

Charles Boone, Teaching Artist ArtSeed Packet

Bio: Charles Boone is a composer living in San Francisco. His music has been performed by the San Francisco Symphony, the Chicago Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and other organizations. He has served as music critic for the San Francisco Examiner and Oakland Tribune and has published articles in Arts and Architecture, Threepenny Review, Sculpture Magazine, and other journals. He has lectured at the Sibelius Academy/Helsinki, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, University of Chicago, Yale University, and other places. For many years, he was an Associate Professor at the San Francisco Art Institute.

ArtSeed Statement: I have known ArtSeed from its very beginning; from before its beginning, actually, which is to say for twenty-plus years. It started as a tiny project with big ideas. It is no longer tiny, now perhaps better described, simply, as small, but the ideas behind it remain big and vital. A work of determination and love, it brings to young folks possibilities of ambition and wanting to make the world a better place, even if just one step at a time. Time has passed quickly and will continue to do so. It won't be long before ArtSeed's fortieth year. That will be something grand to celebrate!

The Lecture: His project for ArtSeed Summer Intensive presentation will shed light on Italian Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca's c. 1440 painting *The Baptism of Christ*. This stunning, complex work details Piero's use of space, his geometric organizational principles, and his commentary on political considerations during his time. It also features his startling juxtaposition of the time and place of Christ's baptism — the Holy Land more than a millennium earlier — with the artist's 15th century Italian homeland.

Lesson#: **Title:** Piero's Use of Space **Date:** 7/24 **Time of day:** 1:00-3:00 pm

Composer: Charles Boone

Materials/Prep: Attentive eyes & ears, paper, pencil, ruler

Introduction/Goals: To find out about how a distinguished painter of the 15th Century utilized geometric organizational principles to make a masterpiece, and hear how the artist harnessed his artmaking for commentary on political considerations during his time.

Activity: Draw your own interpretation of this painting according to your own geometric principles.

Vocabulary: Geometric, Organizational Principles, Renaissance, [egg tempera](#).

Closing: Each student shows their drawing and tells how it is organized.

Successes:

Challenges:

CA State Standard(s): 4.VA:Cn11-Through observation infer information about time, place, and culture in which a work of [art](#) was created. 5.VA:Cn11- Identify how [art](#) is used to inform or change beliefs, values, or behaviors of an individual or society.

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/vapacontentstds.asp>

Relevant Artist(s) and Distinguished People: While the subject of Christ's baptism was addressed in countless paintings by sundry Renaissance artists, the most effective way to provide context to this unique work is not to look far afield; rather, to examine other works by Piero himself. The Basilica of San Francesco, in Arezzo, is a splendid starting place. In addition, his work can be viewed in all its virtual glory on the Internet. Just type in "images for piero della francesca" and marvel at the riches that will come up on your screen.

Piero della Francesca, The Baptism of Christ (3:47 video):

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/early-renaissance1/painting-in-florence/v/piero-della-francesca-the-baptism-of-christ-1450s>

Piero della Francesca: A quiet revolutionary | National Gallery (29:22 video):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zR24Coi1ZGA>

Piero della Francesca: *Baptism of Christ*

SLIDE 1: The painting gallery



This painting, which I admire greatly, is among the most remarkable documents of Christian, religious art, something brilliant in its conception and execution, fascinating in its structure, beautiful and inspiring to look at and think about. It is housed today in London's National Gallery.

SLIDE 2: The painting



Piero della Francesca, c. 1415-1492, was among the finest artists of the early Italian Renaissance and certainly one of the greatest painters in the history of western art. He probably made this work, *The Baptism of Christ*, in the 1440s when he was still very young. In his own time, he was known primarily as a mathematician, having written texts on mathematics and geometry along with studies on pictorial perspective. He was in every respect a revolutionary artist. All of these subjects play significant roles in the paintings he is remembered for.

His *Baptism of Christ* is quite large, about 5-1/2 feet high, painted using egg tempera on two poplar panels. It served as the central part of a larger altarpiece intended for a church in Sansepolcro, a town in NE Italy where the artist was born and died. It was commissioned by an order of monks known as

Camaldamites. That monastic order was dissolved in the 1860s and the painting was taken to London around that time.

