

**RENAISSANCE
FLORENCE: GIOTTO:
FATHER OF
RENAISSANCE ART**



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Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Giotto's role in revolutionizing artistic techniques in the late medieval period, how he used linear perspective to add a three-dimensional quality to his two-dimensional paintings and frescoes, and why he was so important to the Renaissance artists that would follow him over a century later.

Subjects

Art, Architecture, World History, European History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Duomo, Florence
- Campanile (bell tower), Florence
- Scrovegni (Arena) Chapel, Padua
- Giotto statue, Uffizi Museum, Florence

Essential Questions

- Who was Giotto di Bondone?
- Why is Giotto important to the study of late medieval / early Renaissance art?
- How was Giotto able to portray human emotion in his frescoes?
- How did Giotto use three-dimensional techniques in his frescoes to solve the basic problems of representation of space and volume that had perplexed medieval artists for centuries?

Academic Summary

In painting Cimabue thought he held
the field, and now it's Giotto they acclaim
the former only keeps a shadowed fame.

Dante, Divine Comedy: Purgatorio, early 14th century

Now in the year 1276, in the country of Florence, about fourteen miles from the city, in the village of Vespignano, there was born to a simple peasant named Bondone a son, to whom he gave the name of Giotto, and whom he brought up according to his station. And when he had reached the age of ten years, showing in all his ways though still childish an extraordinary vivacity and quickness of mind, which made him beloved not only by his father but by all who knew him, Bondone gave him the care of some sheep. And he leading them for pasture, now to one spot and now to another, was constantly driven by his natural inclination to draw on the stones or the ground some object in nature, or something that came into his mind. One day Cimabue, going on business from Florence to Vespignano, found Giotto, while his sheep were feeding, drawing a sheep from nature upon a smooth and solid rock with a pointed stone, having never learnt from anyone but nature. Cimabue, marveling at him, stopped and asked him if he would go and be with him. And the boy answered that if his father were content he would gladly go. Then Cimabue asked Bondone for him, and he gave him up to him, and was content that he should take him to Florence. There in a little time, by the aid of nature and the teaching of Cimabue, the boy not only equaled his master, but freed himself from the rude manner of the Greeks, and brought back to life the true art of painting, introducing the drawing from nature of living persons, which had not been practiced for two hundred years; or at least if some had tried it, they had not succeeded very happily. Giotto painted among others, as may be seen to this day in the chapel of the Podestà's Palace at Florence, Dante Alighieri, his contemporary and great friend, and no less famous a poet than Giotto was a painter.

Everyone must have heard of Giotto, who was a great painter above any other. A rough workman, hearing of his fame, came to Giotto's workshop followed by one carrying his shield. Arrived there, he found Giotto, and said, 'God save you, master, I want you to paint my arms on this shield.' Giotto, considering the man and his manner of speech, said nothing but, 'When do you want it?' And he told him. Giotto said, 'Leave me to do it;' so he went away. And Giotto, left alone, said to himself, 'What did he mean? Has some sent him for a joke? I never had a shield to paint before. And this man was a simple fellow, and bade me paint his arms as if he were of the royal house of France. Certainly I shall have to make him some new arms.' So considering the matter, he put the shield before him and made a design and bade one of his pupils paint it, and so it was done. There was a helmet, a gorget, a pair of iron gloves, a cuirass, and cuisses, a sword, dagger, and lance. So the worthy man came again and said, 'Master, is my shield painted?' Giotto answered, 'Certainly, bring it down.' But when it

came the would-be gentleman looked at it and said, 'What is this you have been painting? I won't pay four farthings for it.' Giotto said, 'What did you tell me to paint?' And he answered, 'My arms.' 'Are not they all here?' asked Giotto; 'what is wanting? Nay, you are a great fool, for if any one were to ask you who you are, you would hardly know what to answer; and you come here and say, Paint me my arms. What arms do you bear? Whence are you? Who were your ancestors? I have painted all your armor on the shield, and if there is anything else, tell me and I will add it.' But the other answered, 'You are giving me vile words, and have spoilt my shield.' And he went away and summoned Giotto before the justice. Giotto appeared, and on his side summoned him, demanding two florins for his painting. And when the court had heard the matter, they gave sentence that the man should take his shield so painted, and pay six lire to Giotto."

