

Movement from  
byzantine period to  
early renaissance  
style



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## **The transition from the Byzantine period to the early Renaissance as seen through the works of Duccio**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to assess the rationale for accepting the notion that the works of the Italian painter Duccio di Buoninsegna have made a significant impact on the way in which the transition from Byzantine to Renaissance styles can be determined.

The dissertation focuses its attention in particular on the period in the region between 1270 to 1311 in which time Duccio was commissioned to paint a number of significant and high profile works; namely *Madonna of the Franciscans*, *The Rucellai Madonna*, *Madonna and Child* and *Maestà*. Using these four masterpieces as the basis for analyzing their use of form, composition and the subtle influences of a much more realistic and humanistic quality. This will be compared to Duccio's innovative relationship

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with the Renaissance period in contradiction to the somewhat basic style more associated with the Byzantine era that he was working in.

## **Introduction**

It is important perhaps to begin with an overall definition of what is meant by Byzantine and Renaissance painting in order to put the context of where the artist Duccio resides in this discussion.

The Byzantine art movement was active from the period spanning the 5th century AD to 1453 during the time when the Byzantine Empire was the most dominant. The period was centered on the Orthodox Church and featured painted icons, and decorative churches with mosaics and frescoes. With the fall of Constantinople (Istanbul today) to the Turks in 1453, the Byzantine style also ended. This occurred during the European Renaissance era but the influence of Byzantine art remained strong in Russia, and other areas where the Orthodox Church was influential. The Byzantine style essentially grew out of traditional designs involving saints and biblical stories as well as religious symbolic decoration. Figures represented in this period do not have natural forms with human figures depicted as unnaturally long, any emotion portrayed is limited - formal and still, and the facial expressions are conventional and one dimensional. The most prominent figures to be painted during this era are representations of Christ and the Virgin Mary, the apostles, the saints, Bishops and angels.' The political structure of the period revolved around the emperor who was believed to be divinely appointed by God. Art played a large role in visualizing his powers with images of gods, goddesses, cherubs, and personifications of virtues'.

Most historians believe that the birth of the Renaissance occurred in Florence, Italy during the fifteenth century, but the new movement can be seen to have been growing and developing at least a century before this. Evidence to back this theory up will be presented throughout this paper. In particular the most well known of these painters is Giotto, who is referred to in a number of instances within the body of this text. He introduced an early three dimensional quality to his work; however the perspective was inaccurate and unsophisticated, a little like that of Duccio, with figures in paintings often hovering in space in a shallow depth of field.

The Oxford English dictionary definition for Renaissance is The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists

' A Term meaning ' rebirth' applied to an intellectual and artistic movement that began in Italy in the 14th century, culminated there in the 16th century, and influenced other parts of Europe in a great variety of ways. The notion of a rebirth refers to a revival of the values of the classical world, and the concept was used as early as the 15th century, by Italians who thought they were living at a time when the qualities of ancient art and literature were blossoming anew after centuries of barbarism. In the following century Vasari gave the idea of such a revival a systematically developed form; he thought that art had declined in the Middle Ages, had been set once again on its true path by Giotto, and had risen to its greatest heights in the work of his friend and hero Michelangelo. To modern historians this picture seems much too simplistic, and the Renaissance is seen more as a period of gradual change than as a sudden break with the past. Nevertheless, the intellectuals of the Renaissance were the first people to conceive a period

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identity for themselves, and this in itself gives the label certain coherence.

Scholars may debate endlessly over the exact interpretation of many aspects of the period, but in the general historical scheme of things, the Renaissance has come to represent the time when ' Medieval' turns into ' Modern' and the religion-dominated world of the Middle Ages gives way to a culture more concerned with the individual.'

Although both terms have many connotations attached to them and a broad scope of other historical references and intricate philosophies and ideologies; for the purposes of this study they will be referred to in terms of their transcendence from flat, one dimensional religious iconographic paintings to the emergence of a humanistic and realistic portrayal of people, architecture and other living things providing a mathematical approach to composition and a clarity of realism.

