PART I

TRECENTO ART HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

ONE:
INTRODUCTION

One day about ten years ago, I took a local bus from Siena to a small outlying town where I planned to examine a panel painting that still sat on an altar in the parish church. Being unfamiliar with the town, I got off the bus too soon and had to walk a couple of kilometers to reach my goal. As I began walking, I looked back toward Siena and saw the bell tower of the Siena Palazzo *Pubblico* [town hall] looming over the horizon from some eight kilometers away. The almost surreal sight boldly proclaimed Siena's presence even from that distance (see Plate I). I immediately realized that the tower must have been similarly visible and conveyed a similar message in the trecento, when it was built. This bell tower was clearly designed not merely to be a functional part of the town hall – it was conceived equally as an icon, a visual symbol of the power of the Sienese government over the surrounding territory.

That experience launched my investigation of political symbolism both in important Sienese buildings and in the pictorial representations of those buildings in painted cityscapes. It also directed my attention to politically charged contents even in images without apparent political subject matter and to the politics of Sienese art patronage generally.

Another major stimulus for this book was my work on the Sienese painter Bartolommeo Bulgarini. Studying Bulgarini's works and career plunged me into the midst of the problem of the possible impact of the Black Death on trecento art as well as the art historiographical and methodological issues it raised. Until recently, the dominant frame of reference for thinking about mid-fourteenth-century Italian painting was the theory advanced in 1951 by Millard Meiss. Meiss's focal point was the plague of 1348, experienced as divine punishment by many of the people who lived through it, as we know from vivid accounts in period chronicles. Meiss concluded that the terror caused by the plague created a culture dominated by a fearful, penitent, religious outlook. Because so much of the art of the time was commissioned for religious purposes, Meiss linked the post-plague religious climate directly to what he perceived to be a reactionary trend in painting of the second half of the century. He explained this conservatism in

art as a religion-driven backlash against the earthly oriented artistic developments of the early trecento and a return to more traditional, abstracting imagery and style.

My work on Bulgarini led me to view later trecento Sienese painting as neither reactionary nor as predominantly shaped by religious penitence but rather as profoundly pluralistic in both its style and contents. It also introduced me to the organized if loosely structured network of artistic working relationships among painters in Siena during the period after the plague. In dealing with the work of Bulgarini and the other painters in this *compagnia*, I became intrigued by the pervasiveness of stylistic pluralism and its possible significance in Sienese trecento culture. Whereas past scholarship most often treated trecento artistic style as an expression solely of formal or purely visual ideas, my work has convinced me that Sienese trecento artistic style also served as a vehicle of thematic content or iconography.

Traditionally, trecento painting was studied primarily from the perspective of the connoisseur interested in establishing the stylistic coherence and relative chronology of bodies of work for which, as is the case with much trecento painting, documentary evidence is lacking. Beginning in the 1970s different types of concerns and questions raised in other areas of art history and other disciplines have increasingly dominated trecento art-historical discourse. A thoughtful and thought-provoking overview and historiographic analysis of scholarship on fourteenth-century art can be found in *Siena, Florence, and Padua: Art, Society and Religion*, edited by Diana Norman.[1] I can highlight only a small number of the issues raised and an even smaller portion of the rapidly growing body of literature here. H. W. van Os was one of the first scholars to redirect Sienese art history away from the study of artistic style as an independent phenomenon and to establish the necessity of interpreting religious images in the context of the liturgy and devotional practice. He has also contributed important insights into the importance of the craft context in the trecento. Joanna Cannon's work on the patronage of the mendicant orders provided not only valuable new information, but also a pioneering model for evaluating the influences of these important patrons on both the style and imagery of the art they commissioned. Her work has also contributed to our knowledge of the dynamics of trecento artist–patron relationships more generally. Our understanding of the interrelationship among trecento politics, religion, and pictorial imagery has become tremendously more sophisticated thanks to the work of numerous scholars, including Rebecca Corrie, Bram Kempers, and Diana Norman. Dillian Gordan, Norman Muller, Erling Skaug, and Christa Gardner von Teuffel have contributed invaluable information regarding the making of trecento art as well as enriching our understanding of the impact of craft practices on artistic results. Gaudenz Freuler's writings on the Sienese painter Bartolo di Fredi and his son Andrea stand as models of a new approach to monographic studies that fully integrate the social and devotional framework with

the painter's production. Although the standard histories of the trecento continue to be those by William Bowsky, Gene Brucker, David Herlihy, Judith Hook, and Lauro Martines, historians Samuel K. Cohn and John Henderson have made major new contributions to our views of the social and economic influences on artistic patronage and production, particularly in the period following the Black Death.

