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Piero della Francesca (ca 1415-1492). *Madonna and Child With Saints*. See page 1204.

TOBACCO MARKETING AND USE IN FILMS AND
CHILDREN'S USE OF TOBACCO

IMPACT OF INFLUENZA VACCINATION DURING
PREGNANCY ON RESPIRATORY ILLNESS IN INFANTS

RISKY ALCOHOL USE, AGE OF DRINKING ONSET,
AND ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

DEXTROMETHORPHAN ABUSE IN ADOLESCENCE,
1999-2004

COMPLETE TABLE OF CONTENTS ON PAGE 1195

JAMA
&
ARCHIVES
JOURNALS
American Medical Association

Piero della Francesca (circa 1415-1492)

Madonna and Child With Saints, circa 1474

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE TOWN OF Urbino, Italy, there lived a man named Federico da Montefeltro, the Duke of Urbino. By profession, he was a *condottiere*—a soldier for hire who led recruits from his hometown into battle on behalf of well-to-do clients, including the city of Florence and the pope, who in those days had his own army. Federico was a clever strategist and an effective leader, and he usually won his battles. Over the years, he and his men were much in demand and well compensated for their efforts, and little Urbino became a prosperous center of culture and the arts.

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”¹ Federico’s true love was Battista Sforza, his beautiful young bride from a prominent family in Milan. Theirs proved to be a happy marriage, with Battista managing the affairs of state capably when Federico was away at war. She knew full well that her responsibility was to produce a male heir, and she got right to work. Their first child was a daughter. So was their second. And their third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth. After 8 daughters in a row, the increasingly desperate Federico and Battista prayed to Saint Guido Ubaldo, patron saint of the nearby town of Gubbio, for divine intercession. Battista was said to have offered up her own life in return for the birth of a son. Early the next year, she did bear a son whom the happy parents named Guidobaldo. Six months later, Battista was dead at age 26 years, leaving behind 9 children and their grieving father.²

Soon afterward, Federico commissioned *Madonna and Child With Saints* from Piero della Francesca for the altar of a small church in his beloved Urbino. In the painting, Federico himself kneels before the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus, who are flanked by 6 saints and 4 angels in a scene of timeless stillness. The ostrich egg suspended over Mary’s head symbolizes new life. By one interpretation, the painting is a traditional portrayal of a donor affirming his devotion to Mary and Jesus. How-

ever, Federico also had deep personal reasons for celebrating the birth of a baby boy, and the sleeping infant before whom he kneels with hands raised in thanks can also be viewed as representing his own long-awaited son Guidobaldo. Yet another interpretation is suggested by noting that the painting’s otherwise near-perfect symmetry is disturbed by an empty space in the left foreground opposite Federico. Had Battista survived, she would almost certainly have been shown there in front of her own name saint, John the Baptist. Like an empty chair at the banquet table, the open space in Piero della Francesca’s painting honors someone not seen—the departed wife and mother, Battista.

Guidobaldo led a pampered boyhood, being tutored by a doting father. When Federico’s luck finally ran out and he died in battle, the 10-year-old Guidobaldo succeeded him as Duke of Urbino. He grew up to continue the family’s prowess in military affairs and patronage of the arts. During Guidobaldo’s lifetime, the great Renaissance painter Raphael was born and raised in Urbino, receiving his first serious exposure to fine art in the ducal palace collection. Like his father before him, Guidobaldo married well; however, the union produced no children. When Guidobaldo died of gout at age 36 years, the Montefeltro line and the golden era of Urbino came to an end.

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