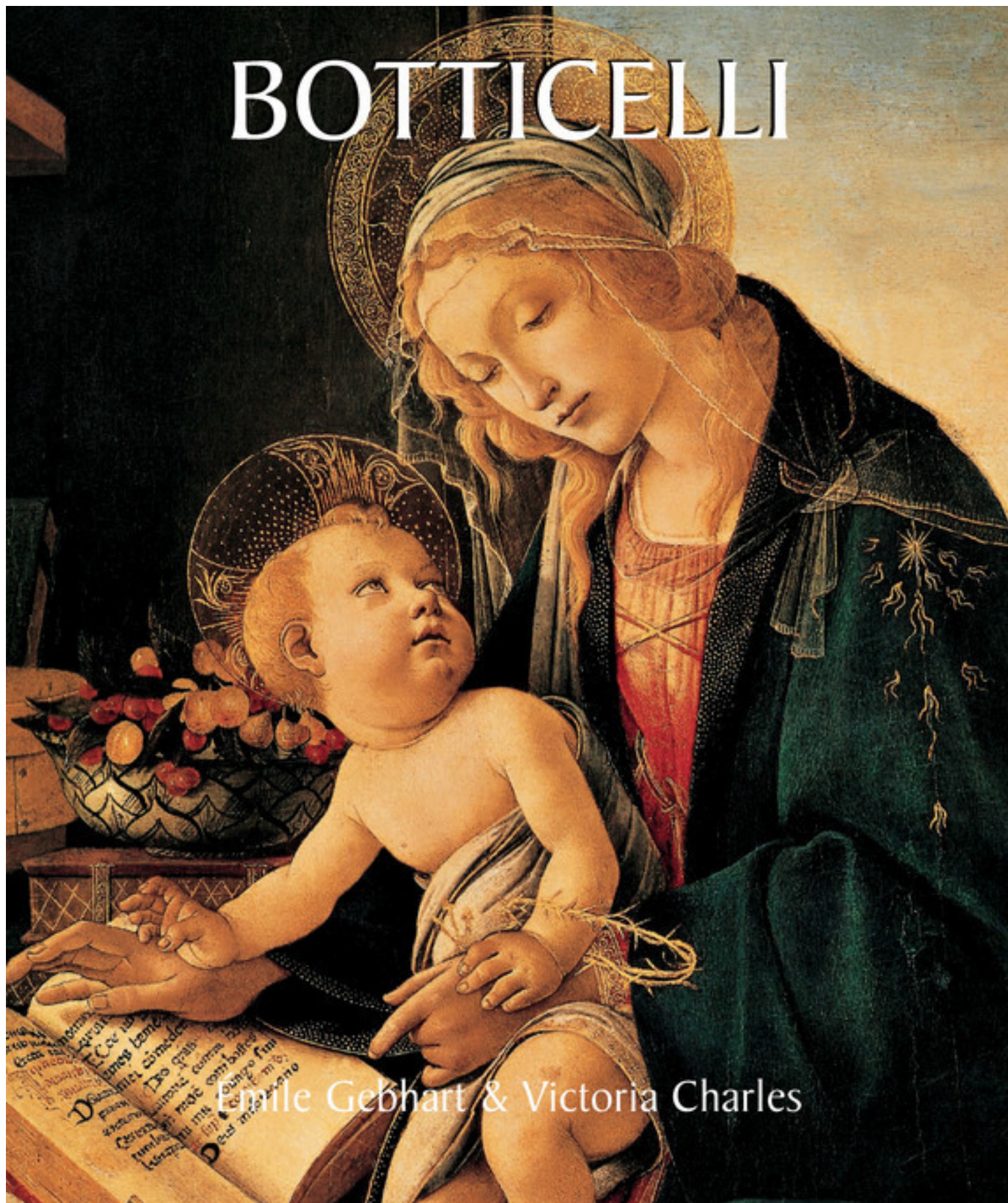


BOTTICELLI



Emile Gebhart & Victoria Charles

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Botticelli

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He was the son of a citizen in comfortable circumstances, and had been, in Vasari's words, "instructed in all such things as children are usually taught before they choose a calling." However, he refused to give his attention to reading, writing and accounts, continues Vasari, so that his father, despairing of his ever becoming a scholar, apprenticed him to the goldsmith Botticello: whence came the name by which the world remembers him. However, Sandro, a stubborn-featured youth with large, quietly searching eyes and a shock of yellow hair – he has left a portrait of himself on the right-hand side of his picture of the Adoration of the Magi – would also become a painter, and to that end was placed with the Carmelite monk Fra Filippo Lippi. But he was a realist, as the artists of his day had become, satisfied with the joy and skill of painting, and with the study of the beauty and character of the human subject instead of religious themes. Botticelli made rapid progress, loved his master, and later on extended his love to his master's son, Filippino Lippi, and taught him to paint, but the master's realism scarcely touched Lippi, for Botticelli was a dreamer and a poet. Botticelli is a painter not of facts, but of ideas, and his pictures are not so much a representation of certain objects as a pattern of forms. Nor is his colouring rich and lifelike; it is subordinated to form, and often rather a tinting than actual colour. In fact, he was interested in the abstract possibilities of his art rather than in the concrete. For example, his compositions, as has just been said, are a pattern of forms; his figures do not actually occupy well-defined places in a well-defined area of space; they do not attract us by their suggestion of bulk, but as shapes of form, suggesting rather a flat pattern of decoration. Accordingly, the lines which enclose the figures are chosen with the primary intention of being decorative. It has been said that

Botticelli, “though one of the worst anatomists, was one of the greatest draughtsmen of the Renaissance.” As an example of false anatomy we may notice the impossible way in which the Madonna’s head is attached to the neck, and other instances of faulty articulation and incorrect form of limbs may be found in Botticelli’s pictures. Yet he is recognised as one of the greatest draughtsmen: he gave to ‘line’ not only intrinsic beauty, but also significance. In mathematical language, he resolved the movement of the figure into its factors, its simplest forms of expression, and then combined these various forms into a pattern which, by its rhythmical and harmonious lines, produces an effect upon our imagination, corresponding to the sentiments of grave and tender poetry that filled the artist himself. This power of making every line count in both significance and beauty distinguishes the great master-draughtsmen from the vast majority of artists who used line mainly as a necessary means of representing concrete objects.

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Émile Gebhart and Victoria Charles Sandro Botticelli

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1. *Self Portrait* (detail of the *Adoration of the Magi*), 1500.
Tempera on wood, 111 × 134 cm.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Botticelli's Youth and Education



2. *Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist as a Child* (detail), c. 1468.
Tempera and oil on poplar, 90.7 × 67 cm.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.



3. **Sandro Botticelli** (?), *Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1491–1493.
Tempera on panel, 47.6 × 38.1 cm.
Ishizuka Collection, Tokyo.



4. *Virgin and Child with Two Angels*, c. 1485–1495.

Tempera on panel, diameter: 32.5 cm.

The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi, also known as “di Botticello” in homage to his first master, and Sandro Botticelli to those who knew him, was born in Florence in 1445. Even though Vasari asserts he died in the city-state of Florence in 1515, he passed away on May 17th, 1510. Shrewd and highly alert, he was endowed with a certain aristocratic grace, a typical child of the sophisticated class of Florentines. The rigid traditions of the old medieval Commune might well have restricted him to his professional guild or his quarter, or could have tied him to some modest manual occupation. He thus would have had a goldsmith’s workshop or a pharmacy in the shadow of his father’s house, or would have sold Psalters and rosaries on the Ponte Vecchio. On Sundays he might have sung endless *Laudes* amongst his companions of the Dominican clergy, and on occasion he would have donned his blue, black, or grey penitent cape and a yellow wax candle and would, without sadness, have followed the mortal remains of some neighbour to the nearest Campo Santo. A very narrow and humble destiny, which Florentines of the past had accepted indifferently, while the city, according to Dante *sobria e pudica*, lived happily in the untouchable sphere of its worldly traditions. But from the middle of the 15th century, the bonds that tied the citizen and curbed his will and the fancies of his ambition began to crack. The Renaissance gave birth to a creature full of

inclinations, “the Individual”, who now escaped the olden discipline. Encouraged by the Church, adulated by tyrants, republics, or art patrons, the quintessential Florentine art rose above the *Arti Maggiori*, higher still than the bankers, lawyers, wool or silk weavers. It was the art of the painter or sculptor, an aristocracy amongst the princedoms of the Quattrocento, a glory of which young boys were dreaming longingly as soon as they beheld and admired Giotto at Santa Croce, Masaccio at Carmine, Fra’ Filippo Lippi at the Cathedral of Prato, or Donatello at Orsanmichele.

