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THE CATHEDRAL MUSEUM (MUSEO DELL'OPERA METROPOLITANA, OR MUSEO DELL'OPA)

Another of the musts of Siena. It contains Duccio's masterpiece, the Maestà, and a number of other important works, and also gives access to the top of the Facciatone, the intended façade of the new cathedral which was never built, from which there are great views.

Beside the Duomo. Open 10.00-19.00 daily. A combined ticket can be purchased giving access to the OPA Museum, the Duomo and its crypt, the Baptistery and the Oratorio San Bernardino. Note: this is not a detailed description of all the objects in the museum, but a summary of the items likely to be of most interest to the casual visitor. As Sienese museums are constantly being rearranged, some objects may no longer be where the notes say they are. Unfortunately, the signing is abysmal.



Entrance to the OPA museum on the left, under the arches of the side aisle of the new cathedral that was not completed because of the Black Death. The big arch on the right is the Facciatone, the intended main entrance to the new cathedral.

Ground floor: the sculpture gallery

Immediately after the ticket office there is a sculpture gallery (Room 10). To the left of the steps leading down into it are four rather beautiful early stone panels (late 13th century) of the Annunciation, Nativity, Flight into Egypt and Epiphany, taken from a church not far from Barontoli; and just beyond them on the next wall a frieze from a Roman sarcophagus – the only object remaining from the site of the Roman camp on which the Duomo was

built. **Donatello**'s tondo of the Virgin and Child from above the side door of the Duomo (where it has been replaced by a copy) is at the back of the steps; and on the wall to the left of it there is a beautiful marble panel (1438) by **Jacopo della Quercia**, the last work of Siena's most famous sculptor. It shows the Madonna and Child together with Cardinal Antonio Casini (who commissioned the work) being presented to the Madonna by St Anthony Abbot, looking anxious as if fearing that the Cardinal is not quite holy enough.



Jacopo della Quercia sculpture

At the far end of the room, the great rose window designed by **Duccio** from above the altar of the Duomo has recently been erected, with a light behind it, making it far easier to see than it ever was when in the Duomo (where it has been replaced by a pallid copy). It dates from 1288 and is the earliest major piece of Italian stained glass to survive. Some of its motifs were later developed by Duccio for his *Maiestà* upstairs, which was painted some 20 years later. Although to our eyes it is rather stiff and Byzantine in style, it is marvellously colourful. There is a particularly effective scene at the bottom of the death (or rather "Dormition") of the Virgin with crowds clustering round her bed.

The rest of the room is dominated by statues of prophets and philosophers originally made for the façade of the Duomo, rather weather-worn but still with some good faces and poses. The heads tend to jut uncomfortably forward; this is because they were originally high up on the façade and intended to be seen from below. They are by **Giovanni Pisano** (1245-1318), the son of the man who sculpted the pulpit in the Duomo. Note Moses on the left with rays of light protruding from his head. This is a traditional way of portraying Moses, whose face (according to Exodus chapter 34) shone so much when he came down from Mount Sinai that the Children of Israel were afraid to go near him. Sometimes, owing to an early mistranslation of the relevant passage, the rays are shown as horns, giving Moses a devilish air.

A neighbouring room houses yet more battered statues by Pisano originally made for the Duomo, this time of the apostles. For some reason they were removed and placed in store at the turn of the 17th/18th centuries and replaced by copies by a sculptor called **Mazzuoli**. These in their turn were sold in 1890 to the Brompton Oratory in London, where they still are. At the end of this room there is the original of the group of Christ as the enthroned Redeemer that was made in 1345 for the great side door for the nave of the projected new cathedral (see final paragraph below). It is in the sinuous “international Gothic” style that within the space of some 50 years transformed the stiff and stylistic art of the period.

First floor: Duccio's Maiestà



This is the glory of the museum and one of the glories of Siena. A “maiestà” is a picture that shows the Virgin “in majesty” surrounded by angels and saints. This sort of heavenly court is very much a Siennese invention. There is another big Maiestà by Simone Martini in the Palazzo Pubblico, and one in the museum in San Gimignano by Lippo Memmi. But none bears comparison with **Duccio**’s, the earliest and the inspiration for the others. A work of magical serenity, it was painted in 1308-11 for the main altar of the Duomo, Duccio being the most famous and fashionable artist of the period. When it was completed, it was carried in procession from Duccio’s workshop to the Duomo accompanied by music and most of the population of Siena. There it stayed until 1506 when mediaeval work of this sort became unfashionable. It was removed from the high altar, cut into sections and relegated to side chapels and ultimately to the museum.

The work consists of the main panel plus some 50-odd smaller panels. Those on the side wall were originally displayed above and below the main picture, and the ones on the wall facing the main panel were on the back, to be admired by people walking behind the altar. Not all the panels are here; when the painting was removed from the main altar, some were sold (three are in the National Gallery in London and nine in other museums) and some simply disappeared. Reproductions of some of missing ones have been put up among the real ones.

The main panel shows the Madonna and Child on a sumptuously inlaid throne with a cloth of gold laid over it. At the base of the throne a Latin inscription reads "Holy Mother of God, bring peace to Siena and life to Duccio, because he painted you thus". Kneeling in the front row of the painting are the then four patron saints of Siena: Ansano, Savino, Crescenzo and Vittore. Behind them on the left are St Catherine of Alexandria; St Paul (as so often with a long black beard); St John the Evangelist carrying his symbol, a book; and then a couple of angels. On the right, after the angels are St John the Baptist, as usual wearing skins and with unkempt hair from his time in the desert; St Peter, for once holding a book rather than a key; and St Agnes carrying her symbol, a lamb. At the very top of the picture the other apostles are portrayed. All the other figures can be recognized as angels from their wings. The painting used to have a carved Gothic frame, with pinnacles and arches, and the marks of where this once was can still be seen.

