

Perugino

DELPHI  CLASSICS

Masters of Art

Pietro Perugino

(c. 1446-1523)



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Masters of Art Series

Pietro Perugino



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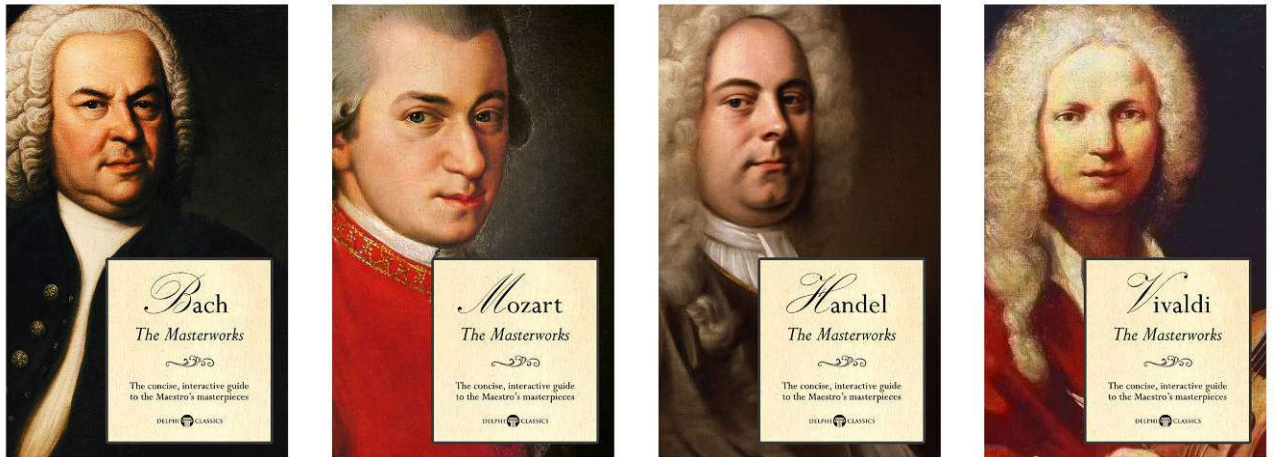
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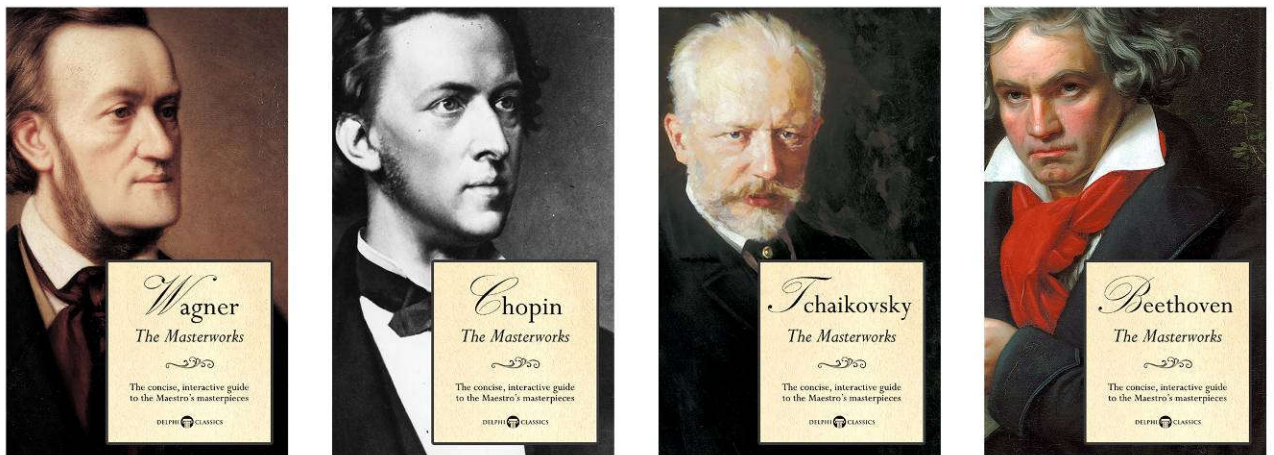
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The Highlights