Now the passion for beauty possessed the soul of Italy and ruled supreme over Florence. There was not a palace, not a church, not a monastery that was not a feast for the eyes and a solemn reminder of the Christian conscience in a dashing play of colours, magnificent garments, the grave demeanour of the figures and their postures, and the display of the most dignified scenes from the Old Testament or the Gospel.

An incessant popular pilgrimage brought citizens of the Mercato Vecchio and the farmers of the *contado* to those beautiful works of art every day. Here they found the image of their faith, the edifying liturgical dramas of the *Rappresentazioni sacre*: the stable of Bethlehem with the ox and the ass; the Wise Men prostrated in front of the manger, clad in purple and ermine, holding the golden incense burners; the painful episodes of the Passion, Jesus, covered in blood, crowned in thorns, crucified between two thieves, resurrected, victorious over death. It was here they greeted the patron saints of their city, village, parish, or friary. As often as ten times a day, a Florentine citizen would find himself lifting his cap in front of an icon of Saint John, clad poorly in a sheepskin, carrying his frail reed cross. Or maybe this citizen stopped at some hospital portico, or a cemetery pavilion, or in the courtyard of a rich Guelph mansion; and wherever he went he would be confronted with the symbols of his public life, even with a vision of his own dying hour. He would see processions and grand entrances of lords, tournaments and banquets, the trumpet of Judgment Day and the pale dead rising from their graves.



5. *Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist as a Child*, c. 1468.
Tempera and oil on poplar, 90.7 × 67 cm.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.



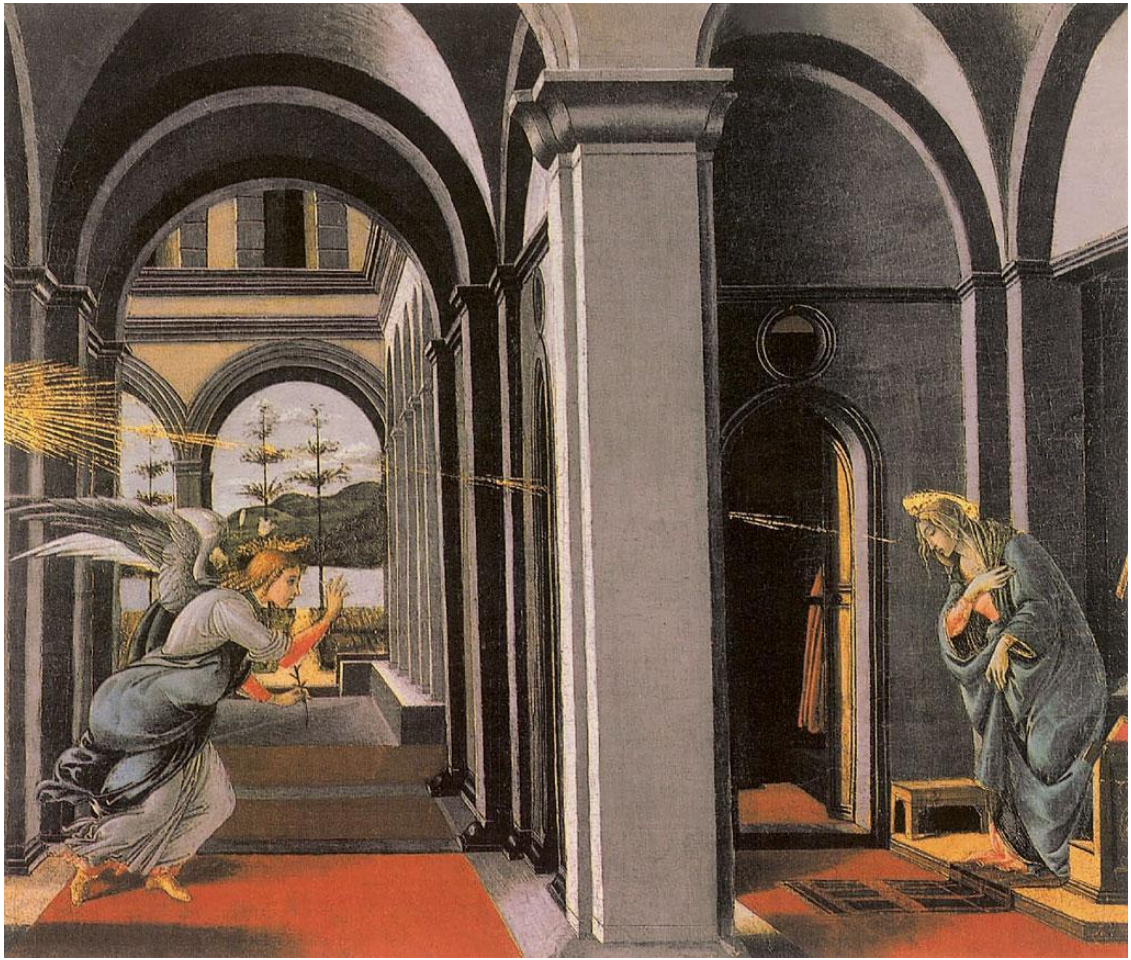
6. *The Virgin Adoring the Child*, 1480–1490.
Tempera on panel, diameter: 58.9 cm.
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.



7. **Sandro Botticelli** and assistants, *The Virgin and Child with Saint John Adoring the Child*, c. 1481–1482.

Tempera on panel, diameter: 95 cm.

Musei Civici di Palazzo Farnese, Piacenza.

