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 dog 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 so equal to that suggests Botticelli’s own brush in around 1485-1488.

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, Filippino Lippi, Antonio Pollaiuolo and Filippo 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 Leonardo 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 catalogue contains a description of every work and three supplementary essays by noted scholars, Alessandro Cecchi, Frederick Ilchman, Victoria Reed and John T. Spike.
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.

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.

Botticelli has depicted the Madonna and Child intently reading a sacred book, their childish hands guiding hers. Jesus looks up as if to show her an especially important passage, the trace of a smile on His lips. Mary's face seems elegiac as she touches her cheek to the Child’s; the Byzantine gesture known as glykophilousa (“loving kindness”)

Sir Kenneth Clark

SANDRO BOTTICELLI | Italian, 1445 - 1510 | Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist, ca. 1505 | Tempera on panel | Florence, Palazzo Medici Riccardi (property of the Città Metropolitana di Firenze)

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Botticelli's sense of beauty means more to us today than the full smooth oval of antiquity” – Sir Kenneth Clark