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**Giotto's *Annunciation to the Virgin* in Arena Chapel in Padua
between East and West**

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The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that Giotto's knowledge of the Byzantine painting and illumination - but also of the textual sources - was deeper than conventionally thought and that in the Arena Chapel the painter realized an astonishing fusion between the Eastern and Western iconographical lines of development. About 1303-1305, on the chancel arch of the Arena Chapel in Padua, Giotto painted an extraordinary and original composition, showing the God the Father sending the Archangel Gabriel to announce to the Virgin Mary the miraculous conception of Christ the Saviour. God's image is painted on a wooden panel inserted in the wall, while the other characters of the scene are made in *buon fresco*. It is evident that Giotto had looked at a non-Western textual and visual tradition, but it is the first time that in Europe such a specific theme was displayed with a corresponding doctrinal and formal complexity.

Keywords: Giotto, Cappella dell'Arena, Iakovos of Kokkinobaphos, Dispatch of Gabriel

At the very beginning of 14th century the Paduan nobleman Enrico Scrovegni decided to finance the building and the fresco decoration of a family chapel in the Arena – the place of the ancient Roman theatre – of his town. He entrusted the execution of the frescoes (fig. 1), and perhaps even the architectural design, to Giotto di Bondone.¹ Enrico's work began on the 6th of February 1300 with the purchase of the land on which the oratory and another building were to be built.² The building work however, was only started in 1302 when the Patriarch of Aquileia, Ottobono de' Razzi, granted permission to build the chapel. The first consecration was held on 25th of March 1303 and on 1st of March 1304 Pope Benedict XI granted an indulgence for those who had visited the *ecclesiam beatae Mariae Virginis de Caritate de Arena, civitatis Padue* in a spirit of humility.³

An interesting event took place on the 9th of January 1305, revealing the fact that from the very beginning the new building was perceived as an affirmation of Scrovegni's personal power. This consisted of a protest called by the monks of the nearby monastery of Eremitani, concerning the demand for a progressive transformation of the building from a private chapel to a church open for worship. In particular, the construction of the bell tower was seen as a sort of provocation towards the community of Eremitani. The same document also seems to allude to Giotto's frescoes, since among the works carried out by Scrovegni, it also referred to "[...] alia multa quae ibi facta sunt potis ad pompam, et ad vanam gloriam [...]".⁴ On 16th March 1305 the Gran Consiglio of Venice approved the loan *de pannis Sancti Marci* to Enrico Scrovegni, for the consecration of his chapel in Padua. Nine days later the building was consecrated and the fresco decoration must have also been almost, if not completely, finished.

The entire pictorial program was executed in *buon fresco*, except for the image of God the Father at the top of the chancel arch (fig. 2). The original panel (fig. 3),⁵ whose dimensions are 150x95 cm, is now preserved in the *Musei Civici* in Padua and there is a modern copy of it inside the chapel. Painted in *tempera* and gold on panel, it was originally hinged to the left doorpost of a small inner space in order to close it. Although the function of this space is not entirely clear, one interesting hypothesis is that on the day of the Feast of the Annunciation, the panel



1 Arena Chapel, Padua, interior (courtesy of Comune di Padova)



2 Arena chapel, Padua, chancel arch (courtesy of Comune di Padova)

turned on its hinges and from the opening, an artificial dove of the Holy Spirit glided towards the interior of the chapel, as an allegory of the Incarnation.⁶ The image of God is bearded and youthful. His white robe and cloak richly trimmed with gold embroidery aim to evoke the splendour and purity of the divine light. He is holding a sceptre, as a symbol of the divine nature of the Archangel Gabriel who is standing to the right of the Father. Apart from its practical function, this painting is at the heart of a composition that has a strong visual impact and profound theological significance. It communicates closely with the frescoed context surrounding it, both in terms of its iconography and its style. All around it is the otherworldly scene of the message entrusted by God to the Archangel Gabriel, to announce to Mary that she had been chosen to be the mother of Christ the Saviour (fig. 2). The angelic choirs are depicted on the sides of the lunette of the arch. Gabriel appears on both sides of the throne: on the left-hand side, when looking at it, he is receiving his assignment, while on the right, he is represented as waiting for the mission. Two other angels, one on each side, both wearing pink and white robes, stand out in the foreground from the hosts of angels. According to a well-argued hypothesis, this may represent, together with the "double" Gabriel, the personification of divine Virtues. So, the figures of Gabriel can be interpreted both as the archangel himself and as an allegory of the divine Virtues.⁷

