

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

# Piero della Francesca

Edited by

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# I **The *Misericordia Polyptych***

## Reflections on Spiritual and Visual Culture in Sansepolcro

*Diane Cole Ahl*

I went to the church of the Most Holy Virgin of the *Misericordia* and before the high altar [was] the wooden altarpiece with images of the most holy Virgin and other saints by the hand of the famous painter, Piero Franceschi, otherwise known as della Francesca, of this city.

Monsignor Zanobio de' Medici, 1548<sup>1</sup>

The *Misericordia Polyptych* (Plate 2), commissioned in 1445, is renowned as the earliest surviving work by Piero della Francesca.<sup>2</sup> It stood in the church of the Compagnia di Santa Maria della *Misericordia*, a confraternity – a charitable organization of pious laymen – that performed works of mercy in the town of Sansepolcro.<sup>3</sup> Although the altarpiece was dismembered in the seventeenth century and time has dulled its once-glowing colors, it still inspires reverence in the beholder. While we may no longer share the confraternity's devotion to the Madonna of Mercy (*Misericordia*), its dedicatee, we can admire Piero's genius in creating so beautiful a work. From the monumental Virgin, whose open mantle echoes the arch of the central panel, to the imposing saints in the wings, the polyptych reveals Piero's genius at endowing his figures with a physical presence and spiritual eloquence that is unequalled in fifteenth-century painting. In the center, the Madonna solemnly opens her cloak to shelter the faithful who kneel at her feet. Beseeking her mercy through their prayers, the supplicants served as surrogates for the populace of Sansepolcro, the town in which Piero was born, lived, and died.

This essay interprets the *Misericordia Polyptych* as a reflection of the religious, civic, and artistic culture of fifteenth-century Sansepolcro. It begins by identifying the distinctive character of the town's spirituality, focussing on the confraternity of the *Misericordia* and its role within Sansepolcro. Next, it reconstructs the history of the commission and con-

siders Piero's relationship with his patrons, the Pichi family and the *Misericordia*. The discussion then turns to the style and iconography of the polyptych. The altarpiece is understood within the traditions of late medieval and early Renaissance art as well as the ritual devotions of the *Misericordia*. New proposals are offered on the sources of Piero's inspiration and the associations it may have evoked for those who prayed before it. As this paper hopes to demonstrate, the *Misericordia Polyptych* is important not only for what it reveals of Piero's style and relationship with his patrons, but for how it reflects the sacred and civic culture of Sansepolcro. The *Misericordia Polyptych* commemorates the *Misericordia's* dedication to the spiritual welfare of Sansepolcro and its special devotion to the Madonna of Mercy. Originally, the twenty-three panels comprising the polyptych were probably enclosed in a three-story frame of gilded wood, crowned with crocketed pinnacles and secured to the altar by buttresses.<sup>4</sup> The saints most venerated in Sansepolcro and by the confraternity are painted in the side panels: Saint Sebastian, protector against plague, whose victims had been tended in the hospital administered by the *Misericordia* since the early fourteenth century; John the Baptist, patron of Florence, which had ruled the town since 1441; John the Evangelist, patron of Sansepolcro;<sup>5</sup> and the recently canonized (1450) Franciscan preacher, Bernardino of Siena, a fervent advocate of the Madonna of Mercy's cult. The pilasters and pinnacles include the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Annunciate, who commemorate the *Misericordia's* special devotion to Mary; saints representing religious orders with congregations in Sansepolcro; and two local pilgrim saints, Arcanus and Giles, who in the tenth century named the town Sansepolcro in honor of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, the site of Christ's tomb and resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

The narrative scenes of the altarpiece exalt the town's identification with the Holy Sepulcher as they celebrate the confraternity. From the *Crucifixion* in the pinnacle to the five panels in the predella, they focus on the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. One panel depicts the Agony in the Garden, where Jesus prayed before his arrest on Maundy Thursday, a day of special significance to the confraternity. The adjacent scene portrays the Flagellation of Christ, the prototype for self-flagellation, the fundamental devotional exercise of the *Misericordia*. Three panels portray the Holy Sepulcher (Fig. 2), honoring the sacred site as well as Sansepolcro itself. The confraternity's insignia, the wreath-enclosed inscription MI[SERICORDI]A, is painted at the base of each pilaster, where it would be seen by the kneeling worshipper. It identifies the *Misericordia* as devotees of the Madonna of Mercy, commissioners of the altarpiece, administrators of the church and its contiguous hospital, and guardians of the community's spiritual welfare. Although the execution of this work was protracted over some fifteen years, Piero's personal investment in this work is certain to have been intense. The *Misericordia* was among the oldest confraternities



