

## Dress and its significance in the decorative mural cycle of the Piccolomini Library (1502-8), Siena Cathedral

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**Abstract:** *Opening directly off the massive, romanesque interior of Siena cathedral, the renaissance Piccolomini Library shimmers like a bejewelled casket. Its vault and walls are enlivened with intricate, colourful frescoes by Bernardino Pinturicchio and his workshop. The main component of the painted scheme is a commemoration of the life of the patron's uncle, Pope Pius II (1458-64), presented in ten, large narrative murals. In keeping with early-renaissance naturalism, great attention is paid to the careful depiction of contemporary dress. Focusing on a small selection of the murals, the aims of this paper are to examine the various modes of sartorial elegance represented there and to consider the role that dress plays in communicating meaning within the decorative programme. Using visual analysis in combination with studies of the history of dress, local Siennese socio-economic context, papal politics and the dynastic agenda, it is demonstrated that the representation of costume plays an important part in the frescoes. It underscores the role of rhetoric, and in particular epideictic oratory, in the mural scheme, elucidates attitudes to local sumptuary laws, and reinforces the celebratory crescendo with which the narrative of Pius's life closes. It will be shown, moreover, that this culminating triumphalist message is rather more optimistic than was actually the case!*

**Keywords:** Piccolomini Library; Pope Pius II; Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini; Cardinal Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini; Bernardino Pinturicchio

Analyses of the narrative episodes from the life of Pope Pius II (Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini) on the walls of the Piccolomini Library in Siena (Fig. 1), painted by Bernardino Pinturicchio in the years 1502-8, consider them in the context of the historical events of the period, of papal diplomacy and of humanist culture, some writers highlighting a departure from traditional library decoration, others analysing the relationship between the images and their inscriptions. Within the limitations of this paper, its aims are to examine a small selection of the frescoes to consider the role that dress plays in communicating meaning within the decorative programme. Using visual analysis in combination with studies of the history of dress, local Siennese socio-economic context, papal politics and the dynastic agenda, it is demonstrated that the representation of costume plays an important part: it underscores the role of rhetoric, and in particular epideictic oratory, in the mural scheme, elucidates attitudes to local sumptuary laws, and reinforces the celebratory crescendo with which the narrative of Pius's life closes. It is shown, moreover, that

the culminating triumphalist message of his legacy as shown in the frescoes is rather more optimistic than historically accurate.

The mural decoration is, to put it bluntly, art as ideology. It would be overstating the case, however, to interpret it as the falsification of history. The mural programme is, quite literally, rhetoric, a visual exposition of a revival of an oratorical form sanctioned by the ancients and in common usage at the papal court: it is a construct, but one which was understood and culturally endorsed. Not only is Pius depicted as an orator - as we shall see - on the library walls, but the whole cycle was conceived as a visual 'oration' to the deceased pontiff (Green, 2005, 166-8). Epideictic oratory was a form of rhetoric which the patron of the library, Cardinal Francesco Piccolomini, nephew of the deceased pope, actively sought to revive at the papal court (May, 2006, 48-59). It worked by striving to conjure images in the mind of the listener through colourful description. To conceive of a permanent, visual 'oration' to his uncle was no great mental leap for Pius's nephew, but a natural development of one of the *topoi* of contemporary culture. The narrative *istorie* on the library walls are a visual epideictic 'oration' on the virtues of this pontiff, composed to convince of their truth.

Of necessity, this study is selective. In turning our attention initially to the second *istoria* in the series, *The Embassy of Aeneas Piccolomini to James I of Scotland* (Fig. 2), the ecclesiological circumstances that brought Aeneas Piccolomini to Scotland are beyond the scope of this paper: focus is trained instead on the frescoed image and the role that it endows to costume. Centre stage on an elevated dais sits the enthroned Scottish king, bearded and dignified, listening intently to Aeneas who appears on the left. Ranks of Scottish courtiers sit on benches running horizontally behind the monarch. Sundry other figures listen in rapt attention on either side of the king. A richly patterned, oriental carpet covers the steps rising to the throne. Behind the courtiers a tripartite arched loggia opens out onto an extensive landscape, a minutely rendered, 'fairytale' panorama rising out to the sides from a central, fjord-like estuary. This could hardly be further from Aeneas's own recollection in his memoirs of the Scottish landscape: 'a cold country where few things grow ... for the most part barren of trees', the most appealing feature of this northern land its 'lusty' women (Piccolomini, 2003, 23-4).

