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## ABSTRACT

I seek to argue that Alessandro Botticelli's unique critical fortunes – that is, his success as an artist in late-fifteenth century Florence, his dismissal by Giorgio Vasari and subsequent obscurity, and his rehabilitation in the nineteenth century – offer a historiographical case study of art history itself. While a developmental scheme championing the High Renaissance dominated the field, Botticelli was excluded. As this scheme was questioned, some critics looked to alternate genealogies of artistic influence, of which Botticelli was one root. Understanding the lack of a sole narrative of progress has led to new approaches in art history, which have provided new perspectives on the works themselves.

In the first chapter, I show how Botticelli was not part of the developmental scheme of that would become dominant; it also reveals a clearer foundation for understanding him by stripping away the myths surrounding him.

The second chapter traces these critical fortunes from the Renaissance through the mid-eighteenth century, using Raphael's art and status to shed light on Botticelli's absence in the dominant narrative. Although Raphael provides the first evidence as to why the elder painter was cast aside, the decline of Botticelli's fortune and its eventual revival directly correspond with the changing art world.

The third chapter explores the Pre-Raphaelites and three English critics who revived interest in Botticelli. These artists diverged from the English Royal Academy, which looked to the High Renaissance. The critics did not present Botticelli as paving the way for the greater masters that followed; rather, they painted a Botticelli deserving of praise precisely for his status as an outsider.

The final chapter traces the art historians who reshaped the language used to describe Botticelli. Earlier essays noted how he differed from other Southern Renaissance painters, and focused on these oddities. However, the major monographs of the twentieth century transform Botticelli from a lesser-known artist to an iconic figure. The character invented by later art historians would have been unrecognizable to fifteenth-century Florentines. Survey texts overlook the details that set Botticelli apart, and instead proclaim Botticelli as representative of a generation of Florentine artists and humanist thought.

A reevaluation of Botticelli provides new perspectives on the discipline of art history. That we have accepted skewed history of a prominent artist for so long suggests that the Southern Renaissance is not a stagnant field, and we are reminded how little we actually know about the artists. We must remember to question the historians of the past and continuously reassess their claims. Much like the works of art they study, art historians too are products of their time and, therefore, are motivated by different factors and evaluate art in the terms with which they are familiar.

# **REVISING ART HISTORY**

**THE CRITICAL FORTUNES OF ALESSANDRO BOTTICELLI**

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**May 12, 2009**

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## INTRODUCTION

Few paintings are more universally recognized than *The Birth of Venus*, yet its artist, Alessandro Botticelli, is far better known than understood.<sup>1</sup> The artistic landscape of fifteenth-century Florence can no longer be divorced from Botticelli's images of handsome youths and elegant women, elaborately dressed, often in the guises of ancient figures. It is easy to forget, while reading art history surveys, that this artist has not always enjoyed such high favor. Now portrayed as exemplifying the taste of the Medici court, Botticelli was all but forgotten after his death in 1510 until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> One can make the case, and many have, that Botticelli's place in the Italian Renaissance canon is justified, and that ignoring him for so long was the true error. While a genius, Botticelli lacks a clear place in the art historical narrative that culminates in the High Renaissance, instead exhibiting a highly individual style.

I seek to argue that Botticelli's unique critical fortunes – that is, his professional success as an artist valued by the late-fifteenth century Florentine elite, his dismissal by Vasari and subsequent obscurity, and his rehabilitation in

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence Kanter, et al., *Botticelli's Witness: Changing Styles in a Changing Florence* (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1997), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Penelope J. Davies, et al., *Janson's History of Art: The Western Tradition* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2007), pp. 537-539.

the nineteenth century – offer a historiographical case study of art history itself. Pliny initially developed the idea of art history as a narrative of progress; Vasari later applied this to a scheme of art history that would champion the High Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> While this dominated the field, Botticelli was excluded because he was judged as a marginal character in this development. As this developmental scheme was questioned, other beliefs developed, which used different criteria and constructed alternate genealogies of artistic influence, of which Botticelli was one root.<sup>4</sup> Thus, we see that Vasari's developmental scheme is only one among a whole range of possibilities, appropriate in some cases and irrelevant in others. This understanding has led to new approaches in art history, such as social histories of art and gender-studies approaches to art, which in turn have provided new perspectives on the works themselves.

In the first chapter, I will show how Botticelli was not part of the developmental scheme traced through Giotto, Masaccio, Perugino, and Raphael. This will begin by analyzing a selection of works from every stage of his development. Seen in comparison to the work of his contemporary Renaissance painters, Botticelli's work was unique, anticipating the Mannerist period rather than embodying the Renaissance. Further, by stripping away the various myths

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<sup>3</sup> Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p.182.

<sup>4</sup> Among the critics that questioned the developmental scheme are art historians like John Ruskin and Walter Pater, as well as artists like the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, J. M. W. Turner, John Constable, and Caspar David Friedrich.



surrounding Botticelli, we should have a clearer idea of the artist that can serve as a better foundation for understanding his critical fortunes.

The second chapter traces these fortunes from his own time through the mid-eighteenth century, using Raphael's art and status in art history to shed light on Botticelli's absence in the dominant story of the history of art. This starts with an investigation of his artistic relationship, or lack thereof, with Raphael, whose death has traditionally signaled the end of the High Renaissance. The genius of the younger master is distinctly tied to his talent for emulation of the great artists that surrounded him, taking the best aspects from each to create a seamlessly beautiful style. Thus, if Botticelli truly was exemplary of his period, one should expect to find some attestation of influence in the young Raphael's art during or after his 1504-1508 sojourn in Florence. A comparison of their works, actually, reveals a negative influence, as if Raphael deliberately strove *not* to incorporate anything of Botticelli's style into his art.

Although Raphael provides the first evidence as to why the elder painter was cast aside even during his lifetime, the decline of Botticelli's fortune and its eventual revival directly correspond with the changing art world. Already forgotten during his lifetime, Botticelli was regarded as just another lesser artist in Vasari's *Le Vite de' piu eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori*. The story of Raphael's reputation, on the other hand, is entirely the opposite: his reputation shifted from an estimable and almost saintly figure, in the view of Vasari, to one that was demonized, with one artist even referring to his Roman works as the

“strongest poison” in 1812.<sup>5</sup> Raphael’s fortunes in nineteenth-century art criticism reveals a conspicuous shift that offers information on Botticelli’s ascent into prominence. I will investigate why Botticelli, an artist whom we today see as representative of the Renaissance, was singled out in the mid-nineteenth century, while contemporaries such as Ghirlandaio, were disregarded.

The third chapter will explore those who did single him out, namely, the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood and three late-nineteenth-century English critics. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood also played a key role in Botticelli’s rediscovery through their art theory and their paintings. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais, two of the founders of the original eight-member group, both expressed great interest in the artist, with Rossetti even writing a poem based on *Primavera*. Botticelli’s influence is readily apparent in the works of later artists associated with the Brotherhood, Edward Burne-Jones and Evelyn De Morgan. The character of their imitation is valuable, because the aspects the two painters chose to take from the old master are precisely those that cause him to stand out from the lineage of Renaissance painters. The emphasis placed on linearity and exaggerated grace by the nineteenth-century artists suggests that they saw in Botticelli’s art a source for the “modern” style and techniques that they would employ. The artists and viewers who rediscovered Botticelli were those who

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Cornelius in Ernst H. Gombrich, *New Light on Old Masters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 132.

diverged from the English Royal Academy's mimetic style, which still looked to late fifteenth-century Italy.

This chapter will also discuss the pivotal moment in Botticelli's history when late nineteenth-century English critics revived interest in him. The critics Walter Pater and John Ruskin, arguably the most influential English art historians in this process, shaped the Botticelli we know today. Though they very much disagreed on certain points about the artist, their writings reveal their true intentions: they did not seek to bring to the light an artist that paved the way for the greater older masters that followed him; rather, they painted a Botticelli deserving of praise precisely for his status as an outsider.

The final chapter will trace the art historians who, following Botticelli's reintroduction in England, continued to reshape the language used to describe him and his works. Earlier essays, such as those by Pater or Crowe and Cavalcaselle, focus on how Botticelli differed from other Southern Renaissance painters and praise and criticize these oddities. However, as one reads the subsequent major monographs by Horne (1908) and Lightbown (1989), a distinct trend arises that demonstrates how Botticelli was transformed from a lesser-known artist to an iconic figure. These scholars started with the little originally known about Botticelli, which consisted of generic tales from Vasari and a few mentions by fifteenth and sixteenth century sources, and further consulted his paintings as a source for insight about the artist. The end result was a multi-faceted character: Botticelli's eccentric personality was exposed in the faces of his Madonnas, both

contemplative and quirky; arguments were made in favor of strong religious convictions, both devout and apathetic toward God. His technical skill was praised as avant-garde and his emphasis on line was congratulated as unique. The Botticelli invented by later art historians, the exemplar “painter of Florence,” would have been unrecognizable to fifteenth-century Florentines.

In addition to these specialized and scholarly writings, surveys of Renaissance and general Western art history provide another layer of comprehension, as they reflect more publicly held views on art than do the specialized works. Suddenly the details that set him apart are either overlooked or simply praised as if they were common. Indeed, current texts meant to provide the foundation for future generations of art historians simply proclaim Botticelli to be representative of a generation of Florentine artists and his paintings as filled with portraits and the teachings of the humanism that were so popular at the time.

A reevaluation of Botticelli provides a great deal of information about the discipline of art history. Though the evaluation of Botticelli’s aesthetic has shaped how we see fifteenth-century Florence, there are many details about his art that, in my view, do not correspond to that period. The fact that we have accepted a very skewed history of a prominent artist for so long suggests that the Southern Renaissance is not a stagnant field, and we are reminded how little we actually know about the artists of that time. We must remember to look back at and question the historians of the past and continuously reassess their claims and sources. Much like the works of art they study, art historians too are products of

their time and, therefore, are motivated by different factors and evaluate art in the terms with which they are familiar.

This paper does not intend to say that Botticelli is not an excellent artist. On the contrary, his unique talent produced highly memorable images and his fame is certainly not solely attributable to the art historians that rediscovered him. Rather, the reevaluation of art historical writing on Botticelli sheds light on the field, the ever-evolving opinions on art, and those figures that facilitated the artist's ascent to celestial popularity.

Over the course of many years, historians have understood several versions of the now larger-than-life Alessandro Botticelli. Nevertheless, at present a very prominent myth surrounding the artist must be considered: the elaborate story told by introductory art history texts and “coffee table books.” In the same manner that Leonardo has been reduced to the Mona Lisa and his anatomical drawings or Michelangelo to the Sistine Chapel ceiling, there exists a grand and simplified version of Botticelli. He is best known as the artist of two very popular paintings whose images have come to symbolize art in its many shapes and forms. Most famously, Andy Warhol appropriated Botticelli's figure from his *Birth of Venus* in 1984 (fig.21) – Warhol's choice in itself is a testament to the iconic status of the painting from which the print derives and its commodification– and has since become a ubiquitous image itself. The image and artist are so well

known that the parlor game “Botticelli” was thus named because the chosen historical figure must be at least as common as Botticelli.

Despite all the corrections made by art historians over the years concerning Botticelli’s character, many myths about the artist surprisingly still survive. In one painting alone, the *Primavera* (fig.4), art historians have identified several references to Simonetta Vespucci, and concluded that Botticelli was closely associated with Marsilio Ficino and frequently at the court of Lorenzo de’ Medici.<sup>6</sup> It is easy to see how quickly we are moved to believe in fictions, but here we should attempt to see past them and concentrate on what is actually written.

A notable story repeated by innumerable sources is that of Botticelli and the Dominican friar Savonarola, who is known for his fervent preaching and takeover of Florence. Older sources declare the artist to have been a *piagnone*, a follower of Savonarola’s teachings, while more recent ones acknowledge that perhaps the myth is no more than a myth. Nevertheless, both early and recent sources cite the master’s later style and subject matter as having been greatly affected by the friar’s preaching. The image of a religiously motivated Botticelli is romantic, but rests on no concrete evidence.

There is also a particular conception of the Botticellian aesthetic that has shaped much of what has been written about the artist. Although many of his works were undoubtedly lost in the infamous ‘bonfire of the vanities,’ a large

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Barolsky, “Art History as Fiction,” *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol.17, No.34 (1996), p. 17.

corpus still exists, providing at least some insight into the artist. In addition to these, countless forgeries and paintings by Botticini and *amico di Sandro*, which emphasize specific quirks from Botticelli's paintings to give the impression of authenticity, continue to cause issues of attribution and add another element to the perception of his style.<sup>7</sup> Botticelli's prolificacy and his influence resulted in numerous paintings featuring nearly impossibly graceful figures composed primarily of long limbs, ornately styled strawberry-blonde hair, exceptional linear technique, and distant-looking Madonnas.

The primary sources relating to Botticelli are relatively few in comparison to the plethora of documents available concerning other artists. Still, there are a handful of major sources from which we learn the most about Botticelli, as well as several minor sources that mention Botticelli only in passing, but serve to refine our image of Botticelli during and shortly after his lifetime. The two versions of Vasari's *vita* of Botticelli, naturally, are among the most invaluable sources. There are a number of differences between the version published in 1550 and the second in 1568, including a redesigned introduction and the addition of the comical stories that give the reader a view into Sandro's caustic humor. Also from the sixteenth century is the Codice Magliabecchiano (1516-1530), which includes the Codice Petri, the "Libro di Antonio Billi," and the "Anonimo Gaddiano." From these we have documents such as "Notices of Florentine

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<sup>7</sup> Kanter, et al., p. 23.

Painters, Sculptors, and Architects” as well as “Notices of Florentine churches and of the works of art contained in them.”<sup>8</sup> While these do not add to the critical thought about the artist, they do help to confirm some facts in Vasari’s *vita* and the attribution of some paintings. The Anonimo Gaddiano is a particularly rich source. The “Libro Rosso,” the book in which the Compagnia di San Luca – of which Botticelli was a member – recorded information such as creditors and debtors, is indispensable. Similarly the *catasto*, the tax records kept in Florence, provides some concrete dates in Botticelli’s life, such as his birth and his residence. In addition to these, many contracts for paintings, and letters that mention Botticelli have been found, each adding to Botticelli’s history.

Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, called Alessandro Botticelli (1445 – 1510), lived and died in Florence, Italy, painting during a period that Vasari esteemed as a “golden age” for Florence.<sup>9</sup> He is also associated with the patronage of Lorenzo ‘the Magnificent’ de’ Medici. Botticelli worked primarily in tempera paint, in which he became very skilled; he is particularly known for his talent with the manipulation of line. This manifests itself most clearly in works from the period between 1480 and 1500, which is considered the height of his career.

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<sup>8</sup> Herbert P. Horne, *Botticelli: Painter of Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 343.

<sup>9</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917), E. H. and E. W. Blashfield, A. A. Hopkins, eds., Vol.3, p. 206.



As was the custom of the time, Botticelli was apprenticed to a master painter, commonly identified as Filippo Lippi, whose style is easily seen in Botticelli's early work. Some also believe him to have been part of the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio, the accepted master of Leonardo da Vinci, though art historians such as Alessandro Cecchi dispute this.<sup>10</sup> According to the *Libro rosso de' debitori e creditori*, Botticelli joined the Compagnia di San Luca on October 18, 1472. At that time he officially opened a workshop and admitted Filippino Lippi, the son of his former master, as an apprentice.<sup>11</sup>

Many of Botticelli's paintings have come to be highly recognizable. The 1475 *Adoration of the Magi* (fig.20), containing Botticelli's self-portrait and traditionally the portraits of several members of the Medici family, is an earlier painting and the most well known of his Adorations. Early sources unanimously agree that it was commissioned for the altar of Giovanni (more likely named Gaspare) di Zanobi del Lama in the church of Santa Maria Novella.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, many of Botticelli's commissions were for churches. For instance, Vasari records that the painter also executed a fresco of Saint Augustine for the Church of Ognissanti.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Alessandro Cecchi, *Botticelli* (Milan: Motta, 2005), p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Levey and Gabriele Mandel, *Complete Paintings of Botticelli* (Hamondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p.83.

<sup>12</sup> Levey and Mandel, p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> Vasari, Vol.2, p. 208.

Botticelli spent the majority of his life in Florence, though it is known that he lived for a short time in Rome, from October 27, 1481 until March 15, 1482.<sup>14</sup> During that time, Botticelli, along with three other painters, was called to Rome to help fresco the walls of the Sistine Chapel; Vasari writes that Botticelli was to be the superintendent of the project, while other sources dispute this.<sup>15</sup> His contributions to the chapel include *Scenes From The Life of Moses* and *The Temptation of Christ* in addition to a number of figures of popes. His contribution to the Vatican is notable for its beauty as well as the significance of Botticelli working outside of his normal element, which inevitably affected his art.

The height of his career occurred in the years shortly after his return from Rome. *Venus and Mars*, painted around 1483, may have been done for the Vespucci family, as indicated by the small wasps that emerge from the trunk on which Mars rests.<sup>16</sup> The proportions of the painting suggest that it was probably meant to be a panel for some kind of furniture.<sup>17</sup> The most famous of his works, the *Birth of Venus* (fig.3) and the *Primavera* (fig.4) were commissioned by another prominent Florentine family. Both paintings are believed to have been commissioned by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, the cousin of *Il*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>15</sup> See: Alessandro Cecchi, *Botticelli* (Milan: Motta, 2005), p. 192; L.D. Ettlinger, *The Sistine Chapel Before Michelangelo: Religious Imagery and Papal Patronage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Levey and Mandel, p. 97.