2. *Entombment of Christ*, detail of *Misericordia Polyptych* (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).

in Sansepolcro, one to which his own family had belonged since the late fourteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

The *Misericordia Polyptych* is an important point of departure for understanding Piero. Its wedding of traditional iconography with a monumental style and conception, its luminous description of form, and the spiritual reticence of each figure reflect a synthesis of past and present. While it may be his first documented altarpiece, it is by no means a youthful painting; rather, it reflects a personality already formed and distinctive. By the time the polyptych was commissioned, Piero had been active for well over a decade.<sup>8</sup> Time and fate have deprived us of his earliest works: the processional candlesticks for which he was paid in 1431; the banners he painted in 1436 for Pope Eugenius IV. The altarpiece for the church of San Francesco in Sansepolcro that he began in 1432 with his teacher, the impecunious Antonio d'Anghiari, was never executed: acknowledging that he owed Piero fifty-six florins in back wages, Antonio borrowed money from Piero's father to buy materials for the work but did not finish it.<sup>9</sup> In 1437, the commission was transferred to Sassetta; in 1444, one year before the *Misericordia* asked Piero to paint the polyptych, Sassetta's altarpiece (Fig. 3) was installed in the church of San Francesco.<sup>10</sup> Costing 510 florins, the magnificent *Sansepolcro Polyptych* was the costliest altarpiece ever commissioned in fifteenth-century Italy and a significant influence on Piero.

The *Misericordia Polyptych* is a resonant reflection of the spiritual and visual culture of Sansepolcro that helped shape Piero. As historians have recognized, the sacred and civic culture of Sansepolcro was distinctive in many respects.<sup>11</sup> One, as mentioned above, was the town's association with the tomb of Christ, commemorated by its name and dedication to the Holy Sepulcher; another was its importance as a site of pilgrimage. When Saints Arcanus and Giles returned to the town from the Holy Land, they brought with them priceless relics of the Passion that became objects of public veneration:<sup>12</sup> wood from the "most holy cross on which our Lord Jesus Christ was placed for the redemption of human sin;" drops of his blood; cloth from the shroud wrapping "the most sacred body of our Lord Jesus Christ after he was lowered from the cross;" fragments of "the stone

from the Holy Sepulcher” from which “the name of this land was taken;” “hair and milk of the blessed Virgin and stone from her tomb;” and relics of John the Evangelist, the town’s patron.<sup>13</sup> The display of these relics on September 1 – the jointly celebrated Feast of the Holy Sepulcher and of Saint Arcanus – was among the most important celebrations in the town, honored by processions, masses, and the giving of alms.<sup>14</sup> These relics were deemed so potent that Sansepolcro became an important destination for many pilgrims in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance.<sup>15</sup>

Another distinctive feature of Sansepolcro was the prominence of confraternities in its civic and sacred life.<sup>16</sup> Confraternities, which to this day survive in the town, were organizations of lay people who dedicated themselves to imitating Christ’s example through their philanthropic activities and religious devotions.<sup>17</sup> In Sansepolcro, there were seven confraternities that sang *laude* (songs of praise and mourning) to the Virgin, Christ, and saints.<sup>18</sup> These *laudesi* (laud-singing) companies were complemented by seven confraternities of *disciplinati* (flagellants). *Disciplinati* flagellated themselves in imitation of Jesus’s suffering before the Crucifixion, when he was stripped of his garments, spat upon, and whipped, thereby hoping to expiate the sins of humanity.<sup>19</sup> Confraternities often combined the devotional practices of both types.

As in other towns, the confraternities of Sansepolcro safeguarded pub-



3. Sassetta, Three Panels from the *Sansepolcro Polyptych*, Florence, Villa I Tatti, Berenson Collection (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).

lic welfare. They administered hospices for pilgrims, homes for the indigent, hospitals for the sick, and orphanages for foundlings. They distributed food and clothing to the needy, and they offered solace to prisoners. In so doing, they were following Jesus' example. Caring for the impoverished, tending the sick, comforting prisoners, and providing hospitality to strangers were among the seven acts of mercy prescribed by Jesus in Matthew 25:34–37 as prerequisites for salvation. Through their benevolence and performance of other pious activities – ritual flagellation, the singing of *laude*, attendance at weekly and special masses in confraternal chapels and churches – members were deemed, in their own eyes and those of the community, worthy of divine mercy at the Last Judgment. Even after death, their souls in purgatory were thought to accrue merit through the good works of surviving brethren. The guarantee of such benefits inspired many to become members or to make bequests to confraternities, especially in the wake of the Black Death (1348–50).

