

Painting in Siena in the 14th and Early 15th Centuries

Siena, where most of the works in this room were painted, is dominated even today by its cathedral, a dazzling facade of dark and light stone. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the centerpiece of its interior was a gold and brilliantly colored monumental altarpiece—Duccio’s *Maestà*, panels of which can be seen in a nearby room. Both the fame of the *Maestà*, which drew large numbers of pilgrims to Siena, and Duccio’s influence as a teacher had a long-lived impact on the style of Siennese art. While painters in nearby Florence adopted rounder, more realistic forms, most Siennese artists in the early fourteenth century continued to prefer Duccio’s linear and decorative style, which used gold and strong color to create pattern and rhythm.

Probably among Duccio’s students was Simone Martini, whose reputation led him to work for the French king of Naples and for the pope, then living in Avignon. Through Simone the brilliant colors and rich patterns of Siennese art met the graceful and lyrical figures of French manuscript painting, evolving to form the International Style. Its refined and courtly manner dominated the arts across Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. Simone’s chief competitors in Siena were the brothers Ambrogio and Pietro Lorenzetti, whose influence can also be seen in this room. Like Simone they were probably assistants in Duccio’s workshop, but while Simone painted with refined elegance, the Lorenzetti were concerned with the definition of three-dimensional space, narrative detail, and the depiction of everyday life.

In the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, a greater emphasis on human experience and perceptions prompted artists of many kinds to begin “speaking in the vernacular.” Poets in Sicily invented and perfected the sonnet, and Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy*—not in Latin but Italian. Also for the first time, sermons were given in native Italian dialects by members of influential new religious orders, in particular the Franciscans and Dominicans, who left the shelter of monasteries to preach in cities and towns. Religion focused increasingly on human and humane concerns. The simple virtues of the early Franciscans—who renounced worldly possessions and identified strongly with Christ and his suffering—helped to shift emphasis onto the human nature of Christ and to demand of religious art a new and closer identification with people’s experience. Artists responded by enhancing the sense of particular time and place with detailed settings familiar to their viewers, by expanding the range of gesture and emotion, and by embroidering their narratives with anecdotal details.



Simone Martini
Siennese, c. 1284–1344

The Angel of the Annunciation, c. 1333

This small panel was originally half of a two-part panel made for private devotion. Rich with textured gold and marked by Gabriel’s graceful silhouette, it is typical of Simone’s style.

Note the angel’s ornate robe. In the decades following Marco Polo’s return from China, thousands of caravans traveled the silk route carrying luxurious textiles west. As woven patterns of brocade and damask replaced embroidered and appliqued decoration, Italian cities grew wealthy from textile production and trade. Simone Martini devised new ways to re-create the look of these fabrics, and since much of the original paint of this panel has been lost, it is possible to see his technique. The entire panel, except for the hands and face, was gilded over an underlayer of red. Next Simone painted the angel’s robe in delicate pinks, shadowed with darker tones to define folds and the body. After tracing the outlines of the brocade, he scraped away the paint in the pattern area to reveal the gilding below, and finally textured the gold with tiny punches. This technique may have been inspired by Islamic “sgraffito” (scratched) ceramics, which were imported into Italy.

Tempera on panel, .308 x .216 m (12 1/8 x 8 1/2 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.216



Paolo di Giovanni Fei
Siennese, mentioned 1369–1411

The Presentation of the Virgin, c. 1400

Anne and Joachim were elderly and almost without hope of having children; when an angel announced that Anne would conceive, she promised the child to God’s service. Here, the young Virgin, aged four or five, takes leave of her family to enter the temple. Devotion to the Virgin was especially strong in Siena, where she was patron saint. This panel was probably part of a large altarpiece commissioned for the city’s cathedral, where it would have been seen near Duccio’s own altarpiece dedicated to the Virgin in Majesty, the *Maestà*.

