

Siena in the 1400s

Only about fifty miles separate Florence and Siena. However, as we move from the Florentine pictures in the adjoining room to these painted during the same period in Siena, we might believe we have stepped through time, not space. The gold backgrounds, the rich pattern and tooled detail, the saints and angels standing in formation—all seem more at home in the late Middle Ages than in the early Renaissance.

Though they did not rush to embrace them, Siennese artists were aware of the innovations in Florentine painting. They experimented with its naturalism, its solid, three-dimensional forms, its one-point perspective, and eventually its secular outlook—but their paintings remain distinctly Siennese. On some level artists may have eschewed outside innovations as their own city's economic and political fortunes declined. Certainly their patrons continued to expect works that were in keeping with an older Siennese tradition. For more than one hundred years the powerful legacy of early fourteenth-century masters like Duccio and Simone Martini (see Gallery 3) sustained a preference for color and pattern, refinement and decoration. These artists' venerable images decorated the city's churches and public buildings, remaining part of the fabric of life. Saint Bernardino, a contemporary of the artists here, exhorted listeners to emulate the humility of a Virgin painted by Simone Martini. Such authority discouraged radical departures in style.

Devotion to the Virgin—and her images—was strong. She was Siena's patron saint and appeared on the city's coins. Her veneration had an important civic component, and in Siena artistic patronage was a largely civic enterprise. Into the 1400s many commissions were still communal, funded by the city or religious fraternities. Humanism, which had fueled demand for secular subjects and increased private patronage in Florence, came late to Siena.



Domenico di Bartolo

Siennese, about 1400–1447

Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saint Peter and Saint Paul, about 1430

In the early 1400s, the Siennese artist most influenced by the new Florentine style of painting was Domenico di Bartolo. He was, in fact, the only Siennese painter of his day to receive commissions from Florentine clients.

This small panel is one of the first in Siena to reflect the innovations of the Florentine painter Masaccio. Masaccio used light and perspective to give his figures weight and three-dimensionality, a sense of being *in* a space rather than simply *on* a painted surface. Domenico lit his scene from a source that comes strongly and consistently from the upper left, giving his Virgin and child a tactile reality. Their halos, tilted in perspective, help define the space. So does the niche behind them, which is inspired by ancient architecture.

Domenico's use of light, perspective, and classical motifs suggest that he painted this after seeing the work of Masaccio and others in Florence. He is unlikely to have studied there, however; other elements of his work are typically Siennese, for example, the bright pastel pinks for the niche. Domenico's experiments were not taken up by his contemporaries, but they did influence artists in the next generation.

Tempera (?) on panel, 53 x 31 cm (20 ⁷/₈ x 12 ³/₁₆ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.3



Sano di Pietro

Siennese, 1405–1481

Madonna and Child with Saint Jerome, Saint Bernardino, and Angels, about 1460/1470

In the mid-1400s, Sano di Pietro's workshop was the busiest in Siena. He and his assistants produced—we might almost say mass produced—scores of devotional panels like this one, often for religious fraternities. His half-length Madonnas are iconlike, objects for contemplation. Mother and child are surrounded by saints and angels, wreathed by their halos. The bright colors and the rich gold, textured with punched decoration, have a jewellike quality that appealed to the Siennese taste for ornament and luxury. Sano's images met conventional religious expectations as well. This Madonna's wide oval face and narrow almond eyes have the look of a Virgin painted a hundred years earlier.

The saints are Jerome (left) and Bernardino (right). Sano would have seen the latter preaching in the Campo, Siena's central public square. In frescoes, Sano recorded the throngs and festival atmosphere that attended Bernardino's dawn sermons. Here he gives the saint the sunken cheeks of a man who has lost all his teeth to ascetic self-denial.

When first documented as an independent master, Sano was already in his thirties. He seems to have studied in Sassetta's workshop (see Gallery 3) and to have collaborated with the Master of the Osservanza, also associated with Sassetta. It has been suggested that the Master of the Osservanza is, in fact, the young Sano.

Tempera on panel, 64.8 x 43.8 cm (25 ¹/₂ x 17 ¹/₄ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.274



Matteo di Giovanni

Siennese, about 1430–1497

Madonna and Child with Angels and Cherubim, about 1460/1465

In this room are two panels painted early in the career of Matteo di Giovanni. Both share the format of devotional images made popular in Siena by Sano di Pietro, but they also reveal the younger artist's own developing interests in representing space and heightened emotion.

Like Sano's, this panel is enriched with gold. Matteo, too, has framed his mother and child with angels and cherubim, but here the surrounding figures crowd each other and overlap, creating several different planes in the picture space. Matteo's child, unlike the formal and regally clad boy of Sano's picture, is an infant who grasps his mother's fingers. Their contact is more direct—a caress under the chin—and their emotional tie more explicit. The mood, however, is one of wistful melancholy, expressed in the Virgin's lowered eyelids and reflected in the faces of the angels. The crowding of the figures and the disembodied heads of the cherubim contribute an unsettling sense of foreboding. Matteo's later paintings are marked by violent emotion.

Matteo was not born in Siena but probably received most of his training there. His later works also reveal a familiarity with Florentine artists such as Pollaiuolo. A prolific artist, Matteo's reputation among contemporaries outshone that of other artists better known today.

