2 Art and Organizing
A Brief Personal Reflection

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Introduction

In my aesthetic approach (Strati, 2019), art is just one of the many social phenomena under study, as it is for various other scholars of the aesthetic dimension of organizing (Carr & Hancock, 2003; Gagliardi, 1990; King & Vickery, 2013; Kostera, 1997; Linstead & H.pfl, 2000). My aesthetic approach, in fact, has its foundations in reflections on social practice theory in organizations (Gherardi & Strati, 2012), in the aesthetic sociology of Georg Simmel (1908), in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, in the personalistic hermeneutics of Luigi Pareyson (1954), and in post-humanist awareness (Braidotti, 2013).

I have also addressed, on various occasions, some critical concerns about art and its connections with organizing: (a) art is a phenomenon whose beauty and perfection can sometimes be even anesthetizing and dull our critical–sensorial knowledge (Strati, 1999; Strati & Guillet de Monthoux, 2002), and (b) the philosophy of art itself can constitute a problem that has the same relevance assumed by rationality in organizational theories (Strati, 2019, pp. 66–74) for contemporary everyday aesthetic philosophies (Yuedi & Carter, 2014), which emphasize that, while on the one hand aesthetics goes far beyond the art world, on the other hand art emerges from a wide range of non-artistic activities, experiences, and performances (Sartwell, 2003).

However, I consider art very important in various ways to understand and manage organizational life (Aesthesis. International Journal of Art and Aesthetics in Management and Organizational Life, 2008; Human Relations, 2002; Organization Studies, 2018). What, moreover, the studies on organizational aesthetics most circumscribed to the sphere of artistic phenomena illustrate well (Guillet de Monthoux, 2004; Johansson Sk.ldberg, Woodilla, & Berthoin Antal, 2016; Organizational Aesthetics, 2016; Scalfi Eghenter, 2018; Scandinavian Journal of Management, 2014; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009).

In this brief personal reflection on “art and organizing” I will focus on the frescoes that decorate the Palazzo Pubblico (public palace) where the government of the Tuscan city of Siena in Italy has been sitting for more than seven centuries. I have always found them of an extraordinary charm; I often noticed depictions on which I had not previously dwelt; I usually came out with a feeling of inner satisfaction for the great depiction of the ideals of Good Government and republican citizenship that distinguished the Italian Renaissance of the city state of Siena in the fourteenth century.

Usually, I entered the room and stayed there for a long time. The cycle

of frescoes by Lorenzetti is an excellent work of art, of extraordinary beauty, but also of extreme complexity. I have always looked at it slowly, guided by natural light in the study of figurations, colours, architecture, and, also, of the interior lights of the frescoes. Step by step I immersed myself in the painting of the Sienese Renaissance with all my senses, picking up the smells; moving now here, now there; taking quick notes from time to time – as we shall see in this brief personal reflection on the interconnections between art and organizing.

The Cycle of Frescoes of Buon Governo

The Palazzo Pubblico of Siena is one of the main icons of the city. Together with its tower, the Torre del Mangia, which is of an extraordinary height to be able to emerge over all the other towers of Siena, this palace occupies, in fact, a strategic position in the scenography of Piazza del Campo, which is the main square of the city.
This palace is, therefore, constitutive of the aesthetics of the organizational communication of the city. In other words, it represents the city of Siena. However, at the same time, for more than seven centuries it has been a place of daily life in the city because it is the seat of the town hall of the city, that is, the site of the administrative government and the place of maximum representation of the Sienese community.
Ambrogio Lorenzetti, one of the great masters of Renaissance painting, frescoed the council chamber of elected citizens governing the city between 1338 and 1339. This is the Sala dei Nove (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Allegory_of_Good_and_Bad_Government), so called because at that time nine were the magistrates elected (Consiglio dei Nove) to the government of the Republic of Siena, a predominantly Ghibelline city state that was allied with the emperor and also consisted of the surrounding Tuscan territory and that had rivaled with Florence, the Guelph Duchy allied with the Papal State for more than four centuries, that is, from 1125 to 1555.
It was the Sienese government that commissioned the frescoes by Lorenzetti, and that carefully followed the design. Again, the nine magistrates carefully supervised the implementation and paid for its realization, "just as they had sponsored and paid for the reconstruction of Palazzo Pubblico," points out the historian Quentin Robert Duthie Skinner (2003, p. 164).