Città della Pieve, a town in Perugia, Umbria, central Italy — Perugino's birthplace



Portrait of a Man (believed by some to be Perugino), attributed to Raphael, c. 1506

The Highlights



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

Adoration of the Magi (c. 1473)



A celebrated master of the Umbrian school and a forerunner of Italy's High Renaissance, Pietro Vannucci was born in Città della Pieve, a small town in the mountains near Perugia, central Italy. There is much dispute among scholars regarding the socioeconomic status of Perugino's family. Some maintain that he worked his way out of poverty, while others argue that his family was among the wealthiest in the town. His exact date of birth is not known, but based on his age at death, as mentioned by the art biographer Giorgio Vasari, it is believed that he was born between 1446 and 1452. He was one of a large family and by the age of nine he was dispatched to Perugia, the largest city of Umbria, to learn painting, possibly in the studio of Fiorenzo di Lorenzo, whose style closely resembles Perugino's early works. Afterwards, he worked with Piero della Francesca (who likely taught him perspective form) and Luca Signorelli (the master of Michelangelo) at Arezzo. Like these Umbrian masters, Perugino went to Florence to finalise his training. According to Vasari, Perugino worked with Leonardo da Vinci in Andrea del Verrocchio's shop, as well as with Giovanni Santi, the father of Raphael.

By 1470, young Pietro was already known as "il Perugino" from the city of his adoption, and he returned to Perugia. A year or two later he completed his apprenticeship, having enrolled as a master in the Confraternity of St Luke. Accounts suggest that despite his undoubted talent, Perugino was not particularly enthusiastic about his line of work. In 1475, he painted a series of frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico, and three years later another series in the neighboring town of Cerqueto. Both of these cycles have been lost and the only examples left of Perugino's early style are a few small tempera paintings and the following altarpiece, completed for the church of Santa Maria dei Servi in Perugia, connected to the Baglioni family, but housed today in the city's Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria.

According to the art historian Vittoria Garibaldi, *The Adoration of the Magi* was one of Perugino's earliest commissions, received at the end of his apprenticeship in Florence in 1472; others date the painting to the late 1470's. The scene follows a traditional layout, with the nativity hut on the right and the visitors' procession, developing horizontally, on the left. In the background, behind the ox and donkey, we can see a rocky hill landscape, employing aerial perspective, learned during his time in Arezzo. The Virgin holds the Christ Child on her knees, while Joseph stands behind her with a stick, stressing his age. The oldest of the Magi is already kneeling, as the other two are presented in the act of offering gifts. The crowded procession includes figures that are common in Perugino's works, including a boy with a turban and the blond youngsters in elegant poses. The young male figure on the extreme left, partly cropped, is perhaps a self portrait.

The painting's style is related to work produced at Verrocchio's workshop, where Perugino had spent the formative period of his apprenticeship. The figures form a gathering typical of late Gothic art, as seen in the sacred paintings of Fiorenzo di Lorenzo. The rocky and atmospheric landscape, providing depth from the painting's foreground, is inspired by the works of Leonardo. However, the integration between the characters and the landscape is indebted to Piero della Francesca, including the awareness of the golden ratio in the representation of the tree. Being a former

mathematician, Piero upheld the practice of creating beauty through the use of measurements and geometry, establishing what is known as the golden ratio. He is famous for the centring and positioning of his works, representing geometric order and harmony; common symbols in religious paintings during the Renaissance. Perugino's own depiction of the tree, echoed by the structure of the stable, reinforces this teaching.





Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



*An example work of Perugino's first master, Fiorenzo Di Lorenzo: 'The Adoration of the Magi',
Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia, c. 1490*



*Portrait of Andrea del Verrocchio by Nicolas de Larmessin, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, c. 1470.
Verrocchio was a sculptor, painter and goldsmith, who operated an important workshop in Florence.
His most distinguished student was Leonardo.*



'The Baptism of Christ' by Piero della Francesca, National Gallery, London, c. 1450. This altarpiece is a famous exponent of Piero's golden ratio theory.