During the second half of the thirteenth century, confraternities, particularly those of flagellants, flourished in Sansepolcro and were central to its identity as a Christian community.<sup>20</sup> By the early fifteenth century, every adult male in Sansepolcro belonged to one of these sodalities, whose philanthropic activities touched the lives of each resident and pilgrim. Among the most venerable was the confraternity of Santa Maria della Misericordia. Although its original statutes are lost, other sources, including the revised statutes of 1570, provide valuable information about its history and special devotions.<sup>21</sup> The most important of these was flagellation, performed within the privacy of the confraternal oratory (chapel), both as imitation of Christ and penance for sinful behavior. The *disciplinati* also sang lauds in honor of the Virgin, as attested by a *laudario* (book of sacred songs) of twenty-five songs written in the vernacular, ascribed to the Misericordia and still preserved in Sansepolcro.<sup>22</sup> Dating from the late thirteenth century through 1449, the *laude* express the confraternity's fervent pleas for Mary's compassion and its hopes for salvation. Lauds written in 1449 invoke the intervention of Saint Sebastian, protector against plague, who would pray to "the Lord that this pestilence be lifted by your clemency and give us rest."<sup>23</sup>

Although the date that the Misericordia was founded is unknown, it had been firmly established by 1303, when a wealthy citizen of Sansepolcro bequeathed several houses to the confraternity. In the words of his testament, the houses were to serve "in perpetuity" as homes "of mercy [*miseri-cordia*] and hospices for the poor," where the indigent were to be given "lodging without rent."<sup>24</sup> As the earliest bequest to the Misericordia, this donation suggests that charity toward the poor was a special obligation of the confraternity from its inception. When the Black Death struck Sansepolcro, the group's mission was expanded to include the populace at large. In June 1348, a hospital, dedicated to Santa Maria della Misericordia, was established by

the confraternity against the northeast flank of the town's defensive walls to care for the plague stricken.<sup>25</sup> Nearly 200 wills from the second half of the fourteenth century record donations of money, property, and beds for the hospital, indicating its importance within the community.

Members of the *Misericordia* and those for whom they cared would worship in the church, also dedicated to Santa Maria della *Misericordia*, annexed to this hospital. Along with a garden (presumably for growing medicinal herbs), administrative quarters, and a private oratory for members, the hospital and church comprised what must have been an imposing complex.<sup>26</sup> It visibly signified the confraternity's stature within the community, serving as a refuge for citizens and pilgrims alike. The great complex, today abandoned and in ruins, was vital to maintaining the town's welfare in the Renaissance and well into the twentieth century. The charitable mission of the *Misericordia* was expanded as economic travails increased over the course of the fifteenth century.<sup>27</sup> The confraternity distributed alms and food to the poor and provided medicine to the sick. It succored foundlings, ministered to condemned prisoners, and provided lodging and food to indigent pilgrims who came to Sansepolcro. Perhaps a new altarpiece for its church was deemed essential to serve the *Misericordia* and its growing constituencies within the town.

The commission for the *Misericordia Polyptych* has a complex history that spanned nearly four decades.<sup>28</sup> It originated with the bequest of Urbano di Meo dei Pichi, whose family, one of the wealthiest in Sansepolcro, had been associated with the *Misericordia* from its foundation. On 4 September 1422, Urbano bequeathed sixty florins to the confraternity for "an ornamented altarpiece for the high altar" of its "church or oratory."<sup>29</sup> This evidently was conceived as a replacement for an earlier image, presumably a Madonna of Mercy. On 28 June 1428, a carpenter agreed to follow a drawing by the painter Ottaviano Nelli in preparing the wooden panels and frame. Two years later, the carpenter was paid for his labors and the unpainted panels were delivered to the *Misericordia*.<sup>30</sup> It is almost certain that Ottaviano Nelli never actually executed the altarpiece: on 8 February 1435, one of Urbano's heirs conditionally pledged "to make and paint a panel for the high altar of the oratory," an evident attempt to honor Urbano's still unfulfilled bequest.<sup>31</sup>