This is a very grand work, one that can be enjoyed simply for that reason. However, I will recount some of what is actually there to be seen; the figures, the setting, and so on. But beyond that, there are things of consequence that can't be readily recognized: its structure, its hidden meanings and significance, its history. It is a highly complex work that can be appreciated and understood even more when light is shed on some of this.

A noteworthy aspect of this painting is its calm mood and stillness, produced significantly by the regularity of its primary parts. All of these, like the painting itself, are strongly vertical: the angels, the tree, Christ and John the Baptist. It is this regularity and sense of serenity that gives the painting its particular strength. What is depicted is an ideal moment that causes time to be stopped, a moment of coolness, a moment of silence and peace.

Sansepolcro was founded around the 10th century, supposedly by two pilgrims who traveled from the Holy Land bringing with them a stone from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, hence the name of the city, Sansepolcro, holy sepulcher. A sepulcher is a stone monument in which a dead person is laid, the one in Jerusalem allegedly being the place where Christ's body was put after his death. Sansepolcro's population today is about 16,000 but it was considerably smaller during Piero's lifetime. It is in a valley called Val di Nocea, Walnut Valley, because of the many walnut trees indigenous to the place, a fact of importance to this particular painting.

Its primary focus is the two very real, solid figures in its lower part: Christ, facing directly forward in the exact center, and to the right, John the Baptist in profile. In addition, three angels stand at the left edge, and in the background behind John, four elders. An additional figure, to the right of and behind John, is a man taking off his clothes in preparation for being baptized. One might even call the large tree a character because of its prominence and, as we shall see shortly, significance in this work. In the old testament book of Jeremiah, one reads about trees flourishing when rooted near water, having to do metaphorically with strength derived from God's nourishment. For sure, this tree is flourishing near water.

The winding river stops immediately behind Christ, recalling the ancient notion that at the moment of his baptism, the river's flow miraculously paused. There is, in fact, a river flowing through Sansepolcro's valley, the Tiber, small at that place, but becoming one of Italy's most important waterways by the time it reaches Rome, far to the south. Most likely, what is portrayed here is intended to be the River Jordan, transposed like the human figures, from the place of Christ's actual baptism. Maybe, however, like the rest of the picture's setting, it is indeed the Tiber.

The landscape depicted here is clear and specific, filled with details that are significant in a multitude of ways. What one sees in them is particular to the story that is being told, to the unusual setting in which it is placed, and notably important to political issues during the time the painting was made. Nothing is there just for the fun of it.

John the Baptist, Yochanan, as he was called, was a hermit, an ascetic, and an itinerant preacher in the first century AD. Keep in mind that both he and Christ were Jews, not Christians. Christianity began to flourish only after Christ's death in the year 33 AD, and was promulgated by men who had been his followers. John appears as a major figure not only in Christianity but also in Islam and other religious traditions. He is a familiar subject of countless paintings, not least of all in the Renaissance.

In Jewish tradition, ritual washing is well known. It was said that thanks to its cleansing nature, the person being anointed might become a better Jew. This was a ceremony of purification done in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah; namely, Yeshua, or Yehoshua, the name meaning "savior" or "deliverer." If you know someone named Joshua, now you know the derivation of his name.

The ideal way of doing such cleansing would be in flowing water; hence, a river. In our time, what we know as Palestine and Israel were called Judea in the time of Christ, and it is through that area that the river Jordan, the purported place of Christ's baptism, flows to this day. It runs north to south through the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea and today marks the boundary between Jordan, Palestinian territories, and modern-day Israel.

