fixes its position on the wall with respect to the church interior. And so it is that while the actual architecture joins with the painted frame, the actual space of the nave passes into the painted space and continues into and beyond the wall. Likewise, this illusory scheme accords the episode a more definite place within the spatial organization, as if it were seen through a window.

The decorative plan in the Arena Chapel (Fig. 7) is of another order of aesthetic and obeys a totally different purpose. Thus for example the system of bands that subdivides the wall does not express an essentially organic relation to it. And if the lowest course, which serves as a base for the painted stripes above it, imitates stone, the divisions themselves are virtually flat. Far from creating a transition from the actual to the painted space as does the framework of the St. Francis cycle, the network of enframing bands in Padua remains largely ornamental and abstract. They rise vertically from the figures of Virtues and Vices as pedestals interrupting, and thereby in a sense punctuating, the march of the narrative. But the bands, while they enframe the scenes, serve also to organize the wall and ceiling by dividing the former into upright sections, the other into larger arched ones, thus helping to articulate the interior, without, however, spatially anticipating or expressing the scenes. Nor do they, in their abstract neutrality, induce a movement in any way resembling that of the solid painted frames of the Upper Church. They are scrupulously kept static, the principle of progression being in the scene themselves, which are auspiciously free from the competitive interference of architectural elements.
Thus, the scenes, by contrast with Assisi, maintain an ideal and indeterminate distance from the spectator, like pictures in a dream.

It would be reasonable to assume, therefore, that had Giotto painted the St. Francis cycle he would have taken over the flat system of framing in the Old and New Testament series above it; since the problem in this cycle was essentially the same as in Padua, namely to deploy a cursive narrative around the wall of the nave.

Now, the space implied in the architectural frames\textsuperscript{13} that enclose the scenes of the St. Francis cycle is produced by the heavy painted architrave and the cumulative plasticity of the painted spiral columns, space being but a manifestation of form and solely by it rendered sensible. It will be found that form and space in the scenes, like those of the frame, being interdependent, governed accordingly by the same radical law, express a similar artistic purpose. Hence, although the perspective of the scenes is of a freer and more complex variety than the geometric perspective of the frame, the figure declares its occupancy of the space with the same remarkable definiteness.

This is due to the fact that the figure (Fig. 9) is bounded by planes that render the third dimension by starkly differentiating the lighted from the shaded side of the solid, by emphasizing the dark planes carried uniformly into the depth, measuring the depth along the wall
of the nose, along the receding cheeks, in the cavity of the ear—as indeed consistently along every receding surface throughout the figure. No form, as indeed no plane, is allowed to exist without fulfilling a plastic function, without affirming its relation to the depth. But to confirm its occupancy of the space still further the form is so treated as to produce not volume alone, but also solidity. Every detail, however small, being accorded the same treatment, every stroke set down to the same end, the form takes on, not only a plastic definiteness, but also the raw hardness and consistency of stone, its weight and atomic density. For the artist conceives the form in terms of stone and its properties. And indeed he deals with it as if stone were the material of the mental image, so that the grooves in the forehead seem cut, the folds in the cheeks, the cavity of the ear, hollowed out, the hair traced, with the same imaginary chisel. The whole gets consequently the appearance of sculpture, and, as in round sculpture—of the kind at least in the mind of our painter—the weight is more explicitly given, more compactly gathered around a central axis, and the planes bound it more firmly. This method isolates the form from the space around it and sets off each emphatically against the other (Fig. 21). The space thereby acquires a more explicit emptiness in proportion as the form is more densely solid: space thus becoming a positive counterpart of the form.

But, insofar as the volume is rigidly delimited and circumscribed, it forfeits the ideal qualities of Giotto’s plasticity; and if Assisi is sculptural and lapidary, Padua is as pictorial in its means and effect as was possible in its period (Fig. 11). For in Assisi the deep shadow sinks into the void while it holds the form solidly established within it; Giotto’s form, on the other hand, by a system of modelling in light, emerges in a gradual swell. But in isolating the form plastically the Assisi master at the same time individualizes it. His system is accordingly more naturalistic in aim than that of Giotto.

