

MINISTERO PER I BENI  
 E LE ATTIVITÀ CULTURALI

DIREZIONE REGIONALE PER I BENI  
 CULTURALI E PAESAGGISTICI  
 DELLA TOSCANA

SOPRINTENDENZA PER I BENI  
 ARCHITETTONICI, PER IL PAESAGGIO  
 E PER IL PATRIMONIO STORICO,  
 ARTISTICO ED ETNOANTROPOLOGICO  
 DELLA PROVINCIA DI AREZZO

REGIONE TOSCANA

PROVINCIA DI AREZZO

COMUNE DI AREZZO  
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CAMERA DI COMMERCIO, INDUSTRIA  
 ARTIGIANATO E AGRICOLTURA DI AREZZO

BANCA ETRURIA

TOSCANA PROMOZIONE  
 AGENZIA PER IL TURISMO DI AREZZO

Although Piero della Francesca began travelling at an early age and spent great part of his life working at the most important Courts in Central and Adriatic Italy, he never definitely bound himself to any Lord and always remained closely attached to his native town, so much so that he signed his works as “*Pietro from Borgo*”, as if to proudly underline his origins.

The first section of the Exhibition is called, precisely, *Petrus de Burgo*: Piero's distinctive traits and his poetics, as well as his love for his land, can immediately be seen in the exhibited *Virgin and Child* - Piero's first work - exceptionally found in a private collection after more than 50 years -, in the *Treaty of Abaco* (circa 1460), and in *Saint Jerome with Jerome Amadi*, lent by the Academy Galleries of Venice, dating back to the late 1440s. After many years of untraceability, the fascinating small *ancona* of the *Virgin* (part of the Contini collection) is thus displayed at the Exhibition; according to both Longhi and Salmi, the *ancona* was one of the first works by Piero - thus, on the basis of information on Piero's birth, it may date back to well before his collaboration with Domenico Veneziano or, nonetheless, to when it first started; thanks to its undeniably new elements, it allows us to further understand one of the main issues raised by the Exhibition, namely Piero's role in the formation of Ferrara's culture and the breadth of his knowledge acquired in Florence before going to Ferrara.

The *Abaco*, whose two hand-written versions are on exhibition (the version of the Medicea Laurenziana Library and the signed version of the National Central Library of Florence), strikingly recall Piero's theoretical interests, which he pursued throughout his life, alongside painting.

The *Abaco* is a maths manual, an indispensable tool for accounting purposes, yet it also contains algebra problems and a section on geometric solids, a basis for the following Latin Treaty. Piero's interest in geometry and maths dated back to his youth and training, when he was urged to study what was most useful for a merchant's son.

It was precisely to a merchant in Sansepolcro that Piero dedicated such first text.

Piero's speculative activity did not end with the *Abaco*; rather, his search for scientific rules governing reality and thus the internal structure of paintings, the need for harmony, the study of proportions, the application of mathematical laws to art works, were an integral part of Piero's artistic research.

The view of San Sepolcro dominating the landscape in the painting of *Saint Jerome* - in Venice at least since the early 19th century (part of the Renier collection) - clearly demonstrates both how Piero's works always brought to life the colours and lands of his origin, and how he was profoundly affected by Flemish painting. The devout figure clothed in a red garment (nearly dominating that of the saint facing him) is, quite likely, the same praying figure represented under the cloak in *Our Lady of Mercy* in Sansepolcro - and “is what most resembles Flemish models”; as in no other painting did Piero create a complex interplay of lights, which was in itself a further reference to the Flemish world. As said by Paolucci, this is precisely the “sweet diffused luminosity” of Piero's “Baptism”, now kept in London.

In 1438, Piero left his land for the first time and set off for Perugia, where he worked with Domenico Veneziano at the Baglioni's Palace, the leading family of the time.

Piero had little to learn from Perugia. Even Domenico di Bartolo, the painter from Siena who had made in 1433 a small and innovative work (*Our Lady of Humility* - on exhibition), eventually had to give in to the traditional Gothic style during his stay in Perugia five years later.

Rather, what was fundamental for Piero while staying in Perugia was his collaboration with Domenico Veneziano, his teacher for some time. They shared many interests and both experimented the new science of perspective, forsaking the dark Gothic world for brighter and sunnier colours. Moreover, Domenico's cultural background was completely new to Piero.

