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THE FRICK COLLECTION

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## PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA IN AMERICA

### Frick to Present First U.S. Exhibition on this Remarkable Renaissance Artist

February 12 through May 19, 2013



Piero della Francesca (1411/13–1492), *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels*, c. 1460–70, oil (and tempera?) on wood transferred to fabric on panel, © Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts

Piero della Francesca was revered in his own time as a “monarch” of painting. Yet by the end of the sixteenth century his achievements had sunk into obscurity. During the nineteenth century, however, British and American collectors on the European Grand Tour rediscovered the master’s works and resurrected his reputation, and today Piero is widely acknowledged as one of the founders of the Italian Renaissance. The Frick was a beneficiary of this renewed interest and holds four of Piero’s paintings, more than any other institution outside of Europe. In February, the Frick will present the first exhibition in the United States dedicated to the artist, featuring its four panels together with works from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts; and the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon. Together these seven paintings—all created for Borgo San Sepolcro, the city of Piero’s birth—demonstrate the richness of Piero’s oil technique and the monumentality of his compositions for

which he is celebrated. The exhibition was organized by Nathaniel Silver, Guest Curator and former Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow, The Frick Collection. Support for the exhibition is generously provided by Mrs. Henry Clay Frick II, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, Hester Diamond, the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, and the Robert Lehman Foundation. The

accompanying catalogue has been underwritten by The Christian Humann Foundation and a gift from an anonymous donor in memory of Charles Ryskamp.

Over the course of a nearly sixty-year career, Piero worked in almost every major city across the Italian peninsula but is best remembered for the commissions he completed in and around Borgo San Sepolcro. Piero was born there sometime between 1411 and 1413 and trained locally, establishing connections in his hometown that lasted the rest of his life. In 1439 the young painter moved to Florence, where major refurbishments were underway at several of the city's most important civic buildings. In the Hospital of Sant'Egidio, he worked on the foremost fresco cycle executed in Florence since Masaccio's famed Brancacci Chapel of 1425–27. Distinguishing himself in that medium, Piero soon won a commission to fresco the entire choir of the Church of San Francesco in Arezzo (a short distance from Borgo) with the story of *The Legend of the True Cross*. He completed this, his most famous work, around 1462. Piero's skill attracted the attention of important patrons such as Pope Pius II in Rome and the Duke of Urbino, who commissioned some of Piero's most important surviving paintings.



Hypothetical reconstruction of Piero's altarpiece for the Church of Sant'Agostino, Borgo San Sepolcro, showing the position of seven of the altarpiece's eight surviving panels. The eighth panel, Saint Apollonia, is not illustrated in this view as it was located on the side of the altarpiece.

## PIERO'S WORK SOUGHT BY AMERICAN COLLECTORS



Piero della Francesca, *Saint John the Evangelist*, 1454–69, oil and tempera on poplar panel, The Frick Collection; Michael Bodycomb

European and American collectors in the twentieth century sought out rare examples of Piero's work and secured them with a combination of determination and wealth that is reminiscent of his fifteenth-century patrons. In 1936 The Frick Collection acquired Piero's *Saint John the Evangelist*, at left, from Knoedler and Company, which had discovered the picture in Vienna. Costing the museum \$400,000, *Saint John* was the most expensive Renaissance painting in America at the time and reflected Piero's status as an artist who was perceived as a founder of Italian painting. As the first Piero bought by a public institution in the United States, *Saint John* was introduced to America by sensational national headlines. For Helen Clay Frick, who served as the head of the museum's acquisition committee and had already made at least one attempt to obtain a work by Piero for the Collection (including, in 1930, his *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels*), this acquisition was a long-awaited triumph. *Saint John* was joined in 1950 by *An Augustinian Nun* and *An Augustinian Friar* (see next page). In 1961 Piero's *Crucifixion* entered the Collection, the gift of Trustee John D. Rockefeller Jr., who had purchased the painting in 1924 for \$375,000.

