

## Lauding the Locality: Urban Architecture in Medieval Sienee Painting

by Robert Galantucci

*In no other painting tradition do we find architecture represented with such a tender intimacy, figures juxtaposed against the deep space of street or interior with such a freshness of compositional invention.<sup>1</sup>*

In the twelfth century, Siena was no longer part of the Etruscan or Roman empires; it had gained its independence as an autonomous city-state. With fierce competition from its powerful neighbor Florence and its anti-imperial rivals, the Guelfs, Siena was faced with political and economic warfare from its very creation as a self-governing territory. As a result of this external pressure, the city developed an intense patriotism. This civic sentiment can be seen in the city's architectural presentation, as well as in the depictions thereof, which remained key subject matter in Sienee art for the rest of the city's history.

Beginning with Guido da Siena's *Cruxifixion*, which featured Siena-inspired architecture, urban cityscapes became a consistent subject of medieval Sienee painting. This new concern among the arts is described by author Judith Hook as an exploration of "the way in which man inhabits the buildings he constructs... [and] in the actual building process by which the urban environment was created."<sup>2</sup> As seen in the work of Duccio, followed by Simone Martini, and culminating with Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegories of the Good and Bad Government*, architectural forms and depictions of the commune itself were shown in Siena's art as a vehicle to exalt the city. Looking into the backdrops of medieval art compositions, it becomes obvious that portraying the commune was an opportunity artists seized to portray their communities and their participation in public life. While Siena's art was still far from the naturalism that came to be in the Renaissance revival of aesthetic tastes from antiquity, a new emphasis on being accurate to reality was evident.<sup>3</sup> This development was manifested in a 'social realism' wherein the artists were unwilling to separate their livelihoods from the art they produced. Painters, sculptors, and architects alike were part of the guild systems and the commune; the relationship between an artist and Siena was one through which he or she was willing to articulate the ideals and aspirations of his city, since almost every aspect of life was intimately bound with the collective life of the city around him.<sup>4</sup> Unlike in the fifteenth century when artists were seen as individualists, thirteenth and fourteenth century painters were active citizens with civic responsibilities and allegiances. The patriotic

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<sup>1</sup> Hayden B.J. Maginnis, *The World of the Early Sienee Painter* (University Park Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Hook, *Siena, A City and Its History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), 119.

<sup>3</sup> The Byzantine tradition in Italian art made no attempt to depict the earthly world. Because the subject matter was usually religious and the characters divinities, the trend was often to illustrate these scenes in fantastic settings, as opposed to the Renaissance's return to science and reason, thus more rational settings. (for example, cities and farms, not heavenly or imagined, golden backgrounds).

<sup>4</sup> Hook, 101.

attitude present in medieval Siena encouraged illustrations of urban settings with details attributable to Siena and the way of life in the city. Communal values, and in turn the physical community itself, was so much a part of Sienese culture that its aesthetic representation was inevitable. At the advent of Renaissance, establishing an accurate and rational setting within an artwork was already a predominant trend; however this phenomenon manifested itself in an especially intimate way in the art of pre-fifteenth century Siena. As nationalistic sentiment in the medieval age dramatically increased, painters in Siena began to put more emphasis on the subject matter that appealed most to the both the people and the patrons – the city itself.

Painters in Siena were artisans whose salaries greatly varied, from the wealthy Ambrogio Lorenzetti to the poor and relatively unknown Guido Ciniatti. In a community that was willing to put so much emphasis on appearance and decoration, painters were in high demand for both private and civic commissions. Also, on account of Siena's ruling body, the Counsel of the Nine, and their apparent obsession with urban renewal and urban aesthetics, physical location became a key element in future painting. In this modernizing medieval period, wherein the city prospered greatly, the painting guild became an economic force just as its blacksmith, merchant and assorted guild counterparts did. As art historian Hayden Maginnis observes:

...the wealth of Siena had been created by joint ventures, and as the organization of everything from government to confraternities to pious bequests expressed the conviction that collective effort was of greatest efficacy, so painters understood the benefits of alliance.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the strong presence of the guild systems, nationalism was also present in the visual art employment statutes of the city. Artists from abroad were required to pay a fee in advance if they operated in Siena, and local artists were discouraged from seeking foreign assistants.<sup>6</sup> Providing jobs for its own citizenry, and allowing Siena's art to remain entirely Sienese—in subject matter, patron, and artist—were two goals that the medieval government held paramount. Also contributing to the close relationship within the city-state's labor organizations, the various professionals, including the painters, generally resided in one geographical location. It is in this context that the so called 'schools' of painting were to develop. Siena's artists were not only partners in guilds – they were also members of the same *contradas* (street divisions). Essentially, they were neighbors.

