Antje Anderson

Dr. Wendy Katz

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Piero di Cosimo at the Margins of Art History

Piero di Cosimo, who was likely born in 1461 and died in 1522, was a minor Florentine painter who was never quite forgotten, but for that very reason could also never be quite rediscovered. Some of his mythological paintings seem strikingly different from the work of his contemporaries, especially in terms of his representation of fantastic creatures—from centaurs and nymphs to the monsters of mythology and exotic animals. But brief flare-ups of popularity (especially when the surrealists claimed him as their predecessor in the 1920s) have not led to a shift in the overall status of his work. He hovers on the margins of Renaissance art history, neither typical nor exceptional enough to attract scholarly interest.

Art historians have struggled to define Piero's style because it is atypical, especially in his mythological paintings, which comprise eighteen of the circa fifty works attributed to him. Paradoxically, this made him negligible: On the one hand, he is a painter who did not quite follow (and certainly didn't introduce) major Renaissance traditions or schools, and whose connections to other painters are difficult to trace. But on the other hand, he was never quite marginal enough to catch the attention of scholars who have questioned the canon or who in other ways deconstruct existing binaries and hierarchies of Renaissance art history. I will sketch how art history's evaluation of Piero's style, from Vasari (1568) to the most recent monograph and exhibit (2006, 2015), has been hampered by an undue emphasis on his allegedly eccentric biography and his "strange" style, regardless of the methodology applied to his work thus far.

This will also enable me to show that the methodological approaches that are still being sidestepped in 21st-century work on Piero, specifically feminism, postcolonialism, and queer theory with their explicitly focus on theorizing the margin, could help art historians take a new look at the "strangeness" of Piero's style, themes, and motifs in the wider context of the Renaissance construction of the strange and the stranger.

The point of origin for virtually all art history written about Piero di Cosimo is Giorgio Vasari's brief account of Piero's life and works in his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1568). Vasari (1511-1574) sandwiches Piero between Correggio and Bramante, as one of the artists who "surpassed the age of the ancients" and are the best of their era. Vasari's aim was to glorify Michelangelo, and the High Renaissance more generally, and the artists' biographies in his *Lives* all serve to explain why contemporary Florentine and Roman art was superior to all other moments and places. Taking Plutarch's *Lives* and other ancient sources that defined history through the leading figures of an age as his model, Vasari aims to create a master narrative of the development of art towards ever more perfect mimesis, ending with the art of his own time and place, which he saw as a direct continuation of high Renaissance perfection. This rhetorical and didactic goal is directly connected to the writing of biographies, since the great men of an age cause its excellence—in this case, the excellence of its art, dependent solely on the given artist's creativity and the degree to which he emulates ancient art. As one among the many "further ran" painters Vasari includes, Piero importantly functions as a negative example of an artist who was too detached from the wider social context in which artists like Michelangelo and especially Raphael, who epitomizes the gracious social behavior and painting style that Vasari thinks of as the most praiseworthy.[1]

[1] Vasari, "Preface to the Third Part," 189; cf. "Piero di Cosimo," 289-312. On Raphael as Vasari's model of the socially integrated artist, cf. Goodchild 106-7.

This is why Vasari invariably emphasizes Piero's anti-social existence, characterizing him with terms that suggest he is a hermit, who lives alone and refuses to obey conventional distinctions. Since Vasari and his contemporaries presumed a direct analogy between the personality of an artist and his work, one that is visible in the work regardless of training, Piero's behavior is essential to his artistic style: a strange man will create strange art, or, conversely, strange art like Piero's means that the artist who created it had to be a strange or eccentric man. For Vasari, the claim that Piero led "the life of a man who was less man than beast," including letting his garden grow wild, and his interest in painting fantastic beasts and landscapes were of a piece. And while he allows that his creatures are admirably imagined and technically well-executed (he says there isn't "anything better of that kind to be seen") he sees them as a sign that Piero was too self-absorbed and preoccupied with his imagination, since they are created "for his own delight and for his pleasure in the art." Thus, Piero become a negative foil to Vasari's ideal of the socially integrated and well-mannered artist.[2]

Given that Vasari saw many of the paintings he described (and claimed to own one of them), but did not know Piero except through second-hand accounts, we have to assume that Vasari constructed Piero's eccentric personality based on the "strange" paintings, rather than *vice versa*. Recent archival research in fact suggests that Piero was socially well connected, and an active member of various confraternities. The specifics of his will and other legal documents refute Vasari's claim that he died in poverty. And the number of different patrons who commissioned the small paintings for private spaces that make up the majority of his oeuvre also contradicts the idea that he was a cranky odd-ball. Such recent reevaluations of Vasari by a number of scholars thus corrects the idea that Vasari is a reliable source for facts (even as art

