

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

Siena, City of the Virgin: Illustrated
by Titus Burckhardt*

The Italian city of Siena—the City of the Virgin—is a remarkable jewel that reached the height of splendor during the Middle Ages. It is the home of St. Bernardino (1380–1444) and St. Catherine (1347–1380), is known for its architectural beauty and its religious devotion, and has been recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The art historian and philosopher of religion Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), who explores the city with us in this book, was one of the 20th century’s most renowned experts on sacred art.

Burckhardt informs us that this book is about the “destiny of a town in which the spiritual development of the Christian Western world from the Middle Ages up to the present day is exemplified.”¹ There are continual references in this work to the Holy Virgin, or Mary, the Mother of God, as “She represents a never-failing, indestructible source of maternal power to be found at one and the same time in the depths of the human soul and in the whole of the world itself.”² It was the lofty intellectual and spiritual ambiance of the Middle Ages that gave birth to

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos — Monterey, Calif., USA
e-mail: samuelbendeck@yahoo.com ▪ ORCID: 0000-0001-7356-6775

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¹ *Ibid.*, ix.

² *Ibid.*

the marvel that is Gothic architecture. This Gothic architecture has been impeccably preserved in Sienna. Burckhardt writes, “No other city has retained in equal measure the harmony and severe purity of the architecture of those times.”³

Burckhardt was infused with the Platonic doctrine that “beauty is the splendor of the true,” providing a depth that transcends mere scholarly or theoretical approaches as it delves into the very nature of things and captures, as it were its transpersonal essence at the heart of all sapiential traditions:

In order to understand a culture, it is necessary to love it, and one can only do this on the basis of the universal and timeless values that it carries within it. These values . . . meet not only the physical, but also the spiritual needs of man; without them his life has no meaning. . . . Nothing brings us into such immediate contact with a given culture as a work of art which, within that culture, represents, as it were a “center.” This may be a sacred image, a temple, a cathedral. . . . Such works invariably express an essential quality, which neither a historical account, nor an analysis of social and economic conditions, can capture. A work of art . . . can, without any mental effort on our part, convey to us immediately and “existentially” an intellectual truth or a spiritual attitude, and thereby grant us all manner of insights into the nature of the culture concerned.⁴

The interdependence of the human and the city is crucial, as Burckhardt recalls when he writes of “the true meaning of a *civitas*, a city, that derives its measure not from the machine age but from man, and its order from the spiritual outlook of a human community.”⁵ The correspondence between the human and the cosmos is akin to the transcendence and immanence of the Divine, as St. Catherine of Siena suggests when she compares the city to the image of the human soul:

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

[T]he city is the image of the soul, the surrounding walls being the frontier between the outward and the inward life. The gates are the faculties or senses connecting the life of the soul with the outer world. The intellect, according to the saint, questions each one who approaches the gates whether he be friend or foe, thus watching over the security of the city. Living springs of water rise within it; gardens lie protected by its walls, and in the centre, where beats the heart, stands the Holy Sanctuary.⁶

Siena itself is like a “little universe” consisting of many facets representing the “body, soul, and spirit of Man.”⁷ This tripartite division includes both the human microcosm and the macrocosm. Through metaphysics, the principle of Unity that both transcends and includes diversity in all its degrees and modes can be known. Burckhardt writes:

Hierarchy is the Unity revealing itself in multiplicity through a differentiation which yet does not divide, being of a qualitative nature, so that each separate element, according to that particular character and rank that belongs to it, still remains an expression of the total order. In like manner light, broken up by a prism, scatters its manifold colours yet remains, despite all this store of wealth, a perfect and undivided whole.⁸

The medieval world consisted of four social orders or castes made up of different psychological types to maintain its natural balance. These castes have, as Burckhardt clarifies, “nothing to do with different levels of wealth”⁹ or economic standing as is often erroneously assumed. The first is the priesthood, which “is the only calling which is not inherited, at least this is so in the Christian world. A man becomes a priest as a result of an inward ‘call’.”¹⁰ In contrast, the second, the nobility, “among whom leaders are chosen, is founded on con-

⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

sciously purposeful character and on initiative.”¹¹ The third consists of the “merchants, craftsmen, and independent peasants.”¹² The fourth is largely made up “of those who by nature tend to place all their thought in bodily well-being, and who only by giving service are able to find a place in the great structure of social life.”¹³ These social orders correspond to the elements of fire, air, water, and earth.

