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Nevola, Fabrizio.

Siena: Constructing the Renaissance City.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. 320+190 b/w, 60 colour ill. ISBN 978-0-399-12678-5 (hardcover) \$65.

Syson, Luke (ed.).

Renaissance Siena: Art for a City.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. 372+172 colour ill. ISBN 978-1-857-09392-6 (hardcover) \$65.

Steinhoff, Judith B.

Sieneese Painting After the Black Death: Artistic Pluralism, Politics, and the New Art Market.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. 288. ISBN 0-521-84664-1 (paperback) \$85.

Modern Siena rests in the shadow of Florence, condemned by its proximity to be little more than a day-trip destination for those seeking inspiration under the Tuscan sun. While its larger neighbour has become Renaissanceland, Siena has turned into a Medieval Towne. These adopted identities are shaped by the legacies of history and culture as they were refracted through modern government tourist board priorities and commercial necessities. The Fascists had as much as anyone to do with the fact that Florence was restored to a Renaissance past, and Siena to a Medieval one. Yet once those paths were established by government fiat, the feet of legions of tourists made them hard and firm, and the proud investments of local banks, citizens, and historical re-enactors made them impossible to step off of. Both cities have embraced their invented traditions, Siena perhaps more so than Florence, thanks to its slightly bizarre *Palio* horse race that paralyzes the main square twice each summer and occupies the local imagination for much of the rest of the year. The Medici knew what they were doing when they promoted this derby, already a bit antique and hardly unique, with the Sieneese. It was a Medici princess who helped firm up the boundaries, symbols, colours, and rules by which Siena's neighbourhoods have fought each other intensely for the past few centuries. The preoccupation ensured that their sights would no longer be trained on distant prospects and ambitions or on long range goals, but would remain fixed on the living merry-

go-round in their city's centre, and the 90 seconds it took for horses to go around it three times.

This is more the twisting of tradition than the invention of it. And the three books here underscore how unfortunate it is that Siena has been reduced to renaissance re-enactments and horse races for day-trippers. Siena was a medieval powerhouse of banking and culture, prominent long before Florence. It had what was arguably a more progressive government and a more far-reaching international gaze through the thirteenth and into the fifteenth centuries, and its location on one of the main highways between Rome and points north meant that it was integrally connected to the political, economic, and cultural currents of the day. Modern scholarship has, to some extent, focused on the late-medieval phase of Siena's history because this was when there was a degree of civic coherence. Factionalism seized the city in the early fourteenth century, and became more intense with the economic and demographic collapses leading up to and radiating out from the Black Death of 1438. As the urban pie grew smaller, the factions fought harder for their pieces, pitching Siena by the early sixteenth century into a series of tyrannies of foreign occupations that culminated in the Medici conquest of 1557–59. Given its eventual collapse, much of Siennese historiography has implicitly considered the two centuries from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries as a period of protracted decline that is best ignored.

Yet factionalism was no less rife in Florence, Venice, or Rome — if anything it was critical to their extraordinary artistic development. The two Yale books considered here aim to show that the same was true of Siena. They are companion works, with a certain amount of overlap by design, and together they make a strong case for considering Siena as a distinct and creative centre of artistic, architectural, and cultural development.

Fabrizio Nevola's *Siena: Constructing the Renaissance City* asks directly whether there was a distinctive Siennese Renaissance architecture. He argues emphatically and persuasively that there was, and that in its architectural and urbanistic development through the fifteenth century, Siena remained in the international vanguard and not in Florence's shadow. It drew its inspirations directly from Roman sources, as the Florentines did, and like them it merged these with vernacular forms to create a local hybrid. Both cities sought to identify with Rome, and through extensive archival research and architectural analysis, Nevola shows not simply that the Siennese could do so more convincingly, but

also that they did so more deliberately and coherently. The periods of greatest influence and investment were those associated with the Sienese pope Pius II and the early sixteenth century signore Pandolfo Petrucci, both of whom stimulated extensive urbanistic development, but it was also advanced through civic bodies like the magistracy of the *Ornato*. Renaissance Sienese urbanism recast not simply the physical form of the city, but also its cultural and ritual life. Pius II's patronage certainly boosted familial reputation but it also explicitly promoted the common weal, in an enlightened republicanism set to words by his ally and client the humanist Francesco Patrizi.

Nevola's work is more an urbanistic than simply an architectural history, and his extensive discussions of Sienese economical, political, and cultural life make this a first rate history of the city generally and not simply of its built environment. His approach may leave some readers scratching their heads, since he avoids setting the analysis of Siena's fifteenth century development in the context of its sixteenth century dissolution, as so many do. His approach therefore restores the city's history and fabric as things in constant dialogue with contemporary developments, and not as simply a pale shadow of a once-great city or as a backwater in decline waiting its eventual absorption by its cultural, political, and economic superior to the north.