Represented this way, we are looking at quite a rare iconographic choice for both the Western and Byzantine tradition.⁸ Usually, in fact, when Mary receives the announcement, God is either manifest in a small half-length image in the upper part of the scene or through a symbolic reference, sometimes in the form of a hand stretching out from the Empyrean, sometimes as the dove of the Holy Spirit, or else as the divine ray of light shining towards the ear of the Virgin, following the interpretation of the miracle of incarnation with the *conceptio per aurem*.⁹

Taking into consideration the written sources, the episode of the Angel being sent to Mary and of the Annunciation of the divine incarnation is only present in the canonical *Gospels* in Luke (1, 26-38), and it can be found in the apocryphal *Gospel of James*, dated to the early 3rd century, in the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, of the 8th to the 9th century, in the *Armenian Gospel of the infancy*, dated between the 5th and 6th centuries and in the *Book about the birth of Mary* of the Carolingian period. The episode of the assignment given to Gabriel is only mentioned briefly in Luke ("six months later [that is, after the announcement to Zechariah], the Angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in Galilee, called Nazareth, to a Virgin pledged in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was of the House of David. The Virgin's name was Mary"; 1, 26-27) and in some passages in the *Apocrypha*. We can find two very significant illustrations of the Assignment to Gabriel in two manuscripts of the first half of the 12th century, probably from Constantinople, containing the Marian homilies. The manuscripts are now in the collections of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (MS Vat. gr 1162) and of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS gr. 1208). The author of the text is the monk Iakovos of Kokkinobaphos,¹⁰ who is depicted in front of St John Chrysostom on folio 1r of the Paris manuscript (fig. 4), together with St Gregory of Nyssa.¹¹ The Vatican manuscript is considered to have been produced before the Parisian one, which was probably a copy, made for the author himself. This is suggested by the presence of the author, who does not appear in the first known edition, which may in turn have descended from a lost archetype.¹² The illustrations show a cycle of stories from the life of the Virgin that are unusually numerous and this must have been the most extensive visual testimony on this iconographic theme. They illustrate in detail the homilies composed by the monk. Their importance for the successive elaborations of the Marian iconography cannot be underestimated, nor for that matter can the extremely high quality of the decorations and also the overall workmanship of the manuscripts. From a stylistic point of view, the specialized literature agrees in considering them the work of a Constantinopolitan workshop close to the intellectual and aristocratic circles of the capital of the empire, guided by a miniaturist, referred to today as the Kokkinobaphos Master.¹³

In the illustrations of the two manuscripts the scene of the Dispatch of Gabriel is depicted in half-page miniatures – on folio 113v in the Vatican codex and on folio 153v in the Parisian codex (fig. 5) – in which the analogy with the iconographic solution adopted by Giotto is apparent.¹⁴ God the Father is young and beardless, underlining his identification with Christ the Saviour and he is surrounded by the hosts of angels. In the manuscripts, however, two other figures are also seated on the throne. Their physiognomy is the same of that of the



3 Giotto, *God the Father*, Padua, Musei Civici, Museo d'arte medievale e moderna, tempera and gold on wood (courtesy of Comune di Padova)



4 *Iakovos of Kokkinobaphos and St Gregory of Nyssa*, MS gr. 1208, fol. 1r (© Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris)



5 *The Dispatch of Gabriel*, MS gr. 1208, fol. 153v, (© Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris)



6 Giotto, *Last Judgement*, detail - Enrico Scrovegni offering the model of the Chapel, Arena Chapel, Padua (courtesy of Comune di Padova)



7 *Annunciation*, 12th-c. fresco from Church of St George at Kurbinovo, Macedonia (photo: A. Tomei)

central figure and this is most probably an allusion to the Holy Trinity. The figure of Gabriel (in these manuscripts or in other manuscripts of the same type) seems to be the model for that in the Paduan composition; in both he appears twice, but in the manuscripts, once with his hands folded and stretching out towards God, and once as he flies down to fulfil his earthly mission. It is quite likely that manuscripts like these could also be found in the medieval West, especially in Padua and Venice, where the links to the Byzantine art and culture were very strong, and that the author of the iconographic program of the chapel was aware of them.

