

## PIERO - THE TALISMAN

by Budd Hopkins

I have never actually seen the small panel of the Flagellation by Piero della Francesca. Its image is absolutely familiar to me, however, through the photographs and color reproductions I've lived with and pored over, lovingly, for decades. I even reproduced it once myself in Sacred Spaces, a small artist's book I published in 1982. Historically, Piero's Flagellation has appeared among other familiar Renaissance works in an endless procession of scholarly books and art appreciation courses - and yet, of all the famous works of its time, it is my impression that the Flagellation can be currently found in more studio settings, tacked to more artists' walls, than any other Renaissance painting. One can truthfully say that Piero's Flagellation has become a kind of magic talisman for painters, a Quattrocento gift to the present, and perhaps the modern artist's favorite old master painting. Why? Why this particular work?

My thoughts about Piero's small but gigantic panel were triggered by a 1975 photograph of Philip Guston's studio wall, on which the Flagellation held sway along with Durer's Melancholia and an early De Chirico. Knowing Guston's penchant for loose, expressionist paint handling and, in his late work, his reliance upon bizarre, surreal imagery, I began to ponder his connection with Piero. In the course of many conversations we'd had years before, Guston told me that Piero della Francesca was beyond all argument his favorite artist. This memory led me to recall another conversation I'd had in my studio sometime in the early 'sixties with a man not centrally known for his interest in Renaissance painting. Alger Hiss, a one-time art student, was not only well-informed about the history of art but also extremely observant and articulate. When he was young, Hiss remarked, Giotto was everyone's ideal painter, but now he felt as if things had changed and that Piero della Francesca had replaced Giotto in most artists' affections. He wondered why this had happened, and what follows is my attempt at an answer.

The first difference one can remark upon between, say, a Giotto fresco and Piero's small panel has to do with the absolute dramatic and iconographic unity of a Giotto and the strange split one feels in this particular Piero. In the latter work, at the left, within a colonaded room in deep space, the flagellation of Christ is taking place as a calm, distant, non-violent ritual, whereas at the right and much closer to the viewer stand three stately figures, apparently conversing and either unaware of or indifferent to the scourging of Christ. Typically the unity of a Giotto is formal, emotional and iconographic. However, the strong formal and emotional harmony of the Piero stands in stark contrast to its sharp and peculiar iconographic split slightly more than halfway across the panel. What is going on in this Flagellation, and who are these quiet, self-contained figures who so calmly dominate the right section of the painting? Giotto characteristically chooses to handle one thing at a time, keeping his emotional and iconographic priorities crystal clear, while Piero

chooses in the Flagellation to force two unrelated scenes into a single context. Art historians have expended enormous amounts of intellectual energy trying to establish iconographic reasons for this unsettling split, in which the detached and seemingly uninvolved bystanders are formally more important and more detailed than either Christ or Pontius Pilate. In fact, if this were Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood in the nineteen twenties instead of a Renaissance artist's idea of Palestine, one could easily imagine that we are seeing three expensively costumed extras quietly waiting for their cue to enter while the main actors on a distant stage pose for the violent opening shot.

It is this peculiar split which undoubtedly drew Guston to Piero's Flagellation, and led him to tack up a reproduction of it next to Durer's Melancholia and a proto-surrealist De Chirico. The modern spirit recognizes complexity and contradiction whenever it appears, for such is modern life. Emotionally, Philip Guston - no less than myself and a myriad other artists - have been drawn to Piero's outwardly stable, orderly, classical world - a calming, structured place which exists in spite of its own internal tensions. In the Flagellation, received biblical history exists alongside classical architecture, impending ritual brutality and what one might interpret as the cool, aristocratic indifference of the three figures at the right. Stability and disquiet, sense and disorder, tragedy and serenity, are all present and apparently subsumed beneath the surface of Piero's limpid calm.

Straightforward, totally harmonious classicism has never worked in our ragged century. Though the impulse dies hard, contemporary attempts at achieving traditional Olympian order appear specious, false and unattainable. Piet Mondrian's personal hopes clearly led in this direction, yet he found that to be truthful it was necessary to eschew the easy rewards of symmetry and graceful transition among the parts. In his work, black runs headfirst into white and blue batters hard against red. Every line hurtles past every other line, and serenity is achieved, amazingly, despite the hyperactivity. To our complete surprise, Mondrian achieved unity by granting each line and rectangle and color its maximum independence from each other line and rectangle and color. It is as if, in the last years of the twentieth century, we deeply need the harmony and reassurance that classical order can offer - but we cannot truly believe it or accept it without the underlying presence of tension and contradiction. Giotto's unstrained and relatively simplistic unity has indeed been replaced in the affections of many modern artists by Piero's elevated but oddly subversive classicism.

