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Cimabue’s and Giotto’s versions of the Virgin Enthroned with Child

*Virgin Enthroned with Child* is both the title and the subject matter of two important pieces of late Italo-Byzantine art that were crafted just a few years apart, in the same region of Italy, by late 13th-century artists, Giotto di Bondone, and Cenni di Pepo, also known as Cimabue. Cimabue was born in Florence in 1240, and died in Pisa in 1302. Giotto di Bondone was born in 1270 near Florence and died there in 1337. Some scholars suggest Cimabue may have taught Giotto, but the evidence is said to be inconclusive. In their respective artworks*,* both Giotto and Cimabue use different degrees of realism, hierarchical scale, and perspective to express their own artistic vision. Though at first glance the pieces appear similar—with the same elevated central positioning and heavy religious symbolism—a closer look reveals that they are actually quite distinct.

In terms of realism, Cimabue’s painting (c 1290) presents a more traditionally stylized portrayal of the Virgin and Child and the beings that surround them. Cimabue’s figures have nearly identical facial features, little expression, and a feeling of other-worldliness that resembles older Byzantine icons in style and facial expression. On the other hand, Giotto’s portrayal (c 1310) is more human-like, with faces that each seem to have their own identity and personality. Cimabue portrays the angels, clearly distinguishable with wings, as stacked rather unnaturally in a way that was traditionally associated with heavenly hierarchy—seeming to be almost floating in the air—while Giotto’s angels, who are fewer in number and mixed with wingless humans, are more natural giving the impression they are a somewhat “earthly” group standing or kneeling on solid ground. Cimabue’s Virgin shows virtually no anatomical detail, while Giotto’s Virgin, although deeply modest, clearly shows she was anatomically a woman!

The use of hierarchical scale in Cimabue’s and Giotto’s paintings also stand in slight contrast to one another. Hierarchical scale refers to an artist’s use of different sized characters relative to other characters in order to convey a sense of importance. The larger the figure is, the greater the importance it has, and this can be seen clearly in these paintings. Cimabue shows Mary as perhaps twice as large the angels—suggesting a mildly elevated status—but Giotto’s Mary gives the impression that if she were to stand, she would be three or four times as tall, towering over all the other figures in the painting—illustrating how central the figure of Mary had become in the church at the time. Cimabue’s and Giotto’s paintings also both include additional human figures—without wings, and, in at least a couple of cases, with beards (presumably old testament prophets)—but while Cimabue has them slightly smaller and literally at the bottom of the painting, separated from the Virgin and the divine Child, Giotto places them above and at the same scale as the angels, and right alongside Mary and Jesus—suggesting an elevation of sanctified humankind.

Finally, a marked difference between the two artists is seen in their use (or lack of use) of perspective. The structure shown in Cimabue’s painting appears flatter, with minimal adjustment for depth and distance. This effect is further exaggerated by Cimabue’s previously mentioned placement of his angels. In contrast, Giotto’s painting has a more three-dimensional feel, with the structure’s angles suggesting depth, and Giotto’s angels being lined up in a more realistic manner, with some actually blocking others’ faces from being completely seen. In another nod to perspective, Giotto’s arch to Mary and Jesus’ left is a bit larger than the arch to their right, so that the viewer has the impression of slightly facing Jesus—a theologically significant effect. The beings in Cimabue’s painting appear a bit flat, as if there is very little space between the front and back of the painting. Giotto’s painting appears to have more depth, as if the angels (and others) are gathering around toward the back of Mary’s throne. Of course, though Giotto makes greater use of what can be called perspective, fully developed linear perspective was not used until nearly 100 years later, starting with Brunelleschi.

Painted just a few years apart, these paintings represent the transition from medieval to Renaissance art. It is important to remember that above all else, these were altarpieces to be used in Christian worship, not just art for the sake of beauty. They were presented at the front of the church, and their dimensions were intentionally grand; Cimabue’s painting, for instance, would have towered at the front of a church at roughly 13 by 8 feet. This is in part why there is such a great level of detail and so much grandeur to these paintings. Both these paintings are currently on display in the Uffizi Gallery of Florence, Italy, where they can be viewed and appreciated by the public.