

# Giotto

(born 1267, died 1337, artist of the Florentine School)

*The Nativity*

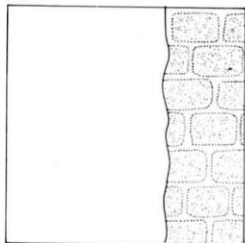
1302–5, fresco Arena Chapel, Padua



Giotto, regarded by many as the founder of modern painting, was a major exponent of fresco, a technique of wall painting known in classical antiquity and revived in the thirteenth century in Rome, where Giotto worked as a young artist. In scale and scope, wall painting was the most important art form in fourteenth century Italy. Giotto's paintings in the Arena Chapel in Padua are among the most perfectly preserved examples of fresco. *Buon fresco* or true fresco, is brush painting on freshly applied, wet lime plaster, using water as the vehicle so that the substance of the paint penetrates the plaster, and, as the plaster dries, the pigment is bound into the crystalline structure. A second main type of fresco is *secco fresco* in which pigment is applied to dry plaster using an organic medium such as egg or size which acts as both vehicle and binder. The *secco* technique had to be used with certain pigments, such as azurite and malachite. *Secco fresco* may be less permanent than *buon fresco* because the paint only forms a crust on the smooth plaster and tends to flake off. Giotto used both techniques for the Arena Chapel.

Fresco was an orderly, methodical process involving the application of several layers of plaster and one of paint. The first preparatory layer, the *arriccio*, made of coarse lime and sand plaster, is applied to the bare masonry. The drawing called the *sinopia*, is made on this. Next, a smooth layer, the *intonaco*, is applied. The paint is laid on this plaster while it is still wet. This meant that only that area of plaster which could be painted over in one day was laid down. For this reason, this stage was termed the *giornata*, from *giorno* meaning day. To avoid splattering and damaging subsequent sections, work proceeded from the top left-hand corner, across and downwards.

It is likely that, for a design as complicated yet unified as the Arena Chapel, some preparatory drawings were done. The technique makes design changes and extensive alterations difficult – for an extensive change, whole sections of plaster had to be lifted out. Minor alterations would have been executed in *secco fresco*. Because the painting had to be completed while the plaster was still wet, the fresco painter needed a well-trained, rapid and resolute hand. These complexities gave fresco its prestige.



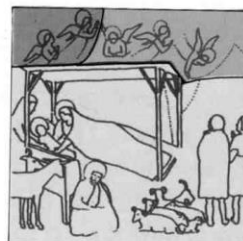
1. The bare masonry was first covered in a coarse, thick layer of lime and sand plaster, called the *arriccio*.



2. The composition may then have been drawn in on the plaster. This stage is called the *sinopia* because of the red earth pigment, *sinoper*, which was used generally mixed with ochre.



3. The painter then applied as much smooth plaster, the *intonaco*, as he could paint in one day and rapidly redrew the outlines. The normal painting process began at the top left-hand corner.



4. On day two, angels and the top of the mountain were painted. The artist worked systematically across the wall and downwards. The sky was added later in *secco fresco* after the *intonaco* had dried.



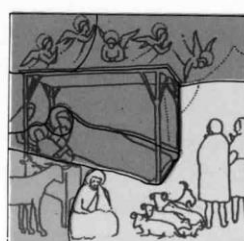
5. On the third day, the large, but relatively uncomplicated area of the stable and background was executed.



6. Day four was devoted to painting the Virgin's head.



7. On day five the figure of the Virgin was worked on. The figure was underdrawn in *buon fresco*, and the blue robe then painted in *secco fresco* which did not follow the contours of the underpainting.



8. On day six the ox and ass were painted.