

Giotto

Giotto di Bondone was born in 1267 in poverty in the countryside near Florence, the son of Bondone, a peasant, and was himself a shepherd. Most authors believe that Giotto was his real name, and not an abbreviation of Ambrogio (Ambrogiotto) or Angelo (Angelotto).

The legend (as reported by Giorgio Vasari in his Lives of the Artists, derived from Ghiberti's Commentari) holds that at the age of 11, while tending the sheep, Giotto was drawing on rocks with chalk. The artist Cimabue happened along and saw young Giotto drawing a sheep, so natural and so perfect that Cimabue immediately asked Giotto's father if the boy could come with him as an apprentice to study art. His father agreed, and thus Giotto's career would have started in Cimabue's bottega. Another story in Vasari's Lives depicts Giotto as a playful apprentice, painting a fly on the nose of a figure with such skill that his teacher Cimabue made numerous attempts to brush the fly away. This legend foreshadows the life-like painted figures that would come to characterize Giotto's work.

His art was extremely innovative, and is commonly considered as a precursor of that evolution which was to lead, shortly after, to the explosion of the Italian Rinascimento. He stands as the key link between the Byzantine art of the late middle ages, and the more realistic and humanistic art which flowered in the Renaissance. The flat, symbolic figures grouped in decorative space gave way to the modelled, individualized figures interacting in perspectival space. He managed to adopt the visual language of the sculptors — by lending his figures volume and weight. Comparing his Madonna to that of his teacher Cimabue shows why his contemporaries considered Giotto's paintings miracles of naturalism.

Giotto's counterpart in the rival city of Siena, the great Duccio, imbued his delicate compositions with deep emotionalism. But Giotto stands alone as the great initiator of three dimensional space in European painting.

He received commissions for many works throughout Italy, and became a good friend of the king of Naples, as well as of Dante Alighieri. Boccaccio cited him in his Decameron.

Giotto di Bondone died on January 8, 1337 in Florence.

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