

The City of the Lady: Sieneese Civic Identity and the Virgin in Early Renaissance Art

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During the course of the Renaissance, Siena's artistic output remained visually and thematically rooted in the iconic Byzantine style, and for this it was long dismissed as stagnant in the light of developments in Florence and Rome. In this essay, I will draw on Diana Norman's seminal research, focusing not on the alleged "conservatism" of this artistic output but on the rich ways Marian imagery in Siena permeates both religion and politics and the way in which these spheres overlap to create a strong sense of Sieneese civic identity. An attitude of devotion in our own personal lives inspired by the Sieneese would undoubtedly, this author believes, begin to mitigate the impact of the current toxically divided political atmosphere in our own lives; this civic devotion is

the endeavor to live under the Virgin's admonition towards "good counsel" and Christ's words of care for the least of these, investing every area of our lives with acts of and promptings toward devotion.

That the Renaissance was born in Florence is a commonly accepted belief substantiated by the iconic art of Michelangelo and Brunelleschi's great Dome. Thus, it is Florence that we remember in the annals of art history. Yet on the outskirts of this Renaissance powerhouse lay an enclave all but consigned to obscurity: the Republic of Siena, hemmed in on all sides by the pressures of Florentine hegemony. During the course of the Renaissance, Siena's artistic output remained visually and thematically rooted in the iconic Byzantine style, and for this it was long dismissed as stagnant in the light of developments in Florence and Rome. However, in light of her research,

Diana Norman presents a compelling argument observing that the art of Siena shows itself to be compellingly unfocused on rapid development in the direction of the single-point perspective realism that dominated the artistic revolution known as the Renaissance.¹ Norman claims the masters at work in Siena wove the religious devotion and the political context of Siena into a strong fabric of civic identity rooted in one figure, the Virgin Mary. In this essay, I will draw on Norman's research, focusing not on the alleged "conservatism" of this artistic output but on the rich ways Marian imagery in Siena permeates both religion and politics and the way in which these

¹Diana Norman, *Siena and the Virgin: Art and Politics in a Late Medieval City State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 3.

spheres overlap to create a strong sense of Sieneſe civic identity.

The key to understanding this religio-political relationship is an appreciation of the Virgin Mary’s primary role in the city’s identity. She functioned not only as an object of devotion, but was also widely regarded to be the supreme advocate and protector of the city. A short story illustrates this point: in 1260, Siena was severely threatened by its powerful northern neighbor Florence, at that time fixated on expanding their jurisdiction and economic clout in the direction of Siena and the surrounding territories in southern Tuscany.² Contemporary annalist Paolo di Tommaso Montauri records the city’s syndic, Buonaguida Lucari, urging the Sieneſe to give ‘all the city and *contado* (subject territories)’ to the ‘queen and empress of life eternal’, the Virgin Mary.³ Then, before the Battle of Montaperti, an incredibly important but brutal conflict between the Sieneſe and the Florentines in which the Florentines were routed:

They celebrated a solemn mass and made grand offerings to the Virgin Mary... And the bishop made a solemn procession, and placed the keys [of the city] in the hands of the Virgin and it was recorded in the documents and the city was given the title of the Virgin Mary.⁴

Fourteenth-century Sieneſe art reflects no subject more centrally or more frequently than that of the Virgin. Even the magnificent civic murals of Ambrogio Lorenzetti, located in the Council Room of the Palazzo Pubblico, confirm this theme. While providing “an erudite painted commentary on the virtues of good government,”⁵ the allegorical murals include images of the Virgin and Child on the shield of the principal personification of a good ruler. Depictions of the Virgin range far beyond the conventional subject matter of an annunciation or nativity scene. Artists like Paolo di Giovanni Fei and Pietro Lorenzetti portrayed scenes from her birth, purification, betrothal, dormition, assumption,

and enthronement. No aspect of the Virgin’s life is overlooked in the city’s devotion to her. Indeed this devotion develops throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries into a nuanced reality connected to the development of Siena’s civic identity, culture, and politics.

Before we can fully grasp the connection of Sieneſe civics to the Virgin Mary, it is necessary to become familiar with the four patron saints of Siena, who play an important supporting role in this narrative of Marian devotion and civic identity. Ansanus and Crescentius, young Roman noblemen, were said to have baptized the Sieneſe and had relics in Siena, respectively. Savinus, a bishop of the early church, was also said to have been the first bishop of Siena. All three of these early Christian saints were martyred for their faith during early fourth-century persecution under the Emperors Diocletian and Maximian. The fourth, Bartholomew the Apostle, has ambiguous connections to the city yet by 1215 there are records of an altar dedicated to him in the main cathedral.⁶ Appearing in paintings alongside the Virgin and Child, they acted as another level of symbolic intercession between the city and its queen, the Queen of Heaven.

