

# From Contemplation to Representation

– a comparison between Giotto's *Frescoes in Padua* and Dürer's *the Apocalypse*

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From the 14<sup>th</sup> century to 16<sup>th</sup> century, with around two hundred years of reformation, the situations in society and roles of religion have experienced a profound change in Europe which went through the transition from Medieval Age to the period of Renaissance. Art works as a mirror for the social and religious movements provide us with one of the most trustable yet affecting ways to speculate people's lives during that times. By comparing Giotto's *Frescoes* in Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, and Dürer's *the Apocalypse*, where the former creates a contemplation space for disciples in the chapel, while the later represents sufferings in reality and implants artists' own will, this essay seeks to explore roles and functions of art works in different periods of history, as well as their relationships with spectators.

Giotto di Bondone was born in July 1266, the end of gothic age in Italy. A wealthy merchant, Enrico Scrovegni, commissioned both Giotto's frescoes in the chapel and the construction of the chapel. His figure also appears in the famous painting – the Last Judgment.<sup>1</sup>

Albrecht Dürer was born in Germany in May 1471 and was active in High Renaissance from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century to early 16<sup>th</sup> century. *The Apocalypse* is one of Dürer's early works which was published in 1498. With the last chapter of the New Testament, *The Apocalypse* is the representation of the religious stories with strong connections to the reality, a time of natural disasters and social turbulence in Germany.<sup>2</sup>

Both of Giotto's frescoes and Dürer the *Apocalypse* use Biblical stories as the motif, however, in Giotto's time the Church stands for absolute authority and the God's will. Though the



Fig. 1 Scrovegni Chapel Interior Wall

frescoes in Scrovegni Chapel are patronized by a merchant, similar to most of its contemporaries, the intention for building the chapel and painting biblical stories on the walls is to reinforce loyalty and piety of the masses. Eventually, Giotto successfully creates the place for disciples' contemplation, through circumspect narratives and selection of the stories, masterful skills in composition and portrait, and lastly passing on humanities in his works.

Narratives in Giotto's fresco paintings follow his meticulous story

<sup>1</sup> Cole, B. (1976). *Giotto and Florentine painting: 1280-1375*. New York: Harper and Row, pp. 63 - 65.

<sup>2</sup> Waetzoldt, W. (2009). *Diule he ta de shi dai (Dürer und Seine Zeit)*. Beijing Shi: Beijing da xue chu ban she, pp.1 - 16.



Fig. 2 Giotto di Bondone, *the Entry into Jerusalem*, c. 1302, fresco on Wall

arrangement in the building, that Annunciation is painted on the alter wall and the Last Judgment covers the opposing side, the west wall (Fig. 1). Visitors will start the journey of the Christian legend the time they enter this chapel with the arch scene above, where Gabriel is telling Mary she will have a child. Along the way, paintings on the side walls begin with Virgin Mary's birth, Jesus' life and finally reaches Crucifixion.<sup>3</sup>

What is more noteworthy is the holy and peaceful space created by bringing together the fresco narratives, interior decorations and the overall architecture design of this chapel. Only in this particular space where all frescoes were made for, worshippers can find the essence value of those artworks, that allow them to meditate and travel in the spiritual world.

With the informative biblical stories, the fresco paintings are essential to pass on Bible's messages to the public, because Bibles were very rare due to lack of printmaking and many people were illiterate at that time.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, apart from the content in the paintings, it is crucial to make the ideas understandable and send effective messages to the viewers. Giotto achieves this with his notable skills and unique style in painting. Ultimately, the frescoes can introduce clear and direct content to the spectators for them to reflect and contemplate.

Giotto uses simple composition in his painting. Key figures are emphasized to draw spectators' attention. In *the Entry into Jerusalem* (Fig. 2), Jesus is located in the center with scaled body larger than other characters, while many figures on the left only have their golden halos seen. With the representative ways of using architecture, Giotto paints the arch on the left not only to point out the direction of Christ's journey, but also imply the whole city of Jerusalem. The use of depth makes the scene more lifelike and with a sense of space. Jesus's clothes are painted in red and drapery in blue, though there is some blue lost due to fresco secco<sup>5</sup>, this doesn't prevent the painting to send its main message via the center figure, that Christ is about to enter Jerusalem, and he is ready to bring salvations to people and face all the challenges ahead. With the thorough inclusiveness of important characters in the stories of Bible and careful composition to emphasize the main subjects, Giotto's frescoes are worthy of spectators' unhurried watching, mindful interpreting and deep contemplation.

