

My favourite painting Daniel St George Chatto

Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, by Giotto di Bondone



Daniel St George Chatto is an artist, former actor and faculty member of The Royal Drawing School, EC2. He exhibits at Long and Ryle, London SW1

‘I know it’s greedy, but I am choosing the whole Scrovegni Chapel—sometimes referred to as Giotto’s Chapel—in Padua as my favourite painting. There are 100 scenes and images, all worthy of a mention, but for me, the chapel in its entirety is much more than the sum of its remarkable parts. It’s an astonishing blue space, as solid yet otherworldly as a sea cave.

The individual images and figures might seem a bit stodgy at first. They aren’t beautiful or ethereal, but they are profound, very subtle and real in expression and gesture; together, they tell a clear story.

The Chapel transforms at night, lit by candlelight. All of the blue tones are extinguished and turn an inky-black colour. Light seems to emanate from the gilded stars’

Scrovegni Chapel (also known as the Arena Chapel), about 1305–06, fresco, 68½ft long by 27½ft wide by 41½ft high, by Giotto di Bondone (1266/76–1337), Padua, Italy

Charlotte Mullins comments on the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

THE frescos by Giotto di Bondone, known as Giotto, in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua epitomise early-Renaissance painting. Three tiers of painted scenes present the lives of Christ and the Virgin Mary beneath an ultramarine ceiling that glitters with stars. On the back wall, Giotto’s vast Last Judgement divides saints from sinners.

Instead of using the unchanging iconography of medieval manuscripts and icon paintings, Giotto painted his figures as credible bodies in believable spaces. In the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary in painted rooms so real they appear to be part of the chapel’s architecture. In the Kiss of Judas, we feel we are present, witnessing Judas betraying Christ, who looks calmly into his eyes as the scene explodes around them. In the Lamentation, the figures that crowd around Christ’s dead body

seem solid, their robes stretched across backs and arms, their hands extended in grief, their faces grimacing and weeping.

This fascination with real bodies stemmed from the renewed interest in the art of ancient Greece and Rome. Humanism rose to the fore, a new branch of philosophy that prioritised earthly life as exemplified by ancient Latin texts and Greek sculptures.

Giotto’s frescos were commissioned by Enrico Scrovegni, who poured much of his inheritance into the chapel. His father, Reginaldo, had been a moneylender, a profession frowned upon by the church, and Enrico made it quite clear he was cut from different cloth.

Giotto painted him presenting a model of the chapel to the Virgin as he accompanies the virtuous to heaven in the Last Judgement, as Reginaldo hangs from a gibbet in hell. 🐉