

Did Piero della Francesca View the Shroud of Turin between 1453 and 1463?

Philippa Foster

I would like to address the ten-year gap in the specific whereabouts of the Shroud between 1453 and 1463. There is documentary evidence that in 1453, Margaret (Marguerite) de Charny handed the Shroud to Duke Louis I of Savoy in Geneva, however, its next documented mention is not until 1464, when Theologian and Minorite General Francesco della Rovere - who wrote the treatise 'De Sanguine Christi' - describes the cloth as being 'coloured by the blood of Christ'.

Ian Wilson's exemplary work indicates that it travelled with the Savoys on their journeys between castles in and around Turin, prior to it finding a long-term home in Chambéry in 1502 - and that there is a record of a clerk being paid for two journeys accompanying the Shroud between Turin and Savigliano in 1485. It was also displayed at The Castle of Rivoli at some point, at Pinerolo during 1478, and Vercelli in 1490 & 1494. However, information on its specific whereabouts between 1453 and 1463 are scant. My interest lay in whether it was ever available for public or private viewings by guests of the Savoys during this period. The Savoys had numerous residences in the vicinity of Turin (Torino), including - Palazzo Madama, Castello del Valentino, Castle of Moncalieri and the Castle of Rivoli, so it is not an easy task to identify where the Shroud was taken at any particular time. But maybe that was the point - like a street magician moving objects beneath three cups - to obscure their true location. Or did tales of its travels, in its silver coffer, act as decoys to its true location, whilst they sought a more permanent home for the Shroud's safe keeping?

The reason for my enquiry was due to the striking pose and features of Christ, depicted in Piero della Francesca's fresco 'The Resurrection', painted in approx 1460-62 *Ref 7* (some references attribute a later date around 1464+), at The Museo Civico in Sansepolcro, south-east of Florence. At first glance, the distance between the Savoy territories in north-western Italy seemed far removed from Sansepolcro near Arezzo, but my suspicions about the accuracy of Piero's renderings of Christ's features encouraged me to dig further into the possibility that he had seen the Shroud at some point, possibly when it was journeying with the Savoys on the Italian side of the Alps.



Having found sufficient similarities between his Fresco and the Shroud, I needed to find geographic and political links, between Piero and the Savoys. (Left.) If a connection could be established, then the painting would take on a new significance

and potentially indicate that private viewings of the Shroud took place prior to the Accord in Paris, which formalised the agreement for Duke Louis of Savoy to pay the Canons at Lirey (the Shroud's previous guardians) an annual rent to compensate them for the loss of revenue from showing the Shroud. It could also help authenticate the Lirey Shroud as the real Shroud rather than a copy, as has sometimes been suggested.

Piero's artistic background

Piero della Francesca grew up in Borgo San Sepolcro (Sansepolcro), Italy, which features in the background landscape of his painting 'The Baptism of Christ'. He painted frescos for churches and undertook commissions for wealthy patrons. He also studied Euclid and incorporated intricate perspective and sacred geometry into his works. He is part of a grouping of Renaissance Humanists, who sought authentication for their religious beliefs through scientific enquiry - not to diminish religious faith, but rather to enhance it with evidence of what they saw as an interplay between two worlds - Heaven and Earth. He travelled for work, to Arezzo, Florence, Rimini, Ferrara, Urbino, and south to Rome. However, I could not initially see any links to the north-western regions surrounding Turin, until closer inspection of his main Patron - Federico III (Federigo) da Montefeltro (Lord of Urbino from 1444 and Duke of Urbino from 1474), which revealed a possible way that Piero could have gained access to such a precious and closely guarded relic, newly acquired by the Savoy family.

Federico da Montefeltro was given the title of Papal Gonfaloniere of the Holy Roman Church, which was a military and political office of the Papal States. In Urbino, south of Rimini, he created what was considered to be the greatest library of classical and scholarly texts outside the Vatican. He was also a patron of the arts, and under his patronage Piero della Francesca painted some of his most notable works, including 'The Nativity'.

