



SANDRO BOTTICELLI

(CA. 1445- 1510)

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD

Probable self-portrait of
Botticelli, in his Adoration of
the Magi (1475)
(Wikipedia CC)

SANDRO BOTTICELLI

Artist of the early Renaissance

This month's essay deals with one of the important artists of the early Renaissance. He incorporated many of the ideas of his predecessors (Cimabue, Giotto, and Masaccio) into his paintings. In addition to the mythological subjects for which he is best known today, he painted a wide range of religious subjects (including dozens of renditions of the Madonna and Child, many in the round tondo shape) and also several portraits. He lived all his life in the same neighborhood of Florence; his only significant time elsewhere were the months he spent painting in Pisa in 1474 and the Sistine Chapel in Rome in 1481–82. He was an independent master for all the 1470s, which saw his reputation soar. The 1480s were his most successful decade, the one in which his large mythological paintings were completed along with many of his most famous Madonnas. By the 1490s, his style had become more personal and to some extent mannered. His last works show him moving in a direction opposite to that of Leonardo da Vinci (who was seven years younger) and the new generation of painters who were creating the High Renaissance style of the 16th century. His posthumous reputation suffered until the late 19th century, when he was rediscovered by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who stimulated a reappraisal of his work and thus he became an important influence on art nouveau of the period. Since then, his paintings have been seen to represent

the ornamental, linear grace of the late 15th century movement in Italian Gothic and some early Renaissance painting.

Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi (better known as Sandro Botticelli) was born in Florence in a house on the street still called Borgo Ognissanti (All Saints Borough). He lived in the same area all his life and was buried in his neighborhood church called *Ognissanti* (All Saints). Sandro was one of several children born to the tanner Mariano di Vanni d'Amedeo Filipepi and his wife Smeralda Filipepi. He was the youngest of the four who survived into adulthood. (Botticelli's name is derived from that of his elder brother, Giovanni, who was a pawnbroker and was nicknamed Botticello [Little Barrel]. Giovanni passed the nickname on to Alessandro apparently because he had the same round stature).

The Ognissanti neighborhood was a modest one, inhabited by workmen of various crafts, but there were some rich families living in the neighborhood as well, most notably the Rucellai, who were a wealthy clan of bankers and wool-merchants. (The head of the family, Giovanni di Paolo Rucellai, had commissioned the famous Palazzo Rucellai, which was a landmark in Italian Renaissance architecture, designed by Leon Battista Alberti, between 1446 and 1451). By 1458, Botticelli's family had moved elsewhere in the neighborhood, and was renting their new house from the Rucellai. This was just one of many dealings that involved the two families.

Not much is known of Botticelli's early life; even his date of birth is not precisely known. (His father's tax returns in years following his birth give his age as two in 1447 and thirteen in 1458, meaning he must have been born sometime between 1444 and 1446). He went to elementary school like most male children of that era. His father apprenticed him to a goldsmith after his schooling was finished. However, since he preferred painting, around 1461 or 1462 his father apprenticed him to Filippo Lippi, who was one of the most admired



Adoration of the Magi
Tempura on panel
Circa 1475
[Wikipedia CC](#)

Florentine masters of the period and was a favorite of the Medici.

Lippi's artistic style, which was formed in the early Florentine Renaissance, was fundamental to Botticelli's own artistic formation, and his influence is evident even in Botticelli's late works. Lippi taught Botticelli the techniques of panel painting and fresco, and gave him an assured control of linear perspective. It was from Lippi that Botticelli learned how to create intimate compositions with beautiful, melancholic figures drawn with clear contours and only slight contrasts of light and shadow. He learned a repertory of types and compositions from Lippi; this included a certain graceful fancifulness in costuming, a linear sense of form, and a partiality to certain paler hues that were still visible even after he had developed his own strong and resonant color schemes.

