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Forms of the Gift in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy;
The art of salvation and socio-political persuasion

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This paper will examine the Arena (Scrovegni) chapel, Padua, Italy commissioned by Enrico Scrovegni circa 1300. In particular; Enrico Scrovegni's intentions, the use and purpose of Giotto's frescos, the articulation of spatial illusion, and the presentation of the chapel and its narratives with reference to Marcel Mauss, and Annette B Weiner's theories of the Gift.

This paper will also develop a number of, well established ideas concerning the socio-political function of the chapel, and its highly innovative and sophisticated use of visual language, and parallelism, with reference to the work of Andrew Ladis, Janetta Rebold Benton and Laura Jacobus.

Giotto's frescos present an articulation of illusional space, which is diverse and, at times uncharacteristic of the period.

Laura Jacobus and Janetta Rebold Benton have both made convincing claims, which describe various aspects of Giotto's unusual and sophisticated manipulation of illusional space. Giotto's paintings at Assisi are described by Rebold Benton in her article *Perspective and the Spectator's Pattern of circulation in Assisi and Padua, Artibus and Historiae* 1989, as having an intention to manipulate the circulation of the audience through the

upper church of Saint Francis in Assisi, by causing them to preference certain distances from images, and to view them at particular points located in the upper church. She argues this is achieved through the use of spatial illusion, which will only appear correct when viewed from given locations, therefore influencing the position of the viewer. The visual elements, which function in this manner are not part the images which illustrate the narrative, they are illusionistic architectural features, which frame those images. This use of visual illusion, outside of the main focus of attention, evidences Giotto's interest in subtly engaging an audience through the manipulation of spatial illusion.

Giotto's sophisticated use of illusionary space is further evidenced by Laura Jacobus in her article; Giotto's Annunciation in the Arena Chapel, Padua, *The Art Bulletin*, 1999. Jacobus examines a number of the frescos within the Scrovegni chapel, and, in particular the Annunciation frescos painted either side of the chancel arch. Jacobus provides a convincing argument for the use of spatial illusion within the chapel as a signifier of differing temporal realms. Those visual elements, which appear to realistically project out of or into the surface of the wall, are representing events in the real present time of the viewer, rather than an imagined past.

The lower parts of the fictive architecture in the Annunciation paintings are behind the decorative band of the arch and exist as part of the wall. These lower elements are in conflict with the small balconies in the upper part, which appear to project into the real space of the chapel. Jacobus argues this is linked to the chapel's location at the site traditionally used for enactments of the

Annunciation, and in occupying two contradictory spaces the images relate to those devotional practices by simultaneously placing the painting of the annunciation in past and present time. Jacobus goes on to include other examples.

Either side of the chancel arch below the Annunciation paintings, are two illusionary chambers, referred to as corretti. These paintings are constructed using a single vanishing point, which corresponds to those of the building when viewed from the main entrance looking along the nave of the chapel. Jacobus describes the realistic spatial illusion of the corretti as a feature which relates to the 'here and now'.

This temporal value is also applied to the grisaille paintings of the Virtues and Vices, which run along the dado of the North and South walls of the nave.

The work of Jacobus and Rebold Benton establishes within Giotto's working process, the sophisticated manipulation of spatial illusion with specific intention in two major sites of his work, Assisi and Padua. This understanding of Giotto's methods allows for further consideration of other possible uses of spatial illusion in the Scrovegni Chapel, in particular Joachim Cast Out of the Temple.

The Fresco is situated high on the south wall.

This image initiates the fresco cycle devoted to Saint Anne, and consequently all three fresco cycles.

This very important image is opposite a small door in the north wall, which originally connected to the Scrovegni Palace, and which would have been used by the family as a private entrance.

The previous image of Joachim's Expulsion is seen from a height equal to that of the fresco itself, an unachievable viewing angle for its intended audience. When viewed from the floor the viewing experience is very different as the acute angle has the effect of compressing the image.

