

## Byzantine Nearness and Renaissance Distance: the Meaning of Byzantinizing Modes in 14th-Century Italian Art

*Hans Bloemsma*

A well-known phenomenon to scholars of 14th-century Italian art is the growing attentiveness in painting of this period to the differences between modern, illusionistic modes of representation on the one hand, and more old-fashioned ones on the other.\* Because of the presence of stylistic features that are traditionally associated with Byzantine and/or Italo-Byzantine art of the preceding period, such as linearity, two-dimensionality and frontality, these old-fashioned modes are often referred to as Byzantinizing. The meaning of these Byzantinizing modes has been subject of an ongoing debate ever since the pioneering studies of György Gombosi and Millard Meiss in the first half of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> I engaged in this debate in my 2013 article “Byzantine Art and Early Italian Painting.”<sup>2</sup> Following established views of scholars such as Keith Christiansen and Paul Krüger, I explained the use of retrospective modes

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- 1 György Gombosi, *Spinello Aretino: Eine stilgeschichtliche Studie über die Florentinische Malerei des ausgehenden XIV. Jahrhunderts* (Budapest, 1926); Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, 1951). Important contributions to this debate include: Bruce Cole, “Old and New in the Early Trecento,” *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 17 (1973), 229–48; Henk van Os, “The Black Death and Sieneese Painting,” *Art History* 4 (1981), 237–49; Diana Norman, “Change and Continuity: Art and Religion after the Black Death,” in *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art Society and Religion 1280–1400*, 1, Diana Norman, ed. (New Haven, 1995), pp. 177–95; Hayden B.J. Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto: A Historical Reevaluation* (University Park, PA, 1997), pp. 164–91; Klaus Krüger, “Medium and Imagination: Aesthetic Aspects of Trecento Panel Painting,” in *Italian Panel Painting of the Duecento and Trecento*, Victor M. Schmidt, ed. (New Haven, 2002), pp. 57–81; Victor M. Schmidt, *Painted Piety: Panel Paintings for Personal Devotion in Tuscany, 1250–1400* (Florence, 2005), pp. 141–60; Judith B. Steinhoff, *Sieneese Painting after the Black Death: Artistic Pluralism, Politics, and the New Art Market* (Cambridge, 2006); Keith Christiansen, *Duccio and the Origins of Western Painting* (New York, 2008).
- 2 Hans Bloemsma, “Byzantine Art and Early Italian Painting,” in *Byzantine Art and Renaissance Europe*, Angeliki Lymberopoulou and Rembrandt Duits, eds. (London, 2013), pp. 37–59.

of representation as a means to counterbalance the ever-increasing verisimilitude of Giottesque art. I argued that these modes allowed artists to evoke a realm that is human and approachable yet at the same time divine and transcendent; the old-fashioned, Byzantinizing elements in these paintings enabled the viewer to experience a higher, spiritual reality within a painting that presented itself as a vivid evocation of the visible world.

But how are we supposed to imagine the higher, spiritual reality that Byzantinizing modes evoke? Is it a reality far removed from the experience of the viewer, thus preserving the transcendental remoteness of the sacred? The implied contrast between the approachable illusionistic modes of Giottesque art and the more abstract modes of Byzantinizing art seems to suggest so. Whereas the illusion of inhabitable space and the suggestion of three dimensional form in Giottesque art give the impression of bringing the divine figures and stories nearer to the everyday experience of the viewer, the earlier, Byzantinizing modes of representation seem to prevent an undesired level of nearness, thus safeguarding the transcendental distance of the sacred. However, such a connection between stylistic abstraction and the evocation of a transcendental, timeless world has been questioned in recent years. Scholars have argued that assumptions about this connection are based on modern ideas about the relationship between abstraction and spirituality, which do not necessarily reflect the reality of people living in earlier periods. Thus, while in modern times the stylized modes of Byzantine and Italo-Byzantine art might have connotations of spirituality and remoteness, this might not have been the case in the later Middle Ages.

Taking this criticism as a starting point, I will re-examine the meaning of retrospective modes in 14th-century Italian painting. The contribution is divided into two parts. The first section will discuss the critique on the assumed relationship between abstraction and spirituality in more detail and will apply it to the specific context of the Trecento. In the second part, I will try to formulate an alternative interpretation based on this analysis, proposing a reversal of the use of the terms “nearness” and “distance” in relation to the different stylistic modes that characterize painting of this time-period. In formulating this interpretation, I will make use of insights from scholars of classical, Byzantine and Western medieval art. In most cases, their observations have not been applied to the Trecento; it is my aim to show the relevance of their remarks for the study of painting of this period. I will also point to a few instances where my observations concur with those of other scholars of 14th-century art, thus acknowledging the historiographical tradition in which my proposed reading needs to be positioned.