Delivery of the Keys (1482)



In 1480 Perugino's reputation had spread to Rome, where he was called by Sixtus IV to decorate a chapel in the Old St. Peter's Basilica. The pope was pleased with his work and went on to commission fresco panels for a new chapel he had built in the Vatican Palace. The Sistine Chapel frescoes Perugino executed included *Moses and Zipporah* (previously attributed to Luca Signorelli), *Baptism of Christ* and *Delivery of the Keys*. Due to the size of the work, Perugino was later joined by a group of painters from Florence, including Botticelli, Ghirlandaio and others. He was also accompanied by Pinturicchio (1454-1513), who was made his partner, receiving a third of the profits. These frescoes were the most revered commission in Rome at the time. The altar wall was also painted with the *Assumption*, the *Nativity* and *Moses in the Bulrushes*. These works were later destroyed to make a space for Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*.

Forming part of a series of *Stories of Jesus*, the following plate, *Delivery of the Keys*, was produced in 1481-1482. While the fresco was still being created, a visit from Alfonso II of Naples resulted in his addition to the far left of the group of foreground figures. To balance out the image, an apostle was added above St. Peter. The scene is referenced in *Matthew 16*, in which Jesus says he will give "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" to Saint Peter. These keys symbolise the power to forgive and to share the word of God, therefore giving the power to allow others into heaven.

The main figures of the fresco are organised in a frieze-like structure of two tightly compressed rows close to the foreground and well below the horizon. The principal group, including Christ handing the silver and gold keys to the kneeling St. Peter, is surrounded by the other Apostles, including Judas (fifth figure to the left of Christ), all depicted with halos, together with portraits of contemporaries, including one believed to be a self portrait (fifth from the right edge). The flat, open square is divided by coloured stones into large foreshortened rectangles. A temple forms the center of the background, giving a sacred equilibrium to the composition. The depiction is inspired by the ideal church from Leon Battista Alberti's *On Architecture*. On either side of the splendid edifice, there are triumphal arches with inscriptions, linking Sixtus IV to King Solomon, recalling the latter's porticoed temple. In the middle distance there are references to two scenes from the *Life of Christ*, including the *Tribute Money* on the left and the *Stoning of Christ* on the right.

The representation of the figures is heavily influenced by Verrocchio. The figure of St Thomas from Verrocchio's bronze group in Orsanmichele is recalled by the dynamic and complex drapery, as well as the Apostles' long flowing hair and elegant demeanours. The poses of Perugino's figures fall into a small number of attitudes that are consistently repeated, usually in reverse from one side to the other, signifying the use of the same cartoon. Although they appear graceful and elegant, these are solid forms, modelled three-dimensionally, standing firmly on the ground. Their heads are smallish in proportion to the rest of their bodies and their features are delicately delineated, with attention to minor detail.

The fresco was believed to be a good omen in Papal conclaves: superstition held that the cardinal, as selected by lot, who was housed in the cell beneath the fresco was likely to be elected. Contemporary records indicate that at least three popes were

housed beneath the fresco during the conclaves that elected them: Pope Clement VII, Pope Julius II and Pope Paul III.





Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail: possible self portrait in the foreground figure, third from left