Many of these elements of Sieneſe political allegiance and religious devotion crystallize in Duccio’s *Maestà*, which is where Diana Norman fittingly begins her examination of Marian imagery. A component of the central, double-sided altarpiece of the cathedral, this image is the embodiment of the Virgin’s influence and significance within the sphere of the church. As Norman writes, “The very act of furnishing the high altar of the cathedral with a painting of this quality allowed the Sieneſe to hope for a reciprocal gift from the Virgin, namely, the continued expression and demonstration of her favour and protection.”⁷ Such bargaining with God, the mother of God, or the gods had likely been going on since Etruscan times and found a new expression in early Renaissance Siena, where it was used to cement a unified identity in the ecclesiastical sphere.

² Ibid., 28.

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁷ Ibid., 42.

An unusual and groundbreaking characteristic of Duccio's *Maestà* is the way the four patron saints surround Mary in a standing position, rather than kneeling, as they would in the typical Byzantine style. In medieval art, the standing position was usually reserved for donors or benefactors, who would symbolically receive intercession because of the way their image was placed in relation to that of the Virgin. From the way Duccio positioned the four patron saints of Siena, we can discern his innovative conception their role. Instead of merely symbolizing religious reverence, the four patron saints represent the interests of the city, providing patronage of the altarpiece while supplicating the Virgin for intercessory favors.

The cathedral was not the only arena of religio-political influence; devotion to the Virgin also found its way into the sphere of politics, where she exerted influence towards civic virtue. Like many other patriarchal societies, an all-male panel governed the city of Siena. Yet the Siennese civic structure was atypical in that the final arbiter of the city's public affairs, even if only symbolically, was a woman: the Virgin. Since the Battle of Montaperti in 1260, specific references to the Virgin as "defender and governor" of the city are recorded in official documents, suggesting the "expression of a status newly accorded to the Virgin in a formal act of homage."⁸

Diana Norman takes the foremost example of this reverence to be in Simone Martini's *Maestà*, a mural housed in the Sala del Consiglio of the Palazzo Pubblico. The original audience would have been 200-500 men of the city and its surrounding provinces who constituted "the supreme legislative body of the Siennese state."⁹ The throne on which Mary is seated in the mural actually resembles the "throne" or ceremonial chair that would have been placed beneath it. Several features of Duccio's innovative *Maestà* are also strikingly present in Simone Martini's later painting. Angels and saints surround the Madonna, amplifying her status as the queen of Heaven, and at the feet of the Virgin kneel the four patron saints of Siena in supplication on behalf

of their city. Along the edge of the throne runs an inscription, a petition to the Virgin. The supplicatory half of the conversation has been lost, but the Virgin's response remains outlined.

My beloved bear it in mind
When your devotees make honest petitions
I will make them content as you desire
But if the powerful do harm to the weak
Weighing them down with shame or hurt
Your prayers are not for these
Nor for whoever deceives my land.

The angelic flowers, the rose and lily
With which the heavenly field is adorned
Do not delight me more than good counsel
But some I see who for their own estate
Despise me and deceive my land
And are most praised when they speak the worst
Whoever is condemned by this speech take heed.¹⁰

Although the inscription itself is presumably fictitious, it complements the ethos of the Virgin Mary, serving the purpose of reinforcing civic virtue in the same way that the Lorenzetti murals do. The legislative processes occurring beneath the mural of the Virgin enthroned as the Queen of Heaven also eventuate symbolically underneath her authority and inspiration. This symbolic presence may have been intended to generate a psychological effect on those below it, turning them towards the kind of virtue that the Virgin esteemed.

In keeping with Diana Norman's analysis, Hans Belting identifies the deeply nuanced devotional and political significance both Duccio's and Martini's *Maestàs*. However he deepens our understanding of their origin and significance by rooting them in images produced for the confraternities of Italian city-states, including Siena. The use of painted panels to convey status or power with a view to outdoing a "rival" confraternity heightens the political tension represented by these images, as well as the deep religio-political loyalty elicited by them. Belting

⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁹ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰ Ibid., 54.

writes of the rivalries between the Dominican friars in Siena, who had commissioned a groundbreaking Madonna, now housed in the Palazzo Pubblico, and an even larger panel produced for Dominican friars in Florence.¹¹ Not only did the production of these paintings reinforce the rivalry between city-states (even within the bounds of the church), it also propelled the artistic development of the *Maestà* as artists sought to outdo each other in representing an old subject in a newer and grander way. Yet the Sieneese sought these innovations while remaining within the general framework of established Marian iconography, hence why Siena began to be designated as artistically stagnant by those who rushed forward into the domain of one-point-perspective humanism. This rivalry between the confraternities also anticipates the continued artistic rivalry that would eventually lead Florence to become the birthplace of the Renaissance, while Siena sunk into relative, although unmerited, obscurity.