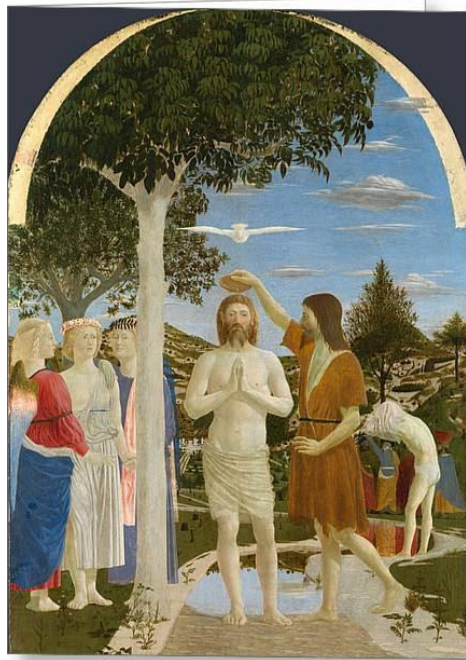
SLIDE 3: Jordan River



SLIDE 4: Modern day baptism



SLIDE 2: The painting



First, the Christ figure, a simple, solemn man, solid as the adjacent tree. In the exact center of the picture, he is shown as being light complected, perhaps indicating his high degree of purity. John's complexion, on the other hand, is darker, possibly denoting his outdoor life as an itinerant and hermit. Christ's delicate white drape contrasts strongly with John's rustic, camel's hair covering and its black leather rope belt.

The dove above Christ's head symbolizes the Holy Spirit part of the trinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. It appears at the precise moment of the baptism. The dove is the most significant horizontal feature of the painting, along with being its whitest. It is exactly parallel with Christ's shoulders and looks down at what is happening below. White clouds in the sky to the upper right rhyme closely with the dove's outstretched wings.

Christ's centrality is highlighted through his being flanked by the painting's two other most important "characters," John and the tree. The verticality of these elements, along with that of the angels to the left, is striking. Christ's grace and the delicacy of what is being depicted are highlighted by a tiny, beautiful detail; namely, the infinitely small space between the bottom of John's cup and Christ's head. Any wider, and a meaningful visual opportunity would have been lost. Water, at this moment, is doubly significant since it is coming onto Christ's head while he is standing only inches from the river.

Something extraordinary in this painting's conception is the transposition into a 15th century Italian valley, of a first century event from the Holy Land, very far away. This, to my mind, is probably the most marvelous and remarkable thing about the work. Every detail of the landscape, which Piero had known since his childhood, is unique to that particular place and precisely depicted. The location of the event we see here is, and can only be, the Val di Nocea in Italy.

The large tree. There can be no doubt about what kind of tree this is. Because of its size and physical relationship to the work's primary characters, not to mention its strong counterbalancing to the left of Christ, and John on his right, one might rightly recognize it as a primary character in the painting.

SLIDE 5: Walnut tree



SLIDE 6: Piero walnut leaves



We've already noted that walnut trees are indigenous to the valley, and the tree in this painting is in no way generic, but clearly walnut.

SLIDE 7: Walnut leaves photo



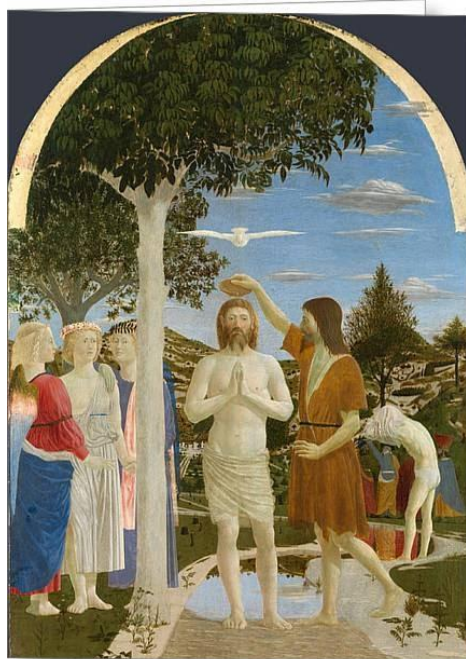
Compare Piero's leaves with this recent photo of walnut tree leaves. There can be no doubt about what kind of tree appears in the painting. The artist is very specific about this.