There is little documented information relating to Duccio's life and career. In large part his life can only be reconstructed, taken from the evidence of those works that have been confirmed as his own. The use of a new stylistic approach provides enough evidence to support the rationale that he was painting in accordance with very early Renaissance tendencies. Duccio is first mentioned in 1278, when the treasurer of the commune of Siena commissioned him to decorate 12 strongboxes for documents. The fact that he was officially self-employed as a " painter" demonstrates that he was a mature and independent artist quite early on. (Jannella, 1991) In 1280 Duccio was fined the considerable sum of 100 lire by the commune of Siena for an unspecified case of misconduct. The number of fines documented

throughout Duccio's life suggests that he was a restless and tempestuous character.

Three predominant shifts took place during the Middle Ages which would drastically change the course of Western Civilization. These included:

- The movement of cultural leadership from the Mediterranean to France, Germany and the British Isles.
- Paganism and barbarism was replaced by a new found appreciation of Christianity
- The ideology of the here and now moved to thinking about the hereafter. Consequently the body was seen as not so much beautiful but as corrupt

With the new emphasis on religion, nudes were forbidden. Medieval artists were concerned with the soul and instructing new believers in the church. Art then became somewhat of a servant to the church.

Medieval Art consisted of three styles; Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic. Duccio's work is often categorised as Byzantine or Gothic.

The central tradition of Byzantine Art was located at the heart of Constantinople. The prevailing view of Byzantine Art is that it was highly true to nature, although contemporary academics criticise the aesthetic value of it, with flat surfaces and little realism, its 'reverse perspective radiating composition disregard for scale and depth etc'.

And that the main purpose of artistic expression was for images to serve and elevate people's minds to immaterial realities. Although Byzantine Art is considered more Abstract than realistic.

During the early 1400's the World began to appreciate a broader alternative to artistic elements and influences. From Florence in Italy the new cultural appreciation spread to Rome and Venice and after 1500 throughout the whole of Europe. This new Renaissance can be attributed to the increased awareness and interest in the art and literature of Greece and Rome - the natural world, realism and the science of the human body. Anatomy was studied and reflected in the way in which artists started to paint people. The attributes of the natural world, realism and the science of the human body were now being contemplated. In addition the Protestant Reformation also decreased the emphasis on how religion and the church were perceived. Before the Renaissance and Reformation, pious images were treated not as 'art' so much, but as objects of worship which possessed the physical presence of the Holy.

During this period the concept of Perspective was recognised and changed the whole visual interpretation of art. The illusion of creating depth on a flat surface was discovered and objects could be seen to be receding in the distance. Even the materials changed from wooden panels and fresco plasterwork to stretched canvases. By the end of the 13century a birth of technically skilled painting emerged and one of those pioneers was Duccio who managed to break down the rigid Byzantine style, replacing it with a softer and more lifelike form. One doctrine cited in this paper is that of the Sieneese School. To briefly explain The Sieneese School of painting flourished in <https://assignbuster.com/movement-from-byzantine-period-to-early-renaissance-style/>

Siena in Italy Siena, most documented between the 13th and 15th centuries.

For a time including Duccio this rivaled work coming out of Florence.

Although it is true to mention that it was more conservative and is more frequently associated with Gothic Art. Its most important members include Duccio, his pupil Simone Martini, the Lorenzetti brothers, Domenico, Taddeo di Bartolo and Matteo di Giovanni, amongst lesser known others. .