[2] Vasari 253, 261-62, 266.

historians still use his list of Piero's paintings and his remarks on patrons as their starting points), emphasizing the very specific rhetorical context of the *Lives*. That said, this skeptical reframing of Vasari's *Lives* is a recent development in art history, and the eccentric savage that Vasari invents as part of his didactic program to warn artists against pleasing themselves rather than their community becomes the Piero of art history until at least the mid-20th century.[3]

Paradoxically, that eccentricity is used both as an argument to keep Piero out of the canon and as a justification to make his art worthy of further study, even as the quintessentially Romantic idea that Piero could be *admired* for being a wild and bizarre solitary genius was a far cry from Vasari's values. That said, the early art historians writing in the wake of the Romantics actually paid little attention to Piero. Since he lacked the colossal genius of a Leonardo or Michelangelo (as per Vasari), these first "modern" art historians and the cultural critics of the nineteenth century who wrote about the Italian Renaissance follow Vasari's roster of great men and either exclude Piero or present him as a minor figure in their own accounts of famous artists. Piero was relegated to Victorian guidebooks, where marginal painters had their place, because a guidebook aimed to include whatever an art-oriented tourist might come across.[4]

Surprisingly, art historians trained at German and Swiss universities like Jacob Burckhardt and Franz Kugler, though they de-emphasized biography in the name of a broader and more detailed historical and cultural narrative, also saw Piero as a negligible figure. Accepting Vasari's portrait of him as an eccentric, they left him outside the main thrust of their larger historical development. Hence, Piero gets only a footnote in Burckhardt's seminal

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[3] For archival sources, see Waldman and Geronimus, especially his appendix of documents and archivally "secure dates" regarding Piero, 269-282. For extensive discussion of Piero's commissions, see Fermor and Geronimus. For Vasari's rhetorical and didactic program, cf. Fermor 23-35 and Goodchild in the 2013 *Ashgate Companion to Giorgio Vasari*.

[4] Charles and Elizabeth Eastlake, who adapted Franz Kugler's *Handbook of Painting: The Italians* for the British traveler, include a single paragraph taken from Vasari (cf. 361), and the same is true of Jacob Burckhardt's *Cicerone,* a guide for travelers originally published in 1855 and translated into English in 1873 (cf. Burckhardt, 64).

Civilization of the Renaissance from 1860. Even the seminal six-volume *New History of Painting in Italy* (1864) by Joseph Crowe and Giovanni Cavalcasselle only devotes seven pages to Piero, and although the authors point to the future direction of university-based art history by digging in the historical archives to correct Vasari and re-attribute an altarpiece, Piero's tendency to "exaggeration of fancy" mark him as a minor artist in their view.[5]

It was not until the connoisseurs, with their admiration for idiosyncratic technique and their focus on the distinctive "hand" of the artist, that Piero began to receive more attention, albeit less in terms of the art history of the Renaissance than of the booming market for Renaissance art. An unusual biography like Piero's was appealing to connoisseurs, who celebrated painters that resembled the late Victorian type of the eccentric Bohemian artist. In addition, Piero's very marginality made him an interesting challenge in terms of attribution, because the solution to the mystery of a painting's previously unknown creator could certify the expertise of the connoisseur. Unsurprisingly, Piero caught the attention of one of the earliest and most famous connoisseurs of the Italian Renaissance, the Italian Giovanni Morelli (1816-1891). Morelli serves as the prime example in Carlo Ginzburg's seminal essay on the historic moment at the end of the nineteenth century when the parallel "scientific methods" of the detective, the psychoanalyst, and the connoisseur emerged simultaneously. Morelli himself first describes his method and some of his conclusions in a series of articles on Italian painters in a German journal in 1876. His discussion of two works by Piero in the Galleria Borghese in Rome prompts him to mention several more works by Piero in other locations.[6]

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[5] Both Kugler and Burckhardt, who was Kugler's sometime student, were academics trained at German and Swiss universities; their many publications on Renaissance art helped shaped early art historiography as sweeping but also detail-oriented cultural history and paved the way for Heinrich Wölfflin's formalism—Wölfflin being a student of Burckhardt's who took over his position as chair of Art History in Basel (cf. Sorensen). For Crowe and Cavalcasselle, cf. 42-49, 47.

[6] These articles were later republished in book form (1892-93) and translated into English as *Italian Painters: Critical Studies of their Works* (1900). For Piero in Morelli, cf. Vol.1, 118-122.