SLIDE 8: Plants



The plants at the bottom along the banks of the river were purposely chosen for the subject of this painting and precise, not generic, in their depiction. They can be identified by anyone familiar with the area's flora. All had medicinal applications during the Renaissance and were used for, among other things, soothing toothaches, curing lunacy, cleansing the kidneys, for constipation, for snake and scorpion bites, and as proofs against spells and witchcraft. In addition, three-leafed clovers symbolize the Holy Trinity, and the plantain, is associated with the Passion and Christ's blood because of its ability to staunch bleeding. The presence of these medicinal plants suggests the redemptive nature of God's healing grace.

SLIDE 2: The painting



Space and depth are explicit in a number of places and ways. Look, for example, how Christ and John in the foreground are larger, seemingly closer to the viewer, than the man taking off his clothes, and how the elders behind him, much smaller, indicate that they are further in the distance. Immediately to the left of Christ the landscape goes into deep space illuminating very well Piero's interest in perspective. You see space and depth distinctly in the sky that is rich blue at the top but fades considerably toward the horizon and the mountains. This is a device familiar to every landscape painter, something you can observe next time the sun is out and you look toward a distant horizon.

In the spaces between the two main figures, one observes the sense of perspective as the landscape recedes into the distance. To the left of Christ's knees, for example, are seven stumps, most likely the remains of walnut trees that have been chopped down, shown larger in the foreground than in the distance just as they would be perceived in real life.

SLIDE 9: Piero's Sansepolcro close up



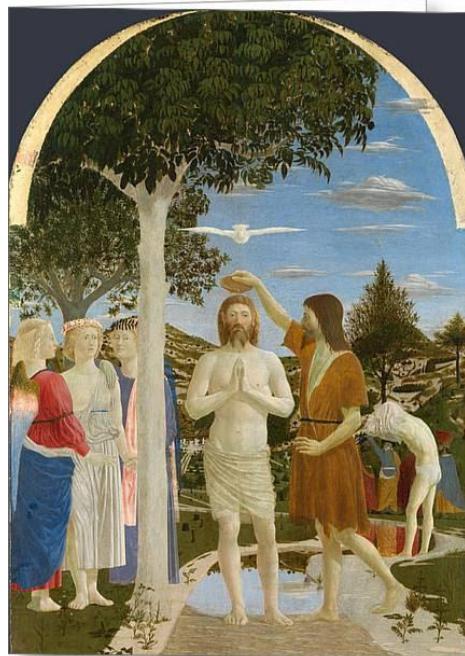
Between Christ and the tree, one discerns a city in the far distance, small in scale because of the range. One commentator says it's Jerusalem, but it is not. It is Sansepolcro as seen from the other side of the valley. Note the road coming out of the town.

SLIDE 10: From Anghiari



Now here is a recent photo looking down the hill from the town of Anghiari, toward Sansepolcro five miles in the distance. Quite amazingly, that road in the painting exists to this day and serves to confirm, after almost six hundred years, the breathtaking exactitude of Piero's work. One commentator says that the town in the distance is Jerusalem. It is not, it is Sansepolcro as seen from Anghiari across the valley. That having been said, although the town we see in the painting is clearly in 15th century Italy, it could also very well function as an allegorical reference to far away Jerusalem.

