

# A Shift in Vision

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One of the most exciting things I learned in art school was how to see “negative space.” A drawing professor introduced it to his beginning class by asking us to shift our habit of vision. For weeks we had been drawing the contours of objects in a still life. He had not allowed us even to look down at the paper while our eyes traced along the shapes of the pitcher, the lemons, the pile of wooden blocks, and our soft-lead pencils followed. Then one day he rearranged the still life and said, “Now. Do not draw the objects at all. Draw the spaces between them. Only the spaces.”

At first, I felt as clumsy as if the delicate dance between hand and eye had turned inside out. Yet it didn’t take long to discover that empty spaces had their own rhythms, their own shapes and proportions, their own grace. At the end of class that day, I leaned back to look at my pencil lines and was shocked to find not only the spaces I’d been so intently drawing, but also the bottle, lemons, pitcher, and blocks. They were all there—though they hadn’t been the point—as a result of drawing empty space.

I found this thrilling. A marvelous secret had revealed itself. I went around trying to see it everywhere, focusing on the emptiness between tables and chairs, between people, buildings, tree trunks, branches. The campus was still full of students and trees, but the world blossomed with a hidden richness. It had been there all along, only not known to me before, never consciously seen.

Of course working with negative space is a necessary skill for any artist; we can’t leave the empty spaces out of the whole we perceive, or the whole we try to create. As a student I would soon realize how this new awareness improved all my own drawing and painting, but even beyond that, it seemed related to everything. Negative space was essential to things being in relationship with everything else, essential to any breathing room, and to any motion through the world.

Two years later a different kind of space opened up—a valley of discouragement and despair. I fell right in. There were so many other skills to develop in art school, harsh critiques to endure, artistic growing pains, confusion and self-doubt. Other students, no older than I, stood before their huge paintings and seemed to know what they were doing. But nothing was going well in my own work. What was it all for? Wasn’t there some larger meaning, some greater purpose to find, to reach for in art, something that no one seemed to be talking about? No matter how many late nights I spent perched on a stool gazing into a mess of colors on a canvas, it seemed that the technical skills of painting were not, in themselves, enough. Not nearly enough. I felt lost in a secret struggle, reaching for something far beyond my grasp.

Then one hot day, I climbed on a bus with my summer classmates, headed out on a field trip. Everyone seemed lit up by a day’s vacation from the studios, but I slumped in my seat, watching barns and trees and stone fences slide by, dragging my own despondency along. We came to Williamstown, Massachusetts, and a small museum I hadn’t heard of, The

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. With no idea what to expect, I stumbled out of the bus with the others and went inside.

Cool, quiet rooms absorbed our busload of voices. Each of us began the more silent wandering one does in a museum, some proceeding along a wall in sequence, moving from one work of art to the next, others surveying the room first for whatever caught their eyes. From across the shining floor in the first room, one painting seemed to pull me. I walked slowly toward it.

Piero della Francesca, *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels*, c.1460–70.

I felt a great stillness. The Madonna filled the painting like a mountain, and the baby perched on her knee, so pale in his nakedness against the midnight of her robe, seemed to float there. He was reaching for a single small rose his mother held out to him. Around them, four figures stood like columns, as if to guard a sacred center. The artist had given only glimpses of their wings.

I would have no memory of how long I stood there, held in the atmosphere of that image. Nothing moved but my own vision, following masses of color, lines of composition. I had learned that diagonals and curves have a power of seeming motion, so that what is still may seem to turn, dive, or even soar. But Piero della Francesca had used these powers with a masterful restraint. He led my eye along subtle paths to every part of the painting, along a sleeve or a fold of robe or a carved lintel seen in perspective in the background. He invited my eye to keep moving, but also to rest along the way, settle as long as I liked on a face, a hand, a small gem fastening the Madonna's robe. He had painted every detail with equal grace, no extravagance. I stepped closer, then backed away for a larger view of the whole, then close again. There was no chink anywhere in the pervading stillness. The painting was charged with a presence I felt as actively serene.

Fellow students were moving on to other rooms. I heard their footsteps, but didn't want to leave the Piero yet. So I stayed in that room, and was soon alone with the angel in red who stood in the right side of the painting, his face turned to look out at the viewer. The angel was pointing a finger as if to say, "Look. Look there. Look again."