<sup>3</sup> Cole, B. (1976). *Giotto and Florentine painting: 1280-1375*. New York: Harper and Row, pp. 67 - 70.

<sup>4</sup> The reader can refer to *Giotto, Arena (Scrovegni) Chapel* of Khan Academy: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/late-gothic-italy/florence-late-gothic/a/giotto-arena-scrvegni-chapel> (accessed on 10 December 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Cole, B. (1976). *Giotto and Florentine painting: 1280-1375*. New York: Harper and Row, pp. 71 - 75.





Fig. 3 Giotto di Bondone, *the Lamentation*, c. 1302, fresco on Wall

What distinguishes Giotto's works from his contemporaries is the emotions and humanities in his paintings and the contemplation becomes more sympathetic and evocative. Take a closer look at *the Lamentation*, Mary holds dead Jesus with deep grief on her face and people around them are all mourning, even angels in the sky are writhing in sorrows. With leafless trees in the upper left corner implying death, the whole scene is in misery and altogether the sadness imbues the spectators easily, whose emotions has followed the ups and downs all the way in the plot of the Christian drama, and the poignant ending with artist's sentimental depiction makes the whole experience in Bible stories touching and impressive. Therefore, religion's power is reinforced by Giotto's frescoes, that he shortens the

distance between the holy world and secular life by giving human emotions to the religious figures, so as to has a more profound influence on the disciples who are meant to receive and believe all the biblical messages embedded in these frescos.

After Giotto's era is the flourishing of Renaissance, and Giotto's depiction of humanities in painting has been deep-rooted in arts in the following two hundred years. Religion's status changes as science gives new perspectives of the universe and individuals are emphasized and encouraged to have their own characteristics. Therefore, artists are not necessarily under church or merchant's patronage to create, rather they have more freedom to make art according to their own wills.<sup>6</sup>

Albrecht Dürer is one of the figures in his times, a well-known artist and theorist in Germany. With Giotto's precedent in proto Renaissance, most artists in Renaissance, including Dürer have mastered the techniques to resemble reality and have their own styles to describe emotions and atmosphere. As with works with biblical themes, comparing with Giotto's frescoes that stand for religion and create idealism for spectators' contemplation, Dürer's artworks are the imposing representation of reality, from the sufferings in society to radical changes in religion, as well as the representation of the artist himself, with personal emotions, intentions and experience in his present.

*The Apocalypse* is one of the extraordinary works by Dürer. Upon its creation, Germany has been going through a hard time in both natural catastrophe and national agitation. Famine, plague and drought has struck the whole country, people's anger and despair soon leads to

<sup>6</sup> Waetzoldt, W. (2009). *Diule he ta de shi dai (Dürer und Seine Zeit)*. Beijing Shi: Beijing da xue chu ban she, p. 45.



Fig. 4 Albrecht Dürer, *Opening the Fifth and Sixth Seals*, c. 1498, Woodcuts



Fig. 5 Albrecht Dürer, *The Angels Restraining the Four Winds*, c. 1498, Woodcuts

social conflicts, later it becomes Peasant's War. Crowds of people leave their home and live a nomadic life, searching for food, settlements, and most importantly, salvation.<sup>7</sup>

Dürer's work is the representation of hardships in those days. With the last chapter of Christian Bible, his woodcuts the *Apocalypse* intend to disclose the similarity between reality and the scene in the Christian story, thus echo the terrifying real world. "There is no detail in the Apocalypse woodcuts that does not accord with objective and verifiable truth", in *Opening the Fifth and Sixth Seals* (Fig. 4), people in torment, the Pope, governors all become characters in the woodcut. Real life figures' representation combining with Dürer's imaginative recreation of the religious story gives the whole scene strong symbolic meaning.