<sup>17</sup> Horne, p. 140.

*Magnifico*, for the Villa Medici at Castello.<sup>18</sup> Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco was also lucky enough to have *Pallas and the Centaur*, executed around the same time as the prior two paintings; it was also for the property of the Castello villa according to a 1516 inventory.<sup>19</sup>

Botticelli is also well known for his paintings of the ‘Madonna and Child’ subject. The *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (fig.12) was in the collection of the Cardinal de’ Medici and in 1675 went to that of the Grand Dukes of Tuscany. However, the tondo, with its gilt-lily frame, was most likely commissioned by the magistrate of the Massai di Camera in the late 1480s. The *Madonna of the Magnificat* is also from this time, though its origins are unknown. This was the painting, more than any other, that would influence the popular conception of Botticelli’s style for the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> These two tondos, while not as ubiquitous as the *Birth of Venus* or the *Primavera*, are excellent due to the sheer number of variants painted by the artist, his workshop, and even forgers. The religious dimension added to Botticelli by works such as these Madonnas is a subject that will play a large role in his “rediscovery” in the nineteenth century.

Finally, the *Mystic Nativity* (fig.8) is one of the last known works of Botticelli. The inscription at the top of the *Mystic Nativity* reveals that it was

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<sup>18</sup> See: Charles Dempsey, “*Mercurius Ver*: The Sources of Botticelli’s *Primavera*,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 31, (1968), pp. 251-273; Ernst H. Gombrich, “Botticelli’s Mythologies: A Study of the Neoplatonic Symbolism of His Circle,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 8, (1945), pp. 7-60; Herbert Horne, *Botticelli: Painter of Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 349; Michael Levey and Gabriele Mandel, *The Complete Paintings of Botticelli* (Hamondsworth, 1985), pp. 92, 96.

<sup>19</sup> Levey and Mandel, p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> Horne, p. 120.

painted in 1500, “during the tribulations of Italy.”<sup>21</sup> It is fascinating not only for Botticelli’s late style, but also because it is so closely associated with Savonarola’s teachings. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether or not Botticelli was associated personally with the Dominican friar or if the artist used his sermons as a basis for the painting.

Botticelli died in 1510 at the age of 66. He was buried with the Filipepi family in the Church of the Ognissanti in Florence.

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<sup>21</sup> Levey and Mandel, p. 109.

## **CHAPTER ONE: REEXAMINING BOTTICELLI IN A RENAISSANCE CONTEXT**

Naturally, it would be impossible to grasp Botticelli's modern role without first examining his status as a Renaissance artist. Most importantly, for a painter whose art has come to personify the period, he is surprisingly unlike his contemporaries. This chapter considers three of his paintings as examples of the variation and change in style that occurred over the course of his career. These visual analyses will illustrate that Botticelli's style progressively became more unique in its inherent goals. I will then clarify some of the modern myths surrounding Botticelli and his art in order to be able to get a clearer picture of the artist based on the historical data available. The foundation established by this chapter will provide the tools necessary to analyze the critical fortunes written about the artist.

The Quattrocento Florentine painters were marked by a particular style that must first be defined before truly grasping how Botticelli's art differed. Although it is not fair to say that the Quattrocento was necessarily a direct, steady march toward realism, it must be understood that critics like Vasari were concerned with a tradition best defined by Boccaccio: "The painter exerts himself to make any figure he paints – actually just a little color applied with skill to panel – similar in its actions to a figure which is the product of nature and naturally has

that action, so that it can deceive the eyes of the beholder, either partly or completely, making itself be taken for what it really is not.”<sup>22</sup> In the pursuit of bringing nature and art closer together – as can be seen in the convincing relationships between realistic figures – the fifteenth-century painters focused intently on perspective, shadow and light, and proportions and anatomy of figures.<sup>23</sup> The growing emphasis placed on observations of reality by the Quattrocento was, as perceived by Vasari, a crucial part of the progression toward the development of the Cinquecento. Botticelli, however, as we shall see in his paintings, differed from this general trend.

*Fortitude* (fig.1), a large panel piece executed around 1470 and now housed in the Galleria degli Uffizi, represents the earliest moment in his career. This painting not only shows a piece that has succumbed to the artistic influence of his contemporaries, it is also the painting that most fits within the styles and trends of the Italian Renaissance as defined by Vasari. The height of Botticelli’s corpus of works is, appropriately, represented by the *Birth of Venus* (fig.3), which was painted in the early to mid 1480s. Botticelli’s style, as it has been captured in the public imagination, is best captured in the beauty and eccentricity of this work. Nevertheless, Botticelli clearly breaks away from the old masters by whom he was previously influenced. The *History of Lucretia* (fig.6), one of Botticelli’s

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<sup>22</sup> John Hale, *Italian Renaissance Painting: From Masaccio to Titian* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1977), pp. 15-16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

last extant large paintings, illustrates the late career of the artist. The awkwardness and lack of convincing realism make it unlike those produced in his earlier career and almost entirely divergent from High Renaissance art, as if the artist had been passed by the new trends of the period. The pieces he created during his career, regardless of whether they are early or late, consistently display a lack of interest in naturalism, an overemphasis on grace, and a lack of interest in emulating ancient style; these qualities betray his status as an aberration in fifteenth-century Florence.

Defying all of the problems in the attribution of Botticelli's paintings, the *Fortitude* (fig.1) of the Uffizi gallery is unanimously identified as an early work of the artist by Vasari and those who wrote before him: Francesco Albertini, Antonio Billi, and the Anonimo Gaddiano.<sup>24</sup> The large panel was one of the seven virtues created for the Mercanzia in Florence, the remaining six of which were executed by the Pollaiuoli brothers, Piero and Antonio. The beautifully rendered figure betrays the strong impression left on the young Botticelli by Filippo Lippi. *Fortitude's* idealized and mimetic qualities resoundingly place the painting within the traditional expectations of Florentine painting. However, one must remember that these are same qualities that Botticelli deemphasized later in his career in order to achieve his unique style.

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<sup>24</sup> Horne, p. 15.

Botticelli was undoubtedly the executor of both cartoon and painting.<sup>25</sup>

The proportions of the figure are perhaps most strikingly unlike the rest of Botticelli's corpus of works. Herbert Horne wrote that "the elaborate modelling of the head" and the "fastidious design of the hands" revealed a sense of urgency on Botticelli's behalf to master "naturalistic painting," of which Domenico Ghirlandaio was the master.<sup>26</sup> The body of Fortitude is clearly elongated, though this had not been done in order to emphasize her grace, but rather to increase a sense of majesty. Calculated foreshortening of the arms and legs intend to convincingly depict a realistic body in movement. Compare her with the figures in *Judith Returning From Bethulia* (fig.2), also identified as painted around 1470, and it is easy to see the impact made by other artists. Botticelli's Judith appears to be of the same build as the virtue, but she, unlike Fortitude, does not appear majestic. Instead, Judith and her maidservant, like so many of Botticelli's figures, have dramatically long limbs to reinforce that they have been caught in a graceful mid-step. Indeed, these figures seem to have more in common with the bodies of those figures depicted by the Mannerist painters of the late sixteenth century. In this respect, Botticelli strayed from the more humbly sized figures of his Renaissance master. This is yet another example of how Botticelli would sacrifice realism for beauty; though in this painting, it seems that the artist's uncertainty in

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.



his early career seems to have tempered the master's later more radical tendencies.

The influence of Botticelli's greatest master, Filippo Lippi, is also easily identifiable in *Fortitude*. The facial features and cranial proportions of the figure clearly diverge with the traits characteristic of Botticelli's women. Fortitude has an almost exaggeratedly high brow, only emphasized by her wide forehead, which is in turn accentuated by the ringlets of hair protruding into her forehead.

Although Botticelli painted *Fortitude* with these features, they are dissimilar from the ovoid face shape he almost exclusively employed for the rest of his career.

*Pallas and the Centaur* (fig.5) and the frescoes of the scenes from the life of Moses in the Sistine chapel, both from the height of his career, exemplify Botticelli's preferred face shape. However, in the manner in which they are executed – a decidedly softer style, less deeply set, faintly lined, and smoothly detailed – Botticelli seems to have returned to his old master. This 'sweet' face, actually, recalls the style of Raphael, especially in his Florentine period.

Despite the fact that Botticelli had not yet fully developed his style, certain features remain unique, and, since this piece is from so early in Botticelli's career, have not yet been overly exaggerated. One aspect that makes this panel look so distinctly Botticellian is the fine attention to detail accorded to every facet of the painting. Botticelli styled Fortitude's hair, in particular, in a complicated array of

curls and pearls very specific to the old master's style.<sup>27</sup> So easily recognizable were these patterns that they were later identified and exploited by followers and imitators of the artist. Similarly, Botticelli elaborately painted the delicate folds of the figure's tunic, which contrast sharply with the deep folds of the red cloth she wears, by which he creates a harmonic image. However, Botticelli's painstaking efforts detract from the ease of movement suggested by Fortitude's forward step and half-drawn sword. The careful symmetry of composition generated by the placement of Fortitude's left arm and right knee result in a sense of stability, though this also counteracts her motion. Indeed, the effortless appearance of the pieces painted at the height of his career, while creating a greater ease of movement, do so only at the cost of the naturalism visible in *Fortitude*, particularly that of the background.

Since *Fortitude* was painted at such an early point in Botticelli's career, it is almost unrecognizable to those familiar with the mature style of the great master. It presents a few clues about its artist in the form of Botticelli's unique quirks, but the majority of the panel is very clearly influenced by other artists. Oddly enough, the aspects that make it stand apart from Botticelli's collection of work are also those that cause the painting to adhere to the expectations of Renaissance painting. The painting thus indicates that while Botticelli may have begun his career aligned with the prevalent tradition of artists in late fifteenth-century Italy, he chose to break from that tradition, as his art changed over time

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

and become more uniquely his. That break, as we shall see, is precisely why he could not logically be considered a good representative painter for his time.

The *Birth of Venus* (fig.3), a painting that requires almost no introduction, was painted by the master for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici at a point considered to be the zenith of Botticelli's career. The modest Venus has become an iconic figure that, along with choice handful of paintings, has come to represent the Italian Renaissance at its best. However, the unique aspects that make this painting stand out are precisely those that cause it to be an aberration in the late fifteenth century. Venus, the landscape upon which the painting is set, and the extraordinary gracefulness are factors that are all quintessentially Botticelli and reactions against Southern Renaissance norms of naturalism, the amount of attention paid to details, and realism.

Venus, naturally, is the clear subject as well as the manifestation of the many idiosyncrasies of Botticelli's paintings of this period. She is obviously modeled after the tradition of the modest Venus Pudica, a statue of the classical era. The implication of interest in classical emulation is by far the most stereotypically Southern Renaissance aspect of the painting. Nonetheless, Botticelli, in the desire to add further grace to Venus, elongated certain body parts like her arm and neck. Unlike the Venus Pudica, Botticelli's figure has an unusual left arm: she not only has an especially long forearm, but the entire limb appears to have been disconnected from her shoulder. This change allowed his Venus to

stand more upright than the ancient statue and allowed the old master to position her arm in a way that echoes her elegantly windblown hair. While this change is helpful in that respect, it is also representative of Botticelli's unconcealed apathy towards the important role realism and anatomy played in the art theory of the time. Her neck, also, is also unnaturally lengthened. Like her left arm, Venus's elongated neck resonates with the curve of her hair. The unusual length of her neck is deemphasized by the addition of a loose lock of hair, but is not sufficient to cover it up. As evidenced by even the other figures in the painting, a lack of talent on Botticelli's part is certainly not the reason for the overextended body parts. One can conclude, then, that he purposefully painted that way. Perhaps Botticelli thought this style especially beautiful, or simply preferred models with these proportions. Whatever the reason, these quirks were not appropriate in fifteenth-century Florentine art. Rather, they more closely resemble the erotic elegance of the later Mannerist period of art.

If one were to guess which qualities Botticelli most highly prized in a painting, it would undoubtedly be elegance and grace over naturalism. As mentioned above, Venus's limbs, though slightly out of proportion, add a lyrical quality to the painting that causes her to appear more elegant. The whole curve of her body, actually, gives the impression of submitting to the strong efforts on the part of the Zephyrs. The illusion of weightlessness is accentuated by her light step; the stance of her feet causes her to appear that she is barely interacting with the surface of the shell she has ridden to the shore. This, too, was done

purposefully, as is evidenced by the various figures of the *Primavera* (fig.4), painted around 1482. The light figures on the dark background of the painting interact so little with the ground beneath them – the exception being the feet of the central grace and the right foot of Mars – that they almost look like paper doll cut-outs, not unlike Masolino's 1424 Adam and Eve in the Brancacci Chapel. Botticelli entirely left out elements that would add to the perception of a realistic image, though it is unclear whether it was done intentionally or not. For example, he painted shadows to emphasize folds and contours, but used them minimally under his figures. While the overall impression is that of graceful movement, it is only achieved, once again, at the expense of the realism of the painting.

The landscape of the painting, although not its most striking element, presents one of the greatest discrepancies between Botticelli and the new styles emerging in fifteenth-century Southern Renaissance painting. Leonardo passed judgment on Botticelli in his *Trattato della Pittura*:

“He can never be universal who does not love equally all things in painting so that if one did not care for the landscape, he would consider it a thing of short and simple study, as our Botticella said, that such study was vain, because if one threw a sponge full of various colors against a wall, it would leave a spot in which one could see a beautiful landscape.”<sup>28</sup>

The seascape of the *Birth of Venus* proves that even if Leonardo did not correctly quote the artist, Botticelli at least agreed with the philosophy. Far from the immensely detailed backgrounds of Leonardo, Botticelli does not seem to have spent a comparable amount of time on the landscape as on the figures. In many of

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<sup>28</sup> Leonardo in Levey and Mandel, p. 10.

his paintings, like in the *Cestello Annunciation* (fig.10) or *Pallas and the Centaur* (fig.5), the Florentine used large elements – a wall or a cliff face, for example – which allowed him to paint less landscape. In the *Birth of Venus*, Botticelli used large laurel trees behind the nymph poised to catch Venus. The greatest part of the background is comprised of the ocean from which the figure rose, an element that seems to have interested Botticelli very little. Shifts in the color of the water, from dark in the forefront to extremely light in the back, are meant to portray depth, but it still appears rather flat due to the regular intervals of v-shaped marking in the water that are presumably waves. Although around the area of the shell, the white lines are finally painted to react to the central scene and resemble foam, the majority of the white Vs are painted in arbitrary acute and obtuse angles. In this instance, Botticelli's reliance on line instead of chiaroscuro greatly detracts from the illusion of the painting and further distances him from masters of the technique.

The land that Botticelli depicted in this famous painting did not receive a great deal of attention either. The majority of the landscape is covered, but the little bits of coastline seem also to have been hastily done. He once again used a shift in color to suggest depth, but rather than subtle changes, Botticelli uses larger jumps of a handful of shades. Additionally, the farthest plane is as sharply defined as the closest, which serves to negate the attempt at depth. Like the v-shaped waves, the coastline extends and recedes in fairly regular intervals. They, too, see some variation, but they are fairly similar and lacking in the finer details

that would grant the painting a greater sense of validity. Likewise, vegetation is only present until the third inlet, after which there are a handful of rather abstract trees. In the shadows under the nymph, Botticelli allows the viewer only one full plant, while the majority of the plant life is comprised of tiny brushstrokes of different colors to represent other grasses.

On the whole, the *Birth of Venus* is a successful Renaissance painting; it is in the details that Botticelli breaks away from his contemporaries. Nonetheless, the ease of movement in the painting and fine attention to some details, certainly capture the sense of *sprezzatura* lacking in the *Fortitude* (fig.1) of his early career. This painting, as a representative for the height of his career, suggests that Botticelli had very definite ideas about what was and was not important for his paintings. For the details in which he was interested, such as the delicate wings of the Zephyrs or the elaborate folds of the nymph's robe, Botticelli was very exact in his approach. On the other hand, it seems that he elected to bend the rules or neglect details in the specifics of anatomy or landscape. It is in these later aspects, as Leonardo pointed out, that Botticelli is not a "universal" Renaissance painter.

The *History of Lucretia* (fig.6), finally, represents the later years of Botticelli's career in which his paintings were most unlike the art being produced by his more famous contemporaries – Raphael, Leonardo, and Michelangelo. This piece is different from the previous two in that it consists of oil, rather than tempera, on wood panels known as *spalliera*. They were most likely

commissioned for the occasion of a wedding to decorate the walls of the newlywed couple's room in the Palazzo Vespucci.<sup>29</sup> However, what makes this piece most interesting is that since it is so far removed in style from the paintings he produced in the 1480s, it seems almost to have been painted by another artist entirely. The painting is characterized by awkwardness and the degeneration of naturalistic details, which offer further evidence against Botticelli's modern reputation as a true artist of the Renaissance.

