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**The resurrection itself appears nowhere in the Gospels, but Piero della Francesca creatively portrays the event as a timeless truth, condensed to its essentials.**

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# The Power of the Resurrection

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

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The commanding figure of the Risen Christ is one of the most enduring images of Christian victory in Western art.<sup>1</sup> Piero della Francesca's fresco heightens the drama of the subject by juxtaposing Christ's perfectly proportioned body, which stands triumphantly emerging from the tomb (presented here as a classical sarcophagus) in the center of the composition, with the four guards slumped at his feet in the foreground. On the left side of Christ the trees in the background are stark and dead, awaiting rebirth, while those on the right are flourishing, symbolizing the rebirth of humanity.

The composition of the painting demonstrates why Piero is considered a master of perspective—it is balanced and symmetrical, framed by Corinthian columns on a classical portico (which were trimmed when the fresco was moved to its current location). Piero chose a viewpoint corresponding to the viewer's position and depicted the architectural frame at a sharp angle from below.<sup>2</sup> While working in Florence during the 1430s, Piero was sure to have encountered the perspectival studies of the artists Masaccio (1401-1428) and Brunelleschi (1377-1446) as well as the writings of Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), but he also wrote his own books on theory and perspective, emphasizing geometry, volume, space, and form.

Piero painted *The Resurrection of Christ* fresco during the middle of the fifteenth century for the Sala dei Conservatori (official chambers of government) in his hometown of Borgo San Sepolcro. As the art historian Marilyn Lavin has noted, Christ's placement in the commune's council hall "both protects the judge and purifies the judged."<sup>3</sup> This civic symbolism combined with the city's namesake, the Holy Sepulcher, further enhances the power of this image.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1 Frank Dabell and J.V. Field, "Piero della Francesca," Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online (Oxford University Press), [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T067465](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T067465) (accessed December 12, 2013).

2 Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2014), 466.

3 Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *Piero della Francesca* (London, UK: Phaidon, 2002), 244.

4 The town takes its name from the presence of two relics of the Holy Sepulcher carried by two pilgrims in the ninth century.