Duccio di Buoninsegna, as the city's foremost painter, acclaimed as the father of the Sienese school of post-Byzantine painting, was given what is arguably the most

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<sup>5</sup> Maginnis, 91.

<sup>6</sup> Maginnis, 85.

significant civic commission for a painting in the commune's name, the *Maesta* (Fig 1).<sup>7</sup> Art before this point in Siena's history was concerned above all with the sacred relationship between God and Man and its associated iconography. Duccio's representation of the Virgin brought a new secondary focus into mainstream painting, the role of Mary as 'protector' of the city. The religious content of art, and the impact that it was forever to have on the city's aesthetics, cannot by any means be overlooked; conversely, the new nationalistic mindset insisted that religion could serve the commune. As scholar Frederick Seymour wrote:

The conception of the mission of Art, hitherto limited to one purely religious...seems widening to open a fresh chapter, to be concerning herself with the moral character of man, with his development in this mortal sphere[his daily life].<sup>8</sup>

Hook notes that separation between church and state was a foreign idea in the Middle Ages, writing, "the lines between the sacred and the secular were blurred or nonexistent," and this close relationship between religion and government was evident in civic art.<sup>9</sup> Moving toward these ends, Duccio treated civilization itself as a vital subject, worthy of the same focus that spirituality also held in art.

**Figure 1**



<sup>7</sup> Enzo Carli, *Sienese Painting* (New York: Scala Books, 1983), 10-1.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Seymour, *Siena and Her Artists* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907), 130.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Cole, *Sienese Painting From Its Origins to the Fifteenth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers Inc., 1980), 43.

The communal values and duties of the Siennese were fully applicable to the artists; for instance, the city Council of the Nine instructed Duccio di Buoninsegna to locate water and then place wells in the most applicable locations.<sup>10</sup> Even Siena's most reputable and in-demand painter was not exempt from his commitment to the commune. One duty, the one to his city, logically influenced his other obligations as a painter, thus Duccio's apparent initiative in including Siennese characteristics in his compositions. One cannot deny the distinctive presence of his city in both his everyday life and in his paintings. *The Maesta*, a commissioned work and an excellent example of the Civic Christianity<sup>11</sup> that was so popular in Siena, serves as a constant reminder that Siena was a city of the Virgin and as such, sacred and secular matters often overlapped. After all, the citizenry insisted that it was the strength of both the commune and the Virgin that had allowed Siena to overcome Florence in the battle of Montaperti.<sup>12</sup> In *The Temptation* panel of the painting (Fig 2), Christ is being lured by Satan to control all kingdoms of the world. In Duccio's depiction, one sees several rather generic hilltop cities, but under closer scrutiny a reference to Siena is observable. Historian Timothy Hyman asserts:

The dark brick roads leading in under the city gates are painted in transparent burnt sienna – a pigment refined from the reddish clay out of which the city itself is built... [it] also provided the graded pinks of the roof tiles.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 2**



In this instance, the artist had no choice but to indicate his city's appearance, for he was using a natural pigment that was exclusive to his location. Nevertheless, elsewhere on

<sup>10</sup> Hook, 27, 103.