## 1 Byzantining Modes: Divine Distance or Divine Nearness?

Central to any discussion of the backward-looking tendencies in 14th-century Italian art is Millard Meiss's *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (1951). In this classic study, Meiss presents the Black Death of 1348 as the cause of what he calls the recovery of the Byzantesque art of the Dugento. Because of the experience of death and disaster, Meiss argues, artists sought a return to images that were more intensely religious. The more hieratic and abstract forms of Byzantesque art allowed them to do so, creating paintings that were less worldly and less humanistic than those of the first half of the century.<sup>3</sup> For Meiss, "more religious" also means more remote. On several occasions in his book, he explicitly equates the spiritual and transcendental with distance and remoteness. Thus he describes the head of Christ on a panel which he attributes to a follower of the Cione brothers as "spiritually remote" (Fig. 9.1), and a Madonna attributed to a follower of Nardo di Cione as "a remote and visionary apparition."<sup>4</sup>

Modern day art historians have questioned the direct link Meiss suggested between the plague and developments in artistic style. They also believe that the old-fashioned stylistic modes that Meiss regarded as characteristic of art after the Black Death, in fact are already manifest in art of the first decades of the century.<sup>5</sup> However, with few exceptions, they seem to accept Meiss's interpretation of these retrospective modes. Like him, they explain the use of these modes as ways to compensate for an undesired level of closeness in Giottesque art, and to imbue paintings with a sense of spirituality and otherworldliness.

A typical example is Diane Norman's analysis of Orcagna's altarpiece for the Strozzi Chapel in Santa Maria Novella in Florence, dated 1354–57 (Fig. 9.2). Orcagna's painting – which had taken pride of place in Meiss's book – famously is full of stylistic paradoxes.<sup>6</sup> As Norman points out, there is a contrast

3 Meiss, *Painting in Florence*, p. 73.

4 Meiss, *Painting in Florence*, pp. 36 and 139. The Head of Christ is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (inv. no. 1981.365.2), and is attributed to the Master of the Orcagnesque Misericordia. The Madonna – the central panel of a small triptych – is in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence (inv. 1890, no. 8456), and is nowadays attributed to Jacopo di Cione.

5 See for an overview and discussion: Van Os, "The Black Death;" Norman, "Change and Continuity;" Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto*; Steinhoff, *Sienese Painting*, pp. 9–26. Meiss himself had made a distinction between so-called un-Giottesque masters of the first half and anti-Giottesque masters of the later part of the century. Meiss, *Painting in Florence*, pp. 6–7.

6 Norman, "Change and Continuity," pp. 183–87. See also Meiss, *Painting in Florence*, pp. 9–13.



FIGURE 9.1 Master of the Orcagnesque Misericordia, *Head of Christ*, second half of the 14th century, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

PHOTO: METMUSEUM.ORG

between the rigid frontality of Christ's pose and the abstract device of the mandorla on the one hand and on the other hand the voluminous treatment of Christ's drapery and the three-dimensional modelling of his head. A similar tension is visible in the subsidiary saints whose three-dimensional form is juxtaposed with the emphatic linearity of their outline and with a spatial setting that gives the impression of flatness: the gold background discourages any sense of depth while the red carpet likewise lacks any suggestion of an inhabitable, three-dimensional world.

According to Norman, Orcagna's use of two contrasting pictorial modes is purposeful:

The Strozzi altarpiece ... encapsulates an ongoing tension within 14th-century religious art. Artists sought to convey a sense of mystery and awe whilst, at the same time, encouraging empathy and close involvement with the holy men and women represented.<sup>7</sup>

Norman thus presents the old-fashioned, abstracting features of the painting as elements that make sure that the painting maintains a sense of elevated spirituality. This is especially visible in the figure of Christ. On the one hand, the three-dimensional treatment of Christ's body and face makes Him seem human and approachable – a “palpable and ‘real’ presence” in Norman's words. On the other hand, Christ's frontality in combination with the abstract treatment of the mandorla makes Him appear as “a divine vision *removed* from this world in terms of space and time” (my emphasis).<sup>8</sup>

The question is whether we can connect the abstract, the spiritual, and the remote in this way. Are we not committing a fallacy that marks many arguments dealing with the supposed contrast between the apparent anti-naturalism of medieval art and the realism of Early Modern art: the assumption that stylized modes of representation were perceived by contemporary viewers as anti-naturalistic and capable of communicating timeless, absolute truths? In recent years, several scholars have argued that this assumed connection between stylization and the evocation of a spiritual and otherworldly realm might be based on modern ideas about the relationship between abstraction and spirituality.<sup>9</sup> Already Henk van Os, in his discussion of Meiss's book, argued

7 Norman, “Change and Continuity,” p. 186.

8 Ibid.

9 See for example: John Onians, “Abstraction and Imagination in Late Antiquity,” *Art History* 3 (1980), 1–23; James Trilling, “Medieval Art without Style? Plato's Loophole and a Modern Detour,” *Gesta* 34 (1995), 57–62; Robert S. Nelson, “To Say and to See: Ekphrasis and Vision in Byzantium,” in *Visuality before and beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, Robert S.



FIGURE 9.2 Orcagna, *Strozzi Altarpiece*, 1354–57, Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Strozzi Chapel.

