

THE PAINTINGS THAT REVOLUTIONIZED ART



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FOREWORD

Art is a universal expression of humanity, and simultaneously a meaningful mirror of the time and culture in which it is created. Like humankind itself, art, too, is subject to constant change, as it follows an urge towards new and previously undiscovered areas, toward new forms and new perspectives. A painting will often speak to us more directly than any kind of written document ever could. It exposes us to a story, a person, or perhaps to nothing but an emotion, with which we can feel a sense of connection and gain access to eras and concepts beyond our own present time.

The present volume assembles 100 paintings that revolutionized art, standing out in the history of art because they transcended boundaries and laid the foundation for that which was new and had never before been seen. This applies to Giotto's frescoes in the Arena Chapel, in which he liberated the figures he painted from the constraints of traditional representational norms for the first time, breathing life into them. It is equally true of Wassily Kandinsky's painting *Impression III*, in which painting fuses with music. Other works captivate the viewer with bold technical innovations, such as the use of oil paint in Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* or the advances in perspectival representation in Paolo Uccello's *Saint George and the Dragon*. Last but not least, there are paintings which have become part of the collective pictorial memory, but which to this day have not given up their last secrets, such as Leonardo's smiling *Mona Lisa*, Vermeer's mysterious *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, and Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*.

Quiet paintings less often discussed outside the realms of expert opinion have also been made part of this selection: the Late Gothic painter Konrad Witz audaciously set his interpretation of the Miraculous Draft of Fishes on Lake Geneva. In doing so, he created the first landscape depiction that clearly referred to a precise location. Chardin confronted the frivolous world of the sumptuous Rococo paintings of his time with the humble activity of a washerwoman. And with his small-format collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* the British artist Richard Hamilton presented one of the first works of Pop Art, long before Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns.

A compilation of 100 revolutionary masterpieces must always be subjective, even if it follows objective criteria. Humankind's artistic creation is too extensive and too varied, the discussion of originality and ingenuity too complex. Chronologically, our selection traces art history from the early Middle Ages to the recent past, and concentrates on the Western world: with the exception of Hokusai's *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, the works of art reproduced here were created in Europe or America. Sculpture, the arts and crafts, and new media from the modern age are not taken into account here, in favor of a stringent focus on the medium of painting (and one woodcut). Paul Klee's recognition of the fact that "art does not reproduce the visible, but makes visible" neatly summarizes the difference between art and mere reproduction. In the same vein, the following selection offers more than just a sequence of art-historically significant works of art. It makes visible the ways in which artists over the centuries have followed their visions, dared to experiment, bravely stood in opposition to the tastes of their times—in which they have taken courageous steps into new terrain, and against all odds have been able to express that which lies beyond the scope of words.

1

ICON OF CHRIST PANTOKRATOR

In the 1950s Greek art historians George and Maria Soteriou made a remarkable discovery. In the remote Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai in Egypt they came across 200 icons dating from between the end of the 5th century and the 13th century, including the icon of Christ depicted here, which probably dates from the 6th century. One of the oldest surviving icons, it is a supreme example of Byzantine art.

It is a representation of Christ as “Pantokrator,” ruler of the world. We see a frontal, half-length portrait of a bearded Jesus, his right hand raised in blessing, his left hand holding a richly ornamented book of the Gospels. His imperial purple clothing and the semi-circular niche around him emphasize his role as ruler. This Sinai icon of Christ is unusual in that the strictly frontal nature of the traditional image is more relaxed; the unknown painter has positioned the figure slightly off-center and has brought the face to life through the depiction of asymmetrical features and shading. The technical expertise displayed in the encaustic painting employed to make this icon, suggests it was created in the Byzantine capital, Constantinople. The motif of Christ Pantokrator emerged during the first flourishing of art in the Byzantine Empire under Justinian I (r. 306–337), which also saw the building of the magnificent new basilica of Hagia Sophia. Some scholars have even suggested it was intended as a votive image for the Emperor himself.