As the long, protracted history for this commission reveals, the Pichi were not always diligent in fulfilling their obligations. The funds promised for the altarpiece in 1435 were not received, despite repeated efforts by the *Misericordia*.<sup>32</sup> More than a decade was to pass before the commission was awarded to Piero; by that time, Ottaviano Nelli probably had died. Although Piero had achieved a measure of fame by 1445, family connections also must have influenced the decision to hire him. One of his brothers was an administrator of the *Misericordia*'s hospital in 1442, and another brother, the Camaldolite monk Don Francesco, was chaplain of

the confraternity in 1443.<sup>33</sup> While the Pichi remained involved with the work, the Misericordia assumed an increasingly active role in assuring its execution, even bringing litigation against the family to secure payment.<sup>34</sup>

The contract between Piero and the Misericordia, dated 11 June 1445, is quite specific.<sup>35</sup> Witnessed by eight officers of the confraternity, it required Piero to paint “the images, figures, and adornment . . . expressly detailed by the above Prior and council, or their successors in office.” The reference to the “successors” reserved the right of officers, who could change with later elections, to modify the program. The altarpiece was to be made “according to the size and type of the painting on wood . . . there at present,” an assurance that it would conform in these respects to the image it was to replace. Piero agreed that “no other painter [could] put his hand to the brush” and that the finest materials, “especially ultramarine,” were to be used, both common stipulations in artists’ contracts. He also was responsible for restoring any defects “of the wood or of the said Piero,” a prudent guarantee. Finally, the altarpiece, which was to be executed by “no other painter . . . [but] the said painter himself,” was to be delivered and installed within three years. For this, the artist would receive 150 florins, 50 as an initial “good faith” payment, with the balance to follow.

Although Piero was required by contract to finish the polyptych within three years, its completion appears to have been extended until 1462 or later. The commission, in fact, coincided with an increase in Piero’s celebrity outside of Sansepolcro. During these years, he worked in Ferrara, Loreto, Rimini, Rome, and probably Arezzo, returning home but infrequently.<sup>36</sup> He also agreed to execute other paintings in Sansepolcro, among them, an altarpiece for the church of Sant’Agostino, commissioned in October 1454, but probably not finished until 1469.<sup>37</sup> It is true as well that the Pichi were slow to pay him, not tendering all of the promised “good faith” money until 1450 or later.<sup>38</sup> Piero’s strategic response may have been to delay.

On 11 January 1454, the Pichi brought suit against the artist, demanding that he return to Sansepolcro by Lent to finish the altarpiece.<sup>39</sup> If the artist did not honor his obligation, he would forfeit the “good faith” payment. His father, who witnessed the issuance of this ultimatum, was required to reimburse the Pichi himself if Piero did not comply. The painter must have returned, for no further complaints are recorded. Numerous small disbursements to Piero are recorded over the years. The majority date from 1459 to 1462, suggesting that much of the work was painted at this time.<sup>40</sup> However, they do not equal the sum of 150 florins promised in the original contract. In the 1460s, the Misericordia was forced to intervene and took action against the Pichi to recover its money. The last known payment to Piero is dated January 1462.<sup>41</sup> In February 1467, he was still awaiting further compensation.<sup>42</sup>

Given these difficulties, Piero’s evident unwillingness to complete the altarpiece may well be understood. Although its main panels and pinnacles

are by him, the pilasters and predella (see Fig. 2) were executed by another painter following Piero's conception. Stylistic and suggestive historical evidence indicates that the artist was the Camaldolite monk and miniaturist Fra Giuliano Amedei.<sup>43</sup> During the late 1450s and early 1460s, he resided in the Badia (abbey) of Sansepolcro. Fra Giuliano was associated with the *Misericordia* by 1460, when he painted its insignia on a stone plaque, still on the church's facade,<sup>44</sup> that recorded a new papal indulgence promulgated on 1 July of that year "on behalf of our community and the men of our confraternity." The indulgence, which offered remission of punishment for sin, was offered to "every person, male or female, young or old, confessed and contrite," who gave alms to the church on the Feast of the Annunciation (25 March) and "each Saturday."<sup>45</sup>

Encouraging worship in the *Misericordia's* church, the indulgence would have provided further incentive to complete the predella and pilasters. The former showcased the town's dedication to the Holy Sepulcher and the confraternity's practice of flagellation, while the latter commemorated the saints most honored in the community. Although it has been argued that these components were afterthoughts,<sup>46</sup> this is unlikely: predellas or historiated panels were standard elements in buttressed altarpieces from this region.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, these didactic components, important conveyors of civic pride and confraternal identity, amplify the associations the altarpiece would have evoked.