PHOTO: THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

that Meiss's idea that stylistic abstraction in art brought out a religious dimension was closely connected to the writings and works of Abstract Expressionist artists such as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.<sup>10</sup> As Van Os points out, earlier in the 20th-century similar ideas had been expressed by Wilhelm Worringer in *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1907) and Vasily Kandinsky in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1912).

In a recent study, Paul van den Akker traces the origins of these ideas back to the 18th century. According to Van den Akker, Johann Joachim Winckelmann was one of the first to make an explicit connection between stylization and what he called “nobility of character.” For Winckelmann, the more graceful and flowing the contours of a figure, the more easily one could recognize its

Nelson, ed. (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 143–68; Paul van den Akker, *Looking for Lines: Theories on the Essence of Art and the Problem of Mannerism* (Amsterdam, 2010).

10 Van Os, “The Black Death,” pp. 239–42. See also Steinhoff, *Sienese Painting*, p. 19, who calls these ideas a “legacy of modern Gestaltist theory.”

elevated and noble character.<sup>11</sup> By showing the historicity of these ideas, Van den Akker convincingly argues that the link between abstraction and spirituality is not a “natural” or “universal” one. While such a link might make sense to a modern audience, it does not necessarily reflect the reality of people living in earlier periods. It is, of course, well known to historians of medieval and Byzantine art that earlier ways of seeing might be very different from ours. To allow for such a difference, they have adopted terms such as “period eye” and “visuality.”<sup>12</sup> Whereas “vision” refers to the physiological act of seeing, and therefore suggests that sight is a natural operation which is the same for people in different times and places, terms like “period eye” and “visuality” emphasize the social and historical factors that influence the ways people see.

Medieval texts offer a great opportunity to study the “visuality” of the period. This is especially the case when it comes to Byzantine art: where modern viewers have traditionally considered Byzantine art abstract and schematic, Byzantine texts offer an entirely different perspective. The Byzantines themselves describe their art as being highly realistic and as anything but depicting a remote, far away world.<sup>13</sup> A well-known example is Nikolaos Mesarites’s late 12th-century description of the representation of Christ in the main dome of the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople.<sup>14</sup> The church of the Holy Apostles and its decorations were demolished in the 15th century. However, other decorations – such as the dome mosaic in the church of Daphni (c. 1090–1100) (Fig. 9.3) – give a good impression of what the work Mesarites describes must have looked like. Mesarites’s description follows the model of a classical ekphrasis, but despite the evident literary elements, it is based on actual visual

11 Van den Akker, *Looking for Lines*, p. 301.

12 The term “period eye” was coined by Michael Baxandall in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, 1972). “Visuality” was introduced in *Vision and Visuality*, Hal Foster, ed. (Seattle, 1988). Important for medieval and Byzantine studies is Nelson, *Visuality before and beyond the Renaissance*. See also Madeline H. Caviness, “Reception of Images by Medieval Viewers,” in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, Conrad Rudolph, ed. (Oxford, 2006), pp. 65–85, and Claire Farago, “Understanding Visuality,” in *Seeing across Cultures in the Early Modern World*, Dana Leibsohn and Jeanette Favrot Peterson, eds. (Farnham, 2012), pp. 239–55.

13 For an overview and discussion see: Nelson, “To Say and to See.”

14 On this see: Nelson, “To Say and to See,” p. 156; See further Henry Maguire, “Truth and Convention in Byzantine Descriptions of Works of Art,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 28 (1974), 111–40; Liz James and Ruth Webb, “To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places: Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium,” *Art History* 14 (1991), 1–17; Liz James and Juliana Gavril, “A homily with a description of the Church of the Holy Apostles,” *Byzantion – Revue Internationale des Études Byzantines*, 83 (2013), 149–60; and Michael Angold, *Nicholas Mesarites. His Life and Works (in Translation)* (Liverpool, 2017).



FIGURE 9.3 Daphni, Church of the Dormition, *Christ Pantocrator*, c. 1080–1100.

PHOTO: CENTRE FOR ART HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION, RADBOD UNIVERSITY NIJMEGEN

observations.<sup>15</sup> To modern eyes, mosaics such as the one in Daphni might appear as flat and two-dimensional: aloof images attached to the gold ceiling of the church. However, Mesarites describes seeing a figure leaning past the edge of heaven and down into the actual space and eye of the beholder. Moreover, the description suggests the immediacy of Christ's presence as well as the power of his gaze:

This dome shows in pictured form the God-Man Christ, leaning and gazing out as though from the rim of heaven [...] Wherefore one can see

15 Maguire, "Truth and Convention," pp. 121–27. On the Daphni mosaic see: Robin Cormack, "Rediscovering the Christ Pantocrator at Daphni," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 71 (2008), 55–74.

