

2014 Higher Level Question 9

Giotto [c. 1267-1337] created an illusion of depth on a flat surface and portrayed dramatic events as if they were happening on a stage. Discuss this statement with reference to a named work by Giotto, commenting on subject matter, composition, style, and the techniques used in his work AND name and briefly discuss one other work by this artist. Illustrate your answer.

Giotto Di Bondone was a Florentine artist who is often regarded as the father of modern painting. He was born in 1267 and studied under Cimabue, developing his use of mathematical perspective to achieve depth in paintings. Giotto broke free from the constraints of the Byzantine style of painting – flat and two-dimensional. He began to reinvent the art of his time with volume, weight, human emotions, depth and dramatic events all depicted in his paintings. No other artist dared to follow his lead and ten years after his death the plague swept across Europe, bringing pessimism and darkness that led to a return to the rigid style of the Byzantine pre-Giotto era, until 100 years later when Massaccio took up and developed Giotto's innovations. This re-introduction of Giotto's style drastically changed art in Europe and helped to bring about the Renaissance or "rebirth" in the 15th and 16th centuries.

One piece that showcases Giotto's ability and skill is "The Lament for Christ" (c. 1306). In this painting the subject matter, composition, style and techniques used all add to an illusion of depth and a portrayal of dramatic events as if they were happening on stage.



Subject matter

This painting is about the mourning for Christ right after his crucifixion. Mary holds her dead son in her lap while other religious figures stand around them. The drama of the scene plays out as if it were happening in front of the viewer. All figures exhibit sorrowful gestures and the grief surrounding the event that has occurred is clear to us. Such a portrayal of raw emotion is very successful in dramatizing the death of Christ.



Composition

The viewer is invited into this dramatic scene with an open and simple composition. Jesus is the focal point of the painting, with all figures gesturing towards him in some way. The landscape draws our eye towards Christ with the long sloping rock in the background. The two figures placed in front with their backs to us frame Mary and Christ, creating an illusion of space and depth. The ground roots the characters in place, creating a platform on which the scene is performed like on a stage.

Style

The style of this piece was typical of Giotto but not of its time. The naturalism of this painting was years ahead of art during the 14th century. Giotto creates a realistic portrait of all figures and expresses different emotions on faces and in gestures, such as St John throwing his arms back in despair and shock. The fact that the two figures on the right can be identified as outsiders who are not there to grieve, but only to anoint Christ's body, shows Giotto's skill in creating realistic emotions on figures. The contrast between these two and the other characters also heightens the drama in the painting.



Techniques

One of the main techniques used here to create an illusion of depth on a flat surface is foreshortening. This can be seen in St John's arm and in the angels hovering overhead. Perspective is also used with the angels who appear much smaller and farther away than the other figures. Giotto uses bulky figures and folds in clothing to hint at volume, with light and shade emphasising these folds.



These figures face away from the viewer but it is still clear that they are kneeling over Christ's body.



Conclusion

Giotto was innovative in his painting and created pieces with a realistic aspect that had not been seen before. In creating depth and drama in his paintings he paved the way for the future artists of the Renaissance.