

REPORT FOR PAPERS OF THE BRITISH SCHOOL AT ROME

The Piccolomini Library in Siena Cathedral: questions of patronage and iconography considered in the light of Cardinal Francesco Piccolomini's humanism and theology

The project for which I held a Rome Award in February and March 2003 formed part of my doctoral research on the Piccolomini Library in Siena Cathedral. This edifice was decorated in fresco by Pinturicchio in 1503-8 at the behest of Cardinal Francesco Piccolomini, in commemoration of the life of his uncle Pope Pius II. Both Pius II and his nephew were at the epicentre of fifteenth century humanism and bibliophilia, of which the library, with its extensive and complex painted decoration, is a visual manifestation. Art historical literature to date examines the painted historical narratives of Pope Pius II's life on the walls of the library and the mythological compartments of the vault, but consistently fails to discern an underlying programme which conceptually links wall and vault imagery. The hypothesis to be put forward in my doctoral dissertation will demonstrate an intellectually rigorous programme appropriate to such a prestigious project and so powerful a patron. The hypothesised programme not only negates the iconographical disjunction between walls and vault perceived by art historians to date, it also presents a novel interpretation of the vault imagery and addresses other significant anomalies within the whole.

Although my topic is located in Siena, the patron was elected to the Sacred College at the early age of 23 and spent a large part of his life in Rome in the company of eminent theologians, humanists and Neoplatonists. In keeping with the *studia humanitatis*, he embellished his *palazzo* (near to the Pantheon) with particularly rich collections of manuscripts and antique sculpture. The famous marble statue of *The Three Graces*, along with many of the cardinal's codices, were transported from Rome to the Piccolomini Library in Siena prior to his death in October 1503 (by which time he had been elected pontiff, taking the name Pope Pius III). *The Three Graces* today retains its physical position at the centre of the library and, according to my thesis, symbolises a concept at the heart of the whole decorative programme.

The iconological analysis of the library decoration is grounded in a study of the historical, cultural and artistic contexts of late *quattrocento* Siena and Rome, and specifically of the nature of Cardinal Francesco's humanism and theology. The original, full complement of codices in the Piccolomini collection and their subsequent fate can be only partially ascertained, owing to absences or incompleteness of inventories. Many of the codices which arrived in Siena in 1503 were later subsumed into the Chigi Foundation of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. On the grounds that these provide an insight into Cardinal Francesco's personal interests and beliefs and possibly a clue to the iconographic programme of the library, certain of these manuscripts, along with others in the Angelica Library in Rome and the Biblioteca Comunale in Siena, were the subject of examination during the period of the Rome Award. This confirmed Cardinal Francesco's intellectual appetite for church history, secular history and politics, as well as revealing some tantalising references to Neoplatonic concepts. The study of Francesco's manuscripts proved to be of enormous potential value to my project and presents an area for further research.

The period in Rome facilitated comparison of the painted episodes from the life of Pope Pius II with other examples of papal *istorie*, which highlighted divergences in the Siena fresco cycle from traditional patterns of representation. It also enabled the study of contemporaneous papal and cardinalate commissions and of other projects by Pinturicchio's workshop. An unforeseen, though invaluable, outcome of the Rome Award was the ability to envisage the physical nature of Cardinal Francesco's environment – to locate the site of his residence and to experience its proximity to other important landmarks in his life, such as the *palazzi* of colleagues and fellow humanists, his titular churches, the new Augustinian foundations springing up in the locality during this period and the relative whereabouts of antique precedents in late *quattrocento* Rome.

In summary, various aspects of my working hypothesis were explored, to positive effect, during the Rome Award, which allowed a previously unimagined degree of concentration in a conducive and stimulating environment.

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