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Faith in the Early Age of Reason

Piero della Francesca in Devotion at the Met

By KEN JOHNSON

Narrow windows sometimes afford expansive views. Consider, for example,"Piero della Francesca: Personal Encounters" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, an exhibition of four small paintings made for private devotion by one of the foundational artists of the Italian Renaissance.

Borrowed from three European museums and one American collection, the four works aren't among Piero's most celebrated. But they are all the devotional paintings he is known to have made (not counting "The Flagellation," which is intimately scaled but has a formal and conceptual complexity that puts it into a separate category). Organized by Keith Christiansen, chairman of the Met's European paintings department, this exhibition is the first to bring them together. Two picture St. Jerome in his wilderness retreat and two portray the Madonna and Child, one thought to be Piero's earliest known painting and the other among his last. Of the four, only the later Madonna and Child is instantly recognizable as a Piero, and it's a beauty. The other three have suffered from the fading of fugitive pigments and abuse by cleanings and restorations.

Piero della Francesca's first known work, this "Madonna and Child" (circa 1439-40) is one of four devotional paintings by him at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

The mother and child pictures bring to mind something I've often wondered: Why was the image of a naked baby — usually with prominently exposed genitals — so popular back then? In "The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion," Leo Steinberg proposed that it had to do with theological debates about whether Jesus was a human being or a transcendent divinity.

Without doubting Steinberg's thesis, I think of the baby as a metaphor of newness. It seems to me not just coincidental that this image would become ubiquitous in a time when the European minds were crossing over from the medieval age of faith to a new age of reason, science and individualism.

On the face of it, Piero's "Madonna and Child" (circa 1439-40) appears to belong to the earlier era of dogmatic belief. Seen from the waist up and framed by an open window, Mary cradles her oversize baby so that his naked body faces the viewer. Another window behind her affords a glimpse of tree-dotted hills in the distance.

"St. Jerome in the Wilderness," from 1450. Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

As a painting, it's fairly unremarkable. But there's something striking on the panel's back side: an image of a bowl — a renfrescatoio, or wine bucket — incised and painted in shades of brown to resemble a piece of intarsia. Pinpricks in exactly measured spots prove that the bowl image was essentially a study in perspective, a subject that Piero and many other Renaissance intellectuals were famously fond of.

Perspective is a way of constructing how the world appears to a single person. Its appearance in art coincided with the rising philosophical idea that all we can know about the world must come through the senses of our uniquely located bodies. Neither divine revelation nor divinely sanctioned earthly authority would trump the claims of the individual's perceptually informed reason.

The two sides of the early Madonna and Child come together in Piero's entrancing late work, "Madonna and Child With Two Angels" (circa 1464- 74). Mary stands in front wearing a blue and gray mantle over a pink dress. Wrapped in a white sheet, Jesus sits in the crook of her arm and solemnly raises his right hand in a benedictory gesture toward the viewer. Just behind them stand a pair of guardian angels. Together these solid, unmistakably Piero-esque characters

produce an ambience of timeless stillness. The cool gray neo-Classical wall and shelving niche directly behind them enhance the dreamlike atmosphere.

"Madonna and Child With Two Angels," circa 1464-74. Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Beyond the angel to the left, however, there's a doorway through which you see part of a different sort of room. Sunlight is pouring in through a pair of windows built into the left wall, casting a trapezoid of brightness onto a wall further back. Here is a keenly observed world of light and space, a place of firmly terrestrial, sensory experience.

The two Jerome paintings take viewers out into the natural world. In "St. Jerome in the Wilderness" (1450), the saint, in a sleeveless white tunic, kneels in prayer under a mostly blue sky. Books on a bench and in a stony niche are close at hand. In the middle distance is a parklike grove of trees. It's like a Renaissance version of Thoreau at Walden Pond.

In "St. Jerome and a Supplicant" (circa 1460-64) Jerome is again in his white tunic, but his head and body are rendered more fully in Piero's distinctively sculptural manner. He sits on a stone bench with a book in his lap, and, as if just interrupted from his reading, he looks intently askance at a man in a red robe — the painting's commissioner — who kneels prayerfully before him. In the distance, a walled town of white buildings nestles between a lake and rolling hills. Sadly, the greens of the foliage and the distant hills have turned to ugly browns, but Piero's feeling for natural reality hasn't been entirely lost.

Why Jerome? Patron saint of translators, librarians and encyclopedists, he was a scholar of the late fourth and early fifth centuries who translated the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into the Latin Vulgate. For Renaissance intellectuals, he personified humanism, an ethos whose spread was accelerated by books and translations, enabling the literate to think for themselves and not take truths on faith or from divinely sanctioned authority.

Born between 1410 and 1420, Piero lived in a time when the cosmologies of Christianity and science still seemed reconcilable, which accounts for the characteristic equilibrium of his work.

For generations to come after his death in 1492, so gracious a balancing act would no longer be possible.

"Piero della Francesca: Personal Encounters" continues through March 30 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; 212-535-7710, metmuseum.org.

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