Moreover, the picture-space in Padua betrays a purpose radically divergent from that in Assisi, where the compositional plan, the placing of the figures, the intervals, obeying the same principle as the mass in the architectural frame, are governed by the same space-generating purpose. The figures and groups avoid that conformity of axis and contour to the boundaries of the area we have met with in Giotto, and are thus not as exclusively confined to the foreground picture-plane, moving more freely in a less rigidly determined void, without inducing that sense of predetermined position. Similarly the masses are placed at distances from each other calculated to make an active factor of the emptiness as opposed to the mere absence of cubic volume.

Yet we meet with noteworthy inconsistencies in the handling of the space in the Assisi frescoes. In contrast to Padua where the spectator’s eye is uniformly assumed to be at the height of the foreground heads—a device that provides a sharper foreshortening and a completer overlapping to the end of achieving a more ideal space-illusion—in Assisi the composition is often sighted from above (as notably in Innocent III Approving the Charter of the Order, Fig. 15, Francis Preaching before Honorius, the Canonization, the Burial of St. Francis, etc.). On the other hand there are scenes in which, while the greater number of heads are seen from the same level, some are raised arbitrarily above the multitude (as in the Miracle at Greccio, Fig. 14). These anomalies clearly interfere with the illusion of depth, for they fail to carry out the rule of optical experience. Yet they occur so often throughout the series that they may be predicated of its style. But there is a further divergency of aim in the two cycles:
Fig. 10. Giotto, *Joachim Retreats into the Wilderness*, Arena Chapel, Padua

Fig. 11. Giotto, *Nativity of Christ* [detail substituted for detail of head of Christ in *Baptism* in the original article], Arena Chapel, Padua
in Assisi the space-mirage is evoked by a setting running back of and rising above the figures, and independent of them (Figs. 17 and 18); with Giotto on the other hand the space is generated within the figure-plane (and at times a secondary plane directly subservient to it), which means that only so much space is conceded the figures as is required to establish them plastically (Fig. 10).

Again, in Padua the composition tends to evolve from the sides inward toward the center; to afford solid lateral supports for the structure of the composition and to form a recess for the display of the main event. This is seldom true of Assisi, where compositions are as frequently faced outward in an extended, unforeshortened view. And in instances the main event is placed in front of the mass of figures (as in the Miracle at Greccio, Fig. 14, and the Death of the Knight of Celano, Fig. 18) by an intention unknown to Giotto. Or again the action is shifted to one side with no figural elements on the other, as in St. Francis Exorcizing Arezzo (Fig. 16). But Giotto’s arrangement is subjected to an unambiguous system of organization in depth. By this system the body is first placed, wherever possible—and particularly at the right and left extremes of the composition—at a sharp angle to the picture-plane. Such placing is calculated to abet a foreshortening of the mass as a whole by an alternation of differentiated values of light, but chiefly by a movement of the lines along the figure from the foremost plane rhythmically inward. Generally Giotto’s scheme takes us from the well-rounded nearer shoulder to the cylindrical neck, which overlaps the farther shoulder, while at its base the opening of the dress, the folds, borders, ornament and so on, encircle and gauge the forms they enclose as they retreat in a continuous course. In such instances (Fig. 12) the drapery is drawn across the torso in a way that makes us aware at once of the stretch of the stuff in its resistance to the bulk under it, and of the dimension it traverses. By such cumulative recession of solid shapes in close conjunction with foreshortening of the masses and the lines, Giotto accomplishes a synthetic and suggestive evolution of volume. The Assisi system (Fig. 13) is less fluid and the form, even if at times it reflects a similar purpose, confronts us as a rigid statement of bulk.

Moreover, in contrast to Padua the objects behind and above the plane of the main action are allowed to arrest the eye in order to extend the space into the depth irrespective of the volume created by the figure, and so to lend the emptiness a more concrete illusion of existence. Accordingly the buildings, the rocks, the trees, are not, as in Giotto, primarily cubic abstractions, but assume a character proper and peculiar to them, with which not only our plastic reflexes but our associative faculties as well are invited to become pre-occupied. The composition is thus accorded, besides a deeper silence, a more authentic site and a sense of actual place. But in Giotto, it will be remembered, site is only summarily indicated in order to be taken in quickly and superseded.

