

# PIERO DI COSIMO

## *The Poetry of Painting in Renaissance Florence*

PIERO DI COSIMO (1462 – 1522) was a creative spirit of uncommon imagination. Although he worked in the shadow of his great Florentine contemporary Leonardo da Vinci, Piero was esteemed in his day for his fantastic inventions. His paintings rivaled the verses of the ancient poets whose tales he transformed into a wonderfully strange visual language all his own. The artist conjured up fanciful myths and allegories, the meanings of which can be mysterious. But

Woodcut portrait of Piero di Cosimo from Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, 1568, National Gallery of Art Library

fantasy was not his only realm. Piero's affinity for vanished pagan worlds did not dull his Christian beliefs, reflected in the religious works he created with equal fervor. He provided tranquil, intimate images for private worship as well as large altarpieces with complex compositions to grace the public chapels belonging to some of the leading families of Florence. Piero also painted sensitive portraits and dwelled in the details of nature, animating his paintings with inviting landscapes — part observed, part imagined. No other painter of such quixotic inclination can be found in the entire Renaissance.

*Piero di Cosimo: The Poetry of Painting in Renaissance Florence* brings together forty-four paintings representing all facets of the artist's career, including altarpieces that still belong to the churches for which they were created. It also reunites several of his poetic mythological scenes, often painted in pairs or in a series to adorn Florentine palaces, but long since scattered from their original homes. With works lent by museums, churches, and private collectors in Europe and the Americas, this is the first major exhibition devoted to Piero di Cosimo.

*The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Galleria degli Uffizi, Superintendency of Cultural Heritage for the City and the Museums of Florence.*

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## PIERO DI COSIMO AND RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

Born Piero di Lorenzo di Piero d'Antonio, the young artist apprenticed in the workshop of Cosimo Rosselli in the 1470s. The bond between them was so strong that Piero took his master's name as his own. He spent his entire career in Florence except for one trip to Rome, but documents concerning his life and art are few. He was sufficiently successful to own at least one house with a courtyard and garden and to leave an estate with funds for masses to be said in his name after his death. Piero died at the age of sixty in 1522, probably of the plague.

Florence in the fifteenth century offered artists a propitious environment. The city was wealthy through international banking and trade, especially in textiles, and boasted a government with relatively wide citizen participation for its time. The *de facto* rulers, the Medici family, were among the greatest supporters of art and architecture of the Renaissance, setting a standard that other citizens strove to emulate. Many of Piero's patrons were bankers and merchants — Renaissance Florence's version of nobility — who were eager to commission paintings to embellish their palaces and altarpieces to demonstrate their piety. Competition among artists and patrons sparked continuing innovation, spurred on by the study of nature and the heritage of ancient art and literature. Mastery of these subjects, along with fertile imagination, stimulated new respect for artists as intellectuals.

## MADONNA AND CHILD WITH SAINTS LAZARUS AND SEBASTIAN

c. 1480–1485

oil and tempera on panel

Superintendency for Cultural Heritage for the Provinces of Florence  
(excluding the city), Pistoia, and Prato; Church of SS. Michele Arcangelo  
and Lorenzo Martire, Montevettolini

This altarpiece, still belonging to a small church in the Tuscan hill town for which it was made, is considered Piero's first independent religious work, painted when he was in his teens or barely in his twenties. Mary and the Christ child are flanked by two plague saints whose identities are confirmed by the inscription under the gray stone step. Lazarus holds a clapper, required for use by those with contagious diseases to announce their presence in public. A little white dog licks his wounds, as described in the Gospel of Luke 16:21. Sebastian is identified by the arrows and wounds inflicted by Roman archers in the third century. Piero's gift for including delightful details is already evident in the animals outside the building that is seen through the window on the right and in the boatman ferrying goods to or from the mill on the left.

MADONNA AND CHILD ENTHRONED  
WITH SAINTS PETER, JOHN THE BAPTIST,  
DOMINIC, AND NICHOLAS OF BARI  
(THE PUGLIESE ALTARPIECE)

c. 1481–1485

tempera and oil on panel

Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum Purchase

PORTRAIT OF A LADY

c. 1503

tempera and oil on paper, glued onto panel

Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence

4a and 4b

# PORTRAITS OF GIULIANO DA SANGALLO AND FRANCESCO GIAMBERTI

c. 1482/1483

oil on panel

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam,  
on loan from the Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis

Giuliano da Sangallo was the most distinguished Florentine architect of his generation and was also Piero's friend. The tools of his trade, a pen and compass, sit on a ledge before him. The portrait was initially planned as an independent work, but the death in 1482 of Giuliano's father, Francesco Giamberti, probably prompted the commission of the second portrait, to be framed with the first as a diptych. Francesco was a musician, which accounts for the sheet of music in front of him. An open-air mass takes place outside a rustic church in the right background, accompanied by an organist wearing a red cap, an imaginative remembrance of the elder man. These are the first known Italian portraits where the sitters are characterized by their profession. The limpid blue sky, clear landscape, and highly lifelike portrayals bear the influence of newly imported Netherlandish paintings on Florentine art.