As a youngster, Domenico had been a pupil of Pisanello and had grown accustomed to the sophisticated culture of Northern Italian Courts, which Piero would later work for. A large segment of Domenico's fresco of a *Famous Man* (from the National Gallery of Umbria), and another important fresco depicting Saint Francis and Saint John the Baptist (from Santa Croce Museum of Florence), are both displayed at the Exhibition.

The following year, i.e. in 1439, both painters were commissioned to fresco the Church of Sant' Egidio, annexed to the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence. Though the frescoes were lost, the Exhibition displays a fragment of the sinopite.

In the cosmopolitan environment of the late 1430s Florence, the heart of the Renaissance, Piero's figurative training underwent a fundamental change.

As written by Carlo Bertelli, “We do not need to be very imaginative to picture what Piero saw and whom he met. The masterpieces by Brunelleschi, Donatello and Masaccio’s generation were all there to be seen, and Ghiberti, Angelico, Luca della Robbia, just to mention a few, were all engaged in new works.”

Besides, the Oecumenical Council was being held in such a powerful town, a circumstance which allowed Piero to meet the humanists of Pope Eugene IV’s Court (the Pope himself was a humanist and an art patron) and to admire the Byzantine Emperor and his suit.

The Byzantine Court stroke deep in Piero’s memory, being the concrete and lively expression of the glories of the Roman Empire. Pisanello, presumably in Florence or the year before in Ferrara, made some *drawings* of the Emperor’s and his officers’ clothes, to be turned into a *medal*: said latter work, on exhibition, comes from Paris, and allows visitors to capture the images which Piero possibly retained from said event. Piero would later recall the Greek Court in the *Scourging*, one of his frescoes in Arezzo, in which he unusually painted the same headgear both for the triumphant Emperor Constantine and for his enemy Maxentius, as revealed by the exhibited copies (coming from Darmstadt) of the frescoes, which were damaged by an earthquake.

In 1446-1447, Piero was in Ferrara at Lionello d’Este’s Court.

Ferrara was quite a different world from Florence. In Florence, the Renaissance was part of the public world, especially thanks to the building of its spectacular Dome, to the associations’ patronage, and to the presence of progressive artists, also within religious orders, such as Beato Angelico (Dominicans) and Filippo Lippi (Carmelites) – the Exhibition displays the latter’s famous *Our Lady of Humility among angels and saints*, known as *Our Lady Trivulzio*.

Quite differently, in the North the Renaissance needed to be supported by local Courts. Lionello’s humanist Court was a particularly active centre in this respect. In his villa in Belfiore, Lionello planned a room where he could rest among the most valuable items of his collection. The walls of his “Studiolo”, his small study, were to be covered with Muses painted by artists from Ferrara and Siena. Piero did not contribute to such plan, though the unknown painter of “Urania Muse”, clearly drew inspiration therefrom.

Piero’s impact on Ferrara’s painters was deep and long-lasting.

Suffice it to observe the frescoes left in Padua’s Ovetari Chapel to see how Bono da Ferrara was profoundly affected by Piero’s painting, as confirmed by the former’s works on exhibition - the splendid *Virgin and Child*, from Budapest, and *Saint John the Evangelist*, from a private collection in Rome.

Ferrara represented a great challenge for Piero too.

At the time, the inspiring figure of Ferrara’s Court was the humanist Guarino Guarini, whose image in a *medal* by Matteo Pasti is displayed at the Exhibition. Guarini believed that a good portrait needed to include as many details as those potentially described by a good writer; Piero believed the contrary. Painting, as he would later say, was nothing but “drawing, proportion, colour”. However, Piero was led to focus on the exclusive problems of painting, or rather of shapes, probably as a result of his visual experiences at the Estensi’s Court.

According to Ciriaco d’Ancona (whose *Commentary* is on exhibition), Lionello d’Este’s linen room held a “Nativity” by Rogier van der Weyden. Although the work was later lost, it introduced Piero to the otherwise unthinkable qualities of oil painting, to its brightness and transparency, to its capacity of giving light to details. As argued by Bertelli, “The comparison between Magdalene’s hair in the exhibited *Lamentation over the dead Christ* by Rogier van der Weyden and the hair of the young woman at the feet of the Lady of Mercy in Piero’s *Polyptych* in Sansepolcro clearly shows what was at stake. In van der Weyden’s work, Magdalene’s hair is naturally bright, curly and tainted by bronze reflections, while in Piero’s work – and also in his later paintings – the locks are thick and unnatural, as if moulded like clay, rather than being painted”. Even though Vasari claimed that Domenico Veneziano had already used oil as a binder for his fresco in Sant’ Egidio, the potential of oil painting, as used by the Flemish, was quite different, being indeed an authentic expressive means.

