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ear theory
history of art and architecture
n.3, oct 2012

publisher:
ear-urv

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issn 2014-6833

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**PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA
LA PALA DI BRERA
DOUBLE SCENE
Gillermo Zuaznabar**

Introduction
Carlos Martí

PREFACE

Ever since I first saw the famous Brera Altarpiece painted by Piero della Francesca in about 1472 for Federico di Montefeltro I have considered it to be one of the most beautiful and enigmatic pieces in the history of painting. The figures are corporeal and the architecture is solid and balanced. However, it seems to levitate, supported by an invisible internal nerve structure. The whole is pervaded by a concealed brilliance that the serene expressions of the characters try in vain to deny. Zuaznabar's essay on this masterpiece has once again awoken my interest in it. And although I am in no position to judge the historiographic value of his analysis, I would like to point out that, in my opinion, he makes a decisive methodological contribution.

When faced with an acclaimed masterpiece, most analysts and critics write an erudite commentary that is merely one more opinion to be added to those already given by their colleagues on the work or the artist. This is the origin of what George Steiner, in one of his uncompromising dialectic darts, refers to as secondary or parasitary discourse, which is characterized by the fact that the work is used as a pretext to prolong the chain of critical comments and acts only as a support around which the branches of the hermeneutic creeper are wound until it is finally lost from view.

Zuaznabar, on the other hand, deliberately interrupts this interpretative chain and inserts some silence between the work and the observers, thus allowing them to observe with nothing overlaid or added. This return to the piece's initial state, released of all the meanings that have accumulated over time, refocuses the gaze of the observers, who are now in a position to continue the search for the keys to the puzzle that all works of art contain.

His essay, then, is based on a position, an attitude, toward the painting that is at once attentive and expectant. Piero's work produces in Zuaznabar an intense and persistent sensation of sorrow. He perceives an oppressive and rarified mood which, in his opinion, emanates from the scene. This is particularly disconcerting considering that it is a nativity scene (a picture commemorating the birth of the Duke of Urbino's first son) and should therefore transmit a greater feeling of liveliness and happiness. He perceives that, behind the static, suspended appearance of the representation, there is a dark, sinister world that creates this "sad, grey, hard and funerary" feeling that takes hold of the observers as they

submerge themselves in the painting and scrutinize the details and nuances that the painting provides.

The divergence between what is seen and what is felt causes a feeling of unease that is what really sets the critical machinery in motion. It is a manoeuvre that shifts the critical voice to the periphery of the circle and unequivocally positions the work chosen as the object of study in the centre. The main task of the critic, then, is to describe, minutely observe the procedures used in the syntactic construction of the work. The author can then openly display his analytical equipment. The geometric figures, the axes, the crosses, all reveal a fabric of invisible threads that weave the work and explain its formal cohesion.

The picture is supported by symmetry but takes on significance and intensity thanks to slight alterations and transgressions of the rules that the symmetry involves. The architecture that provides the background to the ritual act represented is strictly symmetrical but the oblique ray of sunlight is sufficient to disrupt the static equilibrium and activate the visual field of the painting.

It is precisely this stability of the syntactic construction that gives rise to the richness and variety of the interpretations. This way of understanding the critical task brings us back to the analogy of the circle and the fact that all circles have a single centre, but the circumference is made up of an infinite number of points. The investigation carried out by Zuaznabar determines only some of the points of the interpretative circumference, but his aim is not to provide definitive answers. On the contrary, he wants to portray the infinite richness of the work. In the light of this interpretation, Piero's work shines even more brightly and it becomes more intangible and mysterious. This is the effect of genuine gazes when they are turned on great works but do not usurp them. It is exactly the opposite of the effect produced by academic commentaries or parasitary criticisms that become the protagonists and end up by enclosing the work in a box, making it opaque and inaccessible or, even worse, taking over from it and making it dispensable.

Carlos Martí Arís
September 2012

KEYWORDS

Painting, Theory, Composition, Altarpiece, Piero della Francesca.

