

**From the *Primavera* to the *Mystic Nativity*:
Reconciling the Early and Late Work of Sandro Botticelli**

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Introduction

During his career, Sandro Botticelli was present for the rise and fall of two of the most important leaders of Florence. The first being Lorenzo de' Medici, whom Botticelli owes much of his career, and the second being the Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola. During this time, Botticelli would have seen the growth of Renaissance humanism. To establish himself as a learned and desirable artist, Botticelli had to ensure his works were reflective of the polished, inventive, and eloquent values that Lorenzo de' Medici cultivated among his circle of Florentine elites. Much of Botticelli's efforts were aided by Florentine nobles who afforded him access to literature, both contemporary and ancient. Nobles set cultural standards in their exclusive social circles where they would educate and adorn themselves in the hopes of reaching absolute refinement. Because of this, Botticelli found himself as a member of the group of artists who would later be condemned and criticized by Savonarola for their vanity and exploitation, as he believed this was a distraction from the person's true purpose of achieving proximity to God. In the final years of his career, Botticelli shifted from his elegant and fantastical style to create works in line with the zealous religious teachings of Savonarola. A complete understanding of the artist's drastic shift is complicated by a lack of resources pertaining to the artist's personal life besides the writings of Giorgio Vasari. Interest in Sandro Botticelli was not revived until the 19th century, and Divisive scholarship on the artist offers no reconciliation between the "humanist Botticelli" and the "Christian Botticelli."

Stylistic Polarity in the Face of a Singular Manner

In his essay, “Botticelli’s Manner,” Daniel Arasse (2003) describes the artist’s style as that which “derives from his personal temperament, always idiosyncratic,” and the artist’s manner as “what derives from conscious choices, linked to the artistic context in which he operated.”¹ Botticelli’s style is that which allows us to recognize his works as being done by his hand. For example, the familiar bend of the nude figures in the *Dkty 'qhlXgpwu'*(Figure 1)'and *Ecmo p{ 'qhlCrngnu'*(Figure 2) or the billowing hair and soft hands that cover their genitals. In other words, his style is the conventions of beauty in storytelling that Botticelli employs to provoke an aesthetic response determined by the overarching cultural context of Florence. Meaning, his manner is that which provokes a rhetorical response through strategic employment of the overarching ideas circulating Florence. In this way, Botticelli engages his audience in conversation with his own new ideas as he presents them through painting.

Typically, it is expected that an artist would change their manner and their style would remain steadfast and recognizable. Considering historic interpretation, Arasse notes,

“From this point of view, [style] defies, in its absolute singularity, interpretation by the historian; on the other hand ‘manner’ is open to being historically qualified in relation to the choice that it reflects within the contemporary circumstances of the artist.”²

Within this framework, the question of Botticelli’s career, and his relationship to Savonarola, cannot be answered through an examination of his shift in style. This paper will not refute Savonarolan influence in favor of Lorenzo de’ Medici’s, or vice versa. Rather, I will emphasize his manner to determine that which does not change throughout his career, and

¹ Daniel Arasse, “Botticelli’s Manner,” *Dqwkegnk<Ht qo 'Nqt gp/ q'vj g'O ci pkkpgv'vq'Uc:xpct qrc 0*(Milan: Skira, 2003), 16.

² Ibid., 17.

therefore is not dependent upon a certain answer of his alignment towards either historical figure in our understanding of the artist. Botticelli's style shift was noticeable, and the influence both men had on him is significant. However, ignorance to an artist's natural stylistic shift in his/her adapting to the changes and events around him/her is detrimental to a critical analysis of the artist's work. In the case of Botticelli, it is pure speculation to claim that his shift from extravagance to austerity was due to a conscious abandonment of the former in favor of adopting a purely Savonarolan model. I will be looking at Botticelli's paintings to determine the *oppo* in which he approached painting throughout his career, no matter the cultural contexts which demanded his stylistic changes.