The Exhibition’s section on Ferrara is also devoted to the fascinating theme of the battle.

Being fond of chivalry literature and classics, Lionello asked Piero to paint two frescoes in the Estense Palace – later destroyed – representing two battles, or two episodes of the battle between Scipio and Hannibal. What is now left are two partial copies of said frescoes, made by painters in Ferrara (circa 1520): one is kept in London and the other in Baltimore – the latter has been exceptionally lent to the Exhibition in Arezzo.

Quite likely, Piero had already observed in 1439 (when he was in Florence) the two paintings of the “Battle of Saint

Romano” by Paolo Uccello, and had appreciated the painter’s innovative representation of fallen soldiers and broken spears. Yet, by clothing soldiers in Roman garments (being influenced as he was by the learned environment of the Estensi’s Court), Piero’s fallen soldiers were not mechanical toys, as Paolo Uccello’s cataphracts lying on the ground, but rather bleeding and suffering men. Nor was he so reckless as the Florentine painter when representing horses (Uccello had probably used jointed three-dimensional models).

In Ferrara, Piero drew inspiration both from Flemish tapestries and frescoes with battle scenes, which were quite common in patrician villas in Northern Italy, and from Pisanello – present at the Estensi’s Court – who had already dealt with the battle theme in Palazzo Ducale in Venice and Mantua; it is precisely from Mantua that two important segments of Uccello’s frescoes come from and are displayed at the Exhibition: a *frieze with the S sign* and one with the *figure of a woman*. Both in Mantua and in Ferrara, the battle is frayed into a multitude of duels and develops into a bitter fight. In the canvas from Baltimore, we may even notice a foreshortened legless figure which seems to recall the one seen among the fallen soldiers in the frescoes from Mantua.

Moreover, it was thanks to Lionello and to the lively humanist environment at the Estensi’s Court that Piero came first in touch with the ancient world, which prompted him to study ancient monuments in Rome and paint the battle scenes in Arezzo.

In Ferrara, Piero developed a number of distinctive traits typical of his art: the study of narrative options in the light of the most rigorous perspective rules; the relationship between giant-like figures and the surrounding landscape; his first approach to oil painting, which would lead to the sublime Augustinian’s *Polyptych* and the *Virgin Mary of Senigallia*; the discovery of an innate world not to be disclosed to others; and his early contact with the ancient world. By looking at Piero’s works, from the battle scenes – now lost though imagined thanks to their copies – to his early affirmation in the *Baptism*, we can perceive his professional growth at the Estensi’s Court in his close attention to Pisanello’s traditional painting (prompted by his friendship with Domenico Veneziano), in his search for the autonomy of painting, based on perspective and proportional foundations, and in his reference to literary sources in a filtered, re-elaborated and mysteriously remote way.

While in Ferrara, Piero also met the great wood inlayer Cristoforo Canozzi da Lendinara, who was engaged in 1449 in decorating Lionello’s studio in Palazzo Belfiore: the Exhibition displays many works by said artist, including the suggestive painting with *Saint Ambrase*, inserted into a 18th century desk (coming from the Dome of Modena). Inlaid works, creating illusionist effects by resorting to perspective, further contributed to the development of Piero’s style and to his ability to profoundly influence the artistic world of the time. In those years, Piero also went to Loreto to work with Domenico Veneziano on a painting in the Basilica, which was under the Pope’s direct administration. Domenico and Piero then went separate ways, though Piero would later return to the Region for further works.

A recently-found document proves that Piero was in Ancona in 1450, engaged in painting a chapel for the important Ferretti family. This confirms Piero’s extensive work in the Marche Region, whose impact can be traced in painters coming from outside Urbino and working for the da Varano’s Court. As evidence of Piero’s influence on regional painters, the Exhibition displays *Our Lady of Mercy, Saints Venanzio and Sebastian* (coming from Camerino) by the gifted Girolamo di Giovanni (who would later work in Padua in the Ovetari Chapel), a work which clearly reminds us of Piero’s *Polyptych of Mercy*. It was precisely in Camerino that Giuliano Amadei, more of a miniaturist than a painter - who had previously realized, upon Piero’s drawing, the foot-pace and the counterforts of the *Polyptych of Mercy* in Sansepolcro - became prior of Saint George’s Convent in 1467.

