



Judas betrays Jesus

Giotto's painting is noted for its psychological subtlety and its ability to convey a sense of gravity and stillness. In his great cycle of the Life of Christ in the Arena Chapel in Padua (1305) his ability to innovate is also remarkable. Traditionally, the scene in which Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss showed the traitor in profile – again, a figure with whom we do not want to identify, whereas Christ is full face turned towards us, the viewer. Giotto painted them face to face, enveloped in Judas' yellow cloak – yellow is the colour of treachery – isolated in stillness in the midst of a seething mob. In this heart wrenching confrontation Jesus is the still centre of the world.

Jesus before Pilate

The complex sequence of events in which Jesus was taken before the Jewish judicial body, the Sanhedrin, and before Pilate, the Roman governor are usually represented by only one or two incidents. Instead, the Passion Cycle focuses more strongly on the episode in which Pilate, apparently trying to appease the crowd, ordered Jesus flogged, and the soldiers took the opportunity to abuse and mock.

John 19:¹ *Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ² And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. ³ They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face.*



In a perceptive comment on Manet's little-known version of this event (1856) William R. Cross comments:

"By including the outward gazing figure and using multiple diagonals across an utterly dark background, Manet draws us in as fellow participants with the soldiers, whose ambivalence suggests their knowledge of the wrongness of the torment they will inflict. While Manet made Jesus Mocked not for a chapel, but for a Salon, he creates a similarly active tension between the viewer and the image. This is a scene in which no one can be neutral....this picture is an image of love. But what love is this? A love expressed in vulnerability and suffering. Jesus's humanity is palpable and raw, like his wounds – not seen at first glance – which the crown of thorns is pricking on his head. His bony knees,

reddened ankles and sunken chest are not beautiful; they recall Isaiah 53:2b: "He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him." And yet Manet, with his striking composition set in this bright, unkind light, insists that we do indeed look upon him."

Pilate's second attempt to evade judgement includes the scene usually called "**Ecce Homo**" – "Behold the man" as related by John's gospel:

19:4 Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." 5 So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!"



Rembrandt's wonderful rendering of this theme (1665) is perhaps the finest of all his masterly prints. Significantly, he worked over it in 8 separate versions. It was made by engraving on copper, inking the plate, and printing it on expensive imported Japanese paper. Rembrandt took full advantage of the potential of this process to create dramatic light and deep velvety blacks. Again, he seeks to bring the event close to the viewer by setting it against the new Amsterdam Town Hall with its statues of Justice and Fortitude high on the façade, where condemned prisoners were in fact brought out and shown to the crowd in Rembrandt's own time.