Paolo, following in the tradition of Duccio and Simone Martini, used a brilliant palette—note the mosaiclike impression of his strong colors, which range from cool blues to salmony pinks and glassy greens. At the same time, Paolo has infused his scene with an appealing naturalness—legacy from another Siennese master, Pietro Lorenzetti. Paolo concentrates not on the awe-inspiring majesty of the Virgin, but on the human aspects of her story. The young Virgin pauses on the dais. Her expression as she turns a final time toward her parents is tender and rueful—the genuine response of a child.

Tempera transferred from panel, 1.471 x 1.404 m
(57 7/8 x 55 1/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.4



Gentile da Fabriano
Umbrian, c. 1370–1427

Madonna and Child, c. 1422

With one hand the infant Jesus tethers a butterfly, a traditional symbol of his resurrection, while pointing with the other to the neck of his mother’s dress, where the word *mater* (Latin “mother”) is spelled out in rich embroidery. Gentile’s style, cosmopolitan and refined, reflects his work for princes and wealthy churchmen, as well as the influence of his travels. Born in central Italy, he worked in Venice, Florence, and then Siena before finally following the pope to Rome. Probably this panel was painted shortly after he arrived in Florence—its tooled gold decoration is similar to Florentine work, and the inscriptions point to the city’s humanistic schools.

Its rich colors and textured gold surfaces are typical of the International Style’s decorative and aristocratic manner. Note, for example, the sumptuous fabric of Mary’s sleeve and the wispy angels, barely visible, that are inscribed into the surface of the gold. The silhouette of the mother and child creates a complex and rhythmic line to which the gold-embroidered hem of Mary’s gown (reading *Ave Maria gratia plena*. . . , “Hail Mary full of grace. . .”) curls in a bright counterpoint. Nevertheless, the figures have convincing form and their dainty faces are carefully modeled with shadow and light. Gentile’s contemporaries praised his naturalism.

Tempera on panel, .957 x .565 m (37 11/16 x 22 1/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.255



Andrea di Bartolo

Sieneese, active 1389–1428

Joachim and the Beggars, Nativity of the Virgin, and Presentation of the Virgin, c. 1400

As devotion to the Virgin increased in the late Middle Ages, so did the legends surrounding her life. An entire cycle of stories evolved that loosely paralleled events of Christ's own birth and childhood, and they became popular subjects for artists.

These panels were part of a *predella*, a horizontal grouping of small panels below the large central image of an altarpiece. As here, the *predella* often narrated a sequence of events. In the first panel, Mary's aged father Joachim and mother Anne give alms to the poor. To their left a priest stands under the elaborate portico of the temple, from which Joachim had been expelled because the couple's childlessness was seen as a sign of God's disfavor. Next (in the scene illustrated here) we see Anne and the new infant being tended just after her birth. Finally, the young Virgin enters the same temple portico and is greeted by the same priest we saw in the first panel. This continuity lends realism to the scenes despite their gold backgrounds. Details—such as the chicken brought to the new mother—made the Virgin approachable and brought sacred events into the realm of the viewer's own experience.

Tempera on panel, each .442 x .324 m (17 3/8 x 12 3/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.41–4



Andrea di Bartolo

Madonna and Child, c. 1415

While Andrea's scenes of the Virgin's life were intended to relate a story and to engage the viewer by depicting sacred events in familiar settings, this small image invites contemplation.

This way of representing the Virgin—in which she sits not on an elaborate throne but on a simple cushion on the ground—is known as the Madonna of Humility, probably reflecting the relationship between the Latin words *humilitas* ("humility") and *humus* ("ground"). It seems to have been invented by Simone Martini and became extremely popular. As Mary suckles the infant, she gazes wistfully away. Contemporary viewers would have instantly "read" her expression as reflecting sadness at her son's future. On the back of the panel this foreboding is reinforced by a painting of the crucifixion, illustrated below. (Unfortunately this cannot be seen since the panel must be attached firmly to the wall for security reasons.) The viewer is intended to meditate, as Mary does, on the life and suffering of Christ and to empathize with her. The panel was painted for the private devotions of the small figure kneeling at the right. She may have been a Dominican nun; if so, the painting hung in her convent cell. If she was a lay person, it would have been used for meditations in the quiet and privacy of her bedroom.