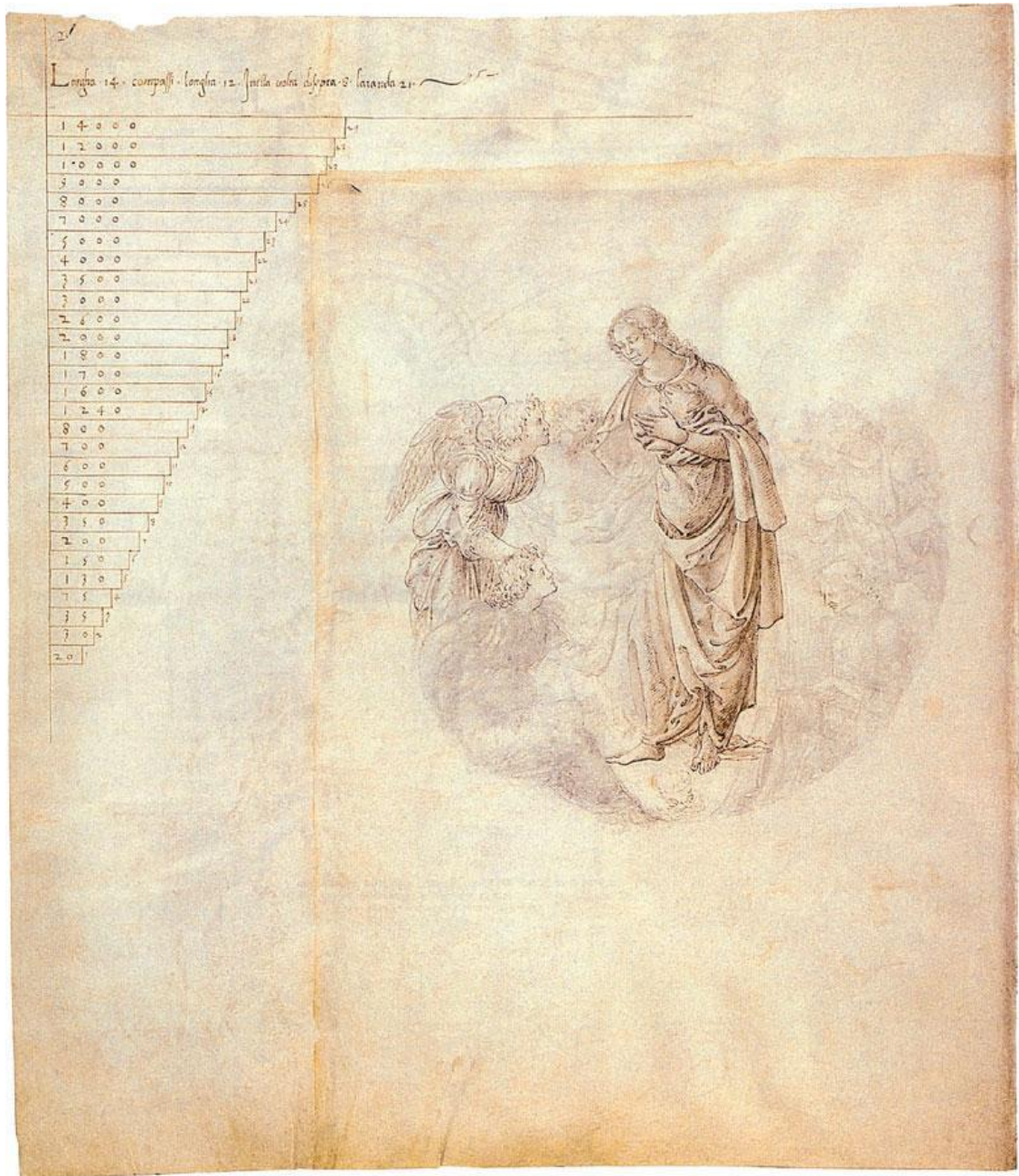


8. *The Annunciation*, c. 1495–1500 (?).
Tempera on panel, 49.5 × 61.9 cm.
Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.

From the 13th century onward, painters became the pride of Florence. Cimabue's grand Byzantine Madonna at Santa Maria Novella, so rigid still, and of such a sullen countenance, nonetheless stunned the *dilettanti* of the year 1260. When Charles I of Anjou crossed Tuscany on his way to Naples, the magistrates honoured the brother of Saint Louis between all the festivities and entertainment by taking him to visit Cimabue's workshop in a garden near the Porta San Piero. All the noblemen, the high bourgeoisie, and the genteel ladies accompanied the French prince with such exclamations of joy that this quarter has since been called "Borgo Allegri". To the sound of trumpets and bells, the Madonna was then taken from the painter's house to the Rucellai chapel in a very solemn procession. Over the course of the 14th century, the writings of Boccaccio and Sacchetti began to reveal the freedom that the Florentine spirit gave to craftsmanship, to adventures and miseries, to the artists' skill and wit, to Giotto's jests, and to the practical jokes of the incomparable second-hand artist Buffalmacco. From the middle of the 15th century, Florentine art itself assumed a national purpose. The patronage of the Medici, from Cosimo the Elder to Lorenzo the Magnificent, elevated the social standing of sculptors and painters who dedicated themselves to the embellishment of patrician life. In fact, all the princes and city-states of Italy borrowed Florence's painters and sculptors, who were sent as missionaries of its genius to all the schools of the peninsula. The artists were received everywhere enthusiastically, regardless of their origins: Sixtus IV invited them to decorate the Sistine Chapel, Alexander VI left the rooms of the Vatican to the superb brush of the Umbrian Pinturicchio, who displayed the drunken revels of the

Borgia without shame. The rigid pride of Julius II never bent except for when he faced the one and only Michelangelo. Leo × was seen kneeling and crying at Raphael's deathbed...

It was thus that in less than fifty years, the Italian artist assumed an eminent place amongst the masters of civilisation. Like the *condottiere*, the poet, the grand schemer, the diplomat, like all those who were privileged by nature and who owed nothing to their forefathers, who were themselves the masterpieces of their own spirit, the artist could now unfold the generous forces or the perverted instincts of his conscience without any constraint. Whether it was Michelangelo or Aretino, the artist was greeted as the *uomo singolare*, *uomo unico*, the unique craftsman of a dazzling destiny and, in order to use the term that was at the very heart of the Renaissance, the *virtuoso*. We know that the *virtù* that Machiavelli glorifies in his most riveting passages has nothing to do with virtue. The virtuoso can be a great Christian, a very pure citizen, an excellent soul – such was Michelangelo and doubtlessly Brunelleschi, as well. But, in most cases, these ideal creatures, such as Cesare Borgia, Benvenuto Cellini, Pier Luigi Farnese, or Aretino, mocked the vulgar morality and the outdated traditions that governed the lives of the naive sort of people.



9. *The Virgin and Child Surrounded by Angels*, c. 1480–1490.
Silverpoint and brown ink on parchment, 44.5 × 39 cm.
Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City.



10. *Angel*, c. 1485–1490.
Pen over chalk, wash and white heightening, 25.3 × 16.1 cm.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

At the same time one must keep in mind that society was amazingly indulgent, delighted by the audacity of the strong and thrilled by the malice of the treacherous. The Italian virtuoso was certainly a product of his age. The Italian Church, corrupted by earthly vanities, had too big a share of moral responsibility in this. The motherly tenderness it showed for its beloved artists encouraged them in their most liberal fantasies. So when Fra' Filippo Lippi had the idea of abducting a young nun and making her his mistress, Pope Eugene IV offered him a marriage dispensation and forgot to release him from his vows. But Lippi rejected the dispensation "so that he could do as he pleased" and kept his head shaved and his status of monk until his death. A dispensation by Pius II did not change anything about this extraordinary lifestyle. In their obituary, the good Carmelite friars registered the death of *Frater Filippus*, and the clergy of Spoleto devotedly laid him to rest at his church of Santa Maria dell'Assunta. He was survived by his son Filippino (who himself became an artist) and six little daughters.

Later, when Pope Clement VII locked up Benvenuto Cellini in the Castel Sant'Angelo because the latter liked to plant an occasional knife in the backs of Roman citizens, the very noble soul Paul III replied to anyone who denounced the vices of his pious assassin: "Men who are unique in their art, like Cellini, cannot be subjected to the law, and him less than anyone."

One must thus keep in mind this dominant character of the Italian genius, of the Florentine genius, soaked with individual energy by three centuries of revolution. From year to year, the Quattrocento further broadened the horizon of enlightenment that fascinated the eyes of its children. The temptation of glory roused in them a calling to the arts. The smallest, the most obscure people harboured dreams of immortality. So the poor young man Sandro, clad in a coarse frock in his father's tanning workshop, haunted by paradisiacal images that he had seen in the village churches, his ear ringing with the chants from the street, was also silently preparing for his future. In this fertile Florence, the butcher's son Filippo Lippi, the barber's son Paolo Uccello, and Pollaiuolo, the son of a poultry merchant, all did the same.



11. *The Annunciation* (left panel), 1490.

Tempera on canvas, 45 × 13 cm.

The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.



12. *The Annunciation* (right panel), 1490.

Tempera on canvas, 45 × 13 cm.

The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

The first lines of Vasari's biography of Botticelli deserve a closer look:

The child was raised with much care by Filipepi and instructed in all things that the little ones must learn before you put them in the shops. But, even though he learned easily and fast anything he set his mind to, he was nonetheless always restless (*era nientedimeno inquieto sempre*) and at school, he rebelled against reading, writing, and arithmetic. Thus the father, irritated by this strange brain (*infastidito di questo cervello si stravaganle*) and disheartened (*per disperato*), made him an apprentice with a goldsmith, a friend by the name of Botticello ("the little bottle"), who was at the time an excellent master of this art.

This young boy with the burning imagination was full of promise but was an appalling pupil. Therefore his disappointed father advised him to become a goldsmith. As a matter of fact, he was "scrawling little figures all over his books and those of his classmates", just like Filippo Lippi. Like Andrea del Castagno, he drew figures and animals on the school walls with coal. Being a good Florentine, his father could not suppress the blossoming talent of the artist who was trapped within the walls of his home. Little Sandro was only too happy to leave the school desks behind and escape the schoolmaster's whip. So he spent some time braiding light filigrees of gold or silver under the watchful eyes of Botticello, chiselling ladies' jewellery and reliquaries, and the daisies and roses that would later blossom on his paintings.