Subject to the same governing intention and moving with the same purpose, the action in Assisi is naturalistically rendered. For contrary to Giotto’s rule the primary aim in Assisi is to create the illusion of physical actuality, not only by imparting a physical existence to the figures, but by insisting also upon the physical terms of their demeanor (Fig. 14). And this is accomplished largely by keeping the figures alive to the physical world around them to which they respond by look, movement and gesture. Their glance, that carries more practical suggestions, is directed straight towards the object of their mental pre-occupation to the point of
Fig. 12. Giotto, *Adoration of the Magi* [detail substituted for detail of head of Christ in *The Raising of Lazarus* in the original article], Arena Chapel, Padua

Fig. 13. Roman Master, *St. Francis Preaching Before Honorius* (detail), Upper Church, S. Francesco, Assisi
implying the distance of interval between them, thus corroborating the physical relation of the objects and figures in space and time as well as their physical reality. But this illusion is carried further by a psychology in the figures which specifies varying degrees of engrossment in a diffused and diversified world of nature, and we find them now in casual converse, now relaxed or vehement, in states ranging from ingenuous or startled attention to frenzied despair. To this end the artist has arrested a typical stage in a progressive movement, as in the pope’s fixed intentness on St. Francis’ preaching, or the shocked and horrified surprise of the guests in the Death of the Knight of Celano (Fig. 18); or the lusty singing of the monks of Greccio (Fig. 14) and in the Mourning of the Clares (Fig. 20), where we recognize the very pitch and timbre of the music in the effort of the strained throats and lifted heads. Or again the figures are presented simply as contentedly aware of their embodied selves or their gestures, busy with their own thoughts as they are barely mindful of what is going on (so especially in the Approval of the Franciscan Rule, (Fig. 15, or the Apotheosis). It is thus that the focus spreads—and as much by this scattering of attention as by individual realism in expression. And thus is the shifting variety of the actual world imitated. But this very diversity of behavior, before it has reached that climax wherein the collective attention is fixed in a single moment, in taking the scene out of the timelessness characteristic of Giotto, puts it (by representing mental states preceding or following the conclusion of an action) within a measurable and recognizable span.

Such an approach, in striving to evoke the illusion of actuality in action, aims simultane-
Fig. 15. Roman Master, Master of the St. Francis Legend, *Innocent III Approving the Charter of the Order*, Upper Church, S. Francesco, Assisi [not illustrated in the original article]

Fig. 16. Roman Master, *St. Francis Exorcizing Arezzo*, Upper Church, S. Francesco, Assisi [not illustrated in the original article]
ously at inducing a sense of veritable place in the scene of that action as part of the more comprehensive authentic world. This we see exemplified perhaps most typically in the way the artist makes the spectator’s interest stray into the composition in the Miracle at Greccio (Fig. 14), both by tipping and facing the cross on the iconostasis away from the spectator to embellish the nave beyond, of which we are otherwise made sensible by the swarming crowd that empties from it into the choir. In doing this the Assisi master goes much further than Giotto (see, e.g., the Presentation of the Virgin in Padua, Fig. 17) not only by describing the site, but by specifying its whereabouts with reference to the rest of the church interior.

Insofar as the master of the Assisan cycle rings the changes upon human expression, the action everywhere diverges both in kind and degree from Giotto’s, who, far from wishing to draw attention to the mental state or to urge its actuality, or again to intensify the emotion, is intent rather on revealing a spiritual truth, which is incompatible with just such transitory aspects of life as those the artist of the St. Francis cycle chose predominantly to represent.