## THE PUGLIESE ALTARPIECE AND NETHERLANDISH PAINTING

Piero painted the altarpiece at right for a country church in Lecceto, outside Florence. Its benefactor was the wealthy wool merchant Piero del Pugliese, whose coats of arms appear at either side of the base of the altarpiece. Portraits of Renaissance patrons were often inserted among the sacred figures, and a likeness of Piero del Pugliese, then in his fifties, appears in the guise of Saint Nicholas, the kneeling figure in a green cloak.

The altarpiece reflects the influence of Netherlandish paintings, which were hugely popular in Renaissance Florence. In 1483 an immense folding triptych of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (see photo) by the northern artist Hugo van der Goes arrived in the city. It

had been commissioned by Tommaso Portinari, the head of the Medici bank in Bruges, for export to his native Florence. There, the Portinari altarpiece was installed in the church at the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova and exerted a profound influence on Piero and his fellow artists. In response, they embraced new advances in the technique of oil painting, combining it with their traditional use of tempera (pigments mixed with egg yolk). Their works increasingly reflected a northern emphasis on saturated, jewel-like color and minutely observed, naturalistic detail.

Piero's enthusiasm for the Netherlandish manner is evident in the meticulously rendered vase of flowers, the distant landscape, and the sparkling pearl- and gem-studded miter, curiously just visible against the red lining of St. Nicholas' cope. Behind the Virgin, the instruments of Christ's future suffering — nails, crown of thorns, and cross — are embroidered on the border of the green cloth of honor, itself a motif perhaps adopted from northern art.

*Adoration of the Shepherds with Saints and Donors*, c. 1473–1478,  
by Hugo van der Goes. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

## THE PREDELLA

Piero's Pugliese altarpiece is his only one to retain its original, uncut predella—the band of scenes beneath the main panel. When altarpieces were dismembered in later centuries, the predellas and main panel were often sold separately, resulting in a more lucrative transaction. Predella scenes typically illustrate episodes from the lives of the holy figures depicted above. In the scene at left, books by heretics are consumed by fire, while those by Saint Dominic miraculously resist the flames; in the center, the young Christ meets the youthful John the Baptist; and at right, Saint Nicholas orders the destruction of a tree used in pagan worship.

## MYTHOLOGIES I

W ealthy Florentines employed painters to decorate furnishings and the walls of their homes with entertaining and often instructive paintings. Piero's *Liberation of Andromeda* may once have served as the front panel of a *cascone*, a chest commissioned at the time of marriage to hold a bride's belongings. Slightly larger paintings on wood, sometimes created in pairs or a series, were designed to fit into the paneled walls of a chamber. Known as *spalliere*, they take their name from the Italian word for shoulder (*spalla*), indicating their usual placement at shoulder height.

Favorite subjects came from ancient Greek and Roman mythology, familiar to Florentines who read the poetry of Ovid and Virgil, writings on the natural world by the ancient philosopher Lucretius, as well as descriptions by Vitruvius of precivilized life. Piero's poetic imagination guaranteed that his patrons would receive extraordinary versions of the well-known stories, full of learned but quirky inventions, such as mythical hybrid creatures, which he must have been granted considerable freedom to devise.

Some of the paintings in this room may be the ones mentioned by sixteenth-century artist and biographer Giorgio Vasari, who reported that Piero "executed, round a chamber in the house of Francesco del Pugliese, various scenes with little figures; nor is it possible to describe the different fantastic things that he delighted to paint in all those scenes, what with the buildings, the animals, the costumes, the various instruments, and any other fanciful things that came into his head."

## MYTHOLOGIES II

The fables told in the two sets of mythological scenes in this room are taken from the writings of the ancient Roman poet Ovid. His *Fasti*, which describes the rustic origins of Roman rituals and festivals, inspired Piero di Cosimo's mischievous *Discovery of Honey* and *Misfortunes of Silenus* (nos. 15a,b). Piero's more high-minded paintings of the legend of Prometheus (nos. 31a,b) were derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an epic poem that recounts tales of heroism, love, artistry, and transformation from classical mythology. The latter text was an invaluable resource for Renaissance artists, surpassed in popularity in Florence only by the works of Dante.

Much of what is known about Piero, or thought to be known, comes from Giorgio's Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, published in 1550 and 1568. Vasari vividly established Piero's reputation as uncivilized and eccentric. The artist's interpretations of ancient myths were highly bizarre, according to Vasari, who wrote of Piero's "wildness" and "imagination," adding: "this young man had by nature a most lofty spirit, and he was very strange" and "he knew no pleasure save that of going off by himself with his thoughts, letting his fancy roam and building castles in the air."



