

**Art in America online, January 14, 2014**  
**Piero's Devotional Paintings, United at the Met**



Piero della Francesca, *Madonna and Child with Two Angels*, ca. 1464-74 (?), tempera and oil on wood (walnut), 24 11/16 by 20 3/4 inches. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Palazzo Ducale, Urbino.

By BRIAN BOUCHER

Four private devotional paintings by Renaissance master Piero della Francesca will soon be united for the first time in an exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition presents the entire output of the artist in the format of holy images intended to encourage private prayer.

"Piero della Francesca: Personal Encounters" (Jan. 14-Mar. 30) brings together paintings from Venice's Gallerie dell'Accademia, Urbino's Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, the Metropolitan and a private collector, the Alana collection in New York. A painting on loan from Berlin, *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*, has never before been lent.

Keith Christiansen, chairman of the department of European paintings at the museum, spoke with *A.i.A.* by phone about the genesis of this grouping of paintings and the enduring appeal of Piero.

**BRIAN BOUCHER** What was the origin of this show?

**KEITH CHRISTIANSEN** The Foundation for Italian Art and Culture [a New York nonprofit that promotes Italian culture] proposed an exhibition of a masterpiece from the Accademia, in Venice, where the director singled out their Piero. He suggested that it go to Florence to be cleaned and restored, and that we would do a full technical analysis and publish the results. This was exactly the kind of collaborative project that the Metropolitan Museum and I really enjoy doing. That was the genesis, and it expanded because this is the Italian Year of Culture, and so the Madonna di Senigallia from Urbino, which I consider one of his most beautiful masterpieces, would be going to Boston. I contacted my good friend and colleague, the Superintendent at Urbino, about the possibility of its also coming to New York. Then I realized that with two other pictures we would have a complete assembly of Piero's devotional painting. This had never been done. You start with one and then you build out to what sounds like a small collection but it's his entire production of devotional works.

**BOUCHER** What are the latest findings in the field?

**CHRISTIANSEN** We're publishing new research in the catalogue. The Venice picture was of particular interest because it's one of two pictures of Piero's with figures integrated into a landscape. It shows Saint Jerome and a donor. The donor's name is written below him in a hand that is not Piero's. It was presumably written by one of the heirs of the man whose name is indicated. So who is this man? An archivist in Venice has spent several months and put together the whole history of the family in Venice and where that sitter fits in to the family. An essay in the catalogue outlines the history of the family, their rise to prominence in the 15th century and their disappearance in the 16th century.

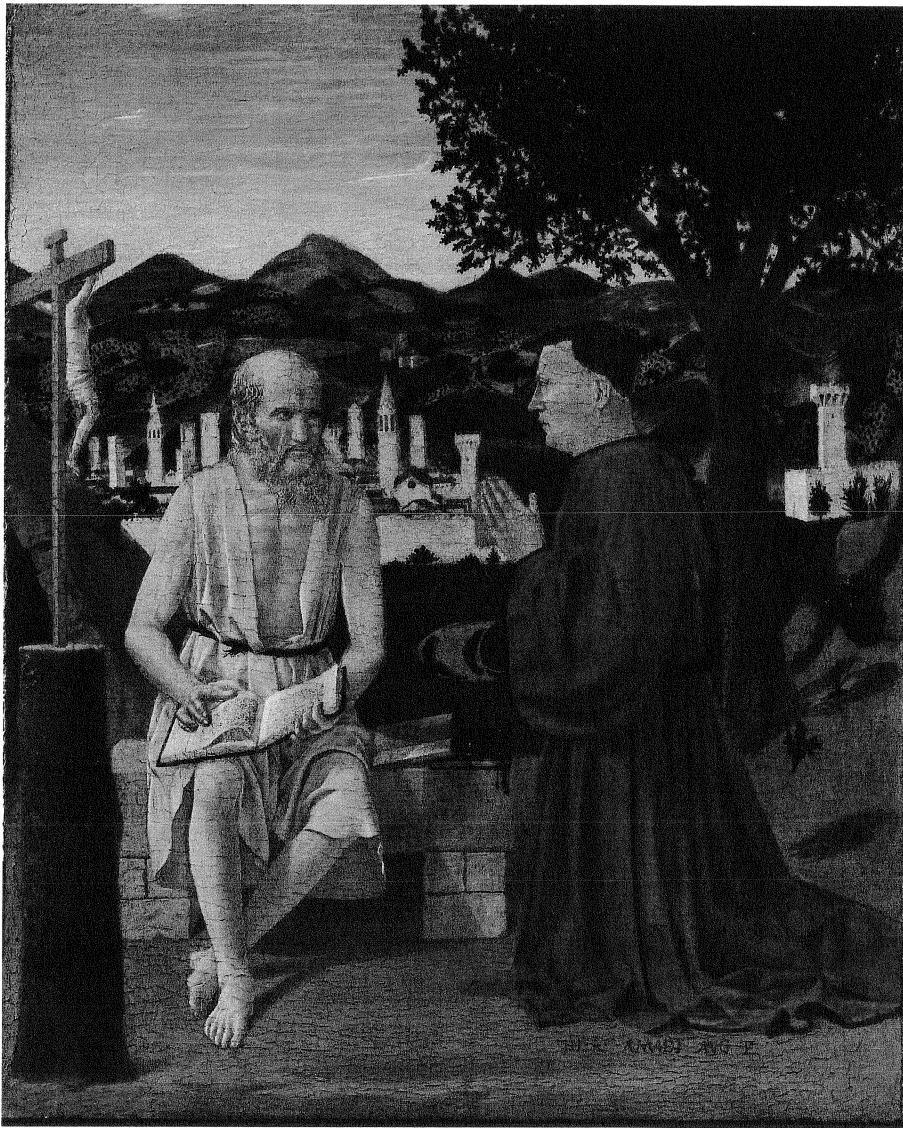
**BOUCHER** Are contemporary artists looking to Piero, or what might contemporary artists gain by studying his works?

**CHRISTIANSEN** As for whether contemporary artists are looking to Piero, you would have to tell me! But Piero was a hero to Balthus. He was a catalyst in the work of Seurat. Seurat never saw his actual works, but at the École des Beaux-Arts there are two full-size copies of the frescoes in Arezzo. Seurat and Cézanne both knew these works, as did Degas, so his influence on Post-Impressionism is direct.

You'd have to ask John Currin where Piero sits for him. If Vermeer has a place in contemporary art, then Piero has a place for the same reasons: space, geometry, light. Those are the three components of Piero's art.

**BOUCHER** What accounts for the enduring fascination with Piero?

**CHRISTIANSEN** There's that space, geometry and light and there's a certain emotional removal or reticence, which I think creates an air of mystery. Certain Buddhas, great Cambodian sculpture or the Parthenon marbles have that quality. There's something that raises them beyond everyday experience. You're participating in something that has a comprehensible space but is elevated to a world beyond the everyday.



Piero della Francesca, *Saint Jerome and a Suppliant*, ca. 1460-64 (?), tempera and oil on wood, 19 ½ by 16 ½ inches. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.



Piero della Francesca, *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*, 1450, tempera and oil (?) on wood (chestnut), 20 1/8 by 15 inches. Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.





Piero della Francesca, *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1439-40, tempera on panel, 20 7/8 by 16 1/8 inches. The Alana Collection, Delaware.

Website: <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/previews/pieros-devotional-paintings-united-at-the-met/>