

FAVORITE

PHILIP PEARLSTEIN

Artist



The Flagellation of Christ
PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA (c. 1416–1492)
c. 1455–60, oil on panel, 23 x 32 in.
Galleria Nazionale delle Marche (Urbino, Italy)

Philip Pearlstein (b. 1924) learned about perspective while awaiting combat. Despite the gravity of his wartime assignment, the real lesson he learned was about the meaning of one-point perspective, more so even than the perspective on life itself.

As a young infantryman in Italy during World War II, Pearlstein was stationed outside Rome as preparations were made for an Allied invasion against the Germans to capture a mountainous region between Florence and Bologna. While some servicemen might have been visiting USO halls or doing mess-hall duty, Pearlstein and a group of like-minded soldiers he befriended would visit the Vatican Museum and other venues while waiting for the battle plan to be forged. “We visited all of these galleries and for me it was a fantastic education in Renaissance art,” says the 94-year-old Pearlstein from his painting studio in Manhattan. “I didn’t learn about Renaissance art and perspective and Piero della Francesca from a college textbook like Janson’s. I learned it firsthand.”

One of the most affecting classrooms, of sorts, that he attended was the Galleria Nazionale delle Marche in Urbino, where the 20-year-old Pearlstein first saw Piero’s *Flagellation of Christ* (c. 1455–60), and where it remains today. “That painting became the basis of my own development as an artist. The lessons it provides on perspective and its use of the Golden Triangle became the basis, too, for my work as a teacher of more



than 30 years. The lessons I learned from the painting are built into the work I do as an artist.” So enamored still is Pearlstein with the painting he first saw more than 70 years ago that he always keeps a half-size reproduction of it at hand. “It’s laying on some surface here in the studio.”

Fortunately, as he acknowledges, Pearlstein didn’t fight in that final battle after all, but he did get what might be considered his first start as a painter, one that automatically came with a large audience. “After the war ended, I was reassigned to paint road signs along demolished roads,” he says. After completing his military service, Pearlstein returned to his native Pittsburgh to attend Carnegie Mellon University, eventually moving to New York to work as a graphic designer. “I worked for a man who taught at Pratt [Institute]. He saw me looking through his art books and he told me that, since I still had some GI Bill benefits left, I should go back to school. I applied to New York University and eventually

got an M.F.A. in art history there. I started teaching at Pratt in 1959 and it wasn’t until my late 30s that I began to paint. I was a late starter.” Indeed, it would not be until 1962 that Pearlstein began to create the figurative paintings for which he is now renowned.

Piero’s *Flagellation of Christ* is famous not only for its radical application of perspective and its realistic interpretation of Christ’s punishment by his captors, but also for its enigmatic quality. Its lefthand scene shows Christ standing within an architecturally precise classical temple, while the scene at right features three men, seemingly indifferent to the brutal beating occurring nearby. For centuries, numerous theories have been posited about the identities of this trio and about both settings. When asked for his take on the subject, Pearlstein replies with candor, “I’m not interested at all in interpretations of this picture. I have always felt a kind of gratitude toward it. It’s a wonderful painting and always surprising when I see it.”