

Piero

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Masters of Art

Piero della Francesca

(c. 1415-1492)



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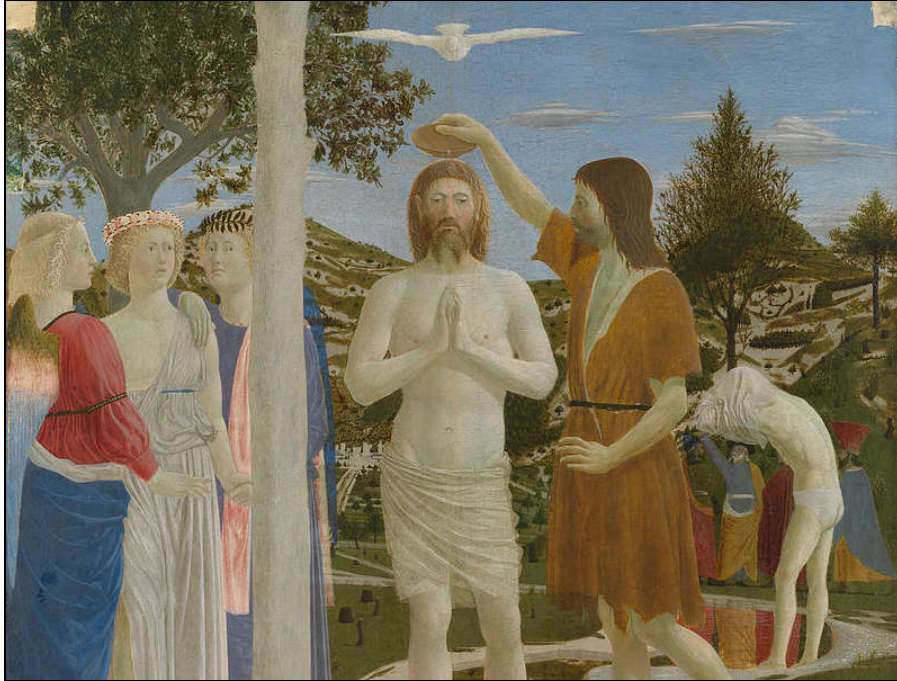
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Version 1

Masters of Art Series

Piero della Francesca



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Masters of Art - Piero della Francesca

First published in the United Kingdom in 2021 by Delphi Classics.

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ISBN: 978 1 80170 007 8

Delphi Classics

is an imprint of

Delphi Publishing Ltd

Hastings, East Sussex

United Kingdom

Contact: sales@delphiclassics.com

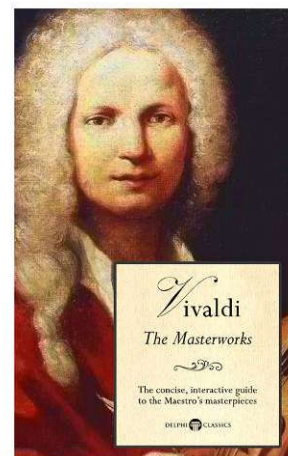
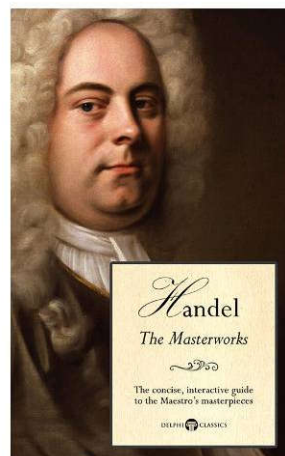
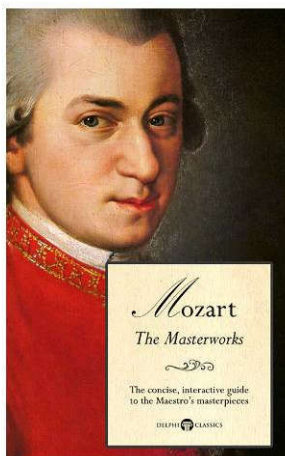
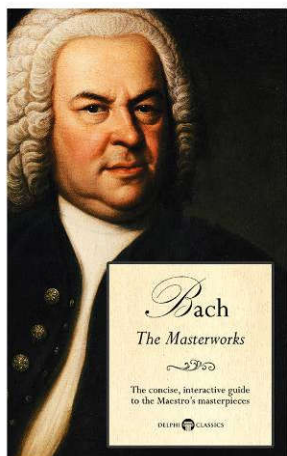