SLIDE 2: The painting



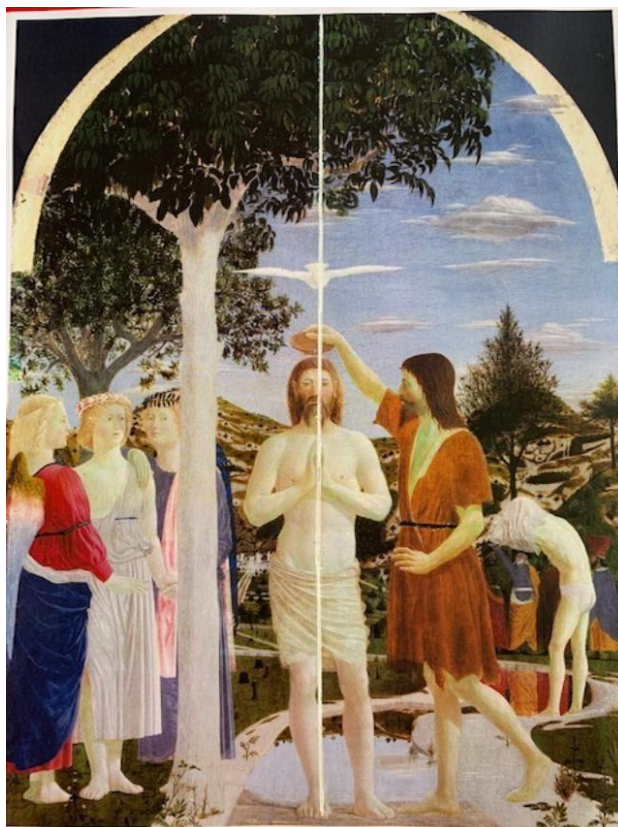
As already mentioned, Piero della Francesca, the painter, possessed a profound understanding of mathematics and geometry. Because of his writings on these subjects, he was even thought to be the equal of the great mathematicians of his day. Mathematics is often thought of as the foundation of beauty, harmony, and truth. Therefore, it might come as no surprise that in a painting such as this, scientific principles might underpin the work's visual aspects. Mathematical symbolism could very well enhance and deepen the meaning of the imagery. Here are several examples of Piero's joining of visual representation and analytic structure.

SLIDE 11: Geometry 1, the circle



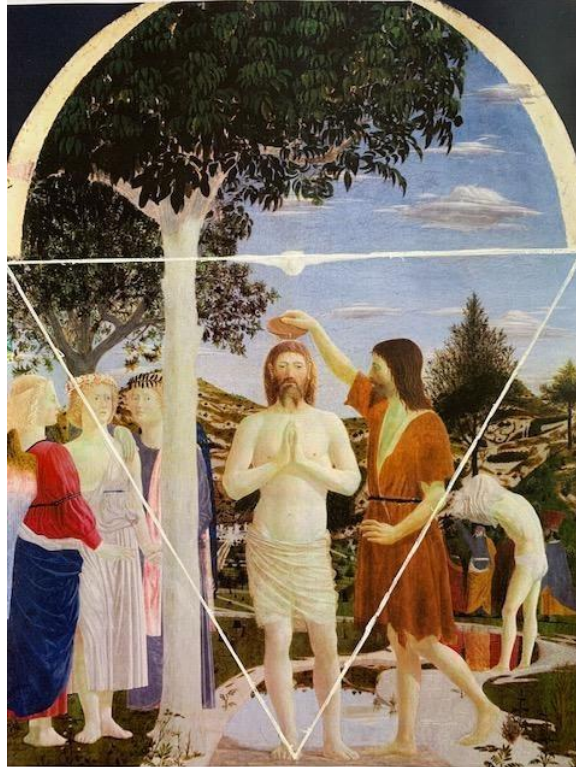
The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove that appears just at the moment of the pouring of the water, floats precisely in the center of the line that marks the joining of the semicircle above and the rectangle below. Complete the semicircle and it passes through Christ's navel; not near it, but exactly through it. Note, as well, that the curve at the top of his loincloth rhymes skillfully with the circle's bottom.

SLIDE 12: Geometry 2, vertical line



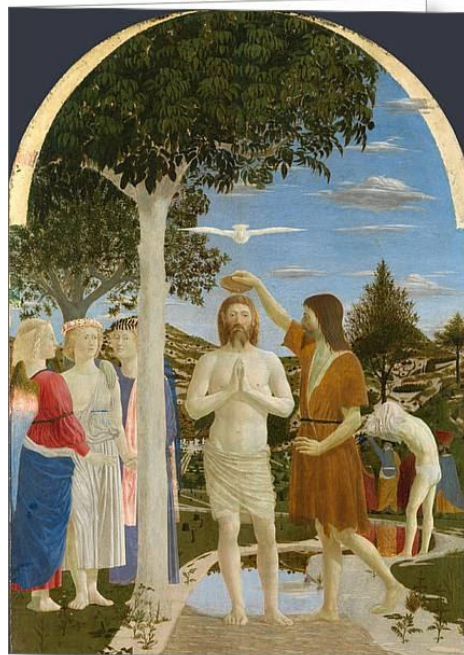
A line exactly bisecting the painting, top to bottom, is a vertical axis that passes explicitly through the dove's center; John's cup; Christ's face, fingertips in prayer, and navel; ending at the tip of his right foot.