Collectively, the four Frick acquisitions marked the height of Piero's popularity in America. Isabella Stewart Gardner had initiated the vogue for Piero in the United States with her 1903 purchase of his magnificent fresco *Hercules* (now on public view at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston). She was followed in 1913 by Singer sewing-machine heir Sterling Clark, who bought the *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels*, an ambitious altarpiece executed on an intimate scale (front page). One year later, Robert and Philip Lehman acquired *Saint Apollonia* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.).

## THE SANT'AGOSTINO ALTARPIECE REENVISIONED

The four Frick panels and *Saint Apollonia* were originally part of an altarpiece that Piero executed between 1454 and 1469 for the Church of Sant'Agostino in Borgo San Sepolcro—the most monumental work the artist created for that city. Described by Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists* (1550) as a work that was “highly praised,” the massive polyptych stood over the church's high altar for almost a hundred years, held aloft by two lateral piers. It was removed from Sant'Agostino shortly after 1555, probably when a group of nuns took over the church and its convent. Displaced from its position in the apse, the altarpiece was sawn into pieces and its gilt frame discarded. Local collectors who valued Piero's artistic achievements preserved many of the panels. Today, however,



Piero della Francesca, *An Augustinian Friar (Saint Leonard?)*, 1454–69, oil and tempera on poplar panel, The Frick Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb



Piero della Francesca, *An Augustinian Nun (Saint Monica)*, 1454–69, oil and tempera on poplar panel, The Frick Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

only eight are known to survive: the Frick's *Saint John the Evangelist*, *An Augustinian Nun*, *An Augustinian Friar*, and *The Crucifixion*; *Saint Augustine* (Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon); *Michael Archangel* (The National Gallery, London); *Nicholas of Tolentino* (Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan); and *Saint Apollonia* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). We can only envision the original appearance of Piero's Borgo masterpiece from its surviving fragments, reassembled in the hypothetical reconstruction shown on page 2. Based on technical evidence and documents, this reconstruction illustrates the likely placement of seven of the eight surviving panels. The gray areas indicate the shape of panels that most likely formed part of this work, suggesting how the altarpiece probably looked.

Most spectacular of the surviving panels are the four saints who dominated the principal tier of the altarpiece (from left to right, *Saint Augustine*, *Saint Michael Archangel*, *Saint John the Evangelist*, and *Saint Nicholas of Tolentino*). These originally flanked a central panel, now lost, that most likely depicted either the *Virgin and Child Enthroned* or the *Coronation of the Virgin*. The large saints in the main tier were surrounded by smaller figures and narrative scenes, including three of the Frick's four paintings. While the fragility of certain panels makes it almost impossible to reunite all eight, the exhibition will

bring together six of them. The panels depicting Saint John the Evangelist and Saint Augustine were integral to the first attempt by art historians to reconstruct the Sant'Agostino altarpiece. In 1941, Millard Meiss of Columbia University identified *Saint John the Evangelist* as part of the polyptych's main tier. Prompted by this breakthrough discovery, Kenneth Clark, a professor at Oxford and the former director of London's National Gallery, attributed a previously unidentified work in Portugal's national collection to Piero and published *Saint Augustine* as a painting from the same complex. The panel will make its debut in America with the Frick exhibition.

The altarpiece takes its name from Saint Augustine (Sant'Agostino), a fifth-century bishop and one of the fathers of the church. In his painting, at right, Piero characterized Augustine as a man in later middle age with a bushy salt-and-pepper beard. His brow furrowed in concentration, Augustine wears a richly decorated cope (a semi-circular brocaded cloak) over a long black habit. Elevated to the status of bishop during his lifetime, Augustine is shown wearing a pointed miter, his ceremonial emblem of office. Its gem-encrusted surfaces exemplify the wealth of material detail that embellishes this figure, including a translucent rock crystal staff, precious jewels, and lavishly embroidered robes. Piero conveyed the grandeur of *Saint John the Evangelist* more subtly. Barefoot and sunburnt, the saint gazes down with his attention focused, reading silently from a book. The gravitas of John's appearance is emphasized by his magnificent drapery. His arms are wrapped in a rich vermillion cloak, the deep folds of which suggest the weight of the costly fabric. Beneath it he wears a blue-green robe, its hem is adorned with gilt embroidery punctuated by rubies and aquamarines set off by a delicate border of pearls.