But these essential and pervasive differences between the works of Giotto and the St. Francis cycle are attended by explicit ones. Perhaps the most telling among these is in respect to type. Giotto’s body betrays a more unquestioned susceptibility to movement, a greater range and ease of posture, than the stiff-jointed figures in Assisi with their awkwardly distributed weight. In spite of its implications of mortal flesh, its more flexible contours and proper
consistency, it communicates chiefly a kind of noble forbearance in every line and pressure, so that we become aware of an ultimate indwelling meaning, as of a living spirit that directs the body and sets it in motion, rather than of its irreducible materiality as in Assisi. In Assisi the bodily frame is square and large-boned, of stout build and ample mould. At times it is magnified to rhetorical impressiveness—uncongenial to Giotto—as in the grandiose St. Francis Exorcizing Arezzo (Fig. 16) or in the papal figures (Fig. 13). The head always sits firmly on a neck which in its posture declares a stubborn life-power as confident as the unwincing glance of the light-colored iris. This harbors the rude knowledge of simple-souled men who live by forcing their bodily needs from the earth. But the conscience within them, like their type, is stolid and impenetrable compared to the spiritually evolved creatures in Padua (Fig. 11). Here the whole man belongs to a higher order of sentiency and his face, marked with graver human experience, betrays a deeper awareness. Full at once of passion and acquiescence, the face is of a softer consistency, the nose rounded, the mouth flexible, the features and intervening areas of a proportion that brings them into immediate physiognomic coordination. By contrast with Assisi, Giotto’s eye is never pre-occupied with an outer object, but always reflects an inner state. The expression accordingly never responds to a moment, but is related to eternity. In Assisi the heads (Fig. 9) are furnished with weighty lips and rounded foreheads. The mouth is abundant but firm, with sensual lips bracketed by prominent folds, and a lump of flesh under it. The upper lip is long. Separating the cheek-bones, which project like flattened knobs over the weathered cheeks below, a straight and sturdy nose dominates the face. But most remarkable is the sharp unbroken arc that hangs from both corners below the mouth. The forehead is furrowed by straight channels cut into it by toil and exposure. The ear, generally small, has a deep, clean-edged hollow like a snail-shell. The eye drops back from the forehead into a shallow pocket delimited by a long sweep of brow. The hair is of a wiry fiber that makes a hard head-covering, subdivided in stiff, shiny strands separated by deep channels. Giotto’s hair, on the other hand, is of a fine silken thread, soft and undulant, and the whole rests a downy mass upon the crown. The hands in the Assisi frescoes are oddly small and furnished with slim, cylindrical fingers. The master has a fondness for displaying the palm in a foreshortened view, reinforced by shadow (see particularly the Glorification of St. Francis, the Miracle at Grecco, Fig. 14, the Death of the Knight of Celano, Fig. 18, St. Francis Preaching before Pope Honorius, and the Apparition of St. Francis at Arles, Fig. 19).

The drapery, since it occupies so much of the frescoed area, contains more abundant affirmation of the wide gap between the two cycles. In Assisi it has a metallic glitter and hardness broken by long sweeps of sabre-edged ridges and by deep finger-shaped channels that sink abruptly from the surface. At times the hanging skirt drops in stiff grooves like the fluting of a column, suggesting classic Roman example. Rarely, however, does the fabric seem to be taken into account, and we find in it a juxtaposition of light and dark not differing essentially in effect from that which we noted in the rocks.

It is true that Giotto’s drapery is founded upon the same radical system. It shows the narrow folds and occasionally a similar surface, but by the side of these analogies the disparities become more conspicuous, and the intimate characteristics of each take on a more definite form. Giotto’s drapery evokes the texture and the suppleness of the stuff, and renders its
Fig. 18. Roman Master, *Death of the Knight of Celano*, Upper Church, S. Francesco, Assisi [not illustrated in the original article]

Fig. 19. Roman Master, *Apparition of St. Francis at Arles*, Upper Church, S. Francesco, Assisi [not illustrated in the original article]
weight and its fall. Its handling is never as inflexibly arbitrary as that of the Assisi master, which has none of Giotto’s refined adjustment between the nature of the fabric and its function of revealing the message latent in the presence, the posture, the gesture and the movement of the figure. As the mind is more collected, the body more relaxed, the mass broader, Giotto’s drapery is more largely disposed and its lines communicate a dignity lacking generally in the Assisi cycle.

But the divergencies, as might be expected, reach other phases of the two cycles. In Assisi the angels are conceived as full-sized earth-inhabitants differentiated from humanity solely by their wings. In Padua they are small and gnome-like, and haunt the free spaces like creatures of the air, from which they seem to watch over the fortunes of men below with the friendly solicitude of familiar spirits. In flying, the lower part of their bodies vanishes in cloud, so that we are astonished to find them occasionally alight in their full height on human feet. But the Assisi angels retain their entire bodies even in flight. And their wings differ. The imbrication of the feathers and their graduation from dark to light endow the wings with weight, power and a kind of mysterious splendor. They look as if they were forged of fire and darkness when contrasted with the wings in Padua, which generally resemble those of huge birds.