Morelli's account, brief as it is, encapsulates the key traits of connoisseurship and its attitude to style: First of all, he emphasizes the individual artist, his (always *his*) idiosyncratic technique as visible in the details of the works, and his place within a network of other artists, established through biographical, almost dynastic, connections and by way of similar details in the work. Trends in genre or cultural history have little or no explanatory value, and Morelli, by publishing initially his methodological discussion in a German journal (under a punny Russian pseudonym), explicitly challenged such university-based models. Accordingly, Morelli stresses Piero's unusual devotion to landscape, peculiar to him as an individual artist. He draws attention to landscape details that are "in every respect identical" in two paintings, one mythological and one religious. True to the connoisseur's investment in connections between individual artistic styles, he is at pains to establish that Filippino Lippi had a major influence on Piero's earlier works "in the types as well as in subordinate details," characteristically with supporting evidence based exclusively on the surface resemblance of the two artists' works.[7]

Morelli is preoccupied (for more than half of his brief entry) with fighting attribution battles on multiple fronts: in the text, in the lengthy footnotes, and in his index, which teems with references to misidentifications—Piero is "*confounded* with Raphael… Mantegna… Franciabigio" and so on. This rivalry with the cultural historians was fueled by what one historian calls Morelli's fierce "anti-intellectualism" and "anti-academicism." Morelli and later connoisseurs insisted that their expertise on art objects, as collectors and evaluators of collections, was more valuable (in both the literal and metaphorical sense) than working with archives of historical documents or creating a broader cultural narrative. Their emphasis on the individual artist as the proper object of study makes sense, since they starting point and end point

[7] Morelli 120, FN5 on the identical landscape details; cf. 119-120 on Lippi.

was always the art object as made (and as made valuable) by a specific creator. The rivalry with academic art historians who, to the connoisseurs, saw the forest but not the trees, continued into early 20th century.[8]

Their heated conflicts with academic art historians notwithstanding, Morelli, Berenson, and other connoisseurs like Morelli's friend Gustavo Frizzoni supplied art history with a number of important and still-accepted attributions to Piero.[9] This is why the first monograph on Piero outside of Italy, by German art historian Fritz Knapp (1870-1938), published in 1899, begins by crediting Morelli and Frizzoni with giving Piero the increased attention he had long deserved. Like the connoisseurs, Knapp is interested in the stylistic traits that distinguished specific hands. But as a formalist, Knapp seeks to understand how this style is precisely not idiosyncratic, not tied to individual biography, as the connoisseurs (and before them Vasari) had argued, but instead explained formal components in the larger context of Renaissance perceptions. The subtitle of his study, which identifies Piero as "an artist in transition from the Florentine quattrocento to cinquecento," announces his focus on the evolution of style from one period to the next. As a doctoral student under the founding father of formalism, Heinrich Wölfflin, Knapp followed in his professor's footsteps in that he traces Piero's formal development in terms of the larger cultural (as well as specifically artistic) influences that may have shaped it.[10]

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[8] Morelli, "Index," 330, my emphasis. On Morelli's anti-academic bent, cf. Sorensen. Fierce internal rivalry among connoisseurs also develops in the 20th century. As Bernard Berenson (1865-1959), the most important early 20th-century American connoisseur of the Italian Renaissance, attributes more works to Piero, he not only insists on what Sorensen, in his entry on Berenson, calls the connoisseur's absolute dedication to the art object, but also trades "nasty reviews… in the *Burlington Magazine*" with British connoisseurs from "the opposite camp." This other camp included R. Langton Douglas (1864-1951), the only connoisseur to write a monograph on Piero, in 1946. Douglas picked several fights with Berenson in the course of his book (as well as with Panofsky, see footnote 17 below).

[9] The connoisseur's impact is visible, for example, in looking at Crowe and Cavalcasselle's original attribution of about a dozen paintings to Piero in their first edition of the *History of Painting in Italy* (1864), compared to the additional 20 or so attributions that editor Tancred Borenius listed in the 1914 edition, several directly credited to Berenson (cf. Crowe and Cavalcasselle 47-48).