As will become amply evident, my work is deeply indebted to these scholars and to numerous others in the fields of trecento art and history. While participating in this contextualizing trend in trecento art history, this book is also concerned with another, largely unstudied issue, which might be termed the semiotics of trecento Sienese painting. Since the 1980s, studies of medieval art have increasingly taken into account the role of artistic style as a signifier of meaning. Until very recently, however, this topic has been pursued as a major theme in trecento studies by only a few scholars, most notably Cole (1973), Grillo (1987), and Hoeniger (1995).

The reading of medieval images also has been immeasurably enriched and advanced by the publication of Belting's book *Likeness and Presence* in 1994. Although Belting focused his discussion specifically on icons or images of religious potency, I believe that the issues he raised about the centrality of function, meaning, and models are widely applicable to civic and narrative images in the trecento as well. In my section on style as iconography, as well as throughout the discussions in this book, my goal is to advance these relatively new approaches to artistic style and to integrate the diverse evidentiary sources, elements of context, and methods of contextualizing art history that have been developed over the past half century.

Trecento art has, for the most part, occupied a liminal space. Hovering between the two more crisply delineated periods of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the trecento's religious and political thought, its institutions, and its artistic forms elude clear periodization. Throughout Europe the fourteenth century was a period in which old and new collided and intersected – a period of transition in all aspects of culture. Only the briefest, general sketch of this complexity of forces is possible here. The development of cities and an urbanized culture had begun to replace the feudal and agriculturally based society in the thirteenth century, resulting in a protracted period of profound social change. This led, among other things, to the emergence of specialized professions and their regulatory agencies or guilds, as well as greater scope for the social and economic participation of women. The flourishing of the professional classes meant, in addition, that a greater range and proportion of the population could participate in the patronage of art. Expanded commerce between Europe and the Near and Far East not only enhanced the European economy, but also increased opportunities for other kinds of travel, mostly by monks and missionaries. Through these channels came exposure to a wider array of artistic and other ideas.

The emergence of the first great universities in Europe (at Bologna, Padua, and Paris), also in the thirteenth century, supported the increased study and practice of law, medicine, and natural science in the fourteenth century. Alongside older beliefs about the world, new methods of scientific analysis were developed, in significant part as a response to Aristotelian texts. These had been preserved in Byzantium by the Arabs, but they had a dramatic impact on western thought beginning only in the late twelfth century, primarily through the complex cultural mix that occurred in Muslim-occupied Spain. The universities promoted not only developments in philosophy and other types of intellectual endeavor, but also the need for large numbers and types of books and a new kind of patron – the student. Somewhat paradoxically, at the same time as rational, systematic thought acquired a greater importance than in the earlier Middle Ages, the fourteenth century saw an equally powerful surge in mysticism and personal, emotional religious expression. These developments in personal piety had a particularly close relationship to visual representation. Many of the mystics' experiences took visual form and were often conveyed to others by the same means. Ordinary individuals seeking an emotional connection with sacred figures often turned to images to stimulate religious experience.

Visual art was a major vehicle of expression for all of these experiences and ideas. As the new civic governments of the cities and city-states asserted themselves over the rule of feudal lords, the repertoire of secular, and especially political, subject matter expanded. Social dislocation gave rise to new forms of social satire aimed at all segments of society. The science of optics influenced the visual representation of both the natural and the supernatural worlds.

Yet it would give a skewed picture of the period to overemphasize the new. There was a strong emphasis on continuity with the past as well as change in trecento thought, belief, and art. Whereas specific approaches to the liturgy and devotion changed and modifications of doctrine were introduced, the basic tenets of Christian doctrine remained constant. Despite the increasing role of communal governments, especially in Italy, and the presence of Jewish and Moslem communities, the church continued to wield great power in society and in individuals' lives. Much of the experimentation that took place in artistic practice still relied on traditional materials and techniques. Even while the social class and values of patrons changed, the system of producing art primarily to fulfill commissions (rarely for the open market and never purely for the artist's own expression) continued.

