

DESCRIVEDENDO

DESCRIVEDENDO THE MASTERPAINTINGS OF BRERA

The Montefeltro Altarpiece by Piero della Francesca

Pinacoteca di Brera, Room 24

Formal Description

Madonna and Child with Saints, Angels and Federico da Montefeltro is the title of this work painted by Piero della Francesca around 1472. The painting is also known as the *San Bernardino Altarpiece* or *Brera Altarpiece*. It will take you about ten minutes to read this description. This is a painting in tempera and oil on wood. The painting is figurative, the painter reproducing forms and colours realistically and in correct proportion. It measures 2.51 meters in height and 1.75 meters in width. Its shape is therefore that of a large rectangle, its vertical side being the longer. The subject of the painting consists of a group of people inside a church. The figures depicted are: Mary on a throne with the Child Jesus, a group on either side of her, each group comprising three saints and two angels. Kneeling in the foreground, on the viewer's right, is Federico da Montefeltro, who commissioned the work. All the characters wear a serious and solemn expression. They are portrayed in full length and very close to each other. They occupy the lower half of the painting, while the upper half is taken up entirely by the architecture of the church. The point of view adopted is frontal, with the perspective lines converging towards the face of Mary, thus making it the focal point of the altarpiece. To best describe the work, let us imagine that it is divided into 9 sectors of equal size, obtained by crossing three columns with three rows. In each sector,

by convention, we assign the numbering used on telephone keypads. From left to right: 1, 2, 3 up; 4, 5, 6 in the middle; 7, 8, 9 below. At the centre of the scene is Mary, who occupies sectors 5 and 8: she sits on a throne set on a platform, but all we can see of the throne are its two armrests. Mary is therefore set slightly higher than the other figures. Her eyes are half-closed, her expression solemn and she is looking down; her hands are joined over her chest and her left foot protrudes slightly from the platform, which is covered by a red carpet with geometrical motifs. Her perfectly oval face is framed by her hair, which is pulled back, held in place by white ribbons and partly covered by a short transparent veil. Mary wears a sumptuous gold brocade velvet dress with red motifs and a long dark blue mantle, finely decorated around the neck and the lower hem, which covers her down to her feet. In sector 8 the Child Jesus, lying on the legs of his mother and resting on the fur lining of her mantle, is asleep on his right side and his body is almost completely turned towards the viewer. The child is naked, wearing only a red coral necklace. His head rests in the crook of his right arm and his right leg is slightly bent, while his other arm lies along his hip and his left leg is extended. Three saints stand on Mary's left and three on her right, set in an almost symmetrical semicircle, two in the foreground and one behind them in the middle. In sectors 4 and 7 we find the first three saints. Starting from the left, in the front row, we have St. John the Baptist, who is gazing at the observer. He is thin, with a dark complexion, long curly brown hair and a sparse beard. He wears a dark beige tunic, partly covered by a blue cloak draped over his left shoulder, and is barefoot; in his left hand he holds a slender stick, while with his right he points to the sleeping baby Jesus. Moving to the right, also in the first row but set slightly back we see St. Jerome. He is an old man, bald and rather emaciated. His gaze is fixed on an indistinct point somewhere above him. He wears a worn light grey tunic tied at the waist by a cord, which leaves his chest bare. In his right hand he holds a stone with which he strikes his chest as a mark of penance while with his left he, too, points to the baby Jesus.

Behind the first two saints, in the middle, stands St. Bernardino of Siena. We can see only his almost completely bald head, and, below, his bare feet sprouting from his grey habit. In sectors 6 and 9, in other words to Mary's right for the observer, we find the other three saints. St. Francis is closest to Jesus's mother. He is tonsured, and through an opening in his tunic he points to the wound in his side, while in his right hand he holds a small rock crystal cross. Continuing to the right, we find St. John the Evangelist, who is depicted as an elderly man, almost bald, with a long, white beard. He wears a dark green tunic and a red mantle that leaves his right shoulder bare; he holds a book with a richly decorated cover in both hands and his gaze is turned towards Jesus. Between and behind the two saints, we can see the face of St. Peter Martyr, who has a long wound on his shaven head, a mark of his martyrdom. He, too, looks at Jesus.