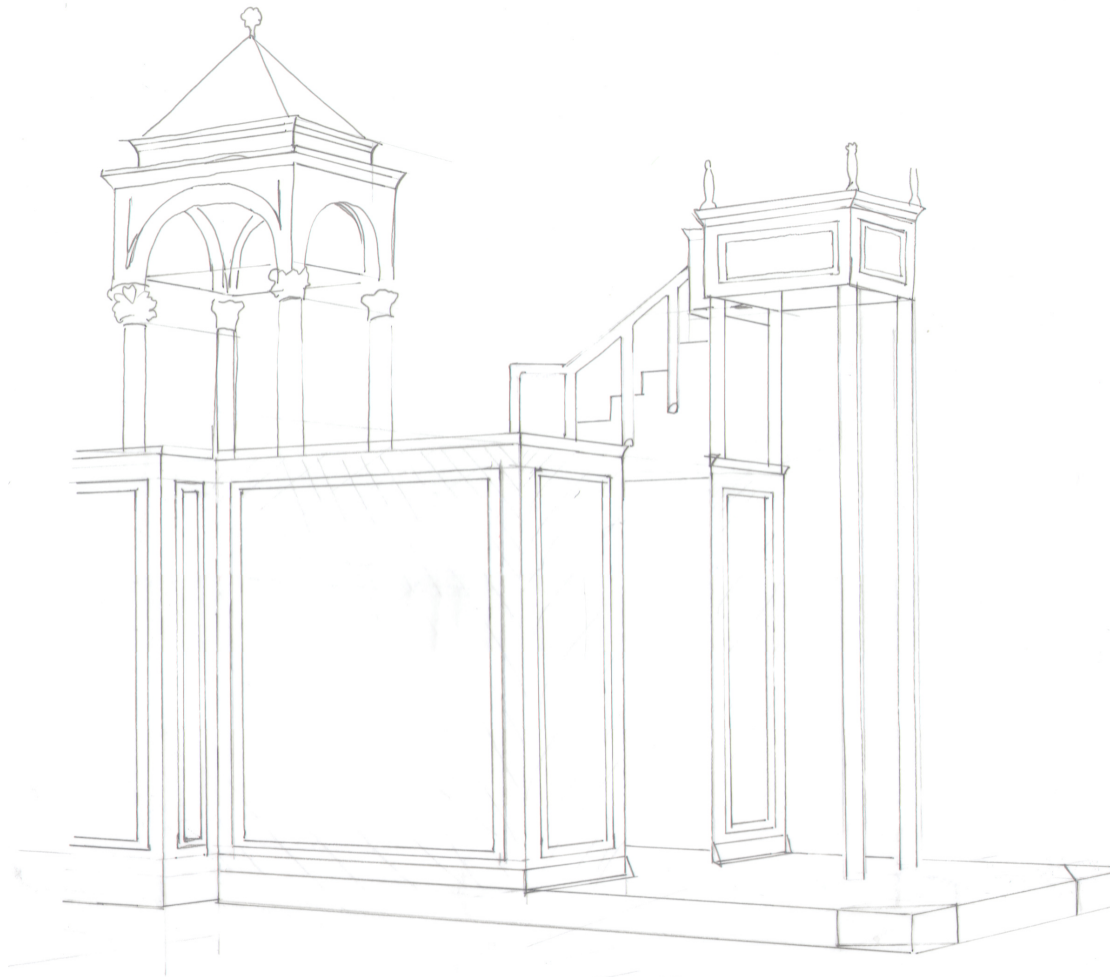
A comparison of the two images allows us to see that the image is not rendered unreadable when viewed at an extreme angle from the chapel floor. Giotto has incorporated into this painting 4 schemes of spatial illusion, which, respond to the needs of an acute viewing angle, and support the narrative drama. No other single image in the chapel is designed in this manner.

An analysis of the spatial schemes used, are revealed through this diagrammatic overlay, which describes the vanishing points and horizon lines.

The green lines relate to the temple enclosure and demonstrate a vanishing point to the left, which, through foreshortening, gives the temple enclosure a sense of depth as its lines converge at a distant point. However the green lines, which run to the right are parallel to each other (parallel projection). This opens the space both within the enclosure, and on the step, allowing us to see both the internal and external elements of the building in order to reinforce Joachim's sense of exclusion. Furthermore, the step where Joachim and the priest interact is emphasised and enlarged as a dramatic space, whose compositional dynamic, points to, and develops, the visual element of the 'void' into which Joachim moves.