## A HUNTING SCENE

1488 to late 1490s

tempera and oil transferred to Masonite

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art,

Gift of Robert Gordon, 1875

The generous dimensions of this painting and the one at right indicate that they were *spalliere*, panels set into woodwork in a palace interior. The question of whether they were originally part of a larger series on the progress of human civilization remains open-ended. *A Hunting Scene* depicts the savagery of a primal hunt, which takes place after people had learned to flush out their prey with fire. The panel at right, *The Return from the Hunt*, reveals the calmer aftermath, as hunters recover quarry and rejoin their female companions on a nearby shoreline.

## THE RETURN FROM THE HUNT

1488 to late 1490s

tempera and oil on panel

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Gift of Robert Gordon, 1875

Possibly the two hunting scenes shown here are the ones described by Vasari for the house of Francesco del Pugliese — a progressive thinker, known for his interest in the writings of the first-century BC poet-philosopher Lucretius. Piero's imagery may be based on Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, first printed in Italy in 1473 but banned in Florence as a threat to church orthodoxy in 1516. Lucretius' description of the semi-wild stage of early humanity and emphasis on raw nature would have appealed to Piero di Cosimo, who made satyrs and centaurs join forces with humans for mutual benefit. In one moving passage in *The Return*, two fur-clad women care for a newly motherless cub.

## THE FINDING OF VULCAN ON LEMNOS

late 1480s

oil and tempera on canvas

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut,  
The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund

This scene and its companion (at right) may be Piero's first mythological narratives. *The Finding of Vulcan* shows the expulsion of the young god from Mount Olympus, a punishment to his mother Juno (Hera) for her meddling in the Trojan War, as told in Homer's *Iliad*. Vulcan lies nude on the ground, the hole in the clouds through which he tumbled visible above. The unfortunate god is surrounded by admiring nymphs wearing elaborate costumes on a flower-gathering mission.

Painted on lightweight canvas rather than wood, the paired scenes would have been easily transported, suggesting that they may have been destined for a country retreat rather than a city palace, compatible with their idyllic subject.

## VULCAN AND AEOLUS

late 1480s

oil and tempera on canvas

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1937

The figure at a forge on the left is likely the mature Vulcan, god of fire and metalworking. He is fashioning a horseshoe, while a rider waits and watches. Aeolus, the keeper of the winds, is the bearded figure pumping the bellows at a fire. Piero's reasons for including the family group and sleeping figure remain a mystery. A wooden structure rises in the background, built with tools that Vulcan would have made. Piero included a giraffe which helps date the paintings; a giraffe was given to Lorenzo de' Medici by the Sultan of Egypt in 1487. Sadly it died soon after when it was led through a low doorway and hit its head.

# LIBERATION OF ANDROMEDA

c. 1510–1513

oil on panel

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Combining Piero's love of unusual landforms and theatrical effects, this late masterpiece shows the artist at the height of his poetic powers. Painted for a Florentine merchant, Filippo Strozzi the Younger, it stays true to the story told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The painting recounts the rescue of the Ethiopian princess Andromeda whose mother, Queen Cassiopeia, had boasted that she was more beautiful than Juno, queen of the gods. In a rage, Juno persuaded the god Neptune to send a sea monster to ravage the Ethiopian coast. To appease the gods, Andromeda was bound at the water's edge and offered to the monster as a sacrifice.

At left Andromeda's uncle and suitor, Phineus, in a strange, red-winged costume, stands next to her anguished father, King Cepheus, in a white turban. The hero Perseus flies in at upper right, then stands atop the monster, wielding death blows to the creature — whose grimace is more likely to inspire sympathy than fear. Perseus' valor won Andromeda's hand in marriage and they rejoice at right, accompanied by musicians playing fantastic instruments.

## ALLEGORY

1500 (?)

oil on panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington,  
Samuel H. Kress Collection

The winged woman who effortlessly controls a rearing stallion gives human form to an idea, the triumph of virtue over animal passions. The mermaid churning up the sea below them was understood in the Middle Ages and Renaissance as a siren, symbolic of lust. Swimming past the island, she perhaps departs in search of more susceptible victims. The painting may have celebrated a marriage or protected a portrait. Renaissance likenesses sometimes had a cover painted with an image that alluded to the sitter's character, which in this case would have been the lady's chastity or virtue.

## SAINT JEROME IN PENITENCE

1495–1500

oil on panel

Museo Horne, Florence

16a

## TRITONS AND NEREIDS

c. 1500 – 1505

tempera and oil (?) on panel

Altomani & Sons — Milan and Pesaro

Tritons (mythical sea creatures with the upper bodies of men, the tails of fish, and sometimes the forelegs of horses) cavort with beautiful sea nymphs. In the companion panel they struggle against one another. Like the bacchanals (nos. 15a,b), these paintings once decorated the palace belonging to the Vespucci family.