Completing the group, in sectors 5 and 8, four angels stand behind Mary in the background, two on the right and two on the left. They are depicted as young, blond and richly dressed, with tunics in richly coloured fabrics. They all carry a jewel on their hairline, gold necklaces and pearls. On their shoulders we see their closed wings and it is this detail that tells us that they are angels. In sectors 9 and 6, in the foreground, in front of the group of saints on the right, we see Federico da Montefeltro, the lord of Urbino, who commissioned the work. He is on his knees, looking at Mary and Jesus, thus facing towards the centre of the scene and showing us his left profile: he is almost bald, with black hair stretching from the middle of his head to the nape of his neck, and he has a pronounced, aquiline nose. The duke is absorbed in prayer, his hands clasped in front of him. He wears shiny metal armour embellished by a short red and yellow velvet cloak, and a sword hangs from his belt. On the ground, in sectors 8 and 9, we see his condottiere's command baton, his gauntlets and his helmet with a large dent in the visor.

The group of figures is set in a Renaissance church in which light grey is the dominant colour. Behind the group, in the centre, we see a deep, enclosed space surmounted by a barrel vault. The coffered vault is divided into rows, each coffer having a flower in the centre. The reproduction of a large shell is set in the semicircular apse in the background. From it, there hangs a chain with a white egg hooked onto it at the end, appearing to form a vertical line above Mary's head although it is in fact set a little further back. In sectors 4, 5 and 6 the walls below the shell, though partly hidden by the figures in the foreground, are faced with rectangular slabs of coloured marble, interspersed with slender white pilasters protruding slightly from the wall. The same architectural motif continues on to the end of sectors 4 and 6, hinting at openings on either side of the building which are not visible in the scene depicted. The light source, outside the painting, comes in from 10 o'clock. On the left shoulder of Federico's armour we can see the reflection of an arched window, suggesting that the light comes from there. The whole composition is immersed in the white light of daytime, producing shadows that lend prominence to the architecture and define the three-dimensional nature of the forms, including the egg in sector 5. The sharp, crystalline atmosphere of the painting and the static nature of the figures impart a feeling of suspension and immobility to the composition as a whole. Piero della Francesca chose to use a limited palette in which the greys prevail, together with shades of blue and light blue and a few notes of red.

Art historical description

The *Montefeltro Altarpiece* is on display in room 24 of the museum, still reflecting the layout devised by the architect Vittorio Gregotti in 1984. The work was commissioned from Piero della Francesca by Federico da Montefeltro, the lord of Urbino, who appears in the painting.