Providing insight into the sometimes contentious relationship between the Renaissance artist and his client, the history of this protracted commission is important for another reason. It helps explain stylistic differences between the individual components, which were executed in response to the payments that the painter received. Technical evidence from the restoration in 1960–64 confirms that Piero executed the altarpiece in two distinct stages.<sup>48</sup> The central panel, the *Crucifixion*, the tiny panels of Saint Benedict and the Archangel Gabriel, and the saints on the left wing – Sebastian and John the Baptist – evidently were completed first. They were painted slowly and with care, accounting for their good state of preservation. By contrast, the saints on the right wing – John the Evangelist and Bernardino of Siena – and the panels of the Virgin Annunciate and Saint Francis above them were done somewhat hastily. The wood was less well primed, as shown by the heavy craquelure and faded colors, especially the green-tinged skin, where the *terra verde* (green underpaint) preparation shows through. Significantly, the saints on the right were painted on a single panel, rather than on two individual ones, as were their counterparts. This reflects a dramatic change in Piero's conception: the figures now inhabit a unified space in the manner of a *sacra conversazione*, the new single-panel type of altarpiece first developed in Florence that had begun to replace the archaic polyptych by 1440 or so.<sup>49</sup> The saints turn with greater ease and mobility toward the Madonna, implying more immediate access to her and, thus, their enhanced efficacy as intercessors.

The proposed sequence of execution is supported by stylistic evidence. The earlier figures reveal the influence of Masaccio, gleaned during Piero's sojourn in Florence, where he had joined Domenico Veneziano in painting the now lost choir frescoes of the church of Sant'Egidio in 1439. Saint Sebastian's intensely sculptural anatomy and stolid, awkward stance reinterpret the shivering nude in Masaccio's *Baptism of the Neophytes* (c. 1425) from the Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence. The youthful saint's nudity and ivory skin, pierced by arrows that draw rivulets of blood, contrast to the voluminous, heavy garments of the swarthy Baptist in the adjacent panel. The deep folds of the Baptist's scarlet mantle recall Piero's study of the apostles, especially Saint Peter, in the Brancacci Chapel *Tribute Money*. The *Crucifixion*, with the wailing Virgin in widow's weeds and grieving Evangelist, calls to mind the pinnacle of Masaccio's *Pisa Polyptych* (1426). Evoking a visceral response to Christ's death, so passionate a rendering would be suppressed in Piero's later work.

The central panel is one of the most famous images of Renaissance art. The statuesque Virgin, whose oval face, round features, and solemn expression reveal Domenico Veneziano's influence, suggests compassion yet majestic detachment, as befits the crowned Queen of Heaven. Those adoring her are not the poor who sought charity from the Misericordia, but rather the rich, as shown by their jewels, brocaded sleeves, and crimson garments, which required costly dyes to produce.<sup>50</sup> Space is gendered, with sexes segregated in accord with contemporary devotional practice. Although women are not mentioned in the Misericordia's statutes, their presence here suggests that they may have played an important role within the Misericordia as donors and caretakers in the hospital.<sup>51</sup> As shown by their hair and dress, they represent diverse marital status: the flowing locks of the maiden in front of the Madonna signify that she is unwed; the women beside her are married, as indicated by their tightly bound, upswept coiffures; and the old woman may be a widow, her hair covered by a black mantle.<sup>52</sup> Like the elderly gentlemen in the crimson overgown on the left, the woman in black is so distinctive in appearance as to suggest that she is a portrait. Presumably, both were members of the Pichi family, their patronage and consequent protection by the Madonna proclaimed by their presence here.

In contrast to these finely dressed figures and realistic portrayals, a confraternal brother of the Misericordia wears the black sackcloth robes that identify him as a member.<sup>53</sup> The hood, pierced with holes for his eyes, conceals his face: brethren wore hoods as they anonymously performed their charitable acts out of love of God and neighbor. The man crosses his arms over his chest, a gesture that priests used while celebrating Mass to signify their submission to God and to beg his grace.<sup>54</sup> This gesture may have served as a model for the brethren in their devotions as they prayed before the image, accepting the Lord's will and exhorting his mercy.