16b

## TRITONS AND NEREIDS (BATTLING TRITONS WITH NEREIDS AND YOUNG SATYR)

c. 1500 – 1505

tempera and oil (?) on panel

Collection of Catherine B. and Sydney J. Freedberg

## THE DISCOVERY OF HONEY

c. 1500

oil on panel

Worcester Art Museum,  
Worcester, Massachusetts, Museum Purchase

This playful bacchanal and its companion (no. 15b) were commissioned for the palace of the Vespucci, a prominent merchant and banking family, to decorate the bedroom of Giovanni Vespucci after his marriage in 1500. A merry band of nymphs and satyrs makes a racket with kitchen utensils to lure bees from a hollow tree. Meanwhile, the obese Silenus arrives at right, teetering on a donkey. Presiding over the scene are the wine god Bacchus, nude except for a red cloak winding around him; his love, Ariadne; and indecently splay-legged Pan holding an aphrodisiac bunch of onions. A green and pink coiffed satyr stands atop the tree to gather honey, while a faun emerges from the womblike trunk below.



## THE MISFORTUNES OF SILENUS

c. 1500

oil on panel

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum,  
Alpheus Hyatt Purchasing Fund and Friends of  
Art, Archaeology, and Music

In the center of this composition, greedy Silenus, drunken companion to the wine god Bacchus, tries his hand at retrieving honey but reaches instead a wasp's nest, a play on the name of the Vespucci family, for whom the painting was made (*vespa* means "wasp" in Italian). On the right, Silenus has tumbled to the ground, having been stung and bucked off his donkey. A trio of satyrs tries to pull him to his feet. At lower left Silenus' stings are soothed with mud, while Bacchus, Ariadne, and nymphs laugh at the sight. The difference in the painted surface of the two bacchanals has caused much discussion. Opinions differ as to whether original paint layers of the *Silenus* panel were abraded at some point in their history or whether the artist left the scene unfinished for some unknown reason.

# THE VISITATION WITH SAINTS NICHOLAS AND ANTHONY ABBOT

c. 1489/1490

oil on panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington,  
Samuel H. Kress Collection

The central scene depicts the Visitation, the meeting of the pregnant Virgin Mary and the elderly Elizabeth, who is soon to give birth to John the Baptist. Their clasped hands indicate both the spiritual and physical center of the altarpiece. Piero cleverly inserted other episodes related to Christ's birth. At left on a stone platform shepherds adore the newborn Christ child, while beyond them Magi wind down a hillside. At right, a fresco of the Annunciation is painted on a church wall in the distance and distraught mothers holding the innocent babes massacred by Herod's soldiers are shown spilling out of a building.

Saint Nicholas reads the opening verses of the Book of Wisdom. The three golden balls near him refer to his charitable act of giving three impoverished girls gold for their dowries. Saint Anthony writes with a quill pen while holding an inkwell and pen case between his knees. Piero further enlivened the scene with details such as Anthony's spectacles, the sumptuous embroidery on his cloak, and the boar that accompanies him. Vasari commented at length on the altarpiece, describing the golden balls as "shining and casting gleams of light and reflections from one another; even by that time men could perceive the strangeness of his [Piero's] brain."

## PROMETHEUS FASHIONING THE FIRST MAN

c. 1510–1515

oil on panel

Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, Alte Pinakothek

In Greek mythology Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus were Titans, rivals of the Olympian gods. At left, Epimetheus, who had fashioned a clay model of the first man, trembles before Jupiter (Zeus), who tears the model apart. Jupiter, furious at the presumptuous attempt at creation, turned Epimetheus into a monkey, symbol of folly—shown half-transformed, climbing a tree behind them. At right, Prometheus with a white sash, gestures to the goddess Minerva (Athena) and points to his own creation on a pedestal, which lacks only the spark of life. She then carries him aloft to find the celestial fire, reminiscent of contemporary sacred plays where actors were suspended by ropes while assuming the role of angels or deities.

## PROMETHEUS STEALING THE CELESTIAL FIRE

c. 1510 – 1515

oil on panel

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg

This panel shows Prometheus' triumph and the tragic conclusion to his story. Soaring to the clouds, he steals the heavenly fire from the chariot of the sun, then uses it to ignite the soul of his statue by means of a smoldering fennel stalk, turning clay into a living being. Jupiter's punishment for such temerity is swift. At right Prometheus is sentenced to be bound for eternity while an eagle daily devours his liver. The enigmatic group of figures in the center may include Pandora, who released all the evils upon humanity, the ultimate punishment for Prometheus' theft of the spark of life. The compositional complexity of earlier panels is here distilled in favor of balance and clarity. The economy of action and setting, the warm, earthy ochers and greens, enlivened by shots of red, are all characteristic of the last years of Piero's career.

## THE TONDO

The popularity of the Florentine tondo, or round-format painting (*tondo* is Italian for “round”), coincided perfectly with Piero di Cosimo’s artistic career. Or perhaps the tondo became so sought after in part because of Piero’s innovative gift and skill for this circular shape, considered the perfect form in nature and in theology. Its roots go back to antiquity, but the tondo also relates to the Renaissance tradition of presenting gifts to a new mother on a painted round tray, known as a *desco da parto*.