Him, to use the words of the Song, looking forth at the windows, leaning out as far as His navel through the lattice at the summit of the dome like an earnest and vehement lover ... His eyes, to those who have achieved a clean understanding, are gentle and friendly and install the joy of contrition in the souls of the pure in heart and of the poor in spirit ... Such are the eyes to those who have a clean understanding; to those, however, who are condemned by their own judgment, they are scornful and hostile and boding of ill, the face is wrathful, terrifying and filled with hardness, for the face of the Lord is of this for evildoers.<sup>16</sup>

Mesarites's description offers an important corrective to the idea of viewing Byzantine art as distant and remote.<sup>17</sup> Stylized modes of representation might be read by a modern viewer as evoking a higher, spiritual reality far removed from his or her more mundane experience. For Byzantine viewers, on the contrary, these modes seem to have enabled the spectator to come into a living, effectual contact with the holy person or story depicted.

Mesarites's description is in line with iconophile theology, which maintained that there was a direct, almost magical connection between the image and the holy persons or events portrayed. Iconophiles stressed that this connection was based on a sharing of likeness with the persons or events depicted, not of essence, thus preventing icons from becoming idols.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, as Theodore the Studite (759–826) wrote, by virtue of this likeness, the image and the model were one.<sup>19</sup> Images were thus seen as places of encounter between the viewer and the divine, doors that allowed the worshipper to enter a holy world and Christ and the saints to move into the believer's world. As a result, the church itself became, in the words of Germanos (patriarch of Constantinople, 715–30), "an earthly heaven in which the super-celestial God dwells and walks about."<sup>20</sup>

16 Nelson, "To Say and to See," p. 156.

17 See also John Shearman, *Only Connect ....: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, 1994), p. 159: "[Mesarites's text] makes us read the picture of Christ not as a distant and static abstraction but as an epiphany, a numinous presence just appearing to the spectator."

18 On this see: Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich, 1990), pp. 164–84; Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680–850: A History* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 772–87.

19 Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972), p. 173.

20 Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 37–39. See also Kallistos Ware, "The Theology and Spirituality of the Icon," in *From Byzantium to El Greco: Greek Frescoes and Icons*, Myrtili Acheimastou-Potamianou, ed. (London, 1987), pp. 37–39. Ware refers to the *Life of St. Stephen the Younger* for the idea that icons functioned as a doors between the

The perceived contact with the divine that speaks from Mesarites's text is typical of Byzantine "visuality" – defined by Robert Nelson as "direct, steady, penetrating, and haptic."<sup>21</sup> Although it could be argued that the formal characteristics of individual images are of less significance here, the direct and frontal visual address that characterizes Byzantine art encourages such seeing.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the way Byzantine art is less interested in illusions of three-dimensional volume and space and more in linearity and surface patterning, allows the images break into the viewer's space and time, thus strengthening the impression of a direct confrontation between beholder and deity. Or, as Bissera Pentcheva wrote recently:

In contrast to the familiar Renaissance model of painting as a window opening onto a vista, the Byzantine spatial icon sought to invade the physical space in front of it; its figures, pressed to the very surface in their static poses and fixed gazes, could only unfold their stories in the space of the beholder.<sup>23</sup>

Scholars of Western art have suggested similar links between the non-illusionistic, "abstracting" tendencies in Western medieval art and medieval ways of seeing. According to Hans Belting, for instance, the isolated gaze that characterizes late medieval devotional images is an indication that the form of these images was adjusted to enable a specific way of seeing.<sup>24</sup> The isolated gaze enabled an experience of direct contact ("Kontakterlebnis") between the viewer and the depicted figures that took the form of a dialogue characterized by reciprocity: the devotee not only saw the holy figures but also was equally seen by these figures.<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein, Jeffrey Hamburger and Michael Camille

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world of the viewer and the world of the image'. On this see also Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton, 2002), p. 137, and Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, p. 786.

21 Robert S. Nelson, "Descartes's Cow and Other Domestications of the Visual," in *Visuality before and beyond the Renaissance*, Robert S. Nelson, ed., p. 12.

22 On this see Nelson, "To Say and to See," pp. 156–59. See also Otto Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium* (London, 1948), p. 7.

23 Bissera V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (University Park, PA, 2010), p. 5, with a reference to Demus *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, pp. 9–10 and 13–14.

24 Hans Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum. Form und Funktion früher Bildtafeln der Passion* (Berlin, 1981), pp. 88–98.

25 Belting quotes the Dominican Gerardus de Frachet, who wrote in his *Lives of the Fathers* (before 1260): "they had in their cells the image of Mary and of her crucified son before their eyes, so that while reading and praying and sleeping they might look upon them and be looked on by them," Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum*, p. 96 (n. 45). English translation in Richard Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology*

have argued that medieval viewers in Western Europe did not think of their art as two-dimensional or abstract, but as art that made the divine fully present, and in which the viewer could connect directly with the heavenly world. Like Belting, Hamburger and Camille stress what they call the “reciprocal presence” and “interpenetration” of image and viewer in late medieval Western art.<sup>26</sup>

In an important study, Caroline Walker Bynum has shown that this direct contact between viewer and image sometimes took on a more physical form. Believers responded not only with their eyes, but from time to time they also touched and even kissed images, treating them as loci of the divine. Some images even instructed believers to venerate them with mouths and fingers.<sup>27</sup> Bynum contrasts this idea of medieval artworks as loci of the divine with theological discussions that seemed to reduce them to merely gesturing toward the heavenly world.<sup>28</sup> According to her, however much medieval theologians may have insisted that there was an ontological gap between image and prototype,

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*and the Arts from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2006), p. 123. On this see also Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (Houndmills, 2002), pp. 144–49.