While the panel with the Madonna and her supplicants reflects an early moment in Piero's understanding of the altarpiece and its formal



4. Fra Angelico, *Cortona Triptych*, Cortona, Museo Diocesano (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).

constraints, the saints in the right panel reveal a more evolved conception. The unifying possibilities of the single-panel *sacra conversazione* are explored as the figures turn into the gold background, suggesting their mobility. In contrast to their counterparts on the left panel, the saints are idealized and elegantly posed. Their drapery is modelled with great softness, seen especially in the Evangelist's deep plum-colored mantle, which appears almost velvety in its texture. Certainly, the condition of these figures has compromised their appearance: contours that once were firm are blurred, and colors once bright are muted. Yet it seems clear that the suavity of these figures represent a later moment in Piero's style in which the influence of Masaccio, so strongly felt in the left panel, is a distant memory. The softly modelled contours, controlled gestures, and restraint of the figures suggest the influence of an altarpiece that Fra Angelico painted for the church of San Domenico in nearby Cortona (Fig. 4).<sup>55</sup> Despite the archaic frame and gold ground mandated by its provincial destination, the *Cortona Triptych* (c. 1436–38) similarly suggests a unified space and potential interaction between the figures, whose softly defined forms and sculptural gestures seem to be reflected in the later saints of Piero's altarpiece.

The influence of Sassetta's magnificent, double-sided *Sansepolcro Polyptych* (see Fig. 3), the commission begun by Piero and his teacher but later rescinded,<sup>56</sup> is evident as well. As mandated by its contract, Sassetta's

altarpiece was modelled after the *Resurrection Polyptych*, then in the church of the Badia of Sansepolcro, painted three-quarters of a century earlier by a follower of Pietro Lorenzetti.<sup>57</sup> The brilliantly colored and richly gilded *Sansepolcro Polyptych* was unequalled by any other fifteenth-century altarpiece for its decorative splendor as well as the dramatic immediacy of its narrative panels. There is no doubt that Piero studied this painting, the most famous in Sansepolcro; indeed, the *Misericordia Polyptych*, commissioned a year after Sassetta's altarpiece was installed in the church of San Francesco, may have been intended to rival it in scale and beauty. The lucidly balanced composition and pristine geometry of the Madonna of Mercy seem in part inspired by *Saint Francis in Ecstasy*,<sup>58</sup> and the saints on the right panel seem influenced by the slender proportions and suave rhythms of Sassetta's figures.

The *Misericordia Polyptych* reveals Piero's receptivity to innovation. At the same time, tradition played a significant role in its conception. As with the contract for Sassetta's altarpiece, the stipulation that the altarpiece resemble its predecessor suggests a reverence for earlier art that was fundamental to the spiritual and visual culture of Sansepolcro as it was in countless locales during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.<sup>59</sup> Since the fourteenth century, the town had turned to nearby Siena and Arezzo for its painting rather than Florence, from which it was more distant geographically. The aesthetic qualities of Sienese art predominated in Sansepolcro and influenced its conception of sacred art. While outmoded by Florentine standards of the mid-fifteenth century, the gold ground, polyptych format, and pinnacles of Piero's altarpiece were still much in vogue in Siena and Arezzo.

The influence of tradition also is evident in the style of the altarpiece, its novel aspects notwithstanding. A source for Piero that has not previously been investigated is the medieval wooden sculpture that for centuries had shaped the devotional and artistic sensibilities of Sansepolcro. Perhaps the town's most important sculpture was the *Volto Santo* in the church of the Pieve.<sup>60</sup> Although dating to the eighth or ninth century, it was devoutly believed to have been carved by Nicodemus, who helped to prepare Jesus' body for the tomb. This larger-than-lifesize image of the clothed, crucified Christ, thought to rival the famous *Volto Santo* of Lucca in its antiquity and miraculous powers, was the object of extraordinary reverence by townspeople and pilgrims alike. Equally venerated was a *Madonna and Child* (Berlin, Staatliche Museen: Fig. 5),<sup>61</sup> commissioned for the church of the Badia in Sansepolcro and carved by the priest Martinus in 1199. The sanctity of this image is proclaimed by the inscription on its base: "from the lap of the mother shineth the wisdom of the Father." This, too, was worshipped as a miraculous image. Both the *Volto Santo* and the *Madonna* were important precedents for the sculptural figures of the polyptych. Their imposing plasticity as well as their enclosed, simplified contours, the deeply undercut folds

of their drapery, and their austere expressions provided important models for the Virgin and saints, whose appearance is so statuesque. Indeed, the *Madonna*, who was suspended over the altar of the Badia and tilted toward the kneeling worshipper,<sup>62</sup> may have influenced Piero's conception of the Virgin, who seems to stand on an elevated plinth as if she were a sculpture seen from below.<sup>63</sup>

