

HIST302

Subunit 5.3.3: “Visual Arts”

While architecture was arguably the most important aspect of Gothic art, the paintings, sculptures, and stained glass that adorned them also reflected the optimism of the age and the emphasis on human experience and its relation to the divine. Painted panels behind the altar depicting biblical scenes and the holy family were gilded with gold backgrounds to stand out, while the sculpted leaves and plants adorning columns were naturalistic in appearance. The sculptures of saintly figures incorporated into facades and niches stood away from a rounded background, striking more naturalistic poses, including gestures, than the stiffer figures of earlier periods. The stories told in the stained glass, meant to be read from bottom to top, illuminated saints' interactions with two worlds, the human and the divine. Scenes representing historical events of the secular world were also becoming more prevalent. These works celebrated ideals and victories linking contemporary monarchs and princes to a heritage of rule that served to legitimize their authority. Related to this development, scenes of court life and the code of behavior known as chivalry reinforced the presence and importance of the nobility, and scenes of town life, such as those that adorn the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena depicting good and bad government, arose during this period.

The images that appeared most were those integral to Christian faith and were meant to inspire the faithful: Jesus on the cross, the Virgin Mary, and the lives of saints and martyrs. Conveying the authority of these figures and the superiority of the celestial realm was the main concern of the depictions. During the high middle ages, figures became more fluid and aspects of architecture in the contemporary world appeared in the background, such as pointed arches. Artists also began experimenting with creating depth in their depictions. Many paintings were executed on wooden panels. For larger paintings, such as altarpieces, dried planks of wood with a special glue-like coating, which was then covered with linen soaked in the same coating, were pieced together and placed in a wooden frame. The panels were then treated with a mixture of calcium sulfate and glue, called gesso. After sketching the pictorial design, gold leaf was applied to the background and pounded in. Smaller panel paintings, meant to be portable and usually for private devotion, were executed in the same way. For more involved and complex stories, painters adopted the medium of the fresco, paintings executed on the expansive area of a wall. The fresco medium, in which pigments were applied to a wall and dampened with a lime plaster, was a technique from antiquity. New monastic houses especially favored this medium to adorn its walls with devotional narratives, including the life of their founders, such as in the houses of the Franciscan order. Frescoes were often conceived as a series, with one wall's story leading into another on the next wall. Again, the stories were primarily from the life of Jesus, the saints, and the Virgin Mary. In

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addition to monasteries, frescoes were popular in private chapels, such as the celebrated Scrovegni Chapel in Padua.

Incorporating an emphasis on human experience amidst predominantly religious themes and subjects in art often meant depicting spiritual figures with naturalistic human emotion, proportion, and movement. It also meant more attention to setting these figures in backgrounds that conveyed depth and familiar landscapes. In the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, mentioned earlier, the Florentine, Giotto di Bondone (1266/76–1337), painted a series of frescoes covering the entire chapel. Depicting the life of the Virgin Mary through the birth of Jesus, and the life of Jesus through the resurrection and his role as judge in the aftermath, Giotto created depth through the naturalistic movements and gestures of his figures who cross buildings and landscapes. These figures are not suspended in time and place but rather interact with their environment, just as humans do. The volume Giotto created in his backgrounds mimicked the real world and created just as much drama as the figures themselves. The bodies of Giotto's figures are reminiscent of the naturalism of classical sculptures. The real drama, however, derives from the expressions on their faces and the gestures communicating distinctively human emotion. The tension in the bodies as they convey movement is reflected in the love, fear, rage, or sorrow the faces express.