It is said that when Giotto was only a boy with Cimabue, he once painted a fly on the nose of a face that Cimabue had drawn, so naturally that the master returning to his work tried more than once to drive it away with his hand, thinking it was real. And I might tell you of many other jests played by Giotto, but of this enough.

Giovanni Villani, Nuova Cronica (New Chronicles), 14th century

The most sovereign master of painting in his time, who drew all his figures and their postures according to nature. And he was given a salary by the commune in virtue of his talent and excellence.

Giovanni Villani, Nuovo Cronica (New Chronicles), 14th century

For over a thousand years, since the end of antiquity and the fall of the Roman Empire, artists had struggled with linear perspective and depth in their works. Long forgotten and misunderstood techniques of ancient times, when Greek and Roman sculptors and artists created works that cried out to humanity, had been replaced by a so-called "Byzantine School" of art, a movement influenced heavily by religious bans on iconography which resulted an extremely conservative anti-realist style. Medieval mosaics, paintings and frescoes, while colorful and beautiful to behold, seemed flat, as though the subjects being painted were almost cartoonish, soulless caricatures laying on the surface of the work.

By the Renaissance of the 15th century, artists across Italy had rediscovered the old techniques. The masterpieces of that golden age powerfully draw viewers into the paintings, as though one could almost step inside the work. Renaissance masters such as Michelangelo and Raphael perfected the use of linear perspective and depth to a point where they were able to create almost fictional representations of worlds that seem real enough to be lifelike. Today Italy is covered in such Renaissance artworks, the most famous of which are probably at the Sistine Chapel and papal apartments at the Vatican. Students studying the famous Renaissance artists are taught that a revolution of sorts brought about the change. The question often left unanswered, however, is who started the revolution. Who was the "father" of Renaissance art? The answer is Giotto di Bondone, commonly known simply as Giotto.

Giotto was born in Tuscany around 1266 (his exact birthdate and birthplace are

unknown – multiple towns today lay claim to his birth). It is possible that “Giotto” might not have even been his given name, but might instead have been a nickname. Tradition holds that he was a shepherd boy discovered by a Tuscan master artist named Cimabue, who in turn took Giotto on as an apprentice. Eventually the student far exceeded the master, and Giotto went on to become the most well known artist of his time, working in cities across Italy. Over the years, Giotto dramatically turned away from the anti-realist Byzantine techniques and towards a more realist style. In doing so, he rediscovered the use of linear perspective and depth in his frescoes.

Giotto’s most famous and important frescoes are in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. Built around 1305 by the Scrovegni family, the chapel contains a series of frescoes centered on biblical stories from the New Testament (a common theme in Medieval and Renaissance art when the vast majority of Europeans could not read). The frescoes are in two cycles: the *Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary* and the *Life of Christ*. All 37 scenes along three of the walls are meant to be “read” in order, almost as though one might be watching a modern movie. They tell the story starting with Mary’s parents (Anna and Joachim – not mentioned in the New Testament canonical Gospels, but heavily discussed in other early church writings), continuing with the story of Mary’s life, and then the story of Jesus. Finally, after “watching” the story unfold through the frescoes on the side and back walls, one is inevitably drawn to the Last Judgment scene on the wall above the entrance, where viewers can see an uncanny resemblance to Michelangelo’s work of the same title from the Sistine Chapel. Although Giotto’s frescoes are not as detailed or as advanced as those that would come from Michelangelo two centuries later, they certainly represent a dramatic shift in technique and perspective. Late in life, Giotto also designed the bell tower at the Duomo in Florence, although it remained unfinished when he died in 1337. Today, Giotto is known as the “father of western art” and the “father of Renaissance art.” Later masters studied his work extensively.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Giotto’s role in revolutionizing artistic techniques in the late medieval period, how he used linear perspective to add a three-dimensional quality to his two-dimensional paintings and frescoes, and why he was so important to the Renaissance artists that would follow him over a century later.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain Giotto’s role in revolutionizing artistic techniques in the late medieval period.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the techniques Giotto used to add a linear perspective and a three-dimensional quality to his two-dimensional paintings and frescoes.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Giotto influenced Renaissance artists who would follow him in the centuries to come.

