

## **Brandeis in Siena: Painting and Art History in Italy**

**Evelyn Beliveau, Class of 2019**

This summer, I attended Brandeis in Siena, a Brandeis University program exploring early Renaissance art at the Siena Art Institute. Between July 11th and August 18th, I lived and studied with nine other students in the city of Siena, a UNESCO World Heritage site with preserved Medieval and Gothic buildings. The program provided an opportunity to discover the history of the region, as well as contemporary Tuscan culture, through the lens of art and art-making.

Formally, the program consisted of two academic courses, but it was much more than that. The art history and studio art courses were closely linked to each other, to site visits in cities around Tuscany, and to our everyday experiences in Siena. We explored developments in painting, sculpture, and architecture from the Romanesque and Gothic periods in the 13th-14th centuries through the beginnings of the Renaissance in the 15th century. In the studio art course, we took up the glazing technique used by Renaissance oil painters, which involves a monochromatic under-painting with color applied afterward in thin layers; we used this technique on still life and landscape paintings, figure paintings from the model, and copies from master works. Excursions during and outside of class time allowed us to see artworks created with the same techniques that we were learning in the studio, as well as works which marked major milestones in art history. These site visits took us to the Pinacoteca Nazionale of Siena, the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, and many churches and architectural monuments in Siena, Florence, and San Gimignano. We also had the opportunity to view contemporary art at Galleria Continua in San Gimignano and at the Venice Biennale, an incredible event featuring more than a hundred contemporary artists from dozens of countries around the world. These instances prompted reflection about art's changing role from the period of the Renaissance we were studying to the modern day. Overall, the site visits and course materials blended with our immersion in Siennese daily life to provide a culturally intensive experience.

This experience has had a profound effect on me. I encountered art in a way that I rarely do; visits to museums and churches felt at once like personal experiences of the artworks, with time to reflect on the profundity of each piece or location, and like class time, with details of the context and significance delivered on-site by knowledgeable professors. The stories of these works will stay with me for a long time. It is particularly powerful to think of the artists working in Florence in the 1420s and after, who were conscious that they were creating a new visual language—a language of humanism, a new respect for the human body and for Classical ideas, a new conception of space and humanity's role in the world. These artists knew they were making breakthroughs in the realism of painting and sculpture or in the intentionality of architecture, and they cared deeply about the precedents they were setting. To walk from the art history class into the painting studio and work with the same techniques, in the same settings as these artists was profound in itself. We were just as active in the process of creating art as we were in learning about it. Furthermore, the history we learned about in class was visible in our daily life, walking around Siena; we were able to visit the Siena Cathedral, a beautiful mix of Romanesque and Gothic architecture, during lunch breaks or glance up at an archetypal Renaissance palazzo on our way home from class. In terms of my personal growth, the program has influenced my academic goals as well as my perspective on art. I am more certain than ever of my love of painting and my path as a Visual Art major, and I expect that concepts from the studio course this summer will directly inform my work in Visual Art courses at Bowdoin. The art history class has had just as strong an effect; my new understanding of the context of the oil painting tradition will give me a more nuanced perspective on my studio work, but I've also realized that I am passionate about art history for its own sake. My studies this summer, therefore, will affect my trajectory at Bowdoin and beyond.

Brandeis in Siena was an intensive, profound experience which broadened my understanding of art and art's connection to specific locations and contexts. I fully experienced the cultural environment of Siena; I learned in great detail the developments in art production which led up to the blossoming of the Renaissance; and I created oil paintings intimately linked through subject matter and style to the location in which I was working. My time in Italy was incredibly valuable and will make its mark on my academic career at Bowdoin.

**Faculty Mentor: Mark Wethli**

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