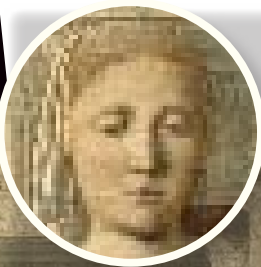


O&A



ART

RENAISSANCE MAN

Piero della Francesca's 15th-century figures feel fresher than ever.

BY DAVID SALLE

PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA, WHO DIED IN SANSEPOLCRO, Tuscany, in 1492, is a time traveler, an artist whose vitality abides in the New World. Less famous but perhaps more subtly influential than Michelangelo, he took painting a quantum leap forward in the use of pictorial space. The static linearity of early Renaissance painting, in which a cadre of biblical personae occupy a shallow plain notably lacking in gravity, became, with Piero, dynamic, lyrical, and theatrical.

The seven paintings in a new show at New York's Frick, "**Piero della Francesca in America**," are mostly of single figures, monumental in attitude; six of the seven are from a single altarpiece depicting the life of Saint Augustine. These pictures are extremely

beautiful, but getting a sense of Piero's compositional brilliance—the greater part of his legacy—is more of a challenge, since all of the large-scale group scenes are in Italian museums, and his masterwork, the fresco cycle "Legend of the True Cross," was painted in situ at the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo and is therefore immobile. A condensed history of Christendom in picture form, "Legend" was completed in 1466. As in a swords-and-sandals epic, everyone from Adam and King Solomon to Constantine and the Queen of Sheba makes an appearance; the battle scenes have a CinemaScopic sweep. Although not the first artist to use it (who's counting?), Piero—a geometrician whose treatise on perspective appears in the annals of Vasari—honed the secret weapon that would define Western painting for centuries: the vanishing point. His figures, though choreographed across precise coordinates, never seem frozen or rote. His battle scenes, crowded with shouting warriors, charging horses, fluttering flags, rushing clouds, and thrusting lances, unfold in the present tense; you can't take them in all in one glance. It's as if an unseen hand has momentarily stilled the gears of the celestial clockworks.

Anointed a "monarch of painting" in the late 15th century, Piero was more or less ignored by later generations—until the 20th century, when the chaste clarity and equipoise of his paintings spoke to the modernist desire for rigor within an "all-over" type of composition. Painters as diverse as Paul Cadmus, Francesco Clemente, and Brice Marden show his influence, while the eccentric non-modernist Balthus developed his pubescent girls' look of heavenly derangement after an apprenticeship spent copying Piero. His influence is not confined to painting; we see Piero in the neoclassical gravitas of architects Michael Graves and Aldo Rossi, and in the processional scenes in Robert Bresson's *Joan of Arc*.

The lone figures in the Frick show emphasize the underlying



FINE ARRAY

Detail of *La Rue*, by Balthus, 1933. Above left: *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels*, by Piero della Francesca, c. 1460–70 (on display at the Frick). Opposite: *Parks*, by Brice Marden, 1938.





TIME CAPSULES

From top: Aldo Rossi's Bonnefanten Museum, in the Netherlands, c. 1900; St. Coletta School in Washington, DC, designed by Michael Graves in 2006.

architecture of his drawing. Like something in a 15th-century how-to-draw book, Piero's heads are built out of simple geometric forms yet have a look of serenity, even sweetness, an inward quality freed from the mask-like stiffness of early Sienese painting. But the drawing is only part of the story; Piero was principally concerned with the division of forms into areas of light and dark. It is this modeling that gives his drawing expressive weight. In some paintings his drapery has the look of Greek sculpture, or Bernini's terra-cotta maquettes. The billowing robes of the saints feel chiseled, and the edges have a satisfying thickness. Somewhat paradoxically, this Hellenist "presentational gravitas," combined as it is with the attention to light and shadow, is what makes his work feel dynamic. Light and air seem to move through it. ●



REAL ESTATE

VILLAGE VANGUARDS

Crumbling medieval towns, all but abandoned and prime for redevelopment, are being snapped up by European property lords as the latest status symbols.

BY TOM ACITELLI



SET IN STONE
The exterior still resembles a medieval town, but the rooms at Santo Stefano's Sextantio now feature such modern amenities as electricity.

ON A MOTORCYCLE TRIP THROUGH Italy's mountainous Abruzzo region in 1999, Daniele Kihlgren, the Swedish-Italian scion of a Milan cement fortune, came upon Santo Stefano di Sessanio, a village with about 40 residents and dozens of abandoned buildings. Struck by its architectural beauty, he began purchasing buildings there. Within five years he owned a third of a town that traces its origin to before the Middle Ages. Kihlgren is one of a small group of European moguls who have picked up the latest real estate status symbol: a crumbling **medieval village** of one's own.

These hamlets—there are hundreds in the remote parts of Italy, France, and Britain—are as likely to show up on eBay as on prominent brokerage listings. Recent sales include the English villages of Askham Richard (which dates from the 11th century and sold for just over \$10 million last May) and Linkenholt (21 cottages, a manor, and 1,500 acres of farmland purchased by Swedish billionaire and H&M owner Stefan Persson), and Courbefy, in the French region of Limousin, whose 200 residents began abandoning it 20 years ago. The new owner, Korean-American photographer Ahae, plans to turn it into an art-focused enclave.

What makes these places salable is a combination of geographic isolation and dwindling economic prospects for the residents—if there are any left. Most, particularly the younger ones, left long ago for bigger cities. Pratariccia, a hilltop village in Tuscany reachable only by foot, has been abandoned since the early 1960s; it was listed last summer for \$3.25 million. For these towns it's often a new owner or oblivion.

"There are two types of interested parties," says Jasper Feilding, a broker at Carter Jonas who worked on the sale of Askham Richard. "One is an investor; either a private individual, a company, or a trust. The other is a developer who sees an opportunity." Following in the footsteps of fashion designer Alberta Ferretti, who turned her Italian village, Montegridolfo, into a vacation destination, Kihlgren transformed Santo Stefano into an *albergo diffuso*, or widespread hotel, with more than two dozen rooms, a restaurant, and shops. In the last decade the number of tourists visiting the village has increased 30-fold, says Kihlgren, but it's not all euros to him: "The main idea is to preserve and restore the heritage." ●