Detail



Detail



Detail



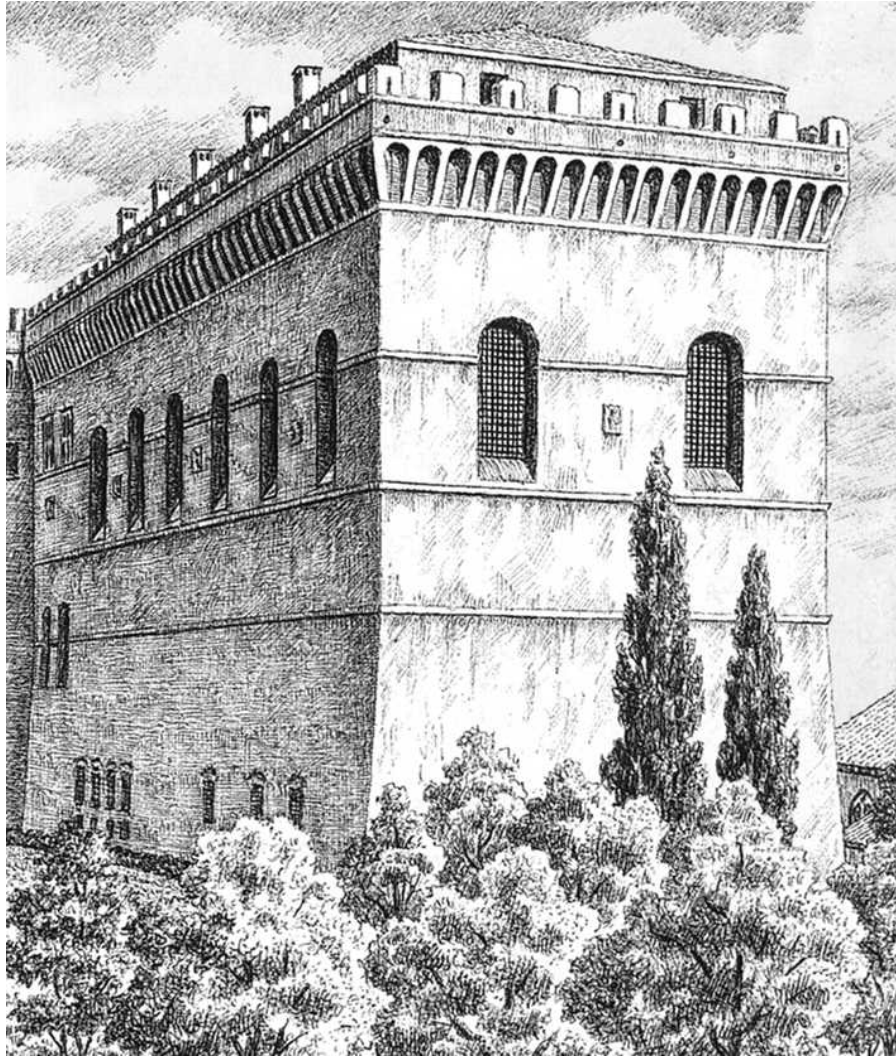
Portrait of Pope Sixtus IV by Justus van Gent, c. 1475



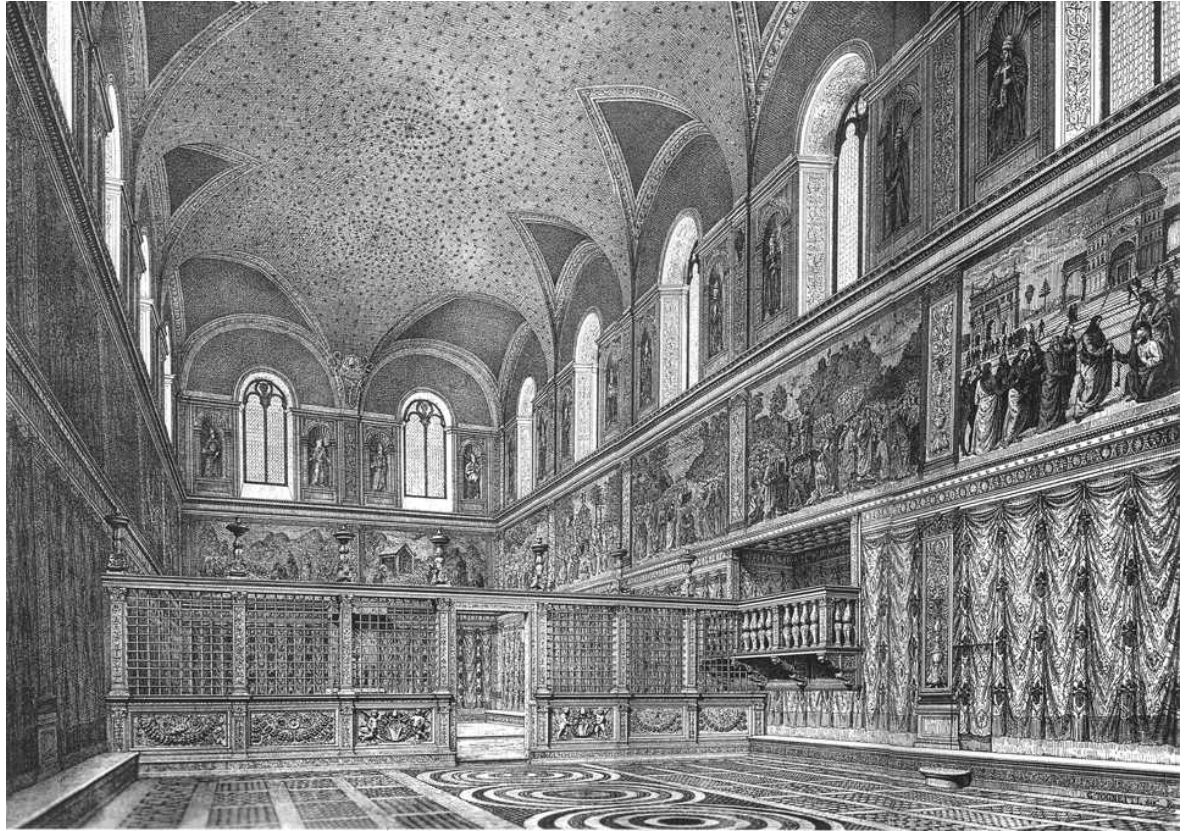
A source of inspiration to Perugino: 'Christ and St. Thomas' (1467–1483), a bronze statue by Andrea del Verrocchio made for one of the 14 niches on the exterior walls of the Orsanmichele in Florence, where it is now replaced by a cast and the original moved inside the building.