In 1464, Botticelli's father bought a house in the nearby *Via Nuova* (New Street, now called Via della Porcellana, Porcelain Street) in which Botticelli lived from 1470 (if not earlier) until his death in 1510. He both lived and worked in the house (a rather unusual practice in his day) despite his brothers Giovanni and Simone also being resident there. The family's most notable neighbor was the Vespucci family (including Amerigo Vespucci, after whom the Americas were named). The Vespucci were Medici allies, and eventually became important patrons of Botticelli.

Early Works

After Lippi left Florence for Spoleto around 1467, Botticelli worked to improve the comparatively soft, frail figural style he had learned from his teacher. To accomplish this, he studied the sculptural style of Antonio Pollaiuolo and Andrea del Verrocchio, who were the leading Florentine painters of the 1460s. Botticelli's first works followed the current version of the popular style in Florence; this style placed great importance on the human figure rather than on space. Botticelli produced figures of sculptural roundness and strength. He also

replaced the delicate approach he had learned from Lippi with a robust and vigorous naturalism, which was shaped always by conceptions of ideal beauty.

Already by 1470, Botticelli was established in Florence as an independent master with his own workshop. Because he was so absorbed in his art, he never married but lived with his family. The transitions in Botticelli's style can be seen in the diptych of Judith (**The Return of Judith**) and Holofernes (**The Discovery of the Body of Holofernes**), completed circa 1470, both of which demonstrate the full achievement of his maturity by showing his perfect mastery of drawing and his skill at expressing intense emotions.

Also completed in 1470 was his first documented commission, the figure of **Fortitude** which was painted for the hall of the *Tribunale dell'Arte della Mercanzia Mercanzia* (Tribunal of the Art of Merchandising, or the merchants' tribunal) in Florence. It was painted to complete the series of allegorical images of the cardinal virtues that had been created by the Pollaiuolo brothers' workshop for the *Tribunale*.

To this period also belongs the **Madonna of the Rose Garden** (1469-70). The Virgin Mary, with a pensive attitude, is holding the Christ Child on her knees beneath a loggia with columns supporting a semicircular arch with a coffered ceiling that frames the head of the Virgin and follows the curved profile of the board on which it is painted. Behind Mary extends a garden with its pink roses dominating the foreground. Below her is a floor with framed marble tiles which demonstrated Botticelli's mastery of perspective. The roses symbolize one of the titles of Mary, *the Mystical Rose*. The pomegranate that Mary holds in her hand and which the Child is tasting, symbolizes fertility, royalty, and with its red color, the blood of the Passion of Jesus. The work shows incisive use of chiaroscuro to give depth to the painting and weight to the figures.

Botticelli's art from this period shows the use of ochre in the shadowed areas of flesh tones that gives brown warmth to the bodies, something that was very different from Lippi's pallor. The forms in his paintings are defined with a line that is at once incisive and flowing, and there is a growing ability to suggest the character and even the mood of the figures by action, pose, and facial expression. In 1472 Botticelli enrolled in the **Compagnia di San Luca** (the Company of St. Luke), which was the Florentine guild of painters and miniaturists. In his enrollment papers, he registered Filippino Lippi, the son of Filippo Lippi, as his apprentice and assistant. Botticelli and Filippino's works from these years, including many Madonna and Child paintings, are often difficult to distinguish which of them did which paintings. The two also routinely collaborated on secular-themed paintings as well. Filippino's presence in Botticelli's workshop has given rise to debate over a group of works, attributed first to Botticelli himself, and then to a fictitious **Amico di Sandro** (Friend of Sandro); scholars today generally agree in ascribing these to the young Filippino).