While both the *Volto Santo* and *Badia Madonna and Child* were venerated throughout Sansepolcro, another sculpture played a significant role in the devotional life of the *Misericordia* itself. This was a now lost *Madonna*, almost certainly a statue of the *Madonna of Mercy*, mentioned in documents of the 1430s and employed in the confraternity's rituals. The documents record payments for processional candles on the Feast of the Annunciation and on Maundy Thursday when the brethren would "go to undress the *Madonna*:"<sup>64</sup> adorned with jewels, crowns, or special robes, holy statues were carried in public processions by confraternities, and later "undressed" – that is, divested of ceremonial finery and cloaked in black mourning – when the members returned to the oratory to begin their private devotions.<sup>65</sup> On Maundy Thursday, when the *Madonna* was "undressed," flagellant confraternities whipped themselves to commemorate the foot-washing of the apostles, the Last Supper, and the agony in the garden, when Jesus' sweat "became . . . like blood" (Luke 22:44).<sup>66</sup> It is hypothesized that the lost *Madonna* may have provided a sculptural precedent for Piero, for it was important to the group's collective rituals.

Of all Piero's debts to the past, the most crucial was his portrayal of the



5. Presbyter Martinus, Sculpture of *Madonna and Child*, Berlin, Staatliche Museen (Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz Skulpturensammlung).

Madonna sheltering the devout beneath her mantle to signify her merciful intercession. The iconography of the Madonna of Mercy is of great antiquity.<sup>67</sup> It was inspired by innumerable literary and liturgical sources: Byzantine hymns that beseech Mary, “Save us, Queen, with the veil of thy mercy;” the “*Salve regina misericordiae*” (“Save us, Queen of mercy”), intoned in the Latin liturgy; Cistercian visionary literature, in which the Virgin protected monks under her mantle so they could dwell eternally “in celestial glory.” Lauds sung by the laity, most notably in confraternities, movingly implore Mary’s intercession with her son while they praise her glory as Queen of Heaven and Mother of God. By the mid-thirteenth century, such texts had begun to be translated into compelling images that appeared in manuscripts, frescoes, processional banners, and altarpieces. The iconography was popular among communal groups, especially confraternities. By the 1260s, the oldest confraternity in Rome, the “*Raccomandati della Vergine*” (Devotees of the Virgin), was given the Madonna of Mercy as its patron, representing her on its processional banner.<sup>68</sup>

Piero’s Madonna emerges from the rich visual legacy that had flourished in Tuscany since the early Trecento, especially in Siena and Arezzo. In Siena, artists from Duccio through Vecchietta portrayed the Madonna of Mercy in manuscripts, panel paintings, and fresco. The work that provides most insight into the *Misericordia Polyptych* is the *Madonna della Misericordia*, commissioned in 1444 from Domenico di Bartolo for the hospital chapel of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena.<sup>69</sup> The now detached fresco illuminates the expectations that worshippers might have brought to Piero’s altarpiece and suggests the intensity of Marian devotion in the mid-fifteenth century.

Santa Maria della Scala functioned as a charitable institution that lodged pilgrims and provided care for the indigent and infirm, as did the hospital of the Misericordia.<sup>70</sup> The fresco depicts the seated Virgin and her Child with a multitude of the devout kneeling beneath her mantle, which is parted by angels. The scroll near the Virgin’s head is inscribed with a plea to Christ: “O my sweet son, look upon this people who hasten beneath the mantle of she who is their advocate and you, their salvation, and for the love I bear grant them all good things, and above all your guidance.”<sup>71</sup> Below an inscription proclaims: “Here is an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Under your mantle the Christian populace is protected.” Similar hopes for the Virgin’s advocacy and protection are likely to have been held by worshippers in the hospital church of the Misericordia. Whether donors or paupers, residents or pilgrims, members of the confraternity or beneficiaries of its charity, all were potential recipients of her mercy and of redemption through her son.

