

The Shimmer of Gold

GIOVANNI DI PAOLO IN RENAISSANCE SIENA

Giovanni di Paolo (about 1399–1482), manuscript illuminator and panel painter, was one of the most distinctive and imaginative artists working in Siena, Italy, during the Renaissance. He received prestigious commissions over the course of his lengthy career from a range of patrons—private individuals and families, guilds, the pope, and numerous religious orders, including the Dominicans, Franciscans, Servites, and Augustinians. This exhibition reunites several panels from one of his most important commissions—an altarpiece for the Branchini family chapel in



The church of San Domenico in Siena. Photo by Superchilum (CC BY-SA 4.0), via Wikimedia Commons

the church of San Domenico in Siena—for the first time since its dispersal, and presents illuminated manuscripts and paintings by Giovanni and by his close collaborators and contemporaries. Through recent technical findings, the exhibition also reveals his creative use of gold and paint to achieve remarkable luminous effects in both media.

The Branchini Altarpiece has been studied by conservators and curators at the Getty Museum as part of a conservation partnership with the Norton Simon Foundation and the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, the Netherlands. The Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena, the Burke Family Collection, James E. and Elizabeth J. Ferrell, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art have generously lent related works of exceptional quality.

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This exhibition complements *The Art of Alchemy* at the Getty Research Institute (October 11, 2016–February 12, 2017) and *The Alchemy of Color in Medieval Manuscripts* in the Museum, North Pavilion (October 11, 2016–January 1, 2017).

 1465



PAINTERLY TRADITIONS IN RENAISSANCE SIENA

Many archival documents and signed works testify to Giovanni di Paolo's prolific career in Siena. As an emerging artist, he drew inspiration from the visual traditions of northern Italy. In the 1420s, Giovanni and fellow Siennese artists responded enthusiastically to the courtly splendor of the



newly arrived painter Gentile da Fabriano (from the Marche region), who immediately worked with and sometimes under the supervision of Siena's leading creative personalities. The works gathered in this gallery—particularly his brilliantly colorful paintings on both panel and parchment—reveal Giovanni to be an artist whose

style drew uniquely from Siennese and Florentine models. The arts of devotion, whether choir books or altarpieces, were of central importance to his clientele, and when displayed together, these wondrous objects allow us to glimpse the spiritual luster of a distant past.



SIENA AND FLORENCE

In fifteenth-century Tuscany, the towns of Siena and Florence thrived on rivalry among artists, patrons, and even religious institutions. At times, a level of influence existed between the two cultural centers, as movement of individuals and commodities between cities often coincided with civic competitions or festivals. The elegance and splendor of royal courtly arts, common in the late Gothic period (about 1380–1450), commingled with a new approach to rendering three-dimensional space, the body, optical effects, and landscapes based on classical forms and models, a style that would eventually embody a “Renaissance,” or rebirth in aesthetics and learning. The works in this section highlight the significance of artists’ journeys in central Italy and emphasize the importance of devotional and liturgical commissions for the blending of regional painterly approaches to figure and surface. The illuminated choir book is one of the most significant art forms to demonstrate the combined efforts of multiple artists.



THE BRANCHINI ALTARPIECE

This altarpiece, completed in 1427, was commissioned for the Branchini family chapel in the church of San Domenico in Siena. The spectacular central panel, representing the Madonna and Child, is considered to be Giovanni's masterpiece. This impressive picture, now owned by the Norton Simon Museum, as well as one of the smaller but equally beautiful surviving predella panels (lower portion), from the Kröller-Müller Museum, have recently been conserved and studied at the Getty. The remaining three known paintings, from Siena (Pinacoteca), are reunited here with the surviving portions of the altarpiece for the first time in modern history. Other missing parts of the altarpiece have not yet been found, but technical analysis may help to identify other panels in the future. There were probably two full-length standing saints on either side of the central panel. A speculative diagram of the Branchini Altarpiece at full scale can be seen on the back wall.

Some scholars have suggested that the young Giovanni may have worked on the Branchini Altarpiece with one of the most successful artists in Italy at that time, Gentile da Fabriano, a painter who traveled to Tuscany from northern Italy for numerous commissions (his work can be seen nearby). Giovanni's *Madonna* may, in fact, be based on a lost masterpiece painted by Gentile in Siena greatly esteemed in its time. Gentile must have influenced Giovanni's technique, as there are many similarities in their painting methods. A sophisticated layering of paint and gold as well as a careful execution of elaborate and fine decorative details is evident in the work of both artists, each a master at depicting the luxury brocaded textiles and animal furs that were so valued during this period. The combination of all of this creates a sumptuous visual delight.



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