In comparison to the delicate movements and subtleties dedicated to the figures of the *Birth of Venus* (fig.3), it is difficult to ignore the rather stilted quality of this painting. The figures of the *History* are stiff despite the level of excitement suggested by the various dramatic poses that he used to move the story along. In place of gentle calligraphy, these figures have yielded to strong, dominating lines, the result of which is the set of over-wrought figures.<sup>30</sup> The changes of his late career are often blamed on the commonly held story that Botticelli had fallen prey to the preaching of the Dominican friar, Savonarola, and allowed his art to suffer as a result. Alternatively, the rigidity is also seen as evidence that Vasari was correct in his account that the artist had been physically disabled at the end of his life as a consequence of prodigal behavior.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the strangeness of the *History's* style is most likely due to Botticelli's choice to execute the painting in oil, the preferred medium of the time.

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<sup>29</sup> Kanter, et al., p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> Vasari, Vol. 2, p. 216.



Although he mastered the use of tempera paint – his exquisite talent with line is undeniable – he never became accustomed to the new medium.<sup>32</sup> The fact that Botticelli was so clumsy when painting with oils is certainly not compatible with the taste of the early sixteenth century or with his role as the face for the High Renaissance in Italy.

Another aspect that detracts from the realism of the painting is the erratic use of light. Behind the legs and feet of the soldiers in the center of the panel, there are clear attempts at shadow, though these are relatively simplistic for the accomplished master. In previous pieces, Botticelli carefully applied layers of light, which lent a sense of warmth to his figures and allowed him to differentiate, with a highly sophisticated technique, textures. For the *History*, however, Botticelli painted in large blocks of light with very little variation in tone, the result of which is the harsh clarity of both figures and architecture.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the shadows are fairly uniform in intensity, regardless of how near or far they are from the figure casting them. In the group of soldiers standing by Lucretia's feet it is particularly clear that the use of shadow is, additionally, inconsistent: they do not fall at the same angle behind the soldiers and are not present at all on the building of the right forefront. The lack of attention on light in this painting is incongruous with the precision of many of the background details. This too, then, sets him apart from Leonardo, a master traditionally understood to have set the

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<sup>32</sup> Kanter, et al., p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

standards for painting for an era, who devoted several sections in his *Trattato della Pittura* to shadow.<sup>34</sup>

Once again, similar inaccuracies occur in the background of the painting. Botticelli obviously valued the study of architecture highly, especially judging by the scrupulous attention paid to the details of the background friezes.<sup>35</sup> However, consistent with many of his other pieces, the actual landscape is mostly covered. The parts still visible present a muddle of references akin to the combination of Roman and Christian architectural decoration: for the background of a classical scene, Botticelli included not only contemporary Florentine architecture, but also the Gothic façade of Netherlandish buildings.<sup>36</sup> As we shall see in the following chapter, the difference between Botticelli's landscapes and Raphael's will also show how the older master is incompatible to the artists whom he would later surpass in fame.

In the introduction to a book entitled *The Complete Paintings of Botticelli*, Michael Levey wrote an impassioned defense in favor of Botticelli's status as a Renaissance artist. He points out that Botticelli "is not known to have executed sculpture, designed buildings, written poems or theoretical treatises," all of which, despite Levey's opinion, should not be dismissed lightly. However, what is most intriguing is he also admits that Botticelli "was if anything in advance of his

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<sup>34</sup> See: Leonardo, *Treatise on Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), A. Phillip McMahon, trans., pp. 4, 61, 72, 161, 174, 209-292.

<sup>35</sup> Kanter et al., p. 60.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

period – having more in common with Pontormo than with his contemporary Ghirlandaio.”<sup>37</sup> In this sentence, however, Levey refutes himself. It is true that the emphasis Botticelli placed on gracefulness at the expense of other facets of his art would later be a mark of Mannerist painters. However, whether Botticelli was stylistically trailing behind his contemporaries or far ahead of them, he was still not *with* them. The issue at hand is not whether or not he was a painter of the Renaissance, but rather whether or not he exemplifies his period and how the answer to that question shapes how the period is defined.

It should now be clear the extent to which Botticelli’s painting disagreed with many of the conventions in late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century Italy. His style, however, is only part of the battle in trying to uncover the facts about the master from under the many myths woven around him. For these, it is necessary to remember which are grounded in fact and which have been simply fabricated to adapt to popular beliefs about the artist. These stories include the connection between Botticelli and Savonarola, and Botticelli’s relationship with the Medici family, specifically with Lorenzo the Magnificent.

The most comprehensive early history on the painter comes from, unsurprisingly, Vasari. From the mid-sixteenth century biography were born many of the modern myths that surround Botticelli. For example, Vasari brazenly attributes the artist’s decline in painting, and therefore unpopularity, to

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<sup>37</sup> Levey and Mandel, p. 5.

overspending and then succumbing to the influences of one of Florence's most infamous figures. After Lorenzo the Magnificent, the historical figure most commonly associated with Botticelli is the fiery Dominican, Girolamo Savonarola, who wrested the reigns of power in Florence from the Medici from 1494 until 1498. The friar took it upon himself personally to rid the world of evil, including the "prostitute Church" and the Medici.<sup>38</sup> The moment for which he is best remembered came in 1497. On Shrove Tuesday, a day the citizens had previously spent in revelry, Savonarola convinced a vulnerable Florence to do away with the niceties they had acquired during the materialistic rule of the Medici, an event now known as the 'bonfire of the vanities.' Objects such as perfume, wigs, fans, necklaces, songbooks, musical instruments, and dice were collected and brought by children to the pyramid-shaped scaffolding built in the Piazza della Signoria. Naturally, artists, particularly those who produced for the Medici family, were among those that suffered most at the hands of the religious fervor. Several of those who lived in Florence during the ordeal, such as Luca Landucci, have left behind haunting accounts of the events that took place, yet it is not yet known for certain which artists in particular were involved willingly and which stood back and watched their paintings turn to ashes. Instead, art historians have relied on Vasari and speculated: artists such as Lorenzo di Credi, Fra

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<sup>38</sup> Girolamo Savonarola in Desmond Seward, *The Burning of the Vanities: Savonarola and the Borgia Pope* (Stroud: Sutton, 2006), p. 169.

Bartolommeo, and, of course, Botticelli, stand accused of being among the former group of artists.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the commonly held belief, there is no proof that Botticelli was actually a follower of Savonarola. In reality, it was his brother Simone who had become a ‘piagnone,’ a sniveler, the name given to Savonarola’s followers.<sup>40</sup> Those who argue in favor cite Botticelli’s change in style, but this is an overly simplistic explanation. Rather, the fact that he was advanced in age should be taken into account when discussing his later works. Botticelli did paint the *Mystic Crucifixion* (fig.7) and the so-called *Mystic Nativity* (fig.8), but neither painting necessarily indicates that he was a follower of the priest. Instead, they show that he was susceptible to the political and religious events of his time. Vasari, or the source from which he gathered his information, was not of this mind, however, and blamed Savonarola for the artist’s ruination.

Regardless of whether or not Botticelli had actually fallen prey to Savonarola’s apocalyptic preaching, the story stuck to the artist and has affected how art historians have evaluated his work. As mentioned above, his style did, to an extent, change later in life, creating a modern problem of misattribution. The artist fashioned by the critics in the nineteenth century incited the production of countless imitations of “peevisish and unsatisfied Madonnas” in the last quarter of

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<sup>39</sup> Christopher Hibbert, *Florence: The Biography of a City* (New York: Norton & Co., 1993), p. 157.

<sup>40</sup> Horne, p. 267.

the century.<sup>41</sup> Today, the idea of the recognizable ‘proper Botticelli’ has caused some to dismiss the later paintings as workshop pieces.

The *vita* of Botticelli also introduces the idea that he was directly connected with Lorenzo de’ Medici.<sup>42</sup> Lorenzo *Il Magnifico* was the head of the powerful Medici family and an influential figure in the Republic of Florence. He is also well known for being a great patron of the arts, avidly collecting antiquities; Vasari tells us that the young Michelangelo was taken into and nurtured by Lorenzo’s court.<sup>43</sup> Logically, anyone who truly perceived Botticelli as the greatest painter of his time would assume that he was of some import to the most prominent collector of Quattrocento Florence. Unfortunately, this theory rests merely on speculation. While we at least have some paintings that indicate that Giuliano commissioned paintings from Botticelli, no documents exist to show that Lorenzo was so important a patron to the artist that, as Vasari writes, he was the only reason the artist did not die of starvation in his old age.<sup>44</sup> In fact, according to the inventory copy of 1512, Lorenzo’s collection included only two paintings by Botticelli, as compared to eight by Fra Angelico.<sup>45</sup>

Given fifteenth-century Florence’s culture of recording everything, it is doubtful that Botticelli dealt with Lorenzo without some trace of the transaction.

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<sup>41</sup> Levey and Mandel, p. 303

<sup>42</sup> Vasari, Vol. 2, p. 206.

<sup>43</sup> Laurie Fusco and Gino Corti, *Lorenzo De’ Medici: Collector and Antiquarian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 4; Vasari, Vol.4, pp. 43-44.

<sup>44</sup> Vasari, Vol. 2, p. 216.

<sup>45</sup> Marco Spallanzani, Giovanna Gaeta Bertelà, eds., *Libro d’Inventario dei Beni di Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Firenze: Associazione Amici del Bargello, 1992).

Thus, based on the evidence available, one must consider the possibility that perhaps Botticelli was not the prominent figure then that he is now. Instead, it seems that while the Medici family was certainly not unaware of him – he was, after all, commissioned to paint the portraits of the Pazzi conspirators – they were more likely not as close as has been assumed.

In judging Botticelli to be a talented painter, art history is not incorrect. However, as was shown, his artistic goals differ from those typical of the early Florentine Renaissance. By reexamining Botticelli's paintings alongside the mainstream expectation of Renaissance painting, it is evident that he, unlike his contemporaries, placed greater emphasis on grace and his own perception of beauty than mimetic representations of bodies and landscapes. Additionally, creating myths in which Botticelli is tied to aspects specific to the period served to reinforce the idea that he is a good representative for the period. Nevertheless, by taking a step back and reexamining the artist, we have a clear sense of the artist who, in the following chapters, will be reconstructed in his critical fortunes.

**CHAPTER TWO:  
THE CRITICAL FORTUNES OF BOTTICELLI,  
16<sup>TH</sup> THROUGH 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES**

Now that the highly individual nature of Botticelli's art is clear, chapter two will explore the repercussions this had on his critical fortunes in the sixteenth through the eighteenth-century. The many twists and turns in the early Botticelli narrative indicate that the development of an iconic figure is invariably dependent upon dominant thoughts about art. Raphael, whose death traditionally marks the peak of the High Renaissance, possessed a talent for emulating the eminent artists around him, and therefore serves as an excellent point of reference from which to judge how Botticelli was esteemed by artists immediately after him. Through my own visual analysis of painting comparisons, we shall see that Raphael was uninterested in Botticelli's work.

Next, I will discuss how the earliest major art historical critic, Vasari, perceived Botticelli. Botticelli's *vita*, as each artist's chapter is called, is fairly poor considering the immense popularity he enjoys now. Rather, Vasari's language and criticism demotes Botticelli to the status of a secondary painter. This is, of course, directly related to the fact that Botticelli did not influence Raphael, removing him from the developmental scheme in which Vasari was invested.



Then, Botticelli's reception in the following will be considered in light of the consequences of the Vasarian beliefs about art. Since his preoccupation with the progression of art was prevalent, little was written about Botticelli in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The rise of the Quattrocento "primitives" in the early nineteenth century was the crucial turning point for the artist's career. However, by comparing Botticelli's reception following the initial peak in interest to that of Ghirlandaio, it is clear that Botticelli was not to entirely to share the fortunes of his contemporaries either. Instead, as taste in art shifted away from the traditional reverence of Raphael, Botticelli began to rise in prominence. It is no coincidence that Botticelli's change in fortunes coincided with changes in art criticism.

Finally, this chapter will examine why Botticelli's critical fortunes rose in the eighteenth century. Tracing literary observations will show that the phenomenon of his obscurity and rediscovery, in fact, is closely tied to the manner in which ideas about art were changing. The shift in emphasis from one movement to the next illustrates how Renaissance artists fell from great historical heights to relative anonymity. Counter-intuitively, Botticelli's fate was not tied to those of the other Renaissance painters. This paradox is precisely why he is an excellent artist for a case study of the discipline.

In a pair of articles, Cecil Gould and Graham Smith proposed that Botticelli influenced Raphael. We can use their assertions as a launching point for

a discussion of the two artists. However seductive their theories, an extensive analysis shows just how different in style the artists are. This is not only clear in the examples cited by the two art historians; rather, in each comparison of their paintings, the elements contained in Raphael's painting are those more stereotypical of the Southern Renaissance as were previously defined. This rejection by Raphael is the first criticism of Botticelli.

In the article entitled "A Note on Raphael and Botticelli," Cecil Gould, former Keeper and Deputy Director of the National Gallery in London, identifies what he believed was proof of Botticelli's influence on Raphael. He is certain the connection exists, though regrettably understudied. In the Burlington Magazine piece, Gould argues that the landscape from Raphael's *Vision of a Knight* (fig.9) is a direct quotation from the so-called *Cestello Annunciation* (fig.10), which Botticelli painted shortly before the arrival of the younger master in Florence. He asserts that the figures of the castle, the fortified bridge, the porticullis over water, and the central slender tree are found in both paintings, with the last as the element that clinches the derivation.<sup>46</sup> Upon first glance one may be inclined to agree with Mr. Gould. Under close examination, however, his argument falters as these similarities prove to be either coincidental or forced. Despite the fact that they have certain aspects in common, the landscapes are remarkably different by virtue of the way they are utilized in each painting.

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<sup>46</sup> Cecil Gould, "A Note on Raphael and Botticelli," *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 120, No. 909 (Dec., 1978), pp. 839-841.

The Flemish-inspired landscape from the earlier work is but a very small aspect of it, seen through a window. This is unsurprising, as Botticelli did not study the painting of landscape for its own sake.<sup>47</sup> Raphael, on the contrary, paid great attention to detail. His landscape involves no less than six planes in addition to the foreground and fades carefully into the background. Further evidence against the attribution is found in the rock on which Raphael's castle sits. Far from a natural occurrence, the rock bears little resemblance to the one featured in the *Annunciation*. This detail is more likely something created in the mind of the young Raphael rather than a borrowed element. The fact that he repeated the motif in the *Madonna of the Meadow* only supports this claim. Like the rocks, the two landscapes are only similar on first glance, and play dissimilar roles in the contexts of each painting as a whole.

The possibility of visual evidence of Botticelli's supposed influence was revisited in a response to Mr. Gould's article. In "Botticelli and Raphael," Graham Smith agrees with the previous article and uses it as a basis for a similar attribution. Mr. Smith suggests that Raphael's *Vision of a Knight* (fig.9) may have drawn inspiration from Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* (fig.11) for the recumbent knight. Additionally, he finds similarity in the common theme of 'choice' in the two paintings: while Raphael's "knight still has his decision to make, Botticelli's

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<sup>47</sup> L.D. and Helen S. Ettlinger, *Botticelli* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 12.

Mars obviously has made his in favour of pleasure and love.’<sup>48</sup> The crossed legs, right over left, and the motif of a figure leaning back on a piece of military equipment augment Mr. Smith’s justification, but these elements are essentially the only similarities. In the calm after his tryst with the goddess, Botticelli’s Mars has thrown his head back and has fallen asleep, nude and elegantly relaxed. The Florentine artist takes this opportunity to show off his skill by depicting the beautifully toned musculature of the god through subtle gradations of light, in stark contrast to the frenzied linearity that defines the dress Venus still wears. These things considered, the central figure of Raphael’s little panel painting resembles Mars much less. The knight, unlike the relaxed Mars, is tense in his sleep, perhaps due to the choice presented to him by the two women; furthermore, his head, rather than hanging carelessly, leans gently on his shoulder. The most easily noticeable difference, however, is the viewpoint from which the figures are seen. The two figures can be seen as mirror images, but, though not perfectly frontal, that the right side of the knight’s face is visible and his left knee is bent and foreshortened suggest that he was not derived from Mars. Raphael’s interest in the antique, far from unique during the Renaissance, may actually be the explanation for how alike the torsos appear; there are likely several such reclining figures present in Renaissance painting. In fact, the pose of the little knight is comparable to the Christ of Raphael’s *Lamentation* from the predella of the

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<sup>48</sup> Graham Smith, “Botticelli and Raphael,” *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 121, No. 912 (Mar., 1979), p. 178.

Colonna Altarpiece.<sup>49</sup> Once again, the case for Botticelli's influence on Raphael rests on flimsy evidence.

Surprisingly, the juxtaposition of the works of Botticelli and Raphael proves resoundingly negative in terms of similarities outside of the religious subject matter common to the Renaissance, indicating that Raphael was not interested in the work of Botticelli. In fact there is a marked visual difference in the goals of each artist's works, especially in their depictions of pictorial space. Whereas Raphael was clearly concerned with realistic depth and interaction of figures, Botticelli displays a greater interest in the emotional intensity of the subject of the painting, sometimes resulting in distorted figures.

It would be a poor examination of the two masters that did not discuss their Madonna and Child paintings; as successful artists of the Renaissance, they obviously created numerous variations for which both artists achieved success. During the period considered to be the peak of his career, Botticelli executed his *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (fig.12), the elaborate beauty of which has made it one of his most famous paintings. Nearly 30 years later, while in Rome, Raphael painted the *Madonna della Sedia* (fig.13), which has been considered the embodiment of an Italian Madonna.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Hugo Chapman, et al., *Raphael: From Urbino to Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 155.