A convincing hypothesis has recently been developed with strong arguments, stating that the iconographic project of the Scrovegni cycle was drawn up by the Augustinian theologian Albert of Padua, who was a leading figure in the cultural circles of the town. Giotto probably portrayed him next to his patron Enrico Scrovegni, as holding on his shoulder the model of the chapel presented to the Virgin Mary (fig. 6).¹⁵ In this regard it is important to emphasize that the same iconographic theme, the Dispatch of Gabriel, reappears, a few years later – between the second and the third decade of the 14th century – in the chapel of St Nicholas of Tolentino, an Augustinian building in the Marche. The author of this cycle was Pietro da Rimini and his workshop.¹⁶ This is the same artist who in 1324 in Padua painted a polyptych for the church of Eremitani. This work was lost but recorded by a source of the 16th century.¹⁷ Pietro da Rimini also executed some frescoes with the stories of Christ in the convent of the Eremitani and now preserved in the Art Gallery of the *Musei Civici* of Padua. The hypothesis that the theological basis of Giotto's frescoes goes back to the thoughts of the Order of St Augustine and therefore probably to Albert of Padua himself seems to be strengthened by this clear coincidence.

Another unusual aspect of Giotto's composition in the Scrovegni Chapel is the insertion of a painted panel in a frescoed context, which is not a solution that was adopted frequently. There are some examples in Umbria, Roman and Campania area, and also in San Pietro al Monte di Civate in the North of Italy,¹⁸ from the 12th century and all of them have a precise iconic connotation, which intends to remind the believer that "paintings, even sacred ones, are images and not reality."¹⁹ It may be useful to mention the most important ones in San Giovanni a Porta Latina in Rome,²⁰ San Pietro in Valle in Ferentillo,²¹ the ancient Cathedral of Naples, Santa Restituta,²² with all possible references to the *Acheiropoieta* images of the Saviour.²³

Immediately below the scene of Gabriel's dispatch, on the chancel arch – and divided by it – we can see Gabriel kneeling on the left and on the right Mary annunciate also kneeling, with a book in her right hand, depicted between perfectly symmetrical buildings (fig. 2). Placing the two actors of the Annunciation on the opposite sides of a triumphal arch or an apse also openly shows a knowledge of oriental models. In fact, this iconographic arrangement was common in the Byzantine areas in the centuries preceding Giotto. I cite here only two very famous examples, among many others: frescoes in Kurbinovo (fig. 7) from the end of the 12th century and Mileševa of the first half of the 13th century (fig. 8). Following the composition by Giotto, this oriental arrangement of the Annunciation scene became quite usual in Veneto paintings.

The position of the Virgin kneeling coincides with the text of the *Meditationes vitae nostri Domini Jesu Christi* by the Franciscan friar Giovanni de' Cauli: "Et aspice Gabriele facie hilari jocunda flexit genibus, inclinato vultu amoro et reverenti ambasciatam Domini sui attenti suscipientem" (IV, 385). This was probably written just around the middle of the 13th century, although there are different opinions about its dating.²⁴ This is the last scene of the representation of the event that is the subject and the beginning of the iconography and of the meaning of Scrovegni's frescoes. The complex iconographic program focuses on the stories of the Virgin and Christ. The narrative sequence of the frescoes, which does not coincide with the sequence in which they were painted, takes place in three registers. It begins in the top register on the wall on the right, starting from the apse area, and continues on the wall on the left, moving from the counter-façade towards the apse, always from the top to the bottom. The same order is followed for the other two registers. The thirty-seven episodes that make up the cycle include the Stories of Joachim and Anne, the Childhood of Christ and the Passion. They end in the counter-façade with the monumental Last Judgment, with the depiction of Enrico Scrovegni offering the model of the building to



8 *Annunciation* (detail with Mary), 13th-c. fresco from monastery church at Mileševa, Serbia (photo: A. Tomei)

the Virgin, with a transept, which does not exist in the building itself. The barrel vault of the Chapel shows, inside *clipei* against a background of a dark blue starry sky, half-figures of the Madonna and Child, of Christ blessing and of Prophets and Saints. In the lower part of the walls there are fourteen allegorical figures, representing *Vices* and *Virtues* painted in monochrome. They are identified by their name at the top and, originally, there was an inscription in Latin along the bottom edge. Finally, the scenes from the Gospel Stories are divided by frames containing scenes and figures from the Old Testament and saints. The whole story of the building – whose original name was actually Santa Maria della Carità – and of its decoration refers to the feast of the Annunciation celebrated on 25th of March. On that day in 1305 the consecration of the Chapel was performed although the first consecration had already been held two years earlier, on the same date, if one takes into consideration the text of a lost inscription, reported in a document of the 16th century.²⁵ The tradition of celebrating the feast of the Annunciation with special devotion and the participation of many believers and authorities was well rooted in Padua a long time before the construction of the Scrovegni Chapel, since the Virgin Mary was the patroness of the city itself. The procession passed through the city and ended in the area of the Roman Arena, where a sacred performance took place. Enrico Scrovegni's decision to build an oratory dedicated to the Virgin in that place has traditionally been seen as an act of atonement for the sin of usury which had marked his father, Reginaldo, whom Dante Alighieri, for this reason, had included in the Hell's third group of the seventh circle. In more recent times Scrovegni's project has been interpreted, instead, as an operation designed to assert the prestige and the economic strength of his family. He placed as it were, a sort of monumental and at the same time highly personal seal on the most important sacred manifestation of the city, which took place under the auspices of the *Comune* of Padua and not of the Bishop.²⁶