SLIDE 13: Geometry 3, triangle



An equilateral triangle, perhaps symbolizing the Holy Trinity, drawn from the top of the rectangle to Christ's right foot, is centered absolutely on the tip of Christ's hands in prayer.

SLIDE 2: The painting



One further detail, this one easy to recognize, is the relationship between John's raised left leg and his raised right arm. He is balanced only on his right leg and appears to be in motion, moving close as he pours the water. His raised leg and arm are perfectly parallel, yet another indication of Piero's geometric thinking. These are just a few examples of the artist's systematic structural considerations. Many others could be cited.

SLIDE 14: Overpainting



In order to make a painting with so many instances of forethought and precision, Piero's calculation and advance structuring has to have been formidable. Nonetheless, we discover in the finished work places where he made small changes, where he seems to have found details that were more pleasing to his eye than what he had so carefully formulated in his mind. Modern-day architects sometimes note on their carefully worked out plans, "Subject to field adjustments," meaning that as their buildings are being built, on the spot modifications might make their original plans better. This seems to have happened here while Piero was working. In one clear example, the right angel's wing clearly overpaints a part of the landscape and the road leading out of Sansepolcro.

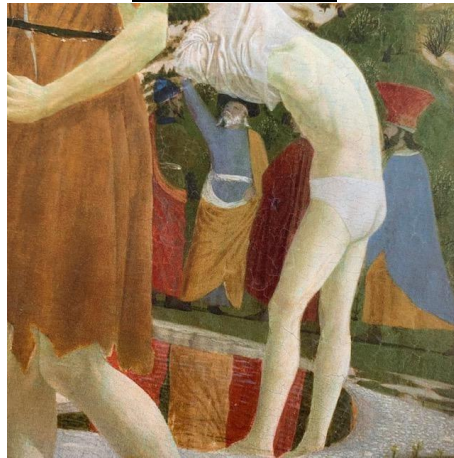
SLIDE 2: The painting



In spite of obvious its religious subject matter, political concerns during the time the work was made are strongly present, ones that were of concern to the monks who commissioned it. There existed, beginning in 1054 AD, and continuing to today, a split in the Catholic church between the Roman based western branch and the Constantinople based eastern branch, Constantinople being the city in Turkey we now call Istanbul. In spite of being part of the western, Roman church, the Camaldamite monks had close ties with the eastern church and were intent on a reunification of the two branches.

The proposition that the two might be reunified had as much to do with political and military issues as with religion, the idea aimed at sending western troops to help defend Constantinople against Moslem Turks. Shortly after the painting was finished, the city did indeed fall to the Turks in 1453. Piero certainly spent time with the churchmen who commissioned the painting so they could advise him of matters they wished to be dealt with in the work. After that, it was left to Piero to figure out how to make it happen. To place all of this in a temporal, context you will easily recognize, it happened just over forty years before Columbus's crossing the Atlantic Ocean in 1492 and his arrival in what are now called the Americas.

SLIDE 15: Elders



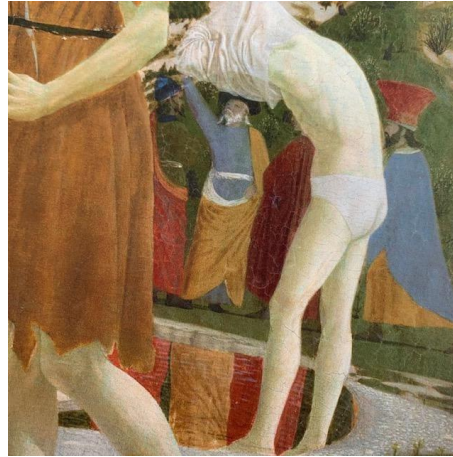
There is ample evidence in the painting of this political concern. First, the four elders in the distance behind John. There are mentions in the Bible of people coming from afar to hear John's preaching and in many such Baptism scenes, groups of secondary figures often appear. Generally, these figures are more prominent and engaged in what's happening, but in this instance, they are the most distant individuals depicted, perhaps even being unaware of what's going on up front. Their brightly colored robes — blue, red, yellow, orange, purple — set them apart from the other people in the painting.