Piero’s impact on regional painting can also be found in Luca Signorelli’s works, who was one of Piero’s pupils. Signorelli, who also worked in Marche, precisely in Loreto and Fabriano, painted the extraordinary *Presentation of Jesus to the Temple*, displayed at the Exhibition (coming from New York).

The Exhibition’s section on Piero’s influence on painting in Modena and Ferrara also displays *The pepper-crusher*, a large portion of the frescoes in the Feo Chapel in San Biagio (Forlì), destroyed during the First World War, and painted by Melozzo da Forlì. The latter, together with Signorelli, decorated the Santa Casa in Loreto in 1480, and presumably stayed also in Urbino, and thus was influenced by Piero.

According to Vasari, Piero also worked in Pesaro, and then again in Ancona, in San Ciriaco, where he painted a beautiful story, the *Wedding of Our Lady*, on Saint Joseph’s altar.

No trace is left of Piero’s works in Pesaro and Ancona, though it is precisely thanks to such works that Venetian

painters discovered his “sweet and new” style (Vasari’s definition, as recalled by Longhi), and especially “the foundation of perspective” which Boschini traced also in Giovanni Bellini’s works (the latter’s splendid painting – *Saint Justine of Borromei* (Bagatti Valsecchi collection) - is on exhibition).

The Exhibition’s section on Sigismondo Malatesta is centred around Piero’s extraordinary portrait of the Lord of Rimini (the town where Piero stayed in 1451), lent by the Louvre (Paris); in making said masterpiece, Piero was clearly affected both by Pisanello’s portraits of the Este family and by Flemish painting: suffice it to look at the black background, the embroideries of the Lord’s clothes, and the extraordinary naturalness conveyed through the use of light, creating subtle reflections in the Lord’s brown hair. In Rimini, Piero also met Leon Battista Alberti, the greatest 15th century theorist of architecture, who was entrusted by Malatesta with the project of a great mausoleum - the Malatestian Temple –for himself and his descendants, where Piero painted a beautiful fresco (now removed). The Exhibition displays a number of *medals* by Pisanello and Matteo de Pasti, who directed the works, and a stone sculpture with a *Banner-holding angel* by Agostino di Duccio – who realized most of the building reliefs – as “mementos” of such an important commission.

Piero often met and compared his work with Alberti – he also met him in Florence, Rome and possibly Urbino; many of the great architect and theorist’s ideas on painting affected Piero’s stylistic evolution.

In 1455, Piero stayed in Rome and worked in the Vatican under Nicholas V, and then again between 1458 and 1459 under Pius II. He also possibly worked under Callistus III (1455-1458).

The early Christian Basilicas, whose bright Christian classicism had previously influenced Angelico, Benozzo Gozzoli and Fouquet, were also admired by Piero, who found in the Lateranense Baptistery, in the apse of Sant’Agnese, and in the Basilica of Giunio Basso the same kind of walls, covered in bright mirrors and marble inlaid works, which had enthralled him in Rimini in 1450. The Constantine Arch celebrated events which were directly related to his engagement in San Francesco in Arezzo, which he had undertaken in 1452. His profound understanding of ancient values led him to ignore the *Battle on Bridge Milvio* of the Constantine era, and to focus on the great fragments of Traiano, which he drew inspiration from, as he did with the horses of the Quirinale - still bearing ancient Greek traits in their late Roman re-elaboration. Piero learnt of the cruelty of ancient Roman battles from the Traiana Column and from carved sarcophagi.

In Rome, Piero also worked in the Pope’s ancient Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. In 1455, the works at the Basilica were directed by Francesco del Borgo, a fellow countryman of Piero, an expert in maths, a bibliophile and possibly an architect, a man of great influence and reputation in the curia, who probably contributed to Piero’s engagement in Rome. In his monograph of 1927, Roberto Longhi attributed to Piero the frescoes left in the vault, remarking “the revealed beauty of the initial sketch, which the painter, for once, seems to have directly drawn on plaster”. Nowadays, especially after the 1981 restoration, any doubts about Longhi’s claims have been dispelled.