The chancel arch was obviously the first element of the building that those who entered the Chapel looked at, and since it is not particularly large, they could see it very clearly. The panel depicting God marks its axis precisely and is perfectly camouflaged by the frescoes painted around it. The blue behind the image, most of which today has disappeared, is the same colour that unifies the space inside the building and is a constant background to the narration of the sacred story.²⁷ With an extremely refined deceptive perspective, the steps are painted at the base of the throne on the wall and not on the panel, which provides the depth and acts as a link between the two surfaces - that is formally and chromatically perfectly homogeneous.²⁸ Moreover, the whole triumphal arch was designed by Giotto as a large perspective experiment. The Virgin and Gabriel, who interpret the episode of the Annunciation, divided by the arch, are in two completely symmetrical shortened buildings, with façades designed parallel to the wall, but with diverging perpendicular lines. The opposite solution with converging perpendicular lines, was chosen instead, two registers lower down, for the two famous frescoes, the so-called "coretti", which were the result of more coherent prospective thinking. These are two areas covered by a rib vaulted ceiling, painted on the sides of the apse and centred in perspective on its axis, and thus dialectically placed in relation with the existent space of the building. They are in fact designed as a "real" space, so the height of the rib vaults that cover them suggests that the level of their floor was the same as that of the presbytery floor, from which they could illusively access it.²⁹

The throne on which God sits is characterised by a similar idea of perspective - the sides are in fact shortened with absolute precision and they directly refer to the shape of the throne of the Madonna di Ognissanti (Florence, Uffizi Gallery), a painting whose date is slightly before that of Scrovegni's panel. The divine figure appears intrinsically monumental and solemn, although these aspects are only slightly indicated, as in all decoration, but they emerge from the expressive intensity of the face, similar to that of Christ, as He appears in the episodes along the walls. The same can be said of the gesture of the hand that is pointing to Gabriel, which is restrained but full of meaning. Finally, his coat and the white robe are richly ornamented with gold embroidered borders and make up the essential volume of his body, which is perfectly defined in the space, according to the *chiaroscuro* principles that are behind the revolution brought about by Giotto in the naturalistic interpretation of the human figure.

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- design; A. RAVA; *L'intervento di restauro del dipinto su tavole con "Dio Padre"*, in *Il restauro della Cappella degli Scrovegni. Indagini, progetto, risultati*, G. BASILE (ed.), Milano, 2003, pp. 216-219.
- 28 This is the most evident proof, in addition to the strictly stylistic aspects, that the panel is of the same period as the frescoes and not carried out at a later time in place of a stained glass window hypothesized by Jacobus who bases his assumptions on the fact that the housing of the panel is the result of the partial closing of a wider window; L. JACOBUS, *op. cit.*, 2008, p. 107.
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Giottovo Navještenje u kapeli Areni u Padovi između istoka i zapada

Između 1303. i 1305. Giotto je povjereno ukrašavanje unutrašnjosti kapele Arena (Padova) scenama iz Isusova i Marijina života. Cijeli je slikovni program izrađen tehnikom *buon fresco*, osim prikaza Boga Oca na vrhu svetišnog luka, koji je oslikan temperom i zlatom na drvenoj dasci. Slika je izvorno bila okovima pričvršćena za lijevo krilo vratašca manjeg prostora kojega su zatvarala, a danas se nalazi u Gradskom muzeju u Padovi (*Musei Civici, Museo dell'arte medievale e moderna*), dok je u kapeli postavljena moderna kopija. Slika Boga Oca u središtu je prizora Odaslanja Gabrijelova s ikonografijom koja je vrlo rijetka u zapadnom slikarstvu. Prikaz je istočnog podrijetla, pa sličnu kompoziciju Giottovoj nalazimo u dva rukopisa iz 12. stoljeća, koja su iluminirana u Konstantinopolu.

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