

Art as Politics in Late Medieval and Renaissance Siena

Background Notes

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Sienese School of Painting

Guido da Siena (13c)

The first Sienese painter for whom we have a name. His work is Byzantine in style.

Master of Tressa (13c)

To whom is attributed the Madonna of the Large Eyes.

Duccio di Buoninsegna c. 1253-1319

Revolutionized the Sienese School of painting. Greatest panel painter of his day; influenced Simone Martini, the Lorenzetti brothers and numerous lesser followers. His art dominated Siena for much of the 14C. His most famous work being the Maestà for the high altar at Siena Cathedral.

Simone Martini 1285-1344

Probable pupil of Duccio, Simone was one of the foremost exponents of the Gothic style in painting. His outstanding masterpiece is the Chapel of St Martin, San Francesco, Assisi; his earliest dated fresco being the Maestà at the Palazzo Pubblico (1315).

Ambrogio and Pietro Lorenzetti both d.1348

After the death of Duccio, they dominated Sienese painting with Simone Martini. Ambrogio's Allegory of Good Government (1338) for the Palazzo Pubblico is considered one of the most important remaining secular works in Europe of that time.

Lippo Memmi, active 1317-1347

Simone Martini's brother in law, he painted the cycle of New Testament scenes at the Collegiate Church and the Maestà in the Palazzo del Capitano, both at San Gimignano.

Taddeo di Bartolo 1362 -1422

Working in the Lorenzetti tradition, his best works are 'The Stories of the Life of the Virgin' (1406-9) in the Chapel of the Palazzo Pubblico and the Famous Men of Antiquity in the vestibule there as well as the Assumption of the Virgin for the high altar at Montepulciano.

Bartolo di Fredi d. 1410

Between 1353-55, he shared a workshop with Andrea Vanni. Bartolo was responsible for the cycle of Old Testament scenes in the Collegiate church of San Gimignano while Vanni painted the famous portrait of Catherine at San Domenico.

Domenico di Bartolo. c.1400-1447

The nephew of Taddeo di Bartolo. Style influenced by Masaccio, Donatello and Jacopo della Quercia. Responsible for most of the scenes in the Pilgrims' Hall at Santa Maria della Scala. His Madonna of Humility (Pinacoteca) marks him out as an exponent of Sienese Renaissance art

Sassetta (Stefano di Giovanni) 1392?-1450

(name given to him in 18C) He was considered the most original painter of the early 15C. He challenged the conservatism of the Sienese artistic community, who out of civic pride, had consciously copied the work of the masters: Duccio, the two Lorenzetti and Martini.

Apart from his Adoration of the Magi at the Palazzo Chigi Saraceni, most of his best work is no longer in Siena (Saint Francis in Ecstasy at Villa i Tatti, Adoration at Met. New York, St Francis cutting up his cloak, Nat Gal London, Madonna of the Snow at the Uffizi).

Giovanni di Paolo 1399-1482

Prolific artist profoundly influenced by Gentile da Fabriano and Sassetta. Giovanni was the favourite painter of the Augustinian order. He was a sought after miniaturist in his youth, illustrating The Divine Comedy for Alfonse V of Aragon (1438-44). He may have been Taddeo di Bartolo or Martino di Bartolomeo's pupil, but he was exposed early to Lombard art via his early Milanese patron (Donna Anna Castiglione). His inventive capacity excelled in narrative subjects. Worked for all religious orders in Siena; gifted enough to have been commissioned by Pius II in 1462.

Vecchietta (Lorenzo di Pietro) 1410-1480

All artistic evidence points to his association with the shop of Masolino in Rome from the late 1420s until the early 1430s. He received many commissions from Santa Maria della Scala; he painted an altarpiece for Pius II in Pienza and a number of Biccherna and Gabella covers. From 1465, he worked predominantly as a sculptor. Many artists of the next generation were trained in his workshop: Benvenuto di Giovanni, Francesco di Giorgio Martini and Neroccio de' Landi.

Sano di Pietro 1405-1481

Illuminator of manuscripts and prolific painter, favoured by the Gesuati order, by the Commune, and by the confraternities associated with the Franciscan order. Becomes the interpreter of the iconography of St Bernardino. Likely collaborator of the Master of the Osservanza.

Matteo di Giovanni c.1430 -1495

Born at Borgo San Sepolcro but lived in Siena from 1452. Derived features from Vecchietta and Domenico di Bartolo. Went into partnership with an obscure painter called Giovanni di Pietro. Well enough thought of to be asked with a group of older painters (Sano di Pietro, Giovanni di Paolo and Vecchietta) to paint an altarpiece for the cathedral at Pienza.

Benvenuto di Giovanni 1436-1509

Worked with Vecchietta on frescoes in the Baptistery. His son was Girolamo di Benvenuto (1470-1524)

Francesco di Giorgio Martini 1439-1501

Most extraordinary artistic personality of second half of century, equally gifted as sculptor, architect, military engineer, painter and theorist. In constant demand. Trained in Vecchietta's workshop. Responsible from 1477 for design and construction of Ducal Palace at Urbino for Federigo da Montefeltro. Some of his paintings are at the Pinacoteca in Siena.

Sodoma (Giovanni Antonio Bazzi) 1477-1529

Came to Siena in early 16C, after training in Lombardy. Vasari claims he acquired his nickname because 'he loved little boys more than was decent', however Bazzi's tax return of c.1531 tells a different story, since in it he claimed he had 30 grown-up children. Furthermore he received countless commissions from religious houses and civic authorities, which suggests something other than what Vasari would have us believe. Famous for his fresco cycle of the Life of St Benedict at Mte Oliveto Maggiore; those at San Domenico and at the Oratory of San Bernardino in Siena to name but the most impressive.

Beccafumi (Domenico di Pace) 1486-1551

Assumed his patron's name. With Sodoma, was the other outstanding figure of 16C Sienese painting, but in Beccafumi's case, it was in the Mannerist style. He had been to Rome to study Michelangelo and Raphael. He was also a gifted sculptor and produced the most innovative scenes for the Cathedral pavements.

Selected Reading

Diana Norman, Siena and the Virgin: Art and Politics in a Late Medieval City State, Yale University Press, 1999. An important study of late medieval Sienese Marian art, which considers the political, economic and cultural context.

John White, Art and Architecture in Italy 1250-1400, Yale University Press/Pelican History of Art, 1992. Useful, if one accepts the predominance of stylistic analysis as opposed to a broader, contextual approach.

Luke Syson, et al., Renaissance Siena: Art for a City, National Gallery Co Ltd, 2007

Judith Hook, Siena: a City and its History, Hamish Hamilton, 1979. Good introduction to the politics, society and culture of the city up to the mid 16th century.

Daniel Waley, Siena and the Sienese in the Thirteenth Century, Cambridge University Press 1991. Portrays the life of the city republic's institutions and those who ran them.

K. Christiansen et al., Painting in Renaissance Siena 1420-1500m, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1988. Beautiful photography enhances this scholarly tome.

Andrew Martindale, Simone Martini, Phaidon 1988. Still the definitive monograph, though heated debates continue to rage. (Out of print)



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, detail of 'Good Government', Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, 1338-40