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Italian Paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

Bulgarini, Bartolomeo

Also known as
Bulgarino, Bartolomeo di
Italian, c. 1300 - 1378

BIOGRAPHY

Bartolomeo Bulgarini was one of the most renowned Sienese painters in the decades spanning the mid-fourteenth century. According to Giorgio Vasari (Florentine, 1511 - 1574) (though he wrongly transcribed his name), he was a disciple of Pietro Lorenzetti (Sienese, active 1306 - 1345), “who wrought many panels in Siena and other places in Italy.”[1] Documents mentioning Bartolomeo appear no earlier than 1338 when, as in various succeeding years, he received payments for having painted the wooden covers of the account books of the office of the *Biccherna*, or Treasury, in Siena (so-called *tavolette di Biccherna*). A Pistoian document of c. 1348–1349 cites him among the best Tuscan painters of the period.[2] Various commissions (*pictura unius tovaglie*) for the Palazzo Pubblico, seat of communal power in Siena, in 1345, the painting of a Madonna for a city gate, the Porta Camollia, in the same city in 1349, and appointment to official posts (including an advisory role, in 1362, together with two other painters, in supervising the moving of Duccio’s *Maestà* to another site within the cathedral) confirm the prestige he must have enjoyed in Siena. In 1370, Bartolomeo became an oblate (lay member) of the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala, for which he executed and signed an altarpiece in 1373. Another altarpiece, which had remained unfinished at the time of the artist’s death, was delivered to another painter to complete in 1379.

Since none of his documented works have survived, the identification and reconstruction of Bartolomeo’s oeuvre has posed particular difficulty. The first attempts to do so, in the early twentieth century, identified him with the Bartolomeus de Senis who signed a modest triptych dated 1373 in the church of San Francesco at Tivoli, but the proposal was soon shown to be untenable.[3] Only in 1917 did the essential features of his profile as an artist begin to emerge. Bernard Berenson assembled a group of paintings characterized by a peculiar amalgam of influences of Ugolino di Nerio and Pietro Lorenzetti, and baptized the artist to whom he attributed them with the invented name of “Ugolino Lorenzetti.”[4] Some years later Ernest De Wald (1923) regrouped other paintings, later recognized to be by Bartolomeo, around a Madonna in the church of San Pietro Ovile (now in the

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Museo Diocesano, Siena) under the name “Ovile Master.”[5] Millard Meiss (1931) showed that the two groups document various aspects of the art of the same painter; Meiss later (1936) identified the hand of “Ugolino Lorenzetti” in a *tavoletta di Biccherna* for which Bartolomeo was paid in 1353, and proposed his identification with the master of the two anonymous groups.[6] In fact, various important works of this master, now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena (nos. 61, 76, and 80), come from the Ospedale della Scala, with which we know that Bartolomeo had close relations. We also know that the painter resided in the parish of San Pietro Ovile. Several art historians, however, were reluctant to accept the proposed identification, until documentary proof was adduced in 1986 that the central panel of the San Vittore altarpiece in Siena Cathedral (of which the Nativity now in the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is a fragment), long attributed to the Ovile Master, was in fact painted by Bartolomeo Bulgarini.[7]

An artist of great accomplishment though of archaizing tendency, Bartolomeo revealed deep nostalgia for the figurative tradition stemming from Duccio di Buoninsegna (Sienese, c. 1250/1255 - 1318/1319), which had now been rendered obsolete by the innovations in Sienese painting contributed by Simone Martini (Sienese, active from 1315; died 1344) and the Lorenzetti brothers. It is possible, therefore, that Bartolomeo may have begun his career as a painter by an apprenticeship in Duccio’s atelier. To his earliest phase we can ascribe such works as the *tavoletta di Biccherna* dated 1329 (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin); the polyptych in the Gallerie Fiorentine, Florence, formerly in the Museo di Santa Croce, Florence; and the triptych from Fogliano, now divided between the Pinacoteca Nazionale and the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, both in Siena. In these works Duccio’s stylistic formulae are restated with a nervously accentuated linearism. A more massive and voluminous figural style, now firmly Lorenzettian in character, and also a greater rhythmic complexity can be recognized in such works as the triptych from Sestano now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena and the polyptych divided among the Museo Nazionale di Villa Guinigi in Lucca, the Pinoteca Capitolina in Rome, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington. A more decorative style, greater softness in modeling, and closer affinity with the figurative ideal pursued by the disciples of Simone Martini thus can be distinguished in such works as the Nativity from Siena Cathedral now in the Fogg Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts (c. 1350). Similar tendencies also distinguish the artist’s later works, including the polyptych now in the Salini collection in Siena (formerly in Sant’Agostino at San Gimignano); a further polyptych, now dismantled and divided between Museo Nazionale di San Matteo in Pisa (*Four Saints*) and Yale University

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Art Gallery in New Haven (*Madonna and Child*, no. 1943.244); and some panels now in the Pinacoteca in Siena (nos. 61 and 80).

