

Cimabue

Noted as the last Italian painter of the Byzantine style, Cenni di Pepo, called Cimabue, is also credited with progressing art towards the naturalism seen in early Renaissance painting. The great biographer of Italian artists, Giorgio Vasari (1511 – 1574) endears Cimabue as the foundation of Italian painting and is literally chapter one of his work, *The Lives of Artists* (first published in 1550).

Cimabue's inkling towards naturalism started early on, as Vasari notes of his youth, "instead of paying attention to his literary studies, Cimabue, as if inspired by his nature, spent the whole day drawing men, horses, houses and various other fantasies in his books and papers. Still, Vasari took much creative license with Cimabue's life and much of it was proven untrue by modern critics, but the artist survives in bringing a more human side to the last days of Byzantine art.

Cimabue is famously mentioned in the poet Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, in *Purgatorio*, proclaiming, "Cimabue thought himself the master of painters; Giotto took from him the glory and relegated him to oblivion." The poet is referring to Cimabue's legendary position in Italian painting being overshadowed by his very own prodigy, Giotto di Bondone (1267 – 1337). Vasari's account tells of Cimabue discovering a young Giotto sketching a sheep from his herd, using a pointed rock upon a smooth stone. Cimabue was so taken by Giotto's natural talent that he convinced the boy's father that he was suited for an apprenticeship in Florence. Though again, Vasari's creative liberties may have told more legend than fact.

All the same, Cimabue was a prominent artist in Florence and Rome and his famous frescos, though badly damaged over time, are highly acclaimed for the time. These included two pieces, *The Crucifixion and Deposition in the Basilica of San Francesco d'Assisi*, the main Franciscan church in Assisi. He also completed a fresco later in life for the lower church in Assisi of *The Virgin with Saint Francis*. One of his most cherished works is the *Madonna of Santa Trinita*, from the Santa Trinita Church in Florence, which now resides in the Uffizi Gallery. For most of history, and even still some now, much of Cimabue's work is confused and misattributed with that of his contemporary, the Sienese artist Duccio (1255 – 1319).

Recently in 2000, findings from curators in London and New York have proven that two similar works, *The Flagellation of Jesus and Virgin and Child*, possibly from 1280, are the true Cimabue. These findings help to distinguish Cimabue's works from that of Duccio, who in their time might have also been rivals.

His mosaic piece, *Saint John the Baptist*, was thought to be the only true surviving piece of Cimabue's for some time. As his only documented Mosaic work it was originally done in 1301 for the *Opera del Duomo* in Pisa, and has been restored since. It is attributed to Cenni de Pepo, and the artist was also known as *Bencivieni Di Pepo* or *Benevenuto Di Giuseppe*.

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