

A. Project Purpose

The project establishes the solitary birdcage in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco *The Allegory of Good Government* as the semiological signifier for submission to the city of Siena through visual representations of containment and bondage in civic, religious, and philosophical contexts.

B. Project Importance

The Allegory of Good and Bad Government by Ambrogio Lorenzetti is considered one of the most significant fresco series in the world.¹ Completed in 1339, it became significant for its non-religious subject matter, which was unusual for its time. As it was commissioned for a room inside the equivalent-town-hall building of Siena, scholars agree that the frescoes served as a visual reminder to the secular leaders of the city. The frescoes visually encouraged Siena's governing body to strive to be like the good government and avoid becoming like the bad government depicted. Scholars justified this explanation by citing various background details of the painting, such as the two banners that float above the city that warn of tyranny and praise security. This is how the fresco has been viewed in the past. Any attempt to delve deeper into its meaning has been through an iconographical approach in art history. Created by art historian Erwin Panofsky, iconography is a methodology that identifies a certain motif in a work of art, analyzes how it informs the interpretation of the work, and relies heavily on literary sources. Although iconography is a standard practice in art history, it offers a dated analysis and can be limiting in scope. I believe that such surface level consideration is problematic when considering *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*.

¹ *The Paintings that Revolutionized Art*. Munich: Prestal Verlag, 2013, pg. 22.

This project is important because it will go beyond Panofskian iconography and instead provide a semiological analysis. This approach goes beyond looking at literary sources and instead looks at visual signs. Thus, where iconography is dependent upon literary sources to decode a work of art, semiotics instead attempts to understand cultural elements like usage, language, and visual comparison to determine meaning. Much of the scholarship on the *Allegory of Good and Bad Government* begins and ends with iconography. Instead, this project will focus on one neglected signifier in the fresco, the singular birdcage, and argue that it was a sign of submission to the medieval viewer. Using semiotics will foster stronger visual analysis between other components of the fresco and contemporary works of the time, as well as deepen the understanding of the allegory for which the fresco is named.

C. Project Overview

This project initially started as the topic for a paper I wrote for Dr. Elliott Wise's medieval art class in Winter Semester 2017. The fresco series has two opposing parts: the *Allegory of Good Government* and the *Allegory of Bad Government*. Each part has two major components: the city of Siena and the *contado*. The *contado* is the Italian word for "countryside" and refers to the surrounding communities and region of a larger city, which was outside of the city's gates and typically the home to a more rural population. Thus, each part of the fresco series shows both the city and the countryside. *The Allegory of Bad Government* depicts the consequences of the city of Siena under a bad government. The city walls are crumbling. Soldiers wreak havoc instead of maintain order. The city and its people are being destroyed. Likewise, the *contado* is also shown, but with crops and homes burning. In contrast, the *Allegory of Good Government* depicts the benefits of Siena being

under a good government. There is commerce. The *contado* produces crops. There are signs of life in the windows—everything from potted plants to cats. While studying this fresco, my eye caught the birdcage hanging in a window above the lecturer. I found it interesting that in a city depicting peace, there would be a caged animal—something with no freedom. Spurred on by similar thoughts, I felt the birdcage would make an interesting iconographical study.

I began to research possible symbolic meanings of birdcages in medieval art, poetry, and liturgy and attempted to find solid, literary evidence that could explain why the birdcage was significant. While researching, I found some historical sources that explained the city of Siena's relationship with the *contado*. These historical documents mentioned that the leaders from the *contado* had to sign a physical document that relinquished their feudal rights and put themselves under Siena's rule. This type of document was called a "document of submission." They bound the *contado* to the city of Siena politically, religiously, and culturally. The fate of the *contado* would have been in the hands of the Siennese government. Thus, my thesis developed into the idea that the birdcage became the visual manifestation of this "document of submission" and became a subtle metaphor for Siena's relationship with the *contado*.

