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Italian Paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

Simone Martini

Also known as
Simone di Martino
Sienese, active from 1315; died 1344

BIOGRAPHY

Probably born in Siena, perhaps in 1284 according to uncertain information transmitted by Giorgio Vasari (Florentine, 1511 - 1574),[1] Simone must already have been a famous artist when he was commissioned to paint the *Maestà* fresco in the Sienese seat of government, the Palazzo Pubblico. Signed and dated 1315, it is the earliest surviving of his ascertained works. Even then his fame must have spread well beyond the borders of his homeland: the Anjevin court in Naples ordered from him the panel *Saint Louis of Toulouse Crowning His Brother Robert of Anjou, King of Naples* (now in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, from the church of San Lorenzo Maggiore in Naples), probably executed immediately after the saint's canonization in 1317. Soon after, the artist was called to Assisi to fresco the chapel of Saint Martin in the basilica of San Francesco. Between 1319 and 1320, he painted the polyptych for the church of Santa Caterina in Pisa (now in the Museo Nazionale in that city). Dating to 1321 or the immediately ensuing years (the date in Roman script is perhaps fragmentary) is the polyptych for San Domenico in Orvieto, now in the Museo Civico of that city, along with other paintings made for Orvieto, including a Madonna in the same museum and a polyptych now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston.

In 1324, Simone married Giovanna, daughter of the painter Memmo di Filippuccio and sister of Lippo Memmi (Sienese, active 1317/1347), who had probably already become Simone's partner and with whom he would sign the polyptych of the Annunciation, two saints, and four prophets for the altar of Sant'Ansano in Siena Cathedral in 1333 (now in the Uffizi, Florence). In the intervening years he painted various documented but now lost paintings, while in 1328 or shortly thereafter he produced the famous equestrian portrait in fresco of the condottiere *Guidoriccio da Fogliano* in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. In 1335, at the height of his fame, Simone was called to the papal court at Avignon, where he produced frescoes, now much ruined, in the church of Notre-Dame des Doms, and also a lost portrait of Laura, Petrarch's love. Also at the poet's request he painted the frontispiece of a codex of Virgil (now in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan), a work that, like the

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portrait, would inspire Petrarch's lavish praise of the master on more than one occasion.[2] In 1342, Simone signed and dated the small panel *Christ Returning to His Parents from the Doctors in the Temple* (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool). He made his will on June 30, 1344, and died in Avignon shortly after.

As shown by his fresco of the Maestà (which we now know was begun at least one year before 1315, and reworked in 1321)[3] and some other works probably of earlier date,[4] by that time Simone had already emerged as a fully independent and highly innovative artist who had broken away from the prevailing Duccesque manner of painting in Siena. An attentive observer of the courtly refinement of masterpieces of the transalpine Gothic, especially miniatures and goldsmiths' work, and also of the sinuous arabesques of Sienese sculptors such as Lorenzo Maitani,[5] Simone was also influenced by the pictorial realism cultivated by Giotto (Florentine, c. 1265 - 1337) and his school in Florence and Assisi.[6] After a continuous qualitative growth, testified by his successive works, he arrived at a style charged with sentiment and enriched with acute realistic observations of detail, as exemplified by the signed quadriptych executed for a member of the Orsini family and now divided among the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp, the Staatliche Museen in Berlin, and the Louvre in Paris. In this and other late works Simone created an ideal of style admired and imitated not only by Sienese masters but also by some of the major painters active in the French courts in the second half of the fourteenth century.

[1] Giorgio Vasari concluded his biography of Simone in both editions of his *Vite* by transcribing the epitaph that he claims to have read above the artist's tomb: "SIMONI MEMMIO PICTORUM OMNIS AETATIS CELEBERRIMO VIX AN. LX. MEN. II D. III"; see Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, 6 vols. (Florence, 1966–1987), 2(1967):200. The epitaph attests that the painter died at the age of sixty; since the date of his death in 1344 is documented, that would mean he was born in 1284. But the fact that the inscription (as well as Vasari) cites the patronymic derived from the artist's brother-in-law rather than the correct patronymic "Martini" casts doubt on its reliability.

