

BOOKS

Reviews

The original Renaissance man?

A small catalogue for the Met and a life by an eminent US scholar scrutinise Piero della Francesca

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In less than a year, New York experienced the rare pleasure of two small exhibitions on the ever mysterious Piero della Francesca (around 1412-92), now touted, somewhat hyperbolically, as an archetypal Renaissance man. As with the catalogue for the exhibition organised by Nathaniel Silver at the Frick Collection last year, *Piero della Francesca: Personal Encounters*, produced for the show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art earlier this year (14 January-30 March) is a solid work of scholarship, rich with insights into Piero's art. The highlight

of the event there was the *Senigallia Madonna and Child with Two Angels*, around 1474, which was conserved to great effect in 2010 and made the subject of a monographic exhibition the following year.

A second work featured, *Saint Jerome and a Suppliant* (Accademia, Venice), around 1460-64, had a technical examination and cleaning jointly arranged in 2013 by the Accademia, Venice's Fine Arts Superintendency, under Giovanna Damiani, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (These aspects of the Accademia's picture are discussed in an unusually readable and informative essay by the conservator Chiara Rossi Scarzanella and two art historians – Roberto Bellucci and Cecilia Frosinini.) Finally, the exhibition featured two other, small-scale devotional panels, the ex-Contini Bonacossi *Madonna and Child* (now Alana Collection, Newark, Delaware), around 1432-39, here convincingly described as an autograph work, and *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness* (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin) of 1450. Much abraded, the latter panel is the earliest painting to be actually signed and dated by Piero.

This publication is beautifully produced and is a joy to read. Complementing the technical essay on the Accademia *Saint Jerome* is a historical one focusing on the likely patron of that work by Anna Pizzati. Based almost exclusively on family



chronicles and other archival sources, it is an account of the gifted and ambitious family of Girolamo Amadi, a Lucchese silk merchant in Venice, other members of which commissioned the architectural gem, Santa Maria dei Miracoli in Venice, and patronised Gentile da Fabriano.

The main section of the catalogue concerns entries on the four paintings by Keith Christiansen. These are long, thoughtful essays on each work, justifying the title, *Personal Encounters*. They cover much ground and enhance the

Piero della Francesca, *Senigallia Madonna and Child with Two Angels*, around 1474 (right) and *The Baptism of Christ*, 1440-50 (below)



mathematical achievements with the full chronicle of his life for the first time". This account follows closely on the historian's publication of Piero documents last year. Of these items, he writes, 100 were his own discovery. Banker's knowledge of Piero may be described as the Renaissance equivalent, say, of that of the late Sir Denis Mahon's of Guercino.

In the face of a widely argued chronology for much of Piero's oeuvre, Banker provides much new material and new reasoning, as in his early dating for the *Baptism of Christ*, 1436-39, in London. He posits a convincing itinerary for the scene-by-scene execution of the Arezzo frescoes illustrating the *Legend of the True Cross*. He also offers

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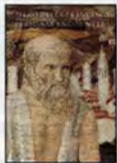
sound evidence for dating the *Madonna del Parto* fresco at Monterchi to the early 1460s. He then places Piero as an intellectual and an artist in the context of the scintillating cultural world fostered by his patron, Federigo da Montefeltro, Count, and later Duke, of Urbino. (In this regard, one may cite Christiansen's tantalising suggestion that one of Piero's masterpieces, the small, jewel-like *Flagellation*, may have been intended as a gift to the Duke as proof of the artist's talents in the realms of art and geometry.)

Even when discussing lost works, such as the practically unknown activity in Rome that the artist is credited with in 1453-54 and 1458-59, the author is insightful. Only in Piero's last years, when the historical evidence is sparser and his artistic production fell, victim to failing eyesight (we learn), does Banker's narrative slacken. And although several of the author's suggestions will no doubt provoke controversy, the importance of Banker's monograph is without question.

Piero della Francesca: Personal Encounters

Keith Christiansen, with contributions by Roberto Bellucci, Cecilia Frosinini, Anna Pizzati, and Chiara Rossi Scarzanella

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 96pp, \$19.95 (pb)



Piero della Francesca: Artist & Man

James R. Banker
Oxford University Press, 304pp, £25 (hbk)