In the upper part of the fictive architecture, the pulpit and the ciborium are each rendered using vanishing points (extrapolated in red), which converge on separate horizons below that used to create the temple enclosure. The lower horizons effectively tilt the two structures upward. Once again this opens up the architectural space and emphasizes a dramatic height in the pulpit and ciborium. This establishes an idea of authority by allowing the upper half of the building a dominant position.

The various incorporated schemes of spatial illusion allow us to look simultaneously 'up to' and 'down into' the structure. To demonstrate the effective use of the non-unified spatial schemes in the fresco, I have redrawn it as a series of images, each using a unified space based on the four separate schemes.

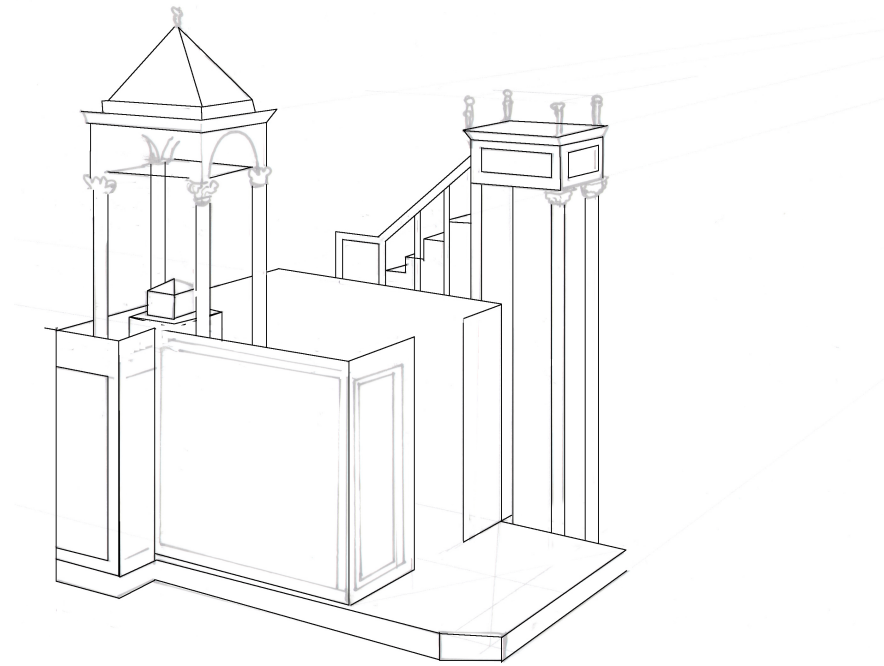


This image is redrawn, using a unified spatial scheme according to the pulpit, in this drawing we can see how the use of a lower horizon line positions us, as if we are crouching and looking up at the building. This spatial scheme does not allow us to see into the enclosure and thus make a dramatic contrast between the interior and exterior, therefore reducing the potential for visual representation of dramatic tension. This Spatial scheme does, however, allow the temple to assume an authoritative position over us.