To construct this argument, I developed a formal and an iconographical base. I researched some of the specifics of the documents of submission and determined what was contractually required of the *contado* and Siena respectively. I also explored other examples of submission with which a medieval viewer would have been familiar. I turned to the New Testament. The Virgin Mary is an important example of willing submission. She famously said, "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord" and followed the will of God over her

personal desires. The city of Siena reveres the Virgin; she is seen as their special protector. Her example meant that the medieval viewer was familiar with the idea of submitting one's will to a higher power. I also discovered that in the document of submission, the *contado* was required to attend processional parades for the Virgin Mary. Her influence permeated everything in the city of Siena.

In my formal analysis, I looked at certain qualities like composition, line, and space, which all perpetuate cage imagery. I determined that the birdcage's placement over the lecturer was also tied to documents of submission and education. I also compared the formal qualities of the *Allegory of Good Government* with the *Allegory of bad Government*. Things like the condition of the buildings and the artist's choice to repeat lines, create the idea of structure within the city. For example, the windows in the *Allegory of Good Government* have bars on them, adding to the allusion that the city is a larger cage, whereas the windows in the *Allegory of Bad Government* are gaping holes in incomplete buildings. There are many visual traits that act as subliminal cages which cannot all be listed in this project proposal. Yet, as strong as the evidence is that I have already collected, a simple iconographical or formal analysis of the fresco series is not sufficient.

Using semiotics, I propose to look more closely at the birdcage as a signifier for Siena's relationship with the *contado* and a sign of submission. I hope to explore more fully the significance of the mass and liturgy to a medieval believer. I will research tales of saints—particularly anchorites—with which a medieval Christian would have been familiar in Siena. I also need to become better acquainted with Siennese history and find examples of how they interacted with the *contado* during this time. For instance, maybe I could find a true story of when Siena protected the *contado*.

This kind of research requires me to travel to Siena. While there I can study the visual arts of the city and find other visual examples of willing submission that otherwise would be impossible to perceive. For example, I need to see if there are any sculptural decorations throughout the city that share the submission motif. I will also study Marian imagery throughout the city to further solidify my idea that the Virgin Mary is also a signifier for willing submission. One essential Marian work of art to see is Simone Martin's *Maesta* in Siena. I will need to visit the Archivio di Stato di Siena, the Archive of Siena, to find documents of submission. Also, there are contemporary works of art housed in the Siena Pinacoteca and the Galleria degli Uffizi in nearby Florence, which need to be studied to see if the birdcage as a sign transcends beyond the fresco series. By being in Siena, I can immerse myself to find visual representations of submission and bondage in not simply one fresco series, but in civic, religious, and philosophical contexts throughout the whole city. A request for funding will be discussed in Section F of this proposal.

As stated in Section B of this proposal, the scholarship of the *Allegory of Good Government* revolves around its historical context and importance as a non-religious fresco, which made it unique during the late medieval period. There has been no analysis of this fresco using the birdcage as a metaphor for the relationship between the *contado* and the city. Not only will this paper build upon accepted, art historical theoretical approaches—such as formalism and iconography—but it will also utilize more contemporary theory, such as semiotics. Establishing the birdcage as a signifier tied to the politics and culture of Siena has never been investigated before. Such an interpretation will fill a gap in the academic scholarship regarding this famous artwork.

D. Thesis Committee

For this thesis committee, I have asked Dr. Elliott Wise to be faculty advisor and Dr. Mark Johnson to be my faculty reader. Dr. Martha Peacock is assigned as the Honors Coordinator for art history.

I initially developed this thesis for a paper I wrote in Dr. Wise's medieval art class. He recommended that it could be my senior thesis and concurrently my Honors thesis. He has been developing the topic with me since I initially brought it up to him for the medieval class. As a medieval and renaissance art enthusiast, he is knowledgeable in Christian liturgy and will know how to help me research such topics.

Dr. Mark Johnson is an art history professor with an extensive knowledge of Italian culture and art. Not only has he taught Classical and Italian art, he is fluent in the language. This type of knowledge will be crucial to using semiotics, as it often looks at language and word connotations. He has also been teaching at BYU for many years and knows what qualifies as a good research paper and argument.

In addition to being my senior thesis advisor, Dr. Martha Peacock is also the Honors Coordinator. She will provide excellent feedback, especially in the early stages of the paper. She will be heavily involved in the development of the thesis before I travel to Italy, as that is when my senior thesis is due. However, as Honors Coordinator, she can help me develop the project further after I return as well.