13. *The Last Communion of Saint Jerome*, early 1490s.
Tempera and gold on wood, 34.3 × 25.4 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Vasari tells us that in this time, relations between goldsmiths and painters were intimate and frequent. The trade of goldsmith naturally led to painting. Masolino da Panicale and Paolo Uccello had once been apprentices in the workshop of Ghiberti. And did not many of Botticelli's famous contemporaries, such as Andrea del Verrocchio and Antonio Pollaiuolo wield the file before they

touched a brush? Domenico Ghirlandaio was the son of Tommaso, the tinsel maker, whose fingers handled the gold tinsel that young girls used to wreath into their hair in the middle of the century. Andrea del Sarto was later trained in the same art. It was a very Florentine discipline, from which the painters of Florence retained their taste for delicate ornaments as well as for the finesse of their work. The practice of the detailed, scrupulous design, the striving for the most tender, purest, even strange forms, the chatter in the workshop, the proximity of the painters' workshops, and their delight at the beauty of a sunset, the golden softness of dusk, the austere look of the Apennine mountains washed in dark blue, the faint chimes of distant bells, the farewell to the dying day, which conjured up the memory of the great exiled Florentine Dante – all these impressions were these young men's labour and leisure at the same time. They helped steer them away from the trade of goldsmith that was honest but limited and rigid in its procedures, and led them onto the footsteps of Masaccio and Filippo Lippi.

The gate of the Baptistery, which Michelangelo referred to as the "Gate to Paradise", taught the children of Florence lessons every day. In fact, Ghiberti worked on this jewel for more than twenty years, and it almost seems as if he simply wanted to exemplify the easy passage from the goldsmith's art to decorative sculpture. But it was actually the aesthetic and the techniques of painting that revealed themselves in these bronze bas-reliefs. The very delicate carving of the hair, the pleats of the robes, stirred by a breeze of air, the details of the ornaments are those of a goldsmith, but the general movement of the figures, the confidence and tricks of the perspective, the succession and grading of the layers, sometimes down to a vague light-dark, betray the "painter in bronze", the artist who does not heed the rules of the school and nimbly overcomes the traditional barriers between sculpture and painting. From each panel numerous heads stand out on a sloping background, aligned in perspective. The effect of picturesque illusion is astounding. In order to achieve it, Ghiberti used all the layers of the relief, all the way to the *stracciallo* (the cleft), where the lower parts are just carved or notched.



14. *Minerva*, c. 1480–1485.

Pencil on paper, 18.9 × 8.7 cm.

Biblioteca Pinacoteca Accademia Ambrosiana, Milan.



15. *Faith*, c. 1480–1490.

Pen and brown ink over black chalk with white heightening, 25 × 16.6 cm.

The British Museum, London.

In Florence, the art of goldsmith was thus the pathway to painting, and the apprentice's passion for images in colour would soon lead him to desert his gold dust-spangled workbench and offer his services to some master who was renowned for his *Holy Family*, his *Magi* or his *Crucifixions*. Therefore, in 1462, young Botticelli hastily took his leave from the old Botticello. His own father, who according to Vasari “understood the inclinations of this brain”, conducted him to the door of Fra' Filippo Lippi, who was still politely called Filippo del Carmine, Filippo the Carmelite, despite the canonical irregularities in his life. Botticelli was fifteen years old at the time. Since 1458, Lippi had been working on his masterpieces, the *Life of Saint John the Baptist* and the *Life of Saint Stephen* in the Cathedral of Prato near Florence. He was then considered the greatest painter in all of Italy. He had taken his entire school and his loyal colleague Fra' Diamante to the Prato. The young man suddenly found himself confronted with an art that was liberal, very vibrant, and slightly sensual. This was no longer the hieratic gravity of Masaccio, the simple dignity of Gospel characters, the discreet pathos of religious scenes, half shrouded in mysterious half-light, or the chaste, slightly frigid graces of the chapel Brancacci. Fra' Filippo's lively imagination threw itself joyfully upon the most familiar realities. He sought to achieve the most seductive faces, the most feminine and motherly Madonnas, the most varied and rich garments, the most original gestures, angels who did not resemble pious choir children, architectures that were more refined, landscapes that were wider, sunnier, and covered in flowers and roses. In the Prato of Vasari's time, after Raphael and Leonardo, during the lifetime of Veronese, one still admired the captivating expression of his figures; the serenity of Saint Stephen, stoical in the shower of rocks hurled at him by raving Jews, the beauty of his eyes turned heavenward, which seemed to plead with God on behalf of his executioners; the apostolic enthusiasm of John preaching to the masses; and in the *Feast of Herod*, the majestic arrangement of the banquet and the “beautiful demeanours of the bodies, the skilful play of the draperies.”

One can assume that Filippo Lippi was fond of little Sandro from the first day. He was to love him tenderly until the end of his life, and as he felt death draw near in Spoleto, he entrusted him, as per his testament, with the guardianship of his ten-year-old son Filippino. Fra' Diamante took the child to Botticelli in Florence, who was then already considered a *maestro buonissimo*.



16. **Sandro Botticelli and Filippino Lippi**, *Queen Vasthi Leaving the Palace of Susa*, c. 1475.
Oily tempera on panel, 46.1 × 43 cm.
Museo della Fondazione Horne, Florence.



17. **Giuliano da Maiano** and other Florentine carpenters, after a painting by **Sandro Botticelli**, *Apollo's Music* and *Minerva in Arms*.
Palazzo ducale, Angels' Room, Urbino.



18. **Francione** and **Giuliano da Maiano**, after a painting by **Sandro Botticelli**, *Dante and Petrarch*, 1478.

Wood marquetry.

Palazzo Vecchio, Lily Room, Florence.



19. *Judith Leaving the Tent of Holofernes*, c. 1497–1500.

Panel, 36.5 × 20 cm.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

The training of the apprentice right on the scaffolding in the cathedral was thus very swift. At the age of twenty-three, Botticelli was already known throughout his native town for the excellence of his work. He had very quickly completed the apprenticeship of a very laborious discipline, the minutest details of which were presented half a century later in the inquisitive *Libra dell' Arte* by Cennino Cennini. But in the course of the Quattrocento, a novice to the art would work thirteen or fourteen years under the eyes and at the service of a master. He would begin by sweeping the workshop and watching the *brasero*, and eventually he would do some sketches. For six years, he would then dedicate himself to mixing colours in the *bottega*, making the skin glues, preparing the canvasses. Finally, for another six years, and still doing drawings every day, even on holidays, he would dip his brush in the colour and try his hand at a golden drapery, at a fresco, at the shading of the figures, at the tones of the fabrics which changed according to how they met light and shadow, at the transparency of water, at architectures, at the fleeting layers of the landscapes, at picturesque flora and fauna, at figures of messengers and greyhounds, at slender cypress trees, or pine trees with rounded cupolas, at the virginal candour of lilies, at bay trees embroidered with bright red flowers, at meadows spattered with anemones, hyacinth, and buttercups. Only then would the boy, the *ragazzo*, become *maestro*, and Florence would have one new master among the ranks of its painters. But in order to make a living while waiting for his lordly and ecclesiastic clientele, the young man would practice another small trade, in the evenings after the workshop closed. Antonio Pollaiuolo returned to the goldsmith's workshop, twisted the filigrees, inserted gems, and cooked up silver enamels. Botticelli, the more inventive one, created new chemicals and dyed fabrics and flags in colours that would withstand sunlight and the unrelenting Florentine rain.

Botticelli, however, did not content himself with the lofty art lessons that Saint Stephen and the Baptist imparted to him in the Cathedral of Prato. In the Florentine sculptors' and painters' workshops of the time, the sheer power of invention, the curiosity for beautiful works was so lively and mutual emulation so intense, that a novice received, even without knowing it, a broad variety of instruction and could claim to have three or four teachers. The artwork of his young fellow apprentices also pushed him to imitate, in this insecure phase when the artist, *inquieto*, still trying to find his own original style, likes to follow the masters' footsteps.

