

Guide to Siena and the Senese: www.siena-guide.com

PINACOTECA NAZIONALE

Siena's main picture gallery. It contains almost only Siennese painting, but of that it has the finest collection in the world.

Open 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. except Saturdays and Sundays, when it may be open half a day only. Free for EU citizens over 65. To view the paintings in date order, go straight to the second floor of the museum - to which the custodians will probably direct you anyway. The paintings in the museum are constantly being shifted around, so the order may not be as described below. The collection is large and Siennese painting is not always easy for the new-comer to appreciate. So we recommend that the visitor should not attempt to see the whole collection at one go. A floor at a time is quite enough. The collection is displayed over the first (the later works) and second floors (the earlier works). We recommend that you start with the second floor. There is also a top (third) floor with a single room containing the "Spannocchi" collection, a somewhat motley selection of old masters from places other than Siena. We recommend that you visit this only if you have the time and energy after seeing the other two floors (there is nothing on the ground floor).



The outside of the Pinacoteca

Siennese painting

Siennese painting started extremely early, and its great period lasted only some 250 years, from around 1300 to around 1550. Throughout the dark ages, although there was painting in Italy, chiefly in the form of frescoes, it was Byzantine in style, showing little originality. For Byzantium, painting was a way of teaching religious stories; artists painted by rule, keeping to set symbolic formulae. The earliest paintings in the Pinacoteca, dating from the 1200s, belong to this tradition.

But in the 1200s, new influences began to be felt and Italian painting began the transition toward naturalism and freedom that was ultimately to lead to Botticelli, Leonardo and the other greats of the Renaissance. Siennese painting never quite kept up, however, with the great Florentines. Whereas in Florence rationalism and a taste for modernity meant that painters were constantly experimenting and evolving, in Siena a mystical streak and a respect for tradition meant that the art stayed stylised and

symbolic for far longer. This makes it more difficult for the modern eye to appreciate. But it is well worth the attempt, as there are many beautiful and magical works. In particular, Sieneese painting has a decorative and ordered aspect, often with wonderful colours, which the Florentines do not always match.

The works in the museum show how the style evolved from the very primitive, almost childlike works of the 1200s - the earliest to survive - to the more sophisticated but stylised pictures of the 1300s and 1400s, gradually growing more naturalistic, ending with the florid and mannerist paintings of the 1500s - after which Sieneese painting declined into mediocrity and sentimentality, never to recover. Most of the works in the Pinacoteca are painted in tempera, powdered pigment mixed with egg to bind it - oils did not become commonly used in Italy until the 15th century, when Flemish painters introduced their Italian colleagues to oil painting.

For details of individual painters, see SIENESE PAINTERS.

SECOND FLOOR

Room 1

At the top of the stairs, almost the first painting (No 1) is a 'Christ the Redeemer in the act of blessing flanked by two Angels' by an unknown master known as the 'Maestro of 1215'. This is one of the earliest surviving Sieneese paintings. The 6 scenes at the side show the history of the true Cross and its discovery by St Helena. To the right is a painted crucifix of about the same date (No. 597). In both works, note the square faces, wide eyes and generally primitive aspect. Paintings of this sort - especially crucifixes - were being produced in various parts of Italy. What is typically Sieneese is the "impasto" or raised surface, which was often encrusted with jewels - alas, long ago removed by ancient vandals. On the other side of the room there is a painted wooden statue depicting an almost equally square-faced late 13th century pope. The final painting in this room - a 13th century altar-panel (No 8) by a follower of Guido da Siena - depicts three scenes from the life of Christ: the transfiguration of Christ; his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; and the raising of Lazarus. Note the human touches in these scenes - for instance the people clinging to the trees to get a better view of Christ as he comes into Jerusalem - as Sieneese art begins to move away from the static and wooden style of the earliest works.

Room 2

Now enter room 2 on the right. This room contains paintings of the later 13th century, with a magnificent Virgin and Child (No 16) on the right, now attributed to Dietisalvi di Speme, but previously thought to be by Guido da Siena (every few years some new expert seems to come along to reattribute these early unsigned works). Guido was the first Sieneese painter whose name we know. He is said to have been influenced by the Florentine painter Coppo di Marcovaldo who was captured by the Sieneese at the battle of Monteperti in 1260, Siena's one famous victory over Florence, and made to paint to gain his freedom. Florentine art was already more sophisticated, and the local Sieneese doubtless watched their captive at work with interest. Whether or not it is by Guido, this picture is certainly a more zestful and accomplished work than the earlier ones in the previous room, with wonderful colours and a marvellously cheerful Virgin. This is almost the last cheerful Sieneese painting; thereafter the Sieneese artists tended to cultivate a gloomy and tragic style, beautiful and interesting, perhaps, but depressing for the newcomer used to the more serene and contented

Florentines. Note also the beginning of a Gothic influence in the almond eyes of the Virgin. These eyes were to be a characteristic of Siense painting for the next 100 years.