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A public commission of the city of Siena was, therefore, at the origin of the cycle of frescoes of the Allegory of Good and Bad Government and constituted the humus of symbologies, values, and ideals that Ambrogio Lorenzetti would paint. It is not a question of art that celebrates religions or divinities, nor of art that aims to represent the nobility and the rich gentlemen. Instead, it is art aimed at making the ideals of republican "citizenship" immortal in the secular social life of the Sienese Renaissance. An art, therefore, closely interrelated with the earthly organization, worldly, deadly and that is realized in the frescoing of the walls of the council chamber of the city of Siena.
Was this what fascinated me so much about Lorenzetti's pictorial art? Certainly, the republican ideals, the symbols of daily work life, the values of democracy and social justice constituted an integral part of my aesthetic appreciation of the pictorial representation of the cycle of frescoes of Good and Bad Government.
Although I was aware that it was not a question of republican citizenship and democracy in the current sense of the term because it concerned essentially the upper classes of the city, thinking that every year in the Magistracy of the Nine, fifty-four citizens succeeded each other, and that

the statutes that ordered the government of the city created opportunities for hundreds of others to be part of the councils and commissions – figures of republican democracy that, as the historian Randolph Starn (1994; Italian trans. 1996, p. 28) remarks, would not find a comparison in many of our cities today or even in the Athens of Pericles – I found the organizational communication and the educational project inherent in these frescoes beautiful.

My scepticism regarding the illusion of the goodness of all these republican virtues represented in the frescoes was not due to my aesthetic appreciation of the frescoes, but rather my intellectual knowledge and critical attitude. The work of art, on the contrary, was fascinating, persuasive, and convincing: a great artistic interpretation of the republican experiment that constituted this grandiose political and organizational project of the Italian municipalities that marked the Renaissance.

The goodness of the allegorical representation was thus intimately linked to the beauty of the work of art created by this great master of the Renaissance. The close connection between art and organizing of these frescoes was, in fact, still capable of giving form and charm to the "social memory" of the ideal city of the Renaissance. Also for the choice of the fresco as the specific art form to constitute the aesthetic material of this social memory.

Randolph Starn (1994; Italian trans. 1996, pp. 7–8) writes about this and notes that there is no art form that can be said to be more typically Italian than the fresco and that the cycle of Good and Bad Government by Lorenzetti represents one of the most beautiful results. Consider, just to get an idea of the spread of this form of art, the frescoes of the same

period by Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua or those painted in later times by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

Fresco painting was a form of art closely interrelated with the organizing, of art intimately connected with the reasons of power – even when it is in artistic controversy with the secular or religious power – and, above all, of art aimed at public communication of values, ideals, and symbologies.

Imagine that from 1300 to at least 1600, in Italy, public buildings, castles and stately homes, civic loggias, and churches and chapels scattered throughout the entire peninsula were covered with frescoes. It was the golden age of fresco painting, a pictorial form made with pigments dissolved in water and applied to a layer of freshly laid plaster – notes Starn (1994; Italian trans. 1996, p. 103) – for which the plaster and the painting, with drying, were completely integrated.

Sensitive Construction of the Aesthetic Path

It is during a two-year period of the first half of the fourteenth century, therefore, that Ambrogio Lorenzetti frescoed three walls of the rectangular hall where meetings of the Government of the Nine were held – three frescoed walls that constitute a single cycle of frescoes that receive light from the window of one of the two shorter walls, the one to the left of entrants. On the opposite side and, therefore, on the right of entrants, there is the other short wall on which Lorenzetti painted the Allegory of Good Government. On the long wall facing those who enter, instead, Lorenzetti has depicted the allegorical illustration of the Bad Government and its Effects on the urban and rural environment. On the other long wall, the one behind entrants, Lorenzetti represented the Effects of Good Government both in the city and the country.

In her anthropological essay, Maria Luisa Meoni (2001, p. 14) observes that already the arrangement of the representations that make up

the cycle of frescoes
indicates precise conceptual and pictorial choices: the surface most
illuminated by the natural source – the window – contains the Allegory
of Good Government; in front of those who enter, there are
painted the allegory and the effects of the Bad Government, which
communicate an immediate sense of unease due to the desolation
of devastation and war, the dark and livid hues that mark sterility
and disorder, moral and civil. We are therefore urged to turn to
the other two walls, in spatial succession from left to right, for the
viewer, where the allegorical representation of the Good Government
unfolds and the illustration of its Effects on society takes place.
The reading of this fresco requires a vision of the whole, precisely
because each of the walls of the cycle is – as we have seen – closely