In Owen's *The Florentine and Sienese Renaissance: A monopsonistic explanation* we are reminded that Historians have long been fascinated by the origins of the Renaissance and that ' For art historians this fascination has appeared in investigations of the prominence of Florence in artistic development or comparisons of Florentine, Venetian, and Northern artistic Renaissance movements. It considers the question of how the arts flourished so creatively in Florence rather than anywhere else. Declaring that ' Florentine artists have dominated the course of artistic development for 300 years in a straight line from Giotto to Michelangelo'. It then begins to address the obvious influence which is attached to other European cities, most notably Siena. A city located less than forty miles from Florence which developed its own painting tradition and produced the Siena School. It can be argued that this school despite being innovative and receiving such early practitioners of Renaissance influence like Duccio it bypassed mainstream artistic developments that were forming in other cities such as Florence. One scholar notes ' . had this Sienese school not arisen we should have seen no difference in the progress of Western painting.... It is simply that Sienese painting forms, as it were, an island.'



The peak of Renaissance Art is apparent in the works of masters such as Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael.

Duccio di Buoninsegna is often referred to as the Italian precursor to this Renaissance style.

Born in Siena round 1255 Duccio was the founder of the Sienese school of painting. All of his work is religious and characterized by skillful composition, a decorative quality similar to mosaic work and most importantly bearing a much more emotional tone than that of the traditional Byzantine model.

As one of the most important painters of the early 14th century, Duccio introduced a dynamic move away from the Byzantine style into early Italian Renaissance painting.

Duccio was known for dynamic new altarpiece designs, a striking use of landscape and colour, and unusual expressive relationships between the figures in his paintings. Duccio painted many pictures for the city of Sienna and one for the church of Santa Trinita in Florence. He also executed various works for a number of churches in Pisa, Lucca and Pistorla. These provided him with great renown and made him a considerably wealthy man.

The first work ascribed to Duccio is the *Madonna with the Three Franciscans*. Despite its damaged condition today it still demonstrates all the traditional features of the Byzantine period, but there is a definite softness and more defined features in the gestures of the Mother and Child.

The *Madonna Enthroned (Rucellai Madonna)* On first glance epitomizes many aspects of Byzantine painting, but on closer investigation the three  
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dimensional qualities not found in iconography are very evident. The faces possess contours, shadow and light and a hint of personality. In particular Mary's hand is more natural looking and the two pairs of bare feet on the right and left sides are also fleshed out and real looking. They do not sport the same sized shoes.

These subtleties and more naturalistic, fluid lines are what provide the evidence to support Duccio's work to be categorised in terms of a painter functioning within a style that incorporates the features of both Byzantine and Renaissance characteristics.

This paper will present an overview of the discussions that seek to demonstrate this argument by way of illustration using four of his most significant works *Madonna of the Franciscans*, *The Rucellai Madonna* and the later *Madonna and Child* and *Maestà*.

The Literature Review following on from this Introduction presents an overall and comprehensive approach to the way in which various publications, books, articles, journals and internet references were incorporated into this dissertation. The subsequent chapters detail the main body of the text whilst demonstrating the findings and conclusions determined from the research, together with a complete Bibliography of the references employed.

## **Literature Review**

In response to the challenges of researching and presenting aspects of Duccio's work there was a need to adopt a number of methods and approaches to this study. He is not featured amongst the most popular of artists and although he receives a following of academics and interested <https://assignbuster.com/movement-from-byzantine-period-to-early-renaissance-style/>

students Duccio does not necessarily receive the deserved recognition for his inspirational insight and wealth of artistic material generated over a small space of time.

Despite Duccio Buoninsegna not being the most well known of artists certain information is not limited due to the fact that for some reason Duccio was a well documented character during his lifetime. Biographical text books relating specifically to the painter and his working life include the highly informative Duccio (Masters of Italian Art Series) by Andrea Weber. The large, sumptuously reproduced images compensate for the minimal amount of text. It provides a synopsis of Duccio's years, of which little is written about with regard to his private life. It documents his success as an artist in Siena and the various commissions he received. The book brings together the fragments of his Maesta and reconstructs it using a montage of photographs. Each piece of the painting is analysed and written about, the most famous of which is the Rucellai Madonna, now residing in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and is also explored in more depth in this research. This is a favourable book for those people who like iconic art and the work of early Italian masters.