Specific artistic and political traditions also held enduring power through changes in medieval thought and experience. Among the most intriguing reflections of this are the representations of non-Christian peoples in far away (i.e., non-European) parts of the world as monsters with bizarre bodies despite the empirical experience of the realities by Crusaders and missionaries. Although not a manifestation of bias in the same sense, the Sienese held particularly strongly to

the notion that incorporating past traditions and ideas enriched one's ability to address the new circumstances and needs of the present.

Until recently, art history has treated such periods of transition as deficient or marginal. In my view, however, it is precisely the transitional character of the fourteenth century that makes it and the art it produced so exciting.

Unfortunately, scholars of trecento art have often helped to reinforce the difficulties inherent in grasping a culture in transition by neatly dividing the period in two at the mid-century. The most widespread conception of the first half of the century is that it was a period characterized by change and invention. The art of the second half of the trecento is generally either politely ignored or framed as inferior imitations of the monuments of the earlier period. Ironically, even those who have attempted to reclaim the decades outside of Siena's "golden age" have often replaced one pejorative view with another. Meiss offered an important and widely influential alternative to earlier views that had considered later fourteenth-century painting to be simply backward and lacking in creative energy. However, his theory defined that art as deliberately reactionary – a vigorous repudiation of the "too humanistic" approaches of the early trecento. Beginning almost immediately after the publication of *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* in 1951, specialists in trecento art raised various types of challenges to Meiss's theory. Closer scrutiny of Meiss's important theory, as well as of the subsequent literature on the subject of later trecento art, is the subject of Chapter 2.

Despite the questions that have been raised, we still seem not to have overcome a sense of Sienese art after the mid-century as somehow lacking. Promising, historically cogent ways of interpreting fourteenth-century Sienese painting are emerging from studies of the political motivations for the recurring revivals of "golden age" monuments during both the later fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. Nevertheless, even these approaches most often imply that Sienese artistic culture was driven by a fundamental conservatism.

What most of these studies seem to find that Siena lacked, especially after the mid-fourteenth century, is a commitment to the avant-garde. Despite thirty years of deconstructing the sixteenth-century critic Giorgio Vasari, and the hegemonic view derived from his writings that "invention" and "design" are the key to artistic achievement, we continue to privilege newness and innovation. However, many cultures have made art of quality and interest without pursuing avant-gardism as such. I contend that, to the Sienese imagination, creativity was not directly linked with being avant-garde. It was simply not the most important value. The purposes of art included being beautiful, serving civic ideals and purposes, conveying religious ideas, evoking emotional response or religious devotion, glorifying a patron, God, or the Virgin Mary, and often fulfilling several of these goals simultaneously. To these ends, new imagery and visual ideas were introduced, but "newness" was not by itself a major goal of art making.

Rather, the evidence suggests that a core concern of Sienese artistic culture was to achieve a dynamic balance of both tradition and change. This was particularly the case after the mid-fourteenth century, but it is also evident before then. In part because of this inherently pluralistic goal, I will argue, the Sienese tolerated and even promoted both iconographic and stylistic pluralism.

For each of the topics I undertake in this book (art patronage, artistic working relationships, civic–religious imagery, and artistic style) I present a brief overview of conditions during the early part of the trecento in order to clarify questions of change versus continuity after the middle of the century. In each part I also consider the issues engaged both from a more distant or broader vantage point and at closer range and in greater detail through a case study of an individual painter, patron, or monument.

I have drawn a number of examples from the career and artistic production of one painter, Bartolommeo Bulgarini, who provides a particularly revealing exemplar of both patronage trends and artistic activity across the controversial watershed of the Black Death. This is not to say that Bulgarini, or any one painter, can pose as "Everyman" in Sienese artistic culture. Active circa 1338–73, Bulgarini was recognized as one of the most talented Sienese painters of the mid-fourteenth century and was the only one of his generation mentioned by Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists* (1568). Bulgarini's lesser renown today is partly due to the less dramatically innovative character of his work in comparison with that of Duccio, Simone Martini, or Lorenzetti. In this respect, Bulgarini comes close to being that elusive "Everyman," that is, an ordinary painter of skill and reputation, but not one of the elite of his profession. Thus his situation both exemplifies trecento artistic working conditions generally and allows us to take note of an individual's particular experiences. Most important, Bulgarini was one of the most highly esteemed painters whose career spanned both the first and the second halves of the fourteenth century. Study of his career and commissions therefore enables us to examine elements of continuity and change after the middle of the century.