On the right there is a Virgin with saints (No 7), still thought to be by Guido, with more works by him and Dietisalvi in the middle of the room. Also in this room is Guido's 'St Peter enthroned' (No 14), again with a strip cartoon of scenes mainly from the life of the saint down each side of the main panel. The two top ones are the Annunciation (with the Virgin shrinking from the angel), and the Nativity. In the middle on the left there is Christ calling St Peter and St Andrew (charming fishes in the water), and the freeing of St Peter from prison on the right. At the bottom there is the fall of Simon Magus and the crucifixion of St Peter.

Rooms 3 and 4

Siena's greatest painter was Duccio, and Room 3 contains a number of paintings by Duccio or of the school of Duccio, but all are in pretty mediocre condition (for the best of Duccio in Siena, go to the OPA Museum). The central panel of the triptych at No 28 is, however, particularly worth a glance, with its charming sloe-eyed Virgin and a Child clutching part of her veil. In Room 4, there is a fine crucifix (No 36) by Ugolino di Nerio (a follower of Duccio, active 1317-1327) -note the red-eyed Virgin and saint at the corners, the very epitome of the tragic Siense style.

Rooms 5 and 6

Go through straight through Room 5 (to which we will come back later) to Room 6, which holds the museum's (fairly small) collection of Simone Martini. Simone Martini, Siena's greatest painter after Duccio, was Duccio's pupil, but he developed a sinuous and elegant style of his own. The best examples of this "international Gothic" style are his "Maesta" in the Palazzo Pubblico and the beautiful Annunciation in the Uffizi in Florence. In Room 6, however, there is a marvellous strip cartoon of the life of Blessed Agostino Novello (a Sicilian holy man who settled at San Leonardo al Lago near Siena and became much revered), who is shown swooping down like an early Batman, saving people from a variety of dangers.



Saving a child fallen from a balcony



Saving a child fallen from a hammock

In this room there are also several paintings of the Virgin and Child which may be by Simone Martini - the only one about which there is a fair degree of certainty is that with the bare wood surround. Another delightful painting in this room which may be by Simone Martini is the 'Madonna della Misericordia' - Our Lady of Mercy, sheltering the people of the world under her cloak. Some experts claim, however, that it is by Niccolo di Segna (active 1331- 1345), a great-nephew of Duccio. Either way, it is a beautiful, glowing painting.

Now back to Room 5 to admire the magnificent 'Adoration of the Magi' (No 104) by Bartolo di Fredi (who painted the 'Old Testament' frescoes in the church in San Gimignano), full of movement, with wonderful colours and beautiful detail - note the curls in the hair of the personages; the camels and the bustling Kings' train at the top of the picture; and a stripy cathedral in the Sienese style on the top left. Bartolo di Fredi also painted the very decorative 'Coronation of the Virgin' in this room, between the windows.



Adoration of the Magi by Bartolo di Fredi (detail)

Room 7

On the left there is a good 'Nativity of the Virgin' (No 116) by Paolo di Giovanni Fei (1344-1411) - note the elderly mother. It was probably inspired by Pietro Lorenzetti's painting of the same scene in the Cathedral Museum. To the right of the painting is a fine wooden statue of St John the Baptist wearing his usual garb of a fleece as an under-garment, with a typically Sienese anguished expression. It is by Domenico di Nicolo dei Cori (1363-1453)

On the other side of the room are paintings by the Lorenzetti brothers, Siena's most distinguished painters of the generation after Duccio and Simone Martini. Both brothers (Ambrogio and Pietro) ceased to be mentioned in documents after 1348, and it is thought that they perished in the Black Death that carried off so many of Siena's inhabitants in that year. Both are more expressive in style than their predecessors, but Ambrogio's work is peaceful and lyrical; Pietro's is more passionate and dramatic. First look at the 'Madonna and Child' (No 77) and the 'Deposition of Christ' (No 77a) by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Although the eyes are still unnaturally narrowed, the faces are chunkier and more human than in the earlier Siennese paintings. Note also the tremendous feeling of sorrow and anguish in the lower scene of the Deposition. Opposite, still by Ambrogio, is a 'Madonna and Child with chaffinch', the bird held rather uncomfortably by one wing. On the other side of the wall, there is an assumption by Ambrogio, with a very serious looking Madonna. In the same style, also on the other side is a Madonna by Pietro Lorenzetti.

Rooms 8, 9, 10 and 11

Go past rooms 8, 9 and 10 (the latter being nothing but a small baroque chapel), and stop in Room 11, where there is a good 'Annunciation with Saints Cosmo and Damian' (No 131) by Taddeo di Bartolo (1362-1422). Note that the eyes are now back to a more normal shape after some 100 years of stylized almond eyes. God the Father is shown on the top left with the Holy Ghost as a dove sliding down a ray of light to impregnate the Virgin - although truth to be told, she already looks rather pregnant. There is also a fine crucifix in this room.

Rooms 12 and 13

In Room 12 there are two fine paintings by Giovanni di Paolo (1399-1482), with lots of movement and emotion. The 'Crucifix with Saints' (no 199) includes San Galgano plunging his sword into the stone. In Room 13 there are two wonderful Presentations of Christ at the Temple, with marvellous high priests, probably wearing mediaeval Jewish robes. The stylised tragic faces of the early paintings have now disappeared completely, and every face has its own strong and very human character. The temple, however, is still an idealised Gothic building, and it will be a few years yet before buildings too become naturalistic.