Piero was fortunate to have access to Federico's library to aid his quest for accuracy and meaning in his works. However, in his earlier works, such as 'The Baptism of Christ', the bearded male used to represent Christ, is strikingly 'ordinary' or 'generic' compared to the rendering of Christ in the later 'The Resurrection'. This fresco was a commission for the Town Hall in Sansepolcro, rather than a work for his patron Federico, however, I wondered if an earlier viewing of the Shroud could have enabled Piero to study it in detail, possibly between 1453 and 1460? A court so concerned with scholarly, religious enquiry, employing some of the best artists in Italy, surely wouldn't have missed an opportunity to view and visually record the image on the Shroud, if the opportunity arose. Theoretically it was possible, but did the Dukes of Urbino have sufficiently cordial links to the Savoy to allow them access to this Holiest of all relics?

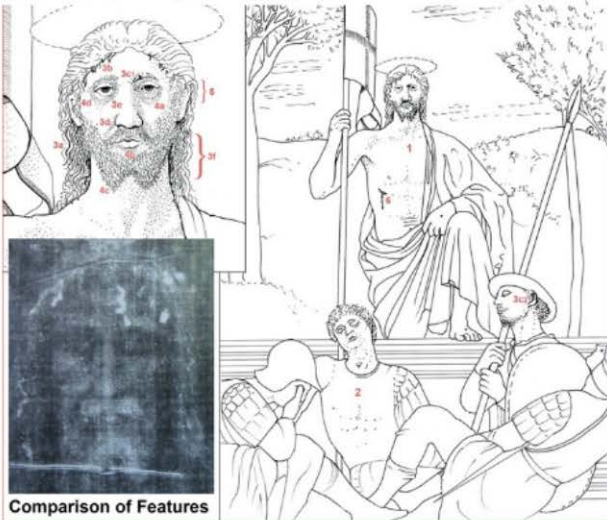
A reference to Franciscan Theologian and Minorite General - Francesco della Rovere (1414-1484) is fascinating in this respect, as he is recorded in 1464, as having said that the Shroud was 'coloured with the blood of Christ'. This sounded as if he had seen it first-hand. At this time, there was a theological debate surrounding the Salvific value of the Blood of Christ, pre- and post- Passion and Resurrection. I wondered if, beyond the symbolic blood of the Eucharist, whether this topic had gained a new relevance because they believed an actual sample of Christ's Blood still existed on the two cloths of the Passion, particularly the Shroud? Three years later, he became a Cardinal and two years after that, he became Pope Sixtus IV, when Pope Paul II died. It appeared that his mediation between the Franciscans and Dominicans in the debate, aided his election to the position of Pope. Had he seen the Shroud in the lead up to the Paris Accord, which formalised the compensation agreed with the Canons of Lirey for the loss of their Holy Relic? This documented quote tentatively provided a link to the Duchy of Urbino, because after he was elected Pope, Rovere arranged the marriage of his nephew Giovanni to the daughter of Federico III da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino. Thus proving a mutual respect between the Duchy of Urbino, and the same Pope who appears to have seen the Shroud, whilst in the keeping of the Savoy between the 1450's and 60's.

Although none of this speculation conclusively proves that Piero della Francesca ever directly viewed the Shroud, it theoretically points to the possibility that the Savoy could have extended an invitation to an artist, (who had already completed works for the Papacy), via his Patron Federico da Montefeltro. Historically, the next step would be to seek documents from the Urbino or Vatican Libraries from that time, but for now, I would like to concentrate on the artistic considerations.

Facial Recognition



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Comparison of Features

Diagrams of 'La Resurrezione' by Piero della Francesca - Museo Civico Sansepolcro, & Photographic negative image of the Turin Shroud, reproduced from Pam Moon's exhibition. © Philippa Foster 2019

So, in relation to the fresco 'The Resurrection' in Sansepolcro - what connections can be drawn between the depiction of Christ and the features of the man of the Shroud? Again, the evidence is subjective and could be coincidental - they could be derived from other works of art that he'd seen, or descriptions he may have heard from its earlier showings in Lirey, and at Geneva in 1453. However, there are several points I would like to point out which appear uncannily similar.