Fra' Filippo Lippi was called to Santa Maria dell'Assunta in Spoleto in 1467, where it seems his pupil did not follow him. He did not hesitate to allow the young Botticelli to take wing on his own. He had, in fact, taught him the technique of his art, the manoeuvres, his concept of personal liberty, this serenity of inspiration that was spiced with a natural cheerfulness in this genial monk. Vasari tells us that "Fra' Filippo liked to be among merry people and always lived with joy." Botticelli held on to his master's serenity for a long time. But as far as cheerfulness is concerned, there is hardly a trace of it in his work, or in his life. The artist was to live the destiny of the lyrical soul, carried towards the more sublime, sapphire-blue regions by enthusiasm and dreams, and hurled back onto earth by the miseries of his time, a destiny of bitterness and disillusion, of anxiety about the future, of life doomed to end in sadness.



20. *Minerva*, c. 1480–1490.

Black pencil, pen and ink, bistre, ceruse and some light brown watercolour on white paper partially primed in pink, cross-ruled in black pencil and perforated on one side along the outlines of the figures, 22.2 × 13.9 cm.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



21. *Abundance or Autumn*, c. 1475–1482.

Drawing, 31.7 × 25.2 cm.

The British Museum, London.

For some years, after his initiation at the Cathedral of Prato, Botticelli was touched by very varied influences. Paolo Uccello and Andrea del Castagno, who along with Masaccio were among the best painters of the first half of the Quattrocento, left rather noticeable marks on his work. In fact, Uccello inspired him to find subtle perspectives and create deep landscapes. To Andrea del Castagno, this violent realist of untamed imagination, Botticelli owed the almost fierce precision of the postures, and maybe the coarseness of certain figures. His familiarity with the great goldsmith-painters of his time, the Pollaiuolo brothers and Verrocchio, was even more fertile. All three of them were a few years older than he. They instilled in him the perfection of detail, the diligence of the design, the harmonious weighing of the ensemble, of the bright range of opaline colours, and the seriousness of the execution, qualities not dominant in Filippo Lippi, but which were going to be the charm of Botticelli's masterpieces.

To all these models mentioned by Florentine art historians, we can add two masters who certainly seduced the young artist by the lure of their poetry: Luca della Robbia and Donatello. Their figures are of such a calm expression, of such enchanted physiognomy, almost translucent so that their delicate, pure souls shine through. There are also the young heroes with fearless hearts and noble swords, such as Donatello's bronze *Saint George* and *David*, the young nude athlete, crowned by an ivy-laced shepherd's hat. Classical sculpture had never attempted to astonish the conscience in such a way, and to reveal the thoughts or sensations of that instant with the help of gestures and poses of ideal simplicity. Are the Florentine youngsters that Della Robbia makes sing or play musical instruments not proof of this spirit? The same is true for Donatello's young *Saint John*; and also for his bands of happy little boys "who walk interlaced like vine branches while dancing and singing" around the external pulpit of the Cathedral of Prato. It was not the official school of aesthetics that guided the hand of these two sculptors. Free from doctrine, in a very Florentine, very naturalist tradition, they aimed for the most seductive expression of life in its first flower, such as they found it on the streets of their towns, on the banks of the Arno, in the bluish incense fumes on the chancels. The young *Saint John*, in bas-relief, is a child of ten years, shoulders and arms naked, chest half covered in a lamb fleece, with curly hair, a defined face and a very gentle gaze. He is a little surprised and his mouth is slightly opened as if for an *Ave Maria*. It is said that the bust of young *David*, serious, already manly, with dreamy eyes, a nervous and almost shivering figure, was the portrait of a young nobleman. The youth of Florence was more than suitable to pose for artwork. Just by making their brown locks longer and softer, Botticelli transformed children or adolescents into his marvellously beautiful angels, which his pupil Filippino Lippi would adopt later on.



22. Workshop of **Sandro Botticelli**, *La Bella Simonetta*, c. 1480–1485.
Tempera on panel, 64 × 44 cm.

Marubeni Corporation, Tokyo.



23. Workshop of **Sandro Botticelli**, *Portrait of a Woman (Simonetta Vespucci)*, c. 1480–1485 (?).

Tempera on panel, 59 × 40 cm.

The National Gallery, London.

Vasari tells us that upon his return from Rome in 1482, Botticelli, in need of money, annotated Dante, and illustrated the scenes of the *Inferno* (he forgot to mention *The Purgatory* and *The Paradise*). This work had a very important moral impact and was the first sign of a deep spiritual crisis that would last until the artist's death. The chronicler interpreted this project as nothing more than a new manifestation of Botticelli's very fanciful spirit; for didn't he write "*Per essere persona sofistica*"? The Italy of Vasari, after Alexander VI, Leo X, and Clement VII, after Alessandro de' Medici, and Lorenzaccio (Lorenzino de' Medici), had abandoned itself to the morbid sweetness of servitude and was certainly quite far removed from Dante and its greatest citizen's mystical terrors, rage, and hatred. Around the same time, a lonely and misunderstood Michelangelo also confessed his religious anxiety on the margins of his *Divine Comedy*. In one of his most beautiful sonnets, he wrote about Dante that "ill-known his labours are, by that foul mob ingrate, whose honours fail but to the just alone."

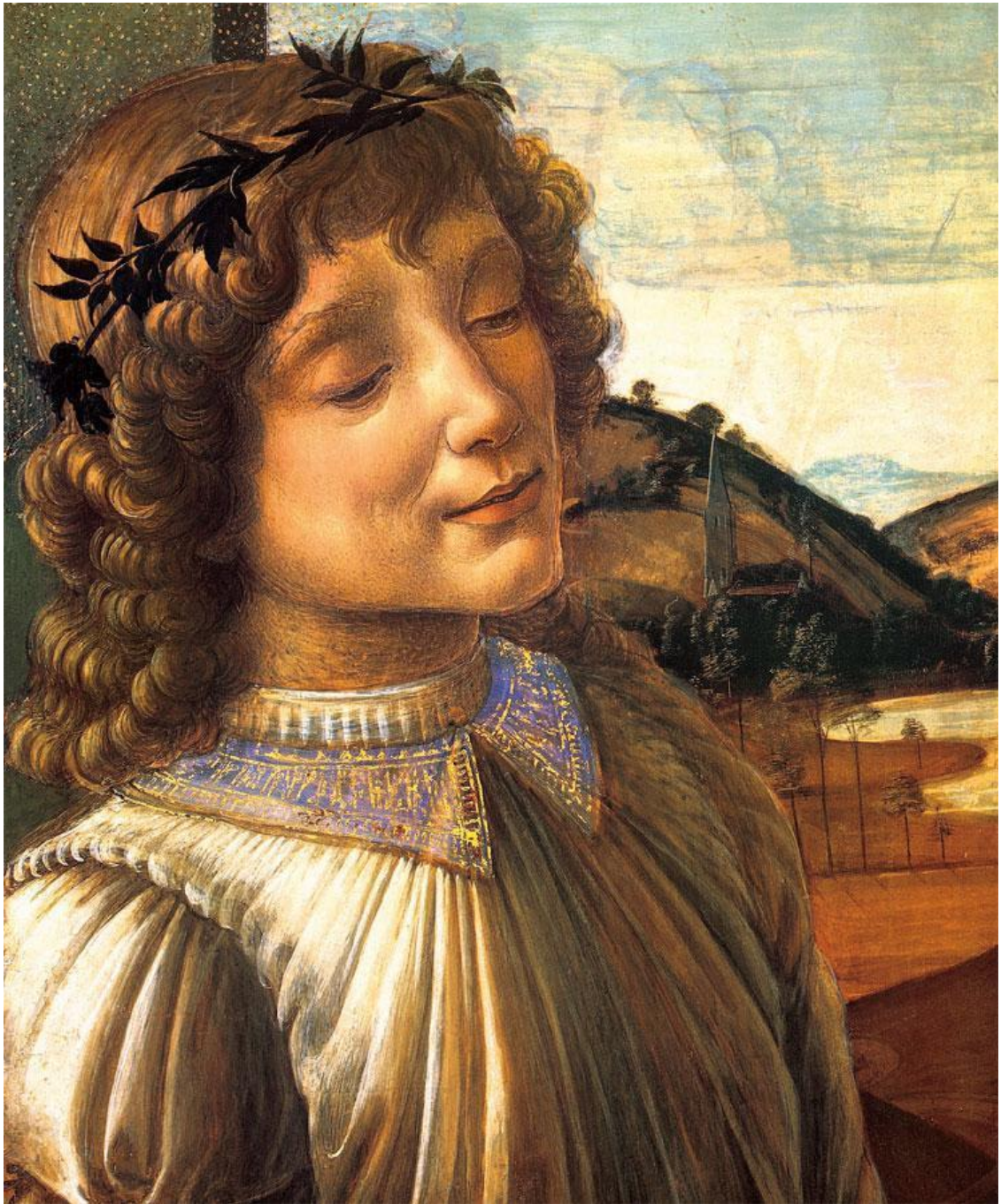
To the Florentines of the Medici era, Dante's dark visions and raptures were even more obscure than in the day of the old Guelph Commune. The people had in fact forgotten the banished man whose remains rested down there in Ravenna, in the tomb of the Roman Empire. With the exception of Machiavelli, hardly any scholars, humanists, Platonists, or politicians read the formidable tercets any more, in which the fury and sufferings of a forever-extinct world lay buried. It wasn't until the age of thirty-five that a certain Florentine painter, looking for resources or inspiration for his art, was able to approach the austere poet and step over the threshold of his *Inferno* for the first time. It is true that depictions of the terrible abyss could be seen everywhere on the walls of the chapels and monasteries. It was a picturesque and familiar sermon that the Church liked to deliver in order to strike their congregations with awe before God's judgment. But did those diabolic images really remind the faithful of the terrible *Cantica*? The spectacle of infernal roasting, the boilers and skewers, devils armed with forks, the twisted bodies and grimaces of the punished, the beastly mask of Satan, all seemed to embody the sonorous homilies of the mendicants, sung between the vespers and the evening mass, from the *pulpito* and sometimes even from trestles set up in the parish churchyards. The one serious feature is the painters' satirical invention. In a shrewd interpretation of popular irony, they threw into the claws of the demon an extraordinary number of men with tonsures, tiaras, mitres, or princely crowns, as well as monks of all colours. The Italian Church looked on these inoffensive auto-da-fés with a benign smile and tolerated depictions of the Antichrist that were grotesque enough to brighten up a children's tale. Maybe the idea was that the pictorial torture inflicted upon popes, bishops, preachers, and minor clergy would fill the minds of the faint-hearted laity with some salutary fear.