Botticelli's earliest surviving altarpiece is a large *sacra conversazione* (sacred conversation) that he did around 1470–72. The painting shows Botticelli's early mastery of composition; he has arranged eight figures set in a natural setting within a piece of closed architecture. Another work from this period is the **Saint Sebastian**, painted in 1474 for a pier in Santa Maria Maggiore Church in Florence. This work was painted soon after the Pollaiuolo brothers' much larger altarpiece, *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* that was done for the Pucci Chapel in Florence's Church of Santissima Annunziata. Though Botticelli's saint is very similar in pose to that done by the Pollaiuolo, his figure is calmer and more poised. The almost nude body is very carefully drawn and anatomically precise, reflecting Botticelli's close study of the human body. He included a delicate winter landscape, thus referring to the saint's feast-day of January 20. This scene was inspired by contemporary Early

Botticelli's close relationship with the Medici family results in a series of commissions.

Dutch painting that was widely appreciated in Florentine artistic circles.

Maturity in Style, Color, and Content

At the start of 1474 Botticelli was asked by the authorities in Pisa to join the work of painting several of the many frescoes for the **Camposanto Monumentale** (monumental cemetery), a large prestigious project mostly done by Benozzo Gozzoli, who spent nearly twenty years on it. Various payments to Botticelli up to September are recorded, but none of his work survives. It seems that whatever Botticelli had started was never finished. Nevertheless, the fact that he was approached from outside Florence demonstrated his growing reputation.

The 1470s also saw the beginning of Botticelli's close relationship with the Medici family, which resulted in a series of commissions including the **Portrait of a Young Man with a Medal of Cosimo the Elder** (1474-75); the various versions of **Portrait of Giuliano de' Medici** (around 1476 through 1478, the year he was murdered); and **The Adoration of the Magi** (1475-76) that was commissioned by Gaspare di Zanobi del Lama, the Florentine banker and financial broker, for his chapel in Santa Maria Novella. It contained 3 generations of Medici family portraits: Cosimo de' Medici, the patriarch of the family; Cosimo's sons Piero and Giovanni; Cosimo's grandsons Giuliano and Lorenzo de'



Top: Eventos en la vida de Moisés/ Sistine Chapel
 Circa 1481-82
 Fresco
[Wikipedia CC](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_in_the_Sistine_Chapel)

Above Right: The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti
 Tempera on panel
[Wikipedia CC](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nastagio_degli_Onesti)

Left: Coronation of the Virgin
 Between 1490 and 1492
 Tempera on panel
[Wikimedia CC](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coronation_of_the_Virgin)

Medici, il Magnifico. (Botticelli is alleged to have made a self-portrait of himself as the blonde man with a yellow mantle on the far right who is looking out to the viewer). It was one of at least seven versions of **The Adoration of the Magi** that Botticelli created and one of the earliest in his career. Of all the paintings of **The Adoration**, this one is the most famous and according to Vasari, made the young Botticelli famous in Florence and throughout Italy. It was this piece that opened the way to Rome and to a papal commission.

Botticelli's early mastery of fresco is clearly visible in his **St. Augustine** (1480) a fresco figure that was commissioned by the Vespucci family for the Chiesa di Ognissanti (Church of All Saints), which was their parish church and Botticelli's. The fresco shows the saint's cogent energy and vigor, thereby expressing both his intellectual power and his spiritual devotion.

In July, 1481 Pope Sixtus IV summoned Botticelli and other prominent Florentine and Umbrian artists to Rome to fresco the walls of the newly completed Sistine Chapel. This large project was to be the main decoration of the chapel. (Most of the frescos remain but are greatly overshadowed and disrupted by Michelangelo's work of the next century, as some of the earlier frescos were destroyed to make room for his paintings on the ceiling. (The Florentine contribution is thought to have been part of a peace deal between Lorenzo de' Medici and the papacy. After Sixtus was implicated in the Pazzi conspiracy against the Medici, in which Lorenzo's brother Giuliano was murdered, hostilities had escalated into excommunications for Lorenzo and other Florentine officials, and a small Pazzi War had developed. This commission to paint the chapel was seen as calming the waters between the two groups).