Giotto, Piero and the other Renaissance artists functioned comfortably as illustrators of myth, history and tales from the Bible - a role few painters today would find acceptable. And yet it is also true that no matter how hardened we've become, most of us still enjoy "rereading" some of these old visual narratives; they remain as pleasantly familiar anchors in our stormy, everchanging cultural seas. Piero's Flagellation illustrates just such an ancient religious story, but only to a certain extent. The right side of his work tells, in

effect, no story at all, but simply depicts a general situation. Yet for us, today, the presence in the background of one of the basic events of the Gospels seems entirely appropriate alongside the mystery of the three standing, seemingly unrelated figures. It is as if we need both - a familiar biblical tale on one side and modern uncertainty on the other. Piero's talisman embraces two contemporary human needs at once, side by side, without reconciliation.

If the modern spirit requires this kind of emotional co-existence, the painter's eye has become accustomed to an equivalent tension in the world of forms. Literal flatness and illusionistic depth are made to co-exist in the same work, and Cubist rhyming has become part of every artist's basic vocabulary. Many modernist painters instinctively repeat in the same work particular lines and shapes and colors which logically would seem to rest in different spatial locations; their inherent similarities, however, make them appear to lie in the same plane. Near and far elements are thereby forced to exist together in a tense, ambiguous spatial limbo. Among Renaissance painters, none deals with this Twentieth Century preoccupation more directly, or with more of a modernist sensibility, than does Piero della Francesca. In his large fresco depicting the Queen of Sheba and her retinue, he includes a group of six women standing in a dense cluster behind the kneeling Queen. Obviously, each of these six figures is in a different location, yet three of them, whose height, stature and costumes differ, seem absolutely bound together in the same plane. Piero accomplished this feat of spatial ambivalence by providing these three attendants with wide, identical belts which flow together with absolute horizontality at exactly the same height from the ground. To the observer, these belts form such a clear, continuous, geometrical band that they effectively weld the three disparate figures firmly together in one continuous plane; Leger could not have done it more effectively - or more arbitrarily.

In the Flagellation, Piero uses a range of different devices to link the three mysterious standing figures to the architecture and landscape behind them. The man at the left, wearing a flattened, black, turban-like headdress, has been placed so that a similar horizontal, black, architectural band, belonging to a building many yards behind him, appears to float conspicuously just above his head. Other details, related in both color and shape, seem to belong equally to the turban and to the distant building's classical decoration. Thus, the background architecture and the foreground man appear to exist in the same ambivalent plane. The second, more youthful figure is hatless. In his case the imagery that Piero invents to frame his golden curls is not still more architecture, which by contrast would have heightened the illusion of fixed depth. Instead, Piero surrounds the young man's "foliage" with the harmonious foliage of lush and distant trees. By this method, foreground and background are again deliberately "rhymed" - linked together by their similar organic texture - in order to cancel out any oppressive illusion of absolute, immutable depth.

The right-most of the three standing figures is the only one depicted

in strict profile. This somewhat bald, middle-aged man gazes intently towards the turbaned figure at the left, and it is here that Piero creates the most ingenious linkage of foreground and background. The building directly behind the bald man's head has on its facade a series of simple metal brackets that jut out into space at regular intervals. Whatever their supposed purpose, these brackets function visually as an extension of the man's gaze, creating a direct path from his eyes to the face of the standing figure at the left. The sophisticated effectiveness of this device brings to mind the similar but crudely unsophisticated way that comic-strip artists sometimes use dotted lines to indicate the direction of a character's glance. And since the bald man at the right has a sharp and prominent nose, the pointed brackets also stress and echo that part of his anatomy, in what is, for Piero, an extremely rare example of something close to wit. However, the basic function of this formal rhyming and pointing has to do with Piero's desire to bring background architectural details up front and into the same plane as the three foreground figures. Because the brackets on the building's wall appear to be some fifty feet behind the three men and at the same time right between their heads, the space of the painting remains simultaneously flat and deep.

It should not be surprising that Philip Guston, or myself, or hundreds of other contemporary artists have regarded Piero della Francesca with special reverence. His painting of the Flagellation, in particular, is truly a talisman. In our century, remarkable for the violence of its wars, the efficiency of its mass murders and the vulnerability of its fragile culture, we need the past, tradition, the myth of a golden age. But we also require unsentimental truth. Beneath the all-encompassing emotional umbrella of classical order and reassuring calm, Piero accepts the existence of both formal tension and ambivalence of meaning. The space he creates is just as complex as the enigmatic disparity he allows between the flagellation and the three self-contained gentlemen at the right. For Twentieth Century souls Piero offers the perfect spiritual resolution: a graceful, lovely, ordered world which satisfies our deepest hunger for something better than ourselves - and yet a world which subtly acknowledges the mystery, strain and ambiguity which we have come to regard as basic properties of human truth.