It was a happy stroke of historical luck that this icon was preserved in a monastery on Sinai, whose isolated location guaranteed its survival over the centuries. Icons (from Greek *eikon*, “image”) were considered a way of reaching contact with the saints: they were not just an image of a heavenly authority, but a means of providing access to the person represented. People prayed in front of devotional images, kissed them, and kneeled before them: the front-facing position of the figures thus provided immediate communication with the viewer. Ultimately, this image worship led to violent theological disputes, to the iconoclasm of the 8th and 9th centuries, and for a time to the prohibition of any images of saints in the Byzantine Empire. However, being on Sinai protected this icon not only during the iconoclastic controversy: in 1453 Constantinople was captured by the Ottomans Turks and the Byzantine Empire (though not its cultural influence) was brought to an end.

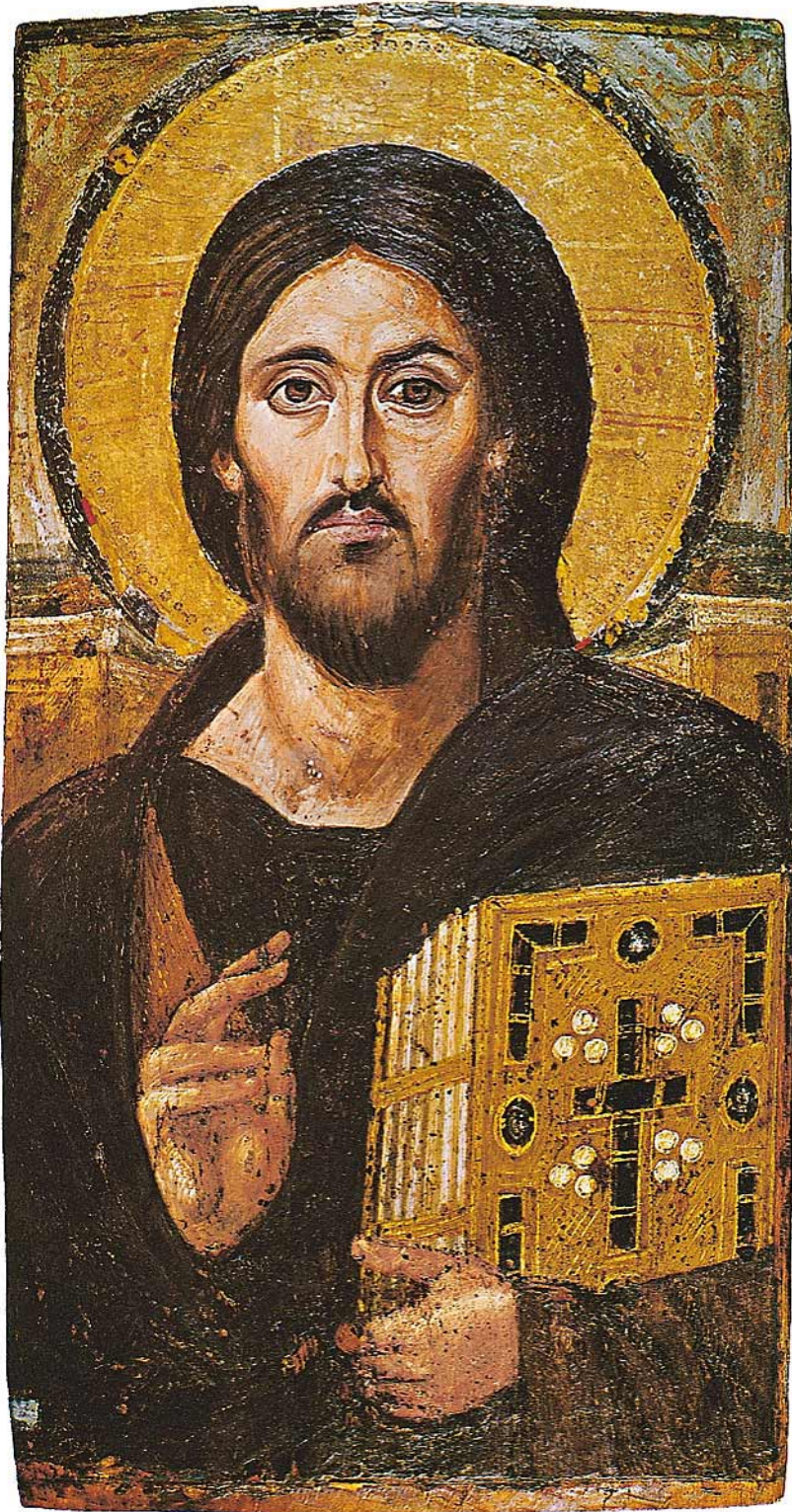
ENCAUSTIC PAINTING

The technique of encaustic painting has been known of since the time of Ancient Greece. Colored pigments are mixed with wax and applied or burnt onto the painting's support (wood panel) while still hot; the term comes from the Greek *enkauston*, “burnt in.” The most famous examples of encaustic painting are Late Egyptian mummy portraits, which are remarkable for their unique state of preservation. Only a few icons made using this technique, including the early Sinai icons, have survived; many were destroyed during iconoclastic periods. During the Middle Ages, tempera and oil paints replaced encaustic painting as the principal painting techniques.

"I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD:

HE THAT FOLLOWETH ME SHALL NOT WALK IN DARKNESS,
BUT SHALL HAVE THE LIGHT OF LIFE."

Gospel of John 8:12



ICON OF CHRIST PANTOKRATOR

6th century (?), Encaustic on wood, 84 x 43.5 cm,
Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai, Egypt

2

THE BOOK OF KELLS

The Book of Kells contains the four Gospels in Latin, as well as some prefaces and tables. It was written and decorated around AD 800 and takes its name from the Abbey of Kells, in Ireland. Written on vellum, the book is famous for the intricate, complex, swirling patterns of its Celtic decoration.