[2] In two of his sonnets (nos. 77 and 78), the great poet praises the art of Simone; Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. Marco Santagata (Milan, 1996), 400, 404. Moreover, on the frontispiece of the codex in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana containing works of Virgil with commentary by Servius (also called Servius Honoratus; Ms. A 79 inf.), a manuscript that Petrarch himself had owned, the poet added the

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following hexameters: “Mantua Virgilium qui talia carmina finxit/Sena tulit Symonem digito qui talia pinxit.”

[3] On the time frame for the execution of the work, cf. Alessandro Bagnoli, *La Maestà di Simone Martini* (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan, 1999), 47–65.

[4] Of the various, often fanciful proposals made in the attempt to reconstruct the still evanescent profile of the young Simone, the most convincing attributions are the *Madonna and Child* no. 583 in the Pinacoteca Nazionale of Siena and the designs for the stained-glass windows in the chapel of Saint Martin in the lower church of the basilica of San Francesco in Assisi. The latter work probably was completed even before the frescoes in the same chapel were begun.

[5] Usually the art of Simone is placed in relation to sculptors like Giovanni Pisano and Agostino di Giovanni or Tino di Camaino; cf. Antje Middeldorf Kosegarten, “Simone Martini e la scultura senese contemporanea,” in *Simone Martini: Atti del convegno, Siena, March 27–29, 1985*, ed. Luciano Bellosi (Florence, 1988), 193–202; and Gert Kreytenberg, “Tino di Camaino e Simone Martini,” in *Simone Martini: Atti del convegno; Siena, March 27–29, 1985*, ed. Luciano Bellosi (Florence, 1988), 203–209. The most exquisitely Gothic of Sienese sculptors and *capomastro* of Orvieto Cathedral, Lorenzo Maitani is mentioned more rarely in the literature on Simone and only in relation to the master’s work in Orvieto; cf. Pierluigi Leone De Castris, *Simone Martini* (Milan, 2003), 188. However, it is possible that the acquaintance between the painter and the sculptor-architect had been established far earlier than this, both because Maitani too was Sienese and also through the intermediary of Giovanni di Bonino, the glassmaker from Assisi who is documented as having worked on the building site of Orvieto Cathedral and probably had been involved in the execution of the stained glass in the lower church of the basilica of Assisi; cf. Miklós Boskovits, “Da Duccio a Simone Martini,” in *Medioevo: La chiesa e il palazzo; Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Parma, September 20–24, 2005*, ed. Arturo Carlo Quintavalle (Milan, 2007), 577.

[6] The circumstance that the stained-glass windows have been attributed in the past by Ferdinando Bologna, *Novità su Giotto: Giotto al tempo della cappella Peruzzi* (Turin, 1969), 152–153; Giuseppe Marchini, *Corpus vitrearum Medii Aevi*, vol. 1, *Le vetrate dell’Umbria* (Rome, 1973), 118–129; Luciano Bellosi, *Buffalmacco e il Trionfo della morte* (Turin, 1974), 102 n. 46; and the present writer, Miklós Boskovits, *A Critical and Historical Corpus of Florentine Painting: The Fourteenth Century*, sec. 3, vol. 9, *The Miniaturist Tendency* (Florence, 1984), 319–321, to the

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Master of Figline (alias Master of the Fogg Pietà), one of the most powerfully original disciples of Giotto, suggests the existence of rather close relations between these artists. After some tentative proposals in the past on the role of Simone in the execution of the stained glass in the chapel of Saint Martin, Alessandro Conti directly attributed the work to the great Sienese artist; the more recent literature shares his opinion. See Alessandro Conti, "Le vetrate e il problema di Giovanni di Bonino," in *Il Maestro di Figline: Un pittore del Trecento*, eds. Luciano Bellosi and Alessandro Conti (Florence, 1980), 24, 25.

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