Tondi were made primarily for devotional use in domestic settings, commissioned by individuals for a bedchamber or antechamber. Their private function, removed from the rigid demands of the church, suited Piero’s imagination by allowing for greater freedom in depicting the religious story. Intimate themes of the Madonna and Child or the Holy Family with Saints or Angels were popular. The impressive sizes of the Washington *Nativity* (no. 14) and Toledo *Adoration* (no. 9) suggest wealthy patrons with enough space for a grand display. Such large tondi might also have been intended for a room in a guildhall or another civic building.

MADONNA AND CHILD WITH  
THE YOUNG SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST  
AND ANGEL

c. 1500–1507

oil and tempera on panel

MASP, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand,  
São Paulo, Brazil

The angel picking a flower may derive from a now-lost drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, who was in Florence when this tondo was painted. Typical for Piero, the tondo teems with life. Eyed by a black bird, a large spotted caterpillar rests atop a tree stump. Caterpillars transformed themselves into butterflies, which since antiquity have been associated with the human soul. Their transformation also symbolized Christ's miraculous birth and resurrection. A dandelion, a bitter herb signifying Christ's suffering, bows down in the foreground, while mushrooms sprout near the oak, itself an attribute of the Virgin. The infant Baptist offers a reed crucifix to Christ, who blesses him and accepts his fate on the cross.

# THE ADORATION OF THE CHILD

c. 1505 – 1510

oil on panel

Superintendency of Cultural Heritage for the City and the  
Museums of Florence, Museo di Casa Martelli

This tondo is a small version of an impressive altarpiece (see photo) that Piero had painted a few years earlier. The altarpiece was destroyed in the Second World War, leaving this domestic painting as a precious record of one of Piero's great masterpieces. The oversized ox, bizarre trees, and football-shaped haystack in the distance appeared in both versions, but the smaller one lacks the adoring shepherd with a lamb at left. Piero modeled the energetic baby blessing his mother on a famous ancient marble sculpture (see photo) that he may have seen in the Medici collection, thus christianizing a pagan image.

*Boy with a Goose*, AD 2nd century (?),  
Roman. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

*Adoration of the Shepherds*, c. 1500 – 1510, by Piero di Cosimo.  
Lost, formerly Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, Berlin

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## THE ADORATION OF THE CHILD

c. 1505 – 1510

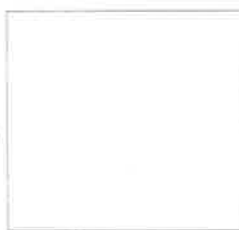
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Lost, formerly Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, Berlin

PIETÀ WITH SAINTS  
JOHN THE EVANGELIST,  
MARY MAGDALENE, AND MARTIN

c. 1510

oil and tempera on panel

Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria

Saint Martin appears at right in the middle distance, raising his sword to divide his cloak and share it with a pauper.



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MADONNA AND CHILD  
WITH THE YOUNG  
SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST

c. 1490–1500

oil on panel

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg

14

THE NATIVITY  
WITH THE INFANT SAINT JOHN

c. 1495–1505

oil on canvas, transferred from panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Samuel H. Kress Collection

35a

## TWO ANGELS

c. 1510 – 1515

oil on canvas, transferred from panel

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Turner Sargent Collection —  
Bequest of Mrs. Turner Sargent (Amelia J. Holmes)

35b

## TWO ANGELS

c. 1510 – 1515

oil on canvas, transferred from panel

Private collection, New York

18

## MADONNA AND CHILD WITH THREE ANGELS

c. 1500

tempera on panel

Galleria Moretti, Florence

MADONNA AND CHILD ENTHRONED  
WITH SAINTS ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY,  
CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA, PETER, AND  
JOHN THE EVANGELIST WITH ANGELS

completed by 1493

oil and tempera on panel

Museo degli Innocenti, Florence

Commissioned by the Pugliese family for the church connected to the founding hospital in Florence, this opulent altarpiece is one of Piero's highest achievements in religious painting. This exhibition marks the first time the altarpiece has left Florence since it was created five hundred years ago.

Saint Catherine, identifiable by her attributes of a broken wheel and a crown with a martyr's palm branch at her feet, reaches up to receive a ring from the Christ child. In an unusual dual mystic marriage, the widowed Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, particularly venerated by the patrons, accepts a gift of flowers, while other blooms are scattered about. The scene is set as a *sacra conversazione*, or sacred conversation, where holy figures from different time periods quietly commune with one another through gesture and gaze. At the top of the throne Piero placed nearly extinguished candles and painted a sculpted head of an angel that seems almost as alive as the two winged cherubs on either side.

MADONNA AND CHILD  
WITH THE YOUNG  
SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST

c. 1490–1500

oil on panel

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg

Images of Saint Jerome and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux appear in the landscape behind the Virgin and embracing infants. Possibly the tondo's original owner was named after those saints or was especially devoted to them. At left, Jerome kneels before a cross and beats his chest with a stone in penitence. The lion near him became Jerome's faithful companion after the saint removed a thorn from its paw. On the other side, Bernard of Clairvaux in the white habit of a Cistercian monk sits before a prayer bench. The devil chained to a column in front of him alludes to the saint's conquest of temptation.

