



SANDRO BOTTICELLI | Italian, 1445 - 1510 | *Venus*, ca. 1484-1490
Tempera on wood panel | Turin, Galleria Sabauda, inv. 172

BOTTICELLI

AND THE SEARCH FOR THE DIVINE

FLORENTINE PAINTING BETWEEN THE MEDICI
AND THE BONFIRES OF THE VANITIES

FEBRUARY 11-APRIL 5, 2017
WILLIAMSBURG, VA

APRIL 15-JULY 9, 2017
BOSTON, MA

Botticelli and the Search for the Divine

The paintings in this historic exhibition introduce us to the hand and mind of Sandro Botticelli, with emphasis on his lifelong effort to make visible the invisible beauty of the Divine. Botticelli's restless genius is explored in unprecedented depth in this exhibition of almost thirty Renaissance paintings by Botticelli, Fra Filippo Lippi, Antonio Pollaiuolo and Filippino Lippi.

The long and troubled career of Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) divides into three sections which are reflected in the exhibition plan: his artistic formation under Filippo Lippi; his mature years, beginning in the early 1470s, when he became the outstanding painter of the classical philosophy

of the court of Lorenzo de' Medici il Magnifico; and finally, from his last years, the little-known, yet profoundly religious paintings from around the millennial year of 1500, when the battle was joined between the dying Medicean dynasty on one side, and the Church reformers of Fra Girolamo Savonarola on the other. The closest witness, who barely survived, was Botticelli.

The fully illustrated exhibition catalogue contains a description of every work and three supplementary essays by noted scholars, Alessandro Cecchi, Frederick Ilchman, Victoria Reed and John T. Spike.



FILIPPO LIPPI | Italian, 1406 - 1469 | *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1466 - 1469 | Tempera on wood panel
Florence, Palazzo Medici Riccardi (property of the Città Metropolitana di Firenze)

The arched top and the remarkable dimensions of this majestic *Madonna and Child* by Filippo Lippi indicate that this large panel was originally the centerpiece of a tabernacle, or *colmo*, in a Florentine palace. Despite the grandeur of the classical architecture, the loving embrace seems particularly lifelike and moving. The Virgin's face seems elegiac as she touches her cheek to the Child's in the Byzantine gesture known as *glykophilousa* ("loving kindness"). She

supports the infant with one hand while she tenderly cradles his head in the palm of her other hand.

The painting is executed in the style of Filippo Lippi's late works in Spoleto, ca. 1466-1469. Among the artists inspired by this monumental, yet intimate, portrayal of the *Madonna and Child*, was his best pupil, Sandro Botticelli.



SANDRO BOTTICELLI | Italian, 1445 - 1510 | *Madonna and Child (Madonna of the Book)*, ca. 1478-1480
Tempera and gold on wood panel | Milan, Museo Poldi Pezzoli, inv. 443

"Botticelli's sense of beauty means more to us today than

Botticelli has depicted the Madonna and Child intently reading a sacred book, His childish hands guiding hers. Jesus looks up as if to show an especially important passage, the trace of a smile on His lips. Mary's face bows modestly with the poignant thoughtfulness that she always wears in Botticelli's paintings to show her understanding of the Scriptures. The deep colors in the small space are heightened by delicate touches of gold everywhere in the room. The desk is delightfully filled with fine items more

expected in a prosperous Florentine palace than the house of a humble carpenter. There is a remarkable profusion of books, almost one on every shelf.

The softly natural treatment of the Madonna's hair and the delicate, almost miniaturist, brushwork invite comparison with Botticelli's paintings of the late 1470s. This small panel for private contemplation offers a glimpse of Heaven as imagined in the mind of Sandro Botticelli.



SANDRO BOTTICELLI | Italian, 1445 - 1510 | *St. Augustine in His Study*, ca. 1480
Detached fresco | Florence, Church of San Salvatore in Ognissanti

an the full smooth oval of antiquity” – Sir Kenneth Clark

This fresco of *St. Augustine in His Study* from the church of Ognissanti was the most important work by Botticelli on public view in Florence during his lifetime. Botticelli has set before us his vision of St. Augustine seated at the lectern in his book-lined study, rapt in his own miraculous and spiritual vision. Before him on the table are an open book, his bishop's mitre and a single page on which he has been writing. The saint's gaze is fixed instead on the fragile rays of light emanating towards him. The

lesson of Botticelli's image is that the deepest truths are revealed only through heavenly grace.

This fresco is only available for exhibition because in 1564, when the choir screen in the church was removed, care was taken to transfer the fresco to the nave. The *St. Augustine* was painted on the same wall as a fresco of *St. Jerome in His Study* by Domenico Ghirlandaio. This pairing of the two works around 1480 was considered a competition that was won by Botticelli.



SANDRO BOTTICELLI | Italian, 1445 - 1510 | *Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist*, ca. 1505 | Tempera on canvas | Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Galleria Palatina, inv. 1912, no. 357

Long considered one of the artist's most enigmatic paintings, the *Madonna and Child with the young St. John the Baptist* is an outstanding work in the last years of Botticelli's life, ca. 1505. The large, rounded figures, which seem weightless, the use of fewer details and less color, are characteristics of his misunderstood late style, in which Botticelli looked back to earlier art in search of spiritual depth.

The Virgin stands before a bower of pink roses, symbolic of her Sorrows at the Passion.

Tightly enclosed within the picture rectangle, Mary bends forward with great solemnity and holds the Christ Child as if handing him to the young St. John the Baptist. Her garments are folded in angular wedges that evoke late Gothic style in northern Europe. The gestures invented by Botticelli have superimposed a prefiguration of the Descent from the Cross on top of the embrace between the Child and his cousin John.



SANDRO BOTTICELLI | Italian, 1445 - 1510 | *Judgement of Paris*, ca. 1485 - 1488
Tempera on wood panel | Venice, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Galleria Palazzo Cini, inv. 40015

The subject, format and dimensions of this delightful *Judgement of Paris* are suggestive of a panel that was painted to adorn the walls of a nuptial chamber in a Florentine palace. Although often mistaken for cassoni panels, *spalliere* were larger and made for insertion into the upper wall paneling over a bench. Often executed by significant artists, they were the forerunners of the independent rectangular paintings that became the basis of art collections.

The goddesses, Venus, Juno and Minerva, are shown in the foreground of a broad landscape. They stand before the handsome shepherd Paris, who was chosen to decide which of the three was the most beautiful. Of the three deities, only Venus garbed in flowing white, is recognizable as she receives from Paris a golden apple inscribed

in Latin "This should be given to the most beautiful." Paris is identified by the two dogs beside him and by his flocks of sheep, goats and cows. Beyond these mythological personages, the landscape is enlivened by trees and bushes and distant cities on the shores of a harbor. At left, there is a glimpse of a city that must be Rome.

The careful execution of the work with numerous details and golden highlights suggests that the painting was designed by Botticelli on commission for an important family and mainly executed by one of his assistants. Scholars believe that the head of Paris and certain passages in the draperies of the goddesses, especially Venus, are of a quality that suggests Botticelli's own brush in around 1485-1488.

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