related to the others, from the point of view of spatial dislocation,
for the conceptual structure, and for the artistic choices.
To complete the picture related to the cycle of Good Government, it
should be added that the three frescoed walls are separate and, at the
same time, connected to each other by the fictitious architecture of
frames, inscriptions, and the movement of the painted light, which goes
from left to right, as does that of the window.
Taken together, therefore, these frescoes are too large to be captured
at a glance and from a single vantage point. Precisely for this reason I
went several times to look at them. These frescoes impose the sensitive
construction of a path, the comprehension through the images of the
flow that, from the obscure oppression of tyranny – the winged harp
"Timor," that is, terror – leads to the visual experience of the philosophical
and political organizing of the social ethics of the city.
This visual experience illustrates the importance of the interconnections
between the "beautiful" and the "good" and between aesthetic
philosophies and moral philosophies that I have discussed in a recent
essay on the beauty of responsible management (Strati, 2020). I wrote it
with reference to the "Italian industrial design" created at the Olivetti,
a leading company in the production of typewriters and computers,
for the intimate link between aesthetics and ethics (Gaut, 2007) that
characterizes the social practices of this project of organizing industrial
design.
Olivetti's design has become the emblem of Italian design (De Fusco,
2002) and still symbolizes Italian design, despite the relevance of Italian
postmodernist design, Radical Design, and Anti-Design (Fiell, Fiell, &
Rossi, 2013). Even a typewriter, in fact, is able to evoke the specific style
of living the daily working life and the particular form of feeling the
relationship between work time and non-working time (Sudjic, 2008,
p. 49) which characterized the responsible and humanistic management
in Olivetti, from the work process and organizational communication to
the company library, the company canteen, the company kindergarten,
and the workers' housing.
Also the working life represented by Lorenzetti in the cycle of Good
and Bad Government shows the relevance of the relationship between
the aesthetic dimension and the social ethics, as I will illustrate in the
next section.

Citizenship and the Aesthetic Redemption of Working Life

In the cycle of frescoes of Buon Governo, the fact that the depictions are
marked by writing responds to the republican dream and to the ideal
of social justice and citizenship. These are epigraphs, quotations, and

inscriptions designed to explain literally – and in two languages, Latin and Italian – the figurative apparatus.

The explanatory inscriptions that bind the image symbolically represent the writing that the Sienese citizen appropriates to the detriment of the monopoly that, at that time, both the clergy and the lawyers, and the aristocracy, had on writing (Starn, 1994; Italian trans. 1996, pp. 20–21).

The cycle of frescoes by Buon Governo maintains, in fact, the communication project of the ideal and philosophical dream of the republican political cause.

This dream is rendered in the allegories of the cycle of frescoes without the presence of the nobility and the clergy. "The idealized city of Lorenzetti and its contado [countryside] are places where life is not only prosperous but also remarkably secular" – Quentin Skinner (2003, p. 137) writes – and we do not see any more the representation "of the lives of these thousands of monks, nuns, friars and other parish priests who lived in Siena at the time."

Instead, we see useful and necessary activities, those of work in the city and in the fields: "the attention of Ambrogio Lorenzetti to the moments of work, to the possession of the necessary expertise to effectively perform a technical operation, expresses a sort of redemption, even aesthetic" – observes Maria Luisa Meoni (2001, p. 55) – which must be connected to an enhancement of their social function, for which the accuracy, elegance, and subtlety of some depictions of work situations seem destined "to enhance their built-in skills and competences."

> High up, at the top of a building, a group of masons, to document the care in architectural interventions in an expanding city. The attention with which Ambrogio [Lorenzetti] paints the workers goes beyond the simple narrative element: as we will also be able to detect on other occasions, the figures of the operators – including a woman – acquire elegance from being fixed in precise postures and technical gestures; almost a trait of "nobility" that enhances the aspects of social utility of the work, and at the same time emphasizes in an original way the knowledge, skills and bodily attitudes of those who perform it.
> (Ibid., p. 34)

Lorenzetti is the "artist–philosopher" of this aesthetic redemption of work through the artistic interpretation of micro-working practices and atmospheres and of the conditions of the world of work.

But we must not run into the error of getting out of symbolism and allegory. These frescoes do not document the life of work in the Siena of the fourteenth century. Rather, they depict the republican dream of citizenship and aesthetic redemption of the work, putting into action

concrete elements between them. How the painter Dosso Dossi will do two centuries later, frescoing the halls of the Castello del Buon Consiglio in Trento, "they do not correspond to any precise concept of reality" but "remain convincing, engaging, moving" – the art historian Claudio Strinati (2009, p. 94) underlines – precisely because they are part of a "realm of painting," which constitutes "the sovereign realm of a convincing fantasy in itself, and at the same time is explicitly not true," nor even likely, and which has an "unstable equilibrium" while it leads us to immerse ourselves in a fascinating and mysterious world.