Although nothing is known definitively of its history, the Book of Kells was probably begun in the monastery of Iona in Scotland, founded in AD 563 by Saint Columba. We know nothing of the monks who wrote or decorated its pages, though it was written by at least two different hands. After a particularly devastating Viking raid in 806, during which 68 people were killed, the monks relocated to the Abbey of Kells, in County Meath. The Book of Kells represents the highpoint of “Insular” illumination, a style that emerged in the British Isles after the retreat of the Romans and that ended with the beginning of the Viking raids on Britain around AD 800. Mostly produced in monasteries as manuscripts, or on metalwork and stone crosses, this style differed markedly from that of the rest of European art. To illustrate and decorate the Gospels, the pages of the Book of Kells combine traditional Christian subjects with Insular art—humans, animals and mythological beasts composed of interlacing Celtic forms in vibrant colors. The illustration of Christ Enthroned demonstrates this combination of Christian themes with birds and interlacing circles. Christ appears seated in the center, with smaller figures (possibly angels) around him. While the depiction of the human form is flat and simplified, with no attempt at showing depth, the birds and interlacing lines have fine detail and bring life to the image. Even the curls of Christ’s hair end in Celtic swirls. Every bit of background is filled with color and with interconnected patterns executed in minute detail. The colors used in the Book of Kells include purple, lilac, red, pink, green, and yellow, more than appear in most other surviving manuscripts. The pigments needed to create these colors included red ochre, yellow ochre, green copper, indigo, and lapis lazuli. Some of these had to be imported from as far away as the Mediterranean and even Afghanistan. These pigments were used to create the most lavishly decorated Gospel book to have survived. Such a large and beautifully decorated Gospel would have been kept on the high altar and removed only for the reading of the Gospels during Mass. The Book of Kells remains the ultimate example of Christian symbols combined with the intricate knot work and interweaving patterns of Celtic art. The patterns and images continue to be admired and have inspired artists to this day.

Created in Scotland around AD 800, the Book of Kells was removed to the Abbey of Kells in Ireland, where it remained for hundreds of years. It was stolen in the 11th century, though later found in a ditch with its cover torn off. The cover, which probably included gold and gems, was never found. The pages, somewhat water-damaged but otherwise fine, were returned to the Abbey. In 1541, during the English Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church took the book for safekeeping. It was not returned to Ireland until the 17th century, when it was given to Archbishop James Ussher. He in turn presented it to Trinity College, Dublin, where the book remains today.