Rooms 14 and 15

In Room 14 the Maesta (No 432) by Matteo di Giovanni (circa 1430-1495) is very much of the Botticelli period, with a more delicately featured Virgin and softer colours. Also noteworthy is a Madonna and Child (No 286) by the same artist, with a happy smiling Madonna, and angels chatting at the top. There are some good paintings by Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439-1502); in particular a Madonna and Child with saints (No 288) and an Annunciation (No 277) on the right on entering.

This was a period when a more realistic style was creeping in, although still fairly idealised by our standards. The Nativity (No 437) also by Francesco di Giorgio Martini shows how buildings have become naturalistic, with a romantic ruin and a real thatched roof stable replacing the fantastic jewelled Gothic halls in which earlier Nativities were housed, and rocks alive with flowers and animals have replaced the earlier elaborate tiled floors. In Room 15, the Adoration of the shepherds and saints (No 279) by Pietro di Domenico (1457-1506) again shows something like a real stable.

Rooms 16, 17 and 19

Rooms 16 and 17 are largely taken up by the works of Sano di Pietro, a factory production line of stereotyped polyptyches. He really only comes into his own only in the predellas beneath the main

panels, many of which have lively and interesting scenes. Room 19 is full of large but mostly undistinguished paintings. We suggest that you walk fairly quickly through these rooms and descend to the floor below for something completely different.

THIRD FLOOR: SPANNOCCHI COLLECTION

For a change from Siense painting before going down to the first floor, go up the small stairway that leads up to the third floor, which is devoted to a small collection of non-Siense paintings formed in the 17th century by a Siense nobleman. Most are undistinguished, but there is a good painting of the Nativity by Lorenzo Lotto (c1480-1557). There are also some other works of the Venetian school and a number of Flemish paintings.



The Tower of Babel, one of the Flemish paintings in the Spannocchi collection.

FIRST FLOOR

This floor has a number of good works by two very different 16th century artists - Beccafumi (1486-1581) and Sodoma (1477-1549), Siena's last two painters of note. Sodoma (his real name was Giovanni Antonio Bazzi) came from the Piedmont but spent much of his life in Siena. His work follows on from the more naturalistic artists on the floor above (he was also influenced by Leonardo da Vinci), with delicately drawn scenes, attractive landscapes, graceful figures and soft colouring. Beccafumi represents the quite new style of mannerism, with figures striking elaborate "mannered" attitudes. Beccafumi is noteworthy, however, above all for a marvellous use of colour and light, creating dramatic and often visionary effects. Occasionally, however, he veers into distressing sentimentality, or into an effect which does not quite come off, as when he gives butterfly wings to angels.

Rooms 20, 21, 22 and 23, and the Sculpture Room

Go straight through Rooms 20-22 (these rooms have some nice paintings but not as good as those further on). In Room 23, pause only before No 102 on the wall opposite the door - a Visitation with Saints by Pietro di Francesco Orioli (1458-1-96). It portrays a charming scene with most of the participants having lively conversations with each other, caught in mid-word.

Bowing as you pass to Queen Elizabeth I on the wall of the stair-well, turn right into the Sculpture Room. The room is worth a visit if only because of the marvellous views of Siena and its roofs – the untidy forest of aerials that once festooned them has now been replaced with neat terracotta-coloured satellite dishes. But the room also has some interesting early sculptured panels. There is a key (in Italian) on the table. No 5 (3 panels on the right wall, bottom row by the window) shows scenes from the life of the Blessed Gioacchino Piccolomini: first ringing at the door of the monastery which he decides to join as a young man; then having an epileptic fit and upsetting a table, but with everything on the table remaining miraculously on it; and finally having another epileptic fit during Mass, but again without upsetting anything.

Rooms 27, 28, 29 and 30

These are devoted to Beccafumi and followers. Look particularly at the Beccafumi tondo of the Virgin and Child in Room 27 (she looks as though her reading has been interrupted); and in Room 28 at the Birth of the Virgin (No 405), showing her as a startlingly grown-up baby already sucking her thumb, the whole scene with wonderful light effects.

Rooms 31-36

Room 31 contains a good fresco of the flagellated Christ tied to a column (No 352), by Sodoma, a much more human painter. In Room 32, look at Sodoma's Deposition, a huge painting with a swooning Virgin, and soldiers hoisting down the dead body of Christ using rather unsteady steps of cloth.

Rooms 33, 34, 35 and 36 contain less distinguished paintings. But on leaving room 36, turn left for two more big paintings by Beccafumi: the Descent of Christ into limbo (No 427) on the right, and St Michael chasing the bad angels out of heaven (No 423) on the left - both full of movement and colour, albeit somewhat muddled in overall composition. Further on in the same room are two frescoes by Sodoma: on the right Jesus praying in the garden while the apostles sleep; and on the left Christ in limbo again, helping a poor soul up into heaven - a more intimate and less dramatic picture than the Beccafumi version of the same scene.



Descent of Christ into Limbo, by Beccafumi