This intense and intricate relationship between the Virgin Mary and the City of Siena was predicated mostly on cultural mythology and stories and ceremonies manipulated to convey a certain very specific message. Quite simply, Mary represented a powerful protective force close to or equal to God himself and by aligning themselves with that, the Sieneese benefited greatly, both in their own self-image and in the eyes of their greedy and belligerent neighbors. Just as the Venetians expressed their distinction from the Roman church through their Doge-centered political structure and unique style of sacred architecture, the Sieneese distinguished themselves from surrounding city-states by their affiliation with the Mother of God. Other cities participated in the cult of the Virgin, but in Siena the Virgin was elevated to the point where she was and is the nexus of the city, its primary object of devotion, and an important political figure simply by her imaged presence. As Norman reminds us, the special treatment and regard of the Virgin was

consistent with the widespread belief in late

medieval Christianity that the divine power attributed to a holy person could also reside in an image of that person and that this image might accordingly possess sensory attributes and be capable of responding to acts of petition and appeal. There was, in short, often a blurring between the identity of the holy person and the identity of her (or his) image.¹²

Despite the meteoric ascent of Florence after cataclysmic event of the Black Death, Siena held its own, politically and artistically. Bereft of proper acknowledgment in the canon of art history for too long, Sieneese art has undergone a reevaluation following Diana Norman's study of its nuances within the city itself and its surrounding regions. The cult of the Virgin, of which Siena was a leading member, preserved and revitalized the conventions of Marian iconography, using the artistic capabilities at their disposal to honor the Mother of God. Norman concludes, "Fourteenth century Sieneese art does indeed, therefore, exhibit a certain kind of 'conservatism'... intimately and primarily connected with the ongoing expression of deeply-rooted civic ideology."¹³ Images and themes from Siena's artistic heritage continued to be held in high esteem, providing a foundation from which later artists could gather inspiration and "the opportunity to develop alternative or more intricate versions of their early fourteenth-century forerunner,"¹⁴ as evinced by the relationship of Simone Martini's *Maestà* to Duccio's earlier version. Sieneese devotion, it must be acknowledged, often stemmed from a patristic rather than strictly biblical understanding of the Virgin's capabilities, yet sincere devotion mixed with political expediency to create a recipe for a civic identity whose strength would last until the present day. Queen of Heaven and Mother of God, Mary was a civic and religious symbol par excellence, and Siena did not hesitate to claim special protection because of this association.

There is perhaps no better contemporary manifestation of the unique Sieneese civic identity

¹¹ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 393.

¹² Norman, *Siena and the Virgin*, 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

than the famous *Palio di Siena*, a race with its origins in medieval festivities surrounding the Feast of the Assumption, the greatest of the civic festivals in Siena.¹⁵ It typifies the character of a town still rooted in its medieval and Renaissance devotion to the Virgin Mary; although more subtly, the town is still woven together by her presence. The general consonance between Marian imagery and political identity has ingrained itself so deeply in Sieneese society that it remains relevant to the modern population of a medieval town.

Inevitably, the question arises of how sincere such Marian devotion can be in the context of political advantage and whether the two can coexist. Yet the tender supplication evinced by both Duccio's and Martini's *Maestàs* attests to authentic devotion; this is perhaps a unification of church and state that could be forgiven. Furthermore, this consonance between political and religious spheres, which would undoubtedly be scoffed at today, is a powerful unifying factor. Even as Siena's supposedly "conservative" art is reevaluated, perhaps the central bond of their society should be reevaluated as well. The sometimes injudicious patriotism of our own country had protected and unified it for so long; yet in the face of postmodern disillusionment it threatens to disintegrate, exemplified most painfully in the lack of a compelling presidential candidate.

The strength of Diana Norman's monograph lies in the thoroughness of her research. She weaves an exhaustively detailed examination of Siena and the surrounding *contado* into a cohesive and absorbing narrative. Her writing is delightful to read even as she focuses with microscopic vision on each and every aspect of society. Her study is nevertheless bereft of an deeper evaluation of the spiritual significance of the material. She correctly identifies the relevance of Marian imagery to this society and in doing so, restores its relevance to the art historical community. But Norman does not impart to the reader any of the lessons to be had from such complete immersion in this society and their emphatic devotion to the Virgin Mary. Although she is clearly invested in the topic, Norman seems reluctant to remove the protective gloves of art historical criticism in order to empathize

with the city's devotion to Mary, choosing rather to see it exclusively as a lightning rod for civic devotion.

Yet the pathetic truth is that as a society, we would learn little from this city's politics, even if immersed in them. Our culture is willing to engage no more profoundly with the richly symbolic spiritual nuance of Siena than Diana Norman; indeed, we have lost the ability to by virtue of the importance we ascribe to skepticism. If we would lay aside that cockroach shell of cynicism even for a moment we would have to reevaluate every aspect of our society: why we mistrust organized religion, why we lack a unified vision, why we are so deeply rifted along racial and socioeconomic lines. It is simplistic to say that Siena can answer these matters on a national scale, nor would a religiously homogenous society be most advantageous in the current cultural climate. Our toxic political climate has compelled us to face the fact that we are broken and fractured, as a society, as a community, and as individuals. Nonetheless an attitude of devotion in our own personal lives inspired by the Sieneese would undoubtedly, I believe, begin to mitigate the impact of these issues in our own lives. We too should strive to live under the Virgin's admonition towards "good counsel"¹⁶ and Christ's words of care for the least of these, investing every area of our lives with acts of and promptings toward devotion.

Bibliography

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¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 54.