

Art Day 5 - looking at pictures for Holy Week

Cimabue Crucifixion

Cimabue was the first great name among Italian painters, moving in style away from the formalised icons of Byzantine art and paving the way for a more naturalistic, humanist art that had its full flowering in the Renaissance. He was born in 1240 in Florence and worked throughout Tuscany and

Umbria. He is the first artist described by Vasari in his great work, the Lives of the Artists, who describes him as 'the first cause of the renewal of the art of painting'. He was also the teacher of Giotto, inspiring him to far greater heights of artistic achievement.

This huge crucifix was painted, on oak panels, to hang in the Franciscan church of Santa Croce in Florence, where it still is today. It is significant in showing Christ as suffering for us on the cross, in line with the Franciscan ideal, embodied in the meditation on Christ 'turn your eyes away from His divinity for a while and consider Him purely as a man'. This Christ is suffering terribly, his head is slumped on his shoulder, his eyes are closed against the agonising pain that shows in his face, his body is contorted with the weight that hangs from the nailed palms, from which



blood flows. The vulnerability is heightened by his nakedness and the transparency of the loin cloth. The figures of Mary and St John are positioned in the old Byzantine manner but they, too, have a new realism. They are not looking serenely outward but are suffering too, their heads on their hands, as they contemplate

this dreadful death. Only the deep blue of the cross itself points at the eternal sky. The halo behind Jesus' suffering head is carved so that it stands out from the cross adding impact for those who would be looking at this monumental crucifix from below. It is a focal point for all who entered the church but also a work for meditation and contemplation on the terrible truth of the crucifixion for our sins.

The work was badly damaged by the great flood of 1966 as Santa Croce was particularly badly hit. As part of the Franciscan ministry, Santa Croce was built in the poorest part of the city, in the low lying marshy area near the Arno, where those who most needed care and help were living. The Franciscans lived out the ideals expressed in this great work, accepting and embracing the risks that this entailed.