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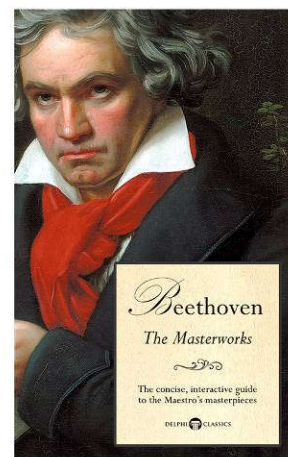
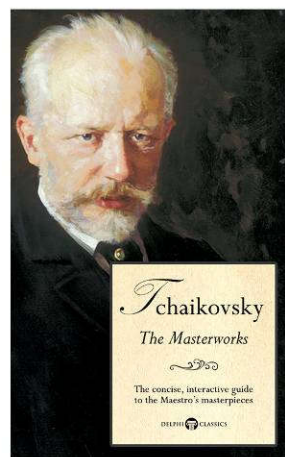
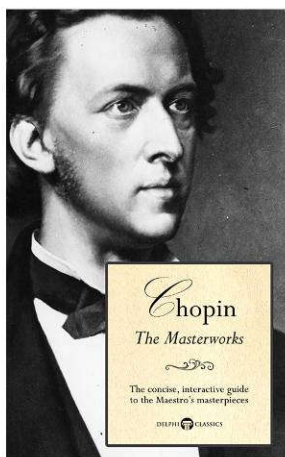
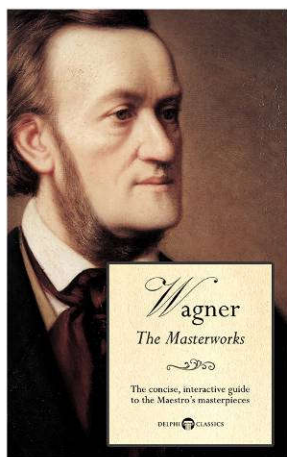
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The Highlights



Sansepolcro, a town 70 miles east of Florence, Tuscany — Piero's birthplace



Central Sansepolcro



A seventeenth century engraving of Piero

The Highlights



In this section, a sample of Piero della Francesca's most celebrated works is provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

Polyptych of the Misericordia (1445-62)



The early Renaissance master Piero della Francesca was born in the town of Borgo Santo Sepolcro, modern-day Sansepolcro, Tuscany, to Benedetto de' Franceschi, a tanner and shoemaker, and Romana di Perino da Monterchi, who were members of the Florentine Franceschi noble family. He was a posthumous child and was called Piero della Francesca after his mother, who was referred to as “la Francesca” due to her marriage into the Franceschi family. The surviving documented facts regarding his life are few, providing only a broad outline of his career and interests. We are not even certain of the chronology of his extant paintings. He was well educated and literate in Latin, though we know nothing of his early training as a painter. It is assumed that he was instructed by local masters influenced by the Sienese school of art.

We do know that in 1439 Piero was employed as an associate of Domenico Veneziano, who was working on a series of frescoes for the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence, as the early Renaissance style was beginning to take hold. In Florence Piero was likely to have studied the pioneering statuary of Donatello and Luca della Robbia, the buildings of Filippo Brunelleschi and the paintings of Masaccio and Fra Angelico. It is also believed that he read a theoretical treatise on painting by the humanist and architect Leon Battista Alberti. His associate Domenico Veneziano, whose own works reveal an emphasis on colour and light as elements of pictorial construction, would have encouraged the young Piero to assimilate these new ideas. It was the influence of the early Renaissance art of Florence that would provide the foundation of Piero's own style.

One document reveals that in Sansepolcro in 1442 Piero was elected to the town council. Three years later the Confraternita della Misericordia commissioned him to produce a large polyptych, now known as the *Misericordia Altarpiece*, his first surviving major work. It reveals his indebtedness to the Florentine masters Donatello and Masaccio, a fondness for geometric form and a calm deliberation with which he habitually worked throughout his career. The commission would not be completed until 1462, seventeen years later, in spite of the three-year time limit given in the contract. Today, the polyptych is conserved in the Museo Civico di Sansepolcro.

