Renaissance Siena
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Abbreviations

ASF  Archivio di Stato, Florence
ASS  Archivio di Stato, Siena
CG   Concistoro Generale
Spannocchi  Archivio Privato Sergardi-Biringucci-Spannocchi
Acknowledgments

This project has been a long time in the making. It began as a session at the 86th annual conference of the College Art Association (CAA) in 1998 and has, in several different incarnations, inched towards publication ever since. My greatest debt of gratitude goes, therefore, to the contributors to this volume: they have been very patient and ever cheerful about the revisions, updates, and delays we have encountered and overcome together.

This collection found its home as a part of the Sixteenth Century Studies and Essays series in the fall of 2004, and I am deeply grateful to Raymond Mentzer, the series’s general editor, for his enthusiastic support for our project. The essays in this book have been improved by the constructive comments of several anonymous readers, and I am very grateful to all of them. Sheryl Reiss was gracious enough to shed her anonymity as a reader, and her careful and thoughtful reading of the manuscript proved invaluable to me and the contributors to this volume. I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the editors and staff at the Truman State University Press; I am especially grateful for the patience with which they guided me, an untried editor, through the complex process of bringing a book of collected essays to fruition.

There are many institutions that assisted the individual contributors to this volume and they are acknowledged in each essay; however, I would like to thank those who offered me invaluable assistance as the book’s editor, especially the staff at the Earl K. Long library at the University of New Orleans and most particularly its interlibrary loan department, as well as Michael Rocke, Fiorella Superbi, and their assistants at the Biblioteca Berenson at Villa I Tatti (the Harvard University Center for Renaissance Studies) in Florence. I am also grateful to Pamela Edwardes, formerly of Ashgate Press, who first saw the value in this project and suggested collecting together those now long-ago CAA papers in a single volume.

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A. Lawrence Jenkens
December 2004
New Orleans
Did Siena have a renaissance? As recently as 1994 a historian of late medieval Siena wrote about the city in the fifteenth century, “All sectors of Sienese life reflected this economic lethargy, including urban planning. Again, no changes or noteworthy additions to the architectural fabric of the city are to be found…. The urban restructuring that characterized numerous other contemporary Italian cities had no significant impact upon Siena.”¹ Although Duccio Balestracci is here referring to urban planning in particular, his remarks reflect a broad consensus that has governed historical attitudes towards the Sienese Renaissance at least until the last twenty years or so. Indeed, many scholars assert that Siena had no true renaissance, even when they speak of Renaissance Siena, and this is especially true when they equate that period with the artistic and architectural styles that developed in fifteenth-century Florence.

This volume will argue on behalf of a renaissance in Siena, first by restating the definition of a renaissance, and then by looking at specific works of art or architectural commissions and understanding them, not only as pale reflections of Florentine ideas and styles, but also within the political, social, economic, and cultural context of Siena itself. The following essays will address this latter task, which is often more daunting than one might suppose. This introduction will consider what it means to talk about the Renaissance in Siena. And if indeed Siena had a renaissance, as it seems it did, then it becomes important to construct a framework for the issues that define the work of scholars interested in that city in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. What follows, then, is not so much an exhaustive review of the literature on Renaissance Siena, but a consideration of the state of research in this area of Italian fifteenth- and sixteenth-century studies. It is important, too, to situate the book within the field since in many ways it both reflects current scholarly trends and points the way to the future.

Interest in Siena during the Renaissance, a period most often defined as stretching from about 1400 to the city’s incorporation into the Grand Duchy of Tuscany in 1555, has blossomed in recent years. This seems to be part of a more

general trend in Italian Renaissance studies to look beyond the center (Florence in the fifteenth century and Rome and Venice in the sixteenth) to the periphery: the smaller cities and towns that fill the map of Italy between its principal cities. The notion of periphery is, however, more than geographical; it extends to the arena of ideas and art. Thus the cultural production of cities like Siena has been judged by the degree to which it successfully emulated the models produced at the center. The more it differed from that model, the less value it had. As a consequence, the cultural production of peripheral cities has often been passed over or, at best, treated summarily in the context of Renaissance studies.

