

## communiqué / press release

For Immediate Release

***Meditations on Piero***  
**Sculptural Essays on the Human Head**

On display in the Octagonal Gallery  
2 May – 3 September 2001

Montréal, 2 March 2001 — The Canadian Centre for Architecture presents ***Meditations on Piero***, an exhibition of contemporary sculpture by the British/Canadian artist Geoffrey Smedley supported by over 30 rare books from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The sculptures draw their inspiration from an extraordinary series of drawings of the human head by the great Italian Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca. The exhibition relates these drawings and Smedley's works to architectural theory and practice, revealing architecture as an activity that goes beyond the making of buildings and that has important historical links to subjects as diverse as geometry, cosmology, and human anatomy.

The guest curators of this exhibition are Alberto Pérez-Gómez, Saidye Rosner Bronfman Professor of the History of Architecture at McGill University, and Louise Pelletier, also of McGill University's School of Architecture.

In a treatise on perspective written towards the end of his life, Piero della Francesca attempted to determine the mathematically "ideal" proportions of the human head, basing his drawings on a belief in the cosmological significance of certain numbers and their geometrical relationships.

Guided by the ancient Greek texts of Plato and Euclid, Piero performed a conceptual sectioning of the head in elevation and plan, exploiting a new technique of graphic representation that had great repercussions within the European architectural tradition. After many years of creative meditation on these drawings, Smedley decided to translate their mystery into

physical form, working the way an architect works to extract from them the structure of his sculptures. His principal piece, *The Numbers*, is a meticulous, four-foot high realization of Piero's ideal head. The head's hard plaster surface, sculpted on a framework of nine horizontal plates connected by vertical rods made of steel and alloy, is inscribed with the numbers used to calculate its proportions.

Smedley includes smaller versions of the large head in other sculptures that explore the connections between Piero's drawings and architecture, cosmology, astronomy and surveying. *Inclined Head* rotates at the inclination of the earth's ecliptic. *Epicycle and Eccentric*, another kinetic sculpture, illustrates Ptolemy's theory of celestial motion, the pre-Copernican view of the universe that allowed ancient astronomers to explain the visible movements of the planets. *Recalled Head* interprets the role of measuring instruments in Piero's plotting of the head and demonstrates his use of proportional triangles to determine dimensions. During the Renaissance, similar techniques and instruments were used to measure the body and the world, to survey cities, to construct perspectives for painting and stage design, and to measure potential building sites. Smedley also offers a study of the relationship between mathematics and painting with his sculpture *Pons Asinorum*, a piece that recalls iconographic themes from Piero's paintings.

Throughout the exhibition, Smedley's sculptures are accompanied by a selection of some of the most famous books in the history of printing, drawn from the CCA collection and three of McGill University's distinguished libraries: the Osler Library of the History of Medicine, the Blacker-Wood Library of Biology and the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. Sixteenth-century woodcuts illustrate the study of human proportions by Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer, and other artists. The twelve books on loan from the Osler Library include an illustrated edition of a treatise by the famous French philosopher René Descartes and the first edition of Andreas Vesalius's magnificent work on human anatomy, *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543). The sometimes surprising links between medical anatomy and architecture are explored using images drawn from the work of architects such as Vitruvius, Andrea Palladio, and Sir Christopher Wren.

**Booklet**

A bilingual booklet published under the editorship of Gerald Beasley, Head Librarian at the CCA, accompanies the exhibition. It features an introduction by Geoffrey Smedley and an extended essay jointly written by Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier. Available at the museum's bookstore, it includes approximately 30 reproductions of the works of Geoffrey Smedley and plates from the books presented in the exhibition.

**Lecture**

As a complement to the exhibition, Alberto Pérez-Gómez will present a lecture entitled **Architecture and the Cloud of Numbers** on Thursday 3 May at the CCA's Paul Desmarais Theatre. Mr. Pérez-Gómez will look at Geoffrey Smedley's sculpture and the relationships between architecture, sculpture and mathematics.

**Architecture Remembered:  
Souvenir Buildings from the CCA Collection**

Concurrent with *Meditations on Piero*, the CCA also presents **Architecture Remembered: Souvenir Buildings from the CCA Collection**, from 2 May to 3 September 2001 in the museum's hall cases. This exhibition organized by in-house curator Rosemary Haddad features over a hundred miniature objects that celebrate the richness and complexity of the built world.

*Meditations on Piero* is based on an exhibition originated by The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College, in association with the Henry Moore Foundation and Yorkshire Sculpture Park.

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