In keeping with the taste of the time, the polyptych was painted with precious colours and supplied with a gilded background. The oldest two panels, to the left of the central panel, depict Saint Sebastian and Saint John the Baptist. They show a close connection with Masaccio's nudes, which Piero would have seen in a visit to Florence. Piero painted the outlying panels of the tympanum (the semi-circular decorative panels above the main sections) later, including the Crucifixion at the upper centre, Saint Benedict, the Angel, the Madonna of the Annunciation, and Saint Francis to the sides. In c. 1450 Piero finished the figures of Saint Andrew and Saint Bernardino. The predellas (the narrow painting scenes along the frame at the bottom of a polyptych) represent five scenes of Christ's life, now believed to have been mostly executed by assistants.

The final section to be painted was the central panel, illustrating the Madonna della Misericordia — a traditional subject of Christian art, showing a group of figures sheltering for protection under the outspread cloak of the Virgin Mary. This subject was especially popular in Italy from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, often used as

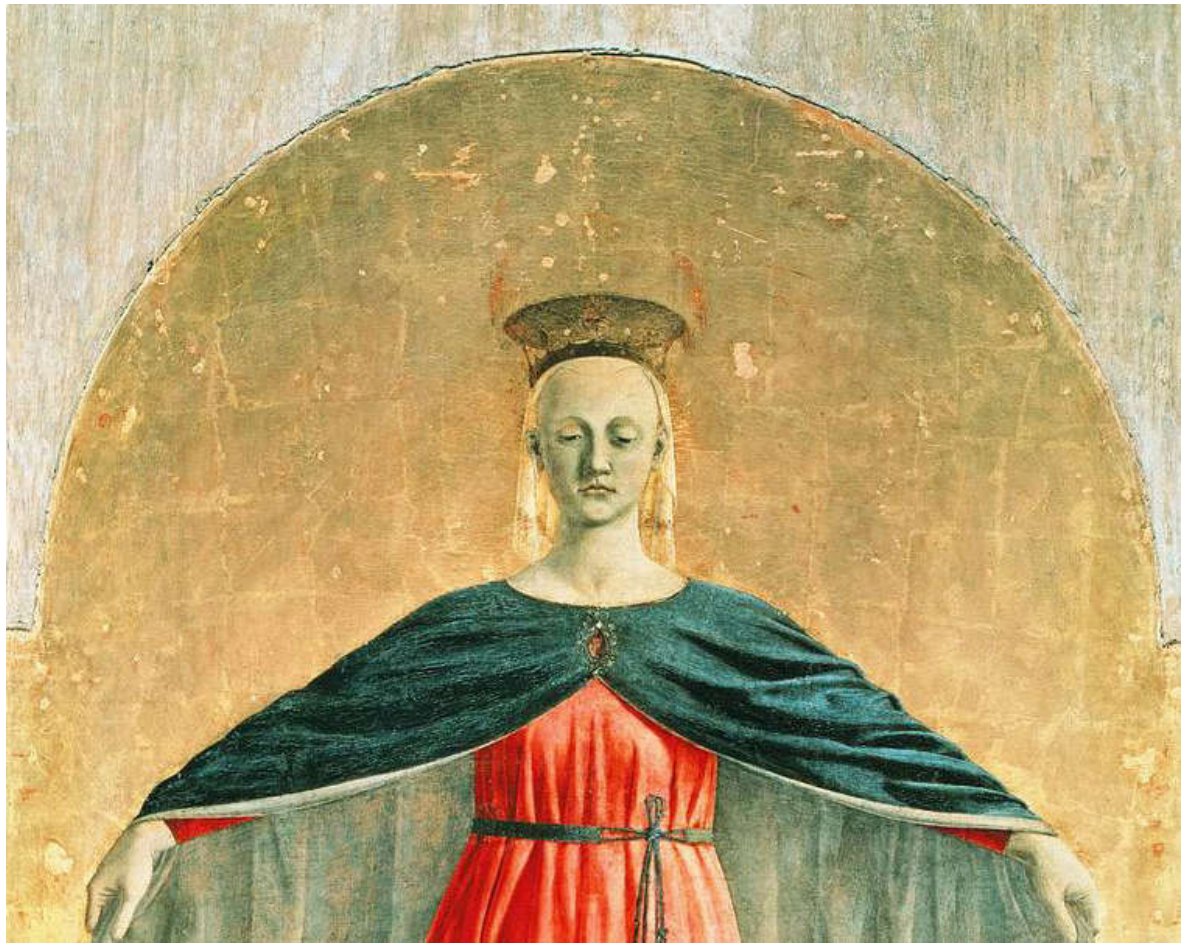
a specialised form of votive portrait. The Virgin stands with her arms dramatically stretched out — hinting at the Crucifixion — her mantle spreading wide, protecting a cluster of worshippers. The hierarchal scale of Mary dominates the panel and her facial features are surprisingly cold and disgruntled, in spite of her act of charity. The blue mantel — a common symbol of the Virgin, representing the colour of the heavens — covers eight crowded figures kneeling in reverence. Each face is depicted with the precision of a portrait, manifesting the artist's interest in fine detail and individual representation. Among the figures, there kneels a member of the Misericordia, whose identity is concealed by the black-hooded uniform of the confraternity, adding an element of mystery.

