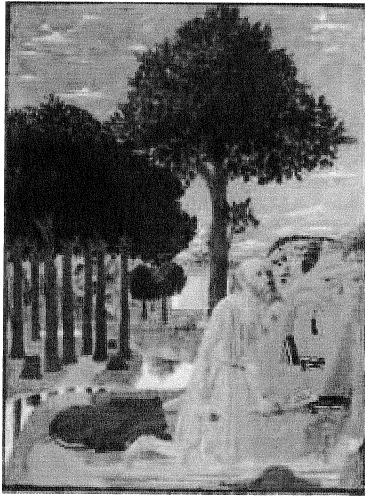


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A Puzzling Enigma



Gemaldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
"Saint Jerome in the Wilderness," 1450

By ROBERT EDWARD BULLOCK, Special to the Sun | January 22, 2014

A carefully focused exhibit of four devotional works by Piero della Francesca, on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, presents works never seen together before while highlighting the 15th-century painter's mastery of mathematical perspective.

Piero della Francesca (d.1492) was a seminal figure of Italian Renaissance painting, an accomplished mathematician and author of an important treatise on perspective. Spanning almost four decades, these four paintings provide a broad yet telescopic overview of his career. The accurate representation of the seen world was one of the preeminent accomplishments of Renaissance painting. Like the mathematical basis underpinning them, Piero's works display a cool-headed precision and unemotional foundation. His peculiar style is something to contend with, perhaps, as he presents religious scenes which appear emotionally frozen yet as fundamental and irreducible as bones or bedrock.

With a crystalline, mathematical geometry and a cool-temperature precision Piero's works consistently display a balance and perfection which emanates from the parts themselves, like a psalm when it is sung. His is a world of incremental measurements and soft shifts of value. The spark that brings these four works together is the conservation treatment of "Saint Jerome and the Suppliant," ca.1460, from the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Painted in the artist's full maturity, its projection of shadows across the varied surfaces and planes is an extension of the laws of perspective. The panel has suffered color change in the copper resinate pigment used in the background hills, which has turned from bright green to brown, but the panel has

otherwise benefitted from conservation work by recapturing the sense of open space and distant figures.

Appearing alongside is "Saint Jerome in the Wilderness," 1450, lent by the Gemaldegalerie Museum in Berlin for the first, and likely only, time. Created for an Anconan cloth merchant by the name of Girolamo Feretti, it shows the fourth-century scholar kneeling in the wilderness before a crucifix, his attributes of a cardinal's hat and a lion (which he aided by removing a thorn from its paw) are nearby as a little stream winds past him, glass-like, to the distance.

"Madonna and Child," ca.1439, may be his earliest surviving work and has suffered from rather unsophisticated attempts at cleaning. Its geometric construction opens out onto a background of treetops and sky, as a softly smiling Madonna, veiled in pink, embraces the baby Jesus in her arms. He gazes up at her, holding a dove in his right hand while clutching the sleeve of her blue robe in his left. Her red tunic stands out strongly against their doughy-white flesh, the composition interlocked in the short, fluid brushstrokes of egg tempera.

On the reverse of this panel is a perspective study. "A Wine Cooler in a Niche" is a highly accurate rendering of a vessel constructed of inlaid wood, the slender edges of its curved vertical ribs laid out in calculated, minute increments. A mastery of perspective study, the little pin pricks by which the design was transferred from the paper to the panel are still visible.

"Madonna and Child with Two Angels," ca.1464, appears to be the best preserved of the panels in the exhibit. Besides the accuracy and simple elegance of the forms of the Madonna, the two angels, and the baby Jesus, it displays a subtle, delicate shading of the architectural detailing, and a penetrating light that perhaps symbolizes the Incarnation itself.

There is an extra layer of atmosphere that lays across the room as the Madonna stands robed in pink, dark blue, and white while holding the Child in her arms. He holds a white flower while wearing a coral necklace, symbolizing protection against evil. And here again we see again a puzzling enigma in Piero's work -- the perfect articulation of religious faith with an emotion that winds away, glass-like to the distance.

"Piero della Francesca - Personal Encounters" is on view through March 30, 2014 at The Metropolitan Museum, 1000 Fifth Avenue (at 82nd Street), New York, NY 10028. metmuseum.org 212-535-7710.

More information about Robert Edward Bullock's work can be found at BullockOnline.com