The Vatican frescoes certainly left a mark on Roman painters, first of all on Lorenzo da Viterbo – whose beautiful *Virgin and Child between Saint Michael and Saint Peter* (from Palazzo Barberini) is exhibited – who presumably painted the Chapel’s vault in Santa Maria Maggiore; and on Antoniazio Romano, whose *Portrait of Prelate* (circa 1460) - from a private collection, and thus here exhibited for the first time - may be compared with Piero’s *Portrait of Sigismondo Malatesta* (from the Louvre).

In Rome, Piero copied and illustrated the Latin translation of Archimedes’ *Treaty* on the spiral (on exhibition), an index of his knowledge of Latin and of his plan to write an entire treaty on perspective in painting, which he would later give a copy of to the Ducal Library of Urbino.

Piero’s first documented visit to Urbino – one of the most important Renaissance capitals of the time– dates back to 1469. He was lodged by Giovanni Santi, who would later become Raphael’s father. He was initially invited to paint an enormous altar-piece for a confraternity. Though he eventually did not realize the work, he nonetheless met Count Federico da Montefeltro – though, quite likely, he had already met him at Lionello’s Court in Ferrara – and his wife Battista Sforza.

In truth, Piero might already have stayed in the mid-1460s in Urbino, whose image was becoming increasingly modern under Fra Carnevale’s direction – recalled at the Exhibition through two significant paintings. It is precisely during those years that Piero presumably painted for Federico a magnificent altar piece, now at the Gallery of Brera in Milan (not applied for since it is deemed unmovable). Said earlier dating would appear to be confirmed by the date (1466) written under the *Virgin and Child* by Giovanni Boccati, in Seppio di Pioraco, which – as pointed out

by Emanuela Daffra – seems to have been made “with the Braidense Virgin’s solemn eyes in mind”. We may also note potential references to Flemish models in the light structure of Piero’s painting in Brera: after all, Piero himself was not indifferent to Spanish-Flemish painting, imported into Italy thanks to the presence in Urbino of the Flemish Giusto of Gand and of the Spanish Pedro Berruguete, whose *Dead Christ between two angels* (1470), lent by the Gallery in Milan, is displayed at the Exhibition.

As written by Paolucci “In Urbino, the painter from Borgo must have found the pleasure of debate, the flair for experimentation and exchange, the intellectual fervour which develops from the knowledge of being part of a great season of the spirit”.

The drawing for the portrait of Federico, used for the altar-piece in San Bernardino Church, was once again used by Piero for the *Diptych of the Dukes of Urbino*, a posthumous homage by to the Duke to his wife, Battista Sforza, who had died in 1472. With extreme freedom, Piero painted the Duke’s expression in the shadow, projecting light on his back. The anxious and tanned face of the Duke contrasts with the Duchess’s still face.

As written by Carlo Bertelli, “The latter is expressionless, and would look like marble if only her skin were not whitened by the moonlight. She appears to have no worries, as if coming from another world, impassive and mysterious. The far-away landscape, with the morning mist rising over the valleys and the boats navigating on calm waters, gives a very ordinary picture, silencing the couple’s appearance, lost in each other’s abstract contemplation. Personal feelings are mingled with an idealized concept of authority. On the back, two carts are about to meet. In spite of the stillness of the other sides of the panels, the monumental and enormous inscriptions, similar to tomb epitaphs, prompt us to contemplate eternity and transitional glory. The glory of the victorious general is compared with the virtuous lady’s encomium, who will be admired by men forever”.

After such an impassive celebration, Piero’s style took a different turn. In his *Virgin Mary of Senigallia*, which he probably painted upon Federico da Montefeltro’s request for his daughter’s wedding to Giovanni della Rovere, Piero pondered on Mediterranean monumentality and Northern family life, using perspective and colours in a sophisticated manner. A small triangle under the Virgin’ elbow allows viewers to perceive the distance between foreground and background, rendering the space both splendid and simple.

In Urbino, Piero continued to carry out his theoretical and speculative activities, dedicating his *De Prospectiva pingendi* to the Duke of Montefeltro, of which its two hand-written versions are here exhibited.

Piero was never salaried by any Court. He never got married and his activity was carried out as part of the administration of a rich family.

He also worked for confraternities, small village churches and for his town’s municipality. He was usual late In completing his works, though his patrons were generally understanding, allowing him to strike a balance between tradition and innovation, intellectual engagement and popular traits. Already blind, he died at the age of 80. Yet, as late as 1492, when he was probably 70, he was still engaged in buying a house in Rimini, with a fruit orchard and a well.

