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Italian Paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

Giotto

Also known as
Giotto di Bondone
Florentine, c. 1265 - 1337

BIOGRAPHY

An artist who played a decisive role in the development of Italian painting in his century and beyond (his works were studied and copied by masters of the stature of Masaccio and Michelangelo), Giotto was probably born in Florence c. 1265.[1] According to the earlier sources, he was a disciple of Cimabue (c. 1240–1302). His earliest works, such as the painted crucifix in Santa Maria Novella and the *Maestà* formerly in San Giorgio alla Costa and now in the Museo Diocesano, both in Florence, and especially his biblical frescoes in the upper church of the basilica of San Francesco at Assisi, reveal the strong influence of the Roman school, both contemporary and classical.[2] It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the young Giotto, a well-established painter by the time he presumably executed the abovementioned paintings (1290–1295), had spent a period of formation or apprenticeship in Rome. By the mid-1290s (although some scholars believe it to be somewhat earlier, and others later) he was commissioned to paint the cycle of stories of Saint Francis, again in the basilica at Assisi, and then to compose the great mosaic of the *Navicella* in the old Saint Peter's at the Vatican. In c. 1300, Giotto returned once again to Assisi to fresco the Saint Nicholas Chapel, in the lower church of San Francesco. He then worked in the Franciscan church in Rimini, where a painted crucifix by his hand still remains. Giotto was then called to Padua, probably between 1303 and 1306, where he painted the famous cycle of frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel, and also paintings, now much ruined, in the Basilica del Santo and in its adjoining chapter house. To this stylistic phase, in which the strong, realistic charge of the frescoes in Assisi is ennobled and enriched with elements of classical solemnity as well as a strong poetical vein, also belong the great *Maestà* now in the Uffizi, Florence, and the frescoes in the Magdalene Chapel in the basilica of San Francesco at Assisi, probably to be connected with a document that speaks of the artist's presence in the Umbrian city just before January 1309.[3] Presumably slightly later in date are the very famous but now barely legible frescoes in the Peruzzi Chapel in Santa Croce in Florence.

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Toward the middle of the second decade, a change in the artist's vision can be discerned. Though not abandoning the ideals of classical solemnity and grandeur, he now developed an interest in realistic details and began to enrich his scenes with secondary episodes, emphasizing the elegance of posture and the eloquence of gesture of his figures. So sweeping were the changes brought by this development that many works of the period between c. 1315 and 1325, including the important mural cycle in the right transept and in the ceiling vaults of the lower church of San Francesco at Assisi and the Stefaneschi altarpiece for Saint Peter's (now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana), although identified as the artist's work by fourteenth-century sources, are instead denied to him and attributed to an anonymous assistant by several scholars.[4] Much the same fate has befallen the Baroncelli polyptych in Santa Croce, a work signed by Giotto and probably executed in 1328, the year in which the artist began a long period of residence in Naples. Of his Neapolitan works, only a few fragments of frescoes survive in the church of Santa Chiara, but there are reasons for thinking that the polyptych signed by the artist and now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna was painted during this period. On his return to Florence in 1334, the artist was commissioned to design the campanile of the Duomo and its reliefs. He also painted the Bardi Chapel in Santa Croce and began to fresco the chapel of the Palazzo del Bargello. By 1335–1336 he was frescoing the chapel of the Castello di Galliera at Bologna and the palazzo of the Visconti in Milan. Giotto was already gravely ill when he returned to Florence. He died there in January 1337.

[1] According to tradition—which Giorgio Vasari also followed—Giotto was born at Colle di Vespignano, in the territory of the Mugello; but see Michael Viktor Schwarz and Pia Theis, "Giotto's Father: Old Stories and New Documents," *The Burlington Magazine* 141 (1999): 676–677.

[2] Some fourteenth-century sources, and then Lorenzo Ghiberti and Giorgio Vasari, asserted that Cimabue was the discoverer of the natural talent of the boy Giotto, and some scholars even have conjectured the existence of a work executed in collaboration between the aging master and his brilliant pupil. See Luciano Bellosi, *La pecora di Giotto* (Turin, 1985), 177–178; Luciano Bellosi, in *Giotto: Bilancio critico di sessant'anni di studi e ricerche*, ed. Angelo Tartuferi (Florence, 2000), 98–100. For Giotto's probable formative period in Rome, a circumstance that explains the attribution of the frescoes of the nave of the upper church of San Francesco at Assisi to Roman painters, cf. Miklós Boskovits, "Giotto: Un artista pococonosciuto?" in *Giotto: Bilancio critico di sessant'anni di studi e*

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ricerche, ed. Angelo Tartuferi (Florence, 2000), 75–95.

[3] Valentino Martinelli, "Un documento per Giotto ad Assisi," *Storia dell'arte* 19 (1973): 193–208.

[4] The mysterious assistant sometimes called the Master of the Stefaneschi Altarpiece is often designated by Italian art historians with the conventional name of "Parente di Giotto." For a discussion of the problem from different points of view, cf. Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton, 1951), 114; Giorgio Bonsanti and Miklós Boskovits, "Giotto o solo un parente? Una discussione," *Arte cristiana* 81 (1994): 299–310.

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