The study of Siena in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has been further discouraged by the great attention focused on the city’s late medieval period. The last decades of the thirteenth century and the first half of the next century represent Siena’s golden age. Under the government of the Nove (1287–1355), the city enjoyed unprecedented political stability and economic prosperity, and its merchant bankers were players not just a regional but also an international stage. As Siena flourished, its government worked to refashion the city’s fabric and thus its identity. Siena’s cathedral was given a magnificent new façade, and the city fathers dreamed of expanding the building to make it one of the largest churches in Italy—the shell of the Duomo Nuovo and its unfinished façade still stand adjacent to the cathedral. At the same time, the seat of government, the Palazzo Pubblico, rose quickly on the Piazza del Campo, Siena’s central square. Its three-light Gothic windows provided the legislated model for the windows in all the palaces facing the piazza in an attempt to create a harmonious whole at the heart of the city’s political life.

Extraordinary achievements in the figural arts also define the Sienese Gothic period. When Duccio di Buoninsegna’s monumental altarpiece for the Duomo—his superb Maestà—was finished in 1311, it was taken to the cathedral in a public procession. The Virgin and Child enthroned reaffirmed Siena’s special relationship with the Mother of God, and her role as the city’s queen and protector was reiterated in the political sphere by Simone Martini’s frescoed Maestà in the council chamber in the Palazzo Pubblico. The inscription on Martini’s work represents the Virgin’s own exhortation to the members of the government to rule her city wisely in her place. The benefits of wise governance, as well as the dangers of a bad regime, are most famously represented in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s frescoed allegory

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5The Gothic in Siena and in Italy generally is more difficult to define stylistically than it is in the north of Europe. Indeed, the term has come to suggest as much a period of time—the late Middle Ages—as any coherent visual style. There are, however, some common stylistic characteristics among the works of art and buildings of late medieval Siena, that might, in general, be thought of as a Sienese Gothic style.
of Good and Bad Government in the chamber of the Nove, the nerve center, as it were, of the city’s government. Indeed, Lorenzetti’s paintings have come to represent a visual summa of the philosophy of Italian republicanism in the latter part of the Middle Ages.7

The cultural greatness of Siena in the first half of the fourteenth century and the city’s failure to produce works of art in the Florentine mode in the following century have resulted in the idea that the city and its patrons were conservative, holding onto the visible vestiges of the past as if in so doing they could in some way recreate the stability and prosperity of a bygone time.8 For example, in Judith Hook’s popular history of Siena—still the layperson’s best introduction to the city’s history and culture—she confronts the “conservatism of Sienese art in the Renaissance,” giving voice to the traditional concern over the “conscious rejection of the Florentine manner” by Sienese artists who instead seemed willing to embrace the Gothic:

It was inevitable that Sienese artists and, for that matter, Sienese patrons, should be responsive to and influenced by, not only their Florentine and Umbrian contemporaries, but also their own great artists whose works they had always before their eyes…. It was clearly difficult for the Sienese artist to escape from traditional styles and indeed doubtful that he ever wanted to. Largely because the Sienese did think with their eyes they eschewed the radical, which the Florentines positively welcomed. It was this which gave to Sienese culture a sense of continuity, of a single development pursued by the whole community, and it was for this reason that Sienese humanism remained a largely academic exercise, whereas in Florence it found practical application in painting, sculpture, and architecture.9

Stated within its traditional parameters, then, the problem in Siena during the Renaissance is of a culture mired in its own past and therefore only partially receptive to contemporary ideas, be they in the visual arts or elsewhere. And while one might debate the reasons for this situation, the end result has always been clear. A flower of the late Middle Ages, Siena’s bloom faded in the fifteenth century, and its root stock was never again strong enough to compete with the Renaissance as it blossomed, first in Florence and then in Rome.

The foundation of this argument is the preferential status given by art historians to Florentine culture from the beginning of the fifteenth century. The earliest historians of Italian art, and especially Giorgio Vasari, who came from central Italy, suggest that the city enjoyed a sort of cultural hegemony. The city’s predominance in fifteenth-century Italy was in many ways made implicit by Jacob Burckhardt, the great nineteenth-century historian and father of Italian Renaissance studies.10 Yet

this was not so clearly the case in the 1400s. Florence enjoyed a position of economic prominence in Italy in the late medieval period, but politically it was only one of many players on the Italian peninsula and not always the most important. Florentine artistic output in the fifteenth century was impressive and influential, but it is unlikely that artists who worked elsewhere—Gentile da Fabriano or Antonio Pisanello in North Italy and Vecchietta and Jacopo della Quercia in Siena, to name but a few—believed that their style was out of date or that they were reflecting a more perfect mode of expression that was developing in Florence. It seems to be historical hindsight that identifies the work of artists like Donatello and Masaccio as the true path to the High Renaissance (Vasari’s “modern manner,” including the work of Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo), a grand tradition that would dominate western art until the end of the nineteenth century. Using this standard to judge the art of Siena—or any other Italian city—one finds what appears to be a pale reflection of modernity, an art that stubbornly resisted contemporary trends to bury itself in a past more glorious than its present could hope to be. By understanding that artists in Siena during the Renaissance were part of a dynamic dialogue that was shaped by the needs and circumstances of the time, then the art of Siena’s golden age and of the Florentine Renaissance become but possible styles to draw upon rather than an absolute standard by which to judge later works.\footnote{For a further discussion of archaism in the Italian Renaissance, see Alexander Nagel, Michelangelo and the Reform of Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 83–113.}

