Brandeis in Siena offers an abroad experience in the arts
The university's newest abroad program completed its first summer

By Jarret Bencks
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Searching for the perfect spot for a study abroad program in the arts, Associate Professor of Painting Joseph Wardwell looked at locations around Europe, including some renowned for their museums and scenery. He zeroed in on Siena, a small Italian city south of Florence with a rich art history and culture that’s probably best known for its historic bareback horse race il Palio.

“Siena is this small community with a very vibrant, rich cultural life centered around Palio, which goes back to medieval times,” Wardwell said. “The larger cities have more arts programs -- and more tourists. In Siena, students are able to experience an emergence into the cultural life that is expressed in the paintings they study, and also expressed in the very street in front of them.”

The Office of Study Abroad and Wardwell have worked for the last two years to develop the program, and this past summer, thirteen Brandeis students headed Italy for the first session of Brandeis in Siena.

“I am thrilled that the Brandeis in Siena program has joined the Brandeis-Led Programs Study Abroad family of offerings,” said Candace B. Matta, assistant director for Brandeis-Led Study Programs. “Our academic collaboration with the Siena Art Institute provides us not only with a home base, but also serves as the cultural launching point for students. The response to the program, with a successful first year with 13 participants, is a testament to its need and niche for both students earning major or minor credit as well as those wanting to earn creative arts requirements. ”

The abroad program is a collaborative partnership between Brandeis University and the Siena Art Institute, and students took one painting course taught by Wardwell and a course in art history taught by Roberto Fineschi of the Siena Art Institute. To tie together what students learned in their art history course, which focused on Siena’s heyday of the late 13th to early 14th century paintings, Wardwell had students use an abridged version of the method used by renaissance painters: Rather than using a wet-on-wet painting method, his students developed sketches then grisaille paintings and then glazed colors over them.

“The fact that both classes were interconnected was one of the program major strengths,” said Jasmine Temple, a studio art major. “It allowed me to combine all of the material learned in both classes into one larger understanding about art, history and the culture of that time period.”

The program lasted five weeks, and students found themselves immersed in the Siena culture in a matter of days, in part thanks to the program’s small size and the relatively small size of the city.

“I was surprised by how fast I got to know the city. People know you immediately,” said Yael Cohen, an Art History major. “After a week, people who sold us fruit and vegetables, and the people who worked at a coffee shop nearby, knew our faces. We were part of the city and the culture so fast.”

Temple said she would never forget a trip to a nearby river during the painting course, where students sketched all day and then swam.
“It was so beautiful. It will be a lasting memory,” she said.

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