ABSTRACT

Piero della Francesca painted La Palla di Brera between 1472 and 1474. It is a votive painting commissioned by Federico of Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, for the Franciscan church of San Donati degli Osservanti, former Tabernacle of the Dukes. Today it is located in Room XXIV of the pinacoteca di Brera in Milan. In the painting a relatively new iconographic theme (a Sacra Conversazione between the Commissioner and the Madonna with child enthroned and surrounded by Saints), turns into a double celebration of the life and death. Indeed, the Duke commissioned the panel to celebrate the birth of his heir, Guidobaldo de Montefeltro, and also to commemorate the unexpected death, six months later, of his wife Battista Sforza.

Guillermo Zuaznabar proposes a complex reading of the painting by Piero della Francesca, through a thorough analysis of the elements and characters that appear in the scene and how their meanings overlap with those that emerge from the unfolding of the compositional axis organizing the panel. Renewed attention to the morbid body of the child and its peculiar position on the mother, the compositional game of crosses, the allegories of death present in elements such as the trail of blood necklace, together with symbols referring to the lifecycle; all of these elements allow the author to ensure that the celebration of life implied in any nativity scene is also, in the Brera Pala, a piety. In the words of Carlos Martí Arís in the introduction to his study of Guillermo Zuaznabar, this return to the piece's initial state, released of all the meanings that have accumulated over time, refocuses the observer's gaze enabling them to continue the search for the keys to the enigma which enshrouds all works of art.

LA PALA DI BRERA DOUBLE SCENE

Piero della Francesca
1472-1474
La Vergine con il Bambino e santi
Sacra Conversazione



And he that saw it hath given testimony:
 and his testimony is true.
 And he knoweth that he saith true:
 that you also may believe.
 John, 19, 35

Room 24 of the Pinacoteca di Brera is impressive. Not so much for its direct view of the altarpiece that Federico da Montefeltro, duke of Urbino, commissioned from Piero della Francesca (1415/1420-1492), but for the sad, grey, hard, funerary atmosphere that the work creates and that permeates the room.

The master from Sansepolcro produced the painting between 1472 and 1474. He used a 251 x 172 centimetre panel, tempera and oils to celebrate both a birth and a death. The duke commissioned the painting to celebrate the birth of his long wished for and sought after heir, Giobaldo da Montefeltro on 1st January 1472, and to commemorate the unexpected death six months later of the child's mother and the duke's wife, Battista Sforza¹. She is represented in the draping clothes of the Virgin with Guidobaldo as the Christ child sleeping in her lap. The commission was a votive panel for the Franciscan church of San Donato degli Osservanti, the former chapel of the dukes. Nine years after the death of Federico da Montefeltro the church of San Bernardino (1483-1491), which houses the dukes' mausoleum, was finished and the panel and the bodies it guarded were moved there. Three centuries later in 1811 the Napoleonic requisitions took it to Milan. Today it is in room 24 of the art gallery above the Academy of Fine Arts in Brera in a dense, gloomy atmosphere.

Death and life are the prime themes in the panel, the indivisible pair that structures the altarpiece, a pair of inseparable elements, united but opposites, to complete the scene that was to accompany the tomb of Battista Sforza, his wife, and later, in San Bernardino, the tomb of Federico da Montefeltro himself.

¹17th January 1472, Guidobaldo da Montefeltro (1472-1508) was born, 6th July Battista Sforza died.

