

Piero Della Francesca:

‘Divine perspective’

c. 1415 - 1492

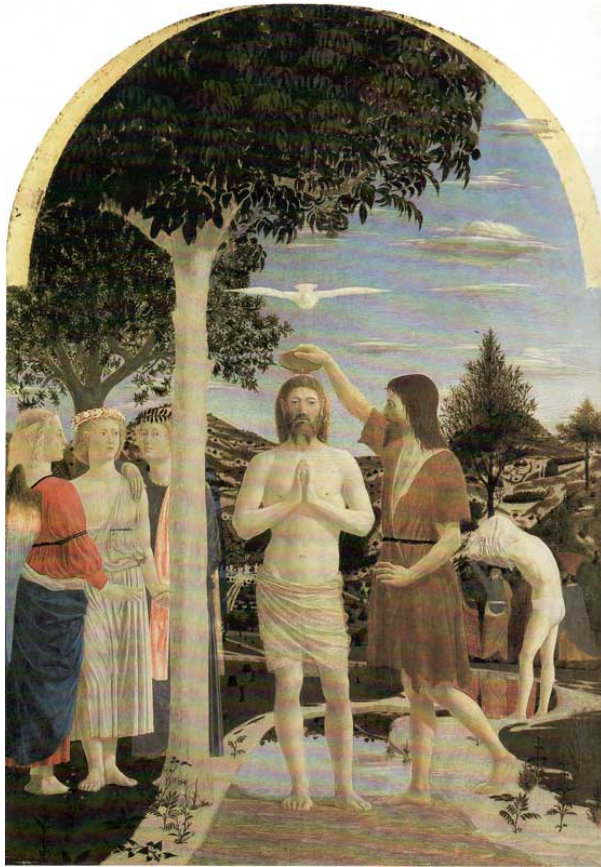
Piero della Francesca

- Born c. 1410/20 in Borgo San Sepolchro and worked as assistant to Antonio d'Anghiari There. After the Papal annexation of the Malatesta lands in 1430, he moved to Perugia and is documented alongside his master, **Domenico Veneziano** in a payment for frescoes in the Choir of San Egidio, Florence, dated Sept. 1439. Both artists were drawn to the experimental style of the Florentine painter Masaccio. Veneziano probably introduced him to his master, in Florence.
- Through him he was introduced to the close study of details of hair, fur and drapery, and copying Classical archeological artefacts with precision (medals, cameos, armour, architectural friezes, seals etc)
- Vasari notes he” attended to mathematics in his youth, and later to painting”.
- Earliest experience in painting heraldic flags of Pope Eugenius’s coat of arms for the gates of the city - not insignificant (bold symmetry, two-dimensional geometry, flat colours)

Piero della Francesca

- The Council of Florence in 1439 brought the Eastern Patriarchs to discuss the reunification of the Greek and Roman Church. They brought with them Greek texts - Sophocles, Euclid, Plato, Aristotle hitherto unknown in Italy.
- Florentine artists and scholars began the first collections of Classical antiquities, visible to Piero and others for the first time, and Piero was able to study Ghiberti's groundbreaking use of Perspective and Alberti's "Treatise on Painting" from which it derived.
- From Alberti, Piero took the invitation to follow Masaccio (then dead for 11 years), in using perspective and composition, to rival the Ancients, and to paint with due dignity and decorum (not making the Saints "look like ham actors" with an excess of gesture)
- In 1442 he was elected Town Councillor at Borgo San Sepolcro, and in 1445, the Confraternity of the Misericordia there commissioned him to paint a polyptych for the altar, to be completed by 1448.
- Visited Urbino around 1444/8 when Oddantonio da Montefeltro was murdered - an event which was once believed to form the subject of his early allegorical masterwork, "The Flagellation of Christ".
- Earliest works include the "Baptism of Christ" (London) and the "St Jerome" (Venice).

Baptism of Christ, c. 1445/51, National Gallery, London



- Tempera on Panel, 167 x 116 cm
- Painted for the Priory of San Giovanni Battista, Borgo San Sepolcro.
- Initially a circular panel of God the Father was above and the sides had additional panels
- Monumental stillness, geometry, frontal arrangement
- Figure of Christ is separated and delineated distinctly from St John - they do not touch. Halo created by bowl.
- Angels derive from Nano di Banco's 'Four Saints' in Orsanmichele, Florence.
- Trees in foreground/background create perspective recession, and hang over us like doubt.
- Iconography of the wood introduced by Donatello but of course is known from Dante's 'selva scura',
- The river flows before, but ceases and is still after, the Baptism. This puzzles the learned men on the right, but not the neophyte who eagerly prepares to follow - intellection causing doubt, which faith does not. Their robes are brighter in the water than in life.
- The light, which diffuses all: from the Gospel of St John "In the Word was Life and Life was the light of Men."
- True landscape assimilates San Sepolcro to Jerusalem.
- Elements of the distant landscape become formal elements of the 2-dimensional composition

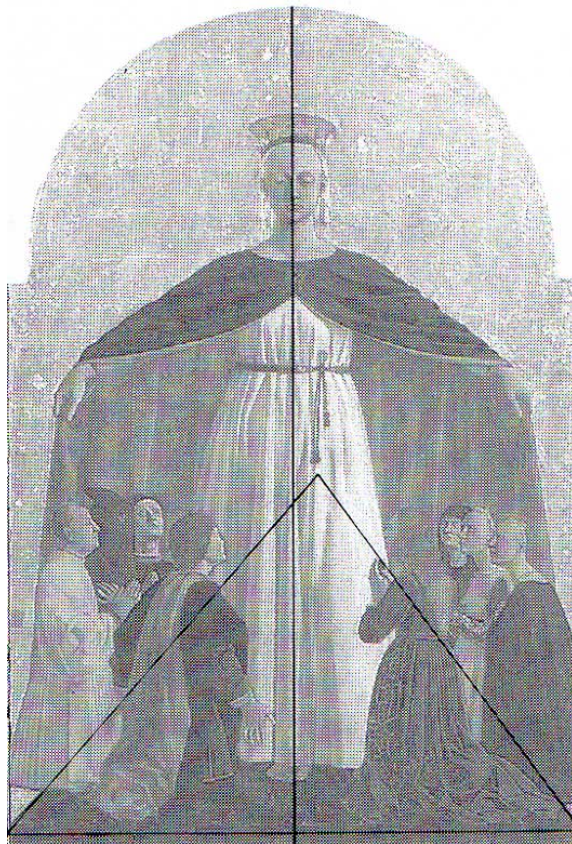
Madonna della Misericordia, 1444 - 61, Sansepolcro, Museo Civico



- Tempera on Board
- Piero's first documented work: the commission stipulated it must be completed by the end of 1448, at a price of 150 gold Florins. In fact it was probably completed much later, towards 1461)
- Piero's hand is clear in the figure of the Virgin here (as well as in the Four Saints on side panels, and the Annunciation in the lower panes)
- Style moves from an early influence of Masaccio's new 'monumental realism' towards a lighter atmospheric harmony of colour.
- Contains an early self-portrait in the kneeling figure in the rear left.