[10] The translation of the subtitle is mine. The 1899 monograph on Piero was originally his 1896 dissertation in Basel. Knapp continued to work under Wölfflin in Berlin, writing his "habilitation" (professorial thesis) there. He did not rise to particular fame as an art historian, but he did become the first professor of art history at the University of

Knapp's study of one specific neglected author is definitely not the "art history without names" and without biographical emphasis that Wölfflin called for in his more radically formalist moments.[11] But he puts the development of Piero's works from his apprenticeship to his last years into a larger context, dating some twenty of his most important works in terms of this overarching development. The formalist thrust behind his argument is especially apparent in his tracing of the Flemish painter Hugo van der Goes' influence on Piero. He argues that the arrival of the *Portinari Triptych (Adoration of the Shepherds)* by Hugo van der Goes in Florence's S. Maria Novella had a major influence on Piero's handling of color and landscape, demonstrated by a detailed analysis of Piero's early oil painting *Visitation with Saints Nicholas of Bari and Anthony Abbott.* In the same chapter on Piero's emerging style, Knapp is also the first to make what was to become a staple comparison between Piero's *Venus, Cupid and Mars* and the compositionally very similar *Venus and Mars* by Botticelli—a comparison that shows the persistence of formalist comparisons that pervade modern art history in ways that can sometimes distract from differences beneath obvious similarities. Knapp observed that the representation of the prone figures close to the picture plane is roughly the same, but that the more advanced Botticelli shows Mars's slack muscles reveal the "psychologically interesting state" of sleep. However, he contended that Piero's background landscapes spatialize his painting in ways that show his interest in "optical phenomena" that are not evident in Botticelli. Both

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Würzburg in 1907, a post he still held under the Nazis until he retired in 1936. Stefan Kummer's brief sketch of his life and works in an essay on the beginnings of art history in Würzburg claims, with an infuriating unwillingness to engage with methodology, that Knapp ultimately "proceeded entirely without method" (Kummer 34). That is misleading. Instead, one could say that his method represented the broadest and thus perhaps most problematic application of formalist ideas of the "natural" development of art. Kummer quotes from Knapp's introduction to an ambitious five-volume history of western art, where he rhapsodizes about a fuzzily organicist, evolutionary concept of history in which art functions as a mirror in which we can see humanity grow and change, strive and struggle, like a living being (cf. Kummer 34-35, footnote 143).

[11] Cf. the preface to first German edition of his *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vii. Famously, Wölfflin did not include this radical idea of a "Kunstgeschichte ohne Namen" in the prefaces to later editions, and it did not end up in the 1932 translation into English (cf. Hatt and Klonk 66).

arguments recall Wölfflin's method of identifying "general representational forms" such as plane vs. recession and closed vs. open form. Knapp ultimately concludes that Piero remained a "quattrocentist" in terms of composition and theme, even though his painterly technique, characterized by his saturated colors, *sfumato*, and spatialized representation of the landscape, aligned him with the 16th-century canon (especially with Leonardo). He sees him as a transitional figure who mediates between Flemish color and Florentine form (more precisely, "zwischen niederländischer Farbenpracht und florentinischer Formenkraft"). But importantly, to a formalist like Knapp, this meant that Piero ultimately doesn't participate in the "eagle's flight of classicism" that elevated the more canonical artists of his time beyond Piero's reach. [12]

Knapp's turn-of-the-century prose detracts from his point, but to the formalists, the question of whether Piero was ahead of or behind his time, or how he related to the "classical turn" that the High Renaissance artists were associated with, was key to connecting the artist to a period philosophy, even as either position positioned him as an outsider. The most famous of the British formalists, Roger Fry (1866-1934), is still wrestling with this same question in the early 1920s, and finds his answer in a set of mythologically-themed paintings that Panofsky was to reinterpret in the 1930s. In 1919, Fry had already briefly tried to reconcile two diametrically opposed tendencies in Piero's *Battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs* in the *Burlington Magazine*. He noted that Piero's color and "his invention of plastic values" were highly advanced for the late 15th century, but that Piero's work also had "an archaic look" and retains "the clear-sighted, brutal realism of mediaeval art," which sounds like a more polarized version of Knapp's idea of Piero as a "quattrocentist." (Knapp, incidentally, could not figure out what to do with *Lapiths*

[12] Cf. Knapp 24-28; 26; 28 (my translation). For the continuing tradition of the comparison between Botticelli's and Piero's depictions of the postcoital Venus and Mars, cf. Douglas 54-58, Fermor 44-48, Geronimo 89-95. For Wölfflin's summary of general representational form or "allgemeinsten Darstellungsformen," see Wölfflin 14-19. For Knapp's concluding thoughts, see 106, 109, and again 106, my translation.

and Centaurs at all. He actually claimed, paradoxically for a formalist, that there was basically no composition in this painting.)[13]