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How do artists use depth to give 3 dimensions to a 2-D painting? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Giotto (20 min)
- Videos – Great Masters of Art: Giotto (10 min)
- Suggestion: The complete video on Giotto is 35 minutes long and is in 4 parts. Although it might be a little long for some classes, it is well worth it. The video details Giotto's life and works and is highly recommended for students and teachers, especially those in AP or advanced classes. If there is not enough time to show it in class, students should see the video in its entirety on their own.
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about Giotto (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: What was Giotto's role in revolutionizing artistic techniques in the late medieval period? How did he use linear perspective to add a three-dimensional quality to his two-dimensional paintings and frescoes? Why was he so important to the Renaissance artists that would follow him over a century later? (20 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail Giotto's role in revolutionizing artistic techniques in the late medieval period, how he used linear perspective to add a three-dimensional quality to his two-dimensional paintings and frescoes, and why he was so important to the Renaissance artists that would follow him over a century later.

Extension

On tour: Scrovegni Chapel in Padua

While on tour, students in Padua will get the opportunity to see the Scrovegni Chapel (also known as the “Arena Chapel” because of its proximity to an old Roman arena), where they can see for themselves Giotto’s most famous and important work. The frescoes decorating the chapel’s interior are considered some of the most important pieces of western art. When they were painted, most people in Padua and across Europe could not read, so Giotto used pictures to tell them the story of Mary and Jesus. Many of the pictures come from the pages of the New Testament, but some also deal with non-canonical stories written by early church authors that seek to “fill in the gaps.” Giotto’s frescoes of Mary’s life speak to such tales. Students who have visited or studied the Sistine chapel and have seen Michelangelo’s Last Judgment will notice a striking similarity to Giotto’s fresco of the same name, both in form and in structure.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www.fordham.edu/Halsall/basis/vasari/vasari1.htm
Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists: Cimabue and Giotto (primary source)
- employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth213/arenachapel.html
Giotto, Arena Chapel (website). From Dr. Allen Farber, Associate Professor of Art at SUNY Oneonta (NY). Great images of Giotto's most famous frescoes from the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. There is also a section on the technique Giotto used in creating his masterpieces. Highly recommended for students and teachers.
- www.giotto.com/giotto/giotto.html
Giotto (website)
- blogs.getty.edu/iris/everyones-talking-about-giotto/
Everyone's talking about Giotto (website) – from the Getty Museum
- www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/giotto
Giotto (website) – from the National Gallery (UK)
- www.artble.com/artists/giotto_di_bondone
Giotto di Bondone (website) – from History World
- www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?bio/g/giotto/biograph.html
Giotto di Bondone (website) – from the Web Gallery of Art
- www.sunnyvaleisd.com/cms/lib3/TX01001155/Centricity/Domain/330/Giotto.ppt
Giotto di Bondone (PowerPoint)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQ56Q5GZA_M
Perspectives: St. Francis, Cimbaque and Giotto (video) – from Kenney Mencher, Art Professor at Ohlone College (CA)
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZJCJz-HAMU
Giotto, Dante and the Arena Chapel (video) – from Kenney Mencher, Art Professor at Ohlone College (CA)

Background Information

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giotto
Giotto – Wikipedia article
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cappella_degli_Scrovegni
Scrovegni Chapel – Wikipedia article
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Campanile_di_Giotto
Giotto's Campanile (Bell Tower) – Wikipedia article
- passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/Florence
On the Road: Florence – from Passports Educational Travel
- passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/florence_sightseeing
On the Road: Florence Sightseeing – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-botticelli-birth-of-venus
Renaissance Florence – Botticelli: Birth of Venus
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-brunelleschi-dome-on-the-duomo
Renaissance Florence – Brunelleschi: Dome of the Florence Duomo
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-donatello
Renaissance Florence – Donatello
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-giotto-father-of-renaissance-art
Renaissance Florence – Giotto
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-machiavelli-the-prince
Renaissance Florence – Machiavelli: The Prince
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-medici-family
Renaissance Florence – Medici Family
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-michelangelo-david
Renaissance Florence – Michelangelo: The David
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-verrocchio
Renaissance Florence -- Verrocchio
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-leonardo-overview
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: An Overview
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/renaissance-europe-leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa
Renaissance Europe – Leonardo da Vinci: Mona Lisa
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-italy-leonardo-last-supper
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: The Last Supper
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-last-judgment

Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Last Judgment

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-sistine-chapel-ceiling

Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Sistine Chapel Ceiling

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-pieta

Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: The Pieta

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-raphael-school-of-athens

Renaissance Rome – Raphael: School of Athens

Key Terms

- Dimension
- Fresco
- Giotto
- Linear Perspective
- Medieval
- Realism
- Renaissance