My eye had no choice but to follow the invisible line from the angel's finger. It led me to the heart of the painting. There, silhouetted against the night of his mother's robe were the baby's hands reaching out for the rose. The center of the painting wasn't the flower itself, but those small reaching hands. I stepped closer. Now it wasn't the hands, or the rose, that commanded my attention. It was the negative space between them. As I let my vision shift, the space itself seemed so alive it began to vibrate.

I looked away, up to the Madonna's face. Her eyes were unwavering. With a majestic calm she gazed downward to where she held the flower—close enough to invite her baby to touch it, and just far enough away that he had to reach.

What precision! The artist had made an eternal moment of that distance. He had filled it with a tension I could both see and feel. He seemed to have calibrated everything in the painting for this one space, as deep and blue and full of mystery as the Madonna's robe.

When Piero della Francesca laid his brushes down and stepped back to view his finished painting—in oil, possibly with some tempera on panel, as the wall label said—he could not have imagined it would someday end up in a small museum in a place called Massachusetts. He died in 1492. His burial was recorded the very day Columbus set foot in the New World. By that time Piero had accomplished many fine panel paintings and frescoes in Italy, where he was born and lived. But in his lifetime he was known more as

a mathematician than as a painter. He wrote treatises on arithmetic and solid geometry, as well as a clear and groundbreaking work on the laws of perspective. Leonardo da Vinci, among other artists of the Renaissance, studied that book closely, as it was written especially for the use of fellow painters.

Perhaps Piero's own passion for the elegance of mathematical truth is what gave his paintings the calm and aloof sense of abstraction that would later appeal to many of us in the twentieth and now twenty-first century. He could not possibly have known how different the world would become, or what other forms of art would evolve over those five hundred years and more. Or that a young art student would someday stand in front of his *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels*, gazing, rapt, finding hope in the small, empty space he had shaped with such precision and care.

What was it about that space? How was it so heartening to me that long-ago day in 1966, and so memorable I still think of it now?

It wasn't only the space itself but everything around it. One doesn't come without the other, they are inseparable—I had learned that much, at least. This painting had a presence, a presence imbued with mystery. And though the mystery seemed especially located in that space between the Virgin's hand, the flower, and the baby's reaching fingers, I felt it running through the entire painting.

Something unknown was shaped and carefully, even lovingly, held by things that were known. The carved marble pedestal, the columns holding up a ceiling, the bodily mass and details of the figures, all these evoked our known, material world. The flower seemed to also, though it was shown in such an understated way, a flower so plain and generalized, I could not be sure if Piero meant a pink rose, as I'd first thought, or a pink carnation.

Some have said it is a carnation and symbolizes the Crucifixion. If so, that might explain a seeming reticence in the Virgin's gesture. What mother would wish for her baby to grab hold of such a destiny, or even the ordinary suffering inherent in any human life? In a subtle nuance of Christian iconography, Piero may have hoped to convey a prophetic awareness in that eternal moment, a kind of inner knowing.

Every time I shifted my vision to gaze again into that small negative space, I found it vibrating with tension. Mystery lived in the dark spaces between the baby's fingers and the Virgin's fingers and the flower. Did the Virgin withhold this flower by intention, or was she simply suspended in the act of giving? It was impossible to tell. Both might be true at once. Her face gave me no answer to the question. Instead, she reassured me with her calm. Though she seemed so aloof at first, her expression showed me a new possibility: a serene wisdom fully present to all that is ambiguous, beyond our reach, ungraspable, unknown.

To me, a young art student longing to bloom, entranced by the painting and falling in love with its beauty, the flower still appeared more like a rose than a carnation. Both are emblems of pure, undying love. But it could have been any flower, anything desired, longed for—a desideratum I felt intensely within myself, but could not yet recognize or name.

I came away from the Clark museum that day deeply heartened. Across a distance of five hundred years, Piero's painting had offered me a timeless gift. From the small negative space he had made so alive, it began to dawn on me that the feeling of mystery itself, the presence of something never quite within our grasp, might be the purpose in art that I was yearning for.

A full breath of air filled my chest. I, too, was a child in the lap of some vast mother who

knows that we grow by the stretch of our own desire, even if we are not sure what we're reaching for. My own un-knowing wasn't a weakness after all, not a symptom of something wrong, something to fix or to solve. It was part of a greater mystery, and four angels were still standing in witness. I came away feeling at peace with the ungraspable quality that lies behind things, around and through and between things. Any life of art or spirit would always mean reaching into that unknown space toward what I love, but can't quite touch or hold. In the beautifully measured stillness of his painting, Piero assured me the mystery will always be here, and from its depth, I too will bloom.