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Italian Paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

Fei, Paolo di Giovanni

Also known as
Feo, Paolo di
Sienese, c. 1335/1345 - 1411

BIOGRAPHY

Documented on July 1, 1369, as a member of the General Council of the city of Siena,[1] Paolo must have already reached his majority by then, so that he would have been born sometime prior to 1344–1345. He must have been trained as an artist in his hometown, perhaps in the shop of Bartolo di Fredi (with whom he would collaborate on the frescoes in the Malavolti Chapel in San Domenico in 1397),[2] or in that of Francesco di Vannuccio, with whom his earliest works also reveal affinities. Various documents cite the artist, but only for his civic duties. Works of his that are recorded by the sources (such as the panel dated 1381 or 1391 formerly in the church of San Maurizio) or otherwise documented (some statues that he colored, paintings executed for Siena Cathedral in 1402–1403 and in 1407–1408, and an altarpiece for the chapel of San Daniele there) have been lost. The painter signed his last will and testament on June 1, 1411. By October of that year he was dead.

Art historians have attempted to reconstruct Paolo's oeuvre on the basis of the only signed painting to have survived from his hand: polyptych no. 300 in the Pinacoteca Nazionale of Siena. Despite the lack of chronological clues about his artistic production, art historians have agreed in ascribing to his initial phase the half-figure images of the Madonna and Child in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints* in the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. In these paintings, the rather stereotyped rigidity of poses and the repetitiveness of the facial masks reveal some uncertainty, characteristic of the production of artists at the start of their careers. By contrast, the painter shows himself fully at his ease in proposing an elaborate composition, rich in observations taken from daily life, in the polyptych of the Birth of the Virgin, also in the Pinacoteca of Siena, probably datable to the early or mid-1380s. The few fragments of fresco attributable to him, found in the Accerigi Chapel in San Domenico in Siena, date to 1387.[3] Two *tavolette di Biccherna* in the Archivio di Stato of Siena, also attributed to the artist, date respectively to 1388 and 1394.[4] An increasingly pronounced attempt to give

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an individual characterization to the protagonists of his paintings, who now move with ease and spontaneity and are happily immersed in the parts they are called to play, can be noted in polyptych no. 300 in Siena, datable to the early 1390s, and in that of the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, executed in 1398–1399, of which the *central panel* is now in the National Gallery of Art. The polyptych in the oratory of San Bernardino al Prato and the Crucifixion recently rediscovered below a clumsy late-sixteenth-century painting in the Museo Civico in Siena probably date to the same years.[5]

To the concluding phase of Paolo's career, characterized by considerable originality and modernity in compositional schemes and an increasing richness of realistic detail, we can assign some small but precious panels for private devotion, such as the triptych in the Minutolo Chapel in Naples Cathedral, probably painted c. 1408;[6] another triptych with the Crucifixion and stories of the Passion, which recently appeared at a sale in Paris;[7] and the *Assumption of the Virgin* in the Gallery—works that probably played an important role in stimulating the artists of the first generation of Sienese painting in the fifteenth century.

[1] For this and other documentary information on the life of the painter, see Pèleo Bacci, *Dipinti inediti e sconosciuti di Pietro Lorenzetti, Bernardo Daddi etc. in Siena e nel contado* (Siena, 1939), 165–206. Sienese citizens attained their majority at age twenty-five.

[2] Gaudenz Freuler, "Die Malavolti-Kapelle des Bartolo di Fredi und Paolo di Giovanni Fei in S. Domenico in Siena," *Pantheon* 45 (1987): 39–53. In Laurence Kanter's opinion (kind personal communication), Naddo Ceccarelli must have been Paolo's master.

[3] Michael Mallory, *Paolo di Giovanni Fei* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1965), 104–110; Peter Anselm Riedl and Max Seidel, eds., *Die Kirchen von Siena*, 3 vols. (Munich, 1985–2006), vol. 2, bk. 1, pt. 2: 656; bk. 2, pt. 2: figs. 730–731.

[4] Michael Mallory, *Paolo di Giovanni Fei* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1965), 143–146, 234–235, 242; Luigi Borgia and Enzo Carli, eds., *Le Biccherne: Tavole dipinte delle magistrature senesi (secoli xiii–xviii)* (Rome, 1984), 118–119, 124–125.

[5] Alessandro Bagnoli, Silvia Colucci, and Veronica Randon, eds., *Il Crocifisso con i dolenti in umiltà di Paolo di Giovanni Fei: Un capolavoro riscoperto* (Siena, 2005).

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[6] Michael Mallory, "An Early Quattrocento Trinity," *The Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 85–89.

[7] *Crucifixion (and the Blessing Christ above), Ascent to Calvary, and Deposition (with the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin above)*, 69 × 53 cm, formerly Comte de V. collection, Étude Tajan, sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, March 30, 1998, lot. 1.

Miklós Boskovits (1935–2011)

March 21, 2016

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To cite: Miklós Boskovits (1935–2011), "Paolo di Giovanni Fei," *Italian Paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, NGA Online Editions, http://purl.org/nga/collection/constituent/1276 (accessed December 20, 2016).

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