TWO:
MEISS AND METHOD:
HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SCHOLARSHIP ON MID-TRECENTO SIENESE PAINTING

For many decades after its publication in 1951, Meiss's book, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* provided the dominant model for understanding painting of the second half of the fourteenth century. In that now-classic work, Meiss advanced his theory that the calamitous plague of 1348 had a devastating impact on trecento culture and the art it produced. To support this interpretation, Meiss cited fourteenth-century chroniclers who had witnessed the effects of the plague and whose pages rang out with cries of horror and despair and aimed bitter accusations of immorality at those who had abandoned the dying. Juxtaposing these anguished accounts with the threats of eternal damnation in some sermons of the period, Meiss concluded that trecento culture as a whole had been traumatized. Because people of the time lacked the means to explain the sudden and horrible onslaught of the disease in any other way, they ascribed the plague to God's displeasure. Those who survived the plague associated God's anger with their greater worldliness in life and, according to Meiss, in art. Thus, according to Meiss, the plague precipitated a conservative backlash in religious thought that, in turn, produced a reaction in artistic style and iconography. In seeking to appease God's wrath, Meiss theorized, people rejected the naturalistic and humanistic developments of early trecento art and sought a return to images that were both more hieratic in content and more abstract in form.

An artistic focal point of Meiss's theory was the altarpiece Orcagna painted for the Strozzi chapel in Santa Maria Novella, Florence in circa 1354–7 (Fig. 1). In the central panel of that work, Christ hovers in a mandorla of heavenly light, his body frontal and his gaze abstracted and remote. In the flanking panels, the Virgin, St. John the Baptist, St. Thomas Acquinas, and St. Peter supplicate Christ on behalf of the owner of the chapel and the Dominican Order

of the church. Instead of entering Christ's presence, the other saints appear to behold him as in a vision. The supernatural qualities of this work seemed to completely validate Meiss's theory of the influence of the Black Death on art. Close examination of Meiss's work, as well as more recent studies, however, points out the high degree of selectivity in Meiss's choice of visual "facts" and interpretive strategies.

At the same time, it is important to realize that, in fact, Meiss's theory did not rely exclusively on the Black Death, that is, on a single disaster. Rather, it analyzed a cultural and artistic response to a cumulative pattern of several disasters that occurred within a short time of one another. In the section titled "The Two Cities at Mid Century," Meiss detailed a series of economic and political crises that occurred in Florence and Siena beginning in the 1340s as well as changes in the economic, social, and political structures of those societies that took place as either direct or indirect consequences of the plague.[1] It is nevertheless easy to understand why these nuances played only a minimal role in most evaluations of Meiss's theory. The very structure of the book conduces to such a reading. Despite his acknowledgment of other factors, Meiss devoted the greatest proportion of space and discussion to the plague and spiritual crisis. Furthermore, he interpreted the style of most postplague art as fundamentally conservative and abstract in character. Only a few scattered comments address other stylistic trends or explanations. Consequently it is the idea of the Black Death as the cause of a reactionary approach to art that has been Meiss's principal legacy. Aided by new information and interpretative strategies, recent scholarship has moved from a critique of that notion and begun to offer fundamentally new visions of trecento art. As a context for understanding that scholarship, as well as the ideas presented in this book, this chapter analyzes the origins of Meiss's paradigmatic theory, its underlying premises, and its scholarly reception.

The Making of a Paradigm: The Origins and Sources of Meiss's Black Death Theory

As background for analyzing Meiss's theory itself, it is useful to briefly explore its formative influences. Only H. W van Os has so far raised these issues.[2] Noting that Meiss's book was published in 1951, van Os perceptively suggested a link between Meiss's thinking about the Black Death and his experiences of World War II and Abstract Expressionist art. These two major events undoubtedly did contribute to Meiss's outlook in ways that are further examined in the following subsections. In addition, Meiss's earlier experiences, particularly during the 1930s, when he actually formulated much of his Black Death theory, are also considered.