It is likely that Dante was a missal of poetry to the young Sandro and that his writings remained among the most treasured memories of his life. The *Divine Comedy* was one of his first encounters with the netherworld, inspiring a curiosity of the invisible that was going to appear even in his least Christian works. Therefore Botticelli's affinity to Dante helps us better understand the core of his inner life and allows us to discover in this artist, who was so enamoured with feminine grace, the deep roots of the strange beliefs with which he would disturb his contemporaries during the last two decades of his life.



24. **Sandro Botticelli** (?), *Portrait of a Young Man with a Trecento Medallion*, c. 1481–1485.
Tempera on panel, 58.7 × 39.4 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Botticelli's First Works



25. *The Virgin and Child with an Angel* (detail), early 1470s.
Tempera and oil on wood, 85.2 × 65 cm.
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.



26. *The Virgin Adoring the Sleeping Christ Child*, c. 1490.
Tempera and gold on canvas, 122 × 80.3 cm.
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

There are three distinct aspects in Botticelli's works that correlate to three very different emotional states: the moderate serenity and originality of the first years during the Medici period; Botticelli's Pagan crisis, a voluptuous vision that nonetheless did not affect the religious idealism in pictures of sainthood that he painted during the same time; then, towards the end of his life, a truly romantic inspiration, like a conversion to a sombre Christianity, when he joined Savonarola's sect and renounced the genius of the Renaissance.

It would be foolish to try to determine the precise years of these three phases, which are separated by nuances of sentiment, rather than by painting methods. They are a sort of steady evolution of Botticelli's distinct aesthetic. The critical method, which seems to work for Raphael, would only yield uncertain results for Botticelli. One can date most of Raphael's works with certainty. For Botticelli, however, a rigorous historical catalogue is difficult to establish. Some paintings can be classified rather plausibly thanks to the events surrounding them. Only one bears the evidence of the year it was completed. It is the last one, the astounding *Mystic Nativity*, which is in the possession of the National Gallery in London and can be dated to 1500.

Botticelli's phase of Pagan idealism falls into the period of Lorenzo the Magnificent. But even here one must beware of too strict a chronology. The poetic seduction of the court and of Medici society doubtlessly left its mark on the young painter's imagination after his farewell from his master Filippo Lippi in 1469. It would continue until Lorenzo's death in 1492. Botticelli's first stay in Rome took place sometime during this period (approximately 1481–1482). Even though this visit hardly lasted a year, it was not without importance. This was the anti-Christian Rome of Sixtus IV, the *Bestia senza pace*, fierce enemy of Florence, the Rome of the she-wolf, Alighieri's haggard she-wolf, "brimming with all sorts of lust, which makes so many people live in sadness." He retained impressions of religious anxiety, which would later lead this follower of Dante on his way to the apocalyptic religion of Girolamo Savonarola. He was thus, until his end, the nervous child that the honest Vasari described, a wavering personality that often shirked his duties, an enigmatic, alluring figure, like the mysterious creatures that slither through the half-light of his paintings.



27. *Three Angels*, c. 1470–1475.

Pen with brown shading with pink wash and white heightening on pink primed paper, 10.2 × 23.4 cm.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

There is one particularity that casts another shadow over Botticelli's charm. Modern criticism has been wary of old historical accounts, maybe to a fault. It thus took up Vasari and pointed out several paintings that he had falsely attributed to Botticelli in his chronicles. It then reattributed them either to Pollaiuolo, Verrocchio, some student of Botticelli, some contemporary artist of very modest renown, or Alunno, an easy hallmark of the entire school. At the same time it gave back to Botticelli the *Virgin and Child with an Angel* of the Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence, a painting that had long been thought to be Fra' Filippo's. Sometimes problems of doubtful authorship stir the curiosity of the world, and may have unfortunate effects on the glory of those who are thus dispossessed of a legendary dignity. While such accidents in art history reinforce the scepticism of the scholars, they can sometimes be remarkably interesting. For Botticelli, they have aesthetic and moral implications at the same time. They are a skewed testimony to his genius and to the prestige that his memory still wielded over Vasari's contemporaries.

Let us now study Botticelli's first paintings. Vasari writes that "at a very young age, *giovanello*, he painted a *Fortezza* (an allegory of fortitude) for the chamber of commerce amongst representations of other Virtues that Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo had done." The *Saint Sebastian* on wood, commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici and kept at the church Santa Maria Maggiore of Florence for some time, dates from 1474. The artist was nineteen years old at the time. And if we add to these two works the aforementioned Madonna of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, the Madonna of Santa Maria Nuova, the Madonna of Prince Chigi (*Virgin and Child with an Angel*), the Madonna of Naples (*Virgin and Child with Two Angels*), the *Madonna of the Rose Garden*, the Madonna of the Louvre (*Virgin and Child with John the Baptist*) as well as *The Return of Judith to Bethulia*, we have assembled, like on a little stage, Botticelli's early work. In fact, several features of his future originality were already emerging.



28. *Nativity with Saint John the Baptist*, 1469–1470.

Fresco, 200 × 300 cm.

Santa Maria della Novella, Florence.

