

## EXHIBITION REVIEW:

### A GIOTTO EXHIBITION IN MILAN (2 SEPTEMBER 2015 – 10 JANUARY 2016)

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The Palazzo Reale in Milan, the former residence of the Visconti, was the venue of some of the major exhibitions in Italy in 2015. The show on Leonardo da Vinci (15 April – 19 April 2015) was followed by an exhibition on another of the luminaries of European art, Giotto. The exhibition *Giotto, L'Italia. Da Assisi a Milan* (Giotto, Italy. From Assisi to Milan) is organized around a dozen works by the great master, which span the main stages of his career. Some of these pieces are very familiar – the Stefaneschi polyptych (c.1330), created for Old St. Peter's in Rome, now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana in Rome; the Bologna polyptych (c.1328); the Baroncelli polyptych (c.1334), still in its original place in the Baroncelli Chapel in S. Croce in Florence. These landmark, mature works from the last years of the 1320s and the early 1330s are shown alongside earlier ones as *God the Father Enthroned* from 1305 painted for the world-famous Scrovegni (or Arena) Chapel in Padua.

A unifying factor for these works, belonging to different periods of Giotto's output, is that all are panel paintings, displayed in semi-darkness. (See Figure 1.)

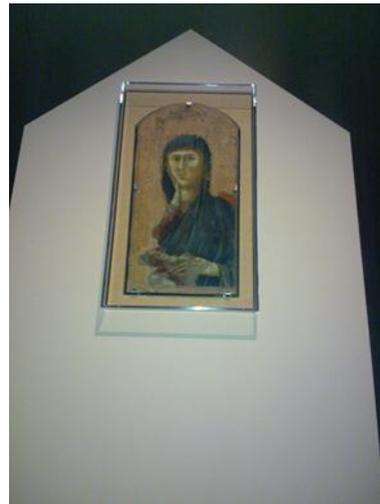


Figure 1. Giotto, *Virgin and Child*, Borgo San Lorenzo.

In other words, the visitor to the show walks through rooms that clearly have the intention of creating an atmosphere that we usually associate with a church space. Standing before paintings on wooden panels of the *Virgin and Child* (Fig. 1), etc. with their gold backgrounds in a quiet, semi-lit room cannot but evoke the experience one has before a religious icon. There is some irony in this, since Giotto has been largely regarded, at least since Vasari, as a revolutionary figure exactly because he overturned the artistic canon established by the *maniera greca*, i.e. the Greek or Byzantine style which had almost hypnotized Italy and most of Europe for centuries. In the most common definition, an “icon” is a Byzantine art form *par excellence* and Giotto's reputation has been based on his conscious breaking away from the Byzantine

tradition. As Giorgio Vasari tells us in his *Lives of the Artists* (1550): “In a little time [Giotto] freed himself from the rude manner of the Greeks and brought back to life the true art of painting, introducing drawing from nature of living persons, which had not been practiced for two hundred years”.

Looking at Giotto’s paintings in Milan against the background of the *maniera greca*, one can appreciate Vasari’s point made already in the middle of the sixteenth century. There is a very un-Byzantine look about much of Giotto. There is indeed a new attempt to situate real people in a real space and show the gamut of human emotions and psychological reactions. At the same time, the Palazzo Reale exhibition offers the possibility of another view at Giotto – as an artist who used, in startlingly original and innovative ways, the techniques of pictorial narrative and a heightened emotional style worked out by Byzantine art, especially since the twelfth century on. Another way of putting this would be to suggest viewing the exhibition of Giotto in the context of the so-called “Byzantine question,” which refers to the problem of the contribution of Byzantine art to the Italian Renaissance. Particularly in the case of Giotto, he has been regularly referred to, by some of the foremost Byzantine art historians, as someone who took up the developments of “the dramatic style” of late twelfth-century Byzantine painting.<sup>1</sup> One of the merits of the present exhibition in Milan is that, by its very display and arrangement and by the choice of works, it actively suggests such a viewing.

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<sup>1</sup> Cormack, R., *Byzantine Art*, (Oxford, 2000); see also Grabar, A., *Byzantine Painting*, (Switzerland, 1953), p.45; various writings by K. Weitzmann, including *Art in the Medieval West and Its Contacts with Byzantium*, (London, 1982); O. Demus’s *Byzantine Art and the West*, (London, 1970), etc.