The city is also the home of two remarkable medieval saints known to Western Christianity. In a state of spiritual ecstasy or union, St. Catherine of Siena heard from the actual mouth of Christ: “I am He who is and thou art she who is not.”¹⁴ It is through the Divine grace that we can know ourselves and the Godhead and find what Burckhardt calls our “own abiding reality”¹⁵ *in divinis* as “the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9).

St. Bernardino of Siena made devotion to the Name of Jesus accessible to everyone, especially through his use of the holy monogram consisting of the first three letters, “IHS,” of the Greek Name of Jesus. He expressed that “the Name of Jesus is Origin without origin” and that it is “as worthy of praise as God Himself,” and again: “Everything that God has done for the salvation of the world lies hidden in the Name of Jesus.”¹⁶ Burckhardt comments on St. Bernardino’s efforts to make this spiritual method of ejaculatory prayer, or invocation, available to all: “The holy man of Siena thus made one of the most inward treasures of contemplative tradition outward and popular, doing so deliberately with the object that for many, through its compelling power, it might become

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

inward again.”¹⁷ The saints and sages of all of the world’s religions have a corresponding spiritual method, as Burckhardt notes: “Indeed, not only in Christianity but also in the mysticism of all other religions this concentration on a divine or on a divine-human Name . . . plays a significant part.”¹⁸

Burckhardt explores the sacred art of the Christian tradition that was crystallized in the mediaeval world. He points not only to its rise in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, but also to the fall of Siena as it “suffered a decline during the Renaissance.”¹⁹ It was in the post-medieval world of the Renaissance that “art” became disconnected from the sacred, no longer reflecting the metaphysical principles of Christianity. He speaks to the impact that the loss of “the eye of the heart, that inward spiritual eye of the soul”²⁰ had on the traditional world, as “Renaissance rationalism had . . . undermined the capacity of men’s souls to sense the imponderables of spiritual reality which a mere symbol is able to convey.”²¹

This masterly book is stunningly illustrated and surveys the history, culture, and spirituality of the Italian city of Siena, known in the medieval world as the “City of the Virgin.” Burckhardt invites readers to immerse themselves in the architectural beauty and devotional splendor of this remarkable city through the medium of color photographs, maps, and reproductions of original manuscripts. Although years have passed since this volume was initially published, provoking readers to ponder its relevance for the present day, it has nonetheless endured and it is as relevant today as it will be tomorrow, as Burckhardt’s aim was to recover the essential principles underlying all sacred art, exemplify-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

ing what is beyond emergent trends and passing fads. Burckhardt upheld the following wish for Siena: “It is therefore to be hoped that widespread interest will be aroused . . . so that help may be forthcoming to preserve one of the most beautiful monuments of Western culture from destruction before it is too late,”²² and yet he knew decisively that “My Kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).



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SUMMARY

Siena, Italy—a UNESCO World Heritage Site—was the home of St. Bernardino and St. Catherine and is known for its architectural beauty and its religious devotion, particularly to the Virgin Mary. Sienna was regarded in the medieval era as “The City of the Virgin.” The art historian and philosopher of religion Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), who explores the city with the reader of this book, was one of the 20th century’s most renowned experts on sacred art. The interdependence of the human and the city is crucial, as it is akin to the correspondence between the human and the cosmos or the transcendence and immanence of the Divine. St. Catherine of Siena compares the city to the image of the human soul. Siena itself is like a “little universe” with many facets representing the tripartite structure of the human being, consisting of Spirit, soul, and body. This masterly book is stunningly illustrated and surveys the history, culture, and spirituality of the Italian city of Siena, which provides the metaphysical keys to comprehend at its deepest roots the architectural beauty and devotional splendor of this remarkable city.

KEYWORDS

St. Catherine of Siena, Siena, metaphysics, mysticism, religion, Christianity, Catholicism, sacred art, art history.

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Burckhardt, Titus. *Siena, City of the Virgin: Illustrated*. Foreword by William Stoddart. Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom, 2008.

²² *Ibid.*, 123.