<sup>50</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *Raphael's Madonna Della Sedia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 5.

Let us first examine the relationship between Mother and Child. The subject was meant to be a devotional one, yet the artists took such divergent approaches toward their paintings that at first glance it is difficult to see any similarities, by no means an insolated incident when comparing their work. Indeed, the iconic Madonna and Child of the earlier painting do not share the close relationship of the other. A pentimento on the *Madonna della Sedia* at the vital point of contact between faces shows how carefully Raphael considered the angle at which the figures would face the viewer. Unsurprisingly, he was successful in creating a piece that at once directly engages and, to an extent, alienates the viewer as if he were walking in on an intensely private moment.<sup>51</sup> It is this depiction of genuine relationships that so appealed to the sixteenth century that Botticelli lacked and Raphael espoused.

The undeniably powerful relationship shared by Raphael's figures, however, is the antithesis to the Mother and Son of Botticelli's *Madonna of the Pomegranate*, in which the two figures are almost unaware of each other. Mother and Son neither look at each other nor at the viewer, instead gazing markedly past as if lost in thought or even bored. Consequently, the way in which the Virgin is meant to support the Child seems to be even more a coincidence of placement than a personal relationship, with the Child unfazed by the instability. Perhaps the most compelling point of interaction is the pomegranate, from which the

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

painting's nickname derives, where the hands of the Son rest tenderly on that of the Virgin.

It is difficult, on the other hand, to imagine Raphael's Mary without her Son. She is a mother who not only holds, but also clasps the Child in her arms so that His upper body is pulled away from the viewer, allowing for beautiful foreshortening of chubby legs and arm. The young Baptist to the right of the Son almost seems to be an afterthought; but upon further study, it is clear that the painting would appear unbalanced without him. Furthermore, John's unwavering worship serves as a pious example for the viewer; his attention, unlike Virgin and Child, could not be drawn away. Through his focus on realistic emotion, realistic settings, and realistic figures, Raphael creates a believable and personal scene that draws in the viewer.

While the piety of Raphael's Baptist can be seen paralleled in the angel on the far right of the *Madonna of the Pomegranate*, who stares intently at the Savior, the same cannot be said for many of the others who seem to have ambled into the frame. In fact, a copy from Botticelli's workshop exists in the Staatliche Museen in Berlin that features an extra figure, and another copy in the Ludlow Collection in London has subtracted two angels.<sup>52</sup> This indicates that the angels are extraneous figures that, possibly, are meant to emphasize the majesty of Virgin and Child. Thus Botticelli wonderfully paints an ethereal devotional

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<sup>52</sup> Levey and Mandel, p. 99.

picture that would not be out of place in the ornate setting for which it was most likely commissioned, in comparison with Raphael's earthbound figures.

Botticelli's *Lamentation* (fig. 14) and Raphael's famous *Entombment* (fig. 15) also clearly highlight these differences in style. Mary, portrayed by both artists as fainting and supported by other characters in the scene, once again provides means for comparison. The figures in the later painting are convincingly human; the Virgin, for example, displays tangible weight. Nearly too heavy for the preoccupied woman holding her, the limp Mary is passed on to the woman below, who was inspired by a figure in Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo* (fig. 16). The illusion of depth and real bodies is masterfully reinforced by quiet details such as the Virgin's arm, carefully placed not only behind, but also in the shadow of the kneeling woman. This group is further used to establish depth as well as a means for balancing the composition. Raphael paints the left knee of the woman receiving Mary under the shadow of the primary group, suggesting two planes in the foreground.

Conversely, Botticelli's work, from a later point in his career, is clearly not concerned with the subtleties so important to Raphael. The Virgin dominates the more compressed *Lamentation*, but does not possess the realistic quality of her counterpart in the *Entombment*. The young Evangelist gives the scene a sense of uncertainty as he seems to support the mother with the fingers of his right hand and push down on her head with left hand and chin; nor does plausible support come from the shoulders of the woman on whom Mary's left arm rests. In



addition to appearing weightless there is an enormous disparity of length between her left and right arms that only adds to her awkward appearance. Christ, precariously placed on His mother's lap, likewise either lacks in weight or is in danger of slipping; He is held essentially only by the Magdalen at His feet and at the head by another woman who gives the unsettling impression of attempting to break His neck.

Raphael avoids the problem of balancing Jesus by progressing the event by a few moments, instead painting the Son carried in a makeshift sling. The weight of His lifeless body is emphasized, even exaggerated by limp arms echoed in His Mother and the nameless men, thrusting forcefully with strained leg muscles. In comparison, two women easily handle the more heavysset Virgin. Perhaps the clearest difference between the two can be seen in the Magdalens. Studies for the *Entombment* attest to the attention given to the positioning of the figure in order to avoid interrupting the frenzied movement in the painting. Although she has lost some of the ease of movement visible in the study of the Lugt collection, the pious Mary rushes to be close to Christ, effectively strengthening the drama and diagonal composition.<sup>53</sup>

The contorted woman at the feet of Christ in the Botticelli painting gives quite a different impression. The position at which she holds her neck is not anatomically sound, looking more like a figure found in a Klimt painting rather than one created during the Renaissance. This kind of exaggeration is not simply a

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<sup>53</sup> John Pope-Hennessy, *Raphael* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 58.

result of the change in style of his late career: a study in Göttingen for the earlier *Coronation of the Virgin* reveals a deliberate distortion of the Virgin's neck in the painting. These comparisons are not to say that the painting by Botticelli is poorly executed, as even his late paintings show enormous talent. His paintings do not simply portray a photographic copy of the world, but rather another world that the artist has created from nature – very unlike Raphael's paintings, which are idealized, yet strongly rooted in reality.<sup>54</sup>

There are many avenues through which Raphael could have come into contact with Botticelli, or at the very least with his paintings. They shared a common acquaintance in Perugino, who was Raphael's master and a colleague of Botticelli's while working in the Sistine Chapel. In addition, Raphael was in Florence during his early career, from approximately 1504 until 1508, which was toward the end of Botticelli's life. Throughout his career Raphael was a student, continuously learning from other masters and emulating them in his own work; he was particularly susceptible to painters of all skill-levels before leaving for Rome. Art history has never forgotten many of the other great artists that inspired Raphael. With few exceptions, major histories about Raphael cite Perugino, Leonardo, and Michelangelo as his primary influences.<sup>55</sup> Even when discussing

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<sup>54</sup> Levey and Mandel, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Recent books that follow this tradition of major influences: Bette Talvacchia, *Raphael* (London: Phaidon Press, 2007); Pierluigi de Vecchi, *Raphael* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2002); Konrad Oberhuber, *Raphael: The Paintings* (New York: Prestel, 1999); Ed. James Beck, *Studies in the History of Art*, Vol. 17, *Raphael Before Rome* (Washington D.C., 1986); A dissenter is found in

less well-known influences, Botticelli is not discussed. Exhaustive research on the topic of Botticelli and Raphael yields no connection. Thus, there is a discrepancy between the story of Botticelli's great fame and the reality that Raphael's art betrays no evidence of influence by the elder master.

Giorgio Vasari's celebrated *Lives of the Artists* is the first important art history survey for the period. In presenting his list as the "most excellent" artists, he consequently played a large part in the formation of the canon of Renaissance artists. While, as mentioned before, Botticelli was one of the seventy artists chosen by the art historian, his *vita* relegates him to a secondary status, unquestionably on a lesser tier than that reserved for Vasari's beloved Raphael, Leonardo, and Michelangelo. Aside from the sheer imbalance in length – Raphael's *vita* is significantly longer than Botticelli's – it is clear from the content and the language Vasari used to describe Botticelli's life that the author considered him to be comparable with a group of artists far beneath divine status. Nonetheless, a critical analysis of the Botticelli *vita* provides a great deal of information, especially when contrasting him with Francesco Francia, a painter and medalist contemporary to Botticelli and Raphael.

Wonderful resource that he is, Vasari did not attempt to seem objective in his *vite*. Rather, he is quick to share his opinion about which artists deserved the most praise. Consequently, Raphael's *vita* is marked by generous approval and his

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Hugo Chapman, et al., *Raphael: From Urbino to Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). The authors contend that Raphael was not apprenticed to Perugino (p. 16).

chapter begins with nothing less than an expression of appreciation to heaven for having shared the divine being with the world.<sup>56</sup> Botticelli, too, receives a certain amount of admiration, though not for any deed of his own. Rather, in order to aggrandize the painter, Vasari associates him with the “illustrious Lorenzo de’ Medici the elder,” under whom it “was truly an age of gold for men of talent.”<sup>57</sup> Immediately, then, we begin to see that Vasari clearly saw the two artists on different planes: the sacred and the secular. Whereas Raphael’s *vita* is extremely detailed, Vasari even records Giovanni Santi’s desire to have Raphael breastfed by his mother, Botticelli’s lacks many important details, including the correct date of his death.<sup>58</sup> Obviously, Vasari, having written in the mid-sixteenth century, was more likely to have access to information about the younger master, but the art historian seems to have gathered only the minimum necessary to write about the Florentine. Botticelli’s *vita* is little more than a catalogue of his works with stories added to the end. Stylistically, Vasari provides even less in the way of praise or criticism. The art historian used general adjectives like beautiful, graceful, and diligent to describe Botticelli’s art, but did not go into any particular critical detail about any piece. Based on this, it is difficult to determine why Vasari had deemed Botticelli to be one of the seventy. The last section, added after the story of his decline and death, seems as if it were merely tacked onto the rest, which only further accentuates the sloppiness that marks Botticelli’s *vita*. Judging by this

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<sup>56</sup> Vasari, Vol.3, pp. 124-125.

<sup>57</sup> Vasari, Vol.2, p. 206.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Vol.3, p. 126; Vol.2, p. 220.

comparison, one could surmise that Vasari would be surprised to learn that Raphael had fallen so far from prominence and Botticelli had become more widely known.

In actuality, Botticelli's *vita* is much more closely related to that of Francesco Raibolini, called Francia, a Bolognese goldsmith and painter. The *vite* share many aspects in common, among these are an introduction without flourish, a plain discussion consisting mainly of a cataloguing of works and an exaggerated story pertaining to their deaths. Although Francia lacks the added benefit of being aligned with Lorenzo the Magnificent, his *vita* is not unlike Botticelli's in that it begins simply with his birth. The fact that their *vite* do not begin with some kind of general discussion of the artist sets them apart from other artists in the second volume. The *vite* of Andrea del Verrochio and Benozzo Gozzoli, for example, do not include the pomp and circumstance of Raphael, but at least have a short introduction to the artists' career. This difference may also be an indication of Vasari's judgments on the artists. In the same manner that Botticelli's *vita* was mainly a timeline based on his commissions, Francia's is also, though his was written chronologically. It is likely that Vasari had less access to personal stories about Francia than he did about Botticelli due to the distance between Bologna, Francia's city, and Florence, the home of both Botticelli and Vasari. Francia's *vite* does include, however, an elaborate fable that surrounds his death.<sup>59</sup> It is fairly certain that the Bolognese artist did not die from depression after seeing

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<sup>59</sup> Vasari, Vol.2, pp. 314-315.

Raphael's St. Cecilia; likewise, Botticelli was most likely not as destitute as Vasari claimed.<sup>60</sup> Raphael's death, too, is fantastic, but differs from Vasari's stories for Botticelli or Francia in that dying on Good Friday, also the day of Raphael's birth, added another layer of meaning to the untimely end to a career in its height.<sup>61</sup> Regardless of the veracity, the deaths of Botticelli and Francia, according to Vasari, are fairly miserable. The similarities between the *vita* of Botticelli and that of this lesser-known artist are undeniable. A close reading of these three *vite* places Botticelli and Francia on one plane, and Raphael on another, much higher, one.

By the time of Raphael's apparent rejection of Botticelli, the Florentine artist had already passed his peak. As Raphael's influence rose, those who did not influence him, like Botticelli, became little more than names in Vasari's *Vite*. Although the fact that so little was written is revealing in itself, the content of these documents is also beneficial to an understanding of Botticelli's role for two full centuries.

Vasari remained the only source of interest for a while, as the contributions made by Filippo Baldinucci and Pellegrino Antonio Orlandi show. Baldinucci's 1681 *Notizie de' Professori del Disegno* stands apart as a literary remnant of Botticelli's career in the seventeenth century. Rather than add to the

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<sup>60</sup> Annotations by E. H. and E. W. Blashfield and A. A. Hopkins in Vasari, p. 220.

<sup>61</sup> Vasari, Vol.3, pp. 221-222.

painter's reputation, the art historian merely paraphrases from Vasari, writing that he was of "such an extravagant and unquiet mind," and "a very good painter."<sup>62</sup> Likewise, Orlandi chose to include Botticelli in the third edition of the 1753 *Abecedario Pittorico*, but takes the same from Vasari about an artist with an "extravagant and bizarre mind."<sup>63</sup> The fact that even an accomplished and thorough art historian like Baldinucci glossed over Botticelli is indicative of his place, as well as that of the other Quattrocento artists, in the sixteenth century.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Luigi Lanzi included Botticelli in Epoch I of his *History of Painting in Italy*, though even then it is in an unfavorable comparison to Mantegna.<sup>64</sup> Lanzi primarily discusses Botticelli's position and works in the Sistine Chapel, believing he was the superintendent of the project, most likely due to Vasari's claim. Interestingly, this comes immediately after declaring the pontiff "unskilled in the fine arts."<sup>65</sup> The art historian also makes mention of Botticelli's smaller paintings. More worthy of note is that the majority of the discussion on Botticelli is to be found within Lanzi's section on engraving rather than painting. In fact, the art historian shared that "Botticelli is here considered an engraver from about 1474."<sup>66</sup> From this we can understand that while the artist was not forgotten, the Botticelli of the

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<sup>62</sup> Filippo Baldinucci in Levey and Mandel, p. 10.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Luigi Lanzi, *History of Painting in Italy* (London: H. G. Bohn 1847), Thomas Roscoe, trans., p. 87.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was understood as almost an entirely different artist.

While the Quattrocento artists as a group suffered until the nineteenth century – they were rarely discussed in seventeenth-century texts, overshadowed by High Renaissance artists like Raphael and contemporary painters – Botticelli’s sharp ascent in popularity is still a singular event. This is more evident when his critical reception is compared to that of one of his contemporaries, Domenico Ghirlandaio.

If one sets aside the fact that Botticelli was far better known than Ghirlandaio, it is easy to see the many similarities between the two painters. Although Ghirlandaio lived for a slightly shorter period of time, they had a competition of sorts when commissioned to paint frescoes of two church fathers for the Ognissanti church.<sup>67</sup> They were both written as rather minor painters in Vasari’s masterwork and, until Botticelli’s rapid ascent in fame, they shared the same poor critical reception as the other Quattrocento painters. The fifteenth-century artists once again became worthy of interest to historians only in the late eighteenth century, but it was only through the interest of artists like the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in England, with the help of the earlier writings of Franz Kugler and Karl Friedrich Baron von Rumohr, that the “primitives” came to be

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<sup>67</sup> Jean Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 2.



fully appreciated.<sup>68</sup> It was in this new environment that Crowe and Cavalcaselle wrote about both Botticelli and Ghirlandaio in *A New History of Painting in Italy*. Whereas the former did not fare as well in this account, their thoughtful discussion of the latter is the zenith of his artistic reception. This, however, was a short-lived victory, as Ghirlandaio would proceed to once again fall out of favor. That Botticelli did not adds to the gap between him and the other Quattrocento artists.<sup>69</sup>

Vasari praised Ghirlandaio for his great mimetic skills, but acknowledged his primitive faults. According to the *vita*, in his youth the artist drew “the most accurate resemblances” of passers-by in a matter of seconds as a youth. Vasari also admired Ghirlandaio’s unclothed figure in Santa Maria Novella, but noted that “there is not to be discovered in it that entire perfection” that the author believed art had reached in his own day.<sup>70</sup> Thus, Vasari considered Ghirlandaio to be, if not one of the great masters, at least an appropriate painter to fit between Masaccio and Leonardo in his developmental scheme. The nineteenth-century art historians, who did not respect mimesis for its own sake, saw this in a negative light and wrote about him accordingly.<sup>71</sup> Bernard Berenson, in 1896, evaluated him as a “mediocrit[y] with almost no genuine feeling for what makes paintings a

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> Vasari, Vol.2, pp. 168, 179.

<sup>71</sup> Cadogan, p. 7.

great art.”<sup>72</sup> While Ghirlandaio has received more favorable criticism since then, he certainly falls far behind Botticelli in terms of popularity.<sup>73</sup>

The decline in interest in Botticelli continued until a small group of rebellious artists, known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, would reverse this course. As late as 1762, Count Francesco Algarotti’s *Saggio Sopra La Pittura*, which was immediately translated into English, French, and German, recounted the opinion of Europe on Raphael as an artist “universally allowed to have attained that degree of perfection, beyond which it is scarce lawful for mortals to aspire.”<sup>74</sup> In this light, it is easy to see that Raphael, in addition to Michelangelo and Leonardo, was placed at the pinnacle of art, the ideal all subsequent artists strove to reach. Hence, through the emulation of their successors, the masters of the High Renaissance came to form the foundation of western art. As it is impossible to detach artist from style, Raphael was necessarily tied to the aspects of the art theory of his period, such as ‘beauty,’ the ‘ideal,’ mimesis, and realism, and thereby embodied the High Renaissance. Even if Raphael had truly reached perfection, the assertion poses a problem: Raphael did not keep to one constant style, but developed a set of styles commonly divided into three distinct periods: his earliest ‘Peruginesque’ manner, the emulation of Leonardo and Fra

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<sup>72</sup> Bernard Berenson in Cadogan, p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> A simple search of the BHA for each artist returns with 284 sources for Ghirlandaio and 620 for Botticelli. Another factor to be taken into account is that, at present, Botticelli’s name recognition far surpasses Ghirlandaio’s: a google search (4/11/09) comes up with nearly 8 times as many hits for Botticelli.

