

# The Perplexity Of Painting

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*"Tiene in sé la pittura una forza divina"*  
(Leon Battista Alberti)

Carlo Bertelli, *Piero della Francesca* (Milan: Silvana Editrice, 1991) (English edition: Ithaca: Yale University Press, 1992) ISBN 88-366-0330-0

Attilio Brilli, *In Search of Piero: A Guide to the Tuscany of Piero della Francesca* trans. Deborah Hodges, (Milan: Electa, 1990) ISBN 88-435-3218-9

Bruce Cole, *Piero della Francesca: Tradition and Innovation in Renaissance Art* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991) ISBN 0-06-430906-1

John Pope-Hennessy, *The Piero della Francesca Trail* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991) ISBN 0-500-55024-7

Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *Piero della Francesca: San Francesco, Arezzo* (New York: George Braziller, 1994) ISBN 0-8076-1317-7

Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, ed., *Piero della Francesca and His Legacy* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1995) ISBN 0-89468-203-2

Bernard-Henri Levy, *Piero della Francesca* (Paris: La Difference, 1992) ISBN 2729107851

Ronald Lightbown, *Piero della Francesca* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992) ISBN 1-55859-168-0

You are driving from the Tuscan city of Arezzo in the direction of the delicate profile of Monte Maggiore in the Apennine range, more precisely towards the small mercantile town of Borgo Sansepolcro: in summer through blazing yellow fields of the myriad turned heads of sunflower plants you would wind back and forth across narrow, sinuous streams; in winter through wooded gorges covered in the russet browns and muted greens of thicket growth, dotted here and there with silver-blue elders. A landscape of understated yet evocative beauty. A little past the halfway point of your journey, on an isolated knoll, lies the walled

hilltown of Monterchi (a corruption of the Latin *Mons Hercules*). Outside these walls on a narrow road flanked by two rows of cypresses you reach the tiny mortuary chapel of Monterchi's cemetery or *camposanto*.

Inside that chapel is a small but important fresco painting, Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto* or (very) pregnant portrayal of the Virgin. You note her protruding abdomen which she touches with her right hand through the expandable pleats of her maternity dress; her left hand twisted awkwardly against her waist as if to support and counterbalance her newly acquired weight; the humility, intense introspection, almost a sense of unease or impending drama, you feel, in the expression on her face with its half-closed eyelids and downcast eyes. "But a mother [you remember Julia Kristeva once stating] is always branded by pain, she yields to it."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it is the extraordinary intimacy of the cramped viewing conditions? The way in which the central figure of the Madonna steps out to engage you as spectator? The entrancing quality of the light? Your growing awareness of the strong geometrical underpinnings of this composition? The two angels who contemplate us so rigidly, witnesses rather than interpreters, pulling back the flaps of the tent-like structure, are almost perfect mirror images of each other made from the simple flipping over of the one cartoon. After a time you begin to understand that a geometry of pentagramal relationships inhabits the interactions of the figures within the internal dimensions of that tent. Nor is it difficult to appreciate the simplicity, yet efficacy, of the sparse symbols Piero uses such as the repeated pomegranate motif with its associations of fecundity and the bursting activity of birth. Or is the strength of your response simply a result of the fact that *you* have made this journey, that this is one of the few paintings left today where one's encounter still has some of the authentic feel of an individual pilgrimage and, as such, is personalised? It is as if, as spectators, we are caused to refocus ourselves in front of this

fresco, as if the placidity of the painting's surface is in some way a rebuke to the restlessness of our eyes: the restlessness that keeps us from seeing things while it kids us that we are seeing everything. Whatever it might be, most visitors to this tiny chapel feel that there is something very special about this painting and this painter.

If you undertake this journey you will have completed the first leg of what, especially after John Mortimer's successful television screenplay of his novel *Summer's Lease*, has recently become known as 'The Piero della Francesca Trail' (see the useful but rather descriptive volume by Sir John Pope-Hennessy or the detailed historical compilation of travellers' responses by the Italian publishers Electa). It is a trek which in recent years, because we have just celebrated the five-hundredth anniversary of the artist's death, has drawn many and varied visitors, attracted not only by the paintings of Piero themselves, but also by the promises of special exhibitions, conferences and celebrations to mark this occasion. There has also been, as naturally happens at these moments, something of a biblioblit of new books on the artist during the last five years. One great disappointment of all this activity and these festivities is that the restoration of the fresco cycle of *The Legend of the True Cross* in Arezzo (the subject of a new illustrated monograph by Marilyn Aronberg Lavin) has not been completed as was previously promised, and today unsightly scaffolding still masks the viewer's appreciation of at least half of that composition. This, however, is a disappointment that is positively balanced by the masterful restoration of the *Madonna del Parto* and the new arrangements for its exhibition on the outskirts of Monterchi. A rehousing which nevertheless means, perhaps somewhat sadly, that the especial intimacy of the traveller's encounter with this work described above and attested to by so many travellers of 'The Piero della Francesca Trail' no longer pertains.