Detail



The Sistine Chapel as it appeared in the fifteenth century



*An engraving that reconstructs the appearance of the interior of the Sistine Chapel in the 1480's.
Perugino's 'Delivery of the Keys' appears on the far right.*



Interior of the chapel today

Madonna and Child with Saint Rose and Saint Catherine (c. 1490)



The popularity enjoyed by Perugino in the 1480's is underlined by the large number of commissions he received. In 1482 he was given an order by the Signoria of Florence for the decoration of the Palazzo Pubblico, though he never executed the work, being summoned to Rome before the end of the year to assist in the decoration of the Sistine Chapel. In 1486 he left Rome and the next twenty years of his life were spent in frequent wanderings. He was known for his practical business sense, great energy and diligent industry, promoting his name as an artistic genius of sorts. He operated workshops in both Perugia and Florence, where he employed a number of assistants to execute the orders that came from all over Italy. Meanwhile, he himself traveled back and forth between the two cities, finding time to visit many other places, undertaking numerous commissions. In 1489 he travelled to Orvieto, where he was employed to finish the work that Fra Angelico had left undone in one of the chapels of the cathedral.

An important early work is the tondo of *Madonna and Child with St Rose and St Catherine* (c. 1490), now in the Louvre. It presents the Madonna and Christ Child enthroned between St. Rosa on the left and St. Catherine on the right, while two angels appear in the background, serving as figures of adoration. The Madonna's blue robe is fastened with a brooch of elaborate workmanship, while the attending saints are dressed in gold-bordered and jewelled robes of ornate design. The tondo is noted for several trademarks of the artist's mature style. Note the Madonna's broad brow, dove-like eyes and the attention to naturalism in representing the hair of the female figures. Fine sections of hair seem to flutter in the air, giving a sense of dynamism. Other key hallmarks are the drooping forms and air of melancholy that permeates the setting. Perugino's works, along with his great future protégé Raphael, are recognisable for the sense of purity and candor they convey, in the depiction of the faces and atmospheric backgrounds. Perugino portrays his forms as graceful and slender, which are defined clearly in outline. The hands are demarcated with tapering fingers that are three-dimensionally modelled, though affected in posture.

Interestingly, Perugino has presented this scene of the enthroned Madonna from a distinctly feminine point of view. The angels, usually portrayed as male according to the Renaissance iconography, appear as two beautiful young women, as their poses and lowered gazes connote their adoration of the Virgin and Child. The two figures of St Rose and St Catherine on either side of the Virgin imply a female spiritual trinity, while the scene's symmetrical composition evokes unity and balance — another debt to Piero della Francesca. Perugino's interest in adding depth to the scene would indicate his awareness of Masaccio's innovations. The Virgin is positioned on an ornate dais, allowing her drapery to fall behind and extend the illusory effect of depth. A further plane is added by the white wall structure behind the saints, rendered as a C-shape and enveloping the background of these forms, giving the impression the foreground figures project out of the painting.





