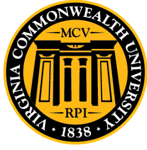

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# Medieval Bologna: Art for a University City

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# Medieval Bologna: Art for a University City

***Frist Museum of Art***
Nashville, Tennessee

**November 5, 2021–January 30, 2022**

**Figure 1.** Entrance of *Medieval Bologna: Art for a University City*, Frist Art Museum, Nashville, Tennessee. Photograph: John Schweikert.

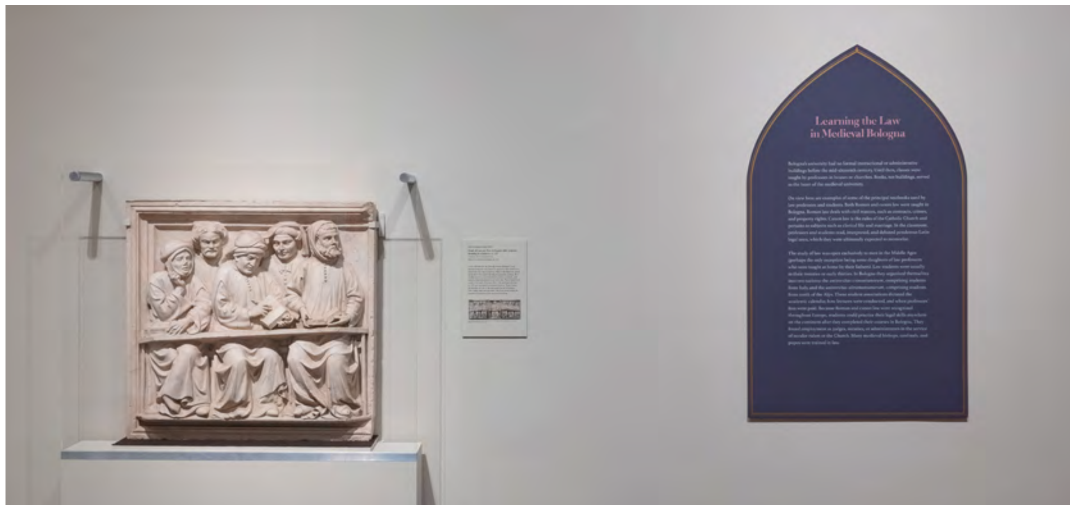


**Figure 2, top.** Installation view of *Medieval Bologna* exhibition, with illuminated codices and folios in foreground and photograph of Basilica di San Petronio on the wall in background. Photograph: John Schweikert.

**Figure 3, above.** Installation view of *Medieval Bologna* exhibition, with marble relief from tomb of Lorenzo Pini, ca. 1397, by Paolo di Bonaiuto. Photograph: John Schweikert.

Bologna's three nicknames, "La Rossa, La Grassa, La Dotta"—"The Red, The Fat, The Learned"—allude to a rich history in architecture, gastronomy, and education. Art historians, however, have perennially overlooked the city in favor of better-known centers of medieval and early modern Italian art production, such as Florence, Rome, and Venice. *Medieval Bologna: Art for a University City*, curated by Trinita Kennedy at the Frist Art Museum, skillfully addressed this undervaluing of Bologna's artistic heritage by bringing to light the specific visual concerns of medieval Bolognese art/artists and their connection with experiences outside the workshop (fig. 1). Through its accessible focus on art as part of this city's medieval life, together with objects' iconographic and stylistic characteristics, the exhibition offered valuable experiences for both art historians and more casual visitors. As the first exhibition in the United States dedicated to the art of Bologna, c. 1200–1400, the substantial list of American lenders, augmented by Bologna's Museo Civico, demonstrated the widespread—if neglected—presence of Bolognese art in this country's collections.[1]

Interspersed throughout four galleries, large-scale photographs of key monuments and buildings in Bologna emphasized a sense of place as much as possible within the museum's spaces (fig. 2). Bologna's university, the oldest in Europe,

**Figure 4.** Installation view of *Medieval Bologna* exhibition, with *Crucifixion*, ca. 1270-1275, by the Master of the Franciscan Crucifixes, visible on back wall; only panels of the Virgin Mary and St. John the Evangelist are original, others are full-scale color reproductions. Photograph: John Schweikert.

shaped the city's culture, and the exhibition's subtitle guided the focus of the first section. Displayed in an initial gallery, a wealth of sculptural fragments and manuscripts—both codices and folios—suitably grounded the visitor in that intellectual context. A marble relief from a professor's tomb, depicting a class in session, effectively relayed Bologna's distinctive character—remembering its teachers with elaborate monuments instead of dukes or popes (fig. 3).

Explicitly demonstrating the university's deep relationship to Roman civil and canon law, numerous texts and miniatures offered evidence of the high quality of late medieval Bolognese manuscript production.[2] Sustained juridical teaching and study stimulated a symbiotic book-making industry. In her catalogue essay, Susan L'Engle describes how textbook manuscripts were manufactured in large numbers, used, and often resold into the secondhand market, a familiar trajectory for university texts today.[3] Wall labels consistently furnished comprehensive explanations detailing the iconography of the illuminations and its connections to legal principles, and elucidating how text and image cooperated for the medieval user.

