

Simone Martini: radiance and invention in 14th-century Italy



Saint John The Evangelist, Simone Martini (c.1284-1344), Siena, 1320,
Tempera on Wood 41.7 X 30.3 cm, the Barber Institute of Fine Arts,
Birmingham.



Transcript

Hello and welcome to our latest Tuesday Talk, part of a series of podcasts given by staff and students at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, an art gallery and concert hall on the University of Birmingham's Edgbaston campus. My name is Becca Randle, Learning & Engagement Coordinator at the Barber. Today I'm going to be talking about a 700 year old work by Simone Martini, currently away at the National Gallery for conservation. This Christian devotional painting of *Saint John the Evangelist* speaks of the unique nature of spiritual artworks.

Devotional images such as this developed from the Byzantine tradition of icon painting. Made from at least the seventh century onwards, an icon was an image of Christ or holy figure painted on a small panel and used as an object of devotion in the Eastern Church. Today the term icon has evolved to refer to an object of fame and importance or, more recently a digital symbol to access software. Both of these meanings hint at the importance of the figures depicted in religious icons and their use as a portal to another realm.

When looking at devotional art works, it's easy to forget that what we see in front of us was originally made for a vastly different purpose and meaning to the secular images that are the norm today. Much like religious artworks outside Europe, they would have been worshipped at home or in churches and were believed to have the ability to heal the sick, answer prayers and provide protection.

Simone's *Saint John the Evangelist* was painted in 1320, as is recorded by the original inscription on the parapet below the saint. It was one of the first works of art acquired by the Barber, in 1938, and usually hangs in the Green or Renaissance Gallery, surrounded by other European artworks all made before 1600. Somewhere between the size of an A4 and A3 piece of paper, it originally formed the right-hand panel of conjoined set of three - a triptych. The other panels would have shown the dead Christ in the center, with the grieving Virgin Mary to the left. Even with the somewhat worn fragile gold gilding, the image is still testimony to Simone's painstaking process of layered embellishment.

Saint John the Evangelist, thought to be the author of the Gospel of John in the New Testament, wears a bright blue tunic with swathes of deep red material draped around him. Looking closer, the clothing has fine gold detailing on collars and cuffs. He clasps his hands in front of his body in prayer. His face is tilted left and is highly expressive, his brow furrowed with concern or anguish, his lips pursed and his head tilted downward. Behind his head, we can just make out an incised halo, punched with a special tool into the gold-leaf. The image is surrounded by an elaborate incised frame, which is part of the same panel. Below the saint, the date of the work can be read in Roman numerals. The more we look, the more we can see signs of the original splendour of this work of art.

According to the chronicler Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*, first published in 1550, Simone Martini was born in 1284 in Siena, Italy. During Simone's life time, Siena was a republic, consisting of the city of Siena and the surrounding territory of Tuscany, the state was one of major powers in medieval Italy. Simone was an innovative artist; influenced by Giotto (Florentine, c.1265-1337) and his school in Florence, he broke away from the prevailing highly stylised art typical of Siena to produce more realistic artworks, giving care to expression, sentiment and detail.

Simone's large double-sided *Maestà* altarpiece in the Siennese seat of government, the Palazzo Pubblico, is considered to be one of his earliest surviving works. It was a notable commission which would likely have been given to Simone after he had already gained some acclaim. His reputation was not confined to Siena, for in around 1317 he was commissioned by the Angevin court in Naples to create *Saint Louis of Toulouse Crowning Robert of Anjou, King of Naples*, now in the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples. This work is celebrated for Simone's characteristically skilful treatment of the fabrics and textiles, especially silks, weaves and new patterns from the East, which were highly prized in Italian society.

In 1997 the Barber commissioned Icon painter Peter Murphy and Jeweller and craftsperson Peter Slusarczyk to produce a replica of Simone's *Saint John*, along with recreations of the other two panels in the triptych, and a step-by-step panel detailing the stages of the authentic icon making

process. Even though the original painting is in good condition, this replica reveals the vibrancy of the pigments and the luminosity of the gold leaf which the work would have possessed centuries ago.

Looking at the replica it's much easier to imagine the effect the work may have had on contemporary worshippers. The triptych could be folded in two places, for transportation, for use by those travelling. When used for devotion, it would have been stood up among lit candles, the light reflecting off the gold leaf and the holy figures transformed into incandescent objects of prayer. The experience would have been profoundly transcendental for those who encountered this work 700 years ago.

Simone and other Italian artists creating similar devotional artworks would have used poplar wood as the base panel as it was readily available in Siena. Then, a layer of open weave fabric such as cloth or muslin would be glued to the wooden panel. This was to provide an even and stable surface. Several layers of white gesso were then applied. Gesso is a powdered white chalky material which is mixed with animal skin glue to make a creamy paste. This was then sanded and polished.

