

Approaches to reading a work of art:  
an incomplete example in progress.

This is the beginning of an analysis of a section found in a complex of frescoes designed by Piero della Francesca. His work was preceded by plans for the scheme by Bicci di Lorenzo, but the existing drawing and design of the work is by Piero. The frescoes were painted by Piero with assistants, from the drawings transferred using, in the main, a technique known as 'spolvero' in which the transfer of each drawing is effected by pricking drawing outlines, placing the drawing on the fresco section to be painted and dusting with a cloth sac filled with charcoal powder; some of the transfers have used the cartoon drawings to make incisive lines by pressing the drawing onto the soft plaster and making outlines with a pointed stylus. The work was probably produced in the period 1452-1459. This sequence of frescoes is usually known as *The Legend of the True Cross*, and is still *in situ* in the choir of the church of San Francesco at Arezzo. The section being looked at is named *The Annunciation*. I have chosen this section because it invites attention to more than one aspect of work in this period and also because the subject appears to be straight forward, but then does not seem, at least initially, to 'fit in' with the overall subject of the other fresco sections.

The basis for my approach to analysis is to use a synthesis of two modes. The first is the method developed by Erwin Panofsky. The table below is taken from that provided by him in his work *Studies in iconology : humanistic themes in the art of the renaissance*, 1939, and reprinted in his book *Meaning of the Visual Arts*, 1982. I won't be using this entirely, but will particularly refer to his first and third columns, 'Object of Interpretation' and 'Equipment for Interpretation'. The second method, which I have invented through the process of doing it, is to read the work in groups of attention: so an initial **intrinsic** reading simply asks what can be seen in the picture using a straight-forward description, without reference, as far as possible, to social, cultural or external sources. The next **second intrinsic** reading adds social or cultural information to the description by naming the subject and, where possible, naming the different figures and their contexts. This is followed with **extrinsic** readings. One extrinsic reading could include information that would contribute to understanding what the context for the production is, who made it and who for, are there other pictures like this with the same or similar subject, contemporary or prior to this work? Eventually this method puts all this together into interpretation and meaning and can include the significance of the work in its own context and then in the context we now find the work. Panofsky's summary is in the tabular form shown. In the 1939 book it appears at the end of a 28 page introduction, which is followed by the book itself, which, it might be said, uses the method.

Object of Interpretation	Act of Interpretation	Equipment for Interpretation	Corrective Principle of Interpretation
Primary or natural subject matter: factual and expressional	Pre-iconographical description	Practical experience	History of style
Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories and allegories	Iconographical analysis	Knowledge of literary sources	History of types
Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of 'symbolic' values	Iconographical interpretation	Synthetic intuition, conditioned by personal psychology and 'Weltanschauung'	History of cultural symptoms or 'symbols' in general

As already noted, my approach is a synthesis of these methods. For the analysis of *The Annunciation* by Piero della Francesca, I have separated the analysis into different levels of reading, both approximate and notional, between intrinsic and extrinsic, variously aligned in different contexts. I have also divided *The Annunciation* section of the frescoes into four: A, B, C & D, top left, bottom left, bottom right and top right sections respectively.

**Initial Intrinsic reading:** Primary or natural subject matter: factual and expressional. Practical experience.

**A** (top left section):

a male human figure in a sky with a building to his left and beneath him.

the figure wears red and blue garments, perhaps indicative of clothing worn in ancient Greece or Rome; he has white long hair and a long beard; on his head is a gold disc; his right shoulder is forward of his body, his right and left hands make a combined gesture; his legs are concealed by horizontal rows of small clouds, his legs and feet are not visible.

**B** (bottom left section, separated from right hand section by a column):

a human figure, probably male, with long dark hair and a gold disc on his head. The gender is at first undefined, but the figure's back has the wings of a large bird, it thus represents an angel. He is dressed in two loose robes, one mainly off-white and one pinkish brown with the trace of a blue ribbing. His feet and lower legs are dressed in red stocking; his legs indicate he is just entering the building from the left. His right hand is

raised with a gesture indicative of pronouncing or teaching, his left hand carries a palm leaf. This is apparently happening on a ground floor with a partly concealed wall, with a pink floor raised on a grey plinth, with two panels or frames, one resembling an eight-panelled door with its surrounding frame. The door panels are decorated with symmetrical geometric forms. To the right is a column with a capital and seated into the floor. The first sense is of a building with an open frontage, but on reflection, it is much more like a stage set, a building with the front taken away so that the 'actors' can participate in their actions, their drama.

**C** (bottom right section, separated from left hand section by a column):

a human female figure, larger than the figure to her right, in a loose, full length red robe, partly open at the neck and an open blue cloak. The figure is mainly fully frontal, with her right leg forward of the left; she gestures to the left with her right hand, her left hand carries a book, held open to a particularly place by one of her fingers, indicating that she may have been interrupted from the activity of reading it. Her light brown hair is covered almost entirely with a white and partly translucent scarf which hangs either side of her head; she has a gold disc on her head.