Tempera on panel, .286 x .178 m (11 1/4 x 7 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.20.a



Sassetta and workshop

Sieneese, probably 1392–1450

Saint Anthony Distributing His Wealth to the Poor, Saint Anthony Leaving His Monastery, and The Meeting of Saint Anthony and Saint Paul, c. 1440

Along with *The Death of Saint Anthony* (adjacent), these three panels are part of a series illustrating the life of Saint Anthony, founder of Christian monasticism. Their original setting is uncertain. They may have been part of a large altarpiece or have framed a painted banner of the sort carried in religious processions. In the first scene (illustrated here), young Anthony renounces his wealth and distributes it among the poor.

Although he lived in the third century, the saint is depicted in contemporary guise. The arms of a prominent Sieneese family appear over a doorway, and some of the architecture may reflect specific buildings in the city and surrounding area. Here are beggars with patches on their clothing, a blind man being led by his small dog, and on the balcony, the iron spikes that supported awnings against the summer sun. Like the dramatic sermons of street preachers and the performance of religious plays, in which townspeople acted the parts of saints, these details helped viewers visualize sacred events with immediacy and vividness.

Sassetta combined tradition—note the typically Sieneese brilliance of his pinks and greens—with a new interest in landscape and experiments in perspective. Through windows and doorways overlapping layers make depth legible.

Tempera on panel, each approximately .475 x .345 m (18 5/8 x 13 5/8 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.20, 1952.5.21, and 1939.1.293



Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia

Sieneese, c. 1403–1482

The Annunciation, c. 1445

Giovanni's brilliant color and pattern were typically Sieneese, but he is distinguished from both his teachers and contemporaries by an expressive—almost fevered—imagination. His unique style is otherworldly and spiritual. Here the drama is heightened by a dark background and contrasting colors, nervous patterns, and unreal proportions. The unsettling effect is amplified by an unexpected juxtaposition of events. In the center, the angel Gabriel brings news of Christ's future birth to the Virgin. At the right, Joseph warms himself in front of a fire, probably a device chosen to anticipate the season of Christ's birth. Outside Mary's elaborate dwelling, Adam and Eve are expelled from a verdant Paradise by God the Father gesturing from a gold radiance. Artists did not normally combine the themes of the Expulsion and Annunciation. Giovanni—perhaps painting for Dominican patrons—does so to make explicit the connection between man's sin and God's promise of salvation, which is fulfilled at the moment of the Annunciation by Christ's human incarnation.

Though Giovanni's primary concern is not the appearance of the natural world, it is clear that he was aware of contemporary developments in the realistic depiction of space. Note how the floor tiles appear to recede, a technique adopted by Florentine artists experimenting with the new science of perspective.

Tempera on panel, .400 x .464 m (15 3/4 x 18 1/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.223

- 1204 Constantinople sacked in the Fourth Crusade
- 1228 Canonization of Saint Francis
- 1234 Canonization of Saint Dominic
- 1252 Florence mints the first florin gold coins
- 1259 Kublai Khan becomes Mongol ruler in China
- 1273 Thomas Aquinas completes *Summa theologica*
- 1291 Mamluks retake last Christian kingdom in the Levant, ending period of the Crusades
- 1295 Marco Polo returns after twenty years in China
- 1302 Dante exiled, begins writing the *Divine Comedy*
- 1309 Papal court moved to Avignon (the Babylonian captivity)
- 1318 **Death of Duccio**
- 1337 **Death of Giotto**
- 1341 Petrarch honored as poet laureate in Rome
- 1344 **Death of Simone Martini**
- 1348 Black Death kills up to half of the population in many Italian cities
- 1353 Boccaccio's *Decameron*
- 1377 Pope Gregory XI returns papacy to Rome
- 1378–1417 Popes in both Rome and Avignon (Great Schism)
- 1379 Founding of the Medici bank in Florence
- 1419 Brunelleschi designs dome for Florence cathedral