

Midterm Paper

Idealism to Naturalism: A Comparison of the *Last Judgement* in Torcello and Scrovegni Chapel

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Introduction

The Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta on the Venetian island of Torcello and the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua both host a *Last Judgement* scene. A *Last Judgement* scene depicts Christ presiding over the final destinies of souls, rewarding and punishing.¹ Looking at both portrayals, this paper seeks to compare and contrast the *Last Judgement* in Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta (Figure 1) to Giotto's *Last Judgement* in the Scrovegni Chapel (Figure 2). This analysis explores the similar iconographies but differing styles and techniques of the pieces and how it contributes to the movement from Medieval to Renaissance art.

Continuation of Medieval Iconography

Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta's mosaic program began during the 11th or 12th century by an unknown artist, or artists, while Scrovegni Chapel's frescoes were completed by Giotto during the 14th.² With only a few centuries between the two, many features exhibited in Torcello remained prevalent at the time when Giotto was commissioned to work on Scrovegni's Chapel.

A main detail about the *Last Judgement* pieces is that they both are placed on the western walls of the churches. This was of typical Byzantine tradition because it forced congregants to engage with the weighty message of the *Last Judgement* before exiting the place of worship.³ Both works also pictured similar figures—a central Christ, the Virgin, the elect, the condemned, angels rolling up the sky, Lucifer, little devils, gluttons, the sexually immoral, etc.—which strongly indicates this piece to indeed be a *Last Judgement* scene. Along with this, the works found in Torcello and Padua portray these figures in similar ways. In both, Christ is distinguished by his encapsulation in an egg-shaped throne, while fire disseminates beneath him to the viewer's right, where hell is depicted. Also, Lucifer, another dominant figure, is colored in blue. Lastly, both Santa Maria Assunta and Scrovegni represent angels rolling up the starry sky; however, their placement differs in the two pieces, but it appears insignificant to such analysis.

The similar iconographical figures in both the Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta and Scrovegni Chapel reveal a continuation of Byzantine religious themes, hindering Giotto's work from being classified strictly as "Renaissance."

¹ Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona, "Triplex Periculum: The Moral Topography of Giotto's Hell in the Arena Chapel, Padua," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 78, no. 1 (January 2015): pp. 41-70, <https://doi.org/10.1086/jwci26321948>, 41.

² James Panero et al., "Venice's Last Judgment by James Panero," *The New Criterion*, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://newcriterion.com/issues/2019/9/venices-last-judgment>, 4.

³ Dorothy C. Shorr, "The Role of the Virgin in Giotto's Last Judgment," *The Art Bulletin* 38, no. 4 (1956): p. 207, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3047668>, 207.

Breaking off from the Medieval Tradition

While Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta and Scrovegni Chapel were decorated only a few centuries apart, they also contain a few major differences in their *Last Judgement* portrayals, indicating the transition from medieval art to a new artistic movement known as the Renaissance. Medieval art often displayed idealized figures, while the Renaissance took on more naturalistic depictions, which Giotto innovatively introduces in Scrovegni Chapel.

Santa Maria Assunta's *Last Judgement* (Figure 1) scene corresponds to an idealistic, Byzantine style through the use of golden mosaics. Mosaics prohibit artists from creating accurate human depictions because of the limitation of the tesserae—tiny, glass squares used to make a mosaic—in color and size. The piece in Torcello also incorporates six registers—lines separating scenes—which also resembles medieval artistic production. Lastly, this Basilica's representation of the Virgin Mary mimics other churches' representations of her from the middle ages. She is adorned and placed to the left of Christ from the viewer's perspective, while John the Baptist is to the right of Christ. These depictions reveal the Virgin as an intercessor between an onlooker and Christ.

Giotto's *Last Judgement* (Figure 2) stands in contrast to all the points above. The Chapel commissioned by Enrico Scrovegni integrates a newer, naturalistic style, achieved by the fresco medium. By creating a fresco, Giotto was able to more accurately depict his figures because of the ability to use a finer brush and to mix colors. In contrast to the Torcello piece, Giotto eliminated the use of registers in order to create a unified piece, allowing for the action to flow in an upward and downward rhythm.⁴ Finally, Giotto pictures the Virgin in a different way. In medieval depictions, similar to Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta's *Last Judgement*, Mary is found standing next to the enthroned Christ, but in the Padua piece, the artist placed the Virgin halfway between earth and heaven. This artistic choice serves meaningful to the patron as the Enrico Scrovegni is depicted in presenting the church plans to her, but it also proves significant in emphasizing Mary's relationship to worshipers and those who look to her for salvation and guidance.⁵ Giotto's decisions to push back against traditional portrayals in his *Last Judgement* allows him to introduce new artistic forms as well as theological values.

Conclusion

Based on this analysis, it appears that both pieces embrace typical Byzantine iconographies for the scene, while they differ in style and motivation. The style of the *Last Judgement* in Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta (Figure 1) holds to the Byzantine tradition of idealism revealed in the materials used, figural depictions, and incorporation of registers. This

⁴ Dorothy C. Shorr, "The Role of the Virgin in Giotto's Last Judgment," *The Art Bulletin* 38, no. 4 (1956): p. 207, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3047668>, 207.

⁵ Dorothy C. Shorr, "The Role of the Virgin in Giotto's Last Judgment," *The Art Bulletin* 38, no. 4 (1956): p. 207, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3047668>, 208.

directly corresponds with the time period in which it was produced—the 12th century. On the contrary, Giotto's *Last Judgement* (Figure 2), created in 1306, embraces naturalism, associated with the newly coming Renaissance. Giotto's decisive break with the Byzantine tradition is ultimately revealed in his accurate human depictions,—enabled by using fresco as the medium—elimination of registers, and representing the Virgin in a different way. In comparing these two *Last Judgement* scenes, the transition from medieval art—associated with idealism—to Renaissance art—associated with naturalism—is put on full display.

Figures

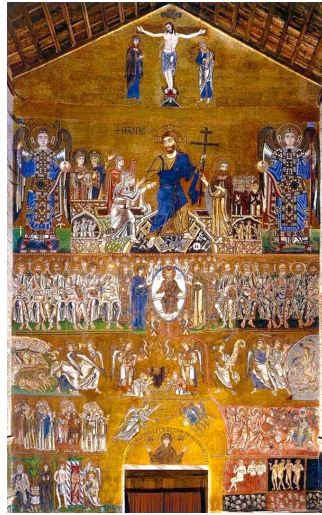


Fig 1.
Anonymous,
Last Judgement,
11th-12th century,
Gold and glass mosaic
Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello.



Fig 2.
Giotto,
Last Judgement,
1306,
Fresco,
Scrovegni Chapel in Padua.

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