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**The presence of the three Marys surrounding the  
body of Jesus in Giotto's fresco, LAMENTATION,  
reminds us of the importance of women in the  
gospel accounts of Christ's life.**

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# Mary and the Women from Galilee

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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**G**iotto's fresco *Lamentation* in the Arena Chapel continues a tradition of depicting the three Marys' role in the grieving over Jesus' body after it had been taken from the cross (not visible in this painting). This scene of lamentation is an apocryphal story, yet it incorporates significant details from the biblical accounts of the women who were present at the crucifixion and burial of Jesus.

The Gospel of John says that three Marys—Jesus' mother; his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas; and Mary Magdalene—stood near the cross (John 19:25). The Synoptic Gospels report that many women who followed Jesus from Galilee observed his crucifixion "from a distance" (Matthew 27:55; Mark 15:40-41; and Luke 23:48). Mark adds that "among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome" (Mark 15:40b), while Matthew specifically identifies "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee" as present (Matthew 27:56).

A wealthy disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, received Pilate's permission to prepare Jesus' body for burial. In the Gospel of John, it is only "Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus by night," that contributes "myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds" and assists Joseph in wrapping the body "with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial customs of the Jews" (John 19:39-40). In the Synoptic Gospels, however, it is the women disciples who observe or assist Joseph in the preparation of the body. Matthew and Mark suggest that two women, Mary Magdalene and another named Mary, were present when Joseph rolled a great stone to cover the entrance to the tomb that had been hewn in the rock (Matthew 27:61; Mark 15:47). The Gospel of Luke reports that several women from Galilee (not identified by name) "saw the tomb, and how his body was laid; then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments" (Luke 23:55-56).

When we read the Lukan account in light of the information in Matthew and Mark, we presume that the women must have prepared Jesus' body

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LAMENTATION OVER THE DEAD CHRIST OR MATER DOLOROSA (1164). Byzantine fresco. St. Panteleimon, Nerezi, Macedonia. Photo: © Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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after it was entombed. In *Lamentation*, however, Giotto depicts the women with the body of Jesus before it is laid within the tomb. The artist probably was inspired in this placement of figures by a Byzantine example similar to the fresco *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1164) in the Monastery of Saint Panteleimon in Nerezi, Macedonia (see above).

Three women mentioned in the gospel accounts can be clearly identified in Giotto's painting by their visual attributes. Mary, the mother of Jesus, wearing a deep aquamarine gown, holds the head and upper body of Jesus across her lap. This detail of the painting also recalls the *pietà* tradition of Mary mourning over the body of Jesus, another popular apocryphal subject in art. The Christian *Pietà* may have its origin in ancient depictions of the Greek legend of Eos and Memnon. According to legend, during the Trojan War Achilles killed King Memnon and stripped him of his armor. A famous kylix, or drinking cup, crafted by the Archaic vase painter Douris in the fifth century BC, depicts Eos, the goddess of dawn, mourning over the lifeless body of her son Memnon (see p. 53). Like this depiction of Eos, Mary remains composed in expressing her deep grief.

Mary Magdalene, who is identified by her red drapery and long flowing hair, sits with the feet of Christ in her lap. The other Mary, wearing a halo, leans over the body of Christ between the other Marys and below John the Beloved. In tradition the beloved disciple is identified with John the Evan-

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*Douris Painter (5th BC) EOS WITH THE BODY OF HER SON MEMNON, SLAIN BY ACHILLES (c. 490-480 BC). Center of red figure cup, 10.5" in diameter. Photo by Hervé Lewandowski: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

gelist, the author of the fourth Gospel, and visually represented as a youth who lacks facial hair.

The long line of the barren rock, perhaps ending in a tomb to the right and outside the border of the painting, leads the viewer's eye back to the intimate exchange between Mary and Christ. The angels in the air above, each with a unique expression of grief (wringing their hands, twisting and turning in various directions), heighten the drama of the death.

Giotto created a new kind of pictorial space in *Lamentation*. Instead of depicting details of the story in a way that forces one to look from one segment of the painting to another, he pushed the entire narrative into the frontal plane, directly confronting the viewer with the monumentality and emotion of the scene. This composition is united by large simple forms, strong and emotional grouping of the figures, and the limited depth of its stage in a manner never found before.

The *Lamentation* is a critical scene for the iconographical program of the Arena Chapel series of frescoes, which are considered to be the most

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ARENA CHAPEL, PADUA (1305). Interior, looking east. Photo: © Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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complete series by Giotto done in his mature style. This chapel in Padua, a university town not far from Venice, is usually called “the Arena Chapel” because it is constructed above an ancient Roman arena. The original chapel, dedicated to the Virgin Annunciate, was acquired in 1300 by a wealthy merchant and influential Paduan citizen, Enrico Scrovegni. He rebuilt it with the likely intention of atoning for his sins and those of his father, Riginaldo, for usury. (In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante banishes Riginaldo Scrovegni to the seventh circle of hell, the part of hell reserved for usurers.<sup>1</sup>) The church was dedicated on March 16, 1305, to Saint Mary of Charity.