Originally intended for some other site, its first known location was the Franciscan church of San Bernardino, just outside Urbino. The church, which was designed as the mausoleum of the Montefeltro family, was built in 1483. The altarpiece was removed from the church by Napoleon's commissioners in 1811 and brought to Milan. The dating of the altarpiece is an aspect still shrouded in uncertainty: most scholars think the painting was commissioned from Piero to mark the birth of Guidobaldo, the duke's firstborn son, in January 1472. His beloved wife Battista Sforza died in that same year, only a few months later. She does not appear in the painting as such, but both the presence of St. John the Baptist whose name is reminiscent of hers, and the face of the Virgin whose features appear to recall those of Battista, allude to her. Piero is likely to have finished the altarpiece no later than 1474, the year Federico received the investiture of the Order of the Garter, whose emblem he is not wearing in the picture. This appears to confirm the hypothesis that it was painted at some point between 1472 and 1474. Piero uses an iconography known as a Sacred Conversation, which was very common in the 15th century, showing Mary in the centre seated on a throne and surrounded by angels and saints, often in the presence of the patron who commissioned the work. In this case, the artist has chosen to set the scene in a church, a setting frequently adopted by Flemish painters, several of whom he worked with at the court of Urbino. Unlike the northern European painters, however, he does not depict the interior of a Gothic cathedral but strictly classical architecture, which he depicts with meticulous accuracy and which he floods with a clear light that enhances even the smallest nuance of colour and material. An aspect of the composition whose real meaning is still a topic for debate today is the egg hanging from the shell adorning the apse. In addition to being a symbol of birth and rebirth for Christians, the ostrich egg is the symbolic centre of the entire composition. It was believed in the Middle Ages that sunlight fertilised and hatched ostrich eggs abandoned in the desert, so the egg's presence in the painting may allude to the Virgin becoming a mother thanks to the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, the presence of suspended ostrich eggs, probably having the same symbolic significance, was fairly frequent in buildings of Christian worship. The saints around the throne were chosen for their most significant characteristics: St. John the Baptist alludes to Battista Sforza; St. Jerome, protector of humanists, reminds us of the Duke of Urbino's literary interests; St. Francis, founder of the Franciscan order, shows the stigmata and holds in his hand a rock crystal cross hinting at his theological role as alter Christus or Second Christ; the figure of St. Bernardino, whom Federico knew and admired, also alludes to the Franciscan order; St. Peter Martyr is portrayed as an example of a martyr who gave his life to bear witness to his faith; and St. John the Evangelist's gospel contains the phrase "and the Word was made flesh", a concept embodied here by the baby Jesus asleep in Mary's lap. Kneeling, in profile, the Duke in armour contemplates the divine apparition: his left profile is shown because the right side of his face was disfigured in a tournament, and so he asked the painter to hide that part of his face. For reasons unknown, his joined hands were later repainted by Pedro Berruguete, who worked at the court of Urbino just like Piero della Francesca. The *Montefeltro Altarpiece* played an important role in the history of Italian art: in this work, the Italian handling of perspective and Flemish attention to details, admirably captured in, for example, the textiles and jewelry, meet and merge in a superb fashion. The light, white and crystalline, a common feature among Flemish painters, plays the leading role in the painting, touching every detail and revealing the changing appearance of the figures' and objects' forms and surfaces.

Biography

Piero was born into a merchant family in Borgo San Sepolcro, in the province of Arezzo, c. 1415. Little is known of his early training as a painter, although, judging from his earliest works, he seems to have been fascinated by the painting of the early 15th century. In 1439 he was in Florence, working as an assistant to the painter Domenico Veneziano on the frescoes in the church of Sant'Egidio. While in the city, he had the opportunity to familiarise himself at first hand with the work of Masaccio and Donatello, which had a profound influence on the development of his style. His career alternated periods working for some of the most important Italian courts with returns to his home town, both for work and to manage his family's affairs. His most important works include a fresco depicting Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta in the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini, and a fresco cycle depicting the Stories of the True Cross in the chancel of the church of San Francesco in Arezzo. That commission was broken off for a few years, when Piero was summoned to Rome to decorate a number of rooms in the papal palace.

For his home town and for other nearby villages he painted masterpieces such as the *Polyptych of the Misericordia* and the *Polyptych of Saint Augustine*, while for the cemetery chapel in Monterchi, he produced the *Madonna del Parto*. In the 1460s and '70s he arrived at the court of Urbino where Federico da Montefeltro, a condottiere and a man of vast cultural interests, gathered around him artists, mathematicians and architects who worked on the construction site of the Palazzo Ducale. Here Piero was to meet theoreticians such as Leon Battista Alberti and the mathematician Fra' Luca Pacioli, the architect Luciano Laurana, and painters of Flemish origin who influenced his style and his artistic choices. The works of the 1470s such as the *Flagellation*, the *Montefeltro Altarpiece* and the *Senigallia Madonna* reveal his growing interest in both perspective and the accurate depiction of the many different aspects of reality that lay at the heart of Flemish art.

In the latter part of his career he also devoted his energy to writing treatises on mathematics and geometry, the best known of which is *De Prospectiva Pingendi*. He was almost blind by the time he died in his home town in 1492, aged 77. His tomb is situated in the Bishop's Palace in Borgo San Sepolcro.