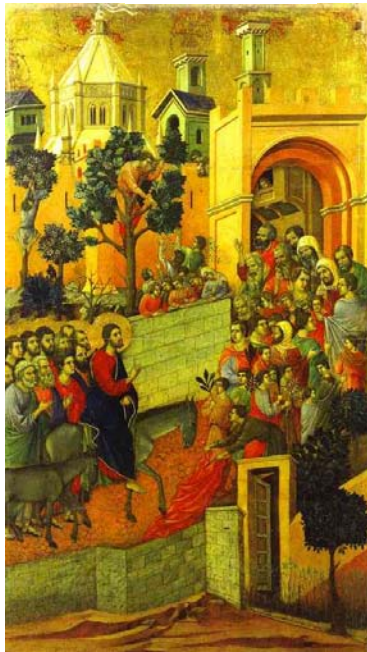
<sup>11</sup> So-called 'Civic Christianity' is a term used to define the relationship between religion and the state in Siena; the dichotomy between the two is a result of the Siena's firmly religious nature as well as its sympathies to the empire.

<sup>12</sup> John White, *Duccio: Tuscan Art and the Medieval Workshop* (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 95.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Hyman, *Siennese Painting The Art of a City Republic* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 9.

the *Maesta*, Siena, without a doubt, is manifested in the painting intentionally. For example, the panels *Entry into Jerusalem* (Fig 3) and *Healing of the Blind Man* (Fig 4) both exhibit characteristics of Sienese architecture such as open and closed balconies with wooden supports; in Curt Weigelt's words, Duccio enriched his paintings "with a keen perception of his surroundings, even in small details, while in the superimposed architectural settings we find a striking reminder of the stages of the Mysteries."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Duccio was the same citizen who was fined for not appearing at a mandatory summoning of military forces and obstructing streets and disturbing the peace, but that did not hinder his paying tribute to the commune in his art.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**



In spite of the acclaim Duccio received both in the medieval age and in the modern era, his life was not one of excessive luxury or leisure. Unlike the treatment that Renaissance painters were to receive years later, Siena's artists under The Nine were laborers. Social mobility was a possibility, and artists ranged from self-taught wall painters to masters who were fortunate enough to own a shop and have pupils working for them. The aesthetic concerns of the commune did undergo drastic changes, and in response the appreciation for the artist also increased.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps another professional, one that could be more easily replaced, would not have fared so well when facing scrutiny for failing to perform his civic duty. In that regard the city's best artists were

<sup>14</sup> Curt Weigelt, *Sienese Painting of the Trecento* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1974), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Maginnis, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Regarding the City Counsel's general emphasis on aesthetics see Hook's *Siena*. For specific legislations requiring citizens to comply with certain visual elements in architectural structures see Duccio Balestracci and Gabriella Piccinni, *Siena Nel Trecento: Assetto urbano e strutture edilizie*, edizioni clusf (Florence, It: Cooperativa Libreria Universitatis Studii Florentini) and W. M. Bowsky, *The Finance of the Commune of Siena 1287-1355* (Oxford:1970), 20.

avored. But the city did come first, and with that in mind the administration certainly was not going to hinder the most talented artisans from creating an artwork by which the commune could gain much fame. This ‘Common Good’ could not be escaped in any aspect of civic life, and even Duccio’s rebellious spirit and distant travels could not cleave him from his Sienese roots. Artists lived among the other workers, and painters often lived in the immediate vicinity of other painters.<sup>17</sup> Because of the strong communal sentiment, Sienese painting, even sacred subject matter such as the *Maesta*, is not void of Siena’s civic presence. The painters, their guild affiliates, and more generally the other citizens, had one goal: to produce acknowledgement of their city’s greatness. As historian Lodovico Zdekauer writes, they “lived to earn their living; they lived for their trades, for their children, and above all, for their country.”<sup>18</sup>