10

MADONNA AND CHILD  
WITH SAINTS MARY MAGDALENE  
AND JOHN THE BAPTIST

c. 1495

oil on panel

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg

30

PIETÀ WITH SAINTS  
JOHN THE EVANGELIST,  
MARY MAGDALENE, AND MARTIN

c. 1510

oil and tempera on panel

text

Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria

2

MADONNA AND CHILD  
WITH SAINTS ONUPHRIUS  
AND AUGUSTINE

c. 1480

tempera and oil on panel

The Alana Collection

## ADORATION OF THE CHILD

c. 1490–1500

oil on panel

Toledo Museum of Art,

Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment,

Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey

The subject of this painting follows the visionary account of Christ's birth written by the mystic Saint Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373). According to her *Revelations*, a popular literary source for Nativity scenes, Mary gave painless birth on her knees and immediately began worshiping the Child while Joseph slept nearby. Full of symbolic detail, the tondo includes plants and flowers referring to Mary's purity, and the slumbering Child on a rock anticipates his death and tomb. Piero added details that are both meaningful and whimsical. The water trickling from the rock implies life springing from death, and thus, Christ's resurrection. Squirming tadpoles in the pool also suggest new life, their mysterious transformation into frogs standing as an analogy to Christ's miraculous birth from a virgin.

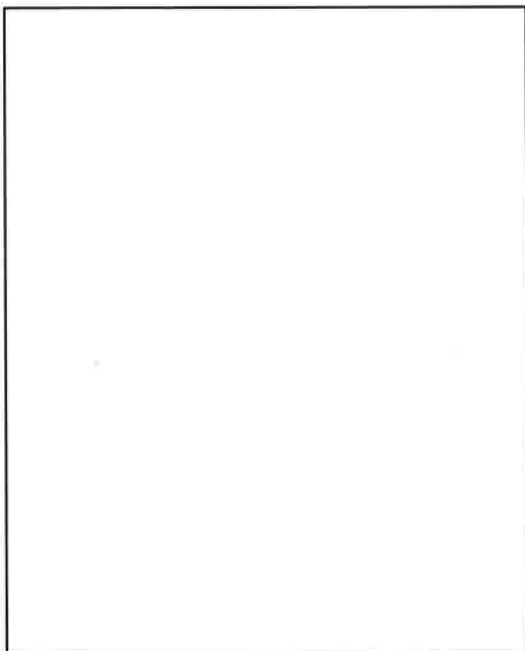
## VOLTO SANTO

c. 1510

oil on panel

Szépművészeti Múzeum/Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

Based on a venerated medieval wooden sculpture now in the Cathedral of Lucca (see photo), this unusual representation of the *Volto Santo*, or Holy Face, depicts a miraculous vision of a living, but not suffering, Christ on the cross. According to legend, Nicodemus, who helped bury Christ, attempted to carve his likeness but was overwhelmed by the task. Angels came to the rescue and completed the face while Nicodemus slept. The image of Christ, fully dressed, evokes sculptures that were jeweled and costumed for feast days or processions.



Nothing is known about the origin of the painting; even the attribution to Piero is complicated but now accepted. The landscape provides distinctive evidence for the painter's hand, with its verdant and rich details, including an artist on scaffolding at the lower right frescoing an image of the lion of Saint Mark on the exterior of a building.

*Volto Santo of Lucca*, late 12th – early 13th century.  
Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca

MADONNA AND CHILD  
WITH SAINTS JOHN THE BAPTIST  
AND CECILIA WITH TWO ANGELS

c. 1505–1510

oil on panel

The Art Institute of Chicago, Lacy Armour Fund

The dark tonality is the result of Piero covering most of his original composition with an opaque brown paint, leaving only the area depicting the Virgin and Child untouched. He then painted the angels and young John the Baptist on top of this dark layer, which over time has begun to show through the surface paint.

Cecilia on the right, the patron saint of music, sings to Christ from a hymnal, while he is distracted by the infant John the Baptist, who offers him more plums even though the Child's cheeks bulge with a bite already taken. While the action appears playful, the plum symbolizes fidelity and alludes to Christ's blood and suffering because of its purple-red juice.



# BEHIND THE SCENES

## HISTORY OF THE ALTARPIECE

These three fragments once formed part of an altarpiece that Piero di Cosimo painted for the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. By the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century the painting was on the Florentine art market. Probably at that time — but possibly earlier — the two sets of angels were cut away from the main section of the altarpiece, perhaps in an effort to appeal to tourists wanting to buy a souvenir. Now reunited for the first time in over a century, the three fragments are shown here so that they can be studied in the context of other paintings by Piero.

Alterations made by past restorers were intended to hide the poor condition and fragmentary state of the altarpiece. A photograph



The altarpiece as photographed in 1928. Photo credit: Frederick Beck

of the lower section taken in 1928 shows that by then it had been fitted with an arched top and thickly overpainted to cover areas of old paint losses (see photo). In the process, the figures were partly repainted. Saint Jerome's cloak was extended down to his ankles using a gray overpaint that hid the original purple

color. Piero's whimsical lion became a fiercer beast, and more flowers were added in the foreground.