Madonna della Misericordia,

1444 - 61, Sansepolcro, Museo Civico



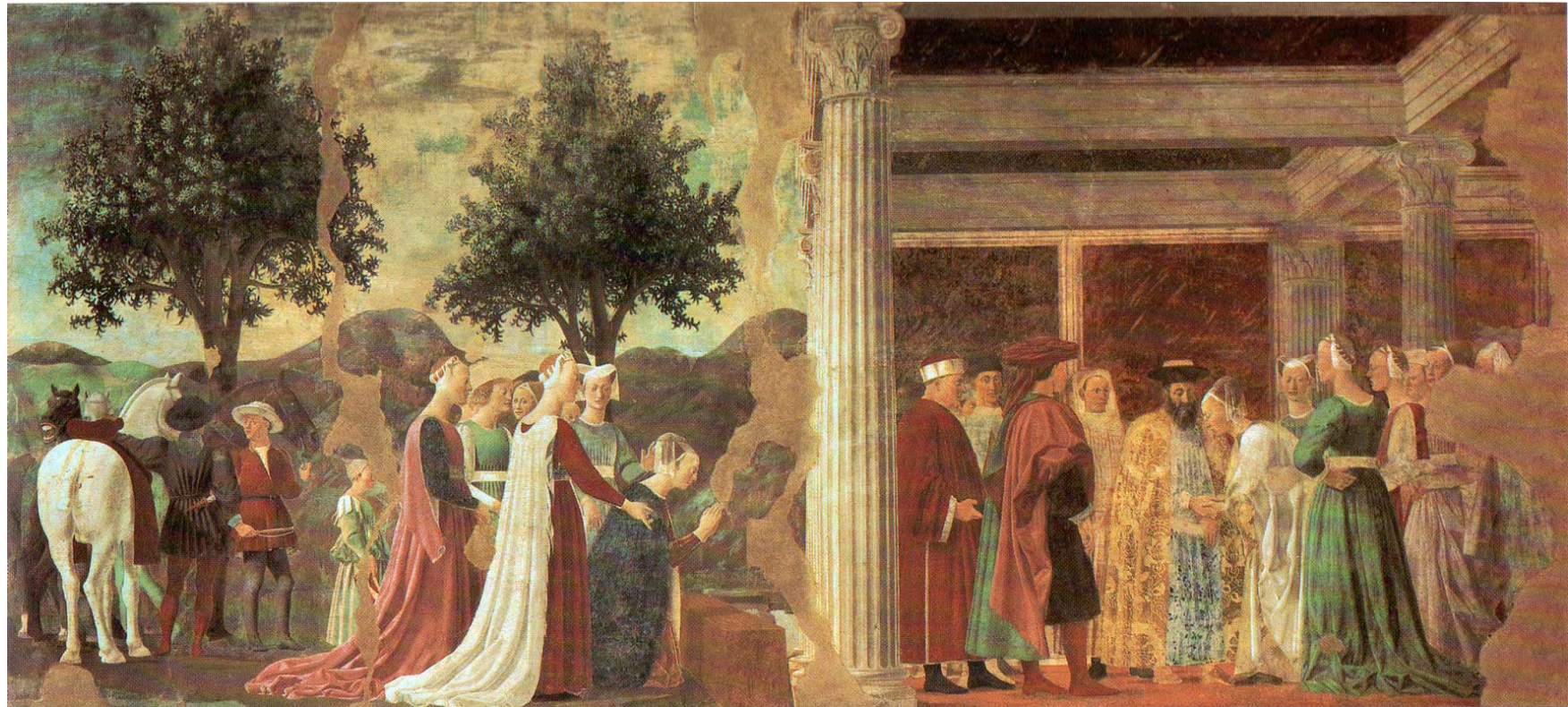
- Compositional diagram: Used a grid structure, dividing the base into 6 units, constructing the grid on their square. The length of the side of each square is the length of St Sebastian's upper arm (follows Alberti)
- Sheltering cloak of the Church protects the pious patrons and the faithful.
- 'Mystic' vanishing point locates the origin of Christ. Moved slightly to the right to break the severity of the perspective.

Piero della Francesca

- Visited Urbino around 1444/8 when Oddantonio da Montefeltro was killed.
- Journeyed to Ferrara (1449) and to Rimini (1451), closely followed Alberti, who probably recommended him to Lionello d' Este and Malatesta.
- When the Florentine painter, Bicci di Lorenzo died in 1452, Piero was called to finish the cycle of frescos in San Francesco in Arezzo representing the “Legend of the True Cross”.
- Work at Arezzo lasted 7-8 years, during which time he was commissioned to produce an altarpiece for the Altar at Sant'Agostino in Borgo (1459), and probably traveled to Rome (Vasari) to meet Pope Nicholas V (d.1455). In Rome he painted two cycles of frescos, but none survive.
- The frescos in Arezzo were completed by 1459, and are recorded as ‘bringing glory to the artist’

Legend of the True Cross

Arrival of the Queen of Sheba, 1452-59,
San Francesco, Arezzo.



Legend of the True Cross

- Decoration of the Choir begun in 1447 by Bicci di Lorenzo, and interrupted by his death in 1452. Piero began work soon after and completed it before his journey to Rome in 1459. Paintings on the left show more evidence of the use of assistants.
- Depicts revelation of Queen of Sheba, en route to Jerusalem, that the bridge over the river Shiloh was built from the wood from which the Cross would be made, and knelt before it in adoration. The scene on the right shows her meeting Solomon to whom she imparts her revelation.
- Composition organised as a double square, divided where the perspective lines of the roof meet the ground.

Legend of the True Cross

- Having learned from Judas where the crosses were buried, St Helen had them disinterred (left) and was able to recognise the Cross of Christ by touching the body of a young man, who miraculously came back to life.
- The fresco is largely by Piero's own hand.

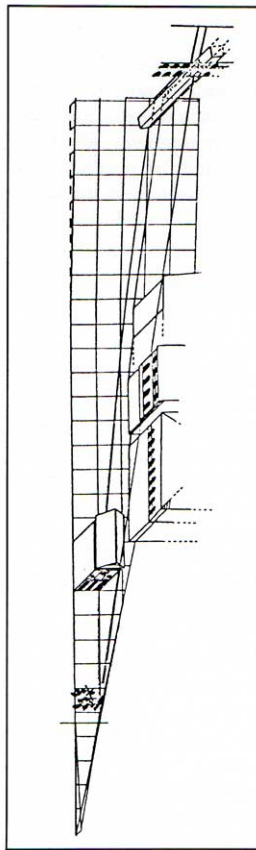
Legend of the True Cross

Discovery & Proving of The True Cross, 1452-59,
San Francesco, Arezzo



‘Resurrection of the Young Man’

1444 - 1450



- Plan of the visible area in the ‘Resurrection of the Young Man’ in the frescoes in San Francesco, Arezzo (A.Martone in O.Calabrese, 1984)
- Vitruvius - there are several types of architectural setting, suitable for the various forms of Theatre - ‘Tragedy’ is characterised by ‘columns, pediments, statues, and other regal appurtenances.’
- City being described is Jerusalem, with architectural details correct for the Roman period of Christ’s Passion.

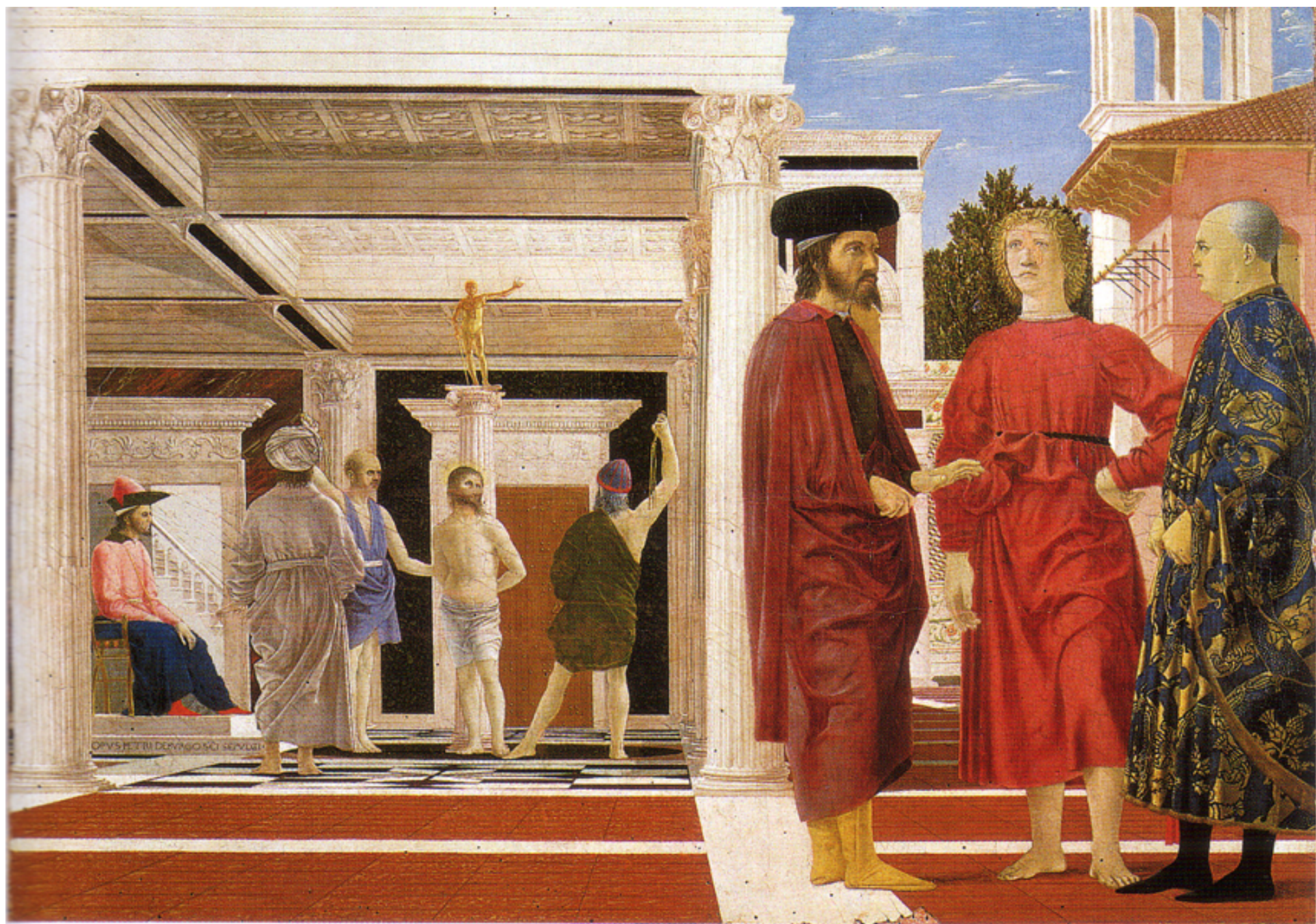
The Annunciation of the Death of the Virgin, San Francesco, Arezzo



