AH311 PIERO’S INVERSIONS:
Piero della Francesca and the Philosophy of Painting

Module: Artists, Genres, Movements
Instructor: Peter Hajnal
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Office hours: Fridays 15:00-16:30 or by appointment
Course times: Tue 13:30-15:00, Fri 13:30-15:00
Location: P98 Seminar Room 3

COURSE DESCRIPTION

One of the truly legendary works of the Italian Renaissance, the radiant and enigmatic six main panels and adjoining “lesser” episodes of Piero della Francesca’s Legend of the True Cross fresco cycle in the Church of San Francesco in Arezzo (finished c. 1459) constitute a virtual encyclopedia of the artistic ideals of the Quattrocento as codified by Alberti in On Painting (1435). The “mathematical” painter par excellence, Piero follows Albertian rules and norms while also interpreting and questioning them by various compositional and other visual means. The frescoes are saturated with unexpected mirroring, visual paradoxes and straightforward puzzles affecting the roles, gestures, and features of characters. These elements are in turn embedded in a system of allusions, cross references, as well as ruptures and discontinuities in all possible dimensions (vertical, horizontal, temporal, spatial, narrative, compositional) sometimes within the same painting, sometimes across different frescoes and even involving Piero’s works from other commissions. What emerges upon careful close reading of the numerous levels of meaning in Piero’s cycle is no less than a philosophy of painting that is at the same time a vision of art and humanity of Shakespearean complexity, making Piero’s work unrivalled not only in the Quattrocento, but possibly in all of art.

The course aims to introduce students to a philosophically minded approach to the art of the Italian Quattrocento relying centrally on the oeuvre of Piero.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance
Attendance is required at all classes. Being late can ruin a class.
More than two absences (that is absences from two sessions of 90 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the grade for the course.

**Assessment and Writing Assignments**
Assessment for this course will be based on in class presentations, preparation and participation, and writing.

This is a discussion based class. Lack of preparation or participation is not better than being absent from class altogether.

Students will write one mid term and one final paper. Tutorials will be offered both before and after the papers are due. Students will also be required to hold at least two presentations.

The mid term paper is due on March 15, 2015.
The final paper is due on May 17, 2015.
Each paper should be 5000 words long.

**Policy on Late Submission of Papers**
As the Student Handbook states, essays that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline and cannot receive a grade of higher than C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.

**Grade Breakdown**
The final grade for this course is based on the following breakdown:

- Presentations: 20%
- Participation: 30%
- Essays: 50%

**SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND CLASSES**

**WEEK 1:** INTRODUCTION: The Legend as a Philosophy of Painting
Stanley Cavell: *The World Viewed* (selections)
Jacobus de Voragine: *The Finding of the Holy Cross*

**WEEK 2:** Piero and Alberti I. Piero as Perspectivist
Giorgio Vasari: *Life of Piero della Francesca*

**WEEK 3:** Piero and Alberti II. Piero’s “Ethics”
WEEK 4: Piero and Alberti III. Storytelling and Narrative
Leon Battista Alberti: *On Painting* (cont.)
Antonio di Tuccio Manetti: *Fatso the Carpenter*
Boccaccio: *The Story of Andreuccio da Perugia* (from *The Decameron*)

WEEK 5: Piero’s Mathematics I.: The Mathematical Experience
Plato: *Timaeus* (entire text)
Plato: *The Republic* (selections)
Aldous Huxley: *Young Archimedes* (1924)

WEEK 6: Piero’s Mathematics II.: Infinity
Erwin Panofsky: *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (selections)
*The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* (selections)
Ernst Cassirer: *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (selections)

WEEK 7: Piero and Art history
Giorgio Vasari: Forewords (from *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*)
David Carrier: *Piero della Francesca and his Interpreters: Is there Progress in Art History?*

WEEK 8: Piero in Context: Culture and History
Michael Baxandall: *Painting and Experience in 15th Century Italy* (selections)
Carlo Ginzburg: *The Enigma of Piero* (selections)
Michel de Montaigne: *On Experience*

WEEK 9: Piero and the Artisans
Leonardo Bruni: *The Ciompi Rebellion* (from *Florentine Histories*)
J.P. Sartre: *The Captive of Venice* (selections)

WEEK 10: Piero’s Humanism
Thomas Mann: *Fiorenza*
Friedrich Schiller: *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (selections)

WEEK 11: Piero and the Body
Maurice Merleau Ponty: *Eye and Mind*

WEEK 12: Piero on Film: The Filmic Medium and Quattrocento Painting
Stanley Cavell: *The World Viewed* (selections)
*Nostalgia* (dir. Andrei Tarkovsky)

WEEK 13: Piero and Abstraction
Wilhelm Worringer: *Abstraction and Empathy* (selections)

**WEEK 14**
TBA  
[Placeholder for possible excursion to Piero Trail]

**WEEK 15**
NO CLASSES

**BOOKS AND READERS**

Readings will be distributed in photocopies as well as electronically (on the shared drive). Images studied in class will also be made available in the class folder on the shared drive. Many of the books used for this course are available from the library, and students are required to secure a copy on their own.