The effect of the *istoria* is dazzling, from the enchantment of the distant landscape with its gothic spires, to the richly appointed, porphyry-columned and gold-studded interior. The assembly comprises an extraordinary range of colourful types, from ascetic clerics to red-headed, thick-bearded, Germanic folk, from turbaned orientals to bare-headed negroes (Karababa, 2017). Materials include velvets, wool, silks, gauzes, brocades, feathers and gold. Writers have perceived in these scenes signs of worldliness unsuitable to an artwork in a cathedral precinct and commissioned by a cardinal. The opulence, however, is a foil. It is a backdrop against which is to be seen the sober figure of Aeneas the 'orator', as he is termed in the Latin inscription below the fresco. Wearing a red, Roman style tunic and green sandals, he has a voluminous, plum-coloured cloak, a *pallio*, wrapped around him in the classical manner (Raspini, 2003, 107). His long, brown locks cascade across his shoulders while he enumerates his arguments on graceful fingers. The restrained, timeless elegance of Aeneas proclaims his integrity and genuineness, and sets him apart from the courtly pomp and material luxuriance that surround him. This is an example of *sunkrisis*, the contrast that is required by the rules of epideictic oratory, here sobriety in opposition to ostentation (McManamon, 1976, 21).

The idea that Aeneas's oratory is an art form in the ancient classical tradition is reinforced by the figure directly behind him. Elderly, balding, with straggly, grey hair and short, bushy beard, this man dressed in a loose, white robe is the type of an ancient philosopher, a precursor to the figures of Plato and Aristotle in Raphael's *School of Athens* (Raspini, 2003, 108). With his hand on his heart whilst he looks imploringly, visibly moved, toward the king, the old Roman conveys the veracity and sagacity of the speech silently issuing from the lips of Aeneas, and his consummate skill as an orator. The hours-long attention with which Aeneas's speeches were met, and of which the immodest author misses no opportunity to remind the reader in his autobiography, is captured in this *istoria*: the audience's concentration is palpable (Piccolomini, 2003, 135).

For humanists, the model to be used to encourage fellow citizens to live a moral life without withdrawing from the world was the ideal of the ancient orator who expressed his *humanitas* with eloquence. Through the power of oratory the will of

men could be persuaded to moral action (D'Amico, 1988, 349). In his eulogy preached in Siena on the first anniversary of Pius's death, Giannantonio Campano praised him for his eloquence (Campano, 1502, 99v). Domenico Dominichi in his *Oratorio de eligendo pontifice* compared Pius to Cicero, claiming that the former surpassed in eloquence both the men of his own age and the greater part of antiquity: he had the persuasiveness of Isocrates, the subtlety of Lysias and the force of Demosthenes (Dominichi, 11v-12r). Pius's skill as orator is here underscored by his appearance, in contrast to his *cinquecento* courtly audience, wearing timeless, classical attire.

Turning to the fifth *istoria*, *The presentation of Leonora of Portugal to Emperor Frederick III* (Fig. 3), Aeneas Piccolomini recounts in his autobiography that in the jubilee year (1450) he was sent by Emperor Frederick III to Naples to meet with Alfonso, King of Aragon and Sicily in order to arrange a marriage between the emperor and Leonora, Alfonso's niece. Aeneas successfully negotiated the contract, as well as safe passage through Italy for the emperor the following year, when he would come to Siena to meet his future bride and be crowned in Rome by the pope (Piccolomini, 2003, 95-115). Here, for the benefit of Sienese visitors to the library, a degree of topographical exactitude has been sought. Showing the action where it actually took place, Pinturicchio gives us a background view of the Porta Camollia, the city walls and the bristling towers of Siena, including its unmistakable cathedral and the shell of the *duomo nuovo*. The foreground action is disposed in a circle around the commemorative monument which was erected *in situ* in 1452 (modern dating), a month after the event had actually taken place.

The throng, mounted and on foot, includes a number of portraits, figures who may be identified from Pius's autobiographical *I commentarii*, as well as contemporaries of the patron. Included in the Sienese welcoming party in the foreground (Fig. 4) are likenesses of Alberto Aringhieri, of the patron's brother Andrea Todeschini Piccolomini and of his wife Agnese di Gabriele Francesco Farnese. Aringhieri, *operaio* in charge of cathedral works during the library construction and decoration, is dressed in black with a Maltese Cross upon his chest, as a Knight of Rhodes. The patron's brother stands next to him, also in black dress and cap. In front of him is his

wife Agnese, wearing a white bodice with dark horizontal lacing, looking out at the viewer (Nevola, 2003, 583-94).

The three main protagonists, meanwhile, are lavishly endowed with gold leaf to highlight their importance. The composition relies on the iconography of marriage, following the usual placement behind the couple of the officiating minister and the main focus on the hand gestures. Contemporaneous *spozalizio* scenes revolve around the placing of the wedding ring on the finger. This composition, not yet a marriage, reverts to the classical form where the couple hold right hands, the *dextrarum iunctio*, as seen in antique sculpture. Aeneas, as Bishop of Siena, rests his hand lightly on Leonora's shoulder in a gesture following the antique and, with down-turned glance, solemnly draws the couple together. Frederick steps forward, the left patten protecting his golden shoe falling away from his foot in a pleasing detail of observation. Gazing directly at Leonora and holding her shoulder, the emperor 'takes possession' of his betrothed.