SLIDE 16: Hats from another Piero painting



Such attire, particularly the distinctive hats, is recognized as being from the area of the eastern Church: Constantinople, Greece, and so on. Clearly, Piero was fascinated by such costumes, having illustrated them in others of his paintings, an example of which you see here.

SLIDE 15: Elders reflection



Nonetheless, the elders' presence is made more conspicuous by their bright robes being reflected in the river. Because of this, in a sense, they are present in the painting twice. In any case, they are from Piero's own time and he may well have seen the dress of such people when, in 1439, eastern emissaries came to Florence for an ecumenical council of union. Their presence in the depiction of this ancient Christian story that is set in a modern Italian landscape can only be to stress the Camaldamites' concern with unification of the Catholic church.

SLIDE 17: Angels

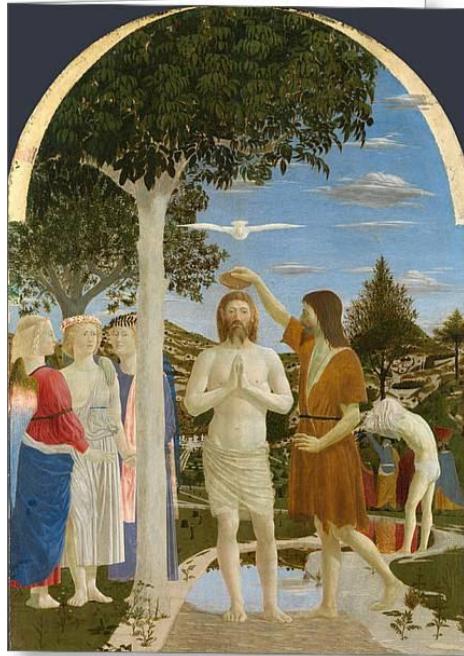


Likewise, the angels signify a number of important ideas, one of them having to do with the painting's political aspects. Between two trees, they stand at the left side of the picture, smaller in size than, and a bit behind, Christ and John, the large tree in the front separating them slightly from the baptism. Angels are always part of renderings of the baptism, generally present in veneration of Christ or else, simply, to hold his robes during the baptismal rite. Here, however, they do neither. All three, curiously androgynous, seem closely allied, companions, no doubt, who are comfortable with each other. The right hand of the

angel on the right even rests casually on the middle angel's shoulder while the two join their left hands. The three are pressed closely together and their sense of unity is palpable. The looks on their faces suggest that they are witnessing something unusual, strange, and remarkable.

There is a long tradition that connects angels to marriage and there are a number of things about Piero's angels that indicates this. Their colorful, fashionable costumes, might imply celebration. Likewise, the joining of hands and placement of a hand on a shoulder, suggest both concord and union. In addition, these angels wear crowns and wreaths, such headgear coming from traditional marriage rites in which the people to be joined are so outfitted.

SLIDE 2: The painting



So, why do two disparate seeming groups appear in this painting, the elders in a western setting while clothed in eastern garb, and the angels in clothing that suggests union, joining together, marriage even? They are present to represent the concerns of the work's commissioners, their interest in the bringing together, the joining, the marriage, so to speak, of the two branches of the church. Through the angels and elders, Piero carried out their intentions with the highest degree of imagination and diligence.

Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ* is a glorious achievement that strikingly describes a moment in the history of Christianity. The landscape into which that moment was transposed in time and place is accurate on multiple levels. And on top of all this, a compelling political statement is set forth and a complex geometric structure incorporated that gives the painting its unique resonance. Once those qualities are understood, the work's merit is markedly multiplied, deepened, made more complex, and, hence, more meaningful, important, and even beautiful. These and other elements coalesce into the painting's clear, coherent presence.

June 2020

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