It is no longer a creation of an ideal world that gives disciples peace and contemplation in a holy space, just as Giotto's frescoes in the Chapel, but through direct and expressive representation. Dürer's woodcuts convey the implication that all sufferings people experiencing now have been written in the Bible and salvation of God will eventually come to those with faith and piety. In *The Angels Restraining the Four Winds* (Fig. 5), among the devastating events depicted in other woodcuts, this one shows angels come to people and help them go through difficulties with God's words. Therefore, the resemblance between the sacred and secular world provides spiritual support for people in unrest and despair.

Furthermore, a wider range of people can see the woodcuts via printmaking rather than just the woodcuts owner. The printmaking technique brings up a significant change how people receive religious knowledge, that they don't necessarily go to the church and listen to the pope, but have freedom to possess personal interpretations for the Bible. Compared with fresco paintings by Giotto that is built for authenticity, the easier access of Dürer's woodcuts and representation of secular sufferings in holy world give Dürer larger number of audiences and achieve more pervasive preachment.

<sup>7</sup> Adams, L. (1974). *Giotto in perspective*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, p. 134.





Fig. 6 Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, c. 1498, Woodcuts



Fig. 7 Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Angels of Death*, c. 1498, Woodcuts

It is also a representation of the artist's own characteristics. The Apocalypse woodcuts are Dürer's early work and created when he just finished the first journey to Italy. Without any patronage from churches or merchants, Dürer makes the woodcut out of his own intention because he is also deeply affected involving in the turmoil and sufferings at that time and understands how necessary for people to have such an epic to go through the misfortune<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, Giotto is under the commission of Enrico, so he has to satisfy the patron's wish. It can be inferred that Enrico's motivation for the patronage was to atone for the sin of his business in usury, because he appears in the Last Judgment and belong to the group that will go to heaven. The difference indicates a larger initiative and freedom for the artists and it is foreseeable that artists would express their personal emotions in the artworks.

By the depiction of death and terror, Dürer is describing the calamity from his perspective and the Apocalypse is powerful because all agitation is originated from the artist himself. In *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, Dürer uses bold stroke to create chaos, and composes crowded characters and items to render an overwhelming effect. He retells St. John's original story with an intense anxiety where the horror is remarkably revealed by a scaring horseman at the lower left corner. The horseman represents death, rides on a scraggly horse, steps over human and declares the fall of apocalypse. All of them are disclosing Dürer's own fear in face of the natural disaster and uncertain destiny of his country.

The style of the woodcuts date back to the medieval ages and shows young Dürer's attachment to Roman Catholic Church. Different from the Church's controlling power and authority in Giotto's times, in Dürer's time the Church exposes severe vulnerabilities in face of the calamity and its authenticity are increasingly doubted by masses of people in the fast-changing religion climate<sup>9</sup>. Dürer unfolds his suspicion too, where in the lower right corner of the woodcut in *The four angels of Death*

<sup>8</sup> Waetzoldt, W. (2009). *Diule he ta de shi dai (Dürer und Seine Zeit)*. Beijing Shi: Beijing da xue chu ban she, pp. 45 - 69.

<sup>9</sup> Brion, M. (1960). *Albrecht Dürer: His life and work*. London: Thames and Hudson, pp. 134 - 147.



Fig. 8 Albrecht Dürer, *the Four Apostles*, c. 1526, Oil Painting

(Fig. 7), the Pope is among the punished crowds, looks hopeless and in great desperation. Twenty years later, Dürer becomes a follower of Martin Luther, the leader for Protestant Reformation. Such as *the Four Apostles* (Fig. 8) demonstrating Dürer's adherence to Martin Luther's reformation<sup>10</sup>, the intention to implant his religious devotion in the artworks becomes more and more significant ever since the early symptom in the Apocalypse by young Dürer.

While Giotto's paintings allow believers to enter narratives of biblical stories and have their deliberate reflection and contemplation, Dürer's woodcuts are representation of reality in the sacred world and create meanings in an expressive way. Not only inviting us to the past, their artworks also have us reflect on the presence. We are at the age when the the emphasis and attention towards individuals are greater than any other times. In contemplation, we slow down in the fast pace of modern life, and with representation, artworks arouse sympathy for each of us and connects the more and more isolated individuals.

Words count: 2291

<sup>10</sup> Waetzoldt, W. (2009). *Diule he ta de shi dai (Dürer und Seine Zeit)*. Beijing Shi: Beijing da xue chu ban she, pp. 221-237.

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