"LOOK MORE KEENLY AT IT AND YOU WILL ...
MAKE OUT INTRICACIES, SO DELICATE AND SUBTLE,
SO EXACT AND COMPACT, SO FULL OF KNOTS AND LINKS,
WITH COLORS SO FRESH AND VIVID THAT YOU MIGHT SAY
THAT ALL THIS WAS THE WORK OF AN ANGEL AND NOT OF A MAN."

Giraldus Cambrensis





above The face of Christ is greatly simplified, with only a few lines used for the eyes, eyebrows, and nose. The hair, however, shows the influence of Insular art with the use of Celtic knots.

right The Chi-Rho page, from the Book of Kells, c. AD 800, iron-gall ink and pigments on vellum, 33 x 24 cm, Trinity College, Dublin



Ingenitio

3

GIOTTO

FRESCOES IN THE ARENA CHAPEL (CAPELLA DEGLI SCROVEGNI)

Italy in 1300 was moving away from its medieval past. In Padua, frescoes for a newly built chapel were commissioned not by the Catholic Church, but by a very “modern” sort of client—the banker Enrico Scrovegni. And to decorate his chapel, Scrovegni chose a new kind of artist, Giotto. His frescoes brought a revolutionary sense of realism and emotion to European art that would inspire painters for centuries to come.

The Scrovegni family in Padua had acquired a controversial reputation. They had made a fortune in banking, yet many accused them of charging their clients usurious interests rates—a sin in medieval Europe. Despite these allegations, around 1300 Enrico Scrovegni extended his family’s fortunes by purchasing land in Padua that had once been part of an ancient Roman arena. On that land he rebuilt a small church, transforming it into a grand family chapel. Many conservative citizens of Padua saw the building as a monument not to piety but to family pride. But it soon became a place of pilgrimage for the remarkable frescoes it contained.

Scrovegni’s painter, Giotto, was among a small group of Italian artists who were beginning to reject the flat, emotionless styles of their day. These artists had begun to rediscover the naturalistic art of ancient Rome. Giotto himself was developing a style that rendered figures in a more three-dimensional manner and with a greater variety of everyday human emotions. This new art would achieve its greatest flowering in Scrovegni’s chapel.

Giotto created his frescoes as a series of panel-like zones that cover the walls of the chapel. The panels tell the story of Jesus in chronological order, beginning with an image of God the Father over the chancel arch and ending with the Last Judgment, an image that covers the entire entrance wall. Each of Giotto’s story panels depicts a particular biblical scene. The outdoor scenes are set in relatively barren landscapes with deep blue skies. Indoor scenes typically take place plain rooms with unadorned walls. Giotto’s unfussy backgrounds heighten the intensity of the human activities that take place in his scenes—activities that the painter captures with unprecedented naturalism. In the panels depicting the Crucifixion and the Lamentation, Giotto’s dead Christ resembles a real cadaver, while Mary and the other witnesses express true agony in their facial expressions. Other frescoes feature characters that people of Giotto’s day would have recognized—street musicians, nursemaids, and household servants. The artist even includes a portrait of Enrico Scrovegni on the Last Judgment wall. The patron, who is shown dedicating his chapel to God, is given quite distinctive facial features: this may be one of the first true portraits created since antiquity.

GIOTTO DI BONDONE was born c. 1267, either in or near Florence. The Renaissance artist and biographer Giorgio Vasari wrote in his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550) that Giotto served as an apprentice to the Florentine master Cimabue. Vasari also writes that Giotto helped create the famous Life of St. Francis paintings in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. Many modern scholars, however, dispute Vasari’s story. By about 1300, Giotto’s growing fame as a painter earned him commissions in many parts of Italy. Aside from his work on the Arena chapel in Padua, he created important frescoes in Naples and Rome. He also worked as an architect, designing the elegant campanile of Florence’s cathedral. Giotto died in 1337 in Florence.

“GIOTTO RESTORED PAINTING TO ITS FORMER WORTH AND GREAT REPUTATION. FOR IMAGES FORMED BY HIS BRUSH AGREE SO WELL WITH THE LINEAMENTS OF NATURE AS TO SEEM TO THE BEHOLDER TO LIVE AND BREATHE.”