Renaissance Siena: Art for a City was produced in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name at London's National Gallery from October 2007-January 2008. It is a superbly illustrated and documented catalogue, yet it is far more than simply that. Curator and editor Luke Sysons has also worked to set the paintings, drawings, and sculptures within Siena's broader cultural development by drawing in a large team of others including Nevola (on civic identity and private patrons), Philippa Jackson (on Pandolfo Petrucci's patronage), and Alessandro Angelini (on patrons, artists, and workshops). The catalogue shows how much artists worked in conjunction with local individual and corporate patrons and within locally-approved forms that perpetuated some medieval traditions. This left more gold, stylized figures, sharper lines, and open spaces on many Sienese canvases, making its painting look less innovative than that of Florence or Venice, and its artists less individual. The catalogue's authors do not aim to deny this or explain it away, but instead demonstrate the far broader variety of art produced in the city through the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and the connections of many of its artists to other peninsular art centres, movements, and inspirations. The extensive illustrations,

high production values, thorough documentation, and clear essays make this a fundamental resource for understanding Sieneese renaissance art in its own terms.

The view of Siena as *retardiare* after its thirteenth and early fourteenth century prominence is thanks in part to Millard Meiss, who advanced the thesis in *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* (1951) that the plague's devastation led survivors to search their souls, repent their ways, and return to more traditional and conservative forms of religion and art. A budding naturalism died as patrons and artists alike trained their sights on heaven and sought to placate a God who clearly didn't like modern art very much. Many people have taken a run at Meiss' thesis, and Judith Steinhoff's analysis in *Sieneese Painting After the Black Death* convincingly sets his ideas into the economic and cultural history of the 1930s and 1940s. Her response to Meiss & Co, rather like the books considered above, is to argue that Sieneese art was not entirely reactionary or monolithic. Artists and patrons worked closely together and if one stream favoured a deeper mixing of tradition and innovation, others demonstrated more open-ness and variety. The book is rooted in a dissertation on Bartolommeo Bulgarini (active 1338–73) who figures prominently as an example of precisely this variety. Steinhoff expands on the political and particularly the civic-religious contexts of patronage, and includes valuable discussions of the social contexts of artistic production. Some wording raises questions: 'mariolatry' is an unfortunately negative term to describe the devotion to the Virgin that lies at the core of Sieneese civic religion. The use of the word "compagnia" to describe a commercial association of artists may be an example of a linguistic 'false friend'; contemporaries frequently used the term to describe religious brotherhoods and guilds, but seldom to designate what we term commercial 'companies'.

These three volumes challenge Siena's consignment to a bit part in the grand Renaissance drama that still gives the best parts to Florence, Venice, and Rome. Other cities like Genoa, Bologna, and Naples could certainly make the same complaint, and perhaps the only disappointment in these volumes is that their exclusive focus on Siena perpetuates the very problem of parochialism they aim to remedy. We will only genuinely credit the cultural role of 'other' cities in the dynamic process of an Italian Renaissance when we treat the Italian peninsula as a whole with patrons, painters, and influences in constant movement around it. John Paoletti and Gary Radke aimed at precisely this

in their text *Italian Renaissance Art* (1997). Ironically, some colleagues have hesitated to adopt it for classroom use because they feel there's too much of that 'other' stuff and not enough on the familiar trio and the familiar names. Sigh. Their more Burkhardtian 'Italian Renaissance' is another invented tradition that, like the modern Siena palio with its acrobatic flag-throwers and vortical horse race, becomes so familiar, romantic and evocative and we easily fall for thinking that it's the real thing.

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Parker, Deborah.

Michelangelo and the Art of Letter Writing.

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xii, 156 + 11 b/w plates. ISBN 978-0-521-76140-6. \$74.13.

Deborah Parker's *Michelangelo and the Art of Letter Writing* fills an important gap in Michelangelo studies. As the author herself explains, the fifth and final volume of Michelangelo's indirect correspondence was published only seventeen years ago in 1994 and it is not just the artist's letters that demand re-examination in light of the recently completed *carteggio indiretto*, but also earlier biographies that have depended, to greater or lesser effect and degrees, on these letters and the vicissitudes of their critical tradition.

Parker's insightful four-chapter study aims at explicating key aspects of the artist's epistolary rhetoric and the interests or investments to which they point. It begins most appropriately with a review of select Michelangelo biographies from different points in history and an analysis of corresponding portrayals of the artist to which the pens of these various biographers gave rise.

The first chapter, "The Role of Letters in Biographies of Michelangelo," focuses exclusively on the periods of the Renaissance, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Parker reveals how both the transmission history of the letters and vested interests of different biographers influenced their characterization of the artist. Specific attention is given to biographies by Giorgio Vasari (1550, 1568), Hermann Grimm (1860), Aurelio Gotti (1876), John Addington Symonds (1892), and Giovanni Papini (1952). Though Ascanio