Fortitude and the *Madonna of the Rose Garden*, both sitting in an arched niche, are of a sculptural appearance, very upright, the head slightly bent to the left. Here we can see the first female faces with accentuated features, the widest part of which is at the level of the eyes and which then narrows down to the chin. An austere sweetness emanates from the *Fortitude*, who is draped generously and is wearing a gold and pearl diadem, iron armbands, and a chiselled steel breastplate. The red cloak unfolding on her knees is embroidered and bordered with Arabic letters. It is creating a colourful effect and also partly hiding the exaggerated length of her legs. She is

holding the commander's staff with both hands, propped up against her belly. This is a bellicose gesture for a seated figure, the same that Andrea del Castagno had lent to his coarse *condottiere* Filippo Scolari. Botticelli's first flowers blossom around the *Madonna of the Rose Garden*, at the end of the tabernacle where the Virgin is resting. This is the decorative tradition that was dear to Fra' Filippo, and also an endearing revelation of his affection for flowers, a very Florentine and Virgilian passion. The painter's soul was doubtlessly wrapped in the memory of Dante's mystical meadows. Botticelli's first Madonnas and the angels that serve as their acolytes demonstrate his efforts to escape the dread of mimicry. They noticeably lack the religious fervour of Fra' Angelico's Madonnas. This Dominican monk of Fiesole was a content ascetic and a visionary *tutto serafico in ardore*, more prudish than the valiant Carmelite Lippi, and never dared paint a female face after a living model. His virgins are blonde and very gentle nuns, his angels blonde and curly, dancing in God's gardens, reminiscent of an archbishop's choir children whom the chorus master is letting out for some innocent play one Ascension Day or Whitsunday afternoon. They dance devotedly to liturgical rhythms and tunes of hymns. Benozzo Gozzoli's angels at the Riccardi palace resemble youngsters receiving their first Communion at the holy table, kneeling, hands crossed over their chests, heads bowed, enshrouded in gold. They are awaiting the altar bread while under the vaults of the church the organ sighs: *O salutaris!*

Botticelli's idealism, on the other hand, was less ethereal, yet not the bourgeois naturalism in which Fra' Filippo often indulged. Lippi's Madonna at the Pitti palace is more of a young girl than a young woman. She comes to us directly from the Florentine *popolino*, looking at us with a vague dreaminess, without too much adoration for the divine child on her lap who is gravely lifting his right arm with the demeanour of a preacher.

The maternal aura of Botticelli's virgins is more reverential and attentive. Their eyes are almost closed in most instances. *The Virgin and Child with Two Angels* is almost severely stiff, despite the softness and abundance of her drapery, and her face is a little sullen. The life of the painting lies entirely in the *Bambino's* expression of infantile tenderness, held by two little angels who are simple little boys straight from the *Mercato Vecchio*. Additionally, Jesus is trying to caress his mother with his little hands. From a plate that a young boy offers to her, *The Virgin and Child with an Angel* is taking some clusters of grapes and an ear of wheat, the symbols of the sacrament of the altar. With the other hand she is holding the *Bambino*, who lifts his right arm in a sort of premature Eucharistic benediction.

The *Virgin and Child with an Angel*, known as the *Virgin of the Innocenti*, sitting and showing her right profile, and the *Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist as a Child*, kept at the Louvre, already look more sophisticated due to the sombre colour of the dress. The first has the uncertain, dreamy look of Lippi's Madonna. Her headdress that covers almost all of her hair is taken from the popular fashion. The second has lowered her eyes and her head is covered with a light transparent veil, crowned by a halo of light. She piously presses the child against her chest, who is puffy, sickly, and whose anxious expression resembles the Jesus in Raphael's *Madonna of the Chair*. The embrace of the Virgin of the Innocenti is less motherly. Assisted by the angel, whose blonde hair is braided like that of a little girl, she seems to be bouncing her son softly to amuse him or to rock him to sleep. The Virgin of the Louvre, in her dark blue cloak, is very grave, even melancholy. Does this meditating face betray a premonition of the tragic Mother of the Seven Sorrows, an anticipation of the *Stabat Mater*?



29. *Adoration of the Child*, c. 1470.

Pen with brown shading, white heightening and ink wash, 16 × 25.7 cm.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



30. *Virgin and Child with an Angel*, 1466–1467.
Tempera on panel, 87 × 60 cm.
Galleria dello Spedale degli Innocenti, Florence.



31. **Sandro Botticelli** (?), *Virgin and Child with Angels*, 1465–1470.
Oil and tempera on panel, 86.7 × 57.8 cm.
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.



32. **Sandro Botticelli** (?), *The Virgin and Child Supported by an Angel under a Garland*, c. 1465.

Tempera on panel, 110 × 70 cm.

Musée Fesch, Ajaccio.

In 1902, the *Archivio storico dell'Arte* registered a Madonna by Botticelli, the *Virgin and Child*, known as the *Madonna Guidi de Faenza*, a work of his early youth that was put up for sale in Rome. Compared to a similar Madonna by Filippo Lippi, which is at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, this Virgin by Botticelli distinctly marks the moment when the pupil embraced a purer ideal and broke free from his master. In Lippi's painting, Mary is but a young Florentine *contadina* girl, her hair covered by an almost monkish bonnet, like those worn by the common people. She looks into the distance indifferently while the child tenderly reaches out to her. To the right, there is a steep high cliff; a river crosses a landscape in the back. A high horizon frames the young woman's head. In comparison, Botticelli's virgin is almost blonde, almost childlike, her head covered by an aerial veil. She gazes upon her son with pious tenderness, and the child turns to her full of affection. The line of the horizon is lowered, and the head of the young mother stands out against radiating light. The Madonna's tunic of bright ruby red, like the pale violet garment of the *Bambino*, heralds the feast of colours in which the painter will indulge. Mary's fine, delicate hands and all the tiny details of the painting are already, as the critic of the *Archivi* put it, flowers of grace, "*fiori di grazia*". This rare jewel reappeared at the gallery of the Baron of Schlichting in Paris, and has since been kept at the Louvre.

Among the young master's paintings, the Madonnas convey a royal dignity. There is a touch of intimacy about the *Bambino* and the side figures, who have been granted the honour to go near the child. The child, animated by the scent of roses, plays with a pomegranate that his mother offers to him with her free hand, and he is carrying a piece of the red fruit to his mouth. The angel of the Innocenti painting is adorned by a traditional halo. The hair of the two angels and Saint John in the Santa Maria Nuova painting is falling over their necks in generous waves, arranged like a diadem or parted in the middle of the head. Botticelli's angels also shed the white wings and the chaste floating robes they wore at the time of Fra' Angelico, along with their iconic medieval gravity. They seduce us more and more with their patrician refinery, the richness of their garments and the velvety sweetness of their large eyes.

Looking at the *Saint Sebastian*, housed today in the museum of Berlin, we can make an observation that will help us understand the general intelligence of Botticelli's works. He is a boy of twenty, tall, slender and willowy, with delicate legs, and somewhat scrawny arms that are tied behind his back. He is standing very upright, his face thoughtful without any apparent suffering. He does not try to move us with the spectacle of his martyrdom. The arrows stuck in his chest, his heart, his flanks, and his thighs, do not seem to bother him. A delicate and robust body, without any anatomical subtlety, presents its muscles and flesh in graphic firmness. The model doubtlessly came from a sculptor's workshop; perhaps Pollaiuolo or Verrocchio had referred him to their friend Botticelli.

What is striking about this figure is the slenderness of the ensemble; Botticelli sticks with Donatello's canon. His master Lippi preferred huddled bodies, round, heavy heads, and strong hands. Botticelli elongates the human body and legs in order to achieve a momentum that sometimes gives majesty to the posture. The chiselled faces with the luminous gaze at their widest point are admirable. This notion of grace was not a novelty; you can find it beyond Donatello, for example in Cimabue, certain primitive painters, and better still, in sculptors of our Gothic age. They responded to the mysticism of their forefathers. The portrait of Saint Louis, crafted from life by the wonderful Franciscan Fra' Salimbene, almost seems to be coming out of the portal of the cathedral. The inscription reads, "*Erat autem Rex subtilis et gracilis, macilentus convenienter et*

longus, habens vultum angelicum et faciem gratiosam.” – “The king was delicate and graceful, slender and tall, his angelic face was full of grace.”