It is within this framework that we understand how Ambrogio Lorenzetti manages to place two ethical–political themes at the centre of his ideal of good governance: that of justice and that of the subordination of private interest to the common good. It is always within this framework that, as Meoni (2001, p. 16) points out, the representation of the

Municipality of Siena is explicit on the level of the allegories of republican citizenship and that, moreover, this representation presents a very significant ambivalence. It
symbolically represents the Bene del Comune [Good of the Municipality] and at the same time, by a happy coincidence, the Bene
comune [common good] of all citizens. The reference to the concrete situation in Siena is intertwined with the ideal ethical-political message.
The relationship between the aesthetic dimension and the ethical dimension of the "organizing" is enhanced. After all, observes Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (2008, p. 74), art
has always been considered an aesthetic gateway to ethical reflection and judgement. Although art provides subjective pleasure and sensuous experience, its philosophical task is to engage in the great quest for objective common truth. Kant emphasizes that the strength of aesthetics is that people organize around a work of art that charms them in ways impossible to grasp by theoretical concepts. In the same way Friedrich Schiller saw art – in this case, the role of a court theater – as the organizer of morality through the aesthetic judgement of the spectators of a play.
At the end of this section, I return to the fact that the cycle of frescoes in the Sala dei Nove, now called Sala della Pace, or the pictorial art of Ambrogio Lorenzetti, fascinated me so much, but not only for its aesthetic beauty. The social ethics, the civic ethics, the republic that the artist depicts with so much beauty has its beauty in its turn: the aesthetic dimension and the ethical dimension turned out to be intimately connected to

each other (Strati, 2020), and it is like if painting should "depict rather than beauty in itself, rather than the triumph of the aesthetic dimension, the ethical dimension" (Strinati, 2009, p. 130).
With the warning that, as I have already observed, with Ambrogio Lorenzetti – one of the great Tuscan painters who, together with Giotto, owed the invention of perspective, that is, the organization of space in painting "according to which a surface gives the sensation of depth" (Strinati, 2009, p. 95) – we are in the presence of
a work of self-representation: that [the work of self-representation of the Sienese republican value] commissioned for political propaganda purposes by the Government of the Nine and that [again the work of self-representation] of the ideals of the artist who, for a happy convergence, depicts the utopian aspiration for a Siena that is joyful, serene, festive and laborious, safe and reassuring in relation to its territory, because it is orderly and well governed.
Therefore, it is worth stressing that Ambrogio Lorenzetti builds the masterpiece by harmonizing the concrete elements in a grandiose and ideologically structured design that depicts an ideal vision through real references.
(Meoni, 2001, pp. 12–13)

Art Reveals the Philosophical Foundations of Organizing

At this point, I could put an end to my brief reflections on art and organizing because I have already clarified the aesthetic sentiments and philosophical considerations that the cycle of frescoes of Buon Governo has gradually aroused in my fifteen years of teaching at the University of Siena. But the fact is that there is more: the frescoes of Buon Governo constitute an artistic document that corrects the interpretation of what is itself a philosophical foundation of the Sienese republican dream. Lorenzetti, in fact, is not only the artist–philosopher of whom Giorgio

Vasari wrote already – he is the author of a work of art that "demonstrates that the emergence of the new principles of civic ethics at work in the pre-humanist republican ideology predates the diffusion of scholastic Aristotelianism, and in any case is independent of it," writes Olivier Christin (2003, p. 12).
It is a precious artistic–philosophical revelation (Skinner, 1986) because it illustrates "a special view of citizenship" and, observes Skinner (2003, p. 114), it is "from these modest origins, rather than from the impact of Aristotelianism, that the classical republicanism of Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and their contemporaries was born. The political theory of the Renaissance owes more to Rome than to Greece." This "philosophy of republican freedom," comments Christin (2003, p. 12) at the close

of the Preface to Skinner's writings on the frescoes of Good and Bad Government,
borrows in fact first of all from the Roman authors, Cicero first, but also Sallust or Seneca. The history of political philosophy prior to the British revolution and the formation of liberal ideology can no longer ignore this other conception, neo-Roman, of the freedom that then emerges. The interpretation of the iconographic program of the Lorenzetti frescoes is, in this, the starting point for a profound re-reading of the foundations of modern political thought.

Epilogue

Perhaps my desire to look repeatedly at the cycle of Good and Bad Government and to breathe the atmosphere of aesthetics (Strati, 2009) of the Sala dei Nove – or Sala della Pace – lies precisely in this mixture of aesthetic feelings originating from art and philosophy, from painting and writing, from aesthetic beauty and ethical beauty, from the aesthetic materiality of the frescoes that is capable of organizational communication even centuries later.
The art we are leaving now – that of Lorenzetti – was great and led me to reflect on fundamental aspects of the moral philosophy and the political philosophy that characterized the relationship between art and organizing in the Republic of Siena in the 1300s. This art, so decidedly immersed in political ideals, was able to respond to its commission with an artistic–philosophical perspective.
It was, that is, a "practical" art that had its own foundations in the "practical" philosophy that originated in ancient Rome and then developed with Niccol. Machiavelli, with Giambattista Vico, and, more recently, with the Italian thought always oriented in the world of historical and political life (Esposito, 2010). It is an art of great civic value, that of Ambrogio Lorenzetti and the cycle of frescoes of Buon Governo, because it is art that, in describing the organizing – imaginary and ideal – of the Republican democracy of the Municipality of Siena, creates community, that is, performs the "organizing."

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