



# THE ORATORY OF SAN BERNARDINO AND THE MUSEO DIOCESANO DI ARTE SACRA

The new diocesan museum of sacred art is housed in space adjacent to the Oratory of San Bernardino, which was totally renovated in 1999 to display the exquisite collection of Sieneese art coming from churches in the diocese, giving a fundamental point of reference for the history of sacred art in the territory of Siena. The first room presents on the right-hand wall thirteenth and fourteenth-century panel paintings by the Tressa Master, Segna di Bonaventura, Bartolomeo Bulgarini, Luca di Tommè, Andrea Vanni, and Taddeo di Bartolo. We can also admire frescoes, originally in the nearby church of San Francesco, by Pietro and Ambrogio Lorenzetti; Ambrogio also painted the extraordinary Madonna del Latte, an image of the Virgin Mary nursing the Christ Child which is one of the outstanding pieces in the collection. Lorenzo di Pietro, known as “Vecchietta,” is represented by two versions of the dramatic scene of the Virgin Mary holding the dead Christ on her lap, one a fresco painting originally in the church of San Francesco, and the other a beautiful polychrome wooden sculpture from the church of San Donato which is the first example of Renaissance sculpture produced in Siena. Other panel paintings are by Sano di Pietro, Pellegrino da Mariano, and Neroccio di Bartolomeo. A vast anthology of sixteenth and seventeenth-century paintings fills the rest of the museum, extending to the little picture gallery in the so-called “garret.” Starting with Christ Carrying the Cross by Beccafumi and small panel paintings by Sodoma and Riccio, it encompasses works by Ventura Salimbeni and Alessandro Casolani as it proceeds to the ripe baroque age of Rutilio Manetti and Bernardino Mei. Small wooden sculptures of Saint Paul by Domenico di Niccolò dei Cori, The Virgin and Child by Antonio Federighi, and The Dead Christ by Urbano da Cortona, an antiphonary illuminated by Lippo Vanni, and precious altar fittings exemplifying the jeweler’s craft complete the display. But the heart of the museum is the ancient rectangular hall used as an oratory by the company of San Bernardino, with its coffered wooden ceiling decorated with heads of cherubs on a blue ground and above all its frescoes of stories from the life of Virgin Mary on the walls. Painted by Pacchia, Sodoma, and Domenico Beccafumi, these offer an extraordinary compendium of Sieneese painting of the first quarter of the sixteenth century. The suspended, rarefied atmosphere of the Oratory of San Bernardino makes it one of the most interesting and evocative places in Siena, providing an overview of Sieneese painting starting in the fourteenth century.