<sup>74</sup> Gombrich, *New Light on Old Masters*, p. 125

Bartolommeo in Florence, and the influence of Michelangelo and artistic maturity of Rome.<sup>75</sup> Due to his adapting style, later artists and critics began to claim that Raphael's art experienced a rise and decline. Tracing the variation in points identified as the peak illustrates how popular opinions about art were gradually shifting.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, three articles written for *Propyläen* (1798, 1799, 1800) by Heinrich Meyer mourned a trend that suggested a greater appreciation for Raphael's Florentine period over the advances he had made in Rome.<sup>76</sup> Previously, those works Raphael produced for the Vatican were held as the standard against which all following paintings were to be judged, and his death was viewed the fine line between Renaissance and Mannerism. However Meyer's lament shows us when this trend began to change. He attributes the change to "letting our sympathies decide in a matter where only reason should be allowed to judge...in the earlier period he desired to please everybody..."<sup>77</sup> It is significant that he attributes his judgment to reason, which popular criticism would reject in the next century.

Despite several appeals in defense of Raphael's progress toward perfection in Rome, Meyer recorded that a collection of artists gathered in Rome in his time had already judged against the Florentine works. Meyer later explained in *Neu-deutsch romantische Kunst im neunzehnten Jahrhundert* that the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>77</sup> Heinrich Meyer quoted in Gombrich, *New Light on Old Masters*, p. 131.

community had granted their attention instead to the old master's *Entombment* and *Disputa* since they liked to copy those best.<sup>78</sup> It is in these discernments of taste that we see the beginning of the anti-academic movement associated with the dawn of Romanticism. The shift is directly related to the generational turnover of thought caused by that new movement. Whereas the eighteenth century saw a concern with the rise of art to perfection, Ernst Gombrich theorized that the young artists that survived the bloody French Revolution were consumed with "the dangers of corruption, the vicious reign of sensuality and meretriciousness in the arts of the *ancien régime* and in the centuries that had brought this debasement."<sup>79</sup> In the paranoia of that atmosphere it is natural that those artists were in search of the innocence of simple piety in the place of the relatively over-elaborate High Renaissance. Unfortunately for Raphael's career – but fortunately for Botticelli – obsessive searches are seldom easily satisfied; the Florentine period, too, was also to be lumped with Rome as imperfect.

Shortly thereafter, in 1811, Count Uexküll wrote a letter revealing a further reversal of taste. A group of artists "with rare talent" had gathered in Rome and were painting in a new style in which everything "must be severe." They considered the early Germans before 1520 "acceptable," and only the progression of artists between Giotto and Raphael to be "the true adepts of art," but found everything Raphael produced after his beginnings in Urbino and

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., pp. 131-132.

Perugia to be an “aberration of the great man.” Raphael’s ‘perfection’ was pushed back once again in the spirit of increasing progressivism.<sup>80</sup>

This constant revision of popular opinion, which looked to earlier and earlier points for a zenith, may seem counterintuitive. Any student of Raphael can identify that he acquired several skills between the earliest part of his career and the end of his Florentine sojourn. Nevertheless, as time passed these acquired skills became less meaningful to those who looked back at the Renaissance. In this manner art criticism was constantly and deliberately reevaluating the earlier artists. It also shows how these nineteenth-century artists and critics were judging a period in the context of their own opinions and those of their time rather than the environment of Renaissance Florence. Surely, how artists like Raphael – and Botticelli – were received in their lives should be taken into account when discussing aberrations. The nineteenth-century artists looked to their predecessors not to judge them in historical terms so much as to inform understandings about their own nineteenth-century preferences and theories of art.

A year later, Peter Cornelius, one of these German artists, finally discounted Raphael altogether. Reminiscent of the religious language traditionally used to describe the once ‘divine’ artist, Cornelius dubbed Raphael’s works in Rome as the “strongest poison,” and the artist as a spirit that had “fall[en] from grace” after having been “a spirit who had beheld the All-highest.”<sup>81</sup> In England,

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<sup>80</sup> Count Uexküll in Gombrich, *New Light on Old Masters*, p. 132.

<sup>81</sup> Cornelius in Gombrich, *New Light on Old Masters*, p. 132.

the appropriately-named Pre-Raphaelites and John Ruskin, the same art historian that would soon champion the cause of Botticelli, also denounced Raphael's masterpieces.<sup>82</sup> Thus, over the course of the nineteenth-century beliefs about art previously unquestioned were overturned.

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<sup>82</sup> Gombrich, *New Light on Old Masters*, p. 132.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD AND BOTTICELLI IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

As a result of this change in opinion the nineteenth century saw the rejection of the genealogy of artists that extended back to Raphael. In order to critique the old-masterish softness and elusive brushwork taught by their contemporary, Sir Joshua Reynolds, at the Royal Academy of Art, the Pre-Raphaelites had to attack its progenitors and find, or create, a new past to which they could tie their own work.<sup>83</sup> Unsurprisingly, the dissenters identified Raphael's career as the point of 'corruption' and looked to the Early Renaissance for inspiration. In this fashion, Ruskin remarked, "So much the worse for Raffaele. I have been a long time hesitating, but I have given him up to-day, before the St. Cecilia. I shall knock him down, and put up Perugino in his niche."<sup>84</sup> Compared with their more famous followers, these earlier artists were seen as more authentic. Among those artists Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites 'found' a painter who was, as discussed above, very much unlike Raphael: Alessandro Botticelli.

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<sup>83</sup> Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 35.

<sup>84</sup> John Ruskin in Francis Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion, and Collecting in England and France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 34.

Botticelli's case stands out because his fortunes are not stagnant, and seem to consistently stand apart from the groups with which he is meant to be associated. Raphael's and Vasari's rejection of Botticelli established an artistic scheme of which the Florentine master was not a part. As time passed, the High Renaissance style flourished through its influence upon a genealogy of artists, and Botticelli was forgotten. A reversal of fortune spawned a revival of the Quattrocento artists, including Botticelli, but he was not simply one of many. Rather, he truly rose only after the other "primitives" had once again been discarded. Botticelli's fortunes are not linked to his period; they are dependent upon the shifts in art criticism, making him an excellent case study for understanding the discipline. The art historical interpretations provide insight into Botticelli, but more significantly, into the changes and developments in art criticism and theory.

This chapter will focus on nineteenth-century artists and critics whose interest in Botticelli brought him prominence. I will begin by showing how the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and its beliefs brought another interpretation to Botticelli's history. We will see that the central tenets of their movement exemplify the changes in taste in art occurring at the time. Likewise, by examining the paintings of some of the later painters associated with the Brotherhood – those, like Evelyn De Morgan and Edward Burne-Jones, who had been most exposed to Botticelli – the strong impact Botticelli made in their art is obvious. Their fascination with the Quattrocento painting is revelatory about



Botticelli and how they perceived him. Next, I will discuss how critics like John Ruskin and Walter Pater interpreted Botticelli into an artist to which modern painters could refer. Ruskin had formed a separate opinion about art than that touted by the Royal Academy. Thus, Botticelli and the ‘strangeness’ of his compositions would come to be used as a counterbalance to the mimesis that mainstream High Renaissance painters revered. Considering why nineteenth-century England was the site of the Quattrocento painter’s artistic resurrection, then, will accordingly serve to improve our comprehension of the artists and theory of the time. More importantly, however, the nineteenth century provides yet another lens through which Botticelli and his works can be examined, granting us significant insight on his style and his modern character.

Before 1830, the English had to travel abroad to Italy, Paris, or Berlin if they wanted to see a Botticelli painting on display. Although several of his works were easily accessible in churches, few English tourists went out of their way while on their grand tours to see his paintings.<sup>85</sup> However, this was destined to change over the course of a very short amount of time. Whereas a buyer could not be found for the *Mystic Nativity* (fig.8) in 1811 and no Botticelli had ever been

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<sup>85</sup> Michael Levey, “Botticelli and Nineteenth-Century England,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol.23, No.3/4, (Jul.-Dec., 1960), p. 297.

shown in a public exhibition to date, it was purchased by Fuller Maitland in 1828, later attracting substantial attention in exhibitions of the nineteenth century.<sup>86</sup>

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, was among the first Englishmen to value Botticelli, and his admiration would come to be shared by other Pre-Raphaelites and critics. The high esteem in which the Brotherhood held the painter would eventually help to cultivate a national fascination, an object of praise for England's aesthetes.<sup>87</sup> In reading their works it becomes apparent that these men viewed art very differently than Botticelli's direct contemporaries. Ruskin's work, *Modern Painters*, gives an indication of how the art world was self-consciously changing, and few would be more affected by it than its artists and critics. As is made clear by nineteenth century writings and artworks, not only were his rediscoverers a product of their own environment, so was Botticelli's fame.

In order to understand why the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood would have chosen Botticelli as a worthy artist with whom to identify, it is worth considering what the artists were protesting and what they held up as the proper characteristics of a Pre-Raphaelite painting. As can be surmised from their name, the Pre-Raphaelites were among those who saw Raphael's career as the beginning of an artistic decline. In their artistic environment, the collection of artists felt contempt

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297-298.

<sup>87</sup> Barbara J. Watts, "The Pre-Raphaelites and the International Competition for Sandro Botticelli's Dante Drawings Manuscript," *Pre-Raphaelite Art in its European Context*, Susan P. Casteras, Alicia Craig Faxon, eds., (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995), p. 85.

for those who wished to be the new Raphael or Leonardo.<sup>88</sup> In reaction, Dante Rossetti, his brother, William Michael Rossetti, James Collinson, John Everett Millais, Frederic George Stephens, Thomas Woolner, and William Holman Hunt found in each other a shared opinion and created the Brotherhood in 1848. Its founders treated the new group as a very serious matter and as such they agreed upon the necessary requirements of a Pre-Raphaelite:

(1) To have genuine ideas to express; (2) to study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them; (3) to sympathise with what is direct and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote; and (4) most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues.<sup>89</sup>

The vague boundaries set by the Brotherhood would later prove unfortunate for the survival of the group, and many, including D.G. Rossetti, would falter from the credo. Even so, their intentions and how they relate to Renaissance painting are paramount to understanding their connection to Botticelli.<sup>90</sup>

The second statement is not entirely expected of a movement whose style, not unlike that of Botticelli, is marked by linearity and flatness. One would imagine that this, at least, is an ideal that had been achieved by the Renaissance artists and their modern emulators; why then would the Pre-Raphaelites feel the need to delineate this requirement? The answer lies in John Ruskin's preeminent work, *Modern Painters*, in which he goes into great detail about how to properly depict nature. Artists, he believed, that have only learned to represent any natural

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<sup>88</sup> Percy H. Bate, *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters, Their Associates and Successors* (New York: AMS Press, 1972), p. 5.

<sup>89</sup> John E. Phythian, *The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: G. Newnes Limited, 1905), p. xv.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

object faithfully have “only learned the language by which [their] thoughts are to be expressed.”<sup>91</sup> It is clear from this that the Pre-Raphaelites did not, in fact, perceive the Italian Renaissance masters to have “expressed” nature. This illustrates how over the course of the nineteenth century a new conception of art was victorious over the conception Count Algarotti had believed to be catholic. Ernst Gombrich explains it best: “Briefly, the essence of art was no longer seen in its power of dramatic evocation, but in its quality of lyrical expression.”<sup>92</sup> The Pre-Raphaelite strategy for depicting nature was in the “minute rendering of natural objects,” which Holman Hunt stated, “the Pre-Raphaelites, as young men, determined should distinguish their works.”<sup>93</sup>

Their third tenet most explicitly references the other painters and relates clearly back to the second injunction; it expands upon the prior, closely related to Ruskin’s assertion, in reinforcing that their art, as opposed to that of others, was born of their own observations. The final enumeration makes transparent the general nature of the aims of the Brotherhood. The young men were sufficiently united to rise in rebellion against artistic standards set by the English Royal Academy of Art and its founder, to whom they so respectfully referred as “Sir Slossua.”<sup>94</sup> They were determined to reform the art of England, the level of

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<sup>91</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, (New York, 1987), David Barrie, ed., p. 6.

<sup>92</sup> Gombrich, *New Light on Old Masters*, p. 133.

<sup>93</sup> Phythian, p. xv.

<sup>94</sup> Barringer, p. 35.

disarray of which was expressed by Constable's morbid 1821 prophecy that within thirty years English art would have ceased to exist.<sup>95</sup>

These ideals of the Pre-Raphaelites grant valuable insight as to why Botticelli was revived at this art historical period; their favor suggests that in his paintings, the Brotherhood found many of the specific attributes they wanted to reintroduce to modern English art. One does not have to search hard to find Botticelli's influence on the Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>96</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti's admiration of the Florentine artist was exceptionally great, so much so that in 1867 he bought the portrait of Smeralda Bandinelli, recognized as being of the master's hand, though it has since been demoted in status.<sup>97</sup> It has also been suggested that this painting was a possible inspiration for some of Rossetti's female half-lengths.<sup>98</sup>

Botticellian qualities can be detected throughout the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in their treatment of line and acute attention to detail. Countless sources state that members of the Brotherhood were interested in the Quattrocento artist, but one is hard-pressed to find any concrete examples discussed. The works of two painters in particular, Edward Burne-Jones and Evelyn De Morgan, both from the third wave of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, demonstrate exactly how Botticelli's unique style manifested itself in Pre-

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<sup>95</sup> Phythian, p. vii.

<sup>96</sup> Watts, p. 85.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>98</sup> Ellis Waterhouse, "Holman Hunt's 'Giovanni Bellini' and the Pre-Raphaelites' Own Early Italian Pictures," *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 123, No. 941, (Aug., 1981), p. 474.

Raphaelite art. The aspects borrowed by the nineteenth century artists, one should note, coincide with those rejected by Raphael.

The group consisting of the original authors of the Pre-Raphaelite manifesto was short lived, breaking up irreparably in 1853.<sup>99</sup> The developing style of Edward Burne-Jones, however, was considered in the 1880s to be the new form of Pre-Raphaelitism, which would remain through the end of the century.<sup>100</sup>

Burne-Jones's choice to exhibit at the elite Grosvenor Gallery exhibition in 1877 caused a stir, but the fame that he gained as a consequence surely encouraged the influence of Botticelli on later artists like Spencer Stanhope, John M. Strucwick, John Waterhouse, and Evelyn De Morgan.<sup>101</sup> As will be made clear, the influence of Botticelli on De Morgan is great. In this way Burne-Jones played a fairly large role in the continuing legacy of the old master on the new art.

In an early essay first printed in the *Fortnightly Review*, Algernon Charles Swinburne makes reference to Burne-Jones in his discussion of Filippino Lippi. The figure of a Sidonia by 'Lippino,' he states, was executed "scarcely less in the manner of his master" and especially "will she recall the heroine of Meinhold to those who have seen Mr. E. Burne Jones's nobler drawing..."<sup>102</sup> It is fitting that the author alluded to Burne-Jones, an artist clearly inspired by Botticelli. His

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<sup>99</sup> Timothy Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (New York: Praeger, 1974), pp. 106-107.

<sup>100</sup> Jan Marsh and Pamela G. Nunn, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 80.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>102</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence," *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), pp. 329-330.

painting of *Aurora* (fig.17) from 1896 is one of many excellent examples. Despite her overly static appearance, in her stride she closely resembles the Grace nearest Mercury in *Primavera*. Like that of Botticelli's figure, Aurora's ethereal nature is suggested by feet that step on the dock with careful ease. Aurora does not appear to interact directly with the ground beneath her, suggesting a degree of elegant weightlessness characteristic of the women painted by Botticelli. In contrast, Raphael's figures exist convincingly with their surroundings. For example, the Virgin of the *Sistine Madonna*, who literally walks on clouds, stands more firmly than the Grace or Aurora, yet she retains an undeniably supernatural quality.

The folds in the fabric on Aurora's dress, on the other hand, negate the movement established by the borrowed element. Though the end result looks artificial, the straight, dark folds are meant to enhance the graceful flow suggested by her light step. This also is consistent with Botticelli's style. Unlike many of his later contemporaries, Botticelli did not make the switch to oil, choosing instead to continue working in tempera, allowing him to master the linear technique that marks his paintings. Much like the garments of the rooftop angels in the *Mystic Nativity*, Burne-Jones painted deep, dark pockets to indicate moving fabric. The inorganic appearance of Aurora's dress is exacerbated by the abrupt shift in the folds, which are vertical until about the point where her legs begin; this also occurs in Botticelli's angels. Of course, it would seem strange for Burne-Jones to have modeled a walking figure after three seated figures, but the *Mystic Nativity*

(fig.8) was well-known in England at the time.<sup>103</sup> Further, although many of the Pre-Raphaelites chose to revive the use of tempera painting, Burne-Jones painted *Aurora* in oil, which indicates that his use of a linear style was deliberate. Raphael, obviously, painted in a more naturalistic manner that the Pre-Raphaelites rejected. Rather than linearism, Raphael exploited oil's capabilities in order to create depth through extremely subtle gradations of light.