Detail



Detail



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Detail



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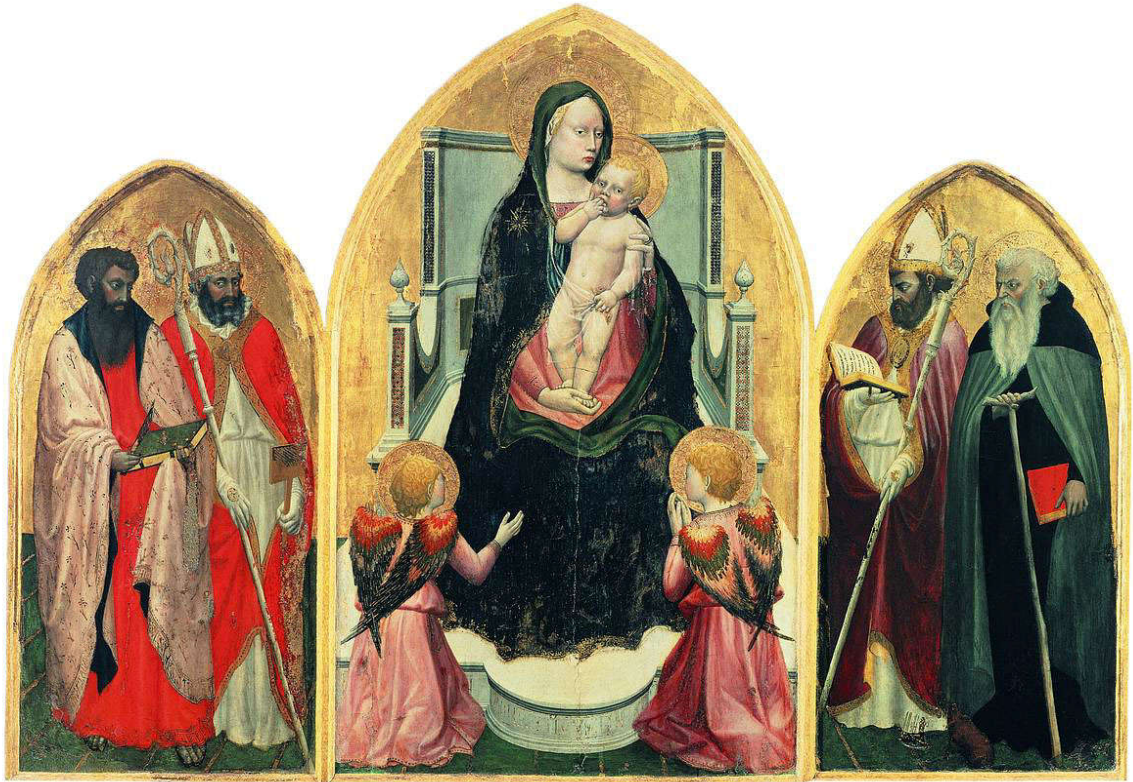
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Detail



William II by Jan Adam Kruseman, 1842. A former owner of the tondo, William II (1792-1849) was King of the Netherlands, Grand Duke of Luxembourg and Duke of Limburg.



A possible influence: 'San Giovenale Triptych' by Masaccio, Masaccio Museum of Sacred Art at Cascia di Reggello, Florence, 1422

The Virgin Appearing to Saint Bernard (c. 1492)



According to Vasari, Perugino returned to Florence in September 1493 to marry Chiara, the daughter of the architect Luca Fancelli. The same year, he made Florence his permanent home, though he continued to accept work elsewhere. During this period he received a commission to paint an altarpiece for the church of Santa Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi in Florence. It represents St Bernard of Clairvaux, deep in his studies, when he is interrupted by a fully corporeal vision of the Virgin Mary, surrounded by four saints. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was an abbot, mystic, co-founder of the Knights Templar and a major leader in the reformation of the Benedictine Order through the nascent Cistercian Order. He advocated crusades in general and convinced many to participate in the unsuccessful Second Crusade, notably through a famous sermon at Vézelay (1146). He was canonised just 21 years after his death by Pope Alexander III.

