

**Predella** journal of visual arts, n°41-42, 2017 [www.predella.it](http://www.predella.it) - Monografia / Monograph ■

[www.predella.it/www.predella.cfs.unipi](http://www.predella.it/www.predella.cfs.unipi)

**Direzione scientifica e proprietà** / *Scholarly Editors-in-Chief and owners:*

**Gerardo de Simone, Emanuele Pellegrini** - [predella@predella.it](mailto:predella@predella.it)

**Predella** pubblica ogni anno due numeri online e due numeri monografici a stampa /

**Predella** publishes two online issues and two monographic print issues each year

*Tutti gli articoli sono sottoposti alla peer-review anonima / All articles are subject to anonymous peer-review*

**Comitato scientifico** / *Editorial Advisory Board:* Diane Bodart, Maria Luisa Catoni, Michele Dantini, Annamaria Ducci, Fabio Marcelli, Linda Pisani, Francesco Solinas

**Coordinamento editoriale** / *Editorial Assistants:* Paolo di Simone, Silvia Massa, Michela Morelli

**Impaginazione** / *Layout:* Nikhil Das, Giulia Del Francia, Vittorio Proietti

**Predella** journal of visual arts - ISSN 1827-8655

In *The Guardian* of 7 November 2009 Marina Hyde referred to Stendhal in Florence gazing «up at Giotto's ceiling frescoes» and having «palpitations of the heart». It was a long time since I had read Stendhal, but I was surprised that he should have been struck by the relatively modest ceilings of Giotto's chapels in Florence. The whole idea of ceiling frescoes that might cause palpitations began, I thought, with Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling, in Rome, not Florence. Most great ceilings are Baroque, and again they are usually in Rome. So I asked *The Guardian* for further information as to which Giotto ceilings these might be. «The frescoes in Santa Croce» was the rather unhelpful reply. Even the historically exciting perspectives of Taddeo Gaddi in the Baroncelli Chapel are unlikely to have struck the early Romantic man-of-letters, even if we might now include them in the boundaries of the late Giotto, given that he took responsibility for its altarpiece. I therefore looked up both Giotto and Stendhal and rapidly discovered it to be a marriage made in Google. The majority of references to one of the greatest pioneers of the modern novel refer to 'Stendhal Syndrome' rather than to his writings. In *The Daily Telegraph* published on 28 July 2010, Nick Squires usefully defined the 'Stendhal Syndrome' as «the giddiness and confusion supposedly caused when one looks at great works of art», but he also transcribed a translation of the original source without reference to works of art at all. This is because in Stendhal's text there isn't any.

The source of the 'Stendhal Syndrome' is in M. de Stendhal, *Rome, Naples et Florence*, 3rd edn., vol. 2, Paris, Delaunay, 1826, pp. 100-102 (Florence 22 janvier)<sup>1</sup>. He was struck by the tombs of Michelangelo, Machiavelli and Galileo, Canova's tomb of Alfieri, the simple open wooden roof of the church and, anti-clerical that he was, surprised by the friendliness of the 'monk' (friar) who let him into the chapel with frescoes (including Sibyls on the ceiling) by il Volterrano (Franceschini). He notes that Fra Bartolomeo was also a 'monk' and «invented chiaroscuro, showed it to Raphael and was the precursor to Correggio». This is a pure aside relating to the friar rather than the art in the church. There is actually no mention of the two chapels with frescoes by Giotto, though Stendhal seems to have survived the craning of the neck in looking up at Franceschini's sibyls. But when he left the church he suddenly felt his heart pounding and a dizziness that made him fear to fall to the ground, «moved by the celestial sensations caused by the fine arts and his passionate feelings» (for the tombs of famous men).

The modern interest in Stendhal's experience, overshadowing his great novels on the web in the process, can be traced back at least to the 1996 horror film *La Sindrome di Stendhal* written and directed by Dario Argento. His protagonist is affected by Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, not by Giotto. The transformation of the syndrome into an element of the Giotto mythology by several sites on the web that were presumably generating each other is a neat demonstration of the power of modern media to create confusion and ignorance among the careless and the less than well informed. Even the art-historian Thomas Hoving was a victim (*artnet* February 2008), but it goes back at least to a blog of 2003, no longer traceable<sup>2</sup>, and possibly much further: it might make a useful exercise in Media Studies to trace its actual origin. Current Google searches on the Stendhal Symptom and Stendhal and Giotto include several examples of the Giotto confusion, though the Wikipedia entry is now corrected (21/11/2017), and increasingly the former cites medical analyses without evoking the artistic source at all<sup>3</sup>.

Stendhal does show a conventional respect for Giotto in his *La Peinture en Italie*<sup>4</sup>, but is hardly enthusiastic: «Giotto studied the reliefs of Nicola Pisano but was incapable of aerial perspective and chiaroscuro», Chapter IX, «sad mannikins of Cimabue and Giotto», Chapter XII. He actually ignores the two chapels in S. Croce we attribute to Giotto today (they were heavily encumbered by inserted tombs in his day), but is quite perceptive in tracing Giotto from Assisi to the Badia, Rome and Naples. In particular, though he follows Vasari's doubtful attribution of the Upper Church at Assisi to Giotto he perceptively considers his work in the

Lower Church to be finer. But he concludes that his readers would find Giotto's art ugly, though they should not consider him «pitoyable». In short, the great Romantic writer was viewing Italian painting with the eyes of a generation in which the antiquarian expertise of the later eighteenth century was being replaced by a desire for ever more immediate experience, and the revivalist interest in the 'Gothic' had not begun. It is therefore inconceivable that it should have been Giotto's work that brought on Stendhal's overwhelming sensation.

- 1 Originally published as Stendhal, *Histoire de la peinture en Italie*, Paris, Didot, 1817: <<https://archive.org/stream/romenaplesetflor02sten#page/100/mode/2up/search/100>> (20/11/2017).
- 2 This was the earliest reference for the 'Stendhal Syndrome' that come up in a Google search in 2009, no longer visible on the web.
- 3 Andrew Scull came half way to correcting the source of the Syndrome in «The Times Literary Supplement» on-line, 21 October 2016: «A sensationalized account of being overwhelmed in the presence of great art (only slightly marred by the fact that it was Volterrano's more pedestrian works, not Giotto's masterpieces, that precipitated his nervous attack)».
- 4 <<https://archive.org/stream/histoiredelapei00stengoog#page/n75/mode/2up/search/giotto>> (20/11/2017).