But Botticelli did not need to scour some distant aesthetic tradition to find models for his figures. Being a Florentine and the pupil of a naturalist master, all he needed to do was to look around him at the people that Florence showed him every day. In Botticelli's time, the Tuscan people – the craftsmen, the stonemasonry and mosaic apprentices, the young farmers, the sand diggers – still had the characteristic features of their ancient Etruscan forefathers: slender, elastic bodies, restless and nimble, the neck a little long, the face more expressive and flexible than regular by the standards of formal beauty. There is a word as only the Italian language could produce it, so tender to the ear and of infinite nuances. It expresses the sensation of art that impresses itself on anyone who lays eyes on this Florentine youth. The word is *snellezza*, the agile lightness of their nimble extremities; *snellezza*, the liveliness of the features, the cheerfulness of the faces.



33. *The Virgin and Child with an Angel*, early 1470s.
Tempera and oil on wood, 85.2 × 65 cm.
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.



34. *The Virgin and Child and Two Angels*, c. 1470.
Tempera on wood panel, 100 × 71 cm.
Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.

We should now study a small Botticelli painting (*The Return of Judith to Bethulia*), in which two very young girls, both slender as a reed, are walking across a plain. The first, Judith, is holding a drawn sword in one hand and a flowering branch in the other. She seems to be talking to Abra,

the girl who is following her with a pretty yet frightened countenance. The burden she is carrying on her head like a basket of oranges explains her nervous demeanour. It is the bloody head of Holofernes, half wrapped in a sack. On the same topic, Botticelli painted a horror scene, a little chaotic but truly dramatic: *The Discovery of the Murder of Holofernes*. In fact, the turmoil of the people who find their general's naked, atrociously mutilated corpse seems to be shared by the horse of the Assyrian captain, which is watching from the background of the scene, shivering. The heroine does not worry about either the "barons" or the general. She is walking under the sun of the God of Israel among the grass and the flowers towards her village Bethulia, swaying her flexible waist, her forehead adorned with gems, her conscience triumphant.

In Botticelli's early work, there is one clearly defined date: 1474. He was sent to Pisa in the month of May to work at the Campo Santo, in order to see which part of the glorious monastery he could paint with frescos. He was paid one Florin for this trip along the banks of the Arno. It seems that his engagement with the people of Pisa was not one of great commitment. Botticelli was asked to prove himself by decorating the chapel of *Incoronata* at the cathedral with an *Assumption*. The books of the institution show sums of money and wheat that were given to Sandro, known as Botticelli until the end of September. The artist did not like this *Assunta*, lifted up by a choir of angels, which is why he "left it unfinished", according to Vasari. Or maybe he was also daunted and discouraged by Benozzo Gozzoli's project: Gozzoli had spent six years unfolding his "opera terribilissima" (Vasari), the Old Testament, the Deluge and the Tower of Babel, Abraham and Sodom, Moses, and David and Solomon along the corridor of the monastery. What had Botticelli hoped to paint in Pisa, the *Divine Comedy*, which would come back to haunt the last dreams of his life? With what kind of terror he would have pierced the melancholy of Campo Santo! But Benozzo, at work alone in this solitude, threatened to overrun everything, from the tomb of Emperor Henry VII to the *Triumph of Death*. So Botticelli took up his walking stick again and made his way to Florence. This *Assumption* and her angels seems to be one of the sources of a legend that is as complicated as it is strange, and that would later be associated with the *Assumption* of San Pietro Maggiore of Florence that had long been attributed to Botticelli and is housed today in the National Gallery in London (Francesco Botticini, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, c. 1475–1476). The painting of this latter work coincided more or less with Botticelli's brief stay in Pisa. Nothing shrouds history more than the random connection of facts simply because they occurred around the same time.



35. *Virgin and Child with Two Angels and Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1468.
Tempera on canvas, 85 × 64 cm.
Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.

Vasari writes that Botticelli made a painting for Matteo Palmieri on the lateral portal of San Pietro Maggiore. It has an infinite multitude of figures, featuring the Assumption of the Virgin and circles of heaven with patriarchs, prophets, scholars, virgins, and angelic hierarchies. This project had been drafted by Palmieri himself, who was a scholar and a worthy man. The work was painted with *maestria* and most delicate diligence. One can discern Palmieri on his knees, as well as his

wife. But despite the beauty of the piece, which ought to have silenced envy, there was ill will and slander. Because they had nothing else to blame, some said Palmieri and Botticelli had committed a grave sin of heresy: “*dissero che e Matteo e Sandro gravemente vi avessero peccato in eresia*”. Whatever their intentions, one had to admit that Botticelli’s figures were truly praiseworthy, both for the diligence he put into representing the circles of heaven and mingling angels and humans, as well as for his excellent foreshortenings, varied postures, and the perfection of the design.

In order to understand this theological adventure, one of the bizarre episodes of Florentine art history, one must stress that the historian lacked precision and completely failed to understand Palmieri’s sin. At which moment did the accusation of heresy against Palmieri and Botticelli surface? Vasari does not say. In what year did the outrage become so fierce that church authorities had to shroud the cursed painting for two centuries and prohibit any worship at the altar of the Palmieri chapel? No word on this, either. Thanks to the work of Father Richa on Florentine churches, we do know about the “storm” of stories on the subject of the unfortunate *Assunta*, made up by Italian writers, and perpetuated by popular imagination. The scholars in Florence, in Italy and beyond the Alps, as well as the good souls of the common believers thought that Palmieri himself had been burned, just like Savonarola, or that his tomb had been opened and his bones scattered.



36. *Virgin and Child*, also known as the *Madonna Guidi de Faenza*, c. 1466.
Tempera and oil (?) on poplar, 73 × 49.5 cm.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.



37. *Virgin and Child*, c. 1467.
Oil on poplar, 72 × 51 cm.
Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon.



38. *Madonna of the Rose Garden*, 1469–1470.
Tempera on wood, 124 × 64 cm.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



39. *Virgin and Child*, 1469–1470.
Tempera on wood, 120 × 65 cm.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

More moderate voices stated that the heretical poem that was at the bottom of the whole affair, and the manuscript which had rested on the heart of the poet, had also been burned at the hand of the hangman. They believed that the heresy, in this tradition of glorifying the Virgin Mary, was to be found in the pages of this mysterious book. Wasn't Palmieri's parchment poisoned by the breath of Origen, who remained the terror of the Church until the appearance of the Arab Averroes? Let us untangle this curious imbroglio of which Botticelli has been the victim for too long.

In the middle of the Quattrocento, Matteo di Marco Palmieri was one of Florence's notable citizens, of an old Ghibelline family, once loyal to the Germanic emperors. Those Ghibellines of Tuscany, who customarily opposed the Church, had a very free spirit and a radiating faith. From their ranks had once come the Florentine Epicureans, whom Dante had buried in the burning tombs of heretics and who laughed at the fires of Hell. Palmieri was well-read in the classics, philosophy, and theology. In 1439, he began to serve on the Florentine council that tried to reconcile Byzantium with Rome. He then became ambassador to the court of Alfonso of Aragon in Naples. In 1467, he solicited the canonisation of a beatified Florentine man in Rome. He afterwards held several high offices in the Commune. In 1475, Florence sent him back to Rome in order to persuade Sixtus IV to break the alliance that the Holy Father had formed with Venice and Milan against the Medici. Upon his return from this fruitless mission, he died in his palace. The church gave him a solemn funeral, embellished by a funeral sermon, and buried him under the sacred tiles of a chapel.

In addition to being a diplomat, a scholar, a Casuist, and initiated to the mysteries of the Innate Light or the procession of the Holy Ghost, Palmieri was also a Florentine and Ghibelline poet. His soul was haunted by Virgil's and Dante's imagery. At the outskirts of Naples he had seen and been disturbed by Sibylla's Cave, Lake Avernus, the well of Hell, and the Phlegraean Fields where steam rises from Satan's boilers. He was thus inspired to write a poem corresponding to the sixth book of the Aeneid and the three *Cantica* of the *Divine Comedy*. When the masterpiece was completed, he sealed the manuscript, not to be opened until after his death.

For his poem, Palmiere borrowed from Virgil the characters who return from the underworld and speak to the people. Like Dante, he divided his poem into three parts of thirty-three songs, and he describes the stroll across the three regions of the netherworld, the screams of the damned, and the unrelenting music of Paradise, the *Hosanna* and the *Magnificat* resounding for all eternity to the tune of harps around the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.



40. *Saint Sebastian*, 1474.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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