

'One of the most charismatic artists ever': Piero della Francesca, adored by everyone from Hockney to Heaney



Jonathan Jones

Mon 5 Aug 2024 03.00 EDT



Painted side-on to conceal an eye lost to jousting ... the Duke and Duchess of Urbino by Piero della Francesca, c1475 Photograph: Peter Barritt/Alamy

He transfixed Pasolini and painted Seamus Heaney's favourite artwork – and now David Hockney is paying tribute to this very modern Renaissance master in a joint show

It's raining inside the Uffizi. The downpour outside, cascading from the Florence skies, is getting in through the ceiling and staff are rushing around with buckets. At the centre of this watery quadrangle are two painted wooden panels mounted in a single gilt frame. It stands in the middle of the room, so you can see the triumphal chariots on the reverse as well as the portraits on the front. The leaks are creating a drumroll, adding to the drama, almost as if nature itself were telling us to pay attention to this masterpiece. Yet even without all that, these are the most arresting faces in the room. Why? [This double portrait – of Battista Sforza and her husband Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino](#) – is by Piero della Francesca, one of the most charismatic artists of all time.

Piero's art is fleshy and personal, ethereal and cosmic. He paints azure skies and floating eggs, fancy hats and wide eyes, with wit and spontaneity, yet underpinned by geometric order. His people are as mysterious as they are ordinary. Battista looks pale and distant, for she was already dead when her portrait was finished in the 1470s. The gold frame separating her from Federico is the barrier between life and death. Across this gulf, the two contemplate each other. If her face is ghostly, his is fearsomely alive: a gnarled walnut painted in profile, not just to emulate emperors on Roman coins but to hide the socket of his right eye, lost in a joust. His disfigured nose is not concealed. Federico made his money as a mercenary, putting his profits into a graceful palace in Urbino where he employed Piero as court artist.

Jousts, hilltop palaces, Renaissance courts – Piero worked more than half a millennium ago. Yet his art speaks to us. The National Gallery in London is about to open [Hockney and Piero: A Longer Look](#), an intimate show revolving around David Hockney's fascination with the Italian. It includes his 1977 painting *My Parents* – as much a tribute to Piero as to his mother and father. They are separated by a green storage unit, just as Battista and Federico are by a gilded column. And on top of it stands a mirror in which we can see a postcard of Piero's *Baptism of Christ*, which hangs in the National Gallery. Like Piero's couple, Hockney's parents are monumental yet idiosyncratic, bathed in a subtle, omnipresent light. For Piero, it's the light of Italy; for Hockney, it's the light of his California studio, where he has brought his parents from Bradford.



📷 A Piero in the mirror ... My Parents by David Hockney (1977).
Photograph: Tate/Tate Images

Hockney is far from Piero's only modern fan. Poets, novelists and feminist theorists have been spellbound by him. Simone de Beauvoir quarrelled with his *Nativity* – another [National Gallery](#) treasure, in which Mary kneels before baby Christ – as a surrender by the mother to her male child. This was countered by philosopher Julia Kristeva, who saw instead a subtle celebration of the maternal.

Female presences are certainly arresting in Piero. The 16th-century writer Vasari says that this artist from Sansepolcro took his surname from his mother, who brought him

up after his father died, securing him a good education that made him a mathematician as well as an artist.

Maybe Francesca's spirit lives on in the colossal figure who swaddles a community in her robes in Piero's [Madonna della Misericordia](#), preserved to this day in Sansepolcro. It's one of several of his masterpieces that can be seen in their original locations in Tuscany and Umbria, from the True Cross fresco cycle in Arezzo to the Flagellation of Christ in Urbino. By the 1980s, doing "the Piero della Francesca trail" was enough of a cliché in a certain English middle-class world for John Mortimer to lightly mock it in his novel *Summer's Lease*.

What a turnaround. A hundred years before *Summer's Lease* – on telly in 1989 with a [delicious performance by John Gielgud](#) – no bourgeois travellers knew of any such trail. Piero is more of a 20th- and 21st-century discovery. He doesn't appear, for instance, in Walter Pater's 1873 classic *The Renaissance*, the book that sent Victorians streaming to Florence to see Botticelli and Michelangelo.



Maternal colossus ... Madonna della Misericordia. Photograph: Leemage/Corbis/Getty Images

Why does this artist mean so much to us moderns? Perhaps it's because he has a narrative irony that we recognise. Seamus Heaney put it best. Choosing [The Flagellation](#) as his favourite work of art, the poet said: "If you see other representations of Christ being scourged, he is right at the front. But Piero della Francesca puts him way down at the vanishing point of the perspective, and it gives the painting an aura of the uncanny; a sense of Christian iconography, but defamiliarised."

That ability to defamiliarise was also true of the modern artist most intimately bound up with Piero – so closely that you really cannot understand one without the other: the gay, Marxist, Catholic poet, novelist and film director [Pier Paolo Pasolini](#). He learned about Piero from his mentor, the art historian Roberto Longhi. In 1927, Longhi published a passionate book that posits Piero as the greatest genius of the early Italian Renaissance, rhapsodising his magical light and his humble yet immortal "peasant" faces. The three angels who stand as witnesses in the National Gallery's Baptism have, says Longhi, "the androgynous air one often finds in peasant youths".

Androgynous peasants? That's something film-lovers may associate with the works of Pasolini, from [The Gospel According to Saint Matthew](#) to the rollicking medieval epic *The Decameron*. It's no coincidence. Pasolini was taught art history by Longhi at Bologna University. In a later edition of his book, Longhi dismisses some academic studies of the artist with the words: "Far more worthy of being remembered, I believe, is the poetry devoted to Piero by Pier Paolo Pasolini."

Pasolini's cinematic masterpiece *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* is like a play put on by medieval peasants, many with headgear copied from Piero's paintings. A cast mostly of untrained locals parade through ruinous towns of the Basilicata region, following the communist Christ as he preaches revolution in words from the Gospel. The camera dwells unselfconsciously on faces as unspoiled as those of Federico da Montefeltro or the Baptism's "androgynous peasants". Like Piero, Pasolini lingers on women's faces young and old, including his own mother's as the mature Mary.

It's the same feeling Piero gives us. In his *Baptism of Christ*, we see a tiny stream that will become the mighty river Tiber, with the white walls of Borgo Sansepolcro in the distance. Those three androgynous peasant angels witness John the Baptist pouring water from the glassy stream on Christ's head. Tall-hatted philosophers gather by the mirroring water while another candidate for baptism – or is he just a bather? – takes off his top. It's completely mysterious. Maybe that's what keeps drawing us back to Piero: his depiction of life itself is an insoluble enigma.

[Hockney and Piero: A Longer Look](#) is at the National Gallery, London, from 8 August to 27 October

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/article/2024/aug/05/piero-della-francesca-hockney-heaney-national>