# The Lives of the Artists by Giorgio Vasari

### Introduction

Giorgio Vasari's "Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects" is a seminal work of art history, originally published in 1550. The book is credited with establishing the genre of artistic biography and providing a comprehensive overview of the Italian Renaissance. In this passage, Vasari tells the story of Giotto, one of the most important painters of the 14th century, and how his skill and reputation were recognized by the Pope. The anecdote about Giotto's circle, which is still remembered in Italian language and culture, is a testament to his ingenuity and technical ability. Through Vasari's vivid storytelling, we are able to gain a deeper understanding of the life and work of one of the great masters of the early Renaissance.

Now in the year 1276, in the country of Florence, about fourteen miles from the city, in the village of Vespignano, there was born to a simple peasant named Bondone, a son, to whom he gave the name of Giotto, and whom he brought up according to his station. And when he had reached the age of ten years, showing in all his ways though still childish an extraordinary vivacity and quickness of mind, which made him beloved not only by his father but by all who knew him, Bondone gave him the care of some sheep. And he leading them for pasture, now to one spot and now to another, was constantly driven by his natural inclination to draw on the stones or the ground some object in nature or something that came into his mind. One day Cimabue, going on business from Florence to Vespignano, found Giotto, while his sheep were feeding, drawing a sheep from nature upon a smooth and solid rock with a pointed stone, having never learned from anyone but nature. Cimabue, marveling at him, stopped and asked him if he would go and be with him. And the boy answered that if his father were content, he would gladly go. Then Cimabue asked Bondone for him, and he gave him up to him and was content that he should take him to Florence.

There, in a little time, by the aid of nature and the teaching of Cimabue, the boy not only equaled his master but freed himself from the rude manner of the Greeks and brought back to life the true art of painting, introducing the drawing from nature of living persons, which had not been practiced for two hundred years; or at least if some had tried it, they had not succeeded very happily. Giotto painted, among others, as may be seen to this day in the chapel of the Podestà’s Palace at Florence, Dante Alighieri, his contemporary and great friend, and no less famous a poet than Giotto was a painter.

After this, he was called to Assisi by Fra Giovanni di Muro, at that time general of the order of S. Francis, and painted in fresco in the upper church thirty-two stories from the life and deeds of S. Francis, which brought him great fame. It is no wonder, therefore, that Pope Benedict sent one of his courtiers into Tuscany to see what sort of a man he was and what his works were like, for the Pope was planning to have some paintings made in S. Peter’s. This courtier, on his way to see Giotto and to find out what other masters of painting and mosaic there were in Florence, spoke with many masters in Sienna, and then, having received some drawings from them, he came to Florence. And one morning going into the workshop of Giotto, who was at his labors, he showed him the mind of the Pope and at last asked him to give him a little drawing to send to his Holiness. Giotto, who was a man of courteous manners, immediately took a sheet of paper and with a pen dipped in red, fixing his arm firmly against his side to make a compass of it, with a turn of his hand he made a circle so perfect that it was a marvel to see it. Having done it, he turned smiling to the courtier and said, “Here is the drawing." But he, thinking he was being laughed at, asked, “Am I to have no other drawing than this?” “This is enough and too much,” replied Giotto, “send it with the others and see if it will be understood.” The messenger, seeing that he could get nothing else, departed ill-pleased, not doubting that he had been made a fool of. However, sending the other drawings to the Pope with the names of those who had made them, he also sent Giotto’s, relating how he had made the circle without moving his arm and without compasses, which when the Pope and many of his courtiers understood, they saw that Giotto must surpass greatly all the other painters of his time. This thing being told, there arose from it a proverb which is still used about men of coarse clay, “You are rounder than the O of Giotto,” which proverb is not only good because of the occasion from which it sprang, but also still more for its significance, which consists in its ambiguity, tondo, “round,” meaning in Tuscany not only a perfect circle but also slowness and heaviness of mind.

So the Pope made him come to Rome, and he painted for him in S.Peter’s, and there never left his hands' work better finished; wherefore the Pope, esteeming himself well served, gave him six hundred ducats of gold, besides having shown him so many favors that it was spoken of through all Italy.

### Reflection Questions

1. How does Vasari's account of Giotto's circle demonstrate the artist's talent and creativity?
2. In what ways did Giotto's use of naturalistic drawing differ from the artistic traditions that preceded him?
3. What does the anecdote about Giotto's circle suggest about the importance of technical ability and innovation in the arts?

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