- 26 Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World* (London, 1996), p. 183; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley, 1997), p. 215. In an essay on visibility in Gothic Europe, Camille concluded: “The view that medieval art was somehow more “spiritual” and a rejection of the corporeal never seemed so wrong ...,” Michael Camille, “Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing,” in Nelson, *Visibility before and beyond the Renaissance*, pp. 197–223, here p. 217. For a modern parallel of such direct and interactive ways of seeing see: David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley, 1998), pp. 21–58.
- 27 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011), p. 65. This phenomenon is of course well known to students of Byzantine art. See Anthony Cutler, *The Hand of the Master: Craftsmanship, Ivory, and Society in Byzantium (9th–11th Centuries)* (Princeton, 1994), pp. 23–29; Liz James, “Senses and Sensibility in Byzantium,” *Art History* 27 (2004), pp. 526–27; Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon*, pp. 6–7. For the Italian context see Joanna Cannon, “Kissing the Virgin’s Foot. *Adoratio* before the Madonna and Child enacted, depicted, imagined,” *Studies in Iconography* 31 (2010), 1–50. For the continuation of these practices in modern times see Francesco Zaccaria, *Participation and Beliefs in Popular Religiosity: An Empirical-Theological Exploration* (Leiden, 2010), pp. 58–60 and 68; and Nathan D. Mitchell, “Theological Principles for an Evaluation and Renewal of Popular Piety,” in *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines. A Commentary*, Peter C. Phan, ed. (Collegeville, MN, 2005), pp. 71–76.
- 28 Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, p. 34. For similar observations see Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, pp. 111–32, and Lars R. Jones, “*Visio Divina?* Donor Figures and Representations of Imagistic Devotion: The Copy of the “Virgin of Bagnolo” in the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Florence,” in Schmidt, *Italian Panel Painting*, pp. 31–55.

images did more than refer to or point to the divine: “They lift matter toward God and reveal God through matter.”<sup>29</sup> As Bynum makes clear, this simultaneous assertion of opposites – lifting and revealing – lies at the heart of late medieval Christianity, and has not been acknowledged enough by modern scholarship. Instead, art historians have overemphasized the theological stress on “seeing through” or “pointing beyond” in medieval art.<sup>30</sup>

The above gives us enough reason to rethink the idea that 14th-century Italian artists used old-fashioned modes of representation to give their works an air of timeless remoteness that was lacking in Giottoesque art. Perhaps the Byzantinizing elements in paintings such as the Strozzi altarpiece should not so much be read as pointing to or evoking a supernatural realm far removed from the viewer’s world, but, on the contrary, as elements that make the holy present in the here and now. The rigid frontality of Christ in the Orcagna’s work as well as his confronting gaze allow the explicit contact between viewer and holy figure that is typical for late medieval art. In addition, the gold background and the red carpet which both lack any suggestion of an inhabitable, three-dimensional world, can be seen as bringing Christ and the other figures forward and pressing them against the surface, thus strengthening the direct connection with the viewer. Instead of encapsulating a tension between forms that convey a sense of spiritual remoteness and those that suggest an illusion of the visible world, paintings such as the Strozzi altarpiece seem to express a contrast between medieval ways of making the divine present and more modern, mimetic modes of representation that we associate with the art of Giotto.<sup>31</sup> In what follows I want to explore an alternative interpretation of this co-existence of two different pictorial modes in 14th-century Italian art.

## 2 Nearness and Distance in Trecento Art Revisited

It is important to note that there are no 14th-century sources that express a possible concern about Giotto’s stylistic revolution or his way of representing the divine. On the contrary, Trecento authors unanimously praise the naturalism in Giotto’s art.<sup>32</sup> The one exception is Benvenuto da Imola. In his commentary

29 Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, pp. 35 and 52.

30 Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, p. 65. For similar observations in relation to Byzantine art see: Bissera V. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” *Art Bulletin* 88 (2006), p. 636.

31 On this see also Nelson, “Descartes’s Cow,” p. 12, who refers to Michel Foucault’s distinction between medieval resemblance and early modern representation and Bruno Latour’s contrast between medieval re-presentation and Renaissance representation.

32 On this see most recently Joost Keizer, “Style and Authorship in Early Italian Renaissance Art,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 78 (2015), 370–85, here pp. 371–74.

on Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1376), Benvenuto writes that certain authorities claim that Giotto sometimes made "great errors" in his work.<sup>33</sup> Benvenuto neither says who these authorities are nor what the great errors are they accuse Giotto of. Even though Meiss suggested that Benvenuto's critique reflected current criticisms of Giotto's pictorial style, more recently Norman Land has convincingly argued that Benvenuto merely employed a literary *topos* to enhance the image of Giotto as a new Apelles.<sup>34</sup> According to ancient authors such as Plutarch and Pliny, the work of Apelles – even though greater than that of any artist of his time – was also less than perfect and contained many mistakes.