Piero della Francesca, *Saint Augustine*, 1454–69, oil and tempera on poplar panel, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon

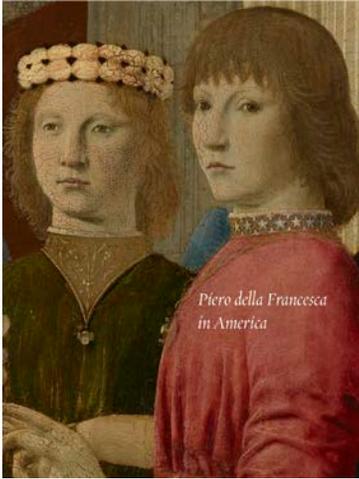
## **IMPORTANT ALTARPIECE FROM THE CLARK SHOWN IN NEW CONTEXT**

Completing the group will be one of the most important Renaissance works in America, Piero's *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels* from the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. This intact altarpiece encapsulates Piero's singular ability to paint monumental figures of profound dignity and spiritual grandeur. As with his frescoes in Italy, which hardly ever travel, this large panel is rarely lent by its home institution. It has been presented in New York City only once since the Clark opened to the public nearly sixty years ago, making this a particularly exciting viewing opportunity. Removed from the artist's native city nearly two hundred years ago, this masterpiece will be returned to the context of Piero's oeuvre when it joins his six other paintings in the exhibition.

The journeys of these paintings remind us of the distance that Piero's reputation has traveled, the early twentieth-century collectors in America who introduced his talents to this country, and the unforgettable impressions that these collectors brought back from Italy of Piero's most impressive frescoes. Unlike *The Legend of the True Cross*

cycle that can never be moved from the Church of San Francesco, the paintings installed together in the Frick's Oval Room will effectively re-create on an intimate scale the experience of visiting his Arezzo masterpiece. They will not reinvent but rather refine the encounter with Piero's magisterial pictorial effects.

## SUBSTANTIAL PUBLICATION ACCOMPANIES EXHIBITION



The accompanying catalogue provides the first sustained consideration of Piero as an artist whose identity was formed by the training and commissions that he received in San Sepolcro. Four essays, seven entries, and an appendix reveal the artist's engagement with indigenous sources by examining the works through the lens of his native city and its traditions. The catalogue introduces each painting with the American collector who brought it to the United States and, in some cases, who made their own visits to San Sepolcro. An introductory essay, written by Guest Curator Nathaniel Silver, addresses the artist's rediscovery by turn-of-the-century American private collectors. It is followed by an essay, also by Silver, that explores Piero's lifetime dedication to his hometown and his creative

engagement with its artistic traditions. Next, Machtelt Israëls, Guest Researcher, University of Amsterdam, addresses the form and construction of the artist's altarpieces there. In the final essay, James Banker, Professor Emeritus, North Carolina State University, considers the painter's local career in the second half of the fifteenth century and suggests a previously overlooked patron of his work. The entries that follow offer a detailed analysis of each individual work, including conclusions suggested by several new technical examinations. This section of the book also includes the *Hercules* fresco (not in the exhibition, but on permanent view at Boston's Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum). Among the themes that emerge from these entries are Piero's interest in the depiction of the human figure, his exploration of subtle lighting and sculptural effects, as well as the orchestration of these effects across larger unified compositions. The appendix features a vivid digital reconstruction that evokes the original setting of the altarpiece, a remarkable visual reference designed by Elena Squillantini, masters candidate, Università degli Studi di Firenze; and Giacomo Guazzini, doctoral candidate, Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Published by The Frick Collection, it is available in softcover (\$27.50; member price \$24.75) and features 149 pages with 80 color illustrations. It is available in the Museum Shop, on the Web site ([www.frick.org](http://www.frick.org)), and by phone at 212.547.6848.