[1] 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):147: "Fu discepolo di Pietro Bartolomeo Bologhini sanese . . . in Fiorenza è di sua mano quella che è in sull'altare della capella di San Salvestro in Santa Croce" (A disciple of Pietro was Bartolomeo Bologhini of Siena . . . in Florence there is by his hand that [a panel] which is on the altar of the chapel of San Silvestro in Santa Croce). This quotation is taken from the second edition of Vasari's *Vite* (1568); in the first, he had indicated the name of the artist as "Bartolomeo Bolghini." In both cases, evidently, the cognomen was an erroneous reading of a signature, perhaps that of the Santa Croce polyptych that Vasari cited. Art historians, beginning with Berenson, have generally recognized that the polyptych displayed in the Museo di Santa Croce, Florence, until 1966 and now in the storerooms of the Gallerie Fiorentine can be given to the master whom Berenson named "Ugolino Lorenzetti," that is, the painter whose oeuvre is now incorporated in the catalog of Bartolomeo. However, as Daniela Parenti of the Uffizi in Florence has kindly explained to me, the painting in question apparently did not belong to this church originally. See Bernard Berenson, *Essays in the Study of Sienese Painting* (New York, 1918), 15–18.

[2] The document, undated, is from the archive of the Pistoian church of San Giovanni Fuor Civitas (Archivio di Stato, Pistoia, Patrimonio Ecclesiastico C 449). It lists the best painters available in Florence, Siena, and Lucca, potential candidates for the execution of the polyptych that Alesso d'Andrea had begun to paint in 1348 but had then abandoned, probably as a result of his premature death in the great plague epidemic in that year. So the list of painters was probably drawn up in 1349 or shortly thereafter. For the relevant documentation, cf. Andrew Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia, MO, 1982), 255–258.

[3] The triptych, signed and dated, was published by Attilio Rossi (1905), who identified the artist as Bartolomeo Bulgarini: the hypothesis, accepted by various scholars in the following years, was rejected by Millard Meiss (1936) and then definitively abandoned. See Attilio Rossi, *Santa Maria in Vulturella (Tivoli): Ricerche di storia e d'arte* (Rome, 1905), 19, 22; and Millard Meiss, "Bartolommeo Bulgarini altrimenti detto 'Ugolino Lorenzetti?'" *Rivista d'arte* 18 (1936): 124–125.

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[4] Bernard Berenson, “Ugolino Lorenzetti,” *Art in America* 5 (1916–1917): 259–275; Bernard Berenson, “Ugolino Lorenzetti,” *Art in America* 6 (1917–1918): 25–52.

[5] Ernest T. DeWald, “The Master of the Ovile Madonna,” *Art Studies* 1 (1923): 45–54.

[6] Millard Meiss, “Ugolino Lorenzetti,” *The Art Bulletin* 13 (1931): 376–397; Millard Meiss, “Bartolommeo Bulgarini altrimenti detto ‘Ugolino Lorenzetti?’” *Rivista d’arte* 18 (1936): 113–136.

[7] No. 1917.89, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA. Hendrik W. van Os, *Sienese Altarpieces 1215–1460: Form, Content, Function*, vol. 1, *1215–1344* (Groningen, 1984), 85–87, recognized the painting as the central panel of the San Vittore altarpiece in Siena Cathedral. Van Os identified its laterals in two panels, one representing Saint Victor and the other a young female saint, in the Royal Museum of Fine Art in Copenhagen. Shortly thereafter, definitive confirmation of Meiss’s attribution to Bartolomeo was published by the discovery in the inventory of the cathedral dated 1594 of the description of an altarpiece that was explicitly cited as “tavola della *Natività* dipinta da Bartolomeo Bulgarini da Siena.” See Elisabeth H. Beatson, Norman E. Muller, and Judith B. Steinhoff, “The St. Victor Altarpiece in Siena Cathedral: A Reconstruction,” *The Art Bulletin* 68 (1986): 610–631.

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