In addition, there are no 14th-century sources that give any indication of an awareness that different stylistic modes existed side-by-side in Trecento works of art. When around 1400 Cennino Cennini wrote that that Giotto had turned art "from Greek into Latin and made it modern," he might have had an understanding that is comparable to our own of the contrast between old-fashioned, Byzantinizing modes of representation and more modern ones associated with the art of Giotto.<sup>35</sup> However, he used this distinction to illustrate the difference between the art of the Trecento and that of the earlier periods, not between old-fashioned and modern styles within 14th-century painting.

Therefore, any suggestion that 14th-century culture had an understanding of the difference between modern, illusionistic modes of representation and more old-fashioned, Byzantinizing ones, is grounded in careful study of the works themselves. It is to the great merit of scholars such as Meiss and Norman that they have made such careful analyses and have drawn attention to the stylistic contrast in Trecento art. However, while acknowledging the merits of this art historical tradition, I hope to have shown that retrospective modes

33 See Michael Viktor Schwarz and Pia Theis, *Giottus Pictor, Vol. 1: Giottos Leben* (Vienna, 2004), pp. 364–65, with full text.

34 Meiss, *Painting in Florence*, pp. 4–5. Norman E. Land, "Giotto as Apelles," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 24:3 (2005), 6–9. More in general, late-medieval sources seem to show an increased concern with images, but these sources are not necessarily Italian, and the concerns are not necessarily about artistic innovation. For an overview, see: Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 203–20. For an interesting case of church censorship in England at the beginning of the 14th-century, see: Paul Binski, "The Crucifixion and the Censorship of Art around 1300," in *The Medieval World*, Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson, eds. (London, 2001), pp. 342–60.

35 Schwarz and Theis, *Giottus Pictor*, pp. 336–37. Around 1447–48, Ghiberti was one of the first to use the terms "maniera greca" and "arte nuova" to describe this contrast. *Ibid.*, pp. 291–94. On the awareness of style in this period see: Bruce Cole, "Old and New in the Early Trecento," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 17 (1973), pp. 231–32; Steinhoff, *Sieneese Painting*, pp. 210–14; Joan A. Holladay, "Consciousness of Style in Gothic Art," in *Opus Tessellatum: Modi und Grenzgänge der Kunstwissenschaft*, Katharina Corsepius et al., eds. (Hildesheim, 2004), pp. 303–14; Keizer, "Style and Authorship," 370–85.

were not necessarily employed to endow contemporary painting with an air of spiritual remoteness in the face of Giotto's stylistic innovations. As an alternative, I would like to suggest that works such as Orcagna's visualize an awareness that religious images might have fallen short in medieval directness when naturalism was explored by Giotto and his followers, and that it was for this reason that artists were reluctant to completely let go of more old-fashioned ways of representation.

Several scholars have proposed the idea that something might have gotten lost in the rise of Renaissance illusionism.<sup>36</sup> Michael Camille, for instance, has argued that the "spectacular interpenetration" of image and viewer that he sees as typical of Gothic art disappeared when paintings became illusionistic views through an Albertian window. According to him, "the spectator withdraws from what is no longer a 'seen,' but a scene separated from the viewer by the window."<sup>37</sup> Because of this withdrawal, viewers are being excluded from the image and no longer implicated in what they are seeing: from participants they become spectators.<sup>38</sup>

This notion of exclusion has also been observed by Jaś Elsner in his book on visuality in classical Rome. Like Camille, Elsner argues that because the world of an illusionistic painting operates in its own space and according to its own narrative logic, the viewer always remains separate from that world. According to him: "that space and logic may be realistic (like our own world, our own sense of perspective, time, form, and so forth), but looking at it is like looking through a screen into someone else's life."<sup>39</sup> Even if the viewer is invited to step through the screen into the world of the painting, there is no real contact. He remains a voyeur, who can only read his way into the picture through an act of his subjective imagination. In fact, according to Elsner, the more the illusion of a real world is offered and thus the suggestion of contact, the more the viewer becomes like Pliny's birds, who when flying up to Zeuxis's celebrated painting discovered that the grapes they desired were only pigment. In the end, Elsner

36 In addition to the authors discussed below, important accounts include: Robert D. Romanyshyn, *Technology as Symptom and Dream* (London, 1989), pp. 33–64; Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality*, Hal Foster ed., pp. 7–9; Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 53–59; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (London 2002), p. 40; Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), pp. 46–48.

37 Camille, *Gothic Art*, pp. 181–83.

38 For comparable observations see Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, p. 13; Nelson, "To Say and to See," p. 158; and Péter Bokody, *Images-within-Images in Italian Painting (1250–1350): Reality and Reflexivity* (Farnham, 2015), p. 31.