## RELATED EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

### Lectures

*Unless otherwise noted, lectures are free. No reservations are necessary, and seating is on a first-come, first-served basis. Lectures will be webcast live and thereafter can be viewed on the Frick's Web site or the institution's channel on FORA.tv.*

<b>Date</b>	Wednesday, February 13, 6:00 p.m.
<b>Speaker</b>	Machtelt Israëls, Researcher, History of Renaissance and Early Modern Art, University of Amsterdam
<b>Title</b>	<i>Piero at Home</i>

During the early Renaissance, Piero della Francesca's artistic talents were highly sought after by patrons across the Italian peninsula but nowhere more so than in his hometown of Borgo San Sepolcro. This lecture will explore how Piero gradually transformed the art of painting by applying his pioneering pictorial imagination to the challenge of three gothic polyptychs and by introducing Renaissance-format paintings into the domestic interior with his *Virgin and Child Enthroned With Four Angels* (featured in the exhibition) and *Nativity of Christ* (The National Gallery, London). The latter work will be discussed in the context of architectural and pictorial decoration designed by Piero for his family's private palazzo. *This lecture is made possible by the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation.*

**Date** Wednesday, March 20, 6:00 p.m.  
**Speaker** James R. Banker, Professor Emeritus, Department of History, North Carolina State University  
**Title** *Three Geniuses and a Franciscan Friar*

More often celebrated as a painter, Piero della Francesca was also a pioneering mathematician. This lecture will discuss Piero's achievements as a mathematician, focusing on his precocious mastery of the teachings of the Greek geometrician Archimedes. Shortly after his death, Luca Pacioli, a Franciscan friar, published two of Piero's treatises under his own name and conveyed Piero's knowledge of geometry to Leonardo da Vinci, who later became an expert in the subject. *This lecture is made possible by the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation.*

**Date** Wednesday, May 1, 6:00 p.m.  
**Speaker** Scott Nethersole, Lecturer, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London  
**Title** *Piero's Landscapes*

The landscapes in Piero's paintings, particularly his *Baptism of Christ* (National Gallery, London), are often thought to recall the area around his hometown of Borgo San Sepolcro. In truth, they evoke the upper Tiber Valley without describing it precisely. But what did it mean to locate sacred scenes in a recognizable and local setting? Did that landscape carry any connotations for the fifteenth-century residents of Borgo San Sepolcro that might be lost to us today? *This lecture is made possible by the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation.*

**Date** Saturday, May 18, 2:00 p.m.  
**Speaker** Nathaniel Silver, Guest Curator, The Frick Collection  
**Title** *From Borgo San Sepolcro to the East Coast*

During a career spanning nearly sixty years, Piero della Francesca worked in almost every major center across the Italian peninsula although nowhere did he accept more commissions than in Borgo San Sepolcro. Like his native city, Piero's paintings are possessed of a character that is neither Florentine nor Sieneese but entirely unique. On the closing weekend of the special exhibition, the show's curator will discuss Piero's career in Borgo and explore how some of his masterpieces created for that city reached American shores. *This lecture is free with museum admission and is made possible by the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation.*

**Gallery Talks:** Introduction to *Piero della Francesca in America*

*Saturdays, February 23 and March 23, at 12:00 noon*

Join the curator for an overview of the special exhibition. *Free with museum admission. Advance reservations are required; to register, please visit our Web site.*

## Seminars

*Seminars provide unparalleled access to works of art and encourage thought-provoking discussion with experts in their fields. Sessions, held when the galleries are closed to the public, are limited to twenty participants. Advance registration is required; register online or by calling 212.547.0704. \$100 (\$90 for Members).*

**Date** Thursday, February 28, 6:00 to 7:30 p.m.  
**Speaker** Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, art historian  
**Title** *Identifying Structure and Meaning in the Works of Piero della Francesca*

The painter Piero della Francesca was one of the greatest mathematicians of his day. He was also a consummate storyteller. By focusing on two of his most noble works, *The Flagellation* (Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino) and *The Story of the True Cross* (Church of San Francesco, Arezzo), this seminar will trace how he adapted these skills to imbue traditional subjects with new significance and unprecedented power of intellectual and emotional expression.