According to legend, St. Bernard, noted for his devotion to the Virgin, whose divine perfections he never wearied of setting forth, was surprised one day, while engaged in writing his homilies, by a sacred visitation. Although he was so weary and ill from his studies that he could scarcely hold his pen, the Virgin's divine presence comforted and restored him.

Perugino portrays the saint dressed in the white habit of his order, seated at his desk, his hands raised with a reverential gesture, as he regards the Virgin before him. Her dress is of a deep crimson colour, her mantle traditionally blue, and around her head is a reddish-brown kerchief. Two angels are in attendance: one robed in deep amber; the other in green and gray. Behind St. Bernard, there are St. Philip and St. John the Evangelist. The figures are grouped under a vaulted three-dimensional arcade that frequently appears in Perugino's work. In the distance, seen through a window, there is an idyllic Umbrian landscape, enhancing the theme of serenity.

Regarded by many as one of Perugino's most beautiful paintings, the altarpiece is noted for its harmony of expression and mystic charm. It is a seemingly effortless symmetrical composition, though there is no static or artificial element. The position of the Virgin and St. Bernard's prayer desk are both slightly off balance, but not enough to disrupt the harmony of the scene. The elegant depiction of the figures' faces contributes to the quiet and dignified atmosphere. There is little attempt at individualising the likenesses, as the artist is more intent in conveying an impression of uninterrupted beauty.

The Virgin Appearing to St Bernard was later acquired in 1830 for King Ludwig I of Bavaria from the Capponi in Florence, and eventually made its way to the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, where it hangs till this day.