It is surprising to find so explicit a difference in the handling of the halo in two cycles supposedly by the same master and of the same period. In Assisi the aureole is without exception a circular foil for the head and is frontally placed. In Padua, on the other hand, it is foreshortened as a means of both accenting and differentiating the personages with the intention of achieving a clearer organization within the single scene and a rhythmic fluidity in the narrative. It should be noted that the foreshortened halo reappears in the specifically Giottesque frescoes of the Lower Church, all of them painted under the influence of Giotto’s Paduan style. On the other hand, when Giotto’s composition becomes more relaxed and continuity less essential, as in the Sta. Croce frescoes in Florence, the halo becomes frontal.

And the architecture shows radical divergencies. Whereas in certain broad aspects that in the Assisi frescoes is planned on contemporary principles shared with Giotto, its character and function are in deep opposition to his. In Giotto the architecture is consistently ideal and abstract. The buildings, being undersized, scarcely suggest human tenancy, but are simplified, abridged, carpentered properties that serve to set off the plasticity and arrangement of the figures. The buildings in the St. Francis cycle are, on the contrary, shown with rare exception in their architectural entirety, complexity and independence. Reared in several articulated storeys, they are more organic, and bear a more nearly credible proportion to the figures. This is true more particularly of the scenes by the St. Cecilia Master, but perhaps most of all of the *Mourning of the Clares* (Fig. 20) and of *St. Francis Exorcizing Arezzo* (Fig. 16). On the whole they are fairly naturalistic renderings of actual buildings. They simulate the materials of architecture in their weight, diversity and proper character, but also register the structural relation between downward pressure and the resistance to it, along with the appropriate ornament and texture. Finally, the Assisan architecture carries its total mass back into the space, away from the figures and independent of them.

The rocky background, again, is as different from Giotto’s in function as it is cruder in treatment. The stony waste of the Assisi frescoes (Figs. 21 and 22) climbs in stratified stages of shining white levels, flashing back a cold light, and drops at edges of a lacerating sharpness
into sheer dark declivities. In Giotto (Fig. 10) the edges are worn to roundness and the planes flow into one another. Thus not only is the general form in Assisi dissimilar, but the flat and the vertical planes confront us in much more emphatic contrast. But the Assisan rocks become part of a more extended and integral landscape, instead of maintaining the subordinate role played by them in Giotto's compositions. By contrast to Giotto's method, the rock in Assisi creates landscape suggestions rivalling the figure, and a space far beyond that necessary to set forth the plastic content. It is thus that the landscape like the architecture encourages suggestions of life beyond the picture.

Nowhere do the styles of Giotto and that of the Assisi master appear less reconcilable than in the vegetation. Shrubs and ground growths occur rarely in either, but the trees, although drawn from a common formula, betray a different form-fantasy and execution. In Assisi (Figs. 21 and 22) they often rise from foot-shaped bases or little stony mounds, carrying heavy heads of foliage. The trunks show isolated limbs projecting from them, at times entire, at others lopped at their base, with only shallow spurs remaining. In Giotto (Fig. 10), on the contrary, the trunk is with very rare exception straight and smooth, and ascends to the leaf-bearing crown without interruption. The Assisi foliage is almost always large and ragged, of a light hue and partly in shadow; in Padua it is of a crisp and dainty pattern and botanically differentiated. If the trees in Assisi are more heavily laden, in Padua one may see through the leaves to a greater depth among the branches.

But far the profoundest discrepancies separate the execution of the two cycles. This is
Fig. 21. Roman Master, *Miracle of the Spring*, Upper Church, S. Francesco, Assisi

