

In a Sacred Italian Race, Some Bristle at the Prize

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SIENA, Italy — No horse race is more sacred in Italy than the [Palio](#), which traces its lineage back 700 years. This year, however, the hotly contested chase has taken an unexpectedly ecumenical — and disputed — twist.

For the first time, a Muslim painter was asked to design the Palio, or banner, that the winner takes home at the end of the race, which is conducted two days every year around Siena's distinctive shell-shaped square.

Not everyone was pleased with the choice, though that was not evident Friday evening, when residents of the winning district, or *contrada*, as Siena's 17 neighborhoods within the city walls are known, jumped over fencing that lined the square to grab the Palio, crying and shouting with joy.

The horse representing their *contrada* had won the race, and they did not seem particularly bothered that the banner has generated controversy in the local and national media during the past weeks over what some have called “a profanation” of the Sienese tradition.

The artist Ali Hassoun, 46, who was born in Lebanon but moved in 1982 to Italy, where he gained citizenship, painted St. George as a knight wearing a black-and-white kaffiyeh. Above the Virgin Mary's face, in Arabic, is the title of the 19th chapter of the Koran, which is dedicated to the Madonna. In her crown, an Arab crescent, the symbol of Islam, is placed on one side of the cross; a Star of David, the symbol of Judaism, is on the other side.

“My Palio talks about spirituality in general, about religions, about the possible encounter among the three monotheistic religions that allows us to transcend our own faith,” Mr. Hassoun said in a telephone interview.

The local administration, which commissioned the banner, chose Mr. Hassoun because his art is traditional, highly figurative and easy to enjoy, Mayor Maurizio Cenni of Siena said at a news conference a few hours before Friday's race.

Traditionally, the rectangular silk Palio honors the Virgin Mary. Palio rules passed by the local administration say that the design requires the Madonna's image at the top, the date of the race, Siena's black-and-white shield, and possibly the symbols of the 10 contradas chosen to compete in each race.

The tradition of having the banner painted by a non-Sienese artist began in the 1970s. Since then, national and international artists like Renato Guttuso of Italy and Fernando Botero of Colombia have done the honors. Some of these banners were criticized as too secular.

When the banner was presented at City Hall on June 26, more than six months after its design was commissioned by the local administration, the archbishop of Siena, Colle Val d'Elsa and Montalcino, Msgr. Antonio Buoncristiani, noted that the representation had to resemble the face of the Madonna of Provenzano, to whom this July's race is dedicated.

Monsignor Buoncristiani said he appreciated Mr. Hassoun's banner in its entirety, but asked that in the future his office be shown the preliminary sketch so it could give an opinion on its religious aspects because it is blessed and shown in church.

Then newspapers began weighing in, starting with the daily newspaper La Padania, the house organ of the anti-immigrant Northern League. A headline on one of its articles read, "The hands of Islam on Siena's Palio."

La Nazione, the largest local daily newspaper, published a letter by two citizens pleading with the archbishop not to allow "an image that is not Christian" to be blessed in the Church of St. Mary of Provenzano, part of a tradition the evening before the race.

And the [Vatican](#) expert Antonio Socci, writing in the conservative newspaper Libero, said "something serious" was happening in Siena "from the spiritual and symbolic point of view."

The archbishop's office responded to the heated debate with a statement acknowledging that placing symbols of the three monotheistic religions on the Virgin's crown was "problematic" and that using a quote from the Koran "lends itself to debate." The statement said the archbishop would make an official comment on the issue after the race, possibly on Tuesday or Wednesday.

Northern Italy and the historically left-wing Tuscany are not new to such religious clashes, often orchestrated by political parties. For years, in Colle Val d'Elsa, northwest of Siena, the construction of a mosque has pitted the left-wing administration against a group of citizens who formed an antimosque committee that helped elect two local council members who brought pressure that delayed the building. On various occasions, pigs' heads were found on the building site. The mosque has been completed, but it is waiting for interior furnishings and permits before it is used for prayer services.

In May, the Northern League, saying it was honoring the memory of the Tuscan writer [Oriana Fallaci](#), who vehemently opposed Islam in the final days of her life, began a new campaign against the construction of a mosque in Greve in Chianti. But Greve's mayor, Alberto Bencistà, said the league was overreacting. A local association had offered local Muslims only a room to meet in, he said; there were no plans to build a mosque. Nonetheless, the Northern League held an unofficial referendum against a mosque in the small town.

The Palio is a medieval feast dedicated to the Virgin Mary with deep religious roots, particularly in Siena, where the Virgin is especially venerated. It allows for breaches of church decorum: the horses, for example, are brought into churches where they, and the jockeys, are blessed by the priests of the local districts. The banner, or "rag," as it is known in Siena, is an object of devotion not only for the two days of the race, July 2 and Aug. 16, but also throughout the year.

"We don't really care about the painting," said Francesco Bartali, 25. "For a contrada person, all that matters is to win the rag. Even if it was blank, we'd still cry over it."

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