If the term “renaissance,” literally the rebirth of classical civilization, was originally associated strongly, if not exclusively, with a post-medieval Florentine culture, in more recent times it has become a catchall phrase to describe the whole of Italy and much of the rest of Europe during the period between the Middle Ages and the modern era. The word now denotes a broad chronological period across a wide geographical area, but often means little more than that.\footnote{In recent times many scholars of the Renaissance, and especially those who work outside Italy and outside the field of art history, have begun to use the term “early modern” instead, a change in nomenclature that presumably frees them from the baggage that accompanies ingrained ideas about what the Renaissance is.} What, then, does it mean to talk about a renaissance in Siena? The answer is difficult, and disagreement is likely among scholars who work on Renaissance Siena. In order to place the essays in this volume in context, the fifteenth and much of the sixteenth centuries in Siena can be described as experiencing a renaissance in the sense that the city, like so many others in Italy, underwent important cultural changes fueled, at least in part, by a revival of classical learning.\footnote{See, for example, Hook, Siena, 149.} The patterns of change are not exactly like those that took place in Florence, although the reception of a Florentine style certainly influenced the Siene artists during the Renaissance. Perhaps, then, this development, and on the related discipline of the history of Italian art has been the subject of interesting debate. See, for example, Michael Ann Holly, Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), esp. 21–68; Felix Gilbert, History: Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); John Hinde, “Jacob Burckhardt and Art History: Two New Interpretations,” Storia di storia 26 (1994): 119–23; and Riccardo Fubini, “Considerazioni su Burckhardt: Il libro sul Rinascimento in Italia,” Archivio storico italiano 158 (2000): 85–118.
period in Siena was shaped not so much by whether its artists understood and could reproduce the “better” mode of Florentine art, but rather by when Sienese artists became attracted to Florentine art and why their work did not look exactly like that model.

**The Historiography of Renaissance Siena**

Historians have long been interested in Siena, although their attention has focused traditionally on the late medieval rather than the Renaissance period. This interest has yielded many important studies that elucidate the city’s social and political structure, its institutions of government, and its economic underpinnings. The issues of what Siena looked like, how it grew, and how its public buildings were decorated during the Gothic period have also received important attention: Millard Meiss’s *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* and Nicolai Rubinstein’s “Political Ideas in Sienese Art” for example, are landmark studies in the relationship among the arts, the affairs of state, and the social contexts of both.

The history of Renaissance Siena has recently begun to receive more attention, both from Italian and international scholars. Their problem, at least at first, was to overcome the longstanding sense that the city’s history after the fourteenth century was one of decline and thus less interesting than its golden age. Ferdinand Schevill phrased this prejudice most eloquently in the short chapter on the “Twilight of Siena” in his 1909 *Siena, the Story of a Mediaeval Commune*:

The mediaeval commune, the history of which I set out to trace, perished with the spread of the new civilization bearing the name of the Renaissance. In a formal sense, indeed, the republic of Siena lived far into the new period, but it led a maimed existence, at the mercy of circumstance, and without that splendid vigor which distinguished it in those strictly mediaeval centuries…. It was precisely because the town in its creative period exhibited an irrepressible activity and developed an attractive and original civilization that we of another age are content to follow its fortunes and to linger over its works. For the same reason the Age of the Renaissance, a period of unarrested decline, has but a weak claim on our interest. Still, whoever has followed with sympathy the rise and culmination of this original and perplexing people will not rest until he has given himself the melancholy satisfaction of viewing also the end.

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14Certainly the work of William M. Bowsky stands out among the English language literature on Siena in the late medieval period. See above, notes 2 and 3. Even though it is now out of date, it is still worth turning to Bowsky’s introduction to the 1964 edition of Ferdinand Schevill’s *Siena, the History of a Mediaeval Commune* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), which offers a succinct and still illuminating appraisal of the state of the research on this period.


Contributors

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