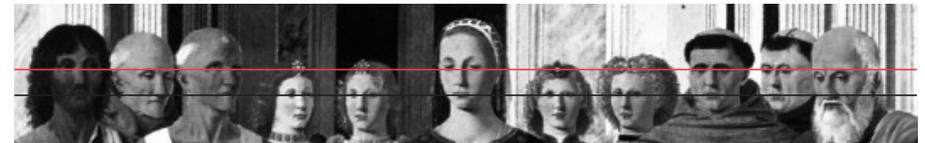
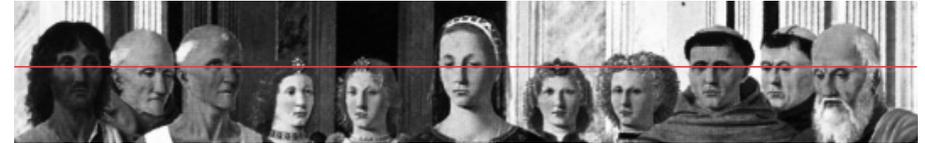


TWO HORIZONS

The panel is divided and structured by two lines.

The first line is vertical and is marked at the highest point of the apse by the gold chain from which is suspended a white egg, a symbol of fertility and the Holy Trinity. This line terminates at another point –the child's penis– and concludes the allegory begun in the shell vault. Between the egg and the child's penis, there is a third point that has not been given its due structural importance until now: the Virgin's left eye. The second line that structures the panel originates from the mournful eyes of the Virgin.

This new lines divides the painting horizontally into two equal halves, one above the other. The eyes mark the horizon. The mother is gazing down in front of her. Her dark eyes trace the horizon and the world to which she belongs. Sharing her world, her height and her line, there are six people: to her left is Francis of Assisi (1118-1226), his eyes wide awake and looking straight ahead; to her right is Jerome (347-420), the protector of humanists, whose eyes are old and uneven. He is the only one whose eyes are raised. Immediately behind him, Bernardino of Siena (1348-1444) offsets Jerome's posture. His head is bowed, his eyes cast down, and he he has the same expression as the Virgin, although his gaze and his eyes are even lower in both height and mood. On the other side, to the left of the Virgin, is Peter the martyr of Verona (1205-1252) who is symmetrical in both expression and position to Bernardino, and who gazes out at about the same level. On his shaved Dominican scalp we see a long bloody cut, sustained in a Cathar ambush, after which he was left for dead somewhere between Cuomo and Milan. In front



of him, closing the scene on the left is John the Evangelist, who has a white beard and is looking down. He replicates and counterbalances the position of John the Baptist, patron saint of the Sforza family, at the other end of the panel. John the Baptist, however, has his eyes raised and is looking ahead and a little to the left, closing the scene.

The horizon traced by the eyes of the group creates movement. Their gazes are on, above or below the line fixed by the Virgin, thus tightening or slacking the tension and creating a dynamic horizon, a vibrato effect.

This effect is highlighted by a second horizon, this one marked by the eyes of the four angels that watch over the Virgin from behind, two on her left and two on her right. The second horizon, five centimetres below the line created by the eyes and 176 centimetres from the bottom margin, also runs through the mouths of the seven people who watch over the sleeping baby. Following this second line of angels, we see that they also appear to have a bright and shining "third eye" on their foreheads, in the form of a jewel. These mineral eyes share and reinforce the horizon created by the eyes of the Virgin and the saints. They announce the shining, luminous gaze of the Virgin and of the saints. Their gazes are illuminating, providers of light and of truth. The two horizons are defined on the one hand by the eyes of the Virgin, the saints and the mineral eyes of the angels and, on the other, by the physical eyes of the angels and the mouths of the Virgin and the six saints. The angels' eyes order the discourse and the speech of the saints and observers, preachers and scribes. The second horizon is thus defined. The panel



contains a vibrant, double horizon. Light, eyes, the word, and enlightening discourse sketch the radiant horizon of the panel.

The composition is made up of pairs. Just as the panel has two horizons, so the vertical axis connecting the egg, the Virgin's left eye and the baby's penis also has a double. This second axis is signalled by the Virgin's large hands held to her chest in a gesture of peace and prayer. The line marked by her palms connects her right eye to her abdomen, which is hidden but emphasized by her golden silk robe, and the child's navel. The mother's sexual organs are just behind the navel, in perfect communion with the conduit through which the child was nourished.