39 Jaś Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (Princeton, 2007), p. 24.

writes, in an illusionistic painting “there is only longing, nostalgia, and even frustrated erotic desire.”<sup>40</sup>

Michael Viktor Schwarz and Hans Belting have formulated similar ideas on exclusion in illusionistic art. Moreover, they apply them to the specific context of the Trecento. Schwarz discusses the introduction of an imaginary screen in the work of Giotto.<sup>41</sup> Like Elsner, Schwarz describes how this screen separates the world of the viewer from that of the painting. As a result, what Schwarz calls the “presence effect” of earlier art is replaced by a “voyeuristic effect”: through the screen viewers can see what is going on in the world of the painting without having to assume that it is necessarily meant for their eyes.<sup>42</sup> However, because the people in the world of the painting do not seem to be aware of the viewer and are only focused on each other, this voyeuristic effect also creates distance. As an example Schwarz uses Giotto’s *Lamentation* (c. 1305) (Fig. 9.4) in the Arena chapel in Padua. He describes how Christ’s body in this painting is not only surrounded by mourners, but is almost hidden by them. His head, hands and feet are emphatically offered to the mourners, not to the viewer. As a result, the viewer is actually more excluded from than included in the scene. Of course, this does not mean that paintings like the *Lamentation* do not make an appeal to the viewer. However, according to Schwarz this appeal is more indirect, and more focused on stimulating his or her emotional re-enactment of the scene: “Schauend erleben wir mit, wie in einer *anderen* Wirklichkeit andere trauerer und den toten Christus umsorgen” (my emphasis).<sup>43</sup>

Hans Belting uses the term “closed” to refer to the narrative structure of paintings such as Giotto’s *Lamentation*. According to him, the Renaissance “Fensterbild” operates illusionistically in a parallel world that is not dependent on a viewer. He contrasts this with the narrative structure of earlier art. As we

40 Elsner, *Roman Eyes*, p. 24, with reference to Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London, 1979) pp. 67–119. See also Jaś Elsner, “Reflections on the ‘Greek Revolution’ in Art,” in *Rethinking Revolutions through Ancient Greece*, Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne, eds. (Cambridge, 2010), p. 70: “No one has told the story as a lament for what was lost in archaic directness and abstraction when the Greeks discovered naturalism.”

41 Michael Viktor Schwarz, *Giotto* (Munich, 2009), p. 45.

42 Schwarz, *Giotto*, p. 43, with reference to Assaf Pinkus, “Voyeuristic Stimuli: Seeing and Hearing in the Arena Chapel,” *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 59 (2010), 7–26.

43 Schwarz, *Giotto*, p. 45. See *ibid.*, p. 48, where Schwarz writes that Giotto’s paintings in the Arena chapel mark the beginning of a “voyeuristisch distanzierter Erleben der Heilsgeschichte.” Already in 1929 Roger Fry made comparable observations on Giotto’s Christ appearing to the Mary Magdalen in the Arena Chapel: “We watch it taking place in a world which is somewhat removed from the actual world, a world which we cannot enter into – wherein we shall never be actors. We cannot identify ourselves with these people; the scene remains there for our contemplation rather than for any immediate personal contact,” *A Roger Fry Reader*, Christopher Reed, ed. (Chicago and London, 1996), pp. 399–400.



FIGURE 9.4 Giotto, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, c. 1305, Padua, Arena Chapel.  
 PHOTO: CENTRE FOR ART HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION, RADBOD  
 UNIVERSITY NIJMEGEN

have seen, Belting interprets the isolated gaze that characterizes late medieval art as enabling direct contact between the viewer and the depicted figures that took the form of a dialogue characterized by reciprocity. Because this dialogue assumes the presence of an external participant for closure, Belting calls the narrative structure of such images “open.”<sup>44</sup> According to Belting, in the 14th century the experience of direct contact that the late medieval open system

44 Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum*, p. 90. On this see also Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, pp. 144–45. Belting’s idea of open and closed systems is comparable to Riegl’s concept of inner and outer coherence, which in turn was adapted by John Shearman, who speaks of transitive and intransitive modes. On this see Shearman, *Only Connect*, p. 36. For a comparable influence of Riegl on Demus’s *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration* see Nelson, “To Say and to See,” p. 158, and Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon*, p. 227, note 15.



FIGURE 9.5 Master of the Fogg Pietà, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, c. 1330, Harvard, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum. Gift of Meta and Paul J. Sachs in memory of Grace Norton, 1927.306.

