

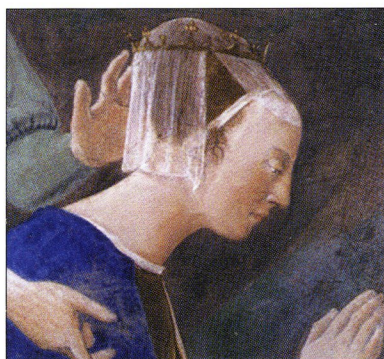
*Milton Glaser nella città di Piero*, with an essay by Luciano Cheles.  
Sansepolero: Casa di Piero della Francesca, 2007. Color illustrations,  
126 pages.

## Review by Gail Leggio

This handsome catalogue documents a recent exhibition of works by Milton Glaser, held at Piero della Francesca's birthplace and coinciding with a show of Piero's own work in Arezzo. A selection of Glaser's well-known posters, silkscreens and lithographs was on view, along with two marvelous colored pencil artists' portraits: *De Chirico*, seated in a characteristic metaphysical piazza, and *Klimt*, against a backdrop of nudes and flat decoration. But the heart of the event was a series of Piero-inspired watercolors, which Glaser has been making since 1989. Glaser has admired the early Italian Renaissance painters since his Fulbright year abroad, 1951–52, when he studied in Bologna under Giorgio Morandi. His approach to the quattrocento master evinces both humility and creative autonomy: "The world does not need bad copies of Piero's work, and so the solution was to treat Piero as if he were nature itself." Rather than revisiting entire compositions, Glaser isolates motifs and rearranges the elements, building on his half-century of experience as one of the world's leading graphic designers.

Take, for example, his variations on Piero's iconic twin portraits, *Federico da Montefeltro* and *Battista Sforza*. In several watercolors, the two are reunited in a single frame: back-to-back, Janus-style; or facing each other and brought close together so their distinctive profiles jigsaw the sky behind them into interesting negative space; or overlapping, facing the same way. In each case, Glaser has darkened Federico's complexion to make a stronger contrast with Battista's ivory skin. In the catalogue essay, "A Century-Old Passion: Piero della

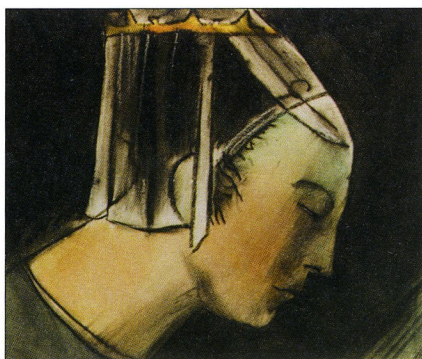
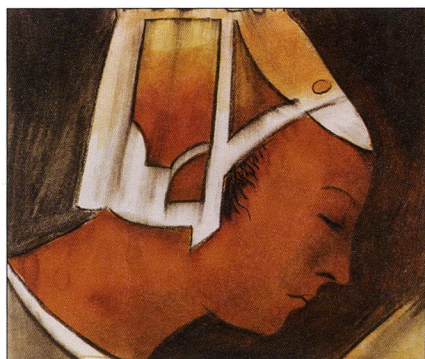
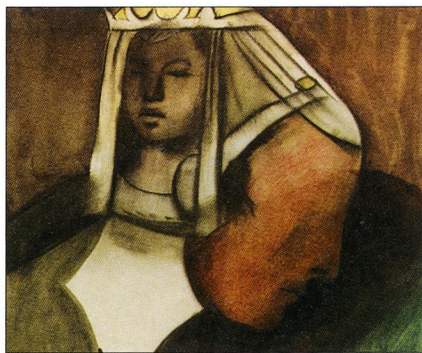
Francesca in America," Luciano Cheles quotes the painter Joseph Stella on the remarkable profile of the Duchess of Urbino, "its holy-wafer whiteness set into the blue background with diamond-like precision." In one version, Glaser reduces Federico to mottled areas of brown, black and red, divided across four sheets. In another, a pair of portraits in soft grey-browns blurs the features of Duke and Duchess. Or Battista is shown alone, in vibrant pale greens and yellows, or under a blue-green aquatic veil, for a Symbolist look. Glaser even inserts the face of Christ, from Piero's