- Fresco, San Francesco, Arezzo.(The Legend of the True Cross)
- Not an Annunciation of the Birth of Christ as usually depicted.
- “In these frescoes, the moment of existence is arrested so completely that the human and historical significance of the action seems in itself to comprise an essential immobility, as if, having reached the limit of narrative possibilities.”
(Busignani, 1967)

Piero della Francesca

- In 1450 he wrote a 'Treatise on the Abacus' which gives evidence of his practical, trading and accounting experience. His family was wealthy from the production of Indigo, and Piero himself invested in land, farmed by tenant farmers. Unlike most of his contemporary artists, Piero's financial and civic positions were very stable.
- Returned to Borgo in 1466 and in 1467 he was appointed to various public offices;
- Around 1474 he appears to be in Urbino to paint the Sinigallia Madonna and the Brera Alarpiece.
- In 1482 he was in Rimini probably to begin a work of long duration(he rented a house with garden and well) but nothing seems to have come of it, probably owing to the onset of the blindness of which Vasari speaks, and is confirmed by the testimony of Marco di Longaro: "When this Maestro was a boy, he led by the hand master Piero della Francesca, an excellent painter, who had gone blind.."
- His death is recorded in the Book of the Dead of the Brotherhood of San Sepolcro, as occurring on 12th October 1492.

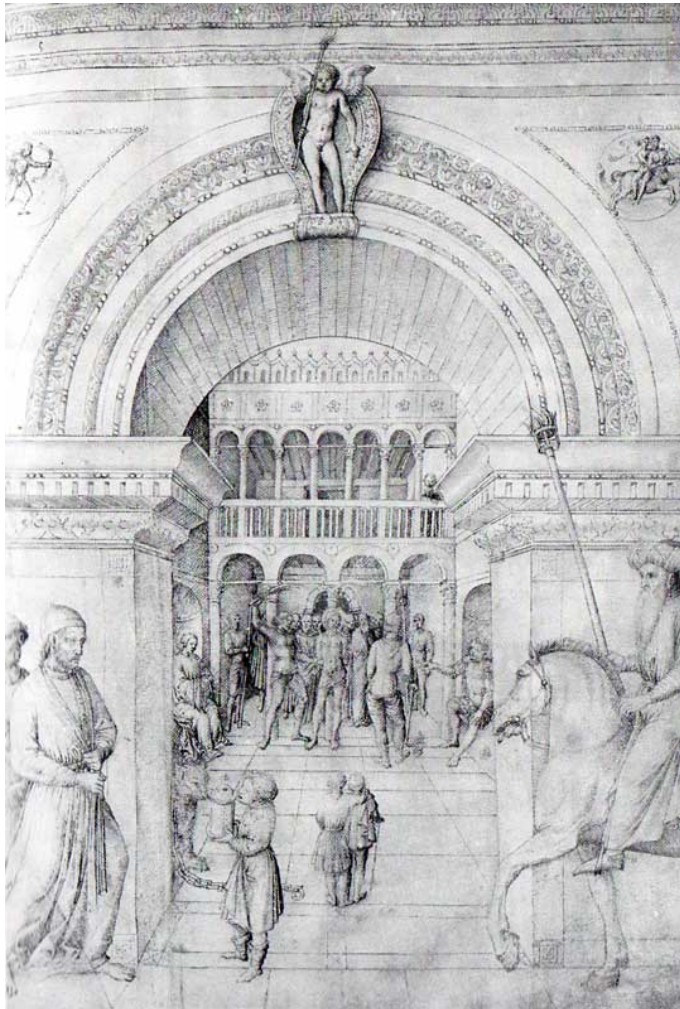


The Flagellation, Urbino,

c 1450, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche

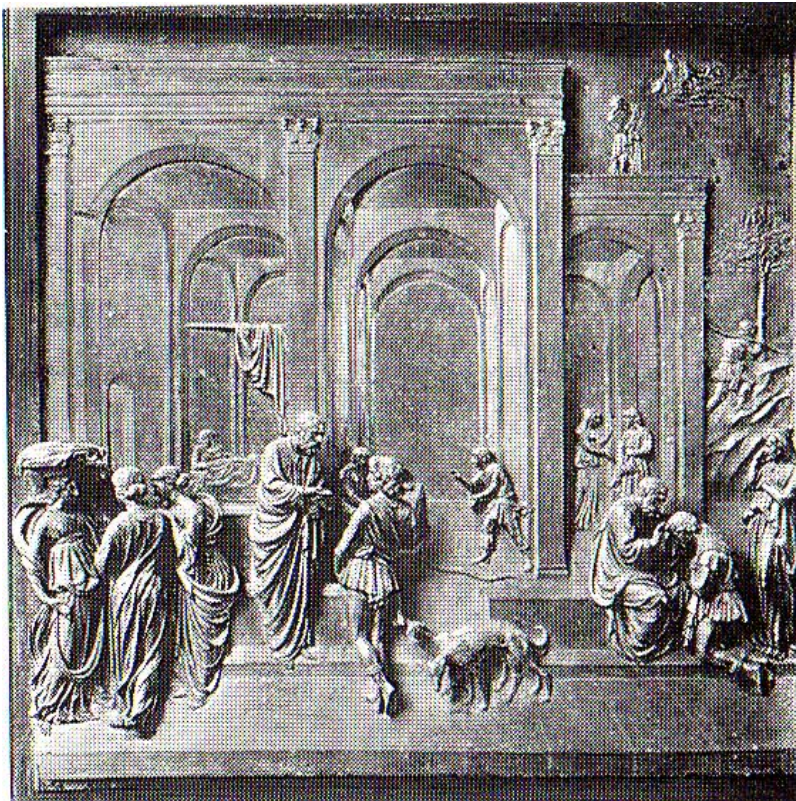
- Formerly in the Sacristy of the Duomo of Urbino. Tempera on Board 58 x 81 cm
- Traditionally associated with the Serafini conspiracy, when Oddantonio da Montefeltro was assassinated (1444). He was thought to be the fair-haired man on the right, flanked by his father and a representative of the Eastern Church (formerly thought to be his evil counsellors, Manfredo Pio and Tommasodell'Angelo) but now thought to represent a meditation on suffering and loss.
- Council of Florence/Ferrara 1439 discussed the reunification of the Roman with the Greek Orthodox Church after centuries of Schism, at a time when Florence was taking the lead in the revival of Greek culture.
- Pisanello had made one of the last Classical Medals representing Emperor John Paleologus of Constantinople, who visited Italy for the Council of Florence, while Piero was training in Florence.

Jacopo Bellini, 'Flagellation', drawing, Louvre, Paris.



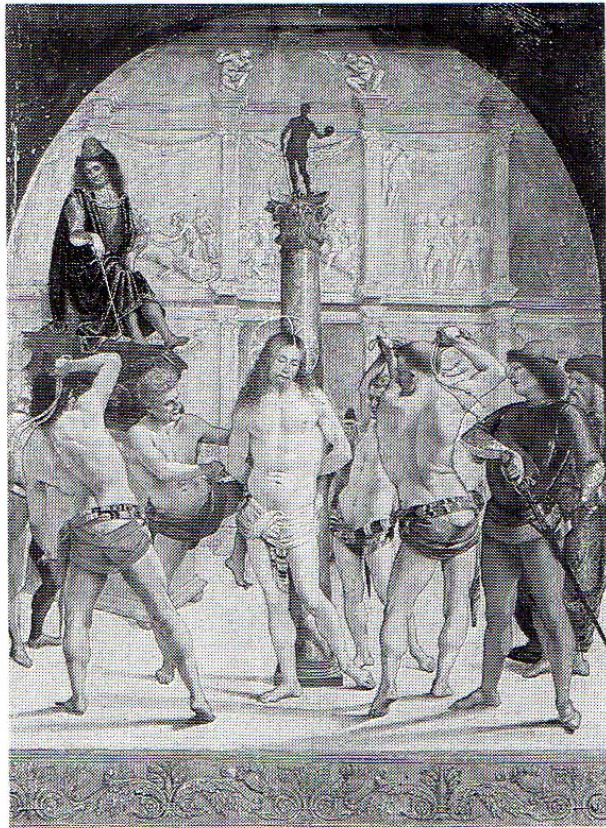
- Set in a striking architectural framework with a strong use of perspective to draw attention to the scene, happening in the background
- Figures in the foreground are 'incidental', giving scale and location to the action.
- Also includes figures, Oriental types, Byzantine functionaries and contemporary men to give historical and geographical context to the scene.