The greenish hue of the flesh is not deliberate; the pink pigment used at the time was painted over a green ground to give a pale and delicate hue, and unfortunately the fading of the pink with time has led to the current corpse-like colour.

The main panel is a set-piece, carefully arranged according to certain conventions, rather like the final scene of a children's nativity play. But in the small panels Duccio could afford to adopt a more lively and animated style, and they are well worth looking at in detail. The ones on the far wall represent the Passion of Christ and are set out in strip cartoon fashion, starting in the bottom left corner and going up and down in a zig-zag. The scenes are as follows:

- Entry into Jerusalem (bottom left)
- The washing of the feet (next to it at the top); and the Last Supper (immediately below);
- Christ's farewell to his apostles (immediately to the right); and Judas taking the bribe for betraying Christ (above);
- The kiss of Judas (above); and the agony in the garden (below);
- Peter denying that he had anything to do with Christ; and Christ before Annas the junior high priest (above);
- Christ accused by the Pharisees; and Christ before Caiaphas the senior high priest;
- Christ in the praetorium; and Christ before Pilate (last two panels on the bottom right).

Go now to the top left:

- Christ again before Pilate (above), and (below) before Herod;
- The crown of thorns (below); and the flagellation;
- Christ on the way to Calvary, and Pilate washing his hands;
- The Crucifixion;
- The deposition from the cross, and the entombment;
- The Marys at the sepulchre (above) and the descent into hell (note Christ standing firmly on the devil);
- The appearance at Emmaus and "Noli me tangere".

The small panels on the other wall are mostly scenes from the life of the Virgin.

Also in this room there is a delightful early painting by **Duccio** of the Madonna and Child, fortunately with the flesh still fairly pink. This was painted about 1283, so a good 20 years before the Maestà. Note how the Child is tweaking the Virgin's veil. Further along the same wall there is a Birth of the Virgin by **Pietro Lorenzetti**, a Siennese master of the generation after Duccio. It is full of domestic detail: see how the attendant is feeling the bath water before bathing the child, and note Mary's elderly father outside being told of the birth by an attendant. The interior of the room and the bedclothes are probably very like those of a rich 14th century Siennese lady.

Behind the Duccio Maestà, there are further rooms. The two on the right contain some good painted wooden statues, including a Madonna by **Jacopo della Quercia** in the first room (the smaller saints on either side are thought to be by his workshop rather than the master's own hand). And in the end room, there are strikingly tragic figures of Mary and St John on either side of a rather stiff and boring crucifix.

Second floor

This floor can be largely by-passed. Its main room is the "Sala del Tesoro", the room of the treasure, in which various gold, silver and other objects once in the Duomo are now displayed. Most are dirty and rather tatty looking. There is one large and gruesome casket with a saintly skull still inside. In the glass case in the wall opposite the entrance, the small but dramatic painted wooden crucifix by **Giovanni Pisano** is worth a glance. And behind the door is a painting of the breast-feeding Madonna that was once in the Piccolomini altar in the Duomo (now replaced by a reproduction). This is a fine work by **Paolo di Giovanni Fei** of a subject much liked by the Siennese for whom milk had all sorts of symbolic meaning.

Third floor

Immediately at the top of the stairs is the "Sala della Madonna degli occhi grossi" (the room of the "**Madonna of the big eyes**"), the name of the painting in the middle of the room by a very early master usually called the **Master of Tressa** (after a place where one of the five known paintings by him was found). It was painted about 100 years before Duccio's Maestà, in a much more primitive style with round Romanesque eyes rather than Gothic almond ones. It hung above the high altar of the Duomo until it was replaced by Duccio's Maestà, and is renowned as the painting before which the Siennese successfully prayed on the eve of the battle of Montaperti in 1260, their most famous victory over their Florentine enemies.

On the far wall, there are three interesting pictures by **Sano di Pietro** of **St Bernardino**, Siena's great preacher saint. The two on either side of the main portrait show him preaching in front of the Palazzo Pubblico in the Campo, and in front of the church of San Francesco. Note how the practice in those days of segregating men and women in church extends even to informal preaching sessions in the street. On the wall to the left of the door there is a fine set of saints by **Ambrogio Lorenzetti**.

The next two rooms contain later Siennese of little interest, so we suggest you walk quickly through, pausing briefly to admire the large painting of St Paul (in a red robe, reading and

perched on a narrow throne) by **Domenico Beccafumi**. In the background behind St Paul, there are scenes of his original conversion and his martyrdom. The work was painted in 1515 and with its vivid colours and movement is a complete contrast to the more austere and static works in the preceding rooms. Whereas Duccio was the first of the great Siennese painters, Beccafumi was the last. After him, Siennese work became maudlin and second rate.

Facciatone: panorama

At the end of the second room is a small doorway and spiral staircase out to an open air walkway from which another spiral staircase leads to the top of the unfinished façade arch of the planned new cathedral (started in 1335). This is probably the best viewpoint in Siena and truly panoramic, with marvellous views of the dome and roof of the Duomo; of Siena itself; and of the country for miles around.

San Niccolò in Sasso and the side door of the “new Duomo”

Back through the museum and downstairs to the exit, which is through the pretty small baroque church of San Niccolò in Sasso, dating from the late 1500s and early 1600s. Every surface is encrusted with intricate plasterwork and painting.

On leaving the church, turn briefly up the hill to the left to admire the intended side door of the “new Duomo”, one of the most perfect Gothic doorways in existence. Unfortunately, however, the reproduction angels at the top look almost as battered as the originals in the museum.

1996, revised in 2005.