



## Botticelli, Sandro (1444?-1510)

by Patricia Simons

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Renowned for his linear finesse and richly colored, meticulous paintings, Botticelli produced profound religious works, astute portraits, and poetic adaptations of classical mythology. According to Charles Dempsey, his characters "approximate to a quasi-courtly ideal of antique grace clothed in the garments of the Florentine present." An air of innocent intimacy and sensual beauty infuses his work, encouraging a suggestively queer response.

Born Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi in 1444 or 1445, Botticelli, the son of a tanner, may have trained as a goldsmith before apprenticing with the great Florentine artist Filippo Lippi. By 1470, he was an independent master, increasingly attracting patronage from a prestigious circle, including men from both branches of the Medici family.

One of several painters chosen to fresco the lower walls of the pope's Sistine Chapel in 1481-82, Botticelli otherwise catered to oligarchic Florentines whose demand for his work, especially domestic images of the Virgin and Child, was sometimes met by workshop production.

Through the 1490s, he labored over elaborate drawings for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, one of which shows male sodomites suffering in the fires of hell (Inferno 15). Also in the 1490s, Botticelli's brother Simone fell under the influence of the zealous Dominican preacher Savonarola, and Sandro took a more somber religious turn in his late works. The only work he ever attached his name to, the *Mystic Nativity* of 1501, contains an apocalyptic inscription in Greek.

Scholars are especially attracted to Botticelli's mythic images, chiefly the large *Primavera* (Spring) of ca 1478 and the slightly smaller *Birth of Venus* of ca 1484. Although we now know that these works did not originally hang together and that the *Venus* was probably not commissioned by any Medici patron, the paintings are still often connected, and associated with the cultural circles of the Medici, especially Neoplatonic currents. They are then given allegorical readings in relation to Marsilio Ficino's philosophy.

An alternative approach to these works lightens the degree of didactic, metaphysical content in favor of a more amorous, poetic, and vernacular one. From this perspective, the paintings relate to the love poetry of Lorenzo de' Medici and verse by Poliziano. To date, only the Neoplatonic circle has been regarded as sympathetic to homoerotic intimacy, and the amorous interpretation has been exclusively heterocentric (even marital), although it need not be, given Poliziano's own homoerotic interests.

Out of favor for centuries, Botticelli was finally admired by Walter Pater in 1870 and John Ruskin in 1874. Their captivation with his charm and "wistfulness of exiles," in Pater's words, influenced the revival of Botticelli's reputation. However, presumptions about an ahistorical "gay sensibility," let alone one suited to the taste of nineteenth-century aesthetes, are not sufficient proof of Botticelli's erotic mode.

More important are documentary traces. On November 16, 1502, when in his later fifties, Botticelli was



Three paintings by Sandro Botticelli.  
**Top:** *The Birth of Venus*.  
**Center:** *Primavera* (Spring).  
**Above:** Saint Sebastian.

accused of sodomy with his *garzone* (shop lad or assistant who may also have served as a model). So averse was he to marital domesticity that an anecdote has Botticelli report that he "walked like a mad man all over Florence throughout the night" rather than return to a nightmare in which he was married. (Usually regarded as nuptial, Botticelli's *Mars and Venus* might relate to this dream, for Dempsey proposes that it depicts "an empty sensual fantasy" of torment during sleep).

Botticelli's workshop was a space where pleasantries mixed with serious discussions about Savonarola's reformist zeal, and a chronicler later took this to mean that an "academy of idlers" gathered there. Others probably thought his shop was a sodomites' hangout. Vasari put it delicately: the painter was "extraordinarily fond of those he knew to be students of the arts."

Although Botticelli has been called "the quintessential Neoplatonic painter," James Saslow notes that he avoided directly homoerotic myths. On the other hand, his Three Graces dance in self-sufficient, gentle union and in Botticelli's oeuvre erotic allusions are not strictly heteronormative.

For example, religious paintings are imbued with a sensual, sometimes mystical, elegance. Nude youths like St. Sebastian, Holofernes, or Mars are graced with glistening, ideal, and relaxed bodies. Adolescent angels are appropriately androgynous, characterized by fresh innocence and sweet beauty. This ephebic, otherworldly refinement carries over into Botticelli's portraits of Florentine youths. Three angels who embrace and kiss male figures accompany the *Mystic Nativity's* apocalyptic prophecy. Although this occurs in the celebratory context of liturgical and allegorical union, the ecstatic intimacy and yearning is affective.

Botticelli died in Florence on May 17, 1510.

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