Fig. 22. Roman Master, *St. Francis and the Beggar*, Upper Church, S. Francesco, Assisi
directly conditioned by the form-image or the artists' conception of the objects of nature, the particular variety of which in Assisi, like the space and the perspective, arises in a more literal reading of appearance, subjected, as might be expected in a province, to a rigorous formalization. Here the prevailing procedure in the painting of the flesh—which is consistently al fresco—is the laying-down of a darkish ground, upon which is imposed a deep ruddy flesh-color. Over this the lighted portions are hatched on with a very fine brush. Generally the streaking, fine and distinct, runs in one direction, following the curvatures of the surface, but the green shadow is allowed to show in large areas of receding planes, thus conferring upon the individual shape as well as upon the total form, the maximum volume. It is by this means chiefly that the whole takes on the three-dimensional quality and the density of round sculpture. The conception of form in Padua, on the other hand, is akin to that of relief. And this conception the painter expresses by beginning with a green underpainting which he proceeds to cover in the flesh-parts with a light color, thereupon laying on the shadows in a slightly darker pigment over it; just as in working a flat slab of marble, the sculptor starts with an evenly lighted surface and models by chiselling into it. And, as in relief, a left-to-right plane variegated in light predominates, the shadow being for the most part relegated to a narrow band within the edges, at times limited to the heavy outer contour, which is made to serve also as a modelling agent (Figs. 11 and 12). For in Giotto, deep shadow is avoided in the interest of the decorative unity of the picture, the form deriving its plastic swell largely from the flash of a shallow light-and-dark. Moreover, the underpainting is scarcely ever allowed to appear under the flesh-color, and when it does, it covers smaller areas and achieves less depth. Also the medium, which is more fluid, is put on more broadly and is more glowing in its effect. Further, while in Assisi the hands provide the uncommon and noteworthy example of a modelling effected by visible streaks of whitish pigment running in almost every instance at right angles to the length of the fingers, in Giotto the light-and-shade is in less accentuated contrast and the hands are modelled by a shadow running with the long dimension of the fingers.

On the foregoing grounds, then, my original claim must stand. If the enumerated divergencies between the two cycles are necessarily selected out of a complex in itself ultimately incapable of essential definition, they are defensible as being at once representative and communicable. As there are students who still hold to Giotto's part in the painting of the Assisi frescoes chiefly because they fail to see the differences reviewed above, so there are some who, having perceived them will persist in regarding them as characterizing two moments in a single artistic activity rather than as separating the work of two distinct masters. These I believe I have answered in the earlier part of this essay (see note 4). While the main part of their difficulty lies outside the range of art history, I hope I have reached my conclusion on art-historical analogy alone. For, it may be stated categorically, in no known instance of the period in question are works by a single hand as unlike in kind and quality as the two fresco-cycles under discussion. To cite with dialectic insistence as many do, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century instances of similar disparity is, other objections apart, to bark up the wrong tree of which the branches may indeed have a different appearance—especially to those in a barking mood—even though they spring from the same stock. But to point to the example of Cézanne or Renoir (whose early and late works show considerable disparities) or to the
numerous periods of Picasso is inadmissible. For such disparities are largely external and, whatever else might be said of them, would have been immeasurably greater within the last hundred years than they were in Giotto’s day; since in that period, let no one forget, a style began to form at a tender age in a uniform environment of sanctioned tradition after which it could neither be discarded nor altered at will.¹⁴

Notes

[From Burlington Magazine 74, 1939, 259–68, and 75, 1939, 96–113.]
1. This exhibition, the most important ever held for the completeness of pre- and post-Giottoque examples, brought together works scattered over many churches and galleries under a daylight never known to have entered the places for which these works had been painted. The shock of actually seeing them has in cases proved too great to insure sound judgment.

2. The vast array of literature which learnedly champions Giotto’s share in the St. Francis cycle has in recent years frequently prejudiced its conclusions by a touching wishfulness to attribute the cycle to a well-known master. In view of this, Rintelen’s merit in first demonstrating the impossibility of the attribution becomes considerable.

3. The modern attribution of the paintings of the St. Francis cycle in the Upper Church at Assisi to Giotto repose upon the authority of Riccobaldo da Ferrara, who in one of his three chronicles which runs to 1313, among other items dated about 1305, states broadly that Giotto painted in Ecclesiam Minorum Assisi. Sanguine partisans of this belief have been quibbling over Ghiberti’s notorious ellipsis “Dipingne nella chiesa d’Asiaci nell’ordine dei frati minori quasi tutta la parte di sotto” as if it were an oracular equivocation. But Ghiberti, in speaking of the two churches as one, could by the closing phrase have meant only the Lower Church. As for his sweeping inclusiveness, so large a portion of the Lower Church was covered with Giottoque frescoes, the statement is, for a Florentine particularly, a condonnable hyperbole. Nevertheless from Pius II onwards literary tradition (Vasari in his second edition only) attributes the St. Francis cycle to Giotto.