When examined in detail, the history of Piero's reception as a painter instructs that he was not always so popularly or widely admired, nor was he always such an accepted part of the canon. Vasari's account of Piero "*defraudato dell'onore che si deve alle sue fatiche*" ("cheated of the honour due him") during his lifetime could also be extended to cover the response to his work during the first four centuries subsequent to his death. For, oddly, his elevation to the status of major artist does not begin to happen until the middle of the nineteenth century and he is then further promoted by Berenson and the Post-Impressionists (Cézanne and Seurat) at the beginning

of the twentieth. For them it is the rational, abstracted structure of Piero's work and its obvious connections with cubism and modernist abstraction that drew approbation. It is not surprising, then, to learn from biographers that Picasso, in the middle of his analytical cubist period, spent hours in front of Piero's Arezzo cycle of *The Legend of the True Cross* engrossed in resolving problems of linear ambiguity, as his drawings and paintings of the hilltown of Horta de Ebro testify. Artists by imitating a painter's work, or even by putting it up for their critiques, place it more firmly in the canon, re-marking it for our critical attention. Piero della Francesca is one of the most potent twentieth century examples of the phenomenon Norman Bryson has labelled as 'retroactive canonisation,' where a painter's work "emerges retroactively, in the tropes of homage (submissive or subversive) in which it comes to be located."<sup>2</sup> For Piero we could also mention a further case of what I would call 'interdisciplinary canonisation' through the various activities of twentieth century architects and writers who have cited, recited and resited Piero's work for us.

Part of Piero's present popularity lies in his populism: even today the faces of the stocky Aretini and Italians of the region encountered in bars, on public transport, during the evening *passaggiata* on town squares, uncannily seem to have just stepped forth from one of Piero's frescoes. There are, too, many popular touches in Piero's painting ranging from the testicle that rather naughtily slips out of the side of the drawers worn by the figure engaged in transporting the wood for the true cross - counterbalanced perhaps even more cheekily by the halo pattern of the growth rings that encircles his head - to the topographical echoes of the approach to Borgo Sansepolcro that are so clearly there in the background to his version of *The Baptism of Christ*. By situating provincial Borgo Sansepolcro on the shores of the River Jordan, Piero is poignantly evoking the hills, fields, crops, sky, even the pungent smell of the tilled Tuscan earth, so familiar to his contemporary onlookers, and familiar also to those viewers today who undertake to travel 'The Piero della Francesca Trail.' That Piero's populism still has a serious hold was powerfully proved recently when it was suggested that his *Madonna del Parto* be moved from its tiny chapel to a grander museum setting. It was significant that the women of Monterchi objected, albeit unsuccessfully, on the grounds that, for them, Piero's painting was a living presence, a potent talisman for birth and fertility and recent critical studies of this work, elaborating on this popular supposition, have attempted to link the figure of the pregnant Madonna to specific cults

of fertility and water rites of the local, pre-Christian rural culture. According to this interpretation, in this painting Piero is not simply responding, as has long been held, to a possible personal, biographical situation, but his subject matter is part of a long-institutionalised secular (but then also Christian) tradition aimed at the protection and support of mothers of the local peasantry during difficult periods of pregnancy and birth.

But perhaps the real reason for the twentieth-century interest in Piero della Francesca's work lies in the fact that he sees painting as an activity of the intellect and that his intuition of the real is part of a formal, intellectual search for the numerical essences of things. Vasari writes of him as "the leading geometrician of his day" and, not surprisingly, *Piero teorico* ('Piero the Theoretician') was the title of a recent international colloquium held on the artist. Sansepolcro was not simply a provincial Renaissance backwater (as most commentators tend to assume), but a more-than-modest centre for mercantile mathematics and humanist activity. Piero's two treatises, on perspective and on the five regular bodies, as recent critical editions have proved, are important moments in the history of geometry and mathematics and exercised, when adapted and disseminated by Piero's protegee and possible plagiarist, Luca Pacioli, a deep influence upon the sixteenth century. As John Pope-Hennessy has remarked "a skeleton of theory" underlies all of Piero's works and geometrical analysis was fundamental to the planning of his compositions. For Piero the essence of painting is perspective, but differently his is an approach to perspective considered from the point of view of the spectator where the intellect plays a role in the creative perception of a sense of depth. Piero is one of the first Renaissance painters to realise that the dimension of figurative painting was not simply that of recognisable forms which belong to the natural world, but that it is also the domain of abstract organisation where line, colour, surface re-present that reality.