The Madonna della Misericordia was also a popular theme in Arezzo. Numerous works chronicle the town’s devotion to the Madonna of Mercy in the early Renaissance. Paintings by Spinello Aretino and Parri Spinelli



6. Parri Spinelli, *Madonna della Misericordia*, Arezzo, Santa Maria delle Grazie (After R. van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting* [The Hague, 1927], p. 9, fig. 144).

became objects of major cults, inspiring great outpourings of public devotion.<sup>72</sup> Bernardo Rossellino's relief of the *Madonna of Mercy with Saints Lorentinus and Pergentinus* above the portal of the Palazzo di Fraternità di Santa Maria della Misericordia identified the residence of a flagellant confraternity dedicated to philanthropy, especially in times of plague.<sup>73</sup> In Piero's day, the most venerated image may have been Parri Spinelli's *Madonna della Misericordia*, commissioned by San Bernardino of Siena for the town's oratory of Santa Maria delle Grazie and painted around 1445 (Fig. 6).<sup>74</sup> The Virgin is framed by angels swinging censers for burning fragrant incense, sanctifying the image and the altar. She beholds the worshipper as she protects multitudes of the faithful – popes, kings, the populace of Arezzo – beneath her cloak. So miraculous was this painting deemed that a new church was erected to enshrine it.

Although emerging from this rich tradition, Piero's altarpiece departs significantly from these works. As if to emphasize the Madonna's humanity, there are no angels parting her cloak or swinging censers. Rather than regarding the worshipper directly as do many images of the Madonna of

Mercy, she lowers her gaze to her devotees, creating an intimate bond between them. In contrast to the multitudes huddling beneath the Virgin's mantle in earlier paintings, only a privileged few kneel before her, suggesting the selectivity of her grace yet leaving room for the devout who might join them. Finally, Piero projects the perspective of the panel from the viewpoint of the kneeling worshipper as if Mary were a sculpture, perhaps alluding to the statue of the Madonna in the Badia or in the Misericordia's oratory. Piero's interpretation of this traditional iconography is distinctive. It reflects a clarity and economy of means that is found in every one of his paintings.

The *Misericordia Polyptych* addressed the needs of the varied constituencies who worshipped in the church of Santa Maria della Misericordia. It reinforced communal pride, honoring the saints whose preservation of Sansepolcro's welfare was invoked in civic statutes (1441): John the Baptist, "head and protector of the magnificent and illustrious people and community of Florence," and John the Evangelist, "head, protector, and governor of the commune and people" of Sansepolcro.<sup>75</sup> Its predella proclaimed the town's association with the tomb of Christ and alluded to the relics venerated in its churches, most notably, fragments of stone from the Holy Sepulcher. Recipients of the Misericordia's charity could pray before the image of the Madonna and imagine themselves among the devout beneath her cloak; donors of alms would receive indulgences for their generosity and be assured of her clemency. In times of plague, as one of the Misericordia's lauds implores, the populace might ask Mary to "take away bitter death and pestilence," or "with tears . . . pray" to Saint Sebastian for his intercession.<sup>76</sup>

Members of the Misericordia had a more resonant relationship with the image. The Madonna of Mercy was their patroness, inspiring their many acts of philanthropy, their self-flagellation, their singing of lauds. Piero's Madonna was not thought to have been a mere simulacrum or image, but the Virgin herself, honored by the candles lit before her and moved by their prayers. As they implored her in their lauds, the Virgin was the source of mercy:

Mercy [Misericordia], we are crying out,  
 Mercy, do not abandon us,  
 Mercy to God, we implore you,  
 Mercy to the sinner.<sup>77</sup>

A fifteenth-century painting is the repository and record of innumerable social relationships.<sup>78</sup> In the case of the *Misericordia Polyptych*, these relationships are complex. The history of the commission reveals the often antagonistic dealings between patron and artist. These account for the protracted execution and the different style of the altarpiece's components. In every element, the polyptych encodes the dedication of the

Misericordia to the Madonna of Mercy and to the welfare of Sansepolcro, whose unique culture – as namesake and commemoration of the Holy Sepulcher, as destination of pilgrims – was safeguarded by its confraternities. In its style, the altarpiece reflects the confluence of innovation and local artistic and iconographic tradition. While the *Misericordia Polyptych*, as the earliest surviving work by Piero, is crucial to our understanding of his stylistic formation, it is equally important to our appreciation of the artistic and spiritual milieu from which he emerged.