Duccio Di Buoninsegna by Cecilia Jannellais a good user friendly paperback reference book. with over 100 color reproductions. It makes reference to the man in relation to documentation that exists regarding his financial affairs and his spontaneous spending sprees. It presumes that he was born between 1255 and 1260, and died in late 1318 or in the early part of 1319. It is well written and extensively researched

A reasonable potted source of chronological information also exists online. The Art encyclopedia website accessed from <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists> provides other useful links to art galleries and different reference sites specific to Duccio.

Sourcing texts that refer specifically to his work also exist. The most useful and comprehensive being *Duccio: The Maesta* By Luciano Bellosi. This book combines all the elements of this famous altar piece using a series of glossy colour plates that enlarge details to actual size. We see that the central panel depicts the Madonna enthroned surrounded by saints and angels, with the back showing scenes relating to the Passion. Other panels from the Maesta portray the Apostles and the Gospel story

The informative text, by a well respected Italian art historian, discusses the social and historical context of Duccio's commission, as well as the artist's well versed relationship with his cotemporary's Cimabue and Giotto, and the influence of their work on Sieneese and Italian painting.

In order to gain an appreciation of Renaissance techniques in comparison to the Byzantine era *Color and Meaning: Practice and Theory in Renaissance Painting* by Marcia B. Hallis an excellent approach guiding the reader on the subject of How Renaissance painters used colour to fuse their pictures, create symbolism and achieve the emotional expressiveness so lacking in Byzantine Art. Simplistic and explanatory it focuses on 20 paintings providing an insight into Leonardo's naturalistic use of shadow in the Mona Lisa and the way in which Michelangelo's flesh toned hues miraculously link the figures in the Sistine Chapel. It also provides an insight into Titian's penchant

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for bright, colours in order to achieve movement. The writer allows us to appreciate Hall the limited resources so many of these artists had to hand, which makes their work even greater in its context. This text provides a traditional analysis whilst demonstrating a deeper scientific approach from the angle of the Conservation laboratory. The writer provides an insightful appreciation of the type of techniques incorporated between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. It explains how important the use of colour, light and shade is on achieving realism through art which has helped with the overall comprehension of works that have leapt from the Byzantine tradition onwards.

Other places where Duccio is referenced are by way of an abundance of anthologies. In particular *Artists of the Middle Ages* By Leslie Ross. The identity of artists is examined in the context of their relationship to some of the most influential works of Art in Medieval history. However as with most books on this subject the artists themselves lose a great deal in translation, as so little information exists regarding their lives.

Ross investigates the Medieval Art world in terms of architecture, iconography, metalwork, and sculpture, whilst summarizing the lives and work of these leading artists. What is gained from reading this book is a factual idea of how an artist's life is led, combined with a useful list of reference material as to how the work was collated. Readers are also provided with an insight into the practices and traditions of medieval art and the role those traditions played in medieval society. A helpful timeline and full index gives scholars or interested students of Art History a breakdown of

the research tools that are necessary for finding more information in this field.

In terms of a definitive study providing a critical analysis that connects and provides evidence for Duccio to be heralded as a founding father of Renaissance art, no specific text appears to exist, although many hint to this relationship and subtlety found throughout his work. A re-examination of long established beliefs about the early renaissance painters can be found in *Painting in the Age of Giotto: A Historical Re-Evaluation* By Hayden B. J. Maginnis, Andrew Ladis

The study is the first to discuss the theories and observations of the sixteenth century art historian Giorgio Vasari in any detail. The writers argue the origins of modern views regarding the period and the ongoing critical strategies and conventions that exist in contrast to historical reality.

In an investigation of the “ new art” of the fourteenth century, Maginnis puts forward the argument that not only was the visual concept of naturalism remarkably short-lived but that that its main pioneers were the painters of Siena and not the painters of Florence.

In particular the detailed analysis of Giotto the Florentine painter and architect’s work demonstrates that his art belonged to a different kind of trend. Through a re-examination of the historical and art-historical evidence related to painting immediately after the plague of 1348 the writers determine the existence of a new interpretation of painting by the mid-century.

