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The Birdcage as a Semiological Signifier for Submission in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Effects of Good Government

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Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s fresco cycle, The Allegory of Good and Bad Government (1339), decorates the walls of the “Room of Peace” (Salla della Pace) in the municipal headquarters of the medieval, Tuscan city state of Siena. Traditionally celebrated for their secular subject matter, these frescos employ countless carefully crafted allegories and representations of virtues and vices used to inspire Siena’s civic rulers to govern justly. Our project brought to light the importance of one small but critical object: the solitary birdcage hanging above the classroom in the center of the Good Government fresco. We argued that through its representation of containment and bondage, this birdcage functioned as a semiological signifier for submission to the city of Siena in civic, religious, and cultural contexts. Building upon previously conducted research done by my mentor and myself, I traveled to Siena to analyze the fresco series in situ, research medieval and Renaissance “documents of submission” at the Archivio di Stato, and discover Sienese artistic precedents for allegorizing political and religious submission, resulting in a publishable paper.

The Allegory of Good and Bad Government has generated a good deal of scholarship because of its importance in the history of Sienese art.1 Many attempts to delve deeper into its meaning have employed an iconographical approach in art history. Such an approach attempts to assign definitive meaning to an object using literary texts from that period. Our project, however, went beyond the limitations of Erwin Panofsky’s system of iconography and instead employed a semiological analysis, which considers the full range of meanings evoked by a signifier. Such an analysis allows the researcher to consider language, culture, historical events, and other visual media as points of reference in determining meaning. It also enables the interpretation to be more fluid. As the fresco series portrayed different aspects of Sienese culture—politics, religion, labor, economics, etc.—a semiological analysis seemed natural and enabled an exploration between these overlapping parts of society. For instance, Sienese politics were intricately connected to the civic and spiritual patronage of the Virgin Mary. There is a famous account of the city fathers placing the keys to the city on the altar of the cathedral, as if “locking” themselves into the care of the Virgin. Such accounts illustrate the overlap in themes of submission and bondage, resulting in a signifier with multiple meanings. We tracked these associations and allusions using historical documents, the rich tradition of Marian iconography in Siena, and a careful, formal analysis of the fresco cycle. Thus, the birdcage became its own allegory, a visual synecdoche or microcosm that echoes the larger allegory of Lorenzetti’s painting.

Based upon firsthand research in Siena and using social art history, we explored the relationship between the city and the contado, the surrounding countryside. Through our research, I was able 1 to comfortably suggest that the birdcage is the visual manifestation of “documents of submission,” historical oaths of fealty signed by the nobility of the contado. I also related religious teachings of willing submission to the fresco, citing the Virgin Mary and Christ as examples who typify this concept. I compared the neighboring Maestà fresco (1311-1317) by Simone Martini to Lorenzetti’s series, suggesting that religious context and culture cannot be separated from the work despite its secular subject matter. I was able to research old manuscripts and books from the era at the Archivo di Stato, which helped establish the long tradition of Mary as protector saint of the city. In addition, by examining medieval contemporary images of the Christ Child holding birds, I established a visual foundation and rhetoric of bird and cage imagery. Using another of Lorenzetti’s works, Maestà (1337-1338), I drew parallels between the young Christ and bird
iconography. This, coupled with the notion of willing submission, related back to the birdcage hanging in the Effects of Good Government composition. Finally, I completed a formal analysis of the fresco series and explored the visual relationship between the various detailed elements of the works.

Our project made an important contribution to the scholarship of one of the most iconic masterpieces of fourteenth-century Italy, but it also has special relevance for the values and mission of Brigham Young University. This religious institution—which requires its students to willingly sign an honor code—teaches that security, peace, and safety are found in willing submission. Ultimately, my faculty mentor, Dr. Elliott Wise, and I intended not only to add to the art historical conversation on this fresco, but to also contribute a fascinating, medieval perspective on faith and obedience to the greater conversation about government and its relationship with its citizens. By so doing, we hoped to broaden the critical thinking that is fostered in the BYU Humanities College on both academic and religious topics.


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