Aside from the familiar models-turned-love-interests, few women are associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Of these, Evelyn Pickering De Morgan, who exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery alongside Edward Burne-Jones and George Frederick Watts, is a significant player in the realization of Botticelli's popularity.<sup>104</sup> Born in 1855, she was the product of a generation of artists that had grown up while the Florentine was rising to fame. Furthermore, she gained access to many more works by Botticelli than her Pre-Raphaelite predecessors through visits to her uncle's home in Florence.<sup>105</sup> De Morgan was the niece of Spencer Stanhope, but also was soon said to be "one of the most faithful imitators of Mr Burne-Jones" and likened by critics to Cimabue, Mantegna, and, of course, Botticelli.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Levey, p. 298.

<sup>104</sup> De Morgan Centre, "About Evelyn De Morgan née Pickering," April 2003, <[http://www.demorgan.org.uk/biogs/eve\\_dm.htm](http://www.demorgan.org.uk/biogs/eve_dm.htm)> (4 Dec 2008).

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Marsh and Nunn, p. 80.



De Morgan's *Flora* (fig.18), an almost exact contemporary of Burne-Jones's *Aurora*, draws, amazingly, even more blatantly from Botticelli for inspiration. De Morgan produced the painting in 1894 as a celebration of Florence, the city in which it was painted, and its Renaissance artists. It includes several references to Florence and especially to Botticelli's *Primavera* (fig.4).<sup>107</sup>

De Morgan's figure, first of all, appears to be an amalgam of both Flora and Venus from the old Florentine master's painting. In her stance she is nearly a mirror image of Botticelli's Venus. There are some differences: the nineteenth century Flora holds her right arm in the center of her body rather than at the hip and drops her left arm instead of holding it up as if in benediction. However, like Venus, she is made exaggeratedly elegant by an s-shaped contrapposto stance, identically tilted head, and most tellingly, the impossibly long neck found in so many of Botticelli's female figures. Moreover, the red sash of the *Flora* figure recalls that held by the *Primavera* Venus. The rest of her dress is a clear reference to the *Primavera* Flora not only in the little flowers that cover the garment, but also in the way it falls. As with the *Aurora*, the Pre-Raphaelite utilized linear folds, though Flora's costume, like Botticelli's, relies more on countless lines that result in sensational, gravity-defying creases in the fabric. The hair of De Morgan's figure seems to allude to the central figure from the *Birth of Venus* in the way strawberry blonde locks, a color to which Botticelli was most certainly

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<sup>107</sup> De Morgan Centre, "Flora (1894)," April 2003, <<http://www.demorgan.org.uk/collections/flora>> (4 Dec 2008).

drawn, float away from the head. Interestingly, in some details De Morgan has taken Botticelli's style one step further: Flora's dress features more frenzied, unrealistic folds; her hair is not blown by Zephyr, causing it to look artificially suspended; she retains the relatively simple, yet visually appealing, red fabric of the *Primavera* Venus, but twists it twice and adds red beads. In this way, De Morgan reminds the viewer that although she admires Botticelli, she is not only copying him; she is also interpreting the Florentine painter and "expressing" nature in a different manner.

Such is also the case with the background of De Morgan's *Flora*. What little that can be seen behind Flora, who fills the greater part of the canvas, virtually duplicates that of Botticelli's *Primavera*. Indeed, one can almost imagine De Morgan merely flipping a switch for more light on the wooded background and painting the image before her. The most similar elements are the little flowers that spring up from beneath Flora's feet and remain uncrushed, though Botticelli's are rather stylized and De Morgan's more naturalistic. Like the *Primavera*, *Flora* uses the vegetation surrounding the head of the central figure to create an anti-halo that contrasts with the light peeking from around the plant mass. In this case, however, the additional light in De Morgan's painting dilutes the dramatic effect of Botticelli's piece created by the sharp shifts from light to dark between goddess, plant, and sky. Rather than reproduce the orange grove in *Primavera*, the nineteenth-century painter inserted either a nescola or loquat tree, whose larger leaves received more detailed attention from the artist, but result in a less dramatic

silhouette.<sup>108</sup> In dealing with the background, *Flora* benefited from the greater amount of light. The resulting subtle elements, such as the inclusion of little birds and leaves of varying shades of green, adds depth and an organic quality that escaped Botticelli's works. De Morgan thus imposes the Pre-Raphaelite obsession with carefully observed nature onto a Quattrocento painting style.

Paintings like *Flora* and *Aurora* demonstrate the artistic impact of the Pre-Raphaelite rejection of the High Renaissance in favor of earlier artists. The nineteenth century witnessed a flux in artistic conventions and expectations; in Britain, the Pre-Raphaelites challenged the Royal Academy's Raphael with their Botticelli. Regardless of whether this was a positive or negative change for English art, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood reaction against art was extremely beneficial to the critical fortunes of Botticelli.

From the reemergence of the art of Botticelli arrived the question of who the artist Botticelli was. After artists rediscovered him, interest in the Renaissance painter grew among art historians and critics. Starting with Walter Pater and John Ruskin, and then with the scholarship of Herbert Horne, art historians developed the myth of Botticelli that is known today.

The critic John Ruskin, a figure closely related to the Pre-Raphaelites, asserted that he was the first to identify the genius of Botticelli, but it was Walter Pater's essay entitled "A Fragment on Sandro Botticelli" that truly revived the

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

reputation of the forgotten master in England. Originally found in the *Fortnightly Review*, he would later include it as a chapter in his 1873 work *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*.<sup>109</sup> All the while, Pater was aware of a shift in artistic tastes, remarking that “people have begun to find out the charm of Botticelli’s work, and his name, little known in the last century, is quietly becoming important.”<sup>110</sup> Pater’s choice of Botticelli is in itself interesting: Botticelli is one of only three painters included and his chapter is exceptional in the unorthodox and effusive praise Pater bestows on him.<sup>111</sup>

The Botticelli of Pater’s essay is not the iconic Florentine artist known today. Rather than describing him as part of the canon of Italian Renaissance artists, Pater praises Botticelli for departing from the “simple religion” of Giotto and his followers and the “simple naturalism” that grew from it.<sup>112</sup> Instead of attacking Raphael, Pater identified the problem in art extending back to Giotto. It is revealing that Pater not only admired Botticelli, but that he admired him *because* he was unlike everything his myth now proclaims him to be. Even Botticelli’s life, the author argues, was unique in its ordinariness; the only experiences he shared with other artists were his time in the Sistine Chapel and

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<sup>109</sup> Watts, p. 85.

<sup>110</sup> Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, and Co., limited, 1910), p. 39.

<sup>111</sup> Leonardo is the third painter in the book, but his chapter is more a biography than encomium. Also, while Pater does include a chapter entitled “The Poetry of Michelangelo,” he has chosen to emphasize Michelangelo’s literary work.

<sup>112</sup> Pater, p. 39.

falling under the influence of Savonarola.<sup>113</sup> Not only satisfied to paint him as a visionary painter, Pater depicts the fifteenth century Florentine as practically modern in his blending “with the charm of line and colour, the medium of abstract painting.”<sup>114</sup> This description may no longer be considered accurate, but it is a bold statement indeed to style a Renaissance painter as successfully using Modernist elements.

Another layer to Botticelli is established in Pater’s comparison of the artist to Dante. Himself a Dantophile, Pater asserts that Dante’s influence on Botticelli is what allowed the artist to be a visionary and a realist.<sup>115</sup> He believes that Dante’s and Botticelli’s notion of the unworthiness of man manifests itself even in the “unique expression and charm” of the artist’s Madonnas.<sup>116</sup> Pater views the Madonnas as “peevish” in appearance and further suggests that they are “mean or abject even, for the abstract lines of the face have little nobleness, and the color is wan.”<sup>117</sup> The disparity between expected images of the Virgin and Botticelli’s, according to Pater, is precisely what he saw as evidence of Botticelli’s unique semi-Dantean outlook on humanity. The critic continues to argue that Botticelli’s Madonna remains apathetic in the battle between good and evil despite the Divine Child she holds in her arms.<sup>118</sup> The “peculiar character” of the artist conveyed in this interpretation of Botticelli’s works is not a familiar one, but it establishes the

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>115</sup> Watts, p. 89.

<sup>116</sup> Pater, p. 46.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

foundation for a modern characterization of Botticelli. Pater accepts Vasari's story of the artist following Savonarola, as well as the biographer's portrayal of Botticelli as a man who sees "the true complexion of humanity" as quite the bleak vision.<sup>119</sup> To Walter Pater, the first to create a believable personality for the artist, Botticelli's paintings revealed melancholy through Dantean awareness of man's frailty.<sup>120</sup>

Although John Ruskin initially did not care for the Florentine master, referring to him as one of those Italian painters whose work is characterized "by a strange hardness and gloom," he quickly became identified with Botticelli's growing cult.<sup>121</sup> In a letter addressed to his secretary at Oxford, the Reverend Richard St John Tyrwhitt, Ruskin reveals just how quickly his fascination with Botticelli grew, writing: "I am surprised to find how much I have changed in my own estimate of Sandro in my last Italian journies [sic] – – for I recollect thinking Pater's article did him full justice – – and now – – though quite right – – it reads Lukewarm to me."<sup>122</sup> The ease with which Ruskin was caught up in the mania surrounding Botticelli is reflective of his period. It is thus especially important to consider Ruskin's view since he reads in Botticelli's paintings an artist so entirely at odds with Pater's.

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>120</sup> Levey, p. 304.

<sup>121</sup> Gail S. Weinberg, "Ruskin, Pater, and the Rediscovery of Botticelli," *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 129, No. 1006, (Jan., 1987), p. 26.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Ruskin, who wrote shortly after Pater, then, also played a principal role in Botticelli's reemergence in nineteenth century England. Ruskin's 1872 *Ariadne Florentina* included his first published writing on the artist and it was extremely favorable.<sup>123</sup> In the lecture he shapes another Botticelli; in stark contrast to the character written by Pater, Ruskin's Botticelli was a deeply religious man.<sup>124</sup> For instance, the critic asserts that Vasari did not know *how* Botticelli spent all the money he had received from the Pope:

It is just possible, Master Vasari, that Botticelli may have laid out his money at higher interest than you know of...And at length, having got rid, somehow, of the money he received from the Pope; and finished the work he had to do, and uncovered it,-free in conscience, and empty in purse, he returned to Florence...<sup>125</sup>

In addition to making Botticelli seem generally more saintly, Ruskin provides some insight as to why Botticelli in particular appealed to his English rediscoverers. Ruskin does not simply say that Botticelli did not squander what he earned, instead he emphasizes the fact that the money received came from the Pope and left "free in conscience." The implication that the Roman Church was corrupt is not difficult to identify. Of course, other than the short period he spent in Rome, Botticelli lived his whole life in Florence; to an Englishman this could suggest that the artist remained virtually untainted from the influences of the Pope. Thus, Ruskin suggests that Botticelli's expenditures would be akin to a penance rather than the mishandling of funds presented in Vasari. This theory fits

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Watts, p. 86.

<sup>125</sup> John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), Vol. 22, E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds., p. 432.

perfectly with his vision of Botticelli as a religious and moral reformer set to revive the Church.<sup>126</sup>

Ruskin, like Pater, held Dante in high regard. As a result, the Trecento poet provides a link between Ruskin's Botticelli and Pater's.<sup>127</sup> At the end of the above-quoted response to Vasari, the author continues by explaining that upon return to Florence, Botticelli threw himself into a commentary and engravings for Dante's *Inferno*. The short statement by Vasari on the matter is criticized by Ruskin, who considered this "out-and-out the most important fact in the history of the religious art of Italy."<sup>128</sup> Botticelli, Ruskin explains, was on a Dantean pilgrimage that led him to follow yet another reformer, Girolamo Savonarola, putting the artist on par with Martin Luther.<sup>129</sup> As a Reformer, Ruskin argues, the lessons taught by Botticelli's works in the Sistine Chapel are of more use than Raphael's *School of Athens* or *Theology*, despite Raphael's great fame.<sup>130</sup> Ruskin's contribution is twofold. His interpretation of Botticelli is radically different from Pater's, which adds another created layer to an artist in the process of being invented. Whereas Pater portrayed Botticelli as a stylistic innovator, Ruskin lauded the artist's role as pre-Reformation reformer. Once again, the current myth around the artist does not perfectly align with Ruskin's idea of the

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 424.

<sup>127</sup> Watts, p. 87; For a full discussion of how Ruskin and Pater interpreted Botticelli's relationship with Dante, see Watts, "The Pre-Raphaelites and the International Competition for Sandro Botticelli's Dante Drawings Manuscript," *Pre-Raphaelite Art in its European Context* (Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: 1995).

<sup>128</sup> Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, p. 433.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 434; 423.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 422-423.



artist as a reformer. Rather, Botticelli's connection with Savonarola is taught as the demise of the painter's career. Ruskin's assumption is even more interesting when one considers the fact that there is no conclusive evidence of Botticelli becoming a Piagnone.

In the formation of his Botticelli, Horne is greatly indebted to the figures created by Ruskin and Pater. Horne accepted Pater's contention that Dante's influence transformed Botticelli's religious paintings and Ruskin's exegesis of Botticelli as a pillar of faith.<sup>131</sup> By the time Horne wrote, in 1908, Botticelli had already become tremendously fashionable, an indelible part of English culture. A very popular joke at the time involved two philistines claiming Botticelli to be both cheese and wine.<sup>132</sup> In a short time, about half a century, Botticelli's art came to be associated with "noble," "calm," and "pure," replacing "curious," "refined," and "artificial" and this language would only continue in the following century.<sup>133</sup>

Judging by the fervor with which Botticelli was adopted by Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, he almost appears to be as modern an artist as those who championed him. While this certainly attests to Botticelli's magnificent talent, it also emphasizes his distance from his contemporaries that led up to the Cinquecento artists as well as the Cinquecento artists. It may seem strange that a painter of interest to a movement determined to tear away at the prominence of

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<sup>131</sup> Watts, p. 90.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>133</sup> Levey, p. 301.

the Renaissance is now commonly accepted as the face of the Renaissance, and, indeed, it is. However, as a consequence, Botticelli's popularity in nineteenth-century England shows that his public figure was not just a product of his own time, but also that of the histories written about him when he is admitted to the canon of artists. Thus, we not only gain a new perspective on Botticelli, but also insight on the critics and artists who 'rediscovered' him, especially the period in which they lived.

#### **CHAPTER FOUR: THE ART HISTORICAL (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF BOTTICELLI**

It was not long after Botticelli's literary reemergence in nineteenth-century England before interest in the artist spread, leading to countless monographs and articles that would eventually come to create the myth that now surrounds the artist. The Florentine had become so popular that between 1900 and 1920, more books were published on Botticelli than on any other painter.<sup>134</sup> This chapter will analyze works about the artist to reveal an interesting trend: as time passed and his fame was increasingly accepted as part of Renaissance studies of art, the manner in which Botticelli was discussed became steadily more positive. The disparity between the evaluation of Botticelli by Crowe and Cavalcaselle in the mid-nineteenth century and later by Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* is directly tied to the public's perception of the artist. In the way he was treated by art historians, we can see that Botticelli was introduced as a rough gem of sorts and his justification as an artist that stands "in the Florentine genealogy between Giotto and Michelangelo" came later.<sup>135</sup>

Botticelli, after being rediscovered by the Pre-Raphaelites but before his restoration at the hands of Pater, Ruskin, and Horne, was described by Joseph Arthur Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle in *A New History of Painting in*

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<sup>134</sup> Levey, p. 291

<sup>135</sup> Casteras and Faxon, p. 81.

*Italy* (1864). These art historians, products of the Victorian mainstream that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood rejected, did not share the dissenting group's admiration of Botticelli. Instead, the authors write of an artist "in a position to profit from the varying success or failure of men whose efforts were directed toward innovation in the use of mediums and vehicles."<sup>136</sup> This statement is a clear accusation by Crowe and Cavalcaselle of Botticelli's mediocre status; they essentially argue that he lacks everything that makes a great artist, embodying the "defects and few of the qualities of the art of his time."<sup>137</sup> The reader gets the sense that the authors, like many before them, have included Botticelli simply because he was included by Vasari, though at times they are certainly hard-pressed to articulate why he did so. Indeed, they venture to posit that the Renaissance biographer was perhaps too enthusiastic in his praise for *Adoration of the Magi* (fig.20).<sup>138</sup>

Indeed, their most biting criticism is reserved to their discussion of Botticelli's stylistic decisions and talent. To the master's credit the authors admit that he possesses "vigour of conception and boldness of hand," but find his admirable technical skilled "marred by coarseness akin to Andrea del Castagno."<sup>139</sup> Obviously this comparison is far from flattering and evinces that Crowe and Cavalcaselle still perceived Botticelli as a less forward-thinking

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<sup>136</sup> Joseph A. Crowe and Giovanni B. Cavacaselle, *A New History of Painting In Italy* (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1908), Vol. 2, Edward Hutton, ed., p. 401.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401.

painter. Their judgment can be understood when one considers that Botticelli is categorized with the fifteenth century and Leonardo, though less than a decade younger, with the sixteenth. Although contemporaries, Leonardo's art, as evidenced by the innumerable anatomical studies for which he is also well known, is significantly more concerned with capturing photorealistic, yet idealized, figures. The figures in Botticelli's paintings, on the other hand, while exhibiting great talent, never reach the same level of naturalism as did the other great artists that make up the Renaissance canon.