Lorenzo Ghiberti, Jacob & Esau, Gates of Paradise, Florence, Baptistery.



- Ghiberti showed that using Brunelleschi's new perspective, the architecture could emphasise the different roles of the figures in the overall composition, and how even 'diminished' figures could be protagonists.
- Moves the architecture back and gives prominence to the figures in the foreground.

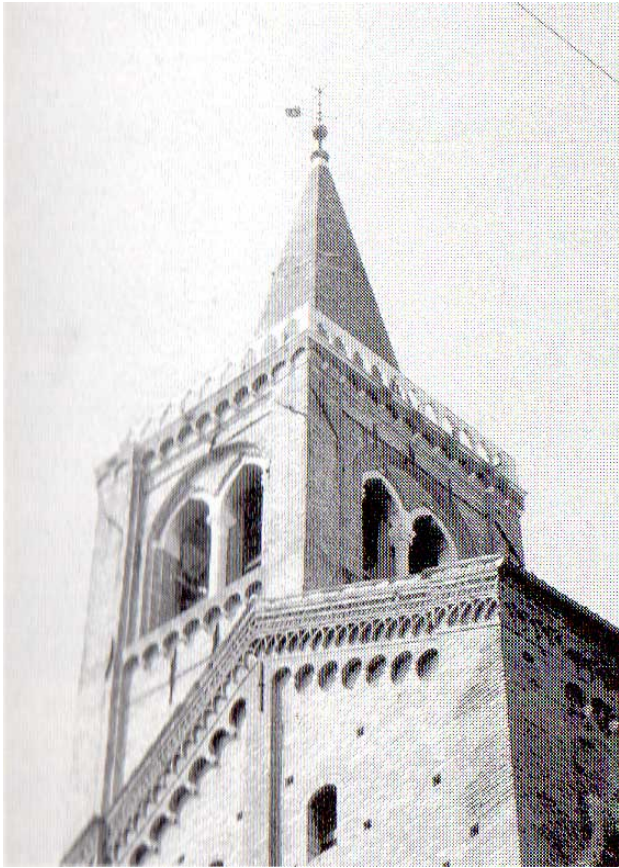
Luca Signorelli, *The Flagellation*, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan



115 Luca Signorelli, *The Flagellation* (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera).

- Fresco
- Pupil and assistant to Piero
- Echoes Piero's composition.
- Play of words on the genitive of his name: 'Luce' and 'Light' emanating from the column.
- "Light is the secret theme and revealer of all in Piero's paintings" (Bertelli) .
- The Flagellation was a night scene, and Piero incorporates two light sources inside and out to separate the two sections of the composition. The hand of the Easter figure in the turban is illuminated by what can only be a lamp.

Campanile of Sant' Angostino, Rimini



- Venetian style decoration of the bell tower is echoed in the balustrades of the staircase in the left courtyard of Herod's Praetorium in the 'Flagellation'

Flagellation: Herod



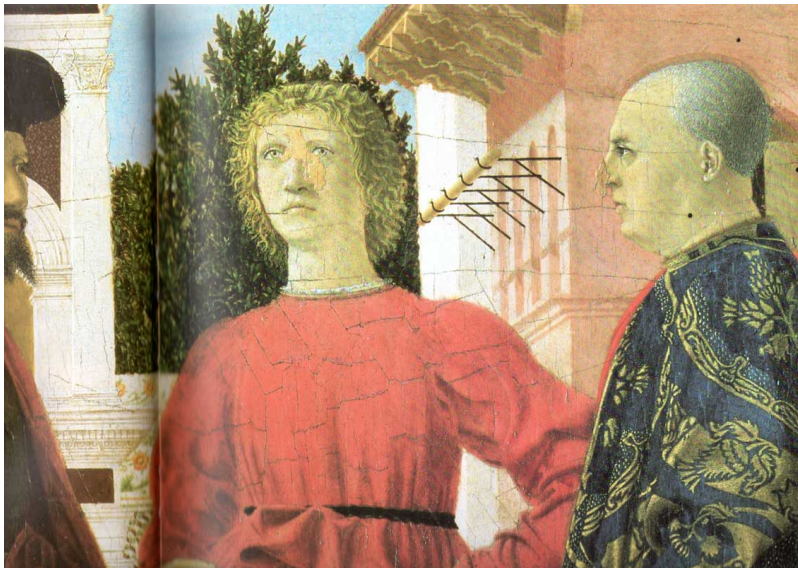
- Staircase in the courtyard has Venetian balustrade, recalling the bell tower of San Agostino da Rimini.
- ‘Divine’ illumination from above suggesting Heaven
- Pointed hat refers to Emperor John Paleologus of Constantinople (signifying ‘The East’)

The Flagellation, 1444-50 detail, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino



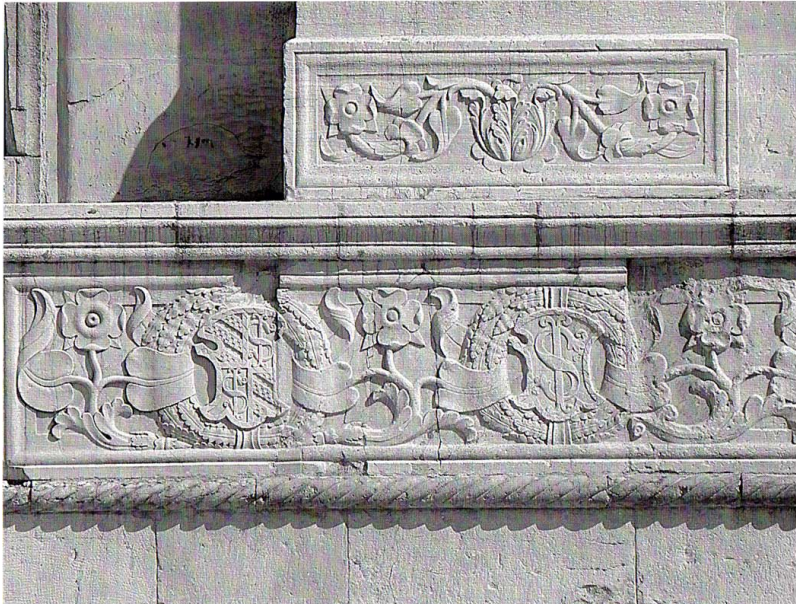
- (Detail) Tempera on Board, 58 x 81 cms
- ‘Triumph’ through ‘Fortitude’
Symbolic figure - representing the triumph of Christ’s Passion through suffering and endurance. Modeled on Roman allegorical figures of Fortitude and Victory.
- The gold and brightness also represent “Sol” (the Sun, symbol of life and resurrection).

Flagellation 1444-50 (detail)



- Detail
- Merchant's house underlines the regal aspect of the Palace.
- Garden Wall is frescoed in the Northern Italian style and refers to the plinth in the Tempio Malatestiano, in Rimini
- Figure in the turban to the left links to the Turbanned figure (Arab) in the Praetorium who observes the Flagellation and acts as an intermediary between the (past) moonlit scene on the left and the daylight present, interpreting the mysteries of the Passion for the figure on the right (Greek). One watches Christ's Passion, the other contemplates the mystery of the Resurrection and communicates it to the furthest figure on the right.
- Fates of Christian and Roman Empires intertwined

Frieze on the exterior of San Frescesco, Rimini



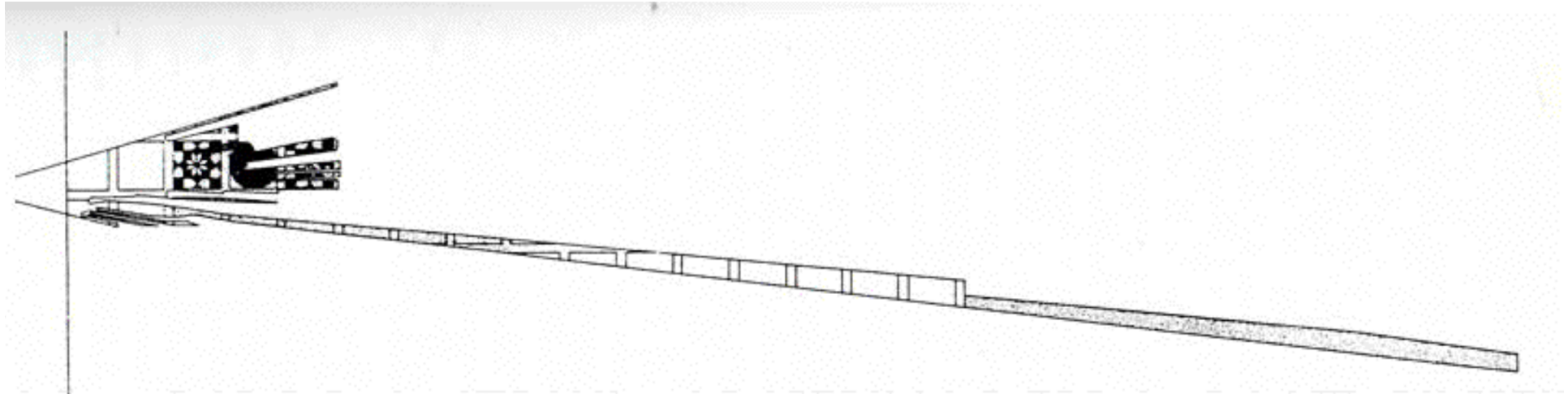
- Incorporated into the decoration of the walled garden of the Flagellation (runs four times round).
- Classically inspired motifs by Jacopo della Pergola, derived from illuminations for Codices belonging to Malatesta Novello - Sigismondo's brother and Lord of Cesena.