But when Fry writes again about *Lapiths and Centaurs* in 1921, in conjunction with three other paintings with a peculiarly archaic look, namely *The Hunt*, *The Return from the Hunt*, and *The Forest Fire*, he resolves this contradiction between the advanced formal features of the paintings and the primitive-looking centaurs, humans, and beasts that populate them. While he still follows Vasari's lead in claiming that Piero's "solitary brooding mind" generates "the strangest visions," he now sees his art no longer as archaic, but as deeply entwined with the Renaissance interest in classical accounts of primitive human life. He draws special attention to Ovid as the source for *Lapiths and Centaurs*, thus showing the influence of ideas from antiquity, thus making the "primitive" content of the paintings seem less "mediaeval" and align more with the Renaissance. At the same time, he emphasizes even more than before that Piero is advanced when it comes to form: He is "an adventurous innovator, and in some directions fully abreast of the forward movement of his day," especially when it comes to the animals that seem to come directly at us in the *Forest Fire.* When Fry concludes that "this freedom from the tyranny of the picture plane was rare in [Piero's] day and for long after" and constituted "an immense step forward in the realization of the picture space and the recessions of planes," his points recall Wölfflin's argument about the evolution of painting from Renaissance to Baroque. Fry is now emphatically casting Piero, though still as much of an outsider than ever, as far ahead of his time, a claim that aligns well with his embrace of the outcast status (and sometimes madness) of post-impressionist painters and their advanced style as early as 1906[14]

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[13] Fry, "Notes," 11. Knapp's original phrase is "Von Komposition ist keine Rede," Knapp 39.
[14] Fry, "Pictures," 131, 137. Cf. Sorensen on Fry's early work on Cézanne and his connection to the "early modernists" of the Bloomington circle, like Clive and Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf, in the early 1900s.

Only about 15 years years later, thought, Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) used these very paintings (along with another pair, *Vulcan on Lemnos* and *Vulcan and Aeolus*) to suggest that formalists like Knapp and Fry were missing key points about Piero precisely because they were so preoccupied with form. Even if formalists and connoisseurs alike could spot familiar motifs and how they were executed (through what Panofsky would have termed pre-iconographical description), they were not identifying the themes and concepts (iconographical analysis), nor analyzing the *Weltanschauung* or mentality that lay behind them (iconological interpretation). In his seminal 1937 essay "The Early History of Man in a Cycle of Paintings by Piero di Cosimo," his iconological analysis of this alleged "Cycle" allowed Panofsky to show that hitherto unrecognized literary references provided a much more unified sense of what Piero was, culturally speaking, doing in these paintings.[15]

At first glance, Panofsky seems to merely fine-tune Fry's argument from 1921 about this group of paintings regarding their classical sources. He starts with Vitruvius, whose ideas on the development of human civilization were well-known and often illustrated in the Renaissance, and draws attention to the role that fire and the God Vulcan as the God of fire play in Vitruvius' stages of human evolution. This serves as the explanation for the link between two paintings that Panofsky is credited with thematically identifying and connecting to each other: *Vulcan on Lemnos* (formerly titled *Hylas and the Nymphs*) and *Vulcan and Aeolus on Lemnos*. But then he turns to an unexpected classical text that only few humanists of Piero's time were familiar with: Lucretius' *De Rerum Naturae*, which represented the early life of humans as a dark time of chaos and suffering, rather than a Golden Age as portrayed in Hesiod or Ovid. The attention to

[15] The labeling of the three steps used here follows Panofsky's introduction to *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955). The "Early Man" essay, Panofsky's most sustained argument about Piero, was first published in 1937, and then became chapter 2 of the 1939 *Studies in Iconology*. His later *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (1960) adds a discussion of Piero's *The Discovery of Honey*, drawing on the same rhetorical contexts (cf. 179-181).

Lucretius (and a fairly tentative claim that both Piero and his presumed patron were familiar with him) enables Panofsky to show that an iconographic program linked the entire "cycle" of mythological paintings, some of which had never been seen as thematically related. Most importantly, *The Hunt*, *The Return from the Hunt*, and *The Forest Fire* (the paintings Fry had already seen as connected) all depict primitive humans in an "aboriginal state" in which they are as yet unfamiliar with the civilizing force of fire, "an iconographical attribute" that partly derives from Pliny and Vitruvius, but most importantly from Lucretius. (Fry, incidentally, had thought Piero was "too flighty and whimsical" to adopt Lucretius's rationalism). In his uncovering and recombining classical sources and showing how they are visualized in the details of Piero's imagery, Panofsky turns around the way that the most puzzling objects and creatures in Piero's paintings had been interpreted (or ignored, for that matter), in a way that recalls his famous iconological rereading of Dürer's *Melencolia I*.[16]