And Jesus, having cried out with a loud voice, gave up the ghost. And the veil of the temple was rent in two, from the top to the bottom. And the centurion who stood over against him, seeing that crying out in this manner he had given up the ghost said: Indeed this man was the son of God.²

The second vertical axis rents the structure in two and describes a line that is not intellectual or metaphysical, but physical, organic and bloody. It describes the physical union between mother and son, and how they share one body and the same organs, blood, and life.

² MARK, 15, 37-39



THE FLESH. THE THIRD HORIZON

Federico da Montefeltro, patron of the panel, rounds off the composition by exhibiting and heralding the material world, the world of living men, of corruptible flesh. Thus, humbly kneeling, he wears his shiny steel armour_clean, geometrical and precise_to protect his flesh and the metaphysical world. The hardness of the metal is clearly a symbol that although he is a *condottiere* (mercenary), he is still vulnerable. Unlike his deceased companions in the scene he can still be injured. He is mortal. In fact, he is portrayed in left profile to keep his deformed right profile hidden. He has only one eye, and half of his nose is destroyed, lost in a confrontation between flesh and fire in the battlefield. The hardness of the metal does not only divide and protect the scene; its power of intimidation contrasts with its shine, perfection and beauty.

In the 15th century the art of war changed. Armies no longer triumphed solely because they had the heaviest armour and were better at hand-to-hand combat. Heavy artillery began to be combined with lighter infantry of archers and lancers, and then with artillery using gunpowder, which enabled armies to triumph from a distance. Armour became lighter and more joints and openings were added to improve versatility of movement³. The desire for mobility and the increasing use of gunpowder meant that armour had to have functions

³ SIMON SCHAMA, "Heavy Metal. Illusion and not war was the speciality of renaissance armour smiths", *Confesiones y encargos: ensayos de arte*, Peninsula, Barcelona 2002.

other than protection. One of these functions was psychological. Master armourers created cuirasses and helmets that looked imposing from a distance so that even before confrontation took place the terrified enemy had almost been defeated. Armour was transformed into symbolic shapes and expressive ornaments. The idea behind this type of armour was that it would display a kingdom of such strength and a combatant of such bravery and power that the enemy would be defeated by his mere presence.

Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the most prized weapons were not those that were most effective in hand-to-hand combat, but those that instilled respect, admiration and fear from a distance. The most prized weapons were those that were the most bellas, the most imposing. Their beauty merely augured horror. The duke of Urbino is thus protected from the scene and distanced from us. His sword in the foreground and the lance, gauntlets and helmet on the floor mark a boundary that the duke will not allow anyone to pass. On one side of the armour and the lance there is a world that we are welcome to contemplate, adore and worship, but not invade. The duke guards and protects its frontiers. His shining armour dissuades us. Perhaps it is the armour that makes room 24 of the Pinacoteca di Brera so sad, grey and hard. Another word should be added to describe the atmosphere that pervades the small room: metallic. It is rectilinear, tense, vibrant, radiant and metallic.

The duke's firm, uncompromising position is not only the result of the strength that he has acquired. His judgement, his gaze, like those of the saints, is also governed by a beautiful luminous eye located in the centre of the cover of the "book" held by John the Evangelist. Interestingly, this book is held exactly at the position required to create a third horizon in line with the duke's healthy eye. This horizon is the horizon of man. It says: I have read, I have understood, I am enlightened and I look ahead. Above his head, avoiding yet illuminating the thought, Francis of Assisi holds a cross made of gold, silver and precious stones. The condottiere's gazes into the other half of the panel at the abdomen of Jerome, who translated the stories of John the Evangelist into Latin. Above Jerome's abdomen, the painter uses the rags protecting his semi-naked body to construct a new cross.



