

Duccio di Buoninsegna

Also known as

Duccio

Sieneese, c. 1250/1255 - 1318/1319

BIOGRAPHY

The greatest exponent of Sieneese painting between the last quarter of the thirteenth and the first two decades of the fourteenth century, Duccio is documented for the first time in the role of painter in 1278, when he was paid by the *Comune* of Siena for the decoration of twelve coffers (*casse*) for the conservation of documents. Although this cannot have been a work of any particular artistic distinction, we may assume that the civic authorities would have chosen an artist who was already prominent in the city and in charge of a thriving workshop. Duccio is further recorded in Siena in 1279 and 1281, and then almost annually from 1285 onward.[1]

Some inferences can be drawn about his youthful career on the basis of his first documented panel painting, the altarpiece “*ad honorem beate et gloriose Virginis Marie*,” commissioned on April 14, 1285, by a Florentine confraternity, the *Compagnia dei Laudesi*, for Santa Maria Novella in Florence—the so-called *Madonna Rucellai*, now in the Uffizi, Florence. The strongly Cimabuesque character of this work (though, in contrast to the contemporary production of Cimabue, it is distinguished by a more intimate and lyrical interpretation of the subject and by more studied calligraphic elegance of line and rich decorative patterning that recall the refinement of French and English Gothic painting of the period) suggests the existence of close relations between the leading Florentine master and the young Sieneese painter in the first half of the 1280s. This also seems confirmed by other works probably painted in these years, such as the frescoes in the Chapel of Saint Gregory in Santa Maria Novella, the *Madonna Gualino* (Galleria Sabauda, Turin), and the *Madonna di Crevole* (Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Siena), as well as by the circumstance that some paintings of Cimabue datable to the 1280s were in the past erroneously thought to be works of Duccio or executed with his collaboration (the *Madonna* in the Santa Verdiana Museum, Castelfiorentino, the *Maestà* in the church of Santa Maria dei Servi in Bologna, and the *Flagellation* in the Frick Collection in New York).[2] There seem to be good grounds, therefore, for supposing that the two artists worked closely together in

the early 1280s, perhaps within the same atelier. But there can be no doubt that Duccio was first trained in Siena in the eighth decade of the thirteenth century, under the influence of such masters as Guido and Rinaldo da Siena. A testimony of the style of this initial phase can perhaps be found in some of the mural paintings in the crypt below the cathedral in Siena, rediscovered in recent years.[3]

Duccio presumably spent the years 1280–1285 in Rome. This is evidenced by a single work, the painted cross formerly in the Castello Orsini at Bracciano (near Rome) and now in the Salini collection near Asciano in the province of Siena. Evidence of the artist's encounter with classical and postclassical figurative culture in Rome is also clearly visible in the great stained-glass rose window (*Dormition, Assumption, and Coronation of the Virgin and Saints*) in Siena Cathedral, based on a design by Duccio and likely dating to the late 1280s. Thereafter the master probably spent his career permanently in his hometown, where he began producing precious small devotional paintings for high-ranking private patrons (the Madonna in the Kunstmuseum in Bern, the former Stoclet collection Madonna now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the small triptych in the Royal Collections of England, Hampton Court). But he was also commissioned to paint altarpieces for churches outside Siena (the Madonna formerly the center of a polyptych in San Domenico in Perugia and now in the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia). The hypothesis of Duccio's identification with a documented Duch de Siene, reported at Paris in 1296 (Stubblebine 1979), has now been discarded.[4]

Both the Cimabuesque reminiscences and the pursuit of grandeur suggested by his experience of Roman art disappeared from the works of Duccio's full maturity. In this phase he seemed more interested in cultivating elegance of pose, softness, and the expression of feelings. Important stages of his development in the first decade of the fourteenth century are the polyptychs nos. 28 and 47 in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena and, especially, the great *Maestà* destined for the high altar of Siena Cathedral, executed between c. 1308 and 1311. It was the largest and most complex altarpiece ever produced in Italy until then. Painted on front and rear sides, it comprised in all some eighty separate scenes.

Many uncertainties surround the output of the last years of Duccio's life. Some art historians—though without sufficient grounds—assign polyptych no. 47 in the Pinacoteca of Siena to this period. A more likely late work of the artist is the important though much damaged fresco *The Submission of the Castle of Giuncarico* in the Siennese seat of government, the Palazzo Pubblico, which is

datable to c. 1314. Documents suggest that the two-sided altarpiece for the Cathedral in Massa Marittima, modeled on the *Maestà* in Siena Cathedral, was in the course of execution in 1316. Undoubtedly painted with the extensive participation of Duccio's workshop assistants, the work is now fragmentary. Its most accomplished passages reveal an extraordinary delicacy in the modeling and a renewed pursuit of realistic effects, both in the composition and in the representation of the human figure, worthy of the master himself.

[1] See "I Documenti," in *Duccio: Siena fra tradizione bizantina e mondo gotico*, ed. Alessandro Bagnoli et al. (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan, 2003), 573–582.

[2] For the relations between Cimabue and Duccio in the 1280s cf. Luciano Bellosi, *Duccio, la Maestà* (Milan, 1998), 128–137; and Miklós Boskovits, in *Duecento: Forme e colori del Medioevo a Bologna*, ed. Massimo Medica and Stefano Tumidei (Venice, 2000), 271–278. Hayden B. J. Maginnis, on the other hand, reversed the influence and conjectured that Cimabue, under the influence of the *Madonna Rucellai*, "responded rapidly to the challenges of Duccio." See Hayden B. J. Maginnis, "Duccio's Rucellai Madonna and the Origins of Florentine Painting," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 123 (1994): 161.

[3] Cf. Alessandro Bagnoli, "Alle origini della pittura senese: Prime osservazioni sul ciclo dei dipinti murali," in *Sotto il duomo di Siena: Scoperte archeologiche, architettoniche e figurative*, ed. Roberto Guerrini and Max Seidel (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan, 2003), 105–145.

[4] James H. Stubblebine (1979) cited Parisian documents relating to a Duch de Siene in 1296 and a Duch le Lombard in the following year. Neither one is described as a painter. See James H. Stubblebine, *Duccio di Buoninsegna and His School*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1979), 1:4, 6, 8, 198–199.

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March 21, 2016

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To cite: Miklós Boskovits (1935–2011), "Duccio di Buoninsegna," *Italian Paintings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/constituent/1249> (accessed January 26, 2022).