As much as Panofsky disagrees with Fry's explanation of art as temperament, in one respect their view of Piero is strikingly similar: just as Fry's idea of Piero as "archaic" and "as the strangest and most curious personality of Florentine art" had followed Vasari's account, Panofsky returns to what he calls Vasari's "most convincing psychological portrait" and concludes that Piero was "an atavistic phenomenon" whose "Early Man" series shows "the subconscious collective of a primitive who happened to live in a period of sophisticated civilization [but] seems to have re-experienced the emotions of primeval man." Panofsky here retreats into Jungian notions of the collective unconscious—a move that embodies the dangers of iconography's focus on the "*essential tendencies of the human mind*." Earlier in the essay,

[16] Panofsky 25; cf. Fry, "Pictures," 131. Fry had tentatively suggested that the three paintings are part of a set with the *Battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs*, but Panofsky dismisses Fry's argument in a lengthy footnote (Panofsky 24). Panofsky's famous analysis of Dürer's *Melencolia I* was not accessible to English-speaking audiences until 1943, but was initially published in German in 1923 in collaboration with Fritz Saxl (cf. Hatt and Klonk 110-111).

Panofsky had already evoked psychoanalysis in a footnote, telling us that a psychoanalyst might say that Piero's habit of cooking his eggs in his glue to "save fire" (as per Vasari's anecdote) might have "fulfilled an unconscious wish to avoid contact" with fire, "the element which both fascinating and terrified him."[17]

His essentializing conclusion aside, Panofsky's analysis demonstrates how to understand Piero's paintings in a way that rather than seeming "strange" and "bizarre," shows how they fit culturally relevant ideas of the late 15th century. It is thus not surprising that no art historian since Panofsky has been able to discuss the "Early Man" paintings without referring to his interpretation, even though several of his speculative claims are no longer widely accepted--for example, the *Forest Fire* is seen as thematically and stylistically separate from the *The Hunt* and *The Return of the Hunt*. Sometimes these counterarguments and challenges to Panofsky come from within the iconographical tradition, via a more nuanced explorations of the classical rhetorical tradition, but without presenting a challenge to his overall method or the thrust of his argument.But more recently, new suggestions about Piero that take issue with Panofsky are also launched from rivaling methodologies, particularly an archivally-based social history that tackles Piero's patrons and the constraints of genre. Sharon Fermor's study of Piero's work from 1993 exemplifies the latter. Fermor, a British-trained art historian who teaches at the University of Warwick, places Vasari's account of Piero's life into the larger didactic mission of the *Lives*, and emphasizes the importance of Renaissance texts that enhance our understanding of Piero, following the model of the careful rhetorical explications of Baxandall's *Giotto and the Humanists* rather than Panofsky's sweeping and sometimes careless assertions. Most

[17] Fry, "Pictures," 131. Panofsky 29-30. For the formulation of iconological interpretation being concerned with "*essential principles of the human mind*," cf. Panofsky's introduction to *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 41. Even Langton Douglas, who vehemently disagrees with Panofsky on the renaming of *Hylas and the Nymphs* in his 1946 monograph on Piero, takes Vasari as gospel, and shows an even stronger identification Piero as an outsider (cf. 99).

importantly, however, she integrates (and expands on) the sparse information about Piero's patrons, especially the wealthy Florentine merchants who commissioned relatively small works for their homes, into a discussion of Piero's style.[18]

This gives her discussion of the "Early Man" cycle a new direction, for example. Fermor mostly agrees with Panofsky on the literary context (Ovid, Lucretius, etc.), but disagrees his assertion, on an iconographic basis, that these were all "executed for the same employer" for two connected sets of rooms. Panofsky had asserted that the single patron, Francesco del Pugliese, was a "wealthy, plain-spoken democrat," who could have seen himself as the Vulcan figure, "the only ungentlemanly workman… in the Olympian leisure class." Fermor points that it was Francesco del Pugliese's "profoundly religious bent" that led to his interest in "early civilizations," and notes that it is very difficult to assign "clear political or ideological significance" to these paintings, not least because Piero was the first to visually represent ideas from Lucretius's *De Rerum Naturae*, a text that had only recently been rediscovered. [19]

Fermor's scholarship here benefits from relying on historical documents beyond the literary texts that Panofsky is exclusively interested in, and thus partly draws on methods from social art history. But her argument is always also shaped by the functionalist approach of John Shearman, which pays very specific attention to the way the function of a work in its original

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[18] The impact of Panofsky is readily visible in Keith Christiansen's discussion of *The Hunt* and in the Ashmolean Museum's pamphlet on *The Forest Fire* from 1984. For challenges that seem to me to come from within iconography, cf. Geronimus regarding a possible third Lemnos paintings and the separation of the *Hunt* pair from the *Forest Fire*, and the recent articles on other painting pairs--by John F. Miller on the *Discovery of Honey* from 2007 and by Patricia Simons on the *Creation of Pandora* from 2015. I would like to note here that I am omitting from my discussion a key pair of works published between Douglas' 1946 monograph and Fermor's in 1993, Maria Bacci's 1966 *Piero di Cosimo* and her 1976 *L'Opera Completa di Piero di Cosimo*.

