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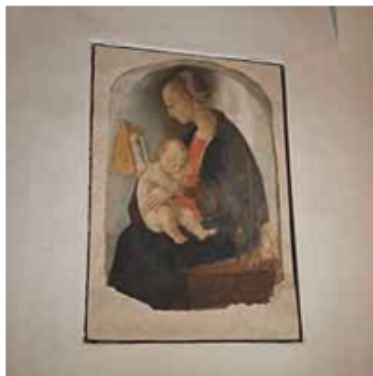
3 Italian Villages for Renaissance Art Lovers

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Piero della Francesca's Renaissance art comes to life in these enchanting Italian hamlets in the Terre di Piero region

By: Robin Rockey

Europe



This year marks the 600th anniversary of Italian Renaissance master Piero della Francesca's birth, along with the anticipated completion of the restoration of one of his masterpieces, the "The Resurrection," housed in Sansepolcro, the artist's hometown. The traveling painter, known as the father of perspective, left a trail of vibrant works throughout Italy. His footsteps through what's known as the "Terre di Piero" (Piero's Land) — which spills across four regions of Italy: Emilia Romagna, Marche, Tuscany and Umbria — form a figurative yellow-brick road through charming, off-the-beaten-path villages where travelers are more likely to run into Italians than tourists.

“Madonna col Bambino” by Raphael graces the wall at Casa Natale di Raffaello, the artist’s home in Urbino. // © 2016 Robin Rockey

Feature image (above): Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca’s hometown of Sansepolcro is a charming Tuscany town where clients can marvel at the artist’s work. // © 2016 David Butali

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Fast Facts

A guide isn’t necessary to travel the Terre di Piero, but it can enhance the experience. Knowledgeable tour leader Simona Spadoni frequently works with travel agents and is an ideal fit for art enthusiasts and history buffs. She can be contacted at infoprimaclasse@libero.it.

Here are three stops within the Terre di Piero to see some of the artist’s most impactful works in picturesque, small-city settings — ideal for travelers seeking an authentic Italian experience complete with incredible food, wine and hospitality.

Sansepolcro

Witness the restoration of a Renaissance masterpiece in action at Museo Civico Sansepolcro art gallery in Sansepolcro, a quaint Tuscany town of about 16,000 residents. Francesca’s “The Resurrection,” completed in the mid-1400s, stands more than 7 feet tall and depicts Christ rising triumphantly from the grave against a forested backdrop indicative of Sansepolcro’s landscape.

“It’s a symbol of early Renaissance art, although not a proper fresco,” said Umberto Senserini, the specialist who will finish restoring the piece to its former glory in October 2016, explaining why the piece is unique.

Senserini notes that Francesca used experimental techniques such as painting on top of dry plaster.

Steal a glimpse into everyday Renaissance life at Francesca’s boyhood home and the town’s Biblioteca Comunale library (open to visitors by appointment), which houses thick, 15th-century record books documenting the city’s history.

Visitors can soak in the bucolic scenery depicted in Francesca’s paintings while savoring local wine and traditional Tuscan dishes, including house-made pasta, at the historic La Pieve Vecchia restaurant, a 20-minute drive outside Sansepolcro. The historic property offers two rooms for overnight stays.

www.lapievevecchia.com

www.museocivicosansepolcro.it

Urbino

A treasure trove of Italian art is housed within the medieval walls of Urbino, an elegant hilltop city in the Marche region. The historic core of this windy city, home to about 15,000 full-time residents, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Here, Duke Federico da Montefeltro commissioned Francesca to decorate his impressive stone palace, the town’s Renaissance architecture piece de resistance. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche (National Gallery of Marche) at Palazzo Ducale (Doge’s Palace) houses two Francesca masterpieces: “The Flagellation” and “The Madonna of Senigallia,” both of which mirror elements of the city’s architecture and landscape.

At Casa Natale di Raffaello, travelers can tour the boyhood home of an even more famous Renaissance master, Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, known simply as Raphael. Antica Osteria da la Stella Ristorante, one of the artist's favorite haunts, still operates as a restaurant today, offering traditional Marche dishes, including house-made "tagliatelle" pasta with white truffle in a romantic, white-tablecloth setting.

Emphasizing simplicity over decadence, Hotel San Domenico from VIP Hotels is a former Renaissance monastery located across from Palazzo Ducale. Polished wood floors and sparse furnishings give the eyes a much-needed reprieve after analyzing art all day.

www.anticaosteriadalastella.com

en.visit.marche.it

www.viphotels.it

Rimini

The formidable Tempio Malatestiano (Malatesta Temple) cathedral stands sentry in the center of Rimini, a city of some 145,000 residents nestled on the Adriatic Sea in the Emilia Romagna region. Rimini's coastal location makes it a sizable European tourist destination, but its walled historic center feels like a separate village.

Francesca's early fresco "Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta Praying in Front of St. Sigismund" is on display inside the Romanesque cathedral's white marble facade. Much of the color has faded, partly due to the painter's unconventional techniques, but the 1451 artwork provides a glimpse inside the artist's mind as his mastery of perspective evolved.

Trattoria La Marianna, an airy cafe with an outdoor patio, serves up delectable seafood dishes al fresco. Travelers can feast on "tagliatelle alle vongole poveracce," a pasta dish peppered with clams, then browse charming nearby shops and visit Domus Del Chirurgo (The Surgeon's House), an ancient archaeological site lined with intricate mosaics.

After touring Renaissance palaces and cathedrals, travelers will feel like royalty themselves at Hotel Brufani Palace in Perugia. It's well worth the two-hour drive from Rimini to swim in the hotel's glass-bottomed grotto pool, which overlooks Etruscan ruins. Rooms are outfitted with plush red and gold period furnishings, and Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, which houses a Francesca collection, is a short stroll away.

www.trattorialamarianna.it

www.visit-rimini.com

www.brufanipalace.com