Each painter brought a team of assistants from his workshop, since the space to be covered was considerable (each of the main panels is about

11.5 by 19 feet), and the work was done in a few months. The schemes present a complex and coherent program asserting Papal supremacy, and are more unified in this than they are in their artistic style, although the artists followed a consistent scale and broad compositional layout, with crowds of figures in the foreground and mainly landscape in the top half of the scene. Allowing for the painted pilasters that separate each scene, the level of the horizon matches between scenes and Moses wears the same yellow and green clothes in all of his scenes.

The Return to Florence from Rome

Florentine tondi (round paintings) were often large, richly framed paintings and Botticelli produced major works in this format, beginning with one of **The Adoration of the Magi** (c. 1473), that he painted for Antonio Pucci (not the one described above painted for Zanobi del Lama). Before Botticelli, tondi had been conceived essentially as oblong scenes, but Botticelli suppressed all superfluity of detail in them and became adept at harmonizing his figures with the circular form. His complete mastery of the tondo format is evident in two of his most beautiful paintings he did after he returned from Rome in 1482, **The Madonna of the Magnificat** (1482) and **The Madonna of the Pomegranate** (c. 1487).

Botticelli also painted a few small oblong Madonnas, notably the **Madonna of the Book** (c. 1480), but he mostly left the painting of Madonnas and other devotional subjects to his workshop, which produced them in great numbers. In his own art works, the Virgin Mary was always a tall, queenly figure wearing the conventional red robe and blue cloak. She often has an inner pensiveness of expression, the same inwardness of mood that is communicated by the saints that Botticelli painted. He also enriched these works by sensitively rendered accessories.

The first major church commission after Rome



The Birth of Venus
Tempra on canvas
Circa 1485
[Google Art Project / Wikipedia CC](#)

was the **Bardi Altarpiece** that was finished and framed by February 1485. The frame of the altarpiece was by Giuliano da Sangallo, who was just becoming Lorenzo de' Medici's favorite architect. An enthroned Madonna and (rather large) Child sit on an elaborately-carved raised stone bench in a garden, with plants and flowers behind them closing off all but small patches of sky, to give a version of the hortus conclusus (enclosed garden), which was a very traditional setting for the Virgin Mary. Saints John the Baptist and an unusually elderly John the Evangelist stand in the foreground. Small and inconspicuous banderoles or ribbons carrying biblical verses elucidate the rather complex theological meaning of the work, for which Botticelli must have had a clerical advisor. These, however, do not interfere with a simpler appreciation of the painting and its lovingly detailed rendering, which Vasari praised. (It is somewhat typical of Botticelli's relaxed approach to strict perspective that the top ledge of the bench is seen from above, but the vases with lilies on it are seen from below).

The Birth of Venus is thought to represent the birth of love into the world in it's purest state.

The donor, Giovanni Bardi, from the leading Florentine Bardi family, had just returned to Florence from over twenty years as a banker and wool merchant in London, where he was known as “John de Barde,” and aspects of the painting may reflect north European and even English art and popular devotional trends. There may have been other panels in the altarpiece, which are now missing.

Another larger and more crowded altarpiece done around the same time is the **San Barnaba Altarpiece** (circa 1487). In this altarpiece, elements of Botticelli’s late-style emotionalism were beginning to appear. The setting is a palatial heavenly interior in the latest style, which shows that Botticelli was taking a new interest in architecture. The Virgin and Child are raised high on a throne, at the same level as four angels carrying the Instruments of the Passion. Six saints stand in line below the throne. Several figures have rather large heads, and the

infant Jesus is again very large. While the faces of the Virgin, child, and angels have the linear beauty of his tondi, the saints are given varied and intense expressions. Four small and rather simple predella (i.e. the base of the altarpiece containing decorated panels depicting scenes related to the main panel) survive; there were probably originally seven predella.