Although the commission is a traditional choice, with limited options for Piero to showcase his skills, he still produces impressive effects. He resolves the difficulty of dealing with a flat solid gilded background, as requested in the commission, by placing the kneeling members of the confraternity in a realistic three-dimensional space, conveyed by the mushrooming mantle, resembling an apse in a church. The modelling of the Virgin's figure, inspired by Masaccio, and the attention to perspective elements, derived by Brunelleschi, indicate how receptive Piero was to the innovative changes taking place at that most pivotal time of art history.





Detail: central panel



Detail



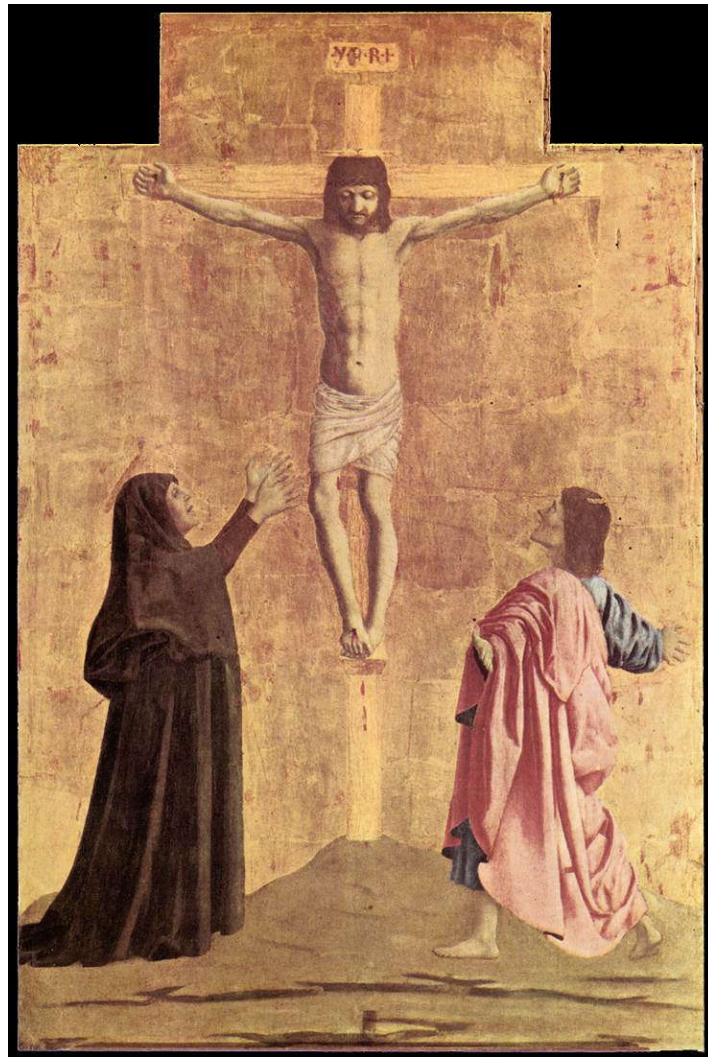
Detail



Detail: left panel — Saint Sebastian and John the Baptist



Detail: right panel — Saints Andrew and Bernardino



Detail: top section — Crucifixion



Detail: Saint Benedict



Detail: Archangel Gabriel



Detail: Virgin



Detail: Saint Francis



Detail: lower section — Deposition scene



Assumed self portrait of Masaccio; detail of 'Saint Peter Raising the Son of Theophilus and Saint Peter Enthroned as First Bishop of Antioch, Brancacci Chapel, S. Maria del Carmine' — Masaccio (1401-1428) was a Florentine artist, often regarded as the first great painter of the Quattrocento period of the Italian Renaissance. According to Vasari, Masaccio was the best painter of his generation because of his skill at imitating nature, recreating lifelike figures and movements, as well as a convincing sense of three-dimensionality.



'Virgin and Child with Saint Anne' by Masolino and Masaccio, Uffizi Gallery, c. 1424



End of Sample