

A Little Guided Visit to the Pienza Cathedral

by Andrew Johnson

... with help from Pope Pius II Piccolomini

From the outside:

In February 1459 Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini returned to his native town of Corsignano, after many years abroad in capacities ranging from diplomat to secret agent to secretary to the Emperor, then as bishop and cardinal. He arrived home as the recently crowned Pope Pius II.

As he wrote in his unique memoirs*: *'A high mountain rises from the valley of the Orcia River, crowned by a plateau...There is a town of little repute but possessed of a healthful climate, excellent wine, and everything else that goes to sustain life...Here Pius was born and passed his childhood...He hoped to feel delight in seeing again his native soil; but he was disappointed, for most of those of his own generation had died and those who were left were feeble and crippled and like harbingers of death...(But) the people were delighted and in holiday mood over the presence of the Pope...Pius decided to build there a new church and a palace...that he might leave as lasting as possible a memorial of his birth.'*

He succeeded, as we see over five centuries later. By his death in 1464, Pius had rebuilt the town's medieval centre into a crown jewel of the Renaissance, and renamed the town after himself.

Dominating the lovely piazza is the cathedral church, with its magnificent facade of local travertine stone. Pius was delighted: *'The facade...is white and shining as marble...and richly decorated with columns and arches and semicircular niches...It had three beautifully proportioned doors, and a great eye like that of the Cyclops'*

Step inside:

Inside, you see the church very much as Pope Pius left it. Unusually, the central nave and two aisles are all the same height: *'This was according to the directions of Pius...It makes the church more graceful and lighter...The entire church with its chapels and altars is visible and is remarkable for the clarity of the light and the brilliance of the whole edifice... (The) windows when the sun shines admit so much light that worshippers in the church think they are not in a house of stone but of glass.'*

This was achieved for Pius by his architect Bernardo Gamberelli of Florence called Rossellino. Pius paid him a perhaps double-edged compliment: *'You did well, Bernardo, in lying to us about the expense involved in the work. If you had told the truth, you could never have induced us to spend so much money and neither this palazzo nor this church, the finest in all Italy, would now be standing.'*

Pius's pride is evident in the coat of arms displayed in the cathedral: the Piccolomini five crescent moons in a cross, with above them the papal tiara and crossed keys of the Church.

But the cathedral was built out over the slope of the hill, and its apse has subsided. A crack runs across the floor and up the transept walls, noticeable even at the church's dedication in 1462. The foundations were rebuilt in the early twentieth century, but monitoring continues.

'(The) entire church ends in a semicircular apse (which), like a crowned head, is divided into five small chapels...in which are fastened gold stars and they are painted the colour of the sky to imitate the heavens.'

'In the central chapel were the episcopal throne and the canons' seats, made of precious wood decorated with sculpture and designs in the work called intarsia.'

Famous today is the complete set of five painted altarpieces by the leading Sieneese painters of the day, together with the tabernacle of finely carved travertine probably made by Rossellino.

The Paintings...Beginning with the first painting in the right aisle:

You are standing beside the first of the painted altarpieces. Like the others, it was made in the latest Florentine Renaissance form -- a single unified space, almost square, framed by classical pilasters. But the golden background symbolizing heaven conforms with Sieneese tradition. The main subject of the altarpieces is the Christ child held by his mother Mary, flanked by four saints. In this altarpiece they are (from left to right) Saint Bernardino of Siena, Saint Anthony Abbot, Saint Francis (who travelled in the Val d'Orcia and one of whose Franciscan order churches is just down the street), and Saint Sabina. A personal touch is Bernardino's reading glasses folded into a case hanging from his belt. This altarpiece is by Giovanni di Paolo, who knew Bernardino. In the lunette above, Giovanni portrays what would have been seen as a vividly modern dead Christ, mourned by Mary. The tiny stones in the almost lunar landscape seem like pearls.

Directly opposite, across the church, you see an altarpiece by a younger painter, Matteo di Giovanni. The saints here are identified as Jerome, with his red cardinal's robes and tame lion; Martin; Nicholas with three golden balls representing his charitable gifts; and Augustine. Augustine has the face of Pope Pius. Martin is thought to have the face of Pius's friend Nicholas of Cusa, a renowned philosopher. You may note the background is reddish: this is the original base colour over which was laid gold leaf that has flaked off over time. From this vantage point, you may look back at the first altarpiece and see how the golden background makes the saints stand out.

The right transept chapel altarpiece is also by Matteo di Giovanni. Flanking the Madonna and Child are saints Catherine of Alexandria, Matthew, Bartholomew, and Lucy. They are identified by the instruments of their martyrdom: Catherine's spiked wheel, Bartholomew's knife, and Lucy by a plate of eyes since hers were gruesomely plucked out. In the lunette above, Matteo demonstrates his knowledge of avant garde style in 1462 by using for the men whipping Christ postures taken from very recent paintings of Hercules in Florence.

In the other transept chapel is an altarpiece by Sano di Pietro. The saints are identified as Mary Magdalene, holding the jar of ointment with which she anointed Christ's feet, the apostles Philip and James, and Anne the mother of Mary. James, holding a pilgrim's staff, refers to Pienza's proximity to the old Via Francigena pilgrimage route from northern Europe to Rome.

The final altarpiece, in the left apse chapel, is often considered the cathedral's masterpiece. It is by Lorenzo di Pietro called Vecchietta, the leading Sienese painter and sculptor of his day. He identifies himself in a Latin inscription as 'sculptor', just as elsewhere he identified himself on sculptures as a painter -- a Renaissance joke or perhaps a form of advertising. This altarpiece's unique form presents the Assumption of Mary to heaven at her death, accompanied by music-making and dancing angels, all under a triumphal arch. Below, Saint Thomas receives Mary's belt as a relic. The cathedral is dedicated to the Assumption of Mary. The saints are Agatha (holding on a platter her own breasts, cut off as part of her martyrdom); Pope Piccolomini's namesake Pope Pius I; a papal saint identified as Calixtus the namesake of Pius' predecessor as pope; and Catherine of Siena whom Pius canonized.

Vecchietta has given Saint Pius the visage of Pope Pius, Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini whose lasting memorial is this his cathedral, in his town of Pienza.

As you leave the church, on your left is the handsome Palazzo Piccolomini.

Around to your right, below the bell-tower and down a set of stairs, is the lower church of Saint John the Baptist, with a beautiful baptismal font carved by Rossellino: as Pope Pius wrote, *‘Three large windows let in ample light...The very aspect of the church rouses emotion and a devout reverence in all who enter.’*

On your right is the bishop’s palace which houses an extraordinary small museum entered from the main street, Corso Rossellino: here you will find a treasure of Renaissance works of art, many donated by Pope Pius himself to his cathedral.



* Quotations from Pope Piccolomini are from *Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, Secret Memoirs of a Renaissance Pope: The Commentaries of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini Pope Pius II: An Abridgement*, translated by Florence A. Gragg, ed. Leona C. Gabel (Folio Society, 1988), Book IX (July to September 1462), pp. 274-281.