Part of the twentieth-century fascination with Piero, it seems, may also perversely be due to the difficulties we experience with his painting. Piero's painting often leaves us feeling perplexed. His monumental *Pala dei Montefeltro* found today in the *Pinacoteca di Brera*, Milan, is such a bewildering painting: a history (*istoria*) seemingly without action, fragments of an everyday world tied to an eternity, where we sense a cogent yet puzzling underlying logic. So precise is Piero's attention to detail that it has been noted that the steel gloves placed by the

donor figure, Federico da Montefeltro, in front of the Virgin even reveal a tiny border of the red velvet that lines them inside. Yet the answers to the grander questions about this work have remained elusive. Who exactly are these figures? For example, the bearded man on the right (St John the Evangelist? St Andrew? St Paul?) and to what 'species' do they belong? (Angels without wings? Saints without haloes?) And where are they with respect to the architecture that contains them? Under an imaginary cupola, in front of one, at the rear of a church, towards its abside? What, too, is the source of the strange light which illuminates this scene? As well, there are a myriad more questions that remain unanswered *hors texte*: for which church was the *Pala* painted? When? (The dates so far proposed vary between 1466 and 1474). Has it always been a painting of today's dimensions?

From the giant scallop shell of the abside on a golden chain hangs the greatest mystery of all, a single, perfect ostrich egg. The ostrich, we know, figures on the *imprese* or coats of arms of the Montefeltro family; ostrich eggs are laid in the sand and warmed in the sun in the absence of parents and so may possibly allude to the unique fecundation of Mary by the Holy Spirit. Or there are possible connections with the nascent interest in Greek culture during the Renaissance and the account in Pausanias of the temple in which a priestess venerated Leda's egg hung from the ceiling in a similar fashion. (Bertelli's volume and the collection of specialist essays *Piero della Francesca and His Legacy* are especially informative on questions such as these). But even with the possibilities of these ovological meditations and explanations there remains something ambiguous and peculiar about this suspended egg. For the more you look at this painting, the more it disintegrates and loses its sense of wholeness to reveal pieces and structures that were not at all apparent when you first looked at it. There is, for example, the curious absence of a figure on the left of the composition, in an empty space signaled by the gaze of both the Duke and the Virgin. Is the painting in some way a memorial to the Duke's dead and therefore absent wife, Battista Sforza, whose memory is also recalled by the presence of her saintly namesake, S. Giovanni Battista, on the extreme left? The fact that Piero seems to have literally reused part of the cartoon of his earlier double portrait of Montefeltro and his wife for his profile of the Duke bears this out and suggests that something of what Alberti believed to be the essential function of painting is at work here: "Tiene in sé la pittura forza divina non solo quanto si dice dell'amicizia, quale fa gli uomini assenti essere

presenti, ma più i morti dopo molti secoli essere quasi vivi ... È così certo il viso di chi già sia morto, per la pittura vive lunga vita." ("Painting," Alberti declares, "possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the abstract present (as they say of friendship), but it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later ... Through painting, the faces of the dead go on living for a very long time.")

There is another fascinating biographical reference in this work: it is possible that the pieces of armour we see (notice how battered the surface of the helmet appears) are those that Federico da Montefeltro wore during a joust in 1450 when a blow from a lance penetrated the visor, broke his nose piercing his right eye and almost touched his brain. This, then, allows us to see the profusion of blood on the bodies of the other saints in a different light. More importantly, the complete mutilation of his right eye together with a profile held so rigidly parallel to the painting's picture plane means that Federico da Montefeltro, who 'donates' the painting to us and is also our 'stand-in,' can't see what we as spectators see, that he is, so to speak, 'turning a blind eye' to the mysteries of the scene before us and yet remains himself one of those mysteries. The strange, almost anamorphic qualities of the surface painting of Federico's armour where in the chestpiece we find fused reflections of Madonna and Child and where in the battered helmet on the ground the shadowy reflections must logically be those of the spectator's space, our space, twisted and contorted almost beyond recognition, indicate a complex metatextual strategy of revealing while concealing, a displaced representation of the act, what we might call the scene, of painting.

There is a further intriguing example of 'wilful blindness' on Piero's part in an equally perplexing work, an altarpiece now in the *Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria* in Perugia. It is an altarpiece which has always seemed to its viewers something of a grand, if unwieldy assemblage, and the scene of the Annunciation which crowns it was, it has been argued, once possibly a separate rectangular altarpiece, subsequently altered to its present shape when it was used to make a gable for the tryptych of the Madonna and Saints.