[19] Panofsky 27-28; Fermor 80-81. Various art historians touch on patronage before Fermor and specifically comment on the nature of *spalliera* paintings, and on his small round *tondi*, meant for private contemplation, not for public display. Thus, Knapp already notes that Piero's mythological works were probably made for this purpose, although pieces for furniture and for wainscoting are not clearly distinguished in his argument. Fry and Panofsky also bring this up in passing, partly based on early (1915) seminal work on *cassoni* paintings by Paul Schubring. But Fermor's is the first sustained discussion of the way this affects the style as well as the themes of Piero's art.

historical context inflects form and style. Thus, beyond emphasizing that Piero's work reflects the interests of his specific patrons (rather than either the artist's temperament or a broader period mentality), she draws attention to the form (and literally, the shape) of the *spalliera* paintings. The relatively small size of many of Piero's paintings is directly related to their private use by patrons, their families, and their visitors. The mythological paintings, painted on panels that were part of the wainscoting of living rooms and bedrooms, had a much less didactic function, given that being "decorative" and "pleasing to the eye" was their major goal. Fermor argues that the fact that such paintings were displayed for close-up view in private homes enabled (or forced, depending on one's view) a painting style uniquely suited to this function. Since the artist assumes that viewers will stand very close to the work, and look at it again and again, seeking to discover new details, it makes sense that Piero's *spalliera* panels and *tondi* feature life-size butterflies or even flies at the picture plane (as in his *Venus, Cupid, and Mars*), exotic or fantastic animals in the middle ground or minute landscape details in the faraway background, which became a stylistic hallmark in his religious and secular paintings alike.[20]

Fermor's book sheds crucial new light on some of the earlier assessments of Piero's work as strange or marginal, because some of the earlier arguments about Piero were clearly comparing his "small" work to more publicly visible, larger-scale, and didactic works. And even though her broader conclusions about how her findings might change "our understanding of Renaissance art and theory" remain a bit timid and generic in their phrasing, she does challenge some of the "misconceptions" not only about Piero but about the unified nature of Renaissance art. Her study as a whole is based on the premise that Piero was not that marginal, and that his style shows his negotiation with existing conventions rather than a penchant for pure, somehow

[20] Fermor 41, 44-45.

unmediated strangeness. The underlying assumption is not so much that Piero needs to be reevaluated, but that the master narrative of Renaissance art inevitably progressing toward the classicism of the High Renaissance can prevent art historians from paying sufficient attention to many Renaissance commissions, especially the decorative work that Piero specialized in.[21]

This revisionism is oddly missing from the only extensive study of Piero in the 21st century, Dennis Geronimus's 2006 *Piero di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange*, which also aims to insert Piero more firmly in the canon but returns to the idea of his "strangeness" with some force. If anything, his methodology (and even his florid writing style) seems like a return to the minutiae of connoisseurship, although now more substantially informed by archival research (and new technology). Geronimus is an art historian at NYU, whose work on Piero began as a dissertation at Oxford University. He helped spearhead (with Gretchen Hirschauer) the large exhibit of Piero's work at the National Gallery in DC and in the Uffizi in Florence in 2015, clearly as part of his effort to champion Piero's cause. However, while his ambitious walk through Piero's entire oeuvre has added a number of important new insights, archival findings, and attributions, Geronimus does not bring any new methodology to Piero's work. Like Fermor, he is concerned with the historical positioning of Piero (albeit with a pronounced emphasis on archival work and also on new technologies that enable him to make connoisseurship's arguments more scientifically). But his return to the idea that Piero, "Odd Man In," as the title to his introduction had it, is basically still completely misunderstood and "in need of serious reconsideration" sidesteps Fermor's convincing suggestions that Piero was neither exceptional nor marginalized in his own time.[22]

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[21] Cf. Fermor 12.

[22] Geronimus 1. For the exhibition, which featured 34 of Piero's paintings, cf. the lavish catalogue edited by Geronimus and Hirschauer.