E. Project Timeline

Fall 2017: Work on and complete senior thesis for art history major.

September 18: Submit Honors Thesis Proposal to Honors Approval Committee.

September-November: Research and write the senior thesis by editing and expanding the original paper. Using various theories learned about in senior thesis class, consider how to explore the topic in different ways. Consult with my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Wise, bi-weekly throughout the research process.

November 10: Turn in rough draft to my senior thesis advisor, Dr. Peacock, who is also my Honors Coordinator.

November-December: Continue to edit and polish the rough draft via peer editing and consulting with Dr. Wise.

December 8: Present senior thesis in formal setting—the Art History Senior Thesis Presentations at the BYU Museum of Art Auditorium.

December 14: Submit final draft of senior thesis to Dr. Peacock. Also submit to Dr. Johnson to read.

December 24, 2017 – January 8, 2018: Complete research-related travel in Siena, Italy.

Winter 2018: Complete and defend Honors Thesis

January 10: Meet with Dr. Wise to discuss the findings in Italy. Begin to reformat and edit paper.

January 12: Apply for graduation.

January 24: Submit first draft (possible just sections) that includes expanded Italy research to Dr. Wise and Dr. Johnson for corrections.

February 7: Submit second draft to Dr. Wise for review and corrections.

February 9: Schedule thesis defense and submit thesis defense information form to the Honors Office along with PDF copy of thesis draft.

February 21: Submit final draft of thesis to advisor, reader, and coordinator for review.

March 2: Hold thesis defense and submit the completed thesis submission form to the Honors Office. I know that the deadline is March 9, but I choose March 2 in case I do not pass my thesis and need to change some things and defend again.

March 15: Email the completed Honors thesis and Great Questions Essay in PDF format to the office for formatting evaluation. Upload these materials to the BYU Print & Mail as well.

April 2018: Graduation.

F. Funding

I am requesting the maximum amount of \$1,000 from the Honors Program to help fund the cost of international travel to Siena. If granted, the above amount will go towards roundtrip airfare (approximately \$1,200 from Salt Lake City to Rome during winter break).

I am also applying for an ORCA grant, that if approved will grant me a maximum amount of \$1,500, which will also go towards expenses to travel including in-country transportation, lodging, and food.

Any other expenses will be provided out of personal funds.

G. Culminating Experience

I intend to submit my paper for publication. There are several art history journals for undergraduates to which I can submit. The foremost being the Bowdoin Art Society's *Journal of Art*. I will also submit to *Renaissance Quarterly*, a publication of the Renaissance Society of America. Besides journals, some possible conferences include the Medieval Kalamazoo Conference and the International Medieval Conference in Leeds, England. In all

of these cases, I would submit my final paper, so it would be in the year 2018, most likely after my graduation.

