

Two dreams by Piero della Francesca

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Abstract

The author studies the contribution that emerges from Piero's dream vision. He notes the relationship doctor/patient is replaced by the painter/viewer one: the dream isn't the problem but the solution, it isn't a puzzle that needs to be reconstructed piece by piece, but rather a global narration governed by the painter/viewer's eye, controlled by the laws of perspective by which each object is placed in its own proper spatial plane.

Key words: painting, dream, perspective, narration

Franco Moretti, Literature Historian at Stanford University, recently pointed out that he used the oxymoron "a moderate passion", definition previously created by the economist Hirschmann, to illustrate the bourgeois' class trade ethics during the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

Two centuries earlier, the same oxymoron "a moderate passion" was at the basis of the artistic expression of Piero della Francesca, one of Italy's greatest painters.

In this contribution two representations of this artistic expression are going to be analyzed: Constantine's Dream found in Arezzo and The Resurrection in Borgo San Sepolcro. During the second half of the fifteenth century, Piero is busy at work in Arezzo's San Francesco Church on his fresco cycle depicting the Legend of the True Cross. Here he placed his great Constantine's Dream (3,29 meters X 1,90).

A group of five figures is represented in this scene: in the central composition, the Emperor is fast asleep in the tent, while at his feet a watchful body servant is in quiet conversation with the spectator. To the left and to the right, two soldiers, one seen from the rear, the other from the front, define the borders of the scene illuminated by the soaring angel. It's the break of dawn.

During the making of his Arezzo cycle, Piero painted another fresco but this time in Borgo San Sepolcro, The Resurrection (2,25 meters X 2,00).

Also here a group of five figures is represented in the scene: the first lights of dawn illuminate the Savior rising from his Sepulchre, beneath him two soldiers are deep asleep. On one side of the Christ the trees are bare, on the other they're in full springtime bloom.

What are the feelings Piero stirs in us with these two works? The Divine messenger points for the emperor to see – the latter surrounded by those who are present and absent at the same time – to a cross and *in hoc signo vinces*. Christ rises and with him Nature is reborn while his guardians continue to sleep.

These two scenes have in common both the eventfulness of the divine light of the messenger's swift appearance and of Christ's sudden rising from the sepulchre as a source of light, and the immobility of the bystanders. Just like the two soldiers who

stand guard in the Dream - similar to the two greyhound dogs of the Rimini fresco who silently communicate - and the soldier in the Resurrection who sleeps, keeping himself from partaking to the event, covering his eyes and his face.

Piero tells us that these two crucial events for mankind, Christ's resurrection and Constantine's foretelling of Massenzio's defeat, should be considered and interpreted as serene, peaceful moments, lacking any kind of external drama.

De te fabula narratur. The great moments of history aren't recognized as being so by those who live them, because only with time will their revolutionary impact be revealed.

Constantine dreams the angel who predicts his victory: we can see him appear at the extreme top of the tent, clearly apart from the scene that is taking place beneath; the Christ rises from the sepulchre and beneath him the four other figures are fast asleep. In both frescoes reality is distinctly separated from the slumber/reverie: it's a different dimension that isn't a direct protraction of reality but just a clear separation of its levels.

The angel is the source of light, of the same light that the body of Christ the Savior diffuses.

And all this happens in stillness and silence: because for Piero this is the only way for the message and for the resurrection to be able to carry the weight of History. Similar to the Dream that is placed in that moment in which the night colours change into dawn, the Resurrection is also alike to the moment in which Nature goes from its winter awaiting to its springtime awakening.

Piero is a painter who looks backwards, the world he narrates – its courts; its emperors, its Condottieri – is an ancient world. Twenty-five years later, Antonello da Messina will describe other characters, other realities, closer to the developments of Italian society just before the discovery of the Americas.

However, it's by looking backwards that Piero was able to read inside the reality of the slumber/reverie, anticipating discoveries that will take place much later.

"God is in the details" This is how Carlo Ginzburg, borrowing directly from Aby Warburg, in 1979 starts his essay "Clues: Roots of an evidential paradigm" - in Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, myths, and the historical method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 96-125. - noticing a similarity between Giovanni Morelli's method and that of both Sherlock Holmes and Sigmund Freud. In all three of these cases, even infinitely minute traces offer the possibility of grasping an even deeper reality that otherwise would be intangible. Traces: more precisely, symptoms (in Freud's case), clues (in Sherlock Holmes' case), pictorial details (in Giovanni Morelli's case).

Their common medical background is for Carlo Ginzburg, the reason of the similarity of their methods.

But it's not only about biographical coincidences. Towards the end of the nineteenth century – and more precisely between 1870 and 1880 – an evidential paradigm clearly imbued in semiotics started to manifest itself. But its origins were much more ancient. (*ibidem*)

So let's analyze how four centuries before, Piero della Francesca, with his Arezzo and Borgo San Sepolcro Dreams, made his contribution to this analytical method identified by Carlo Ginzburg in 1979. In this context the Dream constitutes a symptom and underlines a problem: and only by analyzing its traces will we be able to reach a conclusion. In final analysis it's a puzzle that has to be constituted again by using the relationship doctor/patient.

The contribution that emerges from Piero's dream vision is completely different.

First of all, the relationship doctor/patient is replaced by the painter/viewer one. Furthermore, the dream isn't the problem but the solution, it isn't a puzzle that needs to be reconstructed piece by piece, but rather a global narration governed by the painter/viewer's eye, controlled by the laws of perspective by which each object is placed in its own proper spatial plane.

There's an eye that views and organizes the space and an eye that views the organized space.

This is where the moderate passion that makes up the emotional charge of Piero's art can be found as it can also be found in his two Dreams.

For Carlo Ginzburg these symptoms (Freud), clues (Holmes), and details (Morelli) make up the nineteenth century's contribution to modern science and to the better understanding of mankind.

The Laws of perspective are Piero's legacy, his bequeath and challenge that the twentieth century – the century of relativism and of the avant-gardes – has clearly understood. Piero is an ancient painter who opens the doors to the modern, but also a classical painter because, like Picasso, he finds the solutions.

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