The pink floor raised on a grey plinth is continuous from the lefthand section; the background wall has a geometric mosaic design of cubular rods. There is a small column in relief with a figured capital in the background at the left. Again the building has no frontage, but a room exposed to show the activity can be inferred. The relation of the front column to the relief column at the back, is indicative of artificial (geometrically planned) perspective, the ceiling has a recessed panel which also uses this perspective.

**D** (top right section, this section defined by part of an upper front of a building):

edge of a building with a window opening; a wooden shutter opened inward; a horizontal pole elevated across the front of the building and window, held by stays and a bracket from which hangs a vertical rope formed, at one end, into a circle of rope or noose. There is a shadow from the pole on the wall of the building and onto the door of the shutter. The beading has been drawn using artificial perspective.

## **B & C**

Overall, but particularly in the lower two sections, there is a strong use of dark horizontal bands, indicative of inlays of mottled blue and mottled brown marble. These are in contrasts to the white areas and white columns. The overall sense is of four connected, but separate sections as if each section has been assigned a specific part of the subject.

**Second Intrinsic reading with Extrinsic information:** Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories and allegories. Knowledge of literary sources.

The overall subject of this fresco section is *The Annunciation* and this subject is described in *The Gospel According to Luke*, 1: 26-38.

The figure in **A** is apparently what *The Gospel According to Luke* names as the Lord God. He is depicted in perspective. The combined gesture of the hands is indicative of giving or offering.

The figure in **B** is undoubtedly the Angel Gabriel and in **C** The Virgin Mary. The images derive from a description of The Annunciation, in which the angel Gabriel addresses the Virgin Mary and announces that she is pregnant with a child who is the Son of God. The subject was frequently used by Renaissance painters in this period and Piero would have known about some of these. An important example would be The Annunciation as drawn and painted by Giotto on the Chancel wall at the Arena Chapel. The subject is not part of the 'Legend of the True Cross'.

The primary sources for 'The Legend of the True Cross' were the very many elements gathered by Bishop Jacopo da Vorigine and codified in 1265 in his compendium of 'Lives of the Saints' known by the title *Legenda auro (The Golden Legend)*. The text was used by Franciscans for many years. The oldest extant visual description of the legend is the miniature which accompanies the Mass for 3 May, 750-790, at the Benedictine Abbey of Sainte-Croix in Meaux, donated to Gellone Abbey in 804, where it is still kept. In 814 the *Wessobrunner Gebetbuch* contains the legend of Judas Cyriacus transcribed and illustrated in drawings; and the wings of the Stevelot triptych, 1154-1158 have enamels combining the iconography relating to Constantine and Finding the Cross. The subject of 'The Legend of the True Cross' was used by Agnolo Gaddi for his painting scheme at the Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence, after 1374.

The depictions in the church at San Francesco are modern to Piero's time, indicated by the use of artificial perspective and contemporary architecture, yet the costumes used are indicative of earlier times, with allusions to ancient Greece and Rome. A further allusion to ancient times is the geometric, cuboid rod pattern behind the Virgin Mary, which resembles work carried out in Roman mosaic.

The elements in section **D** do not appear to be part of *The Annunciation*. This might not be of any consequence, except that the section takes up a large part of the fresco section and the position of the rope is placed in an almost central position over the drama taking place in **B** and **C**. The contribution of this section will need to be revisited following

a brief consideration of the immediate context of the fresco section (**extrinsic context 1**) and then of the context of the work of Piero's eminent predecessor, Giotto, and particularly Giotto's work at the Arena Chapel (**extrinsic context 2**).

### **Extrinsic context 1**

*The Annunciation* occupies the bottom left section of the central part of the fresco scheme. This central part has four narrative sections.

To the right of *The Annunciation* is the section known as *The Dream of Constantine* in which is depicted an angel descending diagonally from the top left, with his little finger pointing toward the face of the sleeping Constantine, brandishing a cross of light that illuminates the whole front of the tent and sleeping quarters. The message of the angel is understood by Constantine to mean that he should march with his troops against Maxentius, the pagan enemy. This is the scene of the next fresco section on the right at the same level in which Constantine wins the battle.

Above *The Annunciation* section is the section known as *The Torture of the Jew*, who is named Judas by Bishop Jacopo and Judas Cyriacus elsewhere, and is a different Judas from Judas Iscariot. Judas Cyriacus had refused to say where the True Cross was buried and was lowered into a well and tortured at the behest of Constantine's mother, Helena. She had set out to find the relic of the True Cross after Constantine's victory over Maxentius. In the image Judas Cyriacus is being lifted with a rope from the well after he has revealed the location of the relic and he then accompanies Helena to discover the cross. In the Legend's narrative the Devil calls out, 'Judas, what has thou done? Thou hast done the contrariety that the other Judas did, for by him I have won many souls, and by thee I shall owe many, by him I reigned on the people, and by thee I have lost my realm ...'

In *The Annunciation*, Piero may have provided a connection to the Judas Cyriacus described by Bishop Jacopo to the rope with a noose that could now be said to allude to the hanging of Judas Iscariot, which took place after his betrayal of Christ, a connection between redemption and damnation. This grim connection may be further elaborated.