H. Conclusion

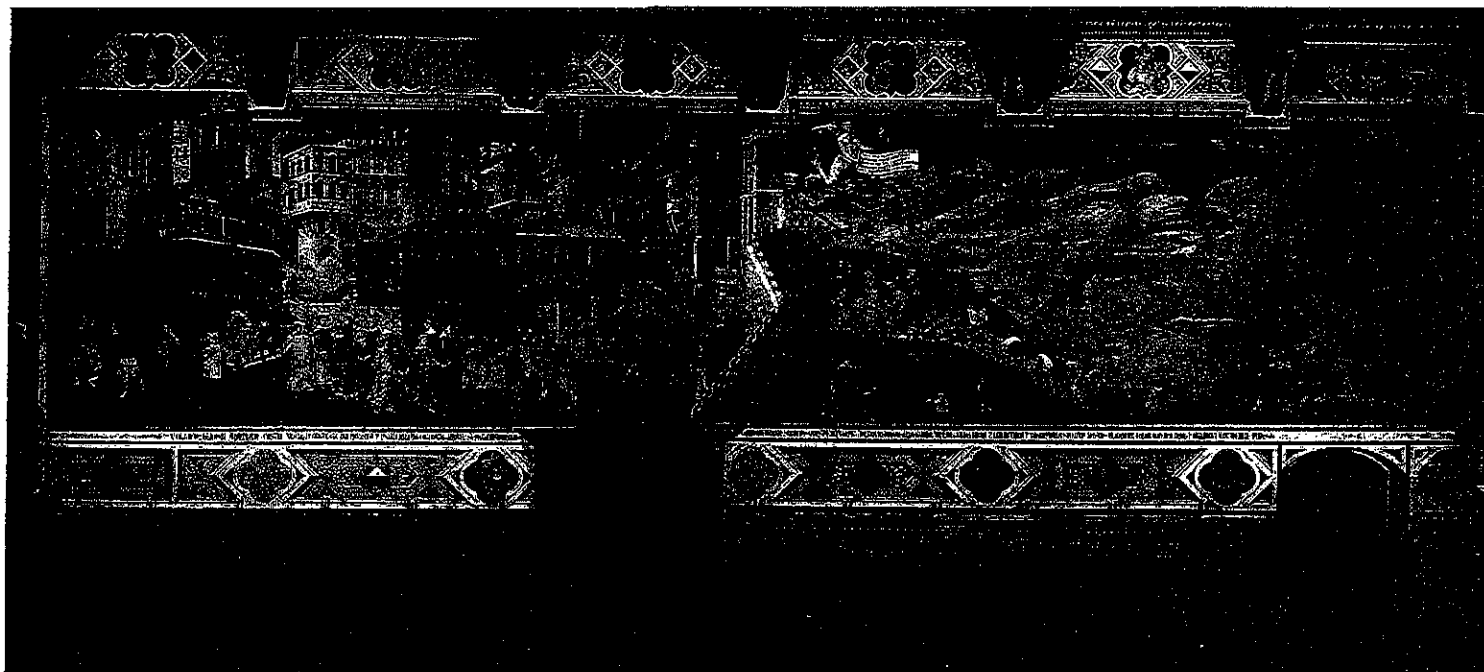
Whenever I tell someone that I am writing a paper on a tiny, unassuming birdcage in a medieval fresco, the follow-up question is always “Why?” At the time I was developing this topic, the United States was about to swear in its forty-fifth president. With modern politics in the back of mind, I was struck by the title of this fresco series, *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*. Even though this is a medieval piece of art, it grapples with a Great Question: What makes good and bad governments? That question is still trying to find its answer even today.

This paper is not only an excellent semiological art history thesis, but I feel it really speaks to the purpose of the Honors Program. It has encouraged me to think in different ways, across time and culture, and consider how a medieval man or woman was supposed to process such an image. This exploration of how security, peace, and safety is found in structure is a theme that resonates with a university like BYU—which has its students willingly sign an honor code. I intend to add to the academic conversation about such an iconic work of art by offering some new insights, but I also hope to add to the greater conversation about government and its relationship to its citizens. I feel that such a topic will not only add to the field of art history, but also showcase the kind-of thinking and perspective that is fostered in the Honors Program and at BYU.

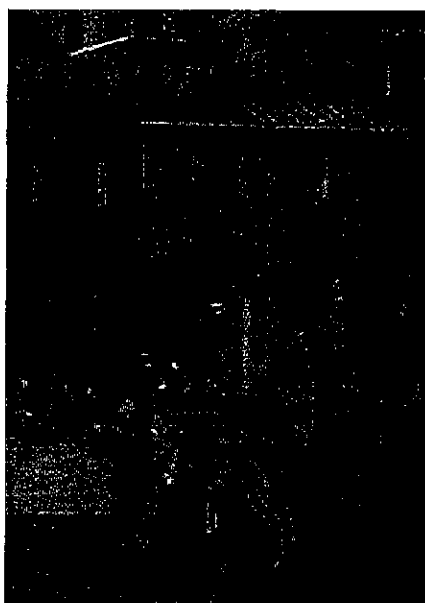
I. Preliminary Bibliography

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J. Art Work Related to Research



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Allegory of Good Government*, 1338-1339, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy.



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Allegory of Good Government* (close-up of birdcage), 1338-1339, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy.



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Allegory of Tyranny* (also known as *The Allegory of Bad Government*), 1338-1339, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy.