

Exhibitions

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Russia moves heaven and earth for Piero

The State Hermitage Museum brings together half of Piero della Francesca's movable works for the largest ever show of the Renaissance master

RENAISSANCE

ST PETERSBURG. Giorgio Vasari, writing in his *Lives of the Artists* of 1550, lamented how Piero della Francesca (around 1415/20-92) had the "truly unhappy" fate of being "robbed of the honour that is due to his labours". Many of the early Renaissance painter's "beautiful pictures" were destroyed in the wars of Urbino, the renovation of Ferrara's ducal palace and the redecoration (by Raphael) of the papal apartments in Rome. Indeed, his esteemed reputation lapsed for several centuries.

Rediscovered in the mid-1800s by British tastemakers and then a succession of Modern artists (Degas and Balthus both made pilgrimages to the frescoes in the Basilica di San Francesco in Arezzo), Piero seems now to have fulfilled Vasari's belief that "time, who is called the father of truth, sooner or later makes manifest the real state of things". The few surviving port-

"We are trying to give people a multifaceted idea of him as an artist"

able works he made have become fixtures at the European and US museums that own them, and rarely travel.

With just 11 pieces, the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg is about to stage the biggest exhibition of Piero della Francesca's work ever undertaken, says the curator, Irina Artemieva. A pair of focused displays at New York's Frick Collection in 2013 and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2014 comprised seven and four works respectively. The 2007 exhibition on Piero and the Italian courts in Arezzo mustered six paintings by the master, although the museum had the advantage of proximity to the immovable



Piero's San Nicola da Tolentino (1454-69, above) and the Sant'Antonio panel (1467-69)



frescoes in the town's own basilica, as well as in Monterchi and Sansepolcro, Piero's Tuscan birthplace.

"In the world, there are about 20 works that could theoretically be moved," Artemieva says. Such scarcity meant that "all the negotiations were extremely complicated" for loans to the Hermitage, which has no Piero works in its collection. The Uffizi in Florence turned down a request for its famous diptych of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino for conservation reasons. After heated political discussion in Sansepolcro over the *Madonna della Misericordia* polyptych, "we failed to get it at the last moment", Artemieva says. However, two fresco fragments will travel from the Museo Civico in Sansepolcro, San Giuliano (around 1455) and San Ludovico (1460).

The loan of the Annunciation panel of the Sant'Antonio polyptych (1467-69) from the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria in Perugia was confirmed as recently as early November. The Annunciation will be the exhibition's centrepiece, Artemieva says, "because it is a nucleus of all [Piero's] innovations – the architecture in his compositions and his achievements in perspective".

Arranged chronologically in one of the state rooms of the Winter Palace, the show takes its starting point from a *Madonna and Child* (around 1435) that was believed



The artist's San Ludovico (1460) is on loan from the Museo Civico in Sansepolcro

lost before it resurfaced in a Chilean private collection in 2007. There will be portraits in profile of Sigismondo Malatesta (around 1450) from the Louvre and a boy, possibly Guidobaldo Montefeltro (around 1483), from the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid. The attribution of the latter work to Piero has been debated in the past; however, Artemieva says the show includes only "his absolutely authentic works, without any suspicion of the participation of his workshop".

Three panels from the Sant'Agostino altarpiece (around 1465), normally scattered between London, Lisbon and Milan, will be reunited. Testament to the Hermitage's ongoing collaboration with Italian institutions, it has also secured San Girolamo e un devoto (around 1460-64) from the Accademia in Venice, and Urbino's *Madonna di Senigallia* (1470-80).

In the absence of Piero's celebrated but immobile frescoes, the museum

will screen a new film about them by Italy's state broadcaster, RAI. The exhibition will also be a rare outing for four manuscripts written by Piero, held at different Italian archives, which visitors will be able to "follow page by page" on digital screens, Artemieva says.

While Piero has mythical status in Anglo-American and Italian scholarship, the Hermitage hopes the show will raise his profile in Russia. "People know the work of the Italian Renaissance, but Piero della Francesca is still quite an obscure figure for our public," Artemieva says. "We are trying to give people a multifaceted idea of him as an artist."

The show is sponsored by the Russian state oil company Rosneft and the Italian bank Intesa Sanpaolo.

Hannah McGivern

• Piero della Francesca, State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 6 December-11 March 2019

THE YEAR IN EXHIBITIONS

Reuniting the great collections

In 2018, curators turned into sleuths to track down some of history's most important collections for several once-in-a-lifetime exhibitions

A TREASONOUS KING'S beheading, a guillotining during the French Revolution and seizure following a conviction for embezzlement have all led to some of history's greatest collections being sold and dispersed. In 2018, these illustrious collections and more have been reunited for some of the best shows of the year. Curators turned into sleuths as they tracked down treasures that once belonged to collectors of exquisite taste and unimaginable riches, but whose drive to hoard was not always unconnected to their eventual downfalls.

At London's Royal Academy of Arts (RA) in January, more than 100 works were reunited for **Charles I: King and Collector**, in what was "one of the greatest feats of curation of modern times", according to

the art historian Bendor Grosvenor. The exhibition brought together highlights from Charles I's (1600-49) collection, perhaps the most important ever amassed by an individual in the UK. The show included works by Renaissance masters including Titian and Mantegna, as well as artists commissioned by Charles, most notably his court painter Anthony van Dyck. "The most important painting in the exhibition in our opinion, and the most complex loan to secure, was Van Dyck's *Charles I in the Hunting Field* from the Louvre," says the exhibition's co-curator Per Rumberg. The work returned to the UK for the first time since it was sold along with the rest of the collection in the so-called Commonwealth Sale following Charles I's beheading for treason.

Many of the works that remained in the UK after the sale were recovered by his son and heir Charles II (1630-85) following the Restoration in 1660. Charles II's own collection – more ostentatious than his father's – was the focus of **Charles II: Art and Power** at the Queen's Gallery in London earlier this year, which has now travelled to the Queen's Gallery in Edinburgh (until 2 June 2019).

One of the works recovered by Charles II, which was in the RA show, was Orazio Gentileschi's *The Finding of Moses* (around 1630-33). This huge painting would eventually end up in another notable collection belonging



A bust by Jean-Louis Lemoyne of Philippe II, Duke of Orléans, whose collection is on show in New Orleans

to Philippe II, Duke of Orléans (1674-1723), which was also reunited this year for **The Orléans Collection** at the New Orleans Museum of Art (until 27 January 2019). The show of 36 works includes pieces by Old Masters such as Rubens and Rembrandt. But, according to the exhibition's curator Vanessa Schmid, some of the most satisfying loans secured were Alessandro Allori's *Venus Disarming Cupid* (around 1570), which is rarely lent partly because it is on wood panel and therefore "less likely to be approved for travel", and Andrea del Sarto's newly restored *Leda and the Swan*, "which has been in storage since 1865".

The Orléans collection outlived Philippe II but was sold off in 1792 by his descendent Louis Philippe II, a year before he was guillotined during the French Revolution; the works were shortly thereafter dispersed in famous London sales. Collectors themselves can sometimes

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