1) The upright, forward facing, muscular stature of Christ, with level, impassive shoulders, yet which hold aloft the standard, and the awkwardly raised leg, as he triumphantly steps from the tomb of His Passion. It looks to me as if the body / torso, including the lance wound, were copied directly from the Shroud image, and the arms and legs then repositioned to fit with the narrative of the picture.

2) The sleeping soldiers below him, include what is considered to be a self-portrait of Piero himself, second from the left - as if to place himself in the role of penitent sinner - as other artists have done before him. A tradition which was continued by Mel Gibson's portrayal of his own hand hammering a crucifixion nail into Jim Caviezel's Jesus, in his film 'The Passion of the

Christ'. It is puzzling how Piero painted himself with eyes closed and head tilted upwards, however, his mastery of perspective is evident in sketches he did of such poses, so he would only have needed to adapt this technique to incorporate his own features.

3) The depiction of Christ's face has several elements which strongly echo the features of the man of the Shroud. (It is easier to compare with the modern photographic 'negative' image of the Shroud for clarity, but interestingly, as with the lance wound, most features are in fact reflected correctly as they would have appeared on the body, rather than copying the 'positive' image which he may have seen on the cloth - which I will discuss later, in relation to the lance wound.):

a) The way the hair falls and twists gently down the sides of the face.

b) The curls of hair around the forehead echo the tendrils of hair and blood flow from the Crown of Thorns.

c) The inner edge of the eyebrow on our right (Jesus' left), is distorted, as if stuck or matted, exactly at the point where the '3' or 'Aum' rivulet on the Saviour's brow would finish (c1). Interestingly, the left ear of the soldier holding the lance, echoes the shape of this distinctive blood flow traversing the creases of the forehead. (c2)

d) The heavy creases either side of the nose.

e) The long, slightly swollen, asymmetrical profile of the nose.

f) The moustache, mouth and twin-forked beard, are also accurate.

4) What have become recognised as 'Vignon' markings, from the work of Paul Vignon in the 1930's *Ref 2*, are present - including: a) the heavily accentuated 'owlish' eyes, b) the heavy line under the lower lip & hairless area between lower lip and beard, c) forked beard, d) accentuated cheeks, one swollen.

5) The hollow eyes are those of a dead man who has awoken to look back at you with a penetrating gaze - part forgiveness, part hurt from the recent trauma of his ordeal. He looks as if he has literally been to Hades and back. They are reminiscent of the eyes on the Shroud cloth, as Piero would have seen it, long before the photographic negative existed.

6) When I recently saw a large reproduction of Piero's painting, on a retreat at Belmont Abbey, Herefordshire, UK, I was struck by the similarities to the Shroud, and further studies revealed many more points in parallel. The one which haunts me the most, is the lance wound. A more perfect placement of the wound would be hard to achieve. The width, angle and positioning for piercing the lungs, as recorded in the Gospels, is exactly as it appears on the Shroud, and lends weight to my belief that Piero's scholarly inquiry for authentic proof of Divine events is in evidence here.

A Reflection of the Divine

He was known for making 'cartoons' for his Frescos. This involved making a full size sketch, then piercing the edges with tiny holes, through which was 'pounced' charcoal dust, to trace the original sketch onto the wet plaster, for painting. This gave him the opportunity to reflect images left and right, as can be seen in other works of his, where the faces of Angels can be seen to have been flipped horizontally, to give a second face in mirror-image. What I have wondered, is whether the placement of the lance wound