While a number of earlier writers, one (Padre della Valle, 1791) as far back as the eighteenth century, see discrepancies between the different scenes in the cycle, none seems to entertain doubts of Giotto’s leading share in their painting before Rumohr, who in his Italienische Forschungen (1827) attributes them to Spinello and his son. They have since been questioned by relatively few. On the whole the majority of Italians have held jealously, nay superstitiously, to the traditional attribution, whereas isolated foreign scholars, like Kallab (1900), Rintelen (1912, 1923), Perlins (1918), Weigel (1925), Moltesen (1930), Gy-Wilde (1930), Martius (1932), Kaufmann (1937) incline to a Roman or Romanizing non-Giottoque master.

It is only fair to add that while post-war opinion has tended to date the frescoes not earlier than 1295 and as late as the second decade, the first decade predominates in the dating. In fact several students, Supino (1920, 1924), Salmi (1937), Coletti (1937), place them immediately before or after the Paduan frescoes, some regarding them a less evolved, some, strangely enough, a more advanced stage in Giotto’s development. The more timid attempt to reconcile the style with Vasari’s chronology, which places the frescoes between 1296 and 1304.

4. The gusts of harried and self-conscious eloquence in recent argument betray a certain sense of inadequacy, owing no doubt to the difficulty of grasping the differentia of a master even of Giotto’s repute. The power to do this, as a condition to any constructive effort, presupposes a knowledge of his artistic kin. But the crucial trouble arises from the despairing vagueness as to the limits of personality. To evade the embarrassment resulting from this, attributions have been risked on outward evidence or on pure ratiocination. Often indeed divergencies are noted but instantly explained as due to immaturity and accordingly relegated to the unchartered period of a painter’s life, namely his youth. The classical and consummate instance of this method is Schmarsow’s study on Masaccio, not to speak of the more recent and equally remarkable integrations of Uccello and Fra Filippo.

But art-historical scholarship has sounder bases. In known evolutions the substance of a style remains constant, as indeed in the common lives of men. For if expression is inevitably governed by the laws of the organism and structure, it can vary no more that the sensible aspects of our mortal selves such as our glance, gait, voice, scent, etc., and the synthesis they produce. And as in these, the changes in style are chiefly changes in degree of tension and not in their essential nature or disposition. Indeed the tendency in the development of the artist, whatever his capacities, is towards expansion of relaxation of plan, of form and of a physical type already present in his first maturity. And even then these changes are subject to a largely pre-determined and calculable course; and the greater the artist the less he swerves from it. Whatever his native powers, his growth and deterioration can neither be so rapid nor so capricious as to render his production at any stage more diverse from the body of his known work than from that of another master.

The general mental analogies, the direction, the orbit—if not the composition—of his thought, his taste and feeling remain the same.

And these factors of his style were more ineradicable and more evident in the trecento than they are to-day. For it must be remembered that, contrary to modern example, a painter of this period, whose formation began at a tender age in an environment saturated with artistic tradition, developed under the added restrictions of workshop practice as well as the demands of a conventional society. His style accordingly tended to form
and canalize at an early age, and the work of his early maturity therefore already contained and manifested (as indeed in all known instances) his peculiar quality and method, even if these still betrayed his origins. If valid in principle, how much more true is this of a mighty genius like Giotto!

Thus, in dealing with attribution, we are not treading the quagmire of uncertainty, as so much of past criticism would lead one to believe.

And yet the affinities noted in recent literature between the St. Francis cycle and Giotto’s unquestioned works are often not those essential to the attribution. To note analogy alone is not enough. For when all is said one cannot escape the necessity of first subjecting the analogies discovered between the two works to a critical analysis aimed at determining whether such analogies may not result from influence or imitation. Only by examining what is left after the “imitable” terms have been disposed of can we pretend to having touched the heart of the problem.

5. I shall for reasons of brevity have to limit my discussion of Giotto’s style to the frescoes alone, since they afford at once a more homogeneous, inclusive and consecutive view of his evolution. I have omitted the S. Pietro mosaic from my list as, in its restored condition, it could hardly add to our knowledge of the master’s style. As for the angels in Boville Ernica, I feel certain it would never have occurred to anyone to attribute it to Giotto on grounds of internal evidence alone. It seems to me a work carried out by Roman mosaicists on a design conceivably by him. Nor have I included all such works as have only recently come to light.