The design was drawn on this smooth white surface using charcoal and ink and areas to be gilded were painted with layers of bole, a greasy red clay. This gives the gold a surface to stick to, and a rich warm colour. Gold leaf was beaten from coins, to almost a hair's thickness, and then applied using a 'gilder's tip' that is used to pick up single leaves and laid carefully onto moistened bole. The gold leaf was gently polished using a smoothing tool, a process called burnishing. The gilded surface was then decorated with incised lines and punching using specialist tools. These techniques caused the panel to shimmer under candlelight.

The Barber's painting of Saint John was made with egg tempera, medium or type of paint made from natural pigments mixed with egg yolk that was used in art from the first century C.E. The pigments used vary in colour, brightness and availability – and therefore preciousness. The red paint used for Saint John's cloak is made from vermillion pigment, often made from crushed cochineal beetles. The blue of his gown is ultramarine, pigment ground from lapis lazuli stone, which was shipped to Europe from the Afghanistan region at great expense. Both of these pigments

were among the most highly prized and expensive and were reserved for the most revered Saints and holy figures.

In contrast to oil paint, which wasn't in widespread use in Southern European painting until the late fifteenth century, egg tempera paint is not easily blended. Instead tempera is painted in layers, allowing the first layer to dry and building up further layers to increase intensity of colour. To achieve realistic skin tones, artists would layer different coloured paints, starting with a green layer made from copper, to counteract any harsh red tones. Although not effecting our Saint Jon, as some tempura artworks age, the top layers of paint can degrade at different speeds, revealing the green layer and making these antique figures appear seasick. Egg tempera, with its layered qualities continued to be used even in the twentieth century by a few artists, for example Andrew Wyeth in his most famous work Christina's World, 1948, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Later in Simone's career, from around 1330, he developed more techniques for rendering fabrics and patterns. These included 'sgraffito', whereby bole and gold leaf are layered over with tempera paint, then scraped away to reveal the shining metal beneath, suggesting detailed illuminated patterns. This technique, like the precious fabrics and pigments, originated in Persia, modern day Iran, in the production of pottery. Another technique may have been influenced by Simone's study of oriental gold thread textiles, whereby he granulated the metal base to give texture to the surface.

By 1335, Simone was at the height of his fame. He moved to Avignon, in southern France, where he was commissioned to produce frescoes for the Cathedral and work on the new Papal Palace. There he met and created works for the Italian poet, scholar and art critic Francesco Petrarca, known as Petrarch, including a portrait of his beloved Laura. Although now lost, Petrarch wrote a sonnet about the portrait and his emotional response to Simone's artistry is testament to his years of striving towards ethereal creations that inspire deep feelings:

*with others who had a reputation for that art,
a thousand years will not see the least part*

*of the beauty that my conquered heart had in me.
But of course my Simone was in Heaven
whence this gentle woman departs;
there he saw it, and painted it in papers,
to prove her beautiful face down here.*

Simone died in Avignon in 1344 aged about 60, after creating a style that was influential across Europe well into the fifteenth century. *Saint John the Evangelist* gives us an insight into the experience of religious art, and Italian painting in an era when trade and artistic traditions from across the world cross-pollinated. The gold-ground panels hanging in the Renaissance Gallery can be easily overlooked, but these artworks communicated and for some even embodied divinity, requiring astonishing artistic ingenuity, skill and devotion.

Thank you very much for listening, and thank you to Jack Davies for composing and playing the guitar music that introduces and ends these weekly talks. There will be another talk in two weeks' time by one of my colleagues, so please do come back then if you would like to hear more.

Speaker Information

Becca Randle joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as Learning and Engagement Coordinator in 2016. She works on a variety of projects including contributing to the teaching of modules for University of Birmingham undergraduate courses, the production of learning resources, workshops, research and public events. She also programmes and delivers on the Barber's Families and Schools programmes.

Having recently completed a postgraduate degree in Museum and Gallery Education at University College London, Becca's research interests include the pedagogical and social function of the museum and art gallery, particularly, foregrounding hidden histories.

Becca is also a West Midlands Area Representative for Engage, the National Association of Gallery Education. Prior to the Barber, Becca worked at Ikon gallery, Birmingham, as well as in community arts and alternative educational provision for young people.

External Links

[BBC 4 Radio Series; the creation of an icon](#)

[Simone Martini, The National Gallery of Art, U.S.A](#)

[Peter Murphy, Icon Painter Website](#)

C. S. Hoeniger, Cloth of Gold and Silver: Simone Martini's Techniques for Representing Luxury Textiles 991, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1991), pp. 154-162, The University of Press on behalf of the International Centre of Medieval Art.

[A. Lee, The look\(s\) of Love: Petrarch, Simone Martini and the ambiguities of fourteenth-century portraiture, University of Warwick.](#)