Apart from a Dominican nun pictured in the penultimate *istoria* of the library series, it is notable that this is the only image in which women are prominently featured. In this mural, the small retinue of ladies-in-waiting, comprising a nun, a small girl and five other women, clusters behind Leonora, whose tilted head and downcast eyes connote modesty and submission (Berdini, 1998, 567). This group of women reflect the paternalistic infrastructure of renaissance society. The role of Eve in Original Sin had only served to worsen a pre-existing inequality in the eyes of the Church Fathers, since woman had been created not from dust in her own right but from Adam's rib (Genesis 2:22). This patristic tradition was melded together by Thomas Aquinas with the complete biology that he found in Aristotle, which gave a 'scientific' basis to androcentric anthropology. In his *Summa theologica*, there are two possibilities for women, marriage or religious life. Of the two, the latter, involving sexual abstinence, is preferable because *all* human action, thought and love should be directed to God, and because sexual activity involves a loss of rational control: continence promotes the recovery of the state of human nature before the Fall (McLaughlin, 1974, 222). The women in this *istoria* are accordingly shown to be married, poised for marriage or wedded to Christ.

Many of the individuals in this image, as at the court of James I of Scotland, are clad in ostentatious dress and rich materials. For men, fine dress was a status symbol as well as a sign of self-esteem and respectability (Richardson, 2015). In a letter of 1513, Machiavelli wrote that before entering a library for long and happy hours of study, he removed his muddy, everyday clothes and dressed himself as though he were about to appear before royalty: 'Then decently attired, I enter the ancient courts of the great men of antiquity who receive me with friendship' (Rice, 1970, 66). For the male, who functions through higher reason or *sapientia*, dress thus indicated intellect (Nelson, 1958, 72-3). Women, on the other hand, who were considered to attain only lower reason or *scientia*, were thought to dress finely only in order to tempt men, indicative of their sensual appetites, lack of self-control and predisposition to vice (Clifton, 1999, 645).

From the end of the thirteenth century, sumptuary laws were frequently enacted that imposed limits on display and regulated the dress of men and women. These served as a means to weaken the power of noble clans that dominated early political life in Italian cities, however the brunt of regulations fell upon the *ornamenta mulierum* (Hughes, 1983, 66-99). Innumerable writers from Saint Jerome (347-420) in the early church to San Bernardino of Siena (1380-1444) railed against ostentation in women as indicative of their vices of vanity, pride and lechery. In this *istoria* we are treated to a fashionable display of ruffs, bodices and detachable sleeves. On occasions such as this - visits of royal or dignified persons - the Sieneese enjoyed indulging in lavish celebration and women were granted a few days' relaxation of certain clauses of the sumptuary law. A few silken garments were in any case allowable provided they were made from cloth manufactured in the city. Andrea Piccolomini's wife Agnese (appearing behind Leonora) is pictured within the limit of wearing a maximum of three gold rings; even the bride-to-be abides by Sieneese legislation that allowed women to wear on their heads at most one unadorned garland of silver weighing no more than two ounces. Saint Thomas had conceded that female display was usually not a sin so long as it was employed in the pursuit of a husband (Hughes, 1983, 74-9).

Sumptuary regulations on design, colour, cut of the cloth, embroidery and ornamentation were naturally unwelcome by women, as well as by their tailors. On

the actual occasion of Frederick and Leonora's visit to Siena in 1451, they were entertained with a recitation in Latin by Battista Petrucci, daughter of a professor of rhetoric. As appreciation, Leonora had enquired of Battista how she would best be rewarded: Battista replied that she wished for permanent exemption from Sieneese sumptuary regulations, a wish that the city government ultimately, though reluctantly, granted (Malavolti, 1599, 38v). In representing the historic occasion of the couple's visit in this fifth *istoria*, Pinturicchio was at pains to ensure that the painted women remain within the parameters of propriety demanded by the rigorous sumptuary controls that were imposed on real women.

Pius opens the last, unfinished book of his memoirs by informing his reader that, in accordance with his various political manoeuvres, not only the Church of Rome but almost all of the peninsula was enjoying the sweetness of peace. He was resolved nonetheless to proceed with his long-attempted plan to push back the Turks, following the Fall of Constantinople, by leading a crusade in person (Gabel, 1960, 237-8, 375-6). Delegating government of the Church and Rome to Cardinal Francesco in his absence, Pius departed for the port of Ancona, arriving on 19 July 1464. Some Spanish and French crusaders were already there but nothing could be done until the arrival of the Venetian fleet. The pope however, prematurely old and crippled with gout, succumbed to a fever. On 12 August sailed in the eagerly awaited Doge, followed into the harbour by his fleet of twelve galleys. Three days later Pius died. The Doge returned to Venice. There was to be no crusade (O'Brien, 2015, 98-103).