Iconography, Byzantine and religious art prior to the Renaissance are discussed in detail in Hans Belting, Edmund Jephcott's *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*. This book provides an overview of the concept of Byzantine Art and its true definition. That Byzantine Art was not necessarily an art form, but much more to do with worship and the recognition of all that is Holy. Hans Belting traces the long history of the sacral image and its changing role in European culture; combined with the beliefs, superstitions and hopes, that exist in relation to people's response and understanding of sacred images. It is an interesting source of facts relating to European Christians and their churches. Not so relevant to the immediate content of this research, yet providing significant background to appreciating a better understanding of Byzantine Art.

There is a chapter on Early Renaissance in Horst Janson and Anthony Janson's *History of Art*. And an overview of Duccio from the perspective of evidence that supports his early Renaissance tendencies. Janson writes ' In Duccio's hands the Greek manner has become unfrozen. The rigid, angular draperies have given way to an undulating softness...The bodies, faces and hands are beginning to swell with three dimensional life.'

This is a well established classic hand book of Art History with Extensive captions provided by twentieth-century art historians speaking about specific pieces of art featured throughout.

Janson has also rearranged early Renaissance art according to genre rather than in terms of any specific time sequence. Ultimately this paper is too trying to demonstrate a grounded positioning of the work of Duccio for

inclusion within the Early Renaissance which does not necessarily need to be defined in terms of geographical location or specific timeframe.

*Sieneese Painting: From Duccio to the Birth of the Baroque* by Giulietta Chelazzi Dini

is a volume tracing the correlation between the Sieneese painters namely Duccio di Buoninsegna, Simone Martini, and the Lorenzetti brothers and the dawn of Renaissance painting. It also extends to include painters right up until 1700 and charts the success of lesser known artists such as Rutilio Manetti, whose style changed radically when exposed to the work of Caravaggio. The last chapters focus on Baroque paintings but the focus for the narrative is principally early Sieneese masters. It documents the struggle towards naturalism. It is organized chronologically, with well documented texts on each period and work.

Additional reading from a chronological perspective includes Duccio di Buoninsegna by Curt H. Weigelt which is an early novel and the first attested biography of the painter written in German in 1911, R. S. Van Marle, The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting, vol. 2 published in 1924. This contains a chapter on Duccio published in English but providing little scope for original ideas.

Duccio di Buoninsegna (1961) is an interpretation, in Italian, of the work of Duccio and boasts a number of colour reproductions of his established works Duccio (1951) by Brandi, is an Italian language text that comprehensively researches the works of Duccio from the perspective of more modern

consideration. Later works in English include John White, Duccio: Tuscan Art <https://assignbuster.com/movement-from-byzantine-period-to-early-renaissance-style/>



and the Medieval Workshop (1979); James H. Stubblebine, Duccio di Buoninsegna and His School (1979); Cecilia Jannella, Duccio di Buoninsegna (1991), with many colour illustrations of his work; Andrea Weber, Duccio di Buoninsegna, About 1255–1319 (1997).

The Documents and Early Sources (2000), ed. by Hayden B. J. Maginnis is one of the most modern approaches to Duccio's work. It offers a series of research tools with which to take further research forward.

## **Chapter One: Madonna of the Franciscans and The Rucellai Madonna**

Madonna of the Franciscans is a small Tempera on wood, Tempera being a technique using powdered pigments mixed with egg yolk and water. It is chronologically the first work ascribed to Duccio in the Academy of Siena. Despite its damaged condition it shows many of the traditional features of the Byzantine era, but the formal stiffness of the ancient Hodegetria (Greek iconography) type has been softened to produce the effect of a more kindly and human depiction. Yet the composition is still dignified apparent though the gestures of Mother and Child toward the kneeling figures. The overall design has been softened with its characters flowing and lucid.