The Crucifixion

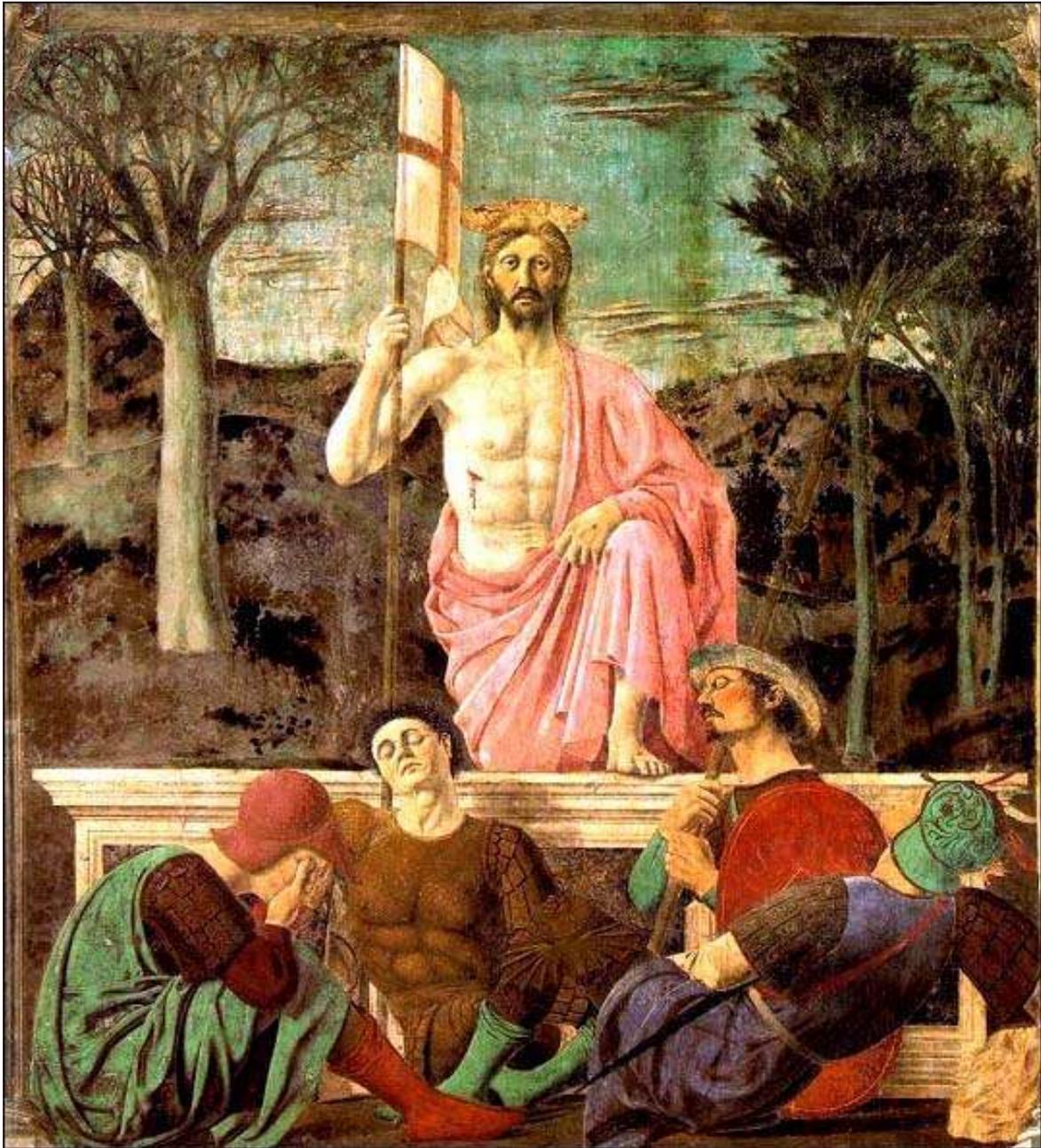
For hundreds of years after Christ's death the Crucifixion was never represented in art. The earliest known versions are, from the East, in the Rabbula Gospels (586) and in the West the tiny drawing in the Utrecht Psalter (around 830). Since the innumerable artists who executed images of Christ on the cross after around 1000 had never seen a crucifixion, their images, from the very simplest to the most complex, are theological, not documentary in nature, however much they sought realism. Of this immense cloud of witnesses the painting by Tintoretto in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice (1565) is one of the most crowded, but also one of the most powerful images.



The Scuola was – and is the headquarters of a lay confraternity founded in 1478 to assist the sick, particularly sufferers from the plague – a term which covered many forms of epidemic illness. San Rocco (St Roch) who died around 1370 had become widely known for his work in hospitals, and his own recovery from the plague after he had isolated himself, expecting to die. A recent article on the current pandemic noted “The long shadow of plague spans centuries. There were about 22 outbreaks of bubonic plague in Venice between 1361 and 1528, another in 1576 that killed a third of the population, and another in 1680 that felled 80,000 people in 17 months.” Tintoretto's Crucifixion includes the moment, recorded in Luke's gospel

23: ³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. ⁴³ He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

This is a rare scene in Renaissance art, but it has been noted that it is in keeping with the emphasis throughout the Scuola cycle on Christ's humility, mercy and compassion for ordinary sinners, the poor and the destitute. And yet, as Christ, raised high, gazes down on the convicted criminal, he is shown as the centre of a marvelous emanation of light. The Light of the world is, in fact the source of all the light which plays over the surging crowd.



The Resurrection

Piero della Francesca's Resurrection was painted for the Town Hall of the small Tuscan town of San Sepolcro ("Holy Sepulchre") in the 1460's. After hundreds of years of being almost totally ignored by art historians Piero was once again studied in the early 20th century, when his austere, geometric style was appreciated for its relevance to contemporary aesthetics. In a 1925 essay Aldous Huxley wrote "It stands there before us in entire and actual splendour, the greatest picture in the world." When British troops began to shell the town during WWII, a young artillery officer, Tony Clarke, who had read that essay, defied orders and held his men back from the bombardment. Although Piero was a skilled mathematician and was able to compose sophisticated perspective constructions he has chosen to use a double viewpoint so that the figure of Christ, calmly commanding, confronts us directly. Notice how his hieratic, yet realistic figure is framed on one side by bare trees, and on the other by trees in full leaf; the transition from death to life.