Duccio is often lauded for his accurate portrayal of urban settings. However, while his work certainly contains elements consistent with the appearance of medieval Siena, it is also fair to say that he was not purely realistic. Where Duccio allowed local factors to influence his work, he was not making a concerted effort to reproduce the specific scenery of his surroundings.<sup>19</sup> The first Sienese painter actually to visit, on multiple occasions, the places he was commissioned to paint, was Simone Martini.<sup>20</sup> Art historian Cecilia Jannella explains that Simone’s process enabled him to be “very accurate in his depictions of town scenes and details: arcades, mullioned windows and rooftops (and also the interior of a house) [all] offer us a very realistic picture of 14<sup>th</sup>-century Siena.”<sup>21</sup> Martini’s role in Sienese civic life is significant to his production of works depicting diverse social classes. He held the position loosely defined as “official painter of the city”, and he continued to be commissioned by the commune to depict subject territories.<sup>22</sup> Simone’s work on the Northeast wall in the Sala del Mappamondo of the Palazzo Pubblico (Fig 5) is a testament to his ability to record feats of the administration’s foreign policy. These secular commissions were executed for 38 lire and 8 soldi—quite low compared to other remunerations of the time.<sup>23</sup> It is probably fair to assume that the administration itself deemed what the appropriate payment would be. A wealthy and established artist, Martini would have accepted the commission simply for yet another opportunity to engage in high-visibility civic work.

As an important member of the art world, both in Siena and abroad, Simone Martini was able, effectively and confidently, to combine the French Gothic style with his local architectural conventions. The *Altarpiece of Blessed Agostino Novello* (Fig 6), which was done after he returned to Siena, appeals to a sense of community and religious fervor. The architecture, as Frederick Hart writes, “wood-grain balconies, nail studded doors, and views into staircase halls recapture the Siena of Simone’s day.”<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the scene illustrates a real democratizing ingredient to his art. The upper left panel, *A Child Attacked by a Wolf* (Fig 7), includes a background view of the city from outside the crenellated walls. Included are assorted styles of architecture in a compact version of a

<sup>17</sup> Maginnis, 193.

<sup>18</sup> Lodovico Zdekauer, *The Life of Old Siena* (Siena: Tipografia Sociale, 1914), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Hyman, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Cecilia Jannella, *Simone Martini* (Italy: Scala/Riverside, 1989), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Maginnis 14, 124-9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1987), 100-1.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



city which in many ways is reminiscent of Siena. The setting of the scene immediately beneath it is where Simone's willingness to depict his commune without an upper-class bias becomes evident. The saint is not in a courtly bourgeois setting; he is on the streets with the company of typical and modest citizens. Even as one of Siena's most affluent artists, Simone did not lose sight of the importance of all classes within society, and it is this nationalism that he exhibits in this painting. He allows the city itself to be a co-protagonist in the good deeds of a religious man.<sup>25</sup>

Further interest in urban realities can be observed in several small commissions done by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. These works were not as politically or socially motivated as his more celebrated works done in the Palazzo Pubblico, however they show his desire to delve into recreating the world in which he lived. The *St. Nicholas Predellas* (Fig 8) are splendid examples of the artist emphasizing the interaction between humans and their milieu. While perspective had not yet become precise and realistic, the settings are convincing enough to make the viewer feel as though he or she were inside the rooms with the figures. Moreover, the houses do not seem simply to be sliced open; they are increasingly naturalistic. Observing all of the panels at once, one can see that the architecturally-framed compositions are what allow the different narratives to remain cohesive despite various settings.<sup>26</sup> On a more macro scale, Lorenzetti also depicted cities from a birds eye view to capture how entire communities interact with their environments. Enzo Carli argues that *Seascape* and *City by the Sea* (Fig 9) are either records of Sienese territory holds that may be part of a larger image or adornments for a coffer; most importantly, these two images are thought to be Western art's first isolated examples of landscape painting.<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 8**



**Figure 9**



<sup>25</sup> Jannella, 62.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Cole, *Sienese Painting From its Origins to the Fifteenth Century* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980), 148-50.

<sup>27</sup> Carli, 46.



Nowhere in Siena's art was the commune more exalted than in Lorenzetti's frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico. The everyday occurrences of the city were depicted by order of the Nine, and they are known as the *Well-Governed City* and the *Ill-Governed City Frescoes* [detail] (10/11 respectively), appearing in the very chamber where the administration met. According to the city as Lorenzetti depicts it, when a government is effective, the citizenry is employed and active, and patrons and architects are no exception. In the Bad Government section, buildings are crumbling and the city is a trap. The city's walls, usually devices to protect the citizens from external threats are now no longer effective, stealing is taking place inside the city, and all of the extensive efforts The Nine had made to beautify the city are deteriorating.