THREE CROSSES

Three crosses can be seen in the panel. To the left of the mother, Francis holds the first like a precious jewel. To her right, like a tattered rag, Jerome's belt is the second. One is a little high; the other a little low. One is rich; the other poor. One speaks of the material order of the church; the other of the spiritual and intellectual order. The two crosses show that shape and value are two sides of the same object. The third cross is in the hilt of the *condottiere's* sword. Vigilant, his sword forms the line that prevents us from entering the scene. It is the cross of action. There are three crosses in the panel that represent three orders of Christians: shape, value and action. The attributes of the Holy Trinity. To expose its lethal side, the cross must be accompanied by wounded flesh. We already know that the duke is shown in profile because of his half-destroyed face. Just as his cross caused injury and death, the wounds that he now bears were also caused by the crosses of his opponents.

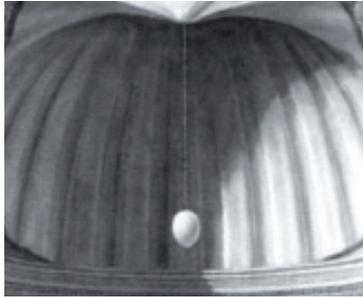
Francis of Assisi investigates a vertical rip in his habit with his left hand. He reveals a bleeding wound under his right breast. The wound is clean, a horizontal cut of seven or eight centimetres. Francis is clearly showing us a stigma. On the other side of the panel at about the same level we see Jerome's cross. It should also be accompanied by a manifestation of the flesh. Indeed, Jerome, who spent the last thirty-five years of his life in a cave in Bethlehem, is holding something in



his right hand. It might be a crumpled piece of paper or a pebble that he presses to his heart in a gesture of pain or suffering. Whether paper or pebble, both are equally useful in the allegory of his literary and ecclesiastic adventure. Jerome's gesture of pain represented by the cross, paper-pebble and heart has a referent. With the middle and index fingers of his left hand he points at the child.

He is not the only one who is intentionally pointing at the child. Two other people are doing the same: John the Baptist, to the right of Jerome, points with a perfectly extended index finger. The staff that John the Baptist holds connects his gesture with Jerome's suffering. The cane clarifies that he is pointing at the heart, the suffering of the child. Finally, Federico da Montefeltro, on his knees and with his strange tubular hands⁴ held in an expression of prayer, points to the same point on the child's body.

⁴ "Federico's hands were not painted by Piero. According to some critics, such as Longhi and Lavin, they were painted by Pedro Berruguete. According to Meiss they were painted by Giusto di Gand. Why? The words of Vasari, who described Piero as ill and blind toward the end of his life, spring to mind.," MARCO BUSSAGLI, *Piero della Francesca*, Giunti, Florence 1998, page 44.



THE CHRIST CHILD, THE LIGHT,
THE BLOOD AND THE WATER

The child is no new-born. He is sixty-two centimetres long, which based on current sizes would put him at about four months old. His mother died when he was seven months old. It is likely that the child's age corresponds to his age at the time the panel was painted. It may also correspond to the time of his mother's death and the time at which Piero was commissioned. This is confirmed by the child's position. The arm under his head indicates that he could sit up, which children only begin to do at six months of age. The child is no new-born; he is big. At his size and age, if the painter had wanted to represent a nativity scene the correct posture would have been with the child sitting, head held high, looking straight ahead in a magnanimous pose, like a king⁵. But in the panel the child is lying horizontally as if asleep. His size, posture and position are strange. The child is big, thick, and the profile of his body is shapeless. His left leg, left arm, hip and thighs are deformed or those of an obese child. Unlike the other characters in the panel, the shape of the child is neither well-defined nor contained, typical features of Piero's paintings. Perhaps the painter was trying to represent a relaxed, sleeping body. Perhaps for this reason he opted to misshape the flesh of the child. But to create such an image he would have had to show the child solidly supported on his mother's lap. The mother, however, has her legs slightly apart and her contact with the child is not at all decisive. Her left leg is stretched out in front of her, and is thus lower than her right leg. This unbalances the child, but he does not slip or fall. He is suspended. There is no clear contact with his mother.



