Proto-Renaissance

The Renaissance begins in the early 1300s. Some people call this period "Late Gothic"—a term which refers to the late Middle Ages, while other people call it the "Proto-Renaissance"—the beginnings of the Renaissance. In any case, a revolution is beginning to take place in the early 1300s in the way people think about the world, the way they think about the past, and the way they think about themselves and their relationship with God.

Giotto—the father of Western painting

The artist who takes the biggest step away from the spiritual style of the Middle Ages is Giotto. You could say, in fact, that Giotto changed the direction of art history. Giotto is perhaps best known for the frescos he painted in the Arena Chapel. They were commissioned by a wealthy man named Enrico Scrovegni, the son of a well-known money-lender. According to the Church, usury(charging interest for a loan) was a sin (!), and so Enrico probably built the chapel and had it decorated by Giotto to atone for the sin of his father's profession.

Commissioning works of art for churches was a very common way of doing "good works" which could help earn one's way into Heaven. We can see Enrico himself in a fresco of the Last Judgment on the west wall of the chapel, on the side of the blessed (or the elect)—those whom Christ has chosen to go to Heaven. He is shown kneeling, giving a symbolic model of the Arena

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chapel itself to the Archangel Gabriel and two personifications of the Virgin Mary: the Virgin of Charity and the Virgin Annunciate (to whom the chapel was dedicated).

In fact, on March 25—the Feast of the Annunciate Virgin—sunlight enters one of the side windows and falls directly on the figure of Enrico. Clearly Enrico believed that his chapel, painted with scenes of the life of Christ and his parents, would earn him a place in paradise.

This photo gives us a sense of what it feels like to be a tourist visiting the Arena Chapel. Because frescos are painted directly on the wall, they can’t easily be moved and put in a museum (unless you take the whole wall!). So, most frescos are still in the spaces that the artists created them for, and the patrons commissioned them for. Having the work of art in its original context helps us to understand its meaning for the people of the 14th century.

Looking at this photo, you can see that there are many separate paintings in the chapel (the Lamentation is one of them). Giotto covered the walls with scenes from the Lives of Joachim and Anna (Mary’s parents) and Christ himself.

Rather like a comic book without words, Giotto tells the story of Christ and his parents through pictures. Why? Because most of the population of Europe was illiterate at this time. They couldn’t read the bible for themselves (besides, Bibles were very rare and expensive because there was no printing press yet, and so
each one had to be copied by hand by monks). So people learned the stories of the Bible -- very important stories, that would help them get to heaven -- by hearing the words of the priest in the church on Sunday, and by looking at the paintings and sculptures in the church. You could say that art back then had a very important function: to teach people the stories of the Old and New Testament, and therefore to help them achieve salvation (heaven after they died). That was the idea!

**Scenes from the life of Christ**

The frescoes in the Arena Chapel tell the story of Mary and Christ on the long walls. By the altar, Giotto painted the *Annunciation*, and at the other end, on the entrance wall, he painted the *Last Judgment*. One of the scenes in the Arena Chapel from the life of Christ is the *Lamentation*. This is a common subject which depicts the moment after Christ has been removed from the cross, when his followers gather around his body and mourn his death. Mary Magdalene is shown with long red hair at Christ's feet, and Christ lies in his mother's lap.

**Relating to divinity**

Have a close look at Giotto's figures. They turn, and throw out their arms, and bend over. We see their fronts, their backs. You could say that this is the beginning of the Renaissance, since Giotto is so interested in representing something (even something divine and sacred) in a very familiar, relatable way.

Look, too, at how each figure expresses his grief in a different way, as true individuals. Some throw their arms out, some are quiet. Remember that if you are a writer, you can write about how everyone felt, but if you are an artist you have to show emotions through the movement of the body and through facial expressions. I always imagine Giotto going to funerals to study how human beings look when they are grieving.