Many of the commissions that were given to Botticelli during the 1480s and 90s by his rich patrons were linked to Florentine customs on the occasion of a marriage, which was by far the most important family ceremony of that time. A chamber was usually prepared for the newly married couple in the family palace of the groom, and paintings were mounted within it. The themes of such paintings were either romantic, exalting love and lovers, or exemplary, depicting heroines of virtuous fame. Botticelli’s earliest known work of this kind was commissioned by Lorenzo de’ Medici for the marriage of Antonio Pucci’s son Giannozzo in 1483. The set of four panels—**The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti**—narrates a story from Boccaccio’s **Decameron**. Mythological figures had been used in earlier Renaissance secular art; however, the complex culture developing in late Florence under the Medici, which was simultaneously infused with the romantic sentiment of courtly love and with the humanist interest for Classical antiquity and its vanished artistic traditions, used these mythological figures more fully and in a more antiquarian fashion. A new mythological language was developing, inspired partly by Classical Roman literature and sculpture and by descriptions of lost ancient paintings, and partly by the Renaissance search for the full physical realization of the ideal human figure.

Among the greatest examples of this new fashion in secular painting are four of Botticelli’s most famous works: **La Primavera** (c. 1477–82), **Pallas and the Centaur** (c. 1485), **Venus and Mars** (c. 1485), and **The Birth of Venus** (c. 1485). The

Primavera, or Allegory of Spring, and **The Birth of Venus** were painted for the home of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, a cousin of Lorenzo il Magnifico and ultimately a rival of his. All four of these panel paintings have been variously interpreted by modern scholarship. The figures certainly do not enact a known myth but rather are used allegorically to illustrate various aspects of love: in **The Primavera**, its kindling and its fruition in marriage; in Pallas and the Centaur, the subjugation of male lust by female chastity; in Venus and Mars, a celebration of woman's calm triumph after man's sexual exhaustion; and in **The Birth of Venus**, the birth of love in the world. **The Primavera** and **The Birth of Venus** contain some of the most sensuously beautiful nudes and semi-nudes painted during the Renaissance.

The four paintings' settings, which are partly mythological and partly symbolic, are pastoral and idyllic in sentiment. Three of these four large mythologies feature Venus, a central figure in Renaissance Neoplatonism, which gave divine love as important a place in its philosophy as did Christianity. (The model for Venus in all three of Botticelli's Venus paintings was Simonetta Cattaneo, the wife of Marco Vespucci and the love of Giuliano de' Medici, Lorenzo's brother). **The Primavera** depicts a group of figures from classical mythology in a garden, thought to be the Garden of the Hesperides, but no story has been found that brings this particular group together. Most critics agree that the painting is an allegory based on the lush growth of Spring, but accounts of any precise meaning vary, though many involve the Renaissance Neoplatonism which then fascinated intellectual circles in Florence, especially the circle around Lorenzo de' Medici.

Although *The Primavera* and *The Birth of Venus* are now known not to be a pair, the two very large mythological paintings are inevitably discussed and studied together. They are among the most famous paintings in the world, and certainly icons

of the Italian Renaissance. Of the two, **The Birth of Venus** is even better known than **The Primavera**. The composition shows the goddess of love and beauty arriving on land, on the island of Cyprus, born of the sea spray and blown there by the winds, Zephyr and, perhaps, Aura. She is standing on a giant scallop shell, as pure and as perfect as a pearl. The painting was controversial for two reasons. First, it was the first Tuscan painting that was done on canvas, not wood. Second and more importantly, it was the first secular painting to incorporate nudity. Prior to *The Birth of Venus*, nudity was only used in religious art to depict Adam and Eve being thrown out of Eden because of the sin of Eve.

Another group of Botticelli's frescoes done around this time is from a chamber in the Villa Lemmi. They celebrate the marriage of Lorenzo Tornabuoni and Giovanna degli Albizzi in 1486. These frescoes also draw on Classical mythology for their subject matter; however, in these, real people mingle with mythological figures. Venus, while attended by her Graces, is giving flowers to Giovanna to instill in her the virtue of love for her husband; Lorenzo, who is called to a mercantile life, is brought before Prudentia and the Liberal Arts to instill in him the virtues necessary to make him an honorable merchant.

