



Art Appreciation Lecture Series 2018
The hidden language of art: symbol and allusion

Balancing the (heavenly) books: Giotto's Arena Chapel

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14/15 February 2018

Lecture summary:

This lecture unpacks the richly layered symbolism of what has been called ‘the Sistine Chapel of the fourteenth century’—the Arena or Scrovegni Chapel, in Padua, painted by Florentine artist Giotto di Bondone around 1303-5. The chapel was commissioned by the wealthiest man in Padua, merchant and financier Enrico Scrovegni, together with a local religious group known as the Cavalieri Gaudenti, or Knights of Prayer. This lecture teases out the many interweaving strands of the decorative program, to show how particular symbolic elements, as well as the choice and arrangement of scenes, articulate the concerns and hopes for salvation of both sets of commissioners. Above all, we will see how many elements are subtly modified and rearranged in order to denounce the dangers associated with greed and love of money—all directly relevant to merchant banker Scrovegni, then the wealthiest man in Padua. Here it should be remembered that even in this period of far-flung trade and commercial prosperity, lending money at interest, or usury, was considered a mortal sin. This was of more than merely academic interest for Scrovegni: in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante was to place Enrico’s father in the seventh circle of hell, reserved for usurers, and around the time the chapel was built (1303-4), Enrico obtained papal absolution for the sin of usury for both his father and himself. Thus, the entire chapel program can be understood as a confession of guilt on Scrovegni’s part, with the aim of balancing the (heavenly) books. Double entry bookkeeping, invented in Italy during this period, was believed to operate in heaven as on earth. In the economy of salvation, sins were debits that could be balanced by the credit gained through good works—of which erecting and endowing a chapel was a notable example. All this helps us better understand the magnitude of Giotto’s achievement, the way in which his invention and psychological insight are put to brilliant use in furthering the key themes of guilt, penance and judgement, as well as the ways in which the chapel was understood and experienced by contemporary viewers.

Slide list:

All frescoes by Giotto, in the Arena Chapel, Padua, c. 1303-5. Chapel is dedicated to the Annunciation, located on triumphal arch. 3 registers of narratives wrap around walls, with scenes from the lives of the Virgin Mary’s parents, Joachim and Anna, and of Mary and Christ. Last Judgement on the back wall. *Basamento* of fictive marble slides and personifications of the Virtues and Vices.

1. Arena Chapel, Padua. Exterior.
2. Arena Chapel, Padua. General view of the interior, looking to the altar.

3. Arena Chapel, Padua. General view of the interior, looking to the entrance.
4. Giovanni Pisano, *Virgin and Child and two angels with candles*, marble, for the altar of the Arena chapel, c. 1305
5. *Annunciation* (on the triumphal arch)
6. *Donation scene*: Enrico Scrovegni and a priest (probably a member of the Cavallieri Gaudenti) presenting the chapel to the Virgin and saints, detail of *Last Judgement* (on back wall, above the entrance)
7. *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple*.
8. *Kiss of Judas (Arrest of Christ)*.
9. *Lamentation*.

References:

General surveys (all of which include chapters on Giotto)

- Norman, Diana, ed., *Siena, Florence and Padua. Art, society and religion, 1280-1400*, 2 vols (New Haven, 1995). Excellent collection of essays by scholars from the Open University, designed as an undergraduate textbook. Vol. 1 has interpretative essays, vol 2 case-studies.
- Smart, Alistair, *The Dawn of Italian Painting, 1250-1400* (Oxford, 1978). Unfortunately out of print, but worth looking out for; well written, thoughtful, easy to read.
- Paoletti, John T. and Gary Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy* (any edition). Very good, readable survey of Italian art 1300-1500.
- Poeschke, Joachim, *Italian frescoes: the age of Giotto, 1280-1400* (New York, 2005). Beautifully illustrated survey of all major 14th century fresco cycles.
- White, John, *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1250-1400* (Pelican History of Art, later republished as Yale History of Art) (any edition). Classic, very detailed survey of 13th and 14th art and architecture.

Giotto and Arena Chapel

- Derbes, Anne, and Mark Sandona, eds., *The Cambridge companion to Giotto* (Cambridge, 2003). Good collection of essays by major scholars.
- Derbes, Anne, and Mark Sandona, *The Usurer's Heart: Giotto, Enrico Scrovegni and the Arena Chapel in Padua* (University Park, 2008). The best recent study, excellent, persuasive analyses, focusing especially on usury and confession of sin.
- Ladis, Andrew, *Giotto's O: narrative, figuration, and pictorial ingenuity in the Arena Chapel* (University Park, 2008). Eloquent and perceptive on character of Giotto's art; discusses at length the parallelism of fresco organisation.
- Wolf, Norbert, *Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337): the renewal of painting* (Cologne, 2006). Picture book, reproduces all his paintings.

For access to all past lecture notes visit:

<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/members/current-members/member-events/hidden-language/>

A book of this grade is generally well kept and is in good shape to read. Might have acceptable shelve wear. Might, rarely, have very limited notes. Ships immediately. No codes or supplemental materials - Your Satisfaction is Guaranteed! Add to Cart. Share. Have one to sell? There is a newer edition of this item: Giotto: The Arena Chapel Frescoes \$102.26 Only 1 left in stock - order soon. Previous page. Publisher. Thames & Hudson. Publication date. January 1, 1993. See all details. 29 May 2011. Arena Chapel - frescoes by Giotto. Arena Chapel, also called Scrovegni Chapel, (consecrated March 25, 1305) is a small chapel built in the first years of the 14th century in Padua, Italy, by Enrico Scrovegni and contains frescoes by the Florentine painter Giotto . A "Last Judgment" covers the entire west wall. Giotto has opened a door into a new style that will be know as Early Renaissance painting. He creates a world that is voluminous, 3-dimensional, and symbolic. The figures in the foreground are clearly human. A wall defines heavenly from earthly. The body of Christ is elevated, protected from the earth. The tree of knowledge stands firmly as a symbol of original sin. The disciples look on calmly, with a peace that goes beyond any human understanding. Giotto di Bondone (1267 - 1337) or Giotto was born at Colle di Vespignano in the Mugello valley near Florence (Girardi 8). He studied under the Florentine painter Cenni di Pepo Cimabue (1240 - 1302), and was influenced by sculptor and architect Arnolfo di Cambio (1240 - 1300) (Girardi 16). "Giotto's art represents a landmark in a new era because it introduced a natural and lifelike style that anticipated Italian Renaissance picture-making" (Fiero 180). Giotto's greatest masterpieces are the frescos he painted inside the Arena or Scrovegni Chapel located in Padua, a city 30 miles southwest of V Giotto, 1266?-1337, Cappella degli Scrovegni nell'Arena (Padua, Italy), Bible, Mural painting and decoration, Italian, Mural painting and decoration, Gothic. Publisher. New York ; London : W.W. Norton. The Arena Chapel was commissioned to Giotto by the affluent Paduan banker, Enrico Scrovegni.[4] In the early 1300s Enrico purchased from Manfredo Dalesmanini the area on which the Roman arena had stood. Here he had his luxurious palace built, as well as a chapel annexed to it. Enrico commissioned Giotto, the famous Florentine painter, to decorate his chapel. Giotto had previously worked for the Franciscan friars in Assisi and Rimini, and had been in Padua for some time, working for the Basilica of Saint Anthony in the Sala del Capitolo and in the Blessings's Chapel. Vices and Virtues symbolise humanity's progress toward bliss (heavenly happiness). With the aid of Virtues, humanity can overcome obstacles (Vices).