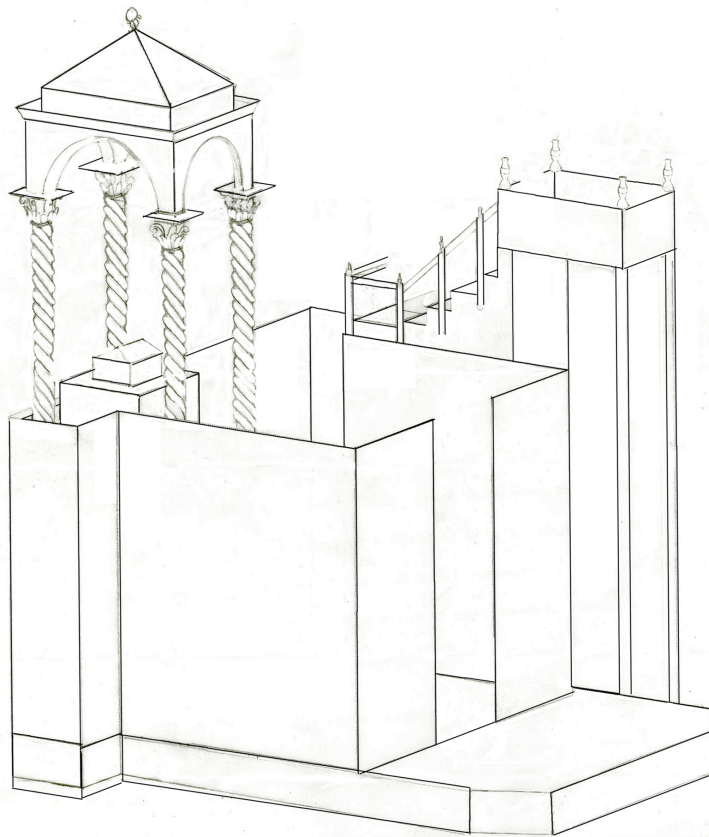


This image is redrawn according to the spatial scheme occupied by the Ciborium. We can see how the higher horizon line lifts the eye up from the previous 'crouching position', allowing us to look down onto the step and see into the temple enclosure. This spatial scheme opens up the step but also 'forces' the perspective into overly dramatic foreshortening. One purpose for the shift between the spatial schemes of the pulpit and the ciborium may be to allow the schemes of the upper and lower portions of the church to flow into each other.

The horizon line of the ciborium is situated between those of the pulpit and the left side of the enclosure, 'smoothing' the transition between the two very different spaces.



This image uses the spatial scheme associated with the left of the enclosure we can see how the viewpoint has risen and consequently we now see into the enclosure space, This spatial scheme also places the viewer above the pulpit and the ciborium, imbuing the building with a very different character, it now lacks the sense of authority, which previously emanated from the upper part of the fictive architecture.



This final drawing uses the space of the enclosure entrance and step. This drawing uses parallel projection, and therefore does not use any vanishing points, all the lines from a given face are parallel to each other.

This parallel projection opens the space around the step in an effective but not overly dramatic manner. This scheme allows the development of a stage where the dramatic expulsion takes place. While this scheme works well for the step it also diminishes the authority of the pulpit and ciborium. Our view into the enclosure is good but the far corner is lifting up and does not create the same sense of contained interior space.

As previously out-lined the whole Arena chapel makes intriguing use of spatial illusions. But I would argue that Joachims Expulsion enjoys a special strategic importance.

It's unique use of spatial illusion combined with it's position directly addresses the Scovegni family as they enter the chapel, and it initiates the narrative of Saint Anne, which was an uncommon choice in Europe at this time.

This presentation of Saint Anne considerably pre dates the cult in southern Europe and therefore invites questions regarding the reasons for this choice. Jacobus de Voraigne had compiled the lives of the saints around 40 years prior to the building of the chapel, which predated the much later, wider dissemination of the text and Saint Anne's height of popularity between 1470 and 1530.

Enrico Scrovegni had ambitious plans for his own political future and that of the chapel, in 1304 Benedict XI issued a papal bull granting indulgences to those visiting the chapel on feasts of Nativity, Annunciation, Purification, and Assumption.

An unusual narrative such as Saint Anne may have been designed as a particular attraction to pilgrims. Jacobus also describes the importance of the Anunnciation feast to the site prior to the erection of the chapel, which may also suggest that the inclusion of St Anne allows a natural development of the Marian theme and the Annunciation.

I would also like to consider a particular resonance between Joachim and Enrico Scrovegni as a motivation for it's inclusion. The Golden Legend describes Joachim and Anna as a wealthy couple who gave generously to their community, and when visiting the temple to make a sacrifice Joachim is condemned by the priest for failing in his duty to his God and his tribe through his childless union with Saint Anne, subsequently he is turned away. Following

Joachim's expulsion and his shameful retreat into the desert, God grants them a child, through divine intervention. The narrative presents a theme of unjust punishment and salvation. In clarifying the unjust expulsion of Joachim from the temple the text of the Golden Legend states that 'God punishes sin not nature'.

Enrico Scrovegni is also a wealthy man who has gifted a chapel, and he too is in a problematic situation as his family wealth was formed at least in part via the sin of usury. Dante included Enrico's father Reginaldo in the seventh circle of the inferno amongst other usurers.

If a parallel between Enrico and Joachim can be established, then his difficulty with the source of the family wealth may be mitigated, and the sinful usury of his father contained, as 'God punishes sin not nature'.