Crowe and Cavalcaselle specifically continue to say they "look in vain for the deep expression of thought and subtlety, which [Vasari] discovers and praises."<sup>140</sup> This judgment is especially worthy of note in that they are not only refuting Vasari, but also of those who would bring the artist back into prominence. Botticelli's nineteenth-century admirers celebrated his ability to paint regal expressions, packed with emotion, an approbation apparently also shared by Vasari. Thus, in their denial of arguably one of the artist's unique skills, Crowe and Cavalcaselle make it clear that the emerging opinion held by the artists and critics in favor of Botticelli was as of yet not a unanimous one.

As discussed previously, as Botticelli's style changed over time, it became less and less influenced by his contemporaries and more aberrant. The commentary made by Crowe and Cavalcaselle reinforces this observation while also judging the more responsive and conventional early period in a favorable

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

light. They explain the support Botticelli received from the Florentine elite by evaluating his art in terms of phases: his first “phase” of talent was well received, but overshadowed by a surfeit of works on the same subject “because they soon ceased to possess the freshness, or exhibit the care in technical execution, which were conspicuous in the earliest and best of them.”<sup>141</sup> They further posit that Botticelli’s *Fortitude* (fig.1) was of a higher standard because the Pollaiuoli brothers prompted a variation in his art.<sup>142</sup> Clearly this opinion breaks soundly with the fact that his more mature paintings have received the most praise. Rather, the biographical chapter penned by the skeptical Crowe and Cavalcaselle is a far cry from the encomia written by their successors.

The notes by Edward Hutton in the 1909 printing of the *New History* are very telling of the progressively positive attitude toward Botticelli. Though writing only about forty years after the book, the editor makes frequent apologies for the mistakes made by the illustrious art historians. For example, while they ascribe the few good aspects of *Primavera* (fig.4) to the influence of Fra Angelico and the Pollaiuoli, Hutton reveals that by his time the painting had a reputation as “one of the greatest and most consoling works of the fifteenth century.”<sup>143</sup> From the writings of the three men one gathers Botticelli did not spring forth from art historical obscurity triumphantly, ready to claim his position in the canon. Rather, it is important to note, his artistic talent was still in question.

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<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

Herbert Horne, a British scholar, wrote his highly respected monograph on Botticelli in 1904. The work did much to define the ‘truth’ about the artist in a time when fame had drawn fashionable skeptics that attempted to tie Botticelli to Pesellino rather than Filippo Lippi.<sup>144</sup> Nevertheless Botticelli is dubbed “the Painter of Florence” in Horne’s title. This characterization draws much closer to how he is known today. Horne writes with evidence for every statement, resulting in an authoritative and exhaustive assessment. On *Primavera*, for example, he lavishes intimate attention to every feature, explaining each in excruciating detail within the context of Botticelli’s artistic style and humanist knowledge.<sup>145</sup> Most importantly, Horne was a product of the art historical criticism of Ruskin and Pater. As a consequence he uses previously discussed nineteenth-century value judgments to praise the fifteenth-century master.

Unlike Crowe and Cavalcaselle, Horne does not deride, but celebrates Botticelli’s unnaturalistic style. He holds the artist in higher esteem than his contemporaries for his expressiveness. He seems to argue that Botticelli was a greater painter than Ghirlandaio, whom he saw as the greatest in the tradition of naturalistic painting at the time. Instead, Horne attributes Botticelli’s early attempts at naturalism as a result of his competition with Ghirlandaio, but explains that “a phase of painting essentially scientific in its aim could not suffice

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<sup>144</sup> Horne, p. 13.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-64.

to engross [Botticelli] long.”<sup>146</sup> Horne reflects the opinions of critics, like those of the previous century, who expect more than “simple naturalism” in art. In an attempt to justify this in a Renaissance context, Horne quotes Leonardo: “That figure is most admirable that which best expresses by its action the actions of its mind.”<sup>147</sup> By using the text from Leonardo’s treatise in this manner, Horne deliberately uses Leonardo’s own words against him to make a point about Botticelli. Although Leonardo surely respected the figural representations that conveyed expressiveness, it is highly doubtful that he would have approved of the sacrificing of the mimetic quality of a painting in order to achieve the desired effect. This is significant because in Horne’s writing we begin to see how, in the early twentieth century, Renaissance standards were being redefined in Botticelli’s favor.

Horne argues that Botticelli’s eloquent linear design is by far the most distinguishing trait of his art.<sup>148</sup> The art historian appears to be so impressed that he uses the artist’s talent for line and contour to associate him with antique art, a period that remained consistently influential until more recently. “Botticelli,” he wrote, “came nearer, at least in the technical part of painting, to the literal realization of the ideal of the Renaissance, that new birth of antique art, than any other master of his age.”<sup>149</sup> While Botticelli was extremely skilled in his use of

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<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*



line, Horne's compliment was granted a little easily, especially when taking into account how much his art changed over the course of his career. As he did with Leonardo, the art historian took a quote from Pliny to prove his point.<sup>150</sup> The quote is not inappropriate, but neither should it be read out of context. The assertion is especially strange when Horne continues to explain that Botticelli exceeds the "naturalistic masters" in this respect.<sup>151</sup> Thus, the art historian further rewrites the Renaissance by devaluing a trait that defined their period of art as well as the ancient artists they strove to emulate.

Finally, Horne makes it clear that he sees Botticelli not as a fifteenth-century master, but as more of a modern painter, as Ruskin did. Time and again he praises Botticelli for his works' expressiveness, which, as discussed before, was highly valued in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, Horne still considers Botticelli as "typically a Florentine," reflecting the shifting "Florentine temperament" and comparable to Dante.<sup>152</sup> It is this phenomenon precisely that allowed Botticelli to later become the face for the Italian Renaissance.

In 1936 we begin to see a more familiar figure in Elie Faure's *History of Renaissance Art*. In his interpretation, Faure presents a Botticelli as a "morbid genius," who requires no justification for his inclusion and merits praise for the same qualities for which Crowe and Cavalcaselle previously criticized him. Botticelli, the art historian asserts, threw the Renaissance back into a passion for

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

line.<sup>153</sup> While the point can be argued for the immediate time in which Botticelli painted, sixteenth-century Florence, to which Leonardo can attest, certainly emphasized chiaroscuro and subtle gradations of light. In which case, Faure's claim is interesting because he lauded the artist for a modern trait while calling it a Renaissance one. It is in simple assertions like these that ideas in art history change.

He continues by evaluating Botticelli and Ghirlandaio, very much in the same manner as Crowe and Cavalcaselle. He paints the two artists as oppositional forces: whereas Botticelli looked for the "artificial," Ghirlandaio isolated "that part which was more direct and most healthy."<sup>154</sup> Here is where Faure diverges from the prior art historians. Rather than use the observation as reasoning for why Botticelli was inferior, the author states it as plain fact. In this, too, we see how ideas about Renaissance art are changing and developing into language not previously used for the period.

Vasari's stories of an eccentric yet affable character in Botticelli's *vita* provide a unique perspective on the artist's personality. Over the course of time, other attributes have been associated with the artist such as passion and melancholy. Faure is no exception. In Botticelli's nude female figures, the art historian found a "desire for naked beauty...so feverish that before looking at it, [Botticelli] twisted and burned it in the flames of his desire." One must decide

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<sup>153</sup> Elie Faure, *History of Art: Renaissance Art* (Garden City: Garden City Publishing, 1937), Vol. 3, Walter Pach, trans., p. 34.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

here whether this is truly the case with the graceful, classical bodies or if Faure was taking some liberty in his interpretation. However, he does seem to be aware of the dangers of others imposing their viewpoints on the artist, boldly stating that Botticelli was the victim of the aesthetes of Faure's time, that while the fifteenth century perverted him, the twentieth had misunderstood him.<sup>155</sup> Though not meant in the same way, the same can be said to hold true today.

John Sewall's *A History of Western Art*, written in 1953, perpetuates the story of an emotionally driven Botticelli. Among lyric sentiment and soft loveliness the author identifies and describes "a consciousness of the conflict and frustration that existed within [Botticelli]."<sup>156</sup> Here Sewall adds another layer to the myth, but also assumes a great deal about the paintings and his own biases. It is very likely that he found frustration or conflict in any of the numerous paintings created by the old master (or those from his studio or the product of a forgery), but he is certainly more likely to have seen what he already expected due to the influence of those, like Pater, that came before him. These authors also all fall prey to a logical fallacy: i.e., that a certain air, such as melancholy, in a painting must be direct reflection of the artist. It may be that these observations are more reflective of the art historians and their time rather than Botticelli's persona.

Sewall also explains to his readers that we "must understand at the outset that the inner beauties of Botticelli's art are not for everybody. Even in fifteenth

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>156</sup> John I. Sewall, *A History of Western Art* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 534.

century Florence he was not a popular artist in a sense of appealing to the public at large.”<sup>157</sup> Once again the author draws parallels between Botticelli’s and his own time. However, he does provide a sense of how the artist was seen in the mid-twentieth century: while appreciated by some members of the art-viewing public, his paintings had not yet gained the popular recognition they now enjoy. If Sewall’s assertion that Botticelli only really worked for “a small circle of erudite persons” in his own time is true, one should not miss the dissonance when taking note how the old master underwent such a strong shift as elite to public art.<sup>158</sup>

In terms of style, Sewall makes the jump from an outright description of Botticelli (as was the case with Faure) to celebrating the artist’s use of techniques that were most certainly not appreciated at the time of their execution. The author admiringly writes that the Florentine was an expert in the matter of using intense hues to re-establish the flatness of the panel.<sup>159</sup> This would have been an appropriate compliment for a contemporary artist, but is not befitting for the fifteenth-century when artists were taught to study nature and improve upon it in order to trick the viewer’s eye. Interpreting the relatively sloppy pattern of lines representing waves in the *Birth of Venus* (fig.3) as praiseworthy for its sensitivity to “the movement of light and delicate things” also appears to be a modern appreciation for something Leonardo or other Renaissance critics would have

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 534-535.

condemned.<sup>160</sup> Sewall is an excellent marker in the process that rewrote the art historical reception of the Florentine.

Frederick Hartt, the art historian that defined a generation of art criticism, wrote a book in 1960 simply titled *Botticelli*. The introduction, in which Hartt briefly described the major events of Botticelli's life, demonstrates his extreme bias in favor of Botticelli as well as how such an inclination could change the defining characteristics of the Italian Renaissance painters. The overview he gives, surprisingly, does not deviate far from Vasari's *vita*, repeating the story of the next-door neighbor and putting the artist himself at the bonfire of the vanities.<sup>161</sup> The art historian is quick to defend Botticelli's reputation from those critics who "have had trouble accounting for Botticelli, wholly out of place in a Florence supposedly obsessed with the conquest of form and space, anatomy, and perspective."<sup>162</sup> By choosing the word "supposedly," Hartt calls into question the traditional understanding of Renaissance expectations for art. As treatises such as Leonardo's demonstrate, the Florentines were extremely concerned with mimetic representation.<sup>163</sup> In actuality, it is simpler to explain that Botticelli was an aberration than to question as basic a characteristic as this. It is the redefinitions made by respected art historians like Hartt to account for Botticelli – not those

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<sup>160</sup> Sewall, p. 542; Leonardo, *Treatise on Painting*, p. 64: (In the section labeled 'Line Drawing') "The contours of any objects should be considered with the most careful attention, observing how they twist like a serpent. These serpentine curves are to be studied to see whether they turn as parts of a round curvature or are of an angular concavity."

<sup>161</sup> Frederick Hartt and Patricia Egan, *Botticelli* (New York: Abrams, 1960), p. 1.

<sup>162</sup> Hartt and Egan, p. 5.

<sup>163</sup> See: Leonardo, trans. A. Phillip McMahon, *Treatise on Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956).

that he wishes to refute – that have altered the present fortunes of the paintings created in that period.

In *Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence*, written in 1963, Sydney Freedberg does not deal with Botticelli directly, but incorporates him into his discussions of Leonardo and Michelangelo. He describes a new version of the artist that perfectly reflects a certain interest in art history. As Freedberg interprets him, Botticelli learned “the most sophisticated techniques for transcription of reality – a reality which...was animate.”<sup>164</sup> This description is extremely telling not only about how he sees Botticelli’s art, but perhaps more interestingly, about how he understands Renaissance art. Despite the many unnatural qualities of Botticelli’s art, it is, once again, called realistic. This implication is that realism, to Freedberg, no longer connoted mimesis. Indeed, he continues to explain that “distortions...sometimes...have been imposed upon the forms in order to extract from them an arbitrary ornamental value.”<sup>165</sup> Freedberg does not hesitate to use Botticelli to impose his own modern theory, complete with discussion of the “condition of the spirit,” on Renaissance painting theory.<sup>166</sup> This imposition seems to be symptomatic of those art historians who were, like Freedberg, concerned with Neo-Platonism.

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<sup>164</sup> Sydney J. Freedberg, *Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 12.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

Botticelli, as an artist interpreted as the champion of the Neo-Platonic school of thought, is also written as an artist that exhibits his spirituality in his works. Ruskin and Pater both had their own interpretations about Botticelli's spirituality, but Freedberg develops this idea further. Rather than operate within the vocabulary of pious versus apathetic, the art historian sees in Botticelli's paintings "an accelerating access of spirituality, and ultimately...mysticism."<sup>167</sup> By discussing Botticelli in this manner, Freedberg changes the way his works are viewed and, thereby, the understanding of religion during the Renaissance. While his theories are intriguing, one would be wise to remember that while Botticelli undoubtedly expressed himself in his art, his paintings were commissioned and therefore reflect the tastes of his patrons to a greater degree.

Ronald Lightbown's highly anticipated monograph presents Botticelli as an established member of the artistic scene of his time. The Botticelli written by Lightbown was a painter universally acknowledged as one of the greatest masters of Florence, likened to Zeuxis and Apelles.<sup>168</sup> In keeping with the clear bias he uses throughout the book, the author insists on proving that most of Vasari's negative assessments of the artist were incorrect.<sup>169</sup> The subject of this 1978 biography is an even more perfect Renaissance master than previously suggested, and probably best reflects the current view of Botticelli.

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>168</sup> Ronald Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli: Life and Work* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 14, 16, 235.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Where others had cautiously determined that Botticelli was not as close to Lorenzo as Vasari had described, Lightbown wanted to convince his reader that the old master was far more connected to the highest circles of the Florentine elite than previously believed. He closely associates the painter with the Vespucci as well as the Medici.<sup>170</sup> Lightbown produces contemporary sources to show that the Vespucci were powerful patrons for Botticelli. In the case of the Medici, the art historian admits that no sources exist to confirm that Lorenzo the Magnificent commissioned anything from Botticelli, but insists that such was the case nonetheless.<sup>171</sup> In an effort to make his case, Lightbown struggles to connect the artist to *Il Magnifico* through his cousin Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici – which, Lightbown explains, indicated a closer familial connection than it does now – and the portraits of Giuliano de' Medici. The evidence of a close relationship between Botticelli and Lorenzo the Magnificent would certainly serve to greatly aggrandize the artist, but to establish a link without evidence has the opposite effect.

Lightbown's explanation concerning Botticelli and Savonarola operates in a similar fashion. Although he acknowledges that we know only of people *around* Sandro that became *piagnoni*, he reads the so-called *Mystic Crucifixion* and *Mystic Nativity* to conclude that the painter must have been “an obstinate but

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<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 58-61.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.



prudent *piagnone*” himself.<sup>172</sup> Like other modern art historians, Lightbown falls into the trap of assuming that an artist’s pieces must be representative of his own beliefs or character; it is not difficult to find something if one is looking for it. Thus, he sees the two later paintings as confirmation that Botticelli, like some around him, succumbed to the friar’s teaching. The author is most convincing when considering the Greek inscription at the top of the painting, but neglects to take into account other possibilities.<sup>173</sup> It is not unlikely that they were commissioned pieces; or Botticelli could have been affected by Savonarola’s teachings without becoming a formal follower, even if it was only because doing so could hurt his career. Nevertheless, the art historian is determined to depict a specific figure.

Lightbown’s monograph is also interesting in that his analyses of Botticelli’s paintings are written in such a manner that they seem to be objective. He dedicates these sections to analyzing the painting; oftentimes the author is caught up in explaining the meaning behind every element or simple description. This was the case with the *Primavera*, in which Lightbown goes into detail about the literary texts on which the painting is thought to have been based.<sup>174</sup> This is unsurprising as he believed that Botticelli “consciously strove to fulfill two of the most characteristic aspirations of humanist art: to re-create the vanished perfections of ancient painting and to rival great works of poetry in significance

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<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-128.

of invention and eloquence of representation.”<sup>175</sup> While the explanations are informative, he provides little technical criticism. In failing to specify that Botticelli’s eccentric style is atypical of late fifteenth-century Florentine painting, Lightbown implies that they were not unexpected. Thus, Lightbown either truly did not perceive of the disparity between Botticelli’s art and that being produced around him, or he saw Renaissance painting in a different tradition, one in which Botticelli was typical.