**Figure 10**



**Figure 11**



*The Fresco of The Good Government* immediately draws attention to the degree to which Lorenzetti was able to epitomize the appearance of medieval Siena. As Frederick Seymour writes, “were Ambrogio to return to his Siena again, he would have no difficulty in finding his way about her streets.”<sup>28</sup> Most artists who incorporated cityscapes into their work were attentive enough to observe simple structural facts and color hues common to Siena, but Lorenzetti’s detail achieved an unprecedented precision. Even the most subtle of architectural features are depicted truthfully. The accuracy of the balconies, porches, and upper-storey additions to the houses’ brick facades can all be confirmed by parallels to the study of Siennese architecture by Duccio Balestracci and Gabriella Piccinni.<sup>29</sup> The wooden *sporti*, the materials, and even the growing favor of round arch supports are clearly documented.<sup>30</sup> Typical concerns with building can also be observed; for example, the city strictly limited the use of *tettoie* and wood roofing in fear of fires and required certain workshops to have brick ceilings.<sup>31</sup> Even habits that are characteristic of Siennese life, such as laundry hanging from windows, are documented in the Good Government frescoes.<sup>32</sup> To tell the viewer that this city is most certainly Siena, Ambrogio placed the she-wolf, the official emblem of Siena at the point where the urban area of the city meets the landscape.<sup>33</sup> In addition, Talamone, Siena’s commercial port can be seen in the sea far off in the distance. Judging by these frescoes, artists plainly were patronized by the commune to show the good deeds and achievements of the leaders.

Although it was forbidden, Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s frescoes portray nine women dancing in a circle, celebrating peace and righteous governing. Hyman suggests that to Lorenzetti they represent “a fundamental image of social well-being – *the dolce vitae riposata*, the *bonhuer de vivre*, that follows from communal freedom and justice.”<sup>34</sup> These women celebrate the excellent state of their community, while men on the rooftops are furiously building another fine specimen of architecture for the city. Under The Council of the Nine, the citizens were undoubtedly going to have a presentable city; every aspect of architecture and urban planning was addressed legally. The aesthetically ideal city that the council aimed to create was precisely what Lorenzetti reproduced in the *Well-Governed City*.

Architecture, which was once a background feature of painting, became a vital element to the composition of paintings and the functioning of society. The city, literally, was an element of Siennese life, truly created and maintained in the name of the Common Good. When Siennese painting was once largely focused on the Byzantine tradition of a purely religious art, setting was of little importance. However, when the populous firmly established a unified identity in the thirteenth century, secular concerns began to arise more prominently in art and architecture. For the painting guild, the city of Siena was not only commissioning much of their work; it also became an archetypal subject matter.

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<sup>28</sup> Seymour, 133.

<sup>29</sup> Duccio Balestracci and Gabriella Piccinni, *Siena Nel Trecento: Assetto urbano e strutture edilizie*, edizioni clusf (Florence, It: Cooperativa Libreria Universitatis Studii Florentini).

<sup>30</sup> Duccio Balestracci and Gabriella Piccinni, 91-2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> G Chierci, “La casa senese al tempo di Dante”, *Bulletino Senese di Stonz Parcia* XXVIII (1921), 355.

<sup>33</sup> Timothy Hyman argues that the Cathedral, which would have also been unmistakably Siena’s, was added later by a different artist.

<sup>34</sup> Hyman, 84.

Duccio initiated this trend by portraying Mary as a regional protector, and by integrating Sienese characteristics into the setting of his biblical narratives. Developed by Simone Martini, among others, and then ultimately epitomized by the work of Ambrogio Lorenzetti, the artistic community, and its patrons, paid tribute to the commune.

In the Frescoes of *Good and Ill Government* the condition of living for Sienese people, and the state of their architecture, appear to be parallel with each other. If the government failed to do its duty and exalt the Common Good, and did not maintain a strong communal morality, the people and their homes would similarly decay. Sienese medieval painting exhibited a shift in emphasis away from Byzantine ethereal backgrounds, towards more earthly settings. Artists began to strive to imitate the most beautiful known aesthetics of the physical world, meaning that for Sienese painters, the depiction of their city's architecture inevitable.

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