Unlike Raphael and his assistants in the later *Battle of Ostia* (1515-17) in the Stanza dell'Incendio of the Vatican Palace, Pinturicchio could not in all sincerity present the climactic image of the library series as a naval victory. A solution was found, not by illustrating an alternative episode from the pope's life, but instead by formulating an iconic construct, showing representatives of east and west unified under the supreme authority of the Church, the Roman pontiff, in the setting of Ancona, intended port of departure for the crusade and place of Pius's death. Expectations were high at the end of the quattrocento for the final fulfilment of the Johannine prophecy: 'So there shall be one flock, one shepherd' (John 10:16). A visual manifestation in the final *istoria* of the accomplishment of spiritual and political

harmony would strike an optimistic note for the Sienese populace and could not fail but to enhance the posthumous reputation of Pius II.

The tenth and final narrative, then, *Pius II at Ancona* (Fig. 5), shows the town of Ancona rising up the headland at right, a schematised depiction of Monte Grasco crowned by the cathedral church of San Ciriaco. Below, the shields of the galley anchored in the port bear the Piccolomini *stemma*: sailors climbing the mast and rigging prepare for departure. The open sea is speckled with the white sails of the incoming Venetian fleet. In the centre of the composition, held aloft in the *sedia gestatoria*, Pius gravely looks down to the group on the left while pointing to two resplendent, exotic figures on the right. Of these, the turbaned, standing male seen in full frontal view, hands on hips and wearing a shimmering violet-tinged, golden kaftan, is identified as Djem Sultan, Ottoman pretender and erstwhile hostage of the pontiff. In actuality belonging to a period after the lifetime of Pius, the tall, striking figure of Djem was familiar to those of Cardinal Francesco's generation, having become a fashionable personality at court, living more like a guest than a prisoner (Setton, 1978, 551). In front of him is a kneeling, bearded figure in equally opulent, oriental dress, identified as Asan Zaccaria, deposed prince of Samo. To the left of the pope is another fallen potentate: wearing a high crowned, wide brimmed blue hat, blue robe and a broad golden chain is the person of Thomas Paleologus, deposed despot of Morea. Kneeling before the pope to the left, in golden, minever-trimmed, brocaded damask is the Venetian Doge Cristoforo Moro, his hat held by the young page behind him (Raspini, 2003, 138). The portraits of the sovereigns previously deposed by the Ottoman Empire, shown together in a unified group beneath the pope, implies the restitution to them of their territories. The inclusion of the Turk in the person of Djem Sultan foretells peaceful co-existence, supporting a popularly held view that the Mohammedans would convert to Christianity. The balance and stability of the new order is conveyed by the pyramidal composition, whilst the pointing gesture of Pius towards the Turk reiterates once and for all what the *istorie* and inscriptions have already made clear: that as defender of the unity of the Church and protector of the Christian faith the life of Pope Pius II was devoted to the cause. The crusade, in truth, was dogged by problems and dissension far too complicated to explicate in this paper. Historians working on diplomatic correspondence from these years observe that it evinces jealousy, self-interest,



myopia and disingenuousness, all disguised by an ingeniously 'fine art of courteous prevarication': all agree that the crusade was doomed to fail (Setton, 1978, 245-268).

In summary, the acute observation of the natural world in which early renaissance artists revelled extended as much to sartorial exactitude and textural description as it did to anatomy, physiognomy and landscape. This paper has sought to demonstrate the range of meanings that Pinturicchio could convey through the representation of dress, from the contrast of *sunkrisis* required of epideictic oratory witnessed in *The Embassy of Aeneas Piccolomini to James I of Scotland*, through the display of material culture and its gendered connotations in *The presentation of Leonora of Portugal to Emperor Frederick III*, and to the facility of costume to convey rank and geographical provenance in *Pius II at Ancona*. Ultimately the Piccolomini Library proclaims that the twenty-first century does not hold a monopoly on the power of the image.

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## Illustrations

Fig 1 Interior of the Piccolomini library, Siena cathedral, decorated in fresco by Bernardino Pinturicchio, 1502-8, looking towards the entrance

Fig 2 The second *istoria*: *The Embassy of Aeneas Piccolomini to James I of Scotland*, Piccolomini library

Fig 3 The fifth *istoria*: *The Presentation of Leonora of Portugal to Emperor Frederick III*, Piccolomini library

Fig 4 The fifth *istoria* (detail), *The Presentation of Leonora of Portugal to Emperor Frederick III*, Piccolomini library

Fig 5 The tenth *istoria*: *Pius II at Ancona*, Piccolomini library