

# von Goetz

## Giotto A Contemporary Artist *Piero Tomassoni*

Earlier this year, an Italian foundation held a symposium on the importance of sheep (the animals) in life and in art. Fittingly, the conference was held in Abruzzo, a region in southern Italy known for ovine farming, where livestock rearing has been a fundamental aspect of the economic and social life for many centuries. Whilst the topic might seem random, various curators and art historians were called upon to trace a history of the sheep as a symbol (and sometimes protagonist) in the arts, each demonstrating how, from the Bible all through contemporary poetry and visual arts, sheep have had quite a remarkable role.

One of the speakers at the symposium began by recounting how one day in the late 13th century the illustrious Florentine painter Cimabue was walking around the Tuscan countryside when he saw something unusual: a very young shepherd, around ten years old, had taken a slate and was using a pointy stone to draw one of his father's sheep that he was guarding. His looking at nature and his instinctive drawing technique impressed Cimabue so much that he immediately offered him an apprenticeship in his workshop. The gifted child was Giotto di Bondone. Although this story, originally narrated by Vasari, is now considered apocryphal, it does draw our attention to a certain fundamental aspect in Giotto's art: drawing from nature. Today, reproducing nature may seem an obvious way of taking inspiration and learning how to paint or sculpt. However, for hundreds of years - during the Medieval times - that was not the case. Painting had remained the same for about 8 centuries in the Byzantine tradition, where sacred characters were depicted in a stylised manner, not connected with the natural appearance of the human figure.

Such was Giotto's virtuosity in drawing that one day, when Cimabue had left the workshop, the young artist painted a fly on a panel that his master had been working on. The insect looked so lifelike that, coming back to his panel, Cimabue tried several times to get rid of the fly with his hand, before realising it was not real. Vasari also recounts a moment when Pope Benedict XII had sent an emissary to Tuscany to collect sample drawings from various artists, in order to establish whom should be chosen for an important commission in St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Having collected a few samples in Siena, the envoy arrived in Florence and asked the same to Giotto. The painter took a sheet and with a brush, keeping his hand steady, drew a freehand circle so perfect that it caused great marvel amongst the bystanders. The Pope's assistant was bewildered by the suggestion that he should take that back as a sample, and feared that he would be mocked. But Giotto proudly insisted that that drawing would suffice. So the emissary sent it along with all the others he had collected, attaching the author's name and describing how it had

# VON Goetz

been made. When the collection of drawings reached Rome, the Pope and his court of experts all agreed that the perfection of that "O" set Giotto apart from all others. Were this anecdote to be true, that could be considered the first "minimalist" painting in history, about 650 years ahead of times.

Art historians have found it hard to determine whether the facts of these stories actually happened. We are not even certain about Giotto being a pupil of Cimabue: the first - undocumented - source on the connection between the two is Dante's *Commedia*, where the poet describes Giotto's fame as so grand that it threw a shadow over the career of the older master. What is certain, is that these legends are effective in conveying and pointing to certain essential traits of the artist, which are as admired today as they were during his times: his gift in portraying nature, and his great, forward looking vision that made him change the course of art history. Even Giovanni Boccaccio, in his *Decameron*, speaks of Giotto's extraordinary technical abilities, as a someone whose precision could fool people to the point of making them believe that what was painted was in fact real, and of how his revolutionary intellect could be considered one of the "lights" of Florence. And an illuminating force it was: soon his fame reached such levels that, still young, he was summoned to work at the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi, whose religious and artistic features made it the most important workshop operating in Europe at that time.

In 1228, about forty or fifty years before Giotto's birth, following the canonisation of Saint Francis immediately after his death, Pope Gregory IX commissioned the Basilica, thereby beginning work on a building site that would become the main centre of artistic excellence and experimentation in the 13th century. The most skilled artists were called to work there, from northern Europe (England and Germany in particular) as well as Italy, including Cimabue, Pietro Lorenzetti and Simone Martini, together with the young Giotto. By that time he had already started to paint in a manner that brought human expression into painting. Whilst the traditional Greek/Byzantine crucifix was a triumphant Christ, he introduced the image of the suffering Christ: a human, heavy figure, with lifelike blood flowing from his hands nailed to the cross. Giotto brought this style to the Basilica of Saint Francis, together with his sensitivity for reproducing nature and architecture with all their details.

The group of Umbrian, Tuscan, and Roman painters who contributed to the frescoes in the Basilica is so vast that it has been very hard to determine who painted what, and attributions are still a subject of debate. While originally most of the work in the Upper Basilica was attributed to Giotto, it is now believed that his work is especially concentrated in the lower part, in the cycle depicting the life and work of Saint Francis. In this cycle of frescoes the level of detail in the depiction of the architecture, of the carpentry and masonry in the scenes, and the way in which the narration is set, create a completely autonomous space, independent from the one of the actual architecture of the church. The level of imitation of nature and use of perspective is unparalleled by the standards of the time, and offers new and impressive visual solutions. The architectural compositions are so complex and rich of references

# von Goetz

and citations of the roman and hellenistic styles, that it has been suggested that this was almost an early example of postmodernism.

Once he concluded this magnificent effort, towards the very end of the 13th century, Giotto had become a mature artist and he was ready to take on his most celebrated and impressive masterpiece, which he began in 1303: the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. In this "total artwork", painting and architecture come together with anatomy, physiology, use of colour, shades, and certainty of measurable space. The hyperrealist details of carpentry, the perfect use of shadows, bodies that become sculptural, and the landscape used as a backdrop, show how the innovative techniques elaborated in Assisi had been fully developed. The first tear in the history of art is depicted here: the birth of expressionism. As Vasari puts it, this is a cathartic moment in which we discover feelings and emotions in art. Giotto also does away with Byzantine modesty: sexual anatomical details, hair, violent images are represented in a graphic way. It is the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern era, from which all the Renaissance masters would come to take inspiration, including Michelangelo for his Last Judgement and Raphael for his Marriage of the Virgin.

The echo of Giotto's work still resonates in the present days. The artists chosen by Lucy von Goetz to pay homage to the Italian master in this exhibition have both explored methods of figuration that engage and challenge our perception of space. Bea Bonafini enters the glorious tradition of Italian tapestry, which is contemporary as well as ancient. The famed tapestry Tutto by Alighiero Boetti comes to mind, together with Il Bel Paese by Maurizio Cattelan, which reduces Italy to a gigantic cheese label to be walked on. Her compositions, closer to a collage than to a pictorial image, are developed on a large horizontal plane that reverses our relationship with frescoes: instead of looking up, we are made to look down, under our feet. Aisha Christison, while using a more traditional format, approaches the figurative space with great freedom. In her paintings and drawings, figures exist in multiple spatial planes. Her style is ductile, but recognisable in the tradition of European post-expressionism. In their ways of combining figuration and abstraction, the two artists remind us that it is still possible to experiment with traditional artforms, and that the spirit of innovation that Giotto laid the foundations for lives on today in the work of our contemporaries.