PHOTO: IMAGING DEPARTMENT © PRESIDENT AND FELLOWS OF HARVARD COLLEGE

offered came into conflict with the illusionism of the closed system. Belting illustrates this conflict with the so-called Fogg Pietà (c. 1330) (Fig. 9.5), now in the Harvard Art Museums. Like Giotto's *Lamentation*, this image shows a group of mourning people around the dead body of Christ. While the group is convincingly located in the illusionistic space of the painting, the body of Christ is not. Instead, it is turned to the viewer in an awkward way. According to Belting, the "unnatural" position of Christ's body should not be seen as a flaw of the painting, but as a purposeful choice of the artist. The artist's aim was not the creation of a perfect illusion, but rather the maintenance of Christ's ability to communicate directly with the viewer, if necessary at the expense of a "correct" realistic representation.<sup>45</sup> As such, the Fogg Pietà is yet another illustration of the tension between old-fashioned and more modern pictorial modes

45 Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum*, pp. 88–89.

in 14th-century Italian art. Still, Belting's interpretation of this tension differs from traditional readings and is more in line with the one I am proposing here. Belting seems to suggest that Trecento art visualizes an understanding that religious images might have fallen short in medieval directness when Giotto and his followers explored naturalism, and that it might have been for this reason that artists were reluctant to completely abandon more old-fashioned modes of representing the sacred.

Where Belting focusses on the gaze of medieval art as enabling "Kontakterlebnis," I would like to go further and suggest that artists had a variety of retrospective means at their disposal to maintain this direct contact between viewer and work of art, including stylization, planarity and the use of a gold background. To these pictorial means could be added more sculptural ones, such as the use of relief. In an article on Pacino di Bonaguida's *Chiarito Tabernacle* (c. 1340s), Christopher Lakey has proposed that Pacino's use of sculpted relief in the central panel of this triptych is intended to endow the depicted figures with a tangible sense of presence in the here and now that allows for direct contact, and even invites viewers to touch.<sup>46</sup> In employing relief, Pacino makes use of a technique to enhance a divine figure's three-dimensional presence and corporeality that was well known in medieval Europe – both in the West as in the East – but that seems at odds with Giottesque illusionism.<sup>47</sup>

To conclude, there might have been a problem with Giotto after all. Even though his illusionistic images marvelled contemporary critics and inspired them to effusive praise, they might have left the religious and devout viewer untouched and frustrated.<sup>48</sup> What they saw in Giotto's art was a world in which they were invited to participate but that ultimately might have left them

46 Christopher R. Lakey, "The Curious Case of the *Chiarito Tabernacle*: A New Interpretation," *Getty Research Journal* 4 (2012), 13–30, esp. pp. 22–25. Lakey's interpretation contrasts with that of Barbara Baert, who sees the gold relief as a way to visualize a transcendental world. Barbara Baert, "Nourished by Inwardness: The Beato Chiarito Tabernacle (c. 1340)," in *Speaking to the Eye: Sight and Insight through Text and Image (1150–1650)*, Thérèse de Hemptinne et al., eds. (Turnhout, 2013), pp. 213–40, esp. pp. 216–17.

47 One could argue that where Giottesque art creates a two-dimensional illusion of the three dimensional world that appeals to the imagination, relief allows artists to present the three dimensional world as an objective material reality. On the use of relief in medieval and Byzantine art see: Lakey, "The Curious Case," pp. 29–30 (notes 31 and 32), with further references. See also Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, pp. 66–67, and Rossitza Schroeder, "Revelations in Relief: an Italo-Byzantine panel with the Virgin and Child," *The Journal of the Walters Art Museum* 68/69 (2010–11), p. 107: "the medium of relief adds to the work's material immediacy and sensual palpability."

48 Petrarch seems to have suggested as much when he wrote on a painting by Giotto that he owned: "The ignorant do not understand the beauty of this panel but the masters of art are stunned by it." However, as Michael Baxandall pointed out, Petrarch is using a classical cliché to stress the humanistic distinction between the informed and the uninformed

feeling excluded. Giotto's paintings encouraged subjective and imaginative identification with the sacred – and succeeded in doing so brilliantly – but as a result, the more direct, objective presence of the sacred was lost. I have suggested that it was to overcome feelings of exclusion and to compensate for a perceived loss of objective presence and thus direct contact, that 14th-century artists such as Orcagna brought into play earlier, retrospective modes of representation that we associate with Byzantine art.

In drawing this conclusion, I propose a reversal of the use of the terms “nearness” and “distance” in relation to the different stylistic modes so characteristic of the art of this period. Traditionally, the term “nearness” is associated with the forward-looking illusionistic mode associated with the art of Giotto: the illusion of inhabitable space and the suggestion of three dimensional form in his art are seen as bringing the sacred nearer to the everyday experience of the viewer. In the reading presented here, Giotto's art is interpreted as in the end falling short in accomplishing this. Ultimately, his illusionistic images fail to enable direct contact with the sacred and therefore, keep the viewer at a distance.

In traditional interpretations, the term “distance” is connected with earlier, more Byzantinizing mode of representation. This mode was thought to have been used by artists to make up for an undesired level of nearness, and to maintain the transcendental remoteness of the divine figures. In the interpretation presented here, this mode does not evoke distance, but on the contrary, nearness. The frontal visual address, the lack of an inhabitable space, the stylization of human form and the use of relief typical for these retrospective modes of representation ensured objective presence and thus direct contact with the viewer. To modern eyes, this may seem a paradox, but it might have been the old-fashioned conventions of Italo-Byzantine art that ensured nearness to the sacred for a 14th-century viewer

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