At some point in their history, the two sets of angels were “transferred,” a technique that involves removing the original wood support from behind the paint layer and replacing it with fabric. Triangular inserts, probably taken from other parts of the sky in the original altarpiece, were added at the lower, inside corners to create the new rectangular format. Extensive overpaint intended to conceal the joins has recently been removed from the work at the left, revealing Piero's original blue sky. Darker overpaint still covers the sky and bodies of the angels in the fragment at right, but it has been removed from their faces, revealing their damaged state.

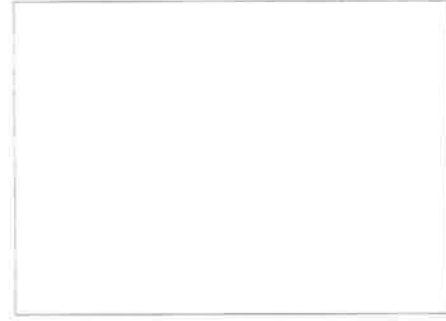
Restorations involving extensive repainting and altering of the original format were common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but are no longer considered acceptable. Conservators have recently removed the modern arched top to reveal what remains of Piero's original painting. They will apply paint only to areas of loss (inpainting) and will use materials that do not discolor and can be easily removed in the future if desired.

# BEHIND THE SCENES

## TREATMENT AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ALTARPIECE

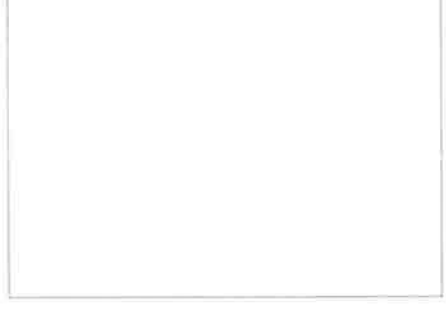
In 2012 the Yale University Art Gallery and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, began a collaborative project to restore two of the three fragments from Piero di Cosimo's altarpiece for the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence: the large lower section and the angels seen at the left. Conservators have painstakingly removed some of the disfiguring and mismatched overpaint, but much remains to be done. The conservation will be completed after the exhibition closes. As more of the original paint surface is uncovered, scholars will gain insights into Piero's technique and the relationship of the fragments to each other.

Despite the altarpiece's damaged condition, extensive passages of delicate coloring and subtly textured paint surfaces remain. Piero's original conception is reflected in the tender modeling of the Virgin's face, the soft blue and purple shadows on her scarf, and the relief of the Crucifixion and hooded members of a religious order "carved" into the base of the Virgin's throne. The tiny procession with a cardinal on horseback, visible in the distance just to the right of Saint Vincent's Ferrer's shoulder, typifies Piero's tendency to enliven his landscapes with narrative details.



Possible reconstruction of the altarpiece with white lines indicating the seven planks of wood

The original format of the altarpiece remains hypothetical. Its width can be determined from the Yale fragment, which has remnants of a brown border along its lateral edges, but the composition's height is not known. Piero painted the altarpiece on a panel made from seven planks of wood; knots from tree branches are now visible above the eyes of Saint Vincent Ferrer and at Saint Jerome's temple. The placement of the angels is suggested by the carpentry joins between the planks, which have opened up over time, causing long vertical cracks in the paint. The cracks in the fragments with angels can be lined up with those in the lower panel in different ways, depending on which vertical lines are "connected" so two options for the reconstruction of the altarpiece are illustrated.



Possible reconstruction of the altarpiece with white lines indicating the seven planks of wood

MADONNA AND CHILD  
WITH SAINTS JOHN THE BAPTIST,  
MARGARET, MARTIN, AND ANGELS

c. 1515 – 1518

oil on panel

Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma,  
Samuel H. Kress Collection

This painting's watery palette punctuated with glowing color, soft light, and a simplified, bare landscape are all hallmarks of the final years of Piero's career. In what is likely his last surviving tondo, Piero recycles and recombines motifs from earlier works. The struggling, grasping baby, rocky settings, and reading saints are found throughout his career. Piero's curious approach to nature is evident in the lamb with spindly legs but the snout of a pig. The sacrificial lamb refers to the Baptist's recognition of Christ as the savior of humankind: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). By embracing the lamb, the Christ child embraces his fate.

