

MISCHIEVOUS GLORY AT SIENA CATHEDRAL

“A few minutes walk west of Piazza del Campo, Siena’s Duomo is beyond question one of the finest Gothic cathedrals in Italy.”
— Fodor’s Italy

Today it seems almost a sin to walk upon the floor of the *Duomo di Siena*, in the Tuscan region of Italy.

This is not because the *pavimentazione* of this majestic cathedral in the historic village of Siena is necessarily holy ground. Rather it’s because it feels almost immoral to smudge the print of a sneaker, a boot, or even a sandal onto the centuries-old, medieval marble masterpieces created by Domenico di Pace Beccafumi and others, and inlaid into the base of this architectural work of art.

Still, perhaps we are getting ahead of ourselves. Perhaps it's better to begin this story a few centuries before our time, back on an almost-forgotten day somewhere between 1490 and 1500 A.D., when Signore Beccafumi was yet a young boy and still unaware of the future greatness that awaited him in the days to come.

If the legends are to be believed, Domenico di Pace Beccafumi was a quick-witted child with exceptional artistic talent and a fondness for practical jokes. When he became apprenticed to the Sienese artist, Mechero, young Domenico found his days filled with hard work and studies, leaving him longing for the time when he could use charcoal to mimic anything he saw, and then race away from his drawings to play in the cramped streets of Siena with his friends.

Well, you can take the boy out of mischief, but you can't take mischief out of the boy. One day Domenico's master sent him to buy fish from the market. Upon returning, the child was so entranced by the sparkling colors and textures of the fish in his basket that he came up with a sneaky idea. He gathered his painting supplies and brought them to the stone steps that rose from the street entrance of his home to the kitchen above. Then, with careful delight, he painted glistening, rainbow-colored portraits of the fish onto each of the steps in his home.

When Mechero returned a few hours later, he was surprised to find Domenico sitting idly at the entrance, hiding a grin on his impish little face. The master looked inside and saw a cascade of his dinner strewn across the dirty steps! His anger was immediate and fierce. He berated the boy for his carelessness at spilling their fish all over the ground and, even worse, leaving them to rot on the stairs. Mechero then huffed his way inside the door and reached down to scoop up the fish on the first stair. Only then did he discover why Domenico was laughing. The fish on the ground had been painted with such care and realism that even the master artist had not recognized they were fake until he had bent down to pick one up!

Looking back now, Domenico's little practical joke appears to have been preparation for the artist's life work inside the historic Siena Cathedral. You see, it was only a few decades later, roughly from 1517-1544, when Beccafumi became the lead artist who directed the creation of the bulk of the now-legendary marble mosaic masterpieces that spread from wall to wall across the floor of the Siena Cathedral.

For the uninitiated, this *Duomo di Siena* has been

around since the 13th century in the Middle Ages, a testament to both faith and the timeless artistry of the Italian Renaissance. Although this remarkable sanctuary features artistic flourishes all the way up to the top of its golden dome, it is the floor that commands the greatest attention from any who walk through its doors. Stretching underfoot from edge to edge, across the expanse of this cathedral is an intricate, ornate presentation of stories told in cuts and colors of mosaic marble artwork.

There are 56 scenes in all represented here, depicting sibyls (prophetesses), Old Testament events, allegories, and religious and civic symbols. Each of these scenes was painstakingly created by artists sculpting pieces of colored marble and then placing them, piece by piece, in splashes of expression within the floor. In fact, more than 40 artists collectively spent almost 200 years to complete the walkways of Siena's *duomo*.

No doubt, the most influential hand of all the artists who touched this monument belonged to Domenico di Pace Beccafumi – the mischievous boy who once painted fishes on steps to fool his master. Beccafumi dedicated the bulk of his adult life – almost 30 years – to crafting art for the floor of the Siena Cathedral. If you are one of the lucky ones who visits this place on your next trip to Tuscany, you too will marvel at his work displayed in *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, in many of the *Scenes from the Life of Elijah*, and most noticeably in the huge, 26-foot frieze of *Moses Striking Water from the Rock*.