An inferred synergy between Joachim and Enrico Scrovegni would be supported by the extensive use of parallelism elsewhere in the chapel, as described by Ladis in his book 'Giotto's O'.

Ladis examines the monochromatic paintings of Virtues and Vices, rendered using realistic use of illusionary space (Jacobus would determine these paintings as being of the here and now).

On the South wall the virtues are depicted, and for every virtue there is a corresponding vice on the North wall, though Avarice is notably absent. The process of comparative looking which these virtues and vices establish are considered by Ladis to be a cue, which is to be extended to all other paintings in the chapel. The central images of the Virtues and Vices are those of Justice and Injustice, the central positioning and unique forward facing stance, within architectural structures, differentiates them from the other

Virtues and Vices and signifies their importance in establishing a core theme.

This theme emerges as a fundamental element in the fresco's presentation of the Saint Anne narrative, the opening image of Joachim's Expulsion establishes and preferences the question of the legitimacy of Joachim's punishment.

The position of the painting, and the subject of the painting, establishes an intriguing visual parallel between Enrico Scrovegni entering his place of worship which is mirrored by Joachim being expelled from his.

Additionally we may also return to the Virtues and the Vices as being part of this dynamic. As Enrico Scrovegni enters the chapel the Vices are behind him and the Virtues before him, in particular the cardinal virtue of Prudence whose core value is the discernment of right from wrong.

Ladis in Giotto's O discusses the difficult position in which Enrico Scrovegni finds himself, and the clear role the chapel plays in his ambition for salvation.

The 'Judgement Day' painting on the west wall depicts Enrico Scrovegni wearing purple robes of penitence whilst offering the chapel. Ladis goes on to propose a tension between the position Enrico occupies through his gift of the chapel as an object, which on the one hand seeks penitence, but on the other aggrandises the family through a statement of wealth and power.

Ladis describes the gift of the chapel as strategically serving an ulterior socio-political motive, "...a conspicuously splendid work of consumption and expiation that made it possible for Enrico to give

money away while making it work for him and his family” (Ladis A Giottos O, p45).

M Mauss in ‘The Gift’ 1925 claims ‘Giving’ is not a selfless act, but a complex social transaction, and that inalienable objects have a particular part to play. Annette B Weiner develops this in her 1992 book ‘Inalienable Possessions: The paradox of keeping while giving’. Weiner establishes an alternative model of gifting, which is not part of a norm of reciprocal exchange.

In medieval Europe lands owned by nobility were gifted with considerable sums of money, and in return they received religious ‘gifts’ such as sacred protection. Weiner cites Lester Little’s book ‘Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe’ to contextualise such gifting as a new ‘urban ideology’ which, saw nobles need to raise financial capital being restricted by the sinful nature of usury. The Catholic church came to sanction these financial transactions, through the mutually beneficial relationship established through gifting. The gifts of land and buildings allowed the church to expand, such gifts of inalienable property had a special status in that the gift giver retained, through noble privilege a symbolic ownership.

Enrico Scrovegni’s gift of inalienable property symbolically retained family ownership, galvanising their social, and economic status as a sanctified entity. The inalienable/unmovable nature of the building, and the fixed symbolic ownership, result in the nature of the gift essentially being the right of others to worship in the chapel, and for the church to benefit from the revenue raised through indulgences.

The image of Enrico Scrovegni in the 'Judgement Day' painting, becomes an illustration of both his gifting and his enduring symbolic ownership of the chapel.

This symbolic ownership reinforces the parallelism between Enrico Scrovegni and the chapel, which in turn cements the relationship of the chapel's core themes of unjust punishment, which result in salvation and redemption, with the position of Enrico Scrovegni.

To conclude, I would propose the task in hand when Enrico Scrovegni commissioned the chapel was to rehabilitate his family name, and to take advantage of changing attitudes within the church, which allowed for political and economic growth via spiritual salvation, and to deflect any inferred guilt from his father's usury as unjust. The chapel would achieve this through its status as an inalienable gift, and through the strategic presentation of Giotto's designs, where Joachim's Expulsion plays a pivotal role, in establishing a beneficial socio-political context, allowing Enrico Scrovegni salvation and prosperity.

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