Flagellation 1444-1450 (detail)



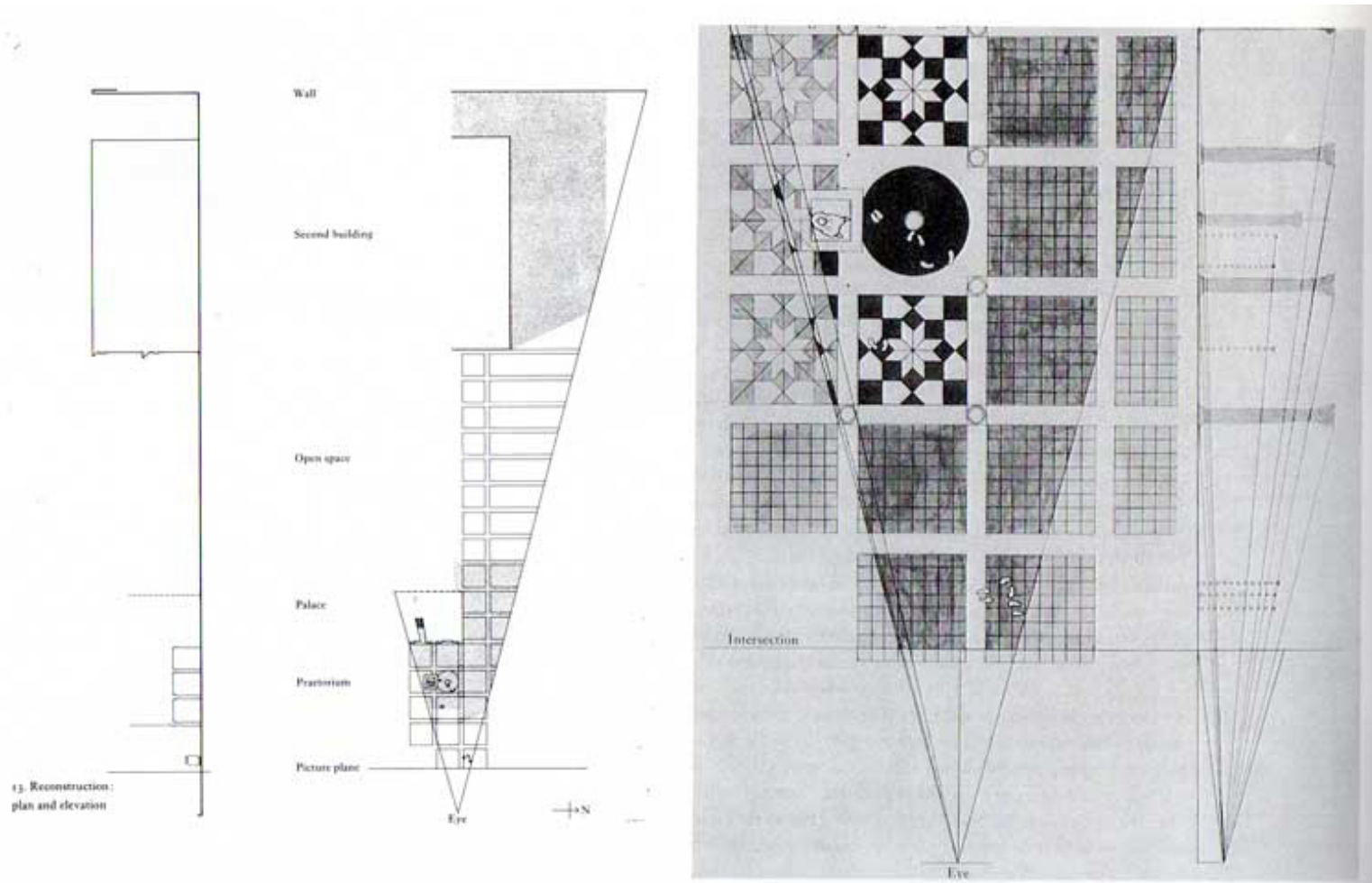
- Painted frieze echoing the Classically inspired motif on San Francesco, Rimini.
- The marriage between Roberto Malatesta and Elisabetta da Montefeltro (Federico's daughter) in 1471, signified the end of a long feud between the two families and the inscription from the Book of Psalms, 'Converunt in unum' ('that two should become one') may refer to this, or to the union of the Christian Church, split between East & West by Schism which the Council of Florence had tried to resolve.

Visible area of the Flagellation



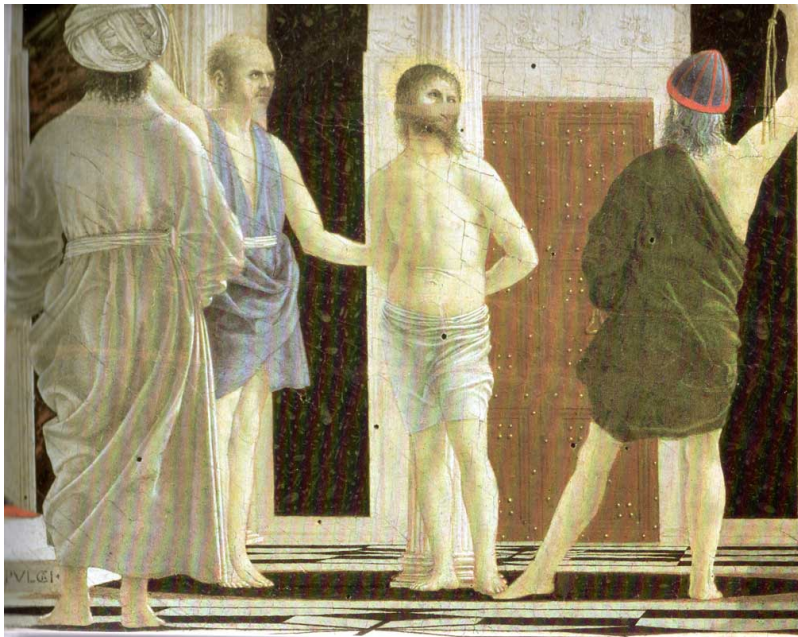
- Diagram of the visible area in the Flagellation by M. Aronberg Lavin 1981
- In the 11th century, the the Holy Column in Jerusalem (the “omphalos”) was enclosed by an aedicule surmounted by a mosaic with an inscription which read: The sole of my foot is the measure for the sky and for the earth.”
- The foot of the main protagonist in the foreground measures exactly the ‘foot’ width of a tile on the marble floor. And from this measure, we are able to calculate precisely, the distance from the front picture plane to the rear wall of the ‘Hortus Conclusus’ the walled garden enclosing the Praetorium of Herod, thus humanising Christ’s divinity as the ‘measure’ of the world. 25

M. Aronberg Lavin, 1981



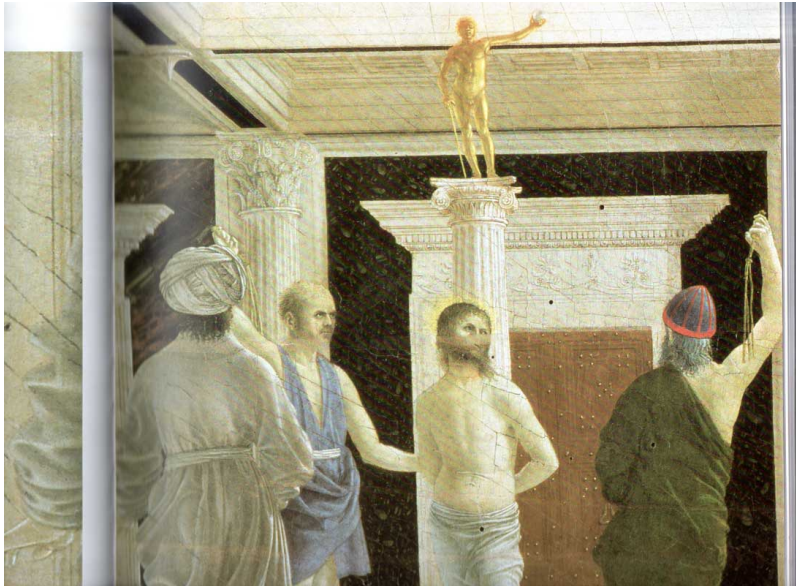
- Plan & Elevation Areas of light and shade in the Flagellation
- Plan & Elevation of the foreground and Praetorium in the 'Flagellation':
- (B.A.R Carter & R. Wittkower, 1953)