on Jesus' right side (our left as we observe the painting) is by accident or design? The Shroud is tricky to understand, because by encapsulating the body, like an envelope, it means that blood issuing from his right side, appears visually on the cloth, to be on his left. It is hard to remember that we see the inside of the burial wrapping, rather than the exterior, if making a direct copy. But he was a very learned man, with good spatial awareness due to his study of perspective, three-dimensional spaces and Platonic solids. Therefore, he may well have intended it this way. However, there is a chance, as any artist might, that he did a sketch from the true Shroud, brought it home to Sansepolcro, and in the course of piercing continuous lines of holes around the outlines and 'pouncing' the image onto the wall, that he could have accidentally reversed the lance wound to the correct side, in a fortunate accident. Interestingly, the Fresco is 225cm x 200cm (89 inches x 79 inches) in dimension, which would mean that Christ is virtually life-sized. Is it possible that Piero literally copied an exact replica sketch, from which this work originates? The work's location in Piero's home town of Sansepolcro is also fascinating. With strong Franciscan links to Assisi just a short distance to the south-east, the town's name means Holy Sepulchre. What better location for a painting called 'The Resurrection'.

Frescos, by their nature, often appear somewhat flat, but within the limits of the process of painting egg tempera onto wet plaster, he has achieved a masterpiece of subtle power and accurate placement of the marks of the Passion. In 1925, Aldous Huxley wrote that it was 'the greatest painting in the world', and he even remarked that the depiction of Christ had an athletic build, which would tally with the impression one has when viewing the full length, negative image of the Shroud. Some people dispute the claim that it is the 'greatest picture in the world', as they feel that Christ looks somewhat wooden and sullen - yet when I look at the image, I see the true likeness of the beaten and lifeless Jesus, re-animated, eyes open, triumphant over death and earthly limitation. In that respect, it is a work of immense significance. And if the link between the Savoy's guardianship of the Shroud and Piero's work can be proven, possibly through documents originating from the Urbino Library, it would also shed light on the whereabouts of the Shroud during its early years with Duke Louis of Savoy.

One final point of interest is that the Fresco of 'The Resurrection' was lost for a long period of time, under a thick layer of plaster, only to be rediscovered, still preserved in immaculate condition. And it was even saved from artillery fire during WWII, by a British soldier - Tony Clarke, who resisted orders to shell the building when he recognised that it contained Aldous Huxley's 'greatest painting in the world'. So, it underwent its own Resurrection and brush with destruction, to truly embody the essence of Piero's work.

I would like to thank the Monks of Belmont Abbey for bringing this powerful work of art to my attention.

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Biography: Philippa Foster has been a professional artist for over thirty years - as a Graphic Designer and Technical Illustrator, specializing in Natural History. She is also a retired Funeral Celebrant. For two decades, she has studied what she believes to be the image of the 'Resurrection' created by Divine Light, on The Turin Shroud. With her husband Alan, she has traveled to many Holy Sites around the world - to better understand 'The Shroud of Turin', 'The Sudarium of Oviedo' and 'the Miraculous Appearances of Mother Mary'.

Shroud articles and the Internet

Mark Guscini

The advent of the Internet and new technologies in communication certainly changed the world in endless ways, and Shroud studies is no exception to this. And yet while it is doubtlessly true that we all now have access to much more information; the quality of this information has not been altered as much as some would like to think. Before presentations and articles were available on-line, and before publishing a book was just a question of money (self-publishing has existed for almost as long as the printing press, but has been made infinitely easier by digital printing and print-on-demand), the quality of the much lower amount of information was probably as equally divided as it is today, among excellent, so-so and poor to absolutely terrible.



Mark Guscini

Ever since Shroud studies started in earnest after the photographs of 1898, there have been Catholic fanatics publishing books on the Shroud, Protestant fanatics doing the same, along with atheist fanatics and others with a bee in their bonnet (sometimes I think it is a more of a killer hornet) about some particular aspect of the Shroud or some other axe to grind. There have also been some excellent books. The same goes for films and documentaries (among which I could recommend the ones made by our newsletter editor).

It is an essential part of human nature to criticize new technological developments; in the past it was the radio, then the television, then the mobile phone and finally the