Some of the manuscripts on display featured areas of extensive annotation, such that a single page could include primary text, illumination, commentary, and a system of markings designed to link passages of gloss to relevant sections of law.[4] These legal manuscripts, with clear monetary value as well as physical signs of prolonged use, are remarkably successful at engaging contemporary viewers who can easily imagine students hard at work hunched over such books. These objects also intimate a potential contribution to the burgeoning body of memory studies, since the illuminated and glossed texts helped students remember a large, complex volume of written material.[5]

Not all the manuscripts and folios on display came from the legal world; choir books and Bibles indicated something of the breadth of Bolognese book arts. The aesthetic variety achieved by the city's illuminators became particularly apparent in a subsequent gallery, drawing attention to the stylistic development of medieval Bolognese illumination. A First Style, identified by its bright, flat planes of color, gradually gave way to a Second Style, with an expanded palette, increased modeling, and similarity to sought-after Byzantine designs.[6]

If the exhibition's impressive display of manuscripts to this point had not already convinced visitors that medieval Bolognese painting

**Figure 5.** Installation view of *Medieval Bologna* exhibition. Photograph: John Schweikert.

warrants a larger place in art history's collective consciousness, the panel and fresco paintings on view should have swayed them. To represent the significant presence of mendicant religious orders in the city's visual culture, a creative installation at the back of the first room presented the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist panels from the c. 1270-75 Master of the Franciscan Crucifixes' work, once located on the *tramezzo* of Bologna's major Franciscan church (fig. 4).[7] With the bulk of the panel paintings assembled in the exhibition's third gallery, viewers had opportunity to become better acquainted with medieval Bolognese painting and illumination more broadly.

Instructive labels connected objects to such contexts as: the upheaval of early trecento papal politics spurring the commission of the (now destroyed) Rocca di Galleria, with its multiple paintings by Giotto and sculptures by Giovanni di Balduccio; the influence of Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel frescoes on Bolognese artists; and contemporary scholars' ongoing struggle towards attribution of medieval Bolognese painting. Although many of the panel paintings survive as fragments from larger works—requiring a hefty degree of imagination to appreciate in entirety their intended impact—this section of the exhibition proved especially substantial in arguing for Bologna's geographical and figurative importance as a crossroads of Italian culture in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (fig. 5). Additional examples of three-dimensional work, however, would have assisted in rounding out the exhibit's presentation of Bologna's artistic spectrum. The few marbles in the galleries gave a tantalizing glimpse into the quality of the city's sculpture. It is no surprise that Nicola Pisano's sculpted tomb of St. Dominic is one of the best-known artworks associated with Bologna.

A final section explored Bologna's art after the plague of 1348. This aspect of the exhibition landed more viscerally than it might have, had it occurred even a few years ago. Originally scheduled for fall 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced a year's delay before visitors could again attend the museum in person. In some ways, these profoundly challenging circumstances intensified the show's impact. On a practical level, it was no small curatorial feat to have maintained the large number of loans and lenders through the exhibition's postponement. Additionally, for today's college educators, the experience of standing before medieval students' texts, followed in short order by works of art in the

aftermath of widespread disease and societal disruption, yielded a potent—if unnerving—bridge to the people who made and used these works of art.

Besides the exhibition itself, a beautifully illustrated catalogue enriches the English-language scholarship on the history of medieval Bolognese art. Most of the essays explore the history of the city's manuscript paintings from multiple angles, as well as in the tradition of trecento Bolognese narrative imagery. Others flesh out such topics as Bologna's urban fabric and the relationship between mendicant orders and the city's art. Given the array of essays and over seventy color plates, presented with stunning details, this catalogue will serve as a key reference for instructors adding medieval Bologna to their art history curriculum.

During *Medieval Bologna*'s run, the Frist Art Museum hosted the biennial Andrew Ladis Memorial Trecento Conference, a highlight of the academic calendar for specialists in fourteenth-century Italian art. Although the conference had to move online and the exhibition became a virtual background, this affiliation affirmed the value of the exhibit for the field of art history. The gathering's keynote lecture by Susan L'Engle (available online) offers a helpful primer in the development of medieval Bolognese manuscript illumination.[8] After seeing the exhibition, which correctly argues for greater recognition of Bologna's prominence in the landscape of late medieval Italian art, writ large, one cannot help but wonder why it took so long to receive such sustained attention from an American institution—followed quickly by gratitude for this significant first step.

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## Endnotes

1. The exhibition catalogue lists over twenty-five American lenders, ranging from comprehensive museums (such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and National Gallery of Art) to numerous university museums, libraries and private collections.

2. Susan L'Engle, "Learning the Law in Medieval Bologna: The Production and Use of Illuminated Legal Manuscripts," in Medieval Bologna: Art for a University City, ed. Trinita Kennedy (Nashville: Frist Art Museum, 2021), 41.

3. L'Engle, 42.

4. L'Engle, 44.

5. See, for example, the essays in The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages (Brill, 2010).

6. Bryan C. Keene, "Pride and Glory in the Art of Illumination: Manuscripts for Church Ceremonies from Bologna and Environs," in Medieval Bologna: Art for a University City, ed. Trinita Kennedy (Nashville: Frist Art Museum, 2021), 75.

7. The rest of the Crucifix (in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna) was represented by a full-scale color reproduction on the wall.

8. For the conference program, see https://fristartmuseum.org/andrew-ladis-memorial-trecento-conference. L'Engle's lecture is available in its entirety: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXn3zM6ZwLM.