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**Christiansen, Keith, with contributions by Anna Pizzati and
Cecilia Frosinini. Piero della Francesca: Personal Encounters**

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aux lecteurs les stimulantes discussions du colloque qui a fourni l'occasion de ce livre.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS MÉTHOT

Collège universitaire dominicain

Christiansen, Keith, with contributions by Anna Pizzati and Cecilia Frosinini.

Piero della Francesca: Personal Encounters.

New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art / New Haven: distributed by Yale University Press, 2014. Pp. 96 + 50 ill. ISBN 978-0-300-19946-8 (Yale University Press) / 978-1-5883-9529-0 (Metropolitan Museum of Art) (paperback) \$19.95.

Beginning with Roberto Longhi in the early twentieth century, art historians seem continually to obsess over the geometric grace and remote beauty of Piero della Francesca. Many have fallen victim to his charms: among them, Bernard Berenson, Kenneth Clark, and John Pope Hennessey (in his classic, *The Piero della Francesca Trail* of 1991). Now, on the occasion of the display at the Metropolitan Museum of the newly-restored *St. Jerome with Suppliant*, a little panel more usually found in the Accademia in Venice, restorer Keith Christiansen indulges in his own personal reflections on Piero, supplemented by very scholarly examinations, on the part of the other contributors, of archival documents and restoration reports. The panel is examined among other small-scale examples of Piero's private devotional works, the "personal encounters" that transpire on an entirely different plane than the tourist's embodied engagement with his large-scale frescos and fresco cycles. This is painting as both conversation and prayer, the proximity of the artist sensed in every small, deliberate stroke of tempera. This kind of intimate description of often-overlooked paintings is long overdue.

I have to say that I've quite often contemplated the little *St. Jerome* panel at the Accademia, displayed in a tight little room off the vast main hallway, placed among other mostly unremarkable examples of Florentine prequels to Bellini and Giorgione. To me, there's nothing at all Venetian about Piero, and yet Longhi entitled his early essay on the painter "Piero della Francesca and the Development of Venetian Painting" (1914) and there he is at the Accademia, still keeping company with the painters of the lagoon. The *St. Jerome and*

Supplicant has always been, to me, a hard-edged and relatively charmless little picture, the flattened profile of the kneeling supplicant to St. Jerome practically etched into the panel with Piero's customary cool precision. One can feel the still, airless heat of a Tuscan afternoon in the pale, dusty blue of the sky and the curious plaster flatness of the cityscape at the base of the background hills. The concentrated yet aloof countenance of the seated St. Jerome, absent-mindedly riffling a few manuscript pages of the book balanced on his knee while he considers the petition of the kneeling Girolamo Amadi, is totally inscrutable. The two Girolamos, patron and saint, confront each other across a millennium of Tuscan days and one wonders how they got together. There is a long chapter in this relatively short book about the fortunes of the Amadi family which, despite its evidence of exhaustive research, really provides little insight into how or why Piero and Girolamo Amadi met, or what occasioned this particular devotional remembrance on Girolamo's part. Similarly, the meticulous account of the panel's restoration—the insights into pigments, perspective, and the tireless patience of Piero's application—does little to dispel its general inscrutability. God may be, as Mies van der Rohe famously said, in the details, but the essence of a "Piero," it seems, lies somewhere beyond.

The three other devotional works discussed here—the Alana collection *Madonna and Child*, the St. Jerome in the Wilderness from Berlin, and the superlative and strange *Madonna and Child with Two Angels* from Urbino—all demonstrate that Piero, over the course of his career, continued to produce small private panels for prayerful patrons. Of these, the Urbino panel, popularly known as the *Senigallia Madonna*, with its large, solid, and almost geometric figures, most closely resembles Piero's more monumental style, realized in his frescoes at San Sepolcro, without sacrificing any of its devotional intimacy. No haloes, no magic, no miracles, just sentry angels standing guard over the matchless, ordinary beauty of a modest mother and child. What is wondrous here is the light through the bottle-glass window; muted golden hues picked up in the contrast between the transparent white linen of the Virgin's veil and concentrated in the dense, glowing coral of the child's necklace; juxtaposed symbols of purity and eternity. While we might parse his paints and preparations, the truth about Piero's painting is that, while rather too much has already been said, there is still so much to know.

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