**Date** Thursday, March 28, 6:00 to 7:30 p.m.  
**Speaker** Carl Brandon Strehlke, Adjunct Curator of the John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art  
**Title** *The Afterlife of Italian Renaissance Altarpieces*

During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, collectors' insatiable taste for Renaissance paintings led to the often callous disassembly of towering polyptychs in Italian and Spanish churches. Precious fragments—such as The Frick Collection's *Temptation of Christ*—were reframed, restored, and sold off as individual masterpieces. This seminar will explore the afterlife of Renaissance altarpieces, revealing the stories of their fascinating journeys from churches to museums across the world and attempts by art historians to reconstruct their original appearances. \$100 (\$90 for Members)

**Date** Thursday, May 9, 6:00 to 7:30 p.m.  
**Speaker** Rika Burnham, Head of Education, The Frick Collection  
**Title** *Piero's Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels*

Great paintings by Piero della Francesca are known for the balance they strike between classical architecture and the sacred figures that so stirringly inhabit them. In this seminar, study and discuss the magnificent, light-filled *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels*, and how within an evocative perspectival space, a complex devotional narrative unfolds for viewers then and now. \$100 (\$90 for Members)

## Course: The Frick Connection

*The Frick is pleased to offer courses for college students and recent graduates under the age of 35. Space is limited to twenty participants, and advance registration is required; please visit our Web site or e-mail students@frick.org. A \$25 annual fee is payable upon acceptance and includes student membership to the Frick.*

**Date** Two-part course: Thursdays, March 7 & 14, 5:30 to 7:00 p.m.  
**Speaker** Nathaniel Silver, Guest Curator, The Frick Collection  
**Title** *Piero and the Italian Renaissance*

Piero della Francesca was one of the founding figures of the Italian Renaissance. Join the curator of the special exhibition in exploring the artist's celebrated *Sant' Agostino* altarpiece and other devotional paintings of the period.

## Symposium

*Please visit our Web site for times, speakers, and additional program information. All graduate students in the history of art, faculty members, and museum staff members are invited to attend. The symposium is free, but advance registration is required; please visit our Web site to register.*

Date: Saturday, May 4  
Title: *Local Heroes: Artists and the Importance of Place*

This symposium will offer scholars the chance to reflect upon the importance of place to individual artists. An afternoon of talks and lively discussion will conclude with a keynote lecture by Alison Wright, Reader, History of Art Department, University College London. *The symposium is made possible by the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation.*

## Free Public Evening: Spring Night

*No reservations are accepted; visitors will be admitted on a first-come, first-served basis.*

**Date:** Friday, May 17, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m.

Enjoy a night of free programs and activities at the Frick, as we open our doors to the public and celebrate our special exhibitions. Attendees will have the opportunity to meet curators, hear lectures and talks, sketch in the Garden Court, and enjoy live music.

## BASIC INFORMATION

**General Information Phone:** 212.288.0700

**Web site:** [www.frick.org](http://www.frick.org)

**E-mail:** [info@frick.org](mailto:info@frick.org)

**Where:** 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

**Hours: open six days a week:** 10am to 6pm on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11am to 5pm on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11 a.m. to 5 p.m.) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.

**Admission:** \$18; senior citizens \$15; students \$10; "pay as you wish" on Sundays from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

**PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection.**

**Subway:** #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

**Tour Information:** included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

**Museum Shop:** the shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

**Group Visits:** Please call 212.288.0700 for details and to make reservations.

**Public Programs:** A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

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For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Head of Media Relations & Marketing or Alexis Light, Media Relations & Marketing Coordinator

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