The picture portrays the enthroned Madonna of the protective mantle. A type derived from Byzantine Art. The three Franciscans kneeling at the virgin's feet demonstrate imploring gestures and intense emotional expressions. This is a cult Byzantine image, yet one that relays far more expression than typical to the style. Particularly as her head is looking out of the picture at the viewer. Her head remains the central focal point of the composition,

whilst at the same time maintaining a calm, concentrated devotion. The style of artistic representation captivates the audience and pulls the viewer into its world. There are fine undulating gold lines at the hem of the Madonna's mantle, which is traditional to that applied to old early paintings. But as a rule Duccio always refrained from covering garments entirely in gold.

By painting the hems and seams only in gold this makes elements of the painting stand out further and encourages an appearance of sumptuousness. In Duccio's time the colour that most represented glamour was the blue which was obtained from the semi-precious stone Lapis Lazuli. This was far more expensive than gold and used frequently in painting to highlight the rich ornate quality of the work. So by avoiding its use Duccio is in fact contradicting his images. Making them at once more emphasized and yet down playing them at the same time. And is in direct contrast to the Byzantine opulent representations

Duccio responds again to the contemporary desire for the modernisation of Art by adapting to the French artistic model in this painting with the inclusion of French gothic motifs in their pure form on individual standing figures. This blatant clear French derivation and the measured breadth of contour, the curving of the robe's hem and the smooth masses of colour make up part of a wider spatial dimension. Here the Gothic preference for linearity and flowing lines reaches its climax. This consequently encourages a pervading sense of animation and movement through expression.

Duccio's Madonna of the Franciscans echoes the compositions developed in Armenia and Cyprus amongst Crusader artists. It can also be identified in

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terms of its unique composition to being an early precursor of the Renaissance master Piero della Francesca's triptych depicting the Madonna della Misericordia. Where the virgin is drawn holding back the edge of her robe the better to receive and protect the three kneeling friars.

The elaborate combination of echoes from the Italian mosaic painter and Duccio's Florentine contemporary Cimabue alongside the added softness of Duccio's own unique personal touch, inspires elements of the new artistic language of the Renaissance.

The features of the beseeching friars and the throne which represents a simple wooden seat placed at an angle to create an effect of perspective, reflects the teaching of Cimabue, who tutored the controversial artists Giotto. Controversial in terms of his professional association with Duccio and the centuries of scholarly rivalry which has evolved in relation to authenticating their works. The unusual posture of the Child's legs is again out of context and repeats the gestures of his early Madonna of Buonconvento and the Rucellai Madonna.

When trying to understand Duccio's style better his Madonna Enthroned, also known as the Rucellai Madonna is one of the best examples. The Rucellai Madonna was commissioned on April 15, 1285, by the Confraternity of the Laudesi of S. Maria Novella in Florence. This contract was discovered in the 18th century and led to the correction of the early biographer Giorgio Vasari's attribution of the Rucellai Madonna to that of Cimabue. Nonetheless the proven documentary evidence and the obvious difference in style between the Rucellai Madonna and Cimabue's other paintings still lead some

academics to legitimise the painting as being that of Cimabue's. There are also others who are reluctant to think either responsible due to the distinctive style and attribute the work to an unknown third artist the general consensus is that the painting belongs to Duccio. There is nothing in the style of the Rucellai Madonna that makes its attribution to Duccio implausible. This fact plus the documentation relating to the contract of 1285 certainly makes such an attribution acceptable.

In stylistic terms, the Rucellai Madonna remains fundamentally Byzantine in many ways. But demonstrates a use of colour uncommon in the late 13th century. For example the dress of the six angels illustrates an abandonment of symmetry and reveals both the deep colors of the more traditional Byzantine period teamed with pastel silvery lilacs, pinks, and light blues, giving the painting a softer and decorative appearance. This decorativeness is exaggerated by the fluid gold lines that trace the hem and opening of the Virgin's mantle.

The Rucellai Madonna is so refined that it excels as an example of more advanced artistic thought. Delicate hues make up the formation of the throne and the shimmering cloth of honor behind the virgin.

The gold hem of the