The Late Works and Last Years

An emergent mannerism appears in Botticelli's works of the late 1480s and into the 90s, exemplified in such works as the **Cestello Annunciation** (1490) and the small **Pietà** that he did in the late 1490s. After the early 1490s, his style changed markedly; the paintings are smaller in scale, the figures in them are now slender to the point of idiosyncrasy; and by accentuating their gestures and expressions, Botticelli concentrates attention on their passionate urgency of action. This mysterious retreat from the idealizing naturalism of the 1470s and 80s perhaps resulted from Botticelli's involvement with the fiery Florentine reformist preacher Girolamo Savonarola in the 1490s. The years from 1494 were dramatic



Mystic Nativity
Oil on canvas
Between 1500-1501
[Wikipedia CC](#)

ones in Florence: its Medici rulers fell, and a republican government under Savonarola's dominance was installed. The Dominican friar was an ascetic idealist who attacked the church's corruption and prophesied its future renewal. According to Vasari, Botticelli was a devoted follower of Savonarola, even after the friar was executed in 1498. The spiritual tensions of these years are reflected in two religious paintings Botticelli did, the apocalyptic **Mystic Crucifixion** (1497) and the **Mystic Nativity** (1500), which expressed his own faith in the renewal of the church. **The Tragedy of Lucretia** (c. 1499) and **The Story of Virginia Romana** (1499) appear to go counter to Botticelli's early views and support, appearing to condemn the tyranny of the Medici and to celebrate republicanism.

According to Vasari, Botticelli took an enduring interest in the study and interpretation of **Dante's Divine**

The Virgin and Child (The
Madonna of the Book)
Tempra on panel
Between 1480 and 1481
[Google Art Project](#), [Wikipedia CC](#)



Comedy. He made some designs to illustrate the first printed edition of the work in 1481, and he worked intermittently over the following years on an uncompleted set of large drawings that matched each canto with a complete visual commentary. In addition, he was also much in demand by engravers, embroiderers, and tapestry workers as a designer; among his few surviving drawings are some that can be associated with these techniques.

Although Vasari describes Botticelli as impoverished and disabled in his last years, other evidence suggests that he remained fairly prosperous. He received commissions throughout the 1490s. At least until October, 1505 he was still paying his dues to the **Compagnia di San Luca** (the Company of St. Luke), which was the Florentine guild of painters. But the absence of any further commissions and the tentativeness of the very last Dante drawings suggest that he was perhaps being overtaken by ill health, especially by a weakness of his body.

Sandro Botticelli died in May 1510, at an age just under 70. He was buried with his family outside the Ognissanti Church in a spot the church has now built over. This had been his parish church since he was baptized there, and contained his painting **Saint Augustine in His Study**.

About 50 paintings still survive that are either wholly or partly done by Botticelli. The Uffizi Gallery in Florence has a magnificent collection of his works, including many of his masterpieces. His manner of painting, which reminded many people of past medieval artists, went out of style around the time of his death. He was surpassed in fame by the great artists of the 16th century: Leonard da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. He was largely forgotten until the nineteenth century, when “pre-Raphaelite” painters of England discovered his mysterious allegories and dreamlike imagery, and used these in their own art. Since that time, Botticelli’s style and works have made him one of the most familiar and popular artists of the Italian Renaissance.

CREDITS

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from

“Art in Tuscany: Sandro Botticelli.” Traveling in Tuscany website

“Botticelli, Sandro.” Encyclopedia.com website. May-June, 2018

Cartwright, Mark. “Sandro Botticelli.” World History Encyclopedia website. August 31, 2020

Lightbown, Ronald W. “Sandro Botticelli (Alessandro Filipepi).” Sandro Botticelli.net website. 2012-2017

Botticelli: Italian Painter.” Encyclopedia Britannica website. December 5, 2023

National Gallery of Art website

Vasari, Giorgio, translated by A.P. Hinds. *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (4 vols). London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd. (Everyman Library), 1963, (originally published in 1550)

Wikipedia website