Detail



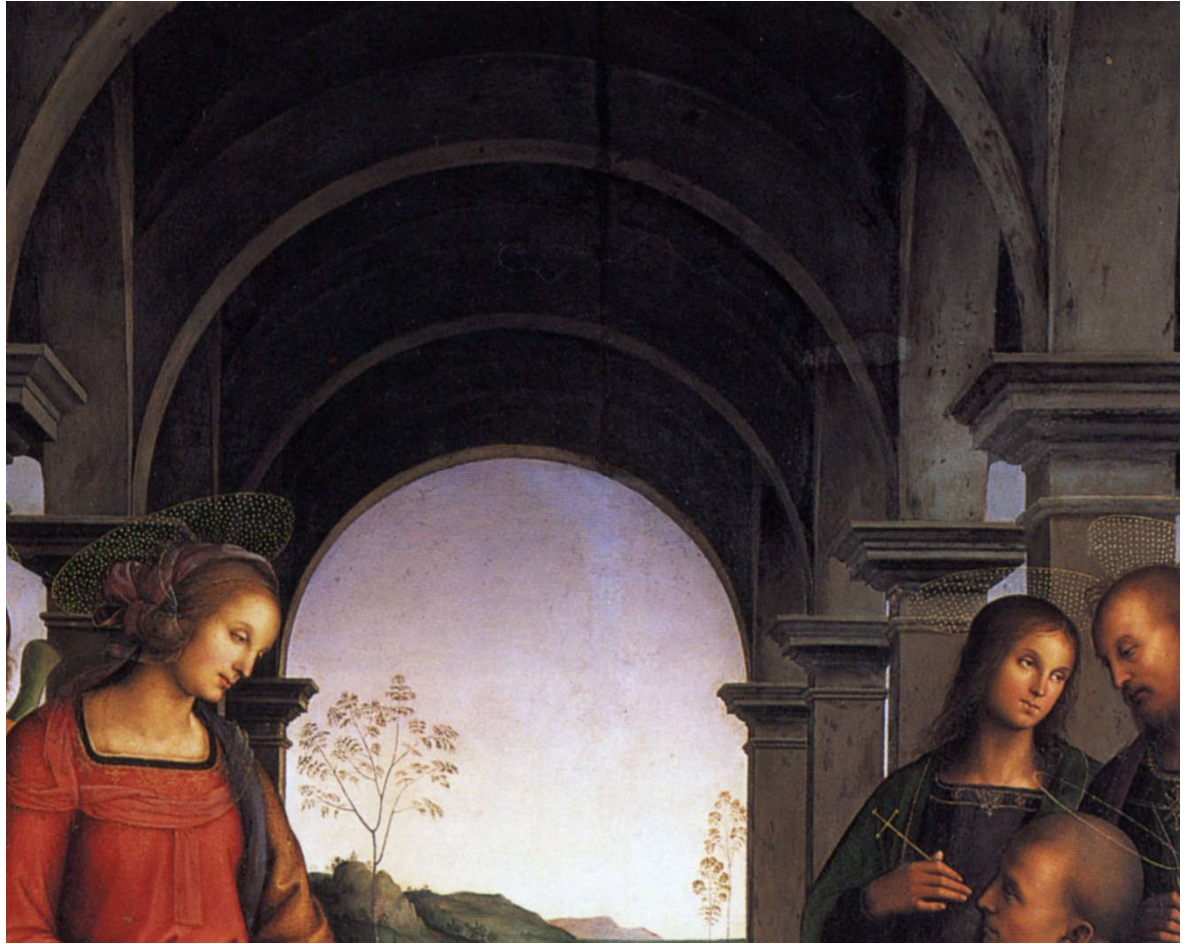
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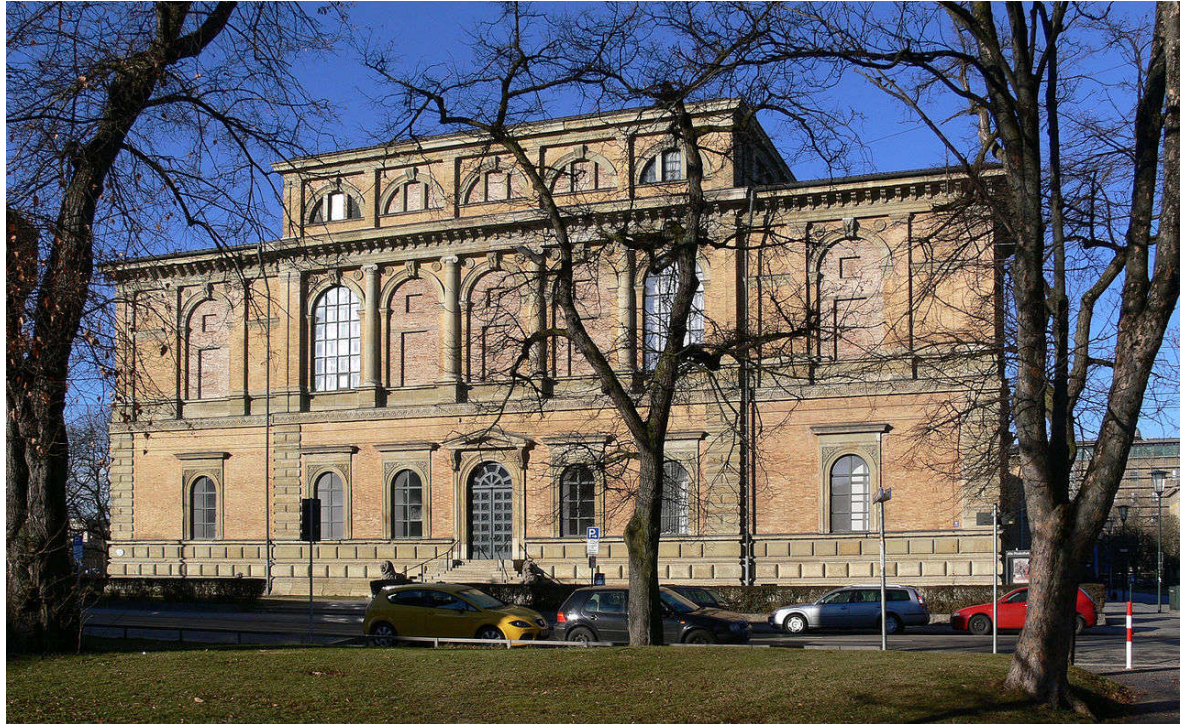
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Detail



Ludwig I of Bavaria by Joseph Stieler, 1825



The Alte Pinakothek, Munich — one of the oldest galleries in the world, which houses a significant collection of Old Master paintings

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