⁵ To appreciate the strange position, expression and shape of the child, we can look at other nativity scenes by Piero in which the child appears lying on the floor but alive, moving feet and hands and looking for his mother: "The Nativity" (prior to 1482), National Gallery, London; firmly seated: "Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels" (1478), Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute Williamstown, Massachusetts; and also seated with a regal expression: "The Virgin of Senigallia" (c. 1474), Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.

The representation of the child supporting his head with his right arm is not correct either. The child is leaning back, neither the elbow nor the shoulder are clearly depicted, and his arm seems to be protruding from his ear, as though it had been cut and pasted. His eyes are closed and his mouth is an inverted arch, his expression sad. Around his neck he is wearing a string of coral beads. Two pendants form a new pair. With his mother's blue tunic as a backdrop, the string of beads ends in diamond like a drop of water. The crystalline sphere is like the stones in the cross held by Francis. The other pendant has no definite shape. It is a coral red stain with blurred edges. It is not a cross and it marks the lower area of the right breast. The pair of pendants on the child's torso matches the pair on Jerome and Francis: flesh and light/cross-knot.

The angels are unclassifiable so there are two worlds in the painting: the world of men, represented by Federico da Montefeltro, and the world of holiness represented by the seven figures that structure the scene. Because we know when the painting was commissioned, we also know that the mother and the saints are dead. In fact they owe their sainthood to their deaths. The only living character is the child. In fact the painting was commissioned because he was born, and his mother died. The mother is portrayed as being alive, although she has no clear contact with the child. Perhaps this is the reason for the sadness of the mother and the son. If the painter has decided that they do not share the same world, and she is alive, then the child must be dead. The pair stigma-blood and water is what John the Baptist, Jerome and Federico da Montefeltro are pointing at. The Christ child's paired elements, then, like those of Francisco, Jerome and Montefeltro, reveal his suffering; they reveal flesh, blood, water and light. Light, water blood and stigma mark his deformed body, which is suspended without contact with his mother. According to the legend, Jesus was lowered from the cross so that he should not remain there on the Easter Sabbath:

(...) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken: and that they might be taken away.

The soldiers therefore came: and they broke the legs of the first, and of the other that was crucified with him. But after they were come to Jesus, when they saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers with a spear opened his side: and immediately there came out blood and water.⁶

And indeed blood and water are coming out of the child's body. Water and mineral blood, blood-coral and water-diamond are an allegory of his death. They are at the opposite end of the axis beginning at the egg, where life begins with its three elements in perfect combination: shell/body; yolk/blood; white/water. The course

of life ends in a lifeless body that contains the same elements but separated the one from the other: body, blood and water. This separation means there is no life. The decomposition is the result of death. In the panel the child is dead.

The Christ child is dead. His death explains his suspension, the lack of contact with his mother, the deformity of his naked flesh, the cut and pasted arm, the sad grimace, the necklace of blood and water, the pendant below his breast like an open wound, like a stigma from which the two elements flow to reveal his death and the path of his life, the three crosses, the down cast eyes of the group, Jerome's suffering, the duke's prayer, the mother's sadness, and the silence and absence of colour in the scene that infuses the atmosphere of room 24 of the Pinacoteca di Brera with a sad, heavy, metallic grey. Everything –the panel, the commission, the structure of the painting, the colour, the light, the atmosphere, the suffering of the characters– can be better understood if the altarpiece is regarded not only as a nativity or a conversation scene, but also as its opposing counterpart.

As historians have been saying for the last two centuries, the Brera altarpiece is a nativity or conversation scene. But at the same time, from its interior, its structure generates its inseparable counterpart, and gives the entire painting a double significance. The Brera altarpiece is a nativity scene that encompasses the whole cycle, the complete circle, in permanent death and birth. The Brera altarpiece is also a pieta.

Gillemo Zuaznabar,
Milano-Barcelona, May 2012

⁶ JOHN, 19, 32-34

PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA LA PALA DI BRERA ESCENA DOBLE

Gillermo Zuaznabar

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