6. And yet this quality in his works is often pushed too conspicuously into the foreground. For the criticism of art seems organically afflicted with a facile and vacant intellectualism that neglects the concrete artistic characters of the object in the process of conceptualization. In this tendency the view of Giotto’s plasticity has been a shelfish or merely verbal fixation in the minds of some writers, forfeiting the formal qualities, which should always be retained within the critical focus. Possessed by this conventional fancy of Giotto’s volume, the student has been discovering it everywhere in his painting. Hence any work not primarily plastic is not by Giotto, while overcharged plasticity, no matter how crude or external, can be due to Giotto alone!

7. Among recent publications Weigelt’s dating of the Peruzzi Chapel prior to the Bardi is in opposition to my view.

8. It is perhaps of interest to note that Giotto’s placing of a large mass in the secondary plane of a gradual recession (the tower at the left in the Banquet of Hades), is in principle descended from the overlapping rocks in the Flight to Egypt in Padua.

9. In the critical demonstration that follows, examples from the Paduan frescoes chiefly will be used for purposes of comparison, for the following reasons: first, because they contain the essential elements of the later works; secondly, because they are in a far better state of preservation; and finally because they are avowedly closer to the Assisi cycle in point of date.

10. I do not here intend to embark on a definite suggestion of the authorship of the Assisi cycle. I shall content myself with taking the only positive step that I consider wise under the circumstances, namely to review my reasons for the conviction that the gap between Giotto and the St. Francis series is unspannable.

In discussing the cycle as a unit I am assuming disparities of style within the series due to different executants. While they all adhere to the terms of a general plan—including the color—laid down by a guiding mind, these disparities vary in degree. Thus scenes 1, 26–28 at the east end isolate themselves from the rest by the most evident divergencies. The remaining frescoes of the series fall into groups less dissimilar among themselves. But it is enough here to recall that the radical style has a single origin.

I do not hesitate in repudiating the contrary where repaint raises in certain quarters. That some retouches of the several recorded repairs are left upon the wall cannot be denied, but these in no way disguise or conceal the original trecento character. I shall remind the reader only that in 1820 Carlo Fea (Descrizione . . . della Basili . . . di S. Francesco d’Assisi . . .) “fece ricomporre all’umana vista la massima parte di tutti questi freschi.” In 1863 (Assisi, Biblioteca Communale, Descrizione del Santuario di S. Francesco d’Assisi Compilato . . . Membri della Commissione Artistica delle Provvidenze dell’Umbria), only one figure in the first scene is found wanting. In 1873 Carlo Felice Biscarca (L’arte in Italia, etc.) claims a restoration of the original vivacità di colore to the frescoes by Cav. Guglielmo Botti. Even Sacconi’s report (Relazione dell’Ufficio Regionale per la Conservazione del Monumenti delle Marche e dell’Umbria, 1903) does not condemn the surface.

And yet it is often those very eyes that see repaint over the frescoes which discern Giotto under it!

11. It is true that when Giotto chooses, he avails himself of a similar device at the east end, as well as in the Virtues and Vices, yet only where the narrative is otherwise interrupted by scenes of a specifically symbolic character or where the attention is deliberately held at rest. In the latter case such perspective is particularly happy as it converges upon the vista of the apse. A similar scheme occurs again, if only incidentally, in the Magdalen Chapel (containing frescoes among all those in Assisi closest to, but not by, Giotto himself) and never thereafter in paintings of a purely Giottesque character.

12. I hope the corroboration of some of the central points in my argument (see The Burlington Magazine, 1939, pp. 259–268) by so close and acute a student as Mr. Perkins (in the August issue of The Burlington Magazine, pp. 84–85) may lead others in the field who still dissent from our view to give the problem the attention due it.

I should like to draw attention to an omission in Note 5, p. 260, of my essay in the June issue. The mosaic angel in the Museo Petriano should have been included in the opinion expressed of the angel at Boville Ernica, both originally parts of the same larger work. There is considerable reason to doubt that these originally belonged to the Navicella.

13. The illusionary architectural elements painted around the scenes of the St. Francis cycle in Assisi, discussed in the June issue of The Burlington Magazine and illustrated there in a general view of the church interior, may be studied to better advantage in Figs. 14, 16 and 18 of the present instalment.

14. The foregoing stylistic confrontation of the works of Giotto and the St. Francis cycle has been necessary before it becomes possible to deal with the positive aspects of either. The discussion of these aspects, which in no way touch the validity of my present findings, I shall leave to another occasion.