Tempera (?) on panel, 79 x 58 cm (31 ¹/₈ x 22 ¹³/₁₆ in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.9


Benvenuto di Giovanni

Sienese, 1436–before 1517

The Adoration of the Magi, about 1470/1475

Many Italian cities celebrated the feast of Epiphany with elaborate pageants that reenacted the procession of the Three Magi. This panel, a maze of pattern and rich decoration, captures the splendor of these spectacles. Costly brocades and furs adorn the three kings. A page on the right wears a peacock-feather cap; even his horse has an elaborately coiffed mane. Crowns and sword hilts are raised in plaster relief and gilded. The figures crowd the front of the picture plane, but we are separated from the holy figures rather than drawn into their world. The central placement of the Virgin—rather than the Magi—reflects her importance in Siena.

Also in this room are five scenes of the Passion that Benvenuto painted for the *predella* (the lower portion) of a large altarpiece. These small panels reveal his mature style more clearly than the earlier *Adoration*. Unlike the massed figures there, here we see the landscape in which the figures move, the distance behind them. The harsh colors and brittle hardness convey a sensation of an airless, crystalline world. The ground is strewn with smooth, vividly colored stones; probably these jewel-toned beads are borrowed from manuscript illuminations. Benvenuto punctuated his scene with fantasy—look, for example, at the soldier's armor in the scene of Christ carrying the cross. Also typical is his inclusion of such everyday details as the young boys who have climbed a tree for a better view.

Tempera on panel, 182 x 137 cm (71 5/8 x 54 15/16 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.10


Neroccio de' Landi

Sienese, 1447–1500

Portrait of a Lady, about 1485

This is often described as one of the earliest portraits from Renaissance Siena. While humanism and a focus on man and individual accomplishment had helped create a market for portraiture in Florence in the mid 1400s, in Siena it remained rare. There was little demand for private secular art of any kind until the last quarter of the century, when humanism finally asserted itself following the election of Pope Pius II, the former Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini. A member of a prominent Sienese family and noted humanist, he was the first pope to write a true autobiography.

The young woman on this panel has a dreamy and idealized beauty, accented by masses of blond hair. (Saint Bernardino preached against women who bleached their hair in the sun and sat in public squares to dry it.) Her three-quarter pose is unusual; most female portraits in Italy at this date were in profile.

Many portraits were commissioned to commemorate a marriage or betrothal. This woman's loose hairstyle suggests that she is not yet married. She may have been a member of the Bandini family, whose crest of sphere-biting eagles appears around the frame, which is probably original. The flames that alternate with the Bandini crest may be a reference to her future husband, or they may hint that her given name was Fiammetta (related to the word for "blaze").

Tempera on panel, 47 x 30.5 cm (18 1/2 x 12 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.47


Neroccio de' Landi
Claudia Quinta, about 1494

Claudia Quinta embodied the greatest virtues of Roman womanhood—chastity, piety, and fortitude. It had been prophesied that Roman victory in the Second Punic War depended on bringing Cybele, the Anatolian Great Mother goddess, to Rome. But when a ship with her image arrived at the mouth of the Tiber River, it became mired in mud. Strong men were unable to free it. Claudia was a virtuous young matron, falsely accused of impropriety, who had prayed to Cybele for a sign of her innocence. At the goddess's direction she slipped a slender cord over the ship's bow and easily pulled the vessel free.

This painting and *Joseph of Egypt*, also in this room, were part of a set of at least seven works representing paragons of virtue. Such cycles devoted to famous men and women of the past had been popular since the Middle Ages and seemed to enjoy particular favor in Siena. The men and women in this set, taken from ancient literature and the Bible, were renowned for chastity, fortitude, or self-restraint. In civic buildings such cycles usually focused on men of political courage, but because this group contains so many women and concentrates on more "domestic" virtues, it probably decorated a private house.

Tempera on panel, 105 x 46 cm (41 5/16 x 18 1/8 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.12


Girolamo di Benvenuto

Sienese, 1470–1524

Portrait of a Young Woman, about 1508

Girolamo was the son of artist Benvenuto di Giovanni (see far left) and his collaborator. This portrait, one of Girolamo's finest paintings, is among the few in which his individual style can be distinguished. While in his father's workshop, Girolamo—like other assistants—would have suppressed his own style in favor of the master's.

The young woman's crisp silhouette, which creates a decorative, almost abstract play against the flat background, would have been familiar to patrons of Benvenuto. But other aspects of Girolamo's picture depart from his father's style—and from long-standing Sienese tradition. Compare, for example, its warm palette and dark colors with the brighter tones of other paintings here.

Girolamo's pursuit of his father's trade was not unusual. Artists' sons were encouraged to enter their fathers' shops, as were the sons of all craftsmen. It eliminated the need to pay apprentice wages and, in many cities, saved on guild fees, as sons were assessed lower admission. Sons might be expected to display some talent—but this was not necessarily a requirement. Long training produced skilled artisans perfectly capable of meeting clients' demands. Most Renaissance painters and sculptors were from tradesmen's families of one kind or another, if not artists, then related occupations like dyers or masons. A few came from noble families, Neroccio de' Landi for instance. Fewer still were sons of peasants.

Oil on panel, 60 x 45 cm (22 7/8 x 17 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.353