The chapel is very simple architecturally. It has a rectangular form with a starry sky in the barrel vault, a gothic triple lancet window on the façade, and narrow windows on the southern wall. The apse is in the east and the main entrance in the west. The iconographic program is intellectually complex. Theological advisers, who were in consultation with the patron, directed Giotto. The frescoes follow three main themes: scenes in the lives of Mary’s parents, Joachim and Anna; scenes from the life of the Virgin; and scenes from the life and death of Christ. Many of these are based in part on hagiographies collected in the *Legenda Aurea*, or *Golden Legend*, by Jacobus da Voragine in 1264.

The magnitude of the project required Giotto to obtain assistance from his workshop, although he executed the principal figures in each scene and devised each spatial composition. Giotto and his assistants painted from top to bottom. Moist plaster had to be applied only to as much surface as could be painted in a day. This area, known as a *giornata*, prevented a premature drying of the wall and assured a true *fresco* composition. Calculated by the *giornate* seams, scholars have determined the frescoes were painted in 852 days.<sup>2</sup>

Enrico Scrovegni probably commissioned Giotto to decorate this chapel because of the artist's contemporary reputation. The *Chronicle* of Giovanni Villani, written just a few years after Giotto's death, described the artist as among the great personalities of the day. The Trecento humanist Boccaccio claimed that Giotto had "brought back to light" the art of painting "which had been buried for centuries beneath the blunders of those who, in their paintings, aimed to bring visual delight to the ignorant rather than intellectual satisfaction to the wise."<sup>3</sup> Dante also predicted Giotto's fame and influence on contemporary culture in the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>4</sup> The Byzantine style of Giotto's teacher, Cimabue, would soon be discarded by Tuscan artists in favor of the style derived from nature painted by Giotto.

The *Flight into Egypt* (see p. 56) is one of the Life of Christ scenes in the middle row on the south wall of the chapel. Iconographically, Mary is the central figure in the painting. Her strength as she holds Jesus on her lap is immediately conveyed to the viewer. Once again, Giotto uses monumental rock forms to accentuate the primary action and direct the viewer's attention: the pyramidal form of the rock frames the Madonna and Child. Joseph is deemphasized on the right side of the composition: while he turns in conversation with a member of the apocryphal entourage, the guiding angel looks directly at Mary.

This emphasis on Mary is a departure from the gospel account, which centers the action of the narrative on Joseph.

Now after [the wise men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

*Matthew 2:13-15*

Giotto portrays Mary as protector of the Christ Child and, by extension, of the Church. The overtly grand stature of Mary is reminiscent of altar panels depicting the Madonna and Child enthroned. Soon after the comple-

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*Giotto di Bondone (c. 1277-1336/7), FLIGHT INTO EGYPT (1305-1306). Fresco, 78 3/4" x 72 7/8".  
Arena Chapel, Padua. Photo: © Alinari / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

tion of the Arena Chapel, Giotto himself did such a composition for the Church of the Ognissanti in Florence from 1305 to 1310.

Both of these compositions – *Flight into Egypt* and *Madonna and Child Enthroned* – recall a time of joy for Mary and her infant child. She is able to protect him and comfort him in her arms. Nevertheless, in the *Flight into Egypt*, Mary appears very stern and intent on her goal to bring her child safely to Egypt. As both Mary and Jesus become more lifelike in paintings during the Renaissance period, the intimacy between the mother and child will also become more human.

The theological importance and the stylistic innovations of the Arena Chapel narratives were disseminated throughout fourteenth-century Europe. Giotto reportedly worked throughout Tuscany, northern Italy, and the Kingdom of Naples, including its capital which was ruled by a French dynasty. He is believed to have traveled to France to work in Avignon, the new seat of the papacy after 1305. The great Renaissance artists Masaccio, Leonardo, and Michelangelo studied the frescoes in the Arena Chapel, which are considered Giotto's first masterpiece and an important milestone in the development of western religious painting.

## NOTES

1 In the *Inferno*, Canto XI, line 64, Dante indirectly identifies Righinaldo – “one who had an azure, pregnant sow / inscribed as emblem on his white pouch” – by the Scrovegni coat of arms.

2 John C. Richards, “Giotto di Bondone,” *The Oxford Companion to Western Art*, edited by Hugh Brigstocke (*Oxford Art Online*, accessed September 9, 2009), [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t118/e1049](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t118/e1049).

3 Boccaccio, *Decameron*, VI, 5, translated by G. H. McWilliam (New York: Penguin, 2003), 457.

4 In the *Purgatorio*, Canto XI, line 94.



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