Flagellation 1444 - 1450



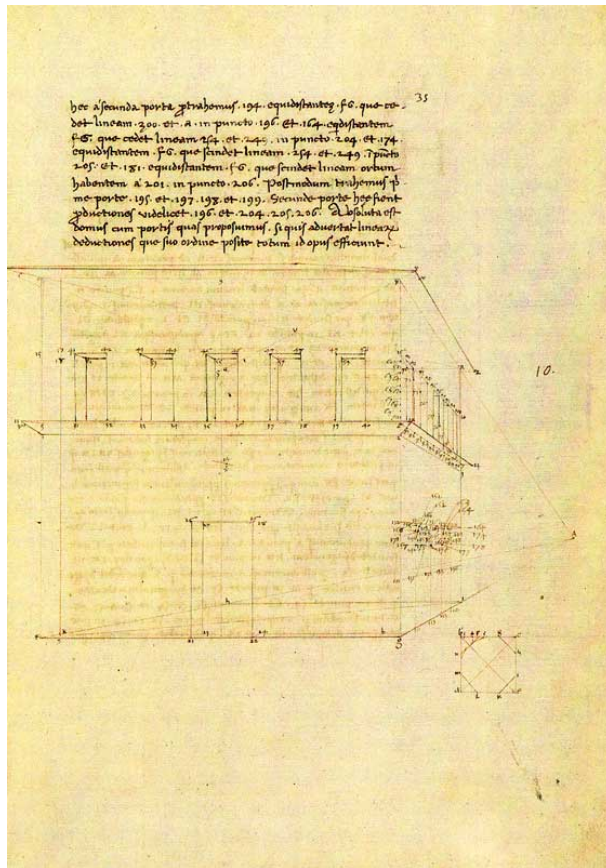
- The Flagellation with the bound Christ and Roman soldiers -
- Herod had Christ whipped in the Praetorium of his palace. Column was later moved to the Church of Syon.
- Column is Ionic (which Vitruvius considered 'feminine') Following the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, and its rebuilding by Hadrian, a single column became its symbol. ("Aelia Capitolina"), and from 'Aelia' it was later corrupted to 'Helia' ('Sun'). The light sources in Piero's painting are double. One inside and one outside the Praetorium.
- Bede notes that the sun placed itself on the top of this column during the summer solstice, thus reinforcing its reputation as a Holy place.
- pavement pattern seen clearly only from above (God's perspective). The porphyry disk at the base of the column represents the 'Omphalos', the centre of the world.

Flagellation, detail



- Column also marked an historical event.
- It was the very place where “a youth had been called back to life on being touched by the Lord’s Cross” - the same miracle that Piero had painted in the Arezzo ‘Miracle of the True Cross’
- From St Ambrose: the ‘omphalos’ was placed between the ‘Anastasis’ and the ‘Martyrion’:
- “The venerable court of the Holy Sepulchre is paved in marble. There are four columns. It was there that the cross was placed on the dead man, who returned to life”.
- According to the ‘Typicon of the Church of Jerusalem’, the Easter procession moved through the Holy Garden and stopped at the ‘centre of the earth’ (the ‘omphalos’- where Pilate had Christ whipped) before moving on to Golgotha.

De Prospettiva Dipingendi, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, col S.P.6, fol. 25v



- C.1470
- Dedicated to Federico da Montefeltro - Piero's second Treatise. Designed as a sequel to Alberti's 'Treatise on Painting'. Combines Piero's fascination with mathematics and the revelation of a Divine order underlying the world of visible appearances.
- Practical notes and exercises for painters.

Resurrection, c. 1459/69, Museo Civico, Borgo San Sepolcro



- Fresco & Tempera, c 200 x 225 cm
- Probably executed after Piero's return from Rome in 1459.
- Vasari called this, "The best of the works which are in that city, and of all his works"
- Had a civic function rather than liturgical, in the Town Hall, and adopted as the Seal of the City (Holy Sepulchre) in the 16th Century.
- Iconographically linked to earlier depictions by Nicola di Segna in San Sepolchro Cathedral and his own earlier depiction of Christ in the triptych of San Giovanni Battista.
- Severe and calm symmetry
- Reflection on pain, experience and endurance.

Madonna del Parto, c. 1467, Monterchi, Sta Maria a Nomentana



- Detached fresco, 206 x 203 cm
- Probably dates from Piero's first Arezzo period, soon after his return from Rimini.
- Pier Francesco Fiorentino copied composition in Certaldo 1467. Functioned as an illusory apse in the chapel.
- Symmetry & reversed cartoon of Angels in complementary colours.
- Subject not so rare in past: Banned in Counter Reformation
- Painted over a similar 14th Century fresco.

Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta,

c.1452, Louvre, Paris.



- Oil & Tempera on Panel, 44 x 34 cm
- Panel uses same cartoon as fresco in Rimini (1451) but lacks the correction made to Sigismondo's hair- Piero reserved the right to alter a portrait after the initial sitting, and the sitter was unlikely to grant a second sitting, hence the use of a cartoon.
- Oil paint allows for subtler veils and transparencies (hint of a beard on the chin) than tempera/fresco.
- Severe geometry, cameo like appearance refers to Roman emperors
- Commissioned at tempestuous moment in Malatesta's life: Action against him by Pope Pius II, Federico da Montefeltro, Francesco Sforza and Alfonso of Aragon was in full swing and the sentence passed against him in the trial prepared by Nicola Cusano resulted in the burning of his effigy.
- Portrait expresses his pride and determination to claim legitimacy for his powers:
- "But I see your face that inspires severity, your frowning eyes' (Pius II).

Brera Altarpiece, c 1475,

(Montefeltro Altarpiece) Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.



- Oil on panel, 248 x 170 cm
- Represents the Virgin enthroned, surrounded by four angels and St John the Baptist, St Bernardine, St Jerome (left) and St Francis, St Peter Martyr, and St Andrew (right). Federigo da Montefeltro is shown in the act of prayer.
- Luca Pacioli (b. 1445 is said to be depicted as St Peter the Martyr). Some work by Pedro Berruguete in the Duke's hands and the helmet on the ground (Longhi)
- Painted for the Tomb of Montefeltro and uses same cartoon as famous Diptych of the Duke and his wife.
- Commissioned as an act of contrition and remorse by Federigo following an amorous encounter which left him injured in a jousting accident.
- Saints show a proliferation of blood and physical injuries.

Brera Altarpiece, c 1475, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.



- Compositional Diagram, (by Marcella Sortegni) showing multiple vanishing points and main correlating axes
- High horizon line through the eyes of the Madonna and Saints discourages the spectator (below) from imagining the illusionistic space extends into their own.
- Mystical Ostrich egg: (Eastern) symbol of fecundity, origin of the Church, aligned with the womb of the Virgin, and main vanishing points.
- Madonna's robe is lined with lamb's wool on which the infant rests - reference to the sacrifice of the Crucifixion
- His mother's knee is the Altar, there is no other depicted.