### **Extrinsic context 2**

On the Chancel Wall at the Arena Chapel, Giotto drew and painted *The Annunciation*. Beneath this image he situated, on the lefthand side, the section depicting Judas Iscariot receiving the money for the betrayal of Christ. Beneath this he depicted an empty

chamber with its innuendo of death. The connection being made by Giotto is between the announcement of the coming conception of Christ and the betrayal that would lead to his crucifixion.

**Summary and conjectural substance** (in progress, January 2014).

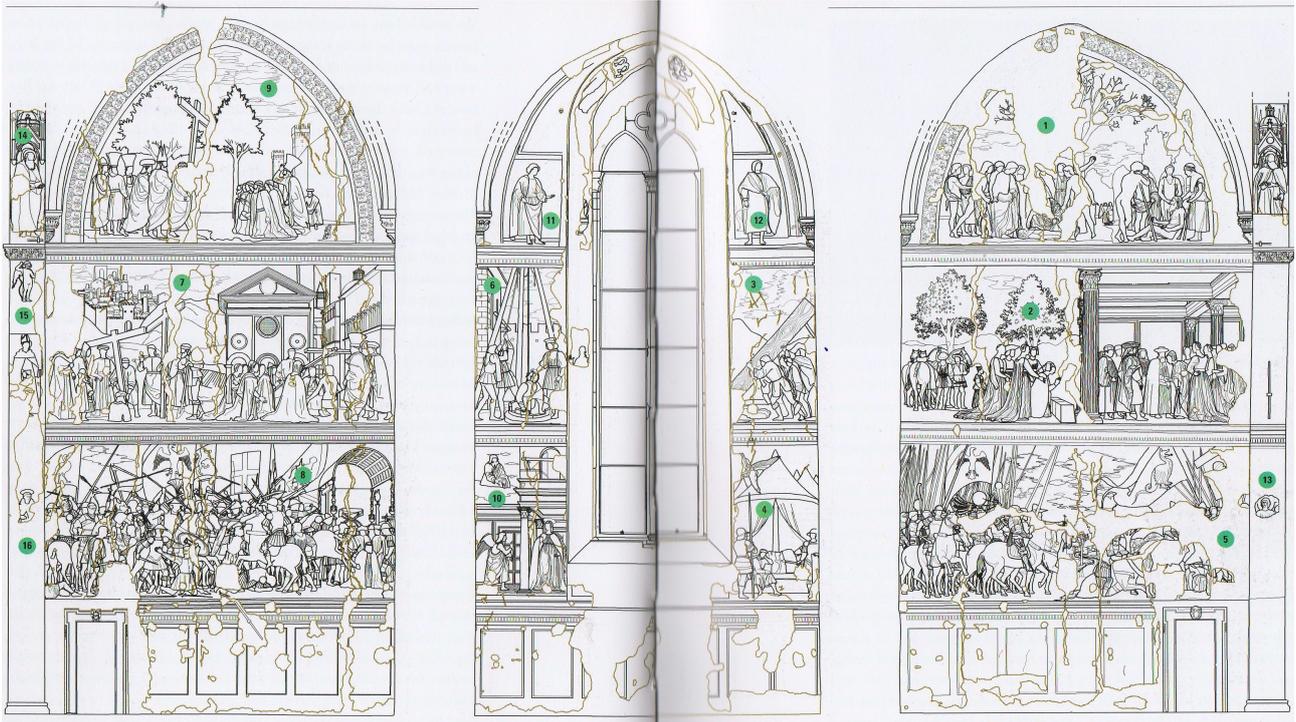
In section **D**, above the Virgin Mary, Piero depicts an empty room on the front of which is a rope with a noose. This can now be said to carry the signifiers for the impending betrayal of Christ and his death, that is, immediately above the announcement of his conception. This portent is emphasised in Piero's fresco by the Angel Gabriel bringing a palm, indicative of Christ's Passion, and not the often depicted lily signifying the Virgin's purity. It is also clearly evident that the Virgin Mary has the facial gesture of distress.

The complex fresco designed and drawn by Piero della Francesca is a clear demonstration of Renaissance modernity. In this one work Piero provides the eloquence of measure and love, the ancient philosophy of Plato with a new *Humanist* Christianity. He makes this possible by the juxtaposition of well chosen indicators of ancient æsthetics into an æsthetics of modern thought. He demonstrates the former through the depiction of ancient architecture and mosaic and the latter through the intricate, decorative designs, for example on the door in the lower left section, and more stridently, by the clarity of the horizontal and vertical designs and use of artificial perspective.

**For further query.**

A review of prior and contemporary works that include *The Annunciation*.

A deeper analysis of fresco sections in the vicinity of Piero's *The Annunciation*.



items referred to: 4. The Dream of Constantine; 5. The Victory of Constantine over Maxentius; 6. The Torture of the Jew; 10. The Annunciation.



### **Bibliographical resources.**

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