Filippo Villani, 1381/82



GIOTTO FRESQUES IN THE ARENA CHAPEL
(CAPPELLA DEGLI SCROVEGNI)

The Betrayal of Christ, c. 1305, fresco, 185 x 200 cm,
Capella degli Scrovegni, Padua





left View of the Arena Chapel (Capella degli Scrovegni) in Padua with Giotto's fresco cycle, c. 1305, overall dimensions of chapel: 12.80 x 20.82 x 8.42 m

above Giotto di Bondone, *The Lamentation of Christ*, c. 1305, fresco, c. 185 x 200 cm, Capella degli Scrovegni, Padua
Twisted, grimacing faces and dramatic postures express the agony of the Lamentation. Giotto transforms the remote biblical event into an emotionally gripping story taking place in the here and now.

"ON THE DAY ON WHICH IT WAS CARRIED TO THE DUOMO,
THE SHOPS WERE LOCKED UP AND THE BISHOP ORDERED A GREAT AND DEVOUT
COMPANY OF PRIESTS AND BROTHERS WITH A SOLEMN PROCESSION,
ACCOMPANIED BY ... ALL THE OFFICIALS OF THE COMMUNE, AND ALL THE POPULACE ...
AND THEY ACCOMPANIED IT RIGHT TO THE DUOMO ... SOUNDING ALL THE BELLS IN GLORY,
OUT OF DEVOTION FOR SUCH A NOBLE PANEL AS WAS THIS."

Sieneſe chronicler Agnolo di Tura, 1350



4

DUCCIO
MAESTÀ

Most European artists of the Middle Ages worked anonymously in the service of the Church. But during the 1200s, individual painters and sculptors began to create art that was distinctively their own ... and to achieve personal fame as a result. Duccio di Buoninsegna was one of these artists. His masterwork, the *Maestà*, is a traditional type of sacred image. But Duccio infused it with his own personality, and he became one of the first great “names” in European art.

Medieval Siena was a vibrant society of bankers, politicians, wool traders, and artists. Its commercial wealth produced strong-willed men and women, and the painter Duccio was among its most fiercely independent characters. Records indicate that as early as 1280 he was fined by the city government for offenses ranging from refusal to carry out his military service to “sorcery.” Yet despite these run-ins with the law, Duccio remained a highly valued citizen. As Siena’s newly constructed cathedral, the Duomo, was being decorated, Duccio helped determine where church furnishings would be placed. He also designed one of the building’s giant stained glass windows. Then, in 1308, he was commissioned to produce the Duomo’s central altarpiece: the *Maestà*.

The *Maestà* image features Mary and Jesus enthroned “majestically” and surrounded by angels. Early *Maestàs* were richly colorful, yet their figures were also rigid and flat in appearance. This formulaic way of painting had its origins in ancient Byzantine art. But 13th-century Italian artists were beginning to break free from Byzantine traditions. Duccio himself developed a highly personal style in which hands and faces appear soft and naturalistic. His Madonnas became famous for their “sweet” and gentle countenance. So when Siennese leaders needed a new altarpiece for their cathedral, they requested something more than a painting—they requested a Duccio!