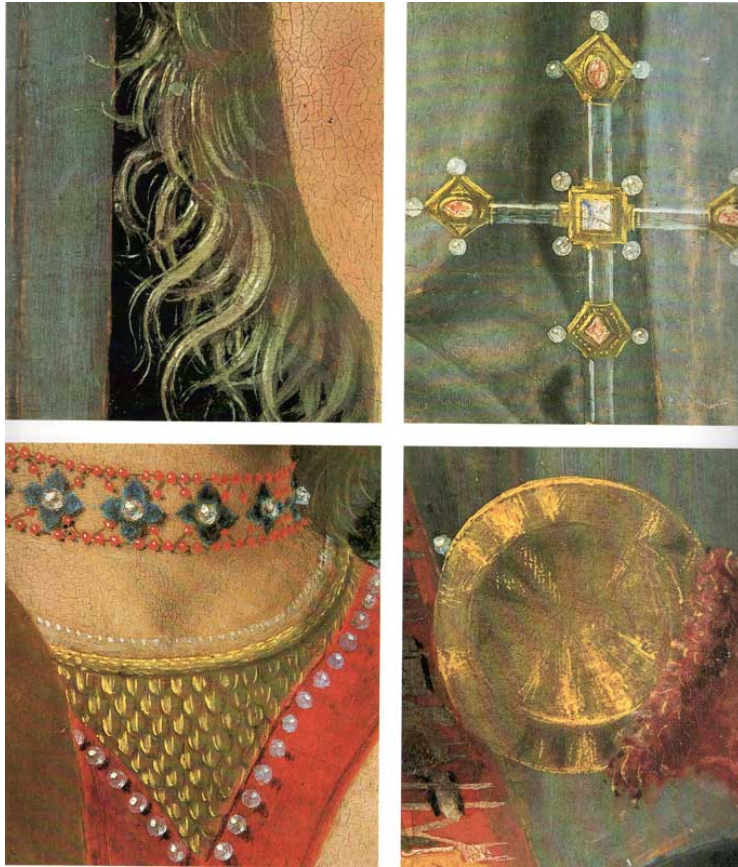
Brera Altarpiece, detail, c.1475

Pinacoteca di Brera



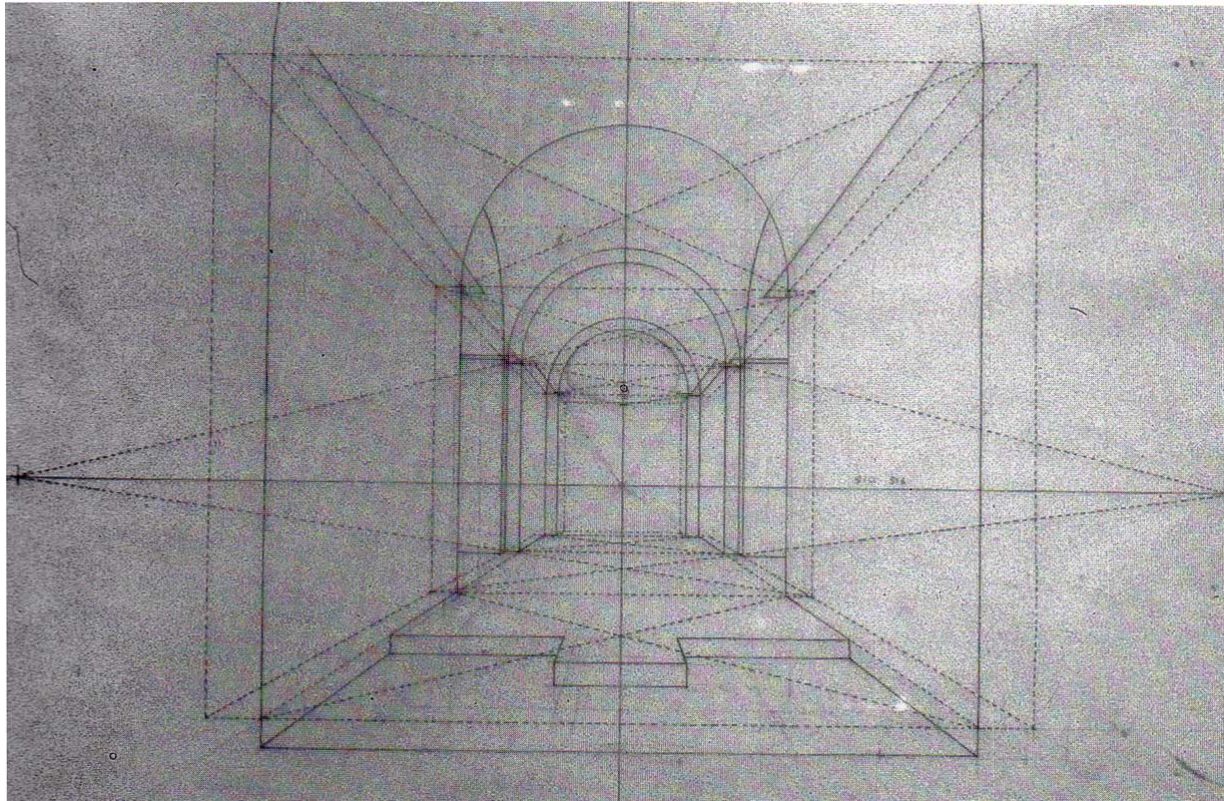
- Tempera on Panel
- Detail of the edge of the Virgin's robe and the perspective recession of the carpet.
- Carpet design reveals a large star on which the Madonna is centred, only 'visible' by deduction and from 'above', but all the information needed to reconstruct it is given perspectively.

Brera Altarpiece, c 1475, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.



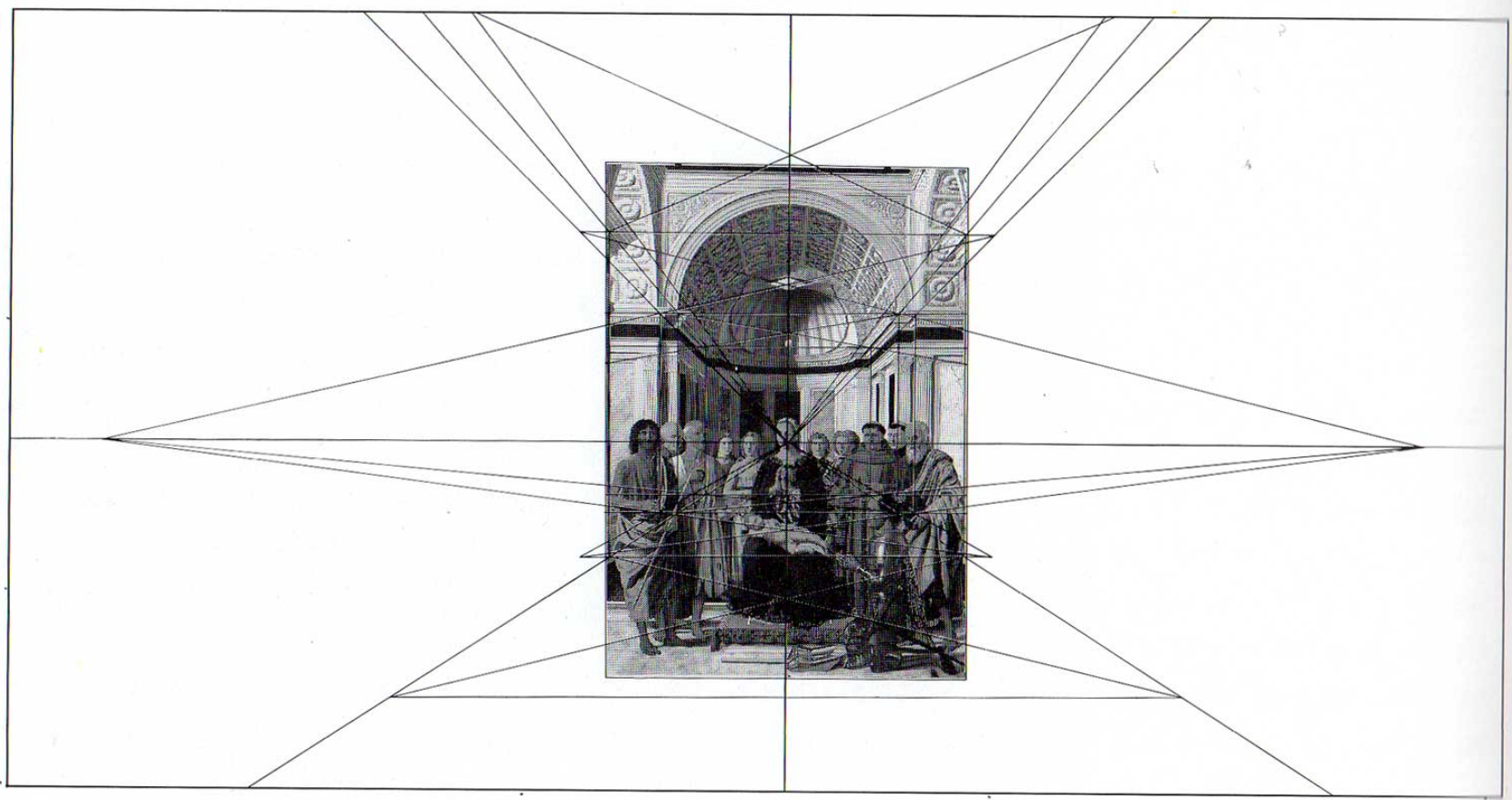
- Details of hair, jewellery and decoration.
- Showing fineness of detailing and precision of brushwork and textures.
- Rock Crystal Cross, typical of the Veneto, is a metaphor of the luminous character of divine truth.
- Point by point, Piero describes the anamorphic qualities of light reflected off a variety of surfaces.
- The Duke's damaged helmet, depicted twice - in the foreground and in the marquetry of a cupboard, deriving from his Studiolo - verifies the historical reality which Montefeltro wished depicted.