Piero della Francesca  
*The Queen of Sheba's Adoration of the Holy Wood* (detail), Arezzo

*The Resurrection*, between Federico and Battista. A suite based on that face of Christ has the spontaneous intensity of Veronica's miraculous veil, especially the way the artist works it out of wet-into-wet brown wash. Another detail from *The Resurrection*, the head of a sleeping soldier, yields two fine but different images. In one, a strong profile in brown wash is set off by the white saucer of the hat; in the other, the image is sketched out in a psychedelic rainbow of pastels.

Glaser's smoky brown washes are particularly sensuous and remind us that, behind all those successful commercial designs, he remains an artist enamored of the physical pleasures of drawing and painting. A group of musical angels from Piero's *The Nativity* (London) is rendered in a russet-to-ivory palette, enlivened with subtle blue and raspberry accents. The sliver of landscape to the left gets solo attention in radiant watercolor and crosshatched graphic versions. Serenity is one of Piero's hallmarks. Even his rare scenes of violence, as in *The Flagellation*, are strangely becalmed. In describing the cult of Piero among twentieth-century American painters, Cheles quotes Marsden Hartley, who was drawn to Piero's "austere peace and simplicity" as well as his "incomparable sense of arrangement." Glaser focuses on one of Piero's few violent incidents, a soldier stabbing another in the throat, from *The Battle between Heraclius and Chosroes* (Arezzo). One of Glaser's watercolors is monochromatic, bathing the scene in the color of dried



Milton Glaser, variations on Piero's *Queen of Sheba's Adoration*



blood. Another is a tight close-up on the head of the victim in incongruously lyrical pastels that make the shocking pink of the blood more disturbing.

In his graphic design work Glaser uses a variety of techniques—cut-and-paste, collage and mixed media, as well as freehand drawing—to think through the permutations of an image. His Piero watercolors, almost always in multiple versions, offer another opportunity to consider the dynamic of shapes. A detail from *The Queen of Sheba's Adoration of the Holy Wood* (Arezzo) yields a quartet of variations on the profile of a woman with a crown and short veil. Glaser plays with the veil's transparency; his permutations range from fairly straightforward and naturalistic, to a bold red and white arrangement of hard-edged shapes, to ghostly reflections of another woman's face. Copying the old masters is one of the touchstones of artistic education, a discipline which great modernists such as Picasso and Matisse had enough sense to practice for their own pleasure and profit. As Glaser, now 78 years old, understands, the dialogue across the centuries between two artists remains a fruitful exchange. Piero still has lessons to teach, and Glaser helps us to look at him with fresh eyes. While some of the work in this catalogue will already be familiar to American audiences, the Piero-inspired watercolors illuminate an important aspect of Glaser's ever-inventive art.

Cheles's essay is a nice bonus, reminding us that Piero's restrained classicism and monumentality without bombast were not always held in as high regard as they are today. Twentieth-century artists from many schools responded to Piero, the Cubists for his sense of geometric order and Precisionists such as Charles Sheeler for the solidity and clarity of his forms. Piero's figures, with their impassive expressions, lent themselves to both Art Deco monumentality and existential alienation. Cheles discusses the WPA muralists, including a surprising example by Philip Guston, *Early Mail Service and the Construction of Railroads* (1938), and the little-known Ethel Magafan's handsome *Cotton Pickers* (c. 1940). That frieze of workers, alluding to Piero's *The Queen of Sheba's Adoration of the Holy Wood*, for a Post Office in Wynne, Arkansas, has considerable grace, especially in the swags of sacking musically joining the figures. Paul Cadmus and George Tooker, figurative painters in an era dominated by abstraction, are inevitably mentioned. Andy Warhol and Larry Rivers make overt allusions to Piero's iconography. With the gestures and enigmas of Alan Feltus's compositions, we see a deeper understanding of Piero. Feltus and Glaser take different approaches to Piero, but both demonstrate what a great creative resource the Renaissance artist has left us.