

Piero di Cosimo's *Visitation with St. Nicholas and St. Anthony Abbot*

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Piero di Cosimo (1462-1521), *The Visitation With St. Nicholas and St. Anthony Abbot*, c 1490, Florentine. Oil on panel. 184.2 x 188.6 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (<http://www.nga.gov>) Samuel H. Kress Collection.



Late 14th-century Florence spawned a cluster of painters remembered as much for their eccentricities as for their genius. For some—Leonardo and Michelangelo—their foibles had little impact on their critical reputations. For others, Piero di Cosimo (1462-1521) among them, the impact was considerable: stories of his personal life—of his terrors, fears, annoyances, rages, even his daily habits and his diet—were preferred over studies of his work. Thus, from Vasari (who, it should be noted, was only 10 years old when Piero died), we learn that Piero was terrified by lightning (though he liked the rain) and locked the door against the thunder; that he was frugal, cooking 50 eggs at a time to save fuel; that he would not permit his garden to be weeded, his vines to be pruned, or his room to be cleaned; that he was enraged by flies and annoyed by shadows; and that he could not bear "the crying of children, the coughing of men, the jingling of bells, and the chanting of friars." Still, as Vasari writes, in his younger days Piero had great humor and was a good companion; he could make people laugh at his often outrageous statements, marvel at the fantastic images he put on canvas, and watch with awe the wonderful spectacles he conjured for the Florentine Carnival procession. Though much of Vasari's account rests on hearsay, its endurance bears witness to the perverseness of human nature, which often has greater appetite for stories of tragedy than of triumph.

On the other hand, Vasari was not unaware of Piero's talent, which he justly praised. He owned one of Piero's works, a nude Venus and Mars, which he "cherished." Vasari also left what is the earliest (and probably eyewitness) description of one of Piero's major works, *The Visitation With St. Nicholas and St. Anthony Abbot*. Commissioned by the Capponi family to be an altarpiece for their chapel in the Church of Santo Spirito in Florence, it is a work of Piero's youth, completed sometime around 1490. The narrative is based on the New Testament account of Luke, who described how Mary, after the Annunciation, rushed off to the hill country to tell the good news to her cousin Elizabeth, who, in spite of her advanced years, was also pregnant. Piero has chosen the moment of the meeting between the two pregnant women as his theme. Vasari, however, is concerned to tell his readers about the other figures in the painting: "...Our Lady is accompanied by St. Nicholas and by St. Anthony, who is reading with his spectacles on his nose, a figure of great animation. In the same work our artist painted a book, bound in parchment, which really looks old and much handled. It is more like a real book than a painting. Some balls, the attribute of St. Nicholas, shine and reflect the light one upon another; they show the pleasure the artist took in tackling difficult problems."

But while Vasari is marveling at the verisimilitude of two small objects, Piero is demonstrating his true genius. Undoubtedly, the topic relates to Florence: the child in Elizabeth's womb is John the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence. But in showing the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, he is also showing the meeting of the past

and the future: the handclasp between Mary and Elizabeth is placed at the geometric center of the painting. To the left are youth and lush foliage; to the right are age, barren trees, stormy skies, and violence. The contrast between the young virgin and the elderly woman is dramatic: clothing, posture, skin, all tell the story.

Moreover, Piero has taken liberties with time: the meeting of the two women occurred a millennium and a half earlier, yet the architecture is Piero's own Florence. And while the two women were contemporaries of each other, the two saints, Nicholas and Anthony, never met: one was a centenarian monk who died in the fourth century, the other probably never lived at all except in myth. (In Piero's time, Nicholas was honored for magically providing dowries for impoverished girls, a legend that has since evolved into the modern Santa Claus myth.) Anthony, with his spectacles well down on his nose (spectacles it is doubtful he ever had) is writing on a scroll. He is identified by his attributes, which are the bell, the cane in the shape of a tau, and the always-present pigs. Nicholas, identified by his attribute, the golden balls, reads from the page of an illuminated manuscript. Meanwhile, other biblical dramas, more or less contemporaneous with Mary and Elizabeth, play out in the background: in the left mid ground a Nativity scene, in the right mid ground, a depiction of the Massacre of the Innocents, and just above it, barely visible, an Annunciation scene. In the background are Piero's fantastical rock formations and ethereal hills.

In his later years, Piero became increasingly irritable and reclusive. Struck with palsy, he would go into a rage when he could not manage his brushes. He distrusted physicians and feared the agonies of a lingering disease over death itself. He need not have feared. As Vasari records, he was found dead one morning in the year 1521 at the foot of a staircase. It is estimated that he left between 50 and 100 paintings—religious, mythological, and fantastical—and none of them signed.