Indeed, the art historian saw Botticelli as such a traditional figure that Lightbown believed the early *Saint Sebastian* (fig. 19) as an example of the artist trying to show off his knowledge of anatomy.<sup>176</sup> It is easy to see from the painting that even if that had been Botticelli’s intent, he did not have much to exhibit since he was never an artist that studied in the well-known manner of Leonardo. Lightbown similarly takes advantage of the pliable qualities of history when explaining the oversized heads of several of Botticelli’s later Madonnas. He refuses to believe that Botticelli’s use of the hieratic scale was a rejection of Renaissance naturalism in favor of the Gothic style, stating that “such an anticipation of Pre-Raphaelite principles is very improbable in a late Quattrocento artist.”<sup>177</sup> In order to sustain his argument, he references Savonarola’s distaste for the sumptuous Florentine Madonnas, but rather than understanding this as a

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

simple call for authenticity, he claims it was “a plea for more verisimilitude.”<sup>178</sup>

Admittedly one could read that in the friar’s request, but to use this explanation is to effectively rewrite the period’s expectations for art as well as the artist’s history. Lightbown clearly had an opinion of Botticelli that he is determined to set as truth.

In the conclusion to his book, Lightbown writes: “In no sense does it appear that Botticelli was technically an innovator; rather, he was a perfect master of the techniques current in the Florentine workshops of his day...”<sup>179</sup> This statement makes apparent the enormous disparity between the Botticelli that Pater knew and the artist understood by Lightbown and the late twentieth century. Not only that, but just as significantly, these comparisons reveal how differently art historians from two periods can interpret the same artist.

Perhaps the texts guiltiest of generalizing Botticelli’s image, as well as the most dangerous for having done so, are those used to introduce undergraduates into the field. The seventh edition of Gardner’s *Art Through the Ages* (7<sup>th</sup> edition), published in 1980, describes a Botticelli well known to us today. Nothing short of dramatic, the book proclaims him to be the “brightest star in the Florentine galaxy in the later part of the [fifteenth] century.”<sup>180</sup> Although there are several indicators that Botticelli was a famous artist at the height of his career – he was, after all,

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>180</sup> Horst de la Croix and Richard G. Tansey, eds., *Gardner’s Art Through The Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 7<sup>th</sup> ed., p. 515.

chosen to paint the effigies of the Pazzi conspirators on the side of the Palazzo Vecchio, a very prominent commission – the fact that he was consigned to oblivion for nearly three hundred years suggests that he fell a little short of that title. Nevertheless, there is some logic behind the conclusion: if he is such a “bright star” now, wouldn’t that indicate the he had previously enjoyed equal fame? The answer seems to be a resounding “no.”

Another oft-repeated story that also appears in Gardner involves Botticelli as a close member of the circle of Lorenzo de’ Medici.<sup>181</sup> More than one scholar has found the portrait of Simonetta in the face of Venus; Botticelli himself has also been incorporated into these stories of those who loved “la bella Simonetta.” However moving this may be, as in the case of Botticelli and Savonarola, there is no conclusive evidence supporting the myth. Rather, art historians have linked the painting not to *Il Magnifico*, but to his cousin, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici.<sup>182</sup> Again, it would seem natural that the most famous painter be associated with the most famous patron of the period, but a good story does not guarantee good history.

It would seem counterintuitive to include an artist full of stylistic exceptions to the rule when teaching the basics of a specific period, yet the Gardner text did precisely that in the discussion of Botticelli. The text explains that his “strange and beautiful style, which ignores...all the scientific ground

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 517.

<sup>182</sup> Barolsky, p.16.

gained by experimental art.”<sup>183</sup> Like Sewall, Gardner recognizes the aberration, yet writes of the break with the Renaissance favorably. Especially intriguing in Gardner, however, is the emphasis it places on the unique aspect of his art. The Botticelli of this text insinuates, then, that his individuality was appreciated when the paintings exhibiting it were executed.

From a brilliant outlier to a brilliant exemplar, the role that Botticelli played in the Renaissance has been revised by art historians time and again. After the sudden explosion of Botticelli’s popularity in the nineteenth century, art historians took up the cause and continually used the Quattrocento painter to their benefit. Their redefinition of Botticelli and, resultantly, the Renaissance, is very telling of changing beliefs about art and art history. We can gather from them that the Renaissance obsession with mimesis was abandoned in favor of more emotional, expression-oriented art. It was this major shift in taste that ultimately dictated Botticelli’s reception. This in turn caused the traditional understanding of Renaissance art to align with the style of the period’s newest superstar painter. Thus, Botticelli’s critical fortunes are truly educative about the transformative power of changing artistic taste.

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<sup>183</sup> de la Croix and Tansey, p. 518.

## CONCLUSION

The 1896 editors of Vasari's biography of Botticelli conclude with this remark:

"No painter is more easily understood today; his subjectivity, his intense personality, his languid distinction, his melancholy, which sometimes degenerates into peevishness, his touch of neurosis, render him the most modern of all the old masters, and perhaps the most sympathetic to our restless, nervous epoch."<sup>184</sup>

Their insightful comments capture not only the nineteenth-century and modern view of the artist, but more importantly, illustrates that there is a different understanding of Botticelli for every age.

Botticelli's transformation exemplifies the critical fluidity of art history as a discipline. In this paper, I have attempted to step back and evaluate him according to the criteria defined by the Renaissance. In this light, it is readily evident that he was more of an aberration than an artist representative of the period. Next, by analyzing paintings by Botticelli and Raphael, I showed how a lack of influence on Raphael's art is further evidence that Botticelli was not part of the artistic progression leading up to Raphael. This developmental scheme adopted by Vasari demoted the artist to the status of a secondary painter in his *vita*. Then, I discussed the repercussions of the theory of a specific genealogy of painters on Botticelli's critical fortunes. Since this scheme remained unquestioned

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<sup>184</sup> Annotations by E. H. and E. W. Blashfield and A. A. Hopkins in Vasari, p. 223.

for nearly two centuries, to the detriment of Botticelli's reception and that of the other Quattrocento artists. When art historians regained interest in the Quattrocento "primitives," Botticelli fared exceptionally well, but it was only when Raphael, the long-held peak of the Renaissance, was ousted from his pedestal that Botticelli truly rose to his iconic status. Botticelli was "rediscovered" by exemplars of a new taste in art that valued emotion over mimesis: John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Finally, I traced the critical reception of Botticelli to show how his newly-acquired fame affected perceptions of his art and of fifteenth-century Renaissance painting. After Botticelli was reintroduced to the art world, the next century of art historians wrote their own interpretations of the artist. Slowly but surely, Botticelli was transformed from the celebrated outlier into the modern pillar of Renaissance Italy and our modern understanding of the Renaissance has been modified.

Botticelli has grown beyond the confines of art historical study and into a popular phenomenon: images of his long-necked beauties appear in even the most mundane advertisements. Although it is beyond the confines of this paper, it would be beneficial to continue to follow his fortunes. His ubiquitous nature suggests that he undoubtedly plays a role in contemporary art. Moreover, his appeal to both lovers of Pop art and lovers of Renaissance art could help to explain the split between those who exclusively value one over the other. Even further, it would be interesting to see how the ubiquitous nature of his art has affected the modern aesthetic centered on long-limbed, curvy women.

As a student it is difficult to argue with a famous name or school of thought. However, Botticelli's fortunes demonstrate that art historians, just as much as any artist, are a product of their time. Consequently, these issues should be reevaluated every so often. Today, there are those in the field of Renaissance studies that believe that the old masters are no longer interesting.<sup>185</sup> This assertion indicates that there is nothing more to discuss about the Raphaels, Leonardos, or Giotto. The progression of the history of art has turned a once mediocre painter into a behemoth; the myth of Botticelli as a painter that exemplified the taste of the Medici court is commonly accepted and taught to undergraduates.<sup>186</sup> The iconic figure cannot be excluded in studies of the Renaissance, but that does not mean that a reconsideration of his position in the canon is out of the question.

Our understanding of the Renaissance in particular is central to art history. Whether continuing the tradition of the period or reacting against it, much of art has been impacted by the works of the Quattrocento and Cinquecento. By christening Botticelli, whom I have shown was more of an aberration than an exemplar, as the face of the Renaissance Florence, we have also changed our understanding of the art of that time. Thus, the re-examination of Botticelli and art history affects how we see art in general.

Studying an old master like Botticelli not only reveals misunderstandings and deepens understanding about that artist, but also casts a firm reminder of the

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<sup>185</sup> See: James Elkins and Robert Williams, eds., *Renaissance Theory* (London: Routledge Press, 2008)

<sup>186</sup> Davies, et al., pp. 537-539.



subjective nature of art history. Art historians, like all people, view the past through the lens of their own time and draw different lessons for their present climates. Because of this, no past treatment of any art historical topic is ever exhaustive and sufficient for all time. Rather, each generation of art historians must reevaluate even the most popular subjects in order to add their own perspective to the ongoing discourse and to educe the understanding that is relevant to their own time.

**APPENDIX: REFERENCED IMAGES**



Fig. 1: Botticelli, *Fortitude* (c. 1470), Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Fig. 2: Botticelli, *Judith Returning from Bethulia* (c. 1470),  
Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Fig. 3: Botticelli, *Birth of Venus* (c. 1483-1484), Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Fig. 4: Botticelli, *Primavera* (c. 1482), Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Fig. 5: Botticelli, *Pallas and the Centaur* (c. 1482), Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Fig. 6: Botticelli, *History of Lucretia* (c. 1504), Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum, Boston

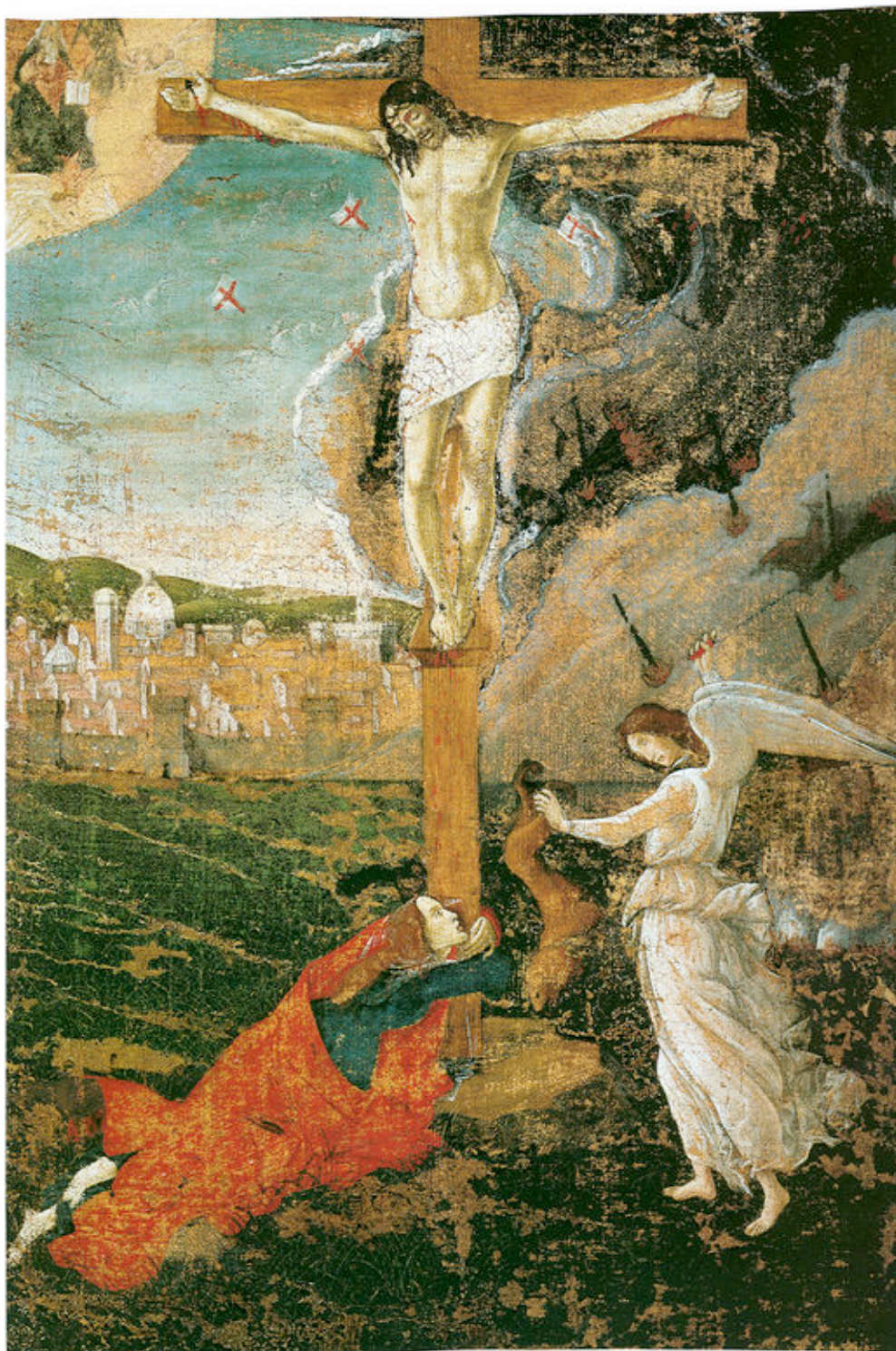


Fig. 7: Botticelli, *Mystic Crucifixion* (c. 1500), Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass.





Fig. 8: Botticelli, *Mystic Nativity* (1500), National Gallery, London



Fig. 9: Raphael, *Vision of a Knight* (c. 1504), National Gallery, London



Fig. 10: Botticelli, *Cestello Annunciation* (c. 1489), Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Fig. 11: Botticelli, *Venus and Mars* (c. 1483), National Gallery, London



Fig. 12: Botticelli, *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (c. 1487), Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Fig. 13: Raphael, *Madonna della Sedia* (1514), Pitti Palace, Florence



Fig. 14: Botticelli, *Lamentation* (c. 1495), Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan



Fig. 15: Raphael, *Entombment* (1507), Borghese Gallery, Rome





Fig. 16: Michelangelo, *Doni Tondo* (c. 1503), Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Fig. 17: Edward Burne-Jones, *Aurora* (1896), Queensland Art Gallery, Australia



Fig. 18: Evelyn Pickering de Morgan, *Flora* (1894), The De Morgan Center, London



Fig. 19: Botticelli, *Saint Sebastian* (1474), Staatliche Museen, Berlin

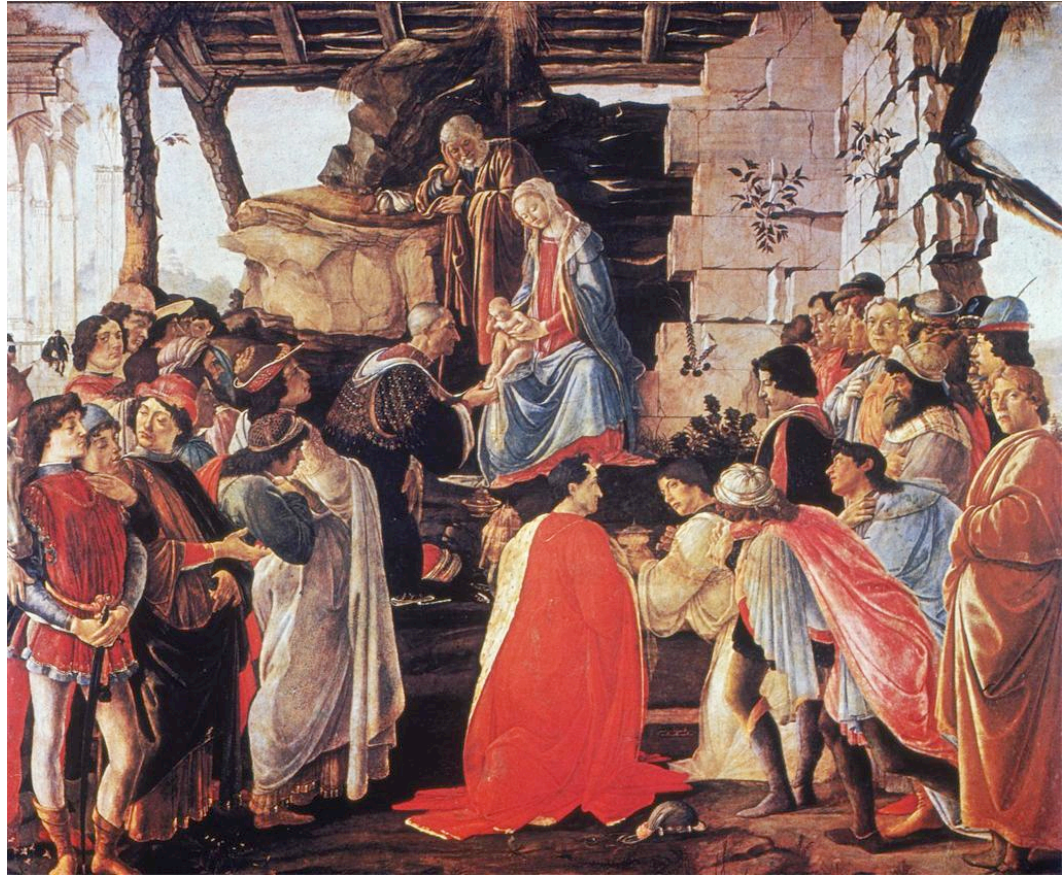


Fig. 20: Botticelli, *Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1475), Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Fig. 21: Andy Warhol, *Sandro Botticelli, Birth of Venus, 1482* from *Details of Renaissance Paintings* (1984), Portfolio of Four Screenprints

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