Since Geronimus accepts that Piero's outsider status defines him and his art, it would only make sense for him to look to ways in which feminism, postcolonialism, and other methodologies that focus on underrepresented, marginalized, and oppressed groups could be mobilized to understand his art. Piero does represent the Other in ways that are strikingly different from other artists of his time, especially in his mythological paintings—but Geronimus ignores the very theoretical approaches that might have enabled him to make a new or different case for Piero's unusual treatment of myth. This absence is also visible in Fermor, who, despite the fact that she otherwise "normalizes" Piero among his Renaissance peers, promisingly suggests that some of Piero's mythological paintings are remarkable for their empathetic portrayal of those who are not quite human, for example in *A Nymph and a Faun* and *The Battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs*, which both represent a mythological demi-human in deep agony over a dead loved one (the faun mourning the dead nymph; the female centaur Hylonome mourning her dead partner Cyllarus). But even though Fermor suggests that these representations might have been meant for women (they were possibly nuptial presents for bedrooms), she does not foray into feminist analysis. And although even survey course textbooks today explain ancient representations of the centauromachy in terms of the Greek (and later Roman) "othering" of whoever was constructed as the Barbarians of the hour (the Persians, the Gauls, etc.), she does not unpack this humanizing representation of Hylonome in terms of postcolonial theory.[23]

On the other hand, art historians who have begun to apply feminist, queer, or postcolonial theory have not yet "discovered" Piero. He does not seem enough of an "odd man out" to be of interest to art historians interested in highlighting the truly marginalized figures of Renaissance art—women in particular. Nor is he one of the well-known artists from the very center of the

[23] Cf. Fermor 50-60, esp. 51, 59. Cf. Kleiner, *Art Through The Ages*, Vol.1, for "postcolonial" readings of the centauromachy, 125, 132.

Renaissance canon whose work is continually reinvestigated. There is no prestige or glory in a radical reinterpretation that singles out a "minor" artist for revaluation, while queering Michelangelo or discussing how Leonardo's representation of Judas evokes foreignness is considered cutting-edge—a move that paradoxically reinforces the very canon it seeks to question. But I would argue that to get at Piero's odd, liminal position—and to explore what strikes me as his real "strangeness," namely, his importance as a Renaissance painter of the strange and the stranger—art historians could draw on the ideas of the Other that feminist, queer, and especially postcolonial theory have put forward. Specifically, the association of the Other with the monstrous, the savage, and/or the foreign, which in turn is often constructed as feminine, queer, and in otherwise "abnormal," is of interest here, with its powerful associations with fear and hostility on the one hand, and with curiosity and the desire to look on the other. Both Piero's eye-catchingly "bizarre" or "strange" beasts (once more as per Vasari), and his empathetically represented semi-humans are interwoven with the Renaissance construction of "exotic" and "savage" beasts and humans with whom the people living in Italy's city states were just coming into contact as proto-colonial mercantilist trade networks expanded beyond Europe. Especially since the fabulous and the real, the mythological and the everyday, often blend in Piero's mythological paintings, in a kind of liminal space between "Us" and "Them," normalized "Self" and monstrous "Other," these works show how the encounter with new strange beings might be negotiated.

Of his many odd creatures, Piero's giraffe in *Vulcan and Aeolus on Lemnos* would be an intriguing starting point for such a new look at Piero; it can function as a way into Piero's art based on a networked concept of artistic and cultural exchange across species, races, oceans, etc. Piero's is an anatomically unusually accurate representation of the sensational and much-noted

gift to Lorenzo de 'Medici that arrived in Florence from Egypt in 1486, and it has been wandering through the footnotes and marginalia of Piero scholarship at least since Panofsky and Douglas.[24] But for this fantastically rare and exotic but real species to show up *on the very edge* of a painting that represents "Early Man" at the moment when civilization is just taking hold gives it exactly the odd liminal position between the real and the fantastic, between the (Renaissance) present and the (Early Man) past, and between the domesticated familiar and the savage Other that makes it "so very Piero." Piero's representation of such liminality is by far the most intriguing aspect of his paintings. But a methodologically more courageous and theoretically more sophisticated exploration of this aspect, in the context of the history of Renaissance representation of the influx of the strange and unfamiliar into Europe and into Florence specifically, is conspicuously missing from the scholarship on Piero di Cosimo.

[24] The giraffe makes its appearance in Panofsky (34, footnote), Douglas (34), in Geronimus, and in the Ashmoleon Museum's booklet on Piero's *Forest Fire*. For the larger historical (not art-historical) context, cf. Erik Ringmar's 2006 essay, who provides 1486 as the arrival date; others claim it arrived 1487. While it is impossible to prove that Piero took sketches of the living animal at the famous Medici menagerie, rather than copy someone else's sketch, he certainly could have: he lived in Florence when the giraffe came and worked on Carnival "floats" and masquerades for the Medici circle (cf. Vasari 295-301).

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