Brera Altarpiece, c.1475, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.



- Perspective study
- Showing principal axes, geometrical structure of the architecture, multiple vanishing points, and the 'mystical heart' of the painting.

Brera Altarpiece, c 1475, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.



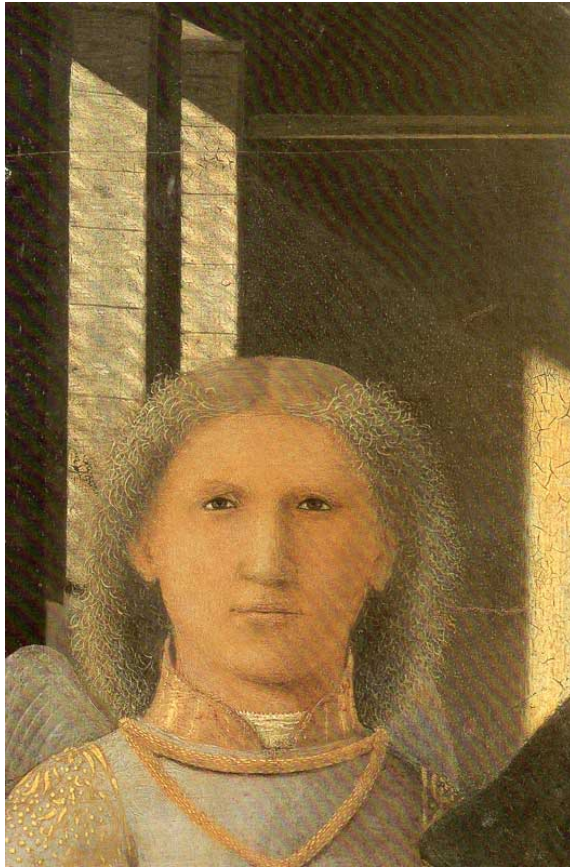
The painting set within its multiple vanishing points

Senigallia Madonna, c 1475, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.



- Oil on Panel, 61 x 53.5 cm
- Refers to Masaccio and Flemish models.
- Background alludes to the 'sheltered place' where God visited his handmaiden.
- Coral necklace and the rose the Child holds alludes to the Passion.
- Diagonals cross on Mary's heart
- One Angel looks to Heaven, the other contemplates the earthly incarnation.
- Perfect balance of compositional and liturgical elements.

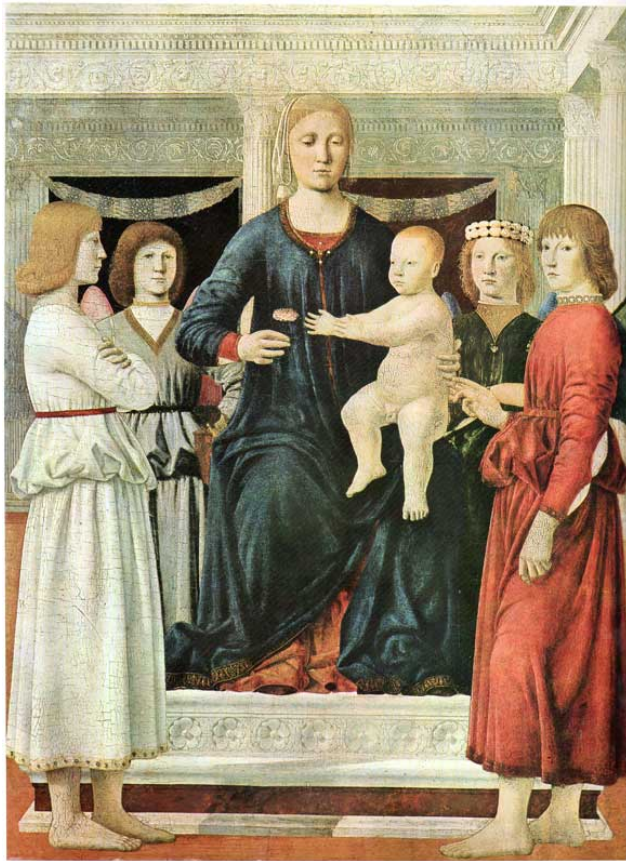
Detail, Senigallia Madonna, c 1475, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.



- Oil on Panel, 61 x 53.5 cm
- (Detail) The room behind the Madonna, flooded with (Divine) light is a symbol of the Annunciation, alluding to Mary's chamber where the incarnation occurred.
- Echoes Flemish models such as Robert Campin.
- The pale blue of the Angel's robe also alludes to the Annunciation.

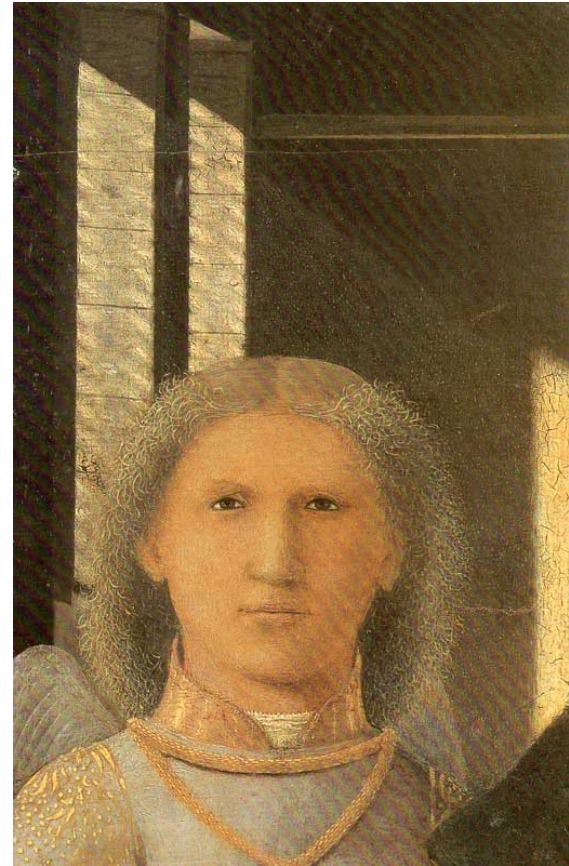
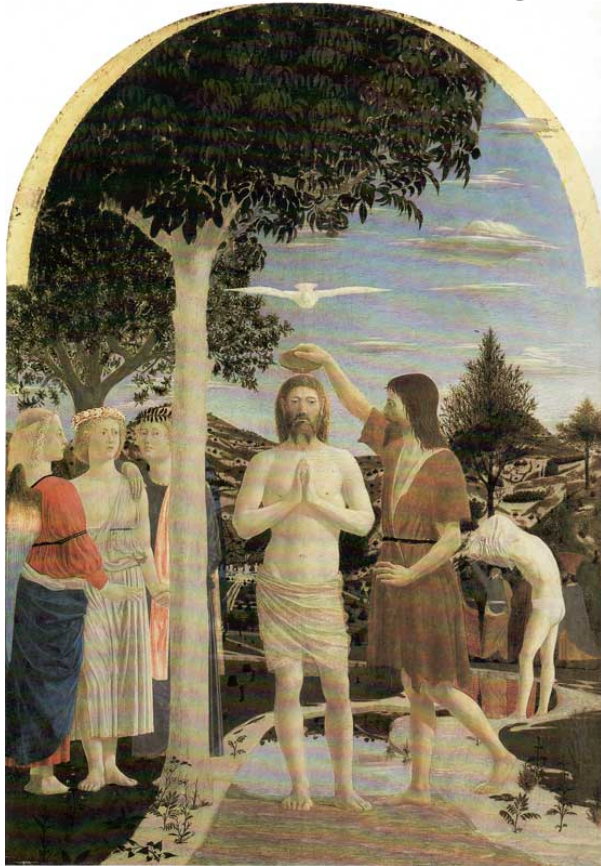
Virgin & Child with Four Angels,

c. 1470, A & J Clark Institute, Williamstown, Mass. .



- Oil and mixed media on Panel, (transferred to panel,1961)
- 117.8 x 78.42 cm cm
- Penultimate Angel on the Right is a repeat of the first Angel to the right in the Montefeltro Altarpiece, The veil of the Madonna repeats the drawing of the Senigallia Madonna and the last angel also reappears in this altarpiece.
- Architectural elements are probably not Piero's but a pupil's - Piero had a penchant for teaching and probably had as large a school of followers as Leonardo.

Light, form and clarity..



- “Light...is the secret theme and revealer of all in Piero’s paintings....
- It is a light, “...in which everyday landscapes are revealed in the enchantment of transparent skies and reflecting waters and in which a friendly relationship is established between nature and man.”