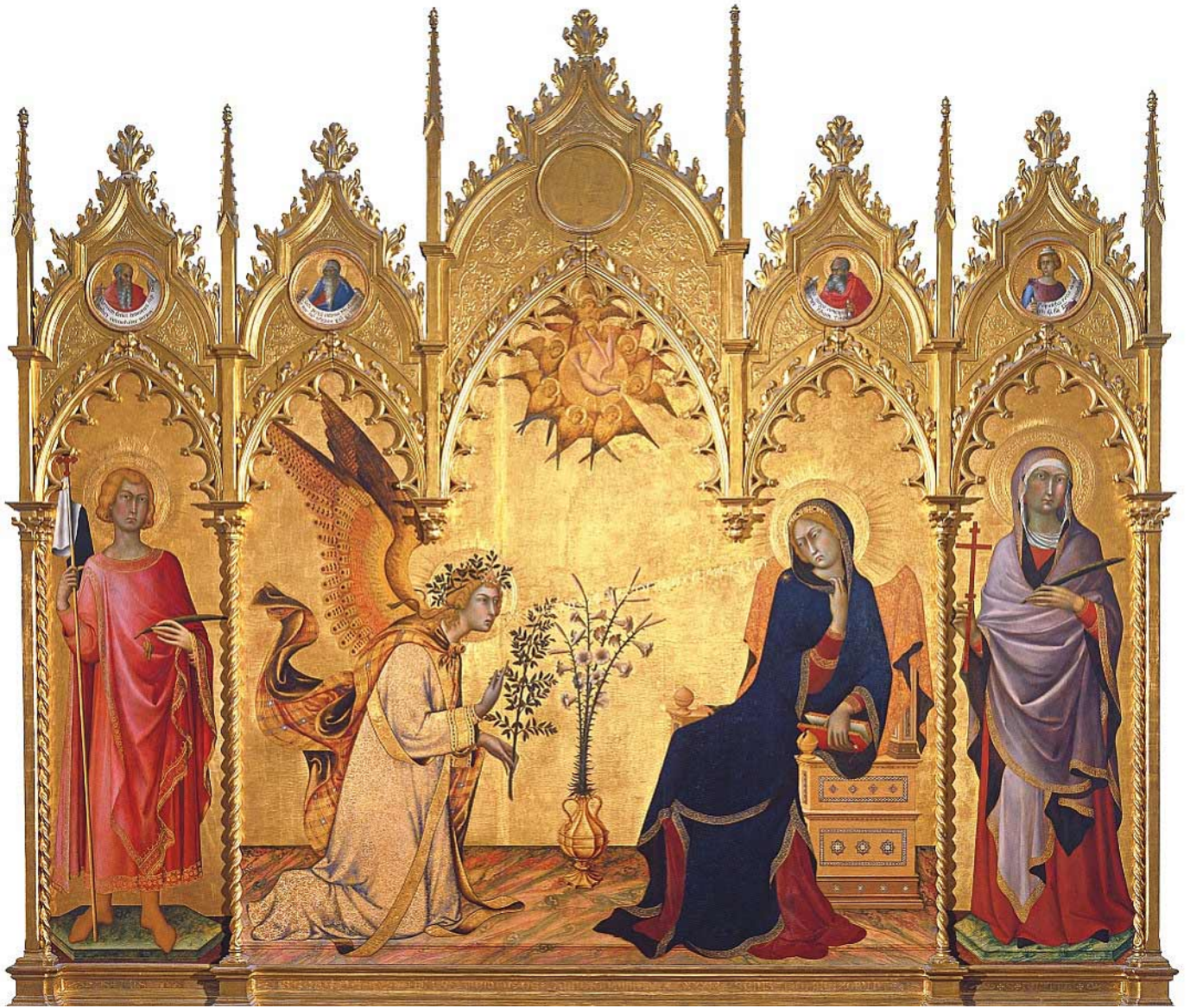
In his completed *Maestà*, Duccio’s Madonna and Child adopt the traditional Byzantine pose. But their faces have a supple quality that resembles real skin. Even Christ’s robes possess naturalistic folds and a lacy, silk-like appearance. Duccio also expanded the traditional *Maestà* format by including images of Siena’s four patron saints kneeling next to the throne. Thus the city itself became an integral part of the sacred work. On the reverse of his *Maestà*, Duccio painted numerous smaller panels depicting scenes from the New Testament. Many of these panels, including one of King Herod ordering the slaughter of newborn children, fully capture the drama of the scene portrayed. They also present spaces and buildings that begin to look truly three-dimensional. Duccio’s altarpiece became an instant success when it was completed in 1311. Siennese leaders were so impressed with the work that they ordered a public holiday during which Duccio’s *Maestà* could be processed through the city streets and formally placed in the Duomo. This kind of civic pride engendered through art would gradually become more common in Italy, especially in Renaissance Florence. Over the following centuries, the artist would become transformed from an anonymous tradesman into a cultural celebrity.

DUCCIO DI BUONINSEGNA

was born in Siena, probably in the late 1250s. His earliest documented work dates from around 1280, and he quickly became one of the most sought-after artists in Tuscany. In addition to his commissions for Siennese clients, Duccio painted the famous *Rucellai Madonna* (1285, Uffizi, Florence) for the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. This altarpiece depicts the enthroned Madonna and Child surrounded by six angels. Documents indicate that Duccio had a large family with seven children. He died in 1318 or 1319 in Siena, only a few years after completing his great *Maestà*.