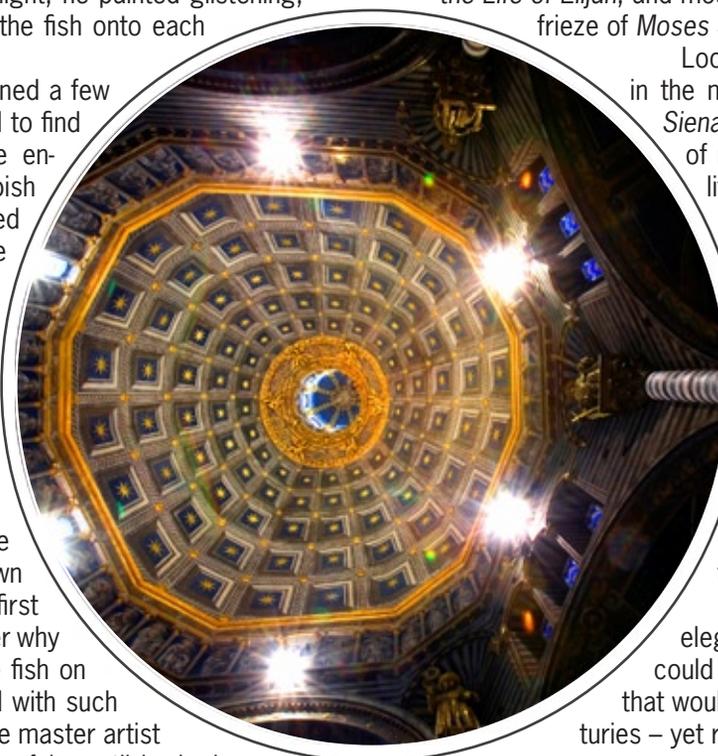
Looking on these now-classic visions in the marble flooring of the *Duomo di Siena*, one has to wonder what kind of man it would take to commit his life to sculpt excellence into the intricate details of an artistic masterpiece such as this – knowing all the while that multitudes of unwashed masses would simply trudge across his art on their way to other parts of the cathedral.

It seems fitting now to remember that this master artist was once just a playful little boy with a grin on his face and a trick up his sleeve.

And it seems somehow elegant that this mischievous child could grow up to create works of glory that would be trampled underfoot for centuries – yet revered for all time. ●

The Duomo di Siena is open to tourists Monday through Saturday, from 10:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., and Sunday afternoon from 1:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is free.

“You can take the boy out of mischief, but you can't take mischief out of the boy...”



Pictured is the interior dome of the Duomo di Siena

THE CHIANTI WINE QUIZ

Think you know the tastiest secrets of the Italy's primo fruit of the vine? Then take this little quiz to test your Chianti smarts – and work up a thirst!

1. What's most important in determining the quality of a bottle of Chianti wine?
 - a) Where the grapes are grown within the Chianti region of Tuscany.
 - b) The type of oak and size of barrels used to age the wine.
 - c) The percentages of the different varieties of grapes used in the wine.
 - d) All of the above.
2. Roughly speaking, how many producers of Chianti wine are active in Tuscany today?
 - a) 4500
 - b) 6000
 - c) 7000
 - d) 9500
3. About how long has Chianti wine been produced in Italy?
 - a) 1000 years
 - b) 700 years
 - c) 500 years
 - d) 50 years
4. Over the years, Chianti has been served in both a squat, straw-covered bottle and in a Bordeaux-shaped bottle. Which of these Chianti bottling styles is more prevalent today?
 - a) Straw-covered bottle
 - b) Bordeaux-style bottle
 - c) Neither
5. True or False: All Chianti wines must use a minimum of 75% Sangiovese grapes as their base.
 - a) True
 - b) False
 - c) What's a Sangiovese?
6. Chianti Classico wine separates itself from "ordinary" Chianti wines by virtue of stricter production guidelines, a more localized growing region, more flexibility in grape varieties, and a slightly higher alcoholic content. What logo is affixed to all bottles of Chianti Classico to distinguish them from "ordinary" Chianti?
 - a) A red chicken
 - b) A blue cow
 - c) A brown goat
 - d) A black rooster
7. True or False: Chianti wine is best when drunk all by itself.
 - a) True
 - b) False
8. The finer-quality wine blend, Chianti Colli Senesi is produced in what sub-zone of the Chianti region?
 - a) Florence
 - b) Siena
 - c) Pisa
 - d) Arezzo
9. Including three months in the bottle, the higher-quality Chianti Classico Riserva wines must be aged for how long?
 - a) 12 months minimum
 - b) 19 months minimum
 - c) 24 months minimum
 - d) 27 months minimum
10. Right now, a nice glass of Chianti wine sounds good.
 - a) True
 - b) Yes
 - c) That's right
 - d) OK by me

Scoring:

- 9 or 10 correct: Drink a toast to your insight and knowledge – You're Chianti royalty!
- 6 to 8 correct: Good solid effort – feel free to act like a Chianti snob among your American friends.
- 3 to 5 correct: Ah well, even the best-bred wines sometimes fall flat. Better luck next time!
- 2 or less correct: Didn't score so well? No worries – you can enjoy a glass of Chianti with dinner anyway. (Just tell people you're "researching" for the next quiz!)

Answers:

1. d, all of the above – all of these factors significantly influence the taste of the finished wine.
2. c, 7000
3. b, 700 years – although some suspect it may have been produced for some time before it showed up in the historical record
4. b, Bordeaux-shaped bottle – the straw-covered bottle defined Chianti for decades, but in an attempt to upscale their product, most Chianti producers now use the Bordeaux bottle.
5. true
6. d, a black rooster
7. False, Chianti's acidity makes it taste best when paired with foods like tomatoes or rich meats.
8. b, Siena
9. d, 27 months minimum
10. a, b, c, or d – all are correct answers!