Here the instance of perplexity was first remarked upon, but only briefly and in passing, by Kenneth Clark in his seminal monograph on Piero. The Virgin directly in front of the kneeling angel is not in the same piazza space as that angel. At first she may seem so as the black stone visible between the pair of columns in turn superimposed on the black panel

behind the Virgin creates the illusion that the columns and the arch lie behind her. This impression is reinforced by the horizontal black bands that counterplay above the two protagonists. However, it is when we notice, and I suggest that it is important that it takes quite a while to do so, that the base of the first column group is in fact placed in front of the Virgin's mantle, then we realise that in so doing Piero has placed her in a separate enclosed space. As Kenneth Clark notes: "indeed it is some time before we realise that the Virgin is *behind* the first columns to the right, and the discovery, when we make it, shocks us by a sense of disproportion."<sup>3</sup> That is, the positions of the angel and the Virgin are articulated in space in a way actually completely different from how they appear to be on first sight. Clark's 'shock' value is enhanced even further when we understand that the Virgin is not simply "behind the first column to the right" as he suggests but that the two figures are placed on the same white strip on the floor where in fact the second group of four columns (visible only as a tiny protruding sliver) must be. This means, of course, that these columns block the line of gaze, and that the angel is unable to see the Virgin and viceversa as drawings of the reconstructed spatial arrangements done by Thomas Martone and referred to by Bertelli indicate. Piero's observer, perhaps now something of a combination of private investigator and perspectival geometrician, has had his or her gaze captured and deceived but is then made something of a collaborator in the construction of the true spatial relations in this composition. In a painting that makes use of some of the most powerful resources that can possibly be employed in the construction of a sense of depth, Piero, one of the Renaissance's greatest theoreticians of perspective, by giving us such a planar effect within a depth is experimenting with one of the theoretical conditions for the possibility of representation in painting.

In the catalogue for a show he recently guest-curated at the *Louvre Museum* in Paris - *Mémoires d'aveugle* (Memoirs and possibly Memories of the Blind) - Jacques Derrida has explored primary questions of vision and the importance of the metaphor of blindness for artistic activity. In the act of painting from memory, Derrida suggests, at the very moment of applying paint to canvas, the painter is no longer looking at his or her subject but at the painting coming into being. During the act of painting, the artist 'has seen' and 'will see' but 'presently does not see,' since at the moment a brushstroke is made there opens up an abyss between the thing painted and the painting stroke. So a painting is always made from memory, always

attempts to recapture the visible through memory, since at the moment of putting brush to canvas, the painter is no longer looking at his or her subject, but at the painting coming into being. Even the very mark made at the tip of the brush is not itself strictly visible until after it is made. The painter is blindly reaching out 'to see' what is there, to make what is there visible, by relying on the hand. This is the perplexing apperception that founds painting. Like the blind themselves the painter is a visionary who sees without eyes what others can see with them. Derrida adds the suspicion that when an artist chooses an image of blindness as his or her subject matter what she or he paints in the end is an allegory for the process of painting, an allegory for the very necessary blindness experienced by the artist in the act of painting. There is also, as Derrida indicates, a powerful analogy between the activity of the artist and that of Christ the Healer of the Blind who reaches out to empower the sight of the blind by tracing the contours of their eyelids with his hands.

- 3 Kenneth Clark, *Piero della Francesca* (London and New York: Phaidon, 1969), p. 66.

So if we are to believe, and there seems no reason not to, Vasari's account of the end of Piero's life there is a touching artistic justice in the fact that Piero during his final years was struck by sudden blindness brought on possibly by glaucoma. Piero's physical blindness, like Federico's one-eyed variety, is a biographical metaphor for what I have called the scene of painting, that moment when a painter deploys complex frames of the presentation of the issue of representation. Of this Piero was the Renaissance painter *par excellence*, the master of what Louis Marin calls the 'reflexive opacity' of painting, that process whereby every painting is like a pane of opaque glass that allows us to see something other than itself, through itself, while it is being viewed. This is the other journey, the journey of the mind, on which Piero takes us where his paintings themselves have become like those dear departed friends whose portraits Alberti says "*con molta ammirazione dell'artefice e con molta voluttà si riconoscono*" ("are recognised by spectators with pleasure and deep admiration for the artist").

#### NOTES

- 1 Julia Kristeva "Stabat Mater," trans. Leon S Roudiez, *The Kristeva Reader* ed. Toril Moi, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p.167.
- 2 Norman Bryson *Tradition and Desire: from David to Delacroix* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1984).