“SIMONE WAS VERY FANCIFUL AND UNDERSTOOD
THE GOOD METHOD OF GROUPING FIGURES
GRACEFULLY IN THE MANNER OF THOSE TIMES.”

Giorgio Vasari



SIMONE MARTINI (AND LIppo MEMMI) **ANNUNCIATION WITH SAINT MARGARET AND SAINT ANSANUS**

1333, tempera and gold on panel, 265 x 305 cm,
Uffizi Gallery, Florence

5

SIMONE MARTINI (AND LIPPO MEMMI) ANNUNCIATION WITH SAINT MARGARET AND SAINT ANSANUS

As more and more artists achieved personal fame during the 14th century, some of them began to attract clients far from their place of birth. The Sieneese painter Simone Martini served many Italian princes. He even plied his trade in southern France, becoming one of the first great “international” artists. Yet Martini’s most famous work, the *Annunciation with Saint Margaret and Saint Ansanus*, was created for the cathedral in his home city. It displays the energy and courtly grace that made him so successful.

During the 1300s, Siena’s cathedral, the Duomo, reflected the city’s wealth and prestige. Blazing green-and-white-striped marble covered its walls and giant bell tower, while its façade was adorned with intricate carvings. Striped marble also adorned the interior, along with soft-colored light that emanated from the stained-glass windows. But the Duomo’s most remarkable decorations were its altarpieces. Along with Florence, Siena was the most important center of painting in 14th-century Europe. And unlike most religious art at that time, Sieneese altarpieces were valued for the artists who made them as well as for their holy images.

Duccio, the “father” of Gothic Sieneese painting, painted the *Maestà* as the cathedral’s main altarpiece. It was installed in 1311 with remarkable public fanfare. Soon afterward, the cathedral would sponsor four more painted works dedicated to Mary and to the city’s four patron saints. All four commissions would go to leading artists from Siena: Bartolomeo Bulgarini, Pietro and Ambrosio Lorenzetti, and the city’s most famous painter, Simone Martini. Martini had helped to spread the Sieneese style throughtout Italy. The subject for Martini’s new altarpiece would be the Annunciation, and the work he produced would reflect Sieneese culture at its creative peak. Yet Martini would not paint the work alone. His brother-in-law and assistant Lippo Memmi painted a significant portion of the image. Memmi had learned to imitate Simone’s style with great accuracy. Even today, scholars are uncertain which sections of the work were painted by Simone and which by Lippo. Despite this problem of attribution, the altarpiece remains among the greatest examples of Martini’s art. The Virgin Mary seems to recoil from the Archangel Gabriel, who announces her divine pregnancy. Gabriel, too, is painted in a way that emphasizes movement. His windblown mantle and wings suggest that he has just landed in Mary’s presence. Martini also endows the work with rich detail, including Mary’s lavishly decorated throne and Gabriel’s colorful wings. Simone’s imagery marks an important transition in Western art. His figures sometimes have the two-dimensional quality of Byzantine painting and medieval French manuscript illuminations. Yet his flair for drama, movement, and detail were entirely “modern”.

SIMONE MARTINI was born c. 1284 in Siena. He was one of many painters from Siena whose graceful style was influenced by Duccio. Like the older artist, Martini was popular and versatile. He became a master of everything from tiny manuscript illuminations to large-scale frescoes. One of his earliest documented works is the great *Maestà* (c. 1315, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena), or the *Enthroned Madonna and Child*, in the city’s town hall, the Palazzo Pubblico. Martini’s triumphs in Siena led to major commissions in Pisa, Assisi, Orvieto, Naples, and elsewhere in Italy. Towards the end of his life, around 1340, Simone traveled to Avignon, France—the headquarters of the papacy at that time. He would spend the rest of his life there. He died in 1344 in Avignon. Lippo Memmi, Martini’s assistant and most important follower, was born c. 1291 in Sienna and died there in 1356.