MADONNA AND CHILD  
WITH SAINTS VINCENT FERRER  
AND JEROME

c. 1510 – 1515

oil on panel

Yale University Art Gallery,  
University Purchase from James Jackson Jarves

MADONNA AND CHILD  
WITH SAINTS JOHN THE BAPTIST,  
MARGARET, MARTIN, AND ANGELS

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IMMACULATE CONCEPTION  
WITH SAINTS AUGUSTINE, BERNARD,  
FRANCIS, JEROME, THOMAS AQUINAS,  
AND ANSELM OF AOSTA

c. 1515–1516

oil on panel

Superintendency for Cultural Heritage for the Provinces of Florence  
(excluding the city), Pistoia, and Prato; Provincia Toscana di San Francesco  
Stimmatizzato OFM, Convento San Francesco, Fiesole

Piero's penchant for creating curious details is evident in the halo encircling Augustine's miter and the large bent nail piercing Francis' hand, an allusion to the saint's profound empathy for Christ's suffering on the cross. Highly unusual for an altarpiece of its date, the composition portrays Saint Francis and Saint Jerome kneeling on a stone block that acts as an extension of the actual altar in the church, creating the illusion of the viewer's space coexisting with that of Piero's imagined, heavenly realm. The term "Immaculate Conception" refers to Mary's immunity from original sin. In the upper part of the composition, Mary and an angel flank God the Father, who exempts Mary from sin with the touch of his scepter.

# SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST

c. 1500–1505

oil and tempera on panel

Honolulu Museum of Art,

Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1961

According to legend, a pagan priest challenged John the Evangelist to prove the strength of his faith by drinking from a cup of poison. John survived unharmed, for once he had blessed the cup, the poison assumed the form of a snake and departed the vessel. Piero gave Saint John his customary androgynous beauty that sometimes leads modern viewers to mistake his Renaissance image for that of a young woman. Piero may have based the golden chalice on one in a painting by Hans Memling, which was then in Italy and is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art (see photo).



*Chalice of Saint John the Evangelist*  
by Hans Memling, c. 1470/1475,  
National Gallery of Art,  
Samuel H. Kress Collection (Gallery M39)

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oil and tempera on panel

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## SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

c. 1500 – 1505

oil and tempera (?) on panel

Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome

A model of penitence, the devoted follower of Christ appears between a dark background and a fictive stone window, recalling Netherlandish portraits. While her beauty and rainbow-hued finery call to mind her reputation as a courtesan, she reads a holy book with the serenity of one redeemed. An alabaster vessel on the ledge alludes to the precious oils with which the Magdalen anointed the feet of Christ and to the myrrh she brought to his tomb.

# THE BUILDING OF A PALACE

c. 1514–1518

tempera and oil on panel

Collection of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art,  
the State Art Museum of Florida,  
Florida State University, Sarasota, Florida

A great palace rises from an undeveloped landscape. Probably intended as a *spalliera* set into wood paneling, the painting has been variously associated with the history of primitive man, the construction of King Solomon's temple, the architectural precepts of Vitruvius in antiquity, or an unrealized palace complex designed by Giuliano da Sangallo for the Medici. The building is nearly complete, but the foreground is cluttered with construction activities in no apparent sequence. Some workers wear antique tunics while others are in fifteenth-century costume. The painting shows neither the classical past nor the Renaissance present but conflates the two. What can be said for certain is that it celebrates the spirit and practice of architecture.

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# MADONNA AND CHILD WITH TWO MUSICIAN ANGELS

c. 1504–1507

oil on panel

Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Galleria di Palazzo Cini, Venice



ATTRIBUTED TO PIERO DI COSIMO  
SAINT VERONICA

c. 1510

oil on panel

Private collection

According to Catholic legend, Veronica wiped the sweat from Christ's face as he was carrying his cross to Calvary. The cloth she used became miraculously imprinted with his features and became known as the *vera icon* (true image) from which her name derives. Images of Saint Veronica holding the cloth were then rare in Italy, but Piero di Cosimo's frequent patron Piero del Pugliese owned a very similar Flemish painting of Veronica, upon which this work may be based.

## MADONNA AND CHILD WITH A DOVE

c. 1490–1500

oil on panel

Musée du Louvre, Département des peintures

Draped in simple garments, gazing modestly down toward a prayer book, Mary appears young, devout, and loving. The cloth of honor behind her is no silk brocade but a humble mat of woven leather, and her blue shawl opens between two fastenings to frame her breast as a red heart. The lively yet solemn child on her lap twists in a movement that echoes images of the Christ child by Leonardo da Vinci. While the gray-tipped tail of the dove on the windowsill suggests an ordinary bird, its tiny halo signals the presence of the Holy Spirit.

## ATTRIBUTED TO PIERO DI COSIMO PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN

c. 1500

oil on panel

By Permission of The Trustees of  
Dulwich Picture Gallery, London

ATTRIBUTED TO PIERO DI COSIMO  
SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST  
ON PATMOS

c. 1510 – 1522

oil on panel

National Gallery in Prague

Lost in thought, John the Evangelist pauses as he waits for inspiration to strike, the inkwell and quill pen unused. The large open book was presumably intended to display text from his Book of Revelation (The Apocalypse). The saint's companion eagle points to the empty page with his beak, perhaps holding the place, and the paper fixed to the rock is also mysteriously blank. This painting and the works on either side present puzzling questions of attribution; it is hoped that the opportunity to compare them here with other secure paintings by Piero will provide insights into their authorship.