Both Lorenzo de' Medici and Girolamo Savonarola had ambitious visions of their future as men in positions of influence which they hoped to achieve through political, cultural and religious tactics. Botticelli's most remarkable accomplishment was his ability to maintain his artistic manner and create works that reflected the cultural tone of Florence at each stage of his career. Botticelli makes clear reference to the ideas fostered by both leading men in his incorporation of both humanistically and Savonarolan determined imagery. This visual reference to the ideas made popular by Lorenzo de' Medici and Savonarola is a rhetorical tool used by Botticelli to present new interpretations of shifting values. I will examine Lorenzo de' Medici's and Savonarola's concepts of the ideal, as well as their humanist backgrounds, and their application in their rule over a Christian Florence to explain the way in which Botticelli adapted his work to subscribe to evolving Renaissance values. This is to say, Botticelli's shift in style is not a direct result of a shift in loyalty to either man, but rather is consistent with his mode of expression of Florentine culture while under the leadership of Lorenzo de' Medici and then

under Girolamo Savonarola. Botticelli's manner must be looked at as an examination of the use of imagery to constitute power, and Botticelli's use of imagery aligned with differing narrative was an acknowledgement of its power rather than a submission. Thus, his manner is the consistent employment of imagery to create inner dialogue between culturally suggestive visuals and sensory experience. Ironically, the ambiguity this creates in interpretation is exactly what provides certainty of this singular manner.

Primavera

With the *Primavera* (Figure 3), Botticelli exemplified his acute awareness of the unique power of the image to illicit social and poetic responses. Painted in 1478, Botticelli contributed to a growing genre of painting in which the artist renders a poetic invention. Depicted is the first ever Spring with Venus at the center of the composition, framed by a halo of lush trees, as the full manifestation of the fertility and cleansing nature of the Spring season. Spring begins to her left, with winds blown in from the west as Zephyr abducts Chloris, resulting in the sprouting of flowers as they are scattered across the ground by Chloris, who transforms into Flora. Above Venus, Cupid is firing his arrow in the direction of the Three Graces engaged in their last dance of Spring. Daniel Arasse points out that, "the Three Graces [...] appear to have been directly inspired by Alberti's evocation of the 'three sisters [...] who were painted laughing and taking each other by the hand, with their clothes girdled and transparent.'" ³ Mercury stands next to them, using his caduceus to disperse the last clouds of the season. This is not a typical grouping, "Mercury's appearance with the clothed and dancing Graces is also specifically archaic, as is the

³ Ibid., 14.

appearance of Venus, who is not nude and who assumes her primitive role as the goddess of gardens.”⁴ The ensemble stands in an orange grove, with flowers blooming underneath them. The imagery was no doubt informed by poetic and literary knowledge and his application of such knowledge as a painter is what makes this one of the most refined works that Lorenzo’s circle would have seen.

Renaissance Humanism and the Impulse to Reinvent

The retronym “Renaissance humanism” refers to the revival of classical antiquity and its integration into the vernacular culture of Western Europe from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. The medieval vision of the world shifted from a spiritual regard for life to an interest in the human realm. The rebirth of knowledge gave humanity more self-confidence, thus making way for innovations in areas like painting, architecture, and philosophy. The emphasis on inventive thinking allowed for more self-belief and self-understanding. Generally, there was an increased emphasis on self-sufficiency, implying that man is in control of his own virtuousness and should practice moral autonomy. Autonomy could be accomplished through humanistic studies, especially moral philosophy, poetry, and the arts. The challenge then was to draw upon Aristotle, Plato, and the Stoics in order to simplify a path to Christian salvation. As Charles Dempsey put it, “It was in this paradox - finding in the subjective discoveries of individual experience, and indeed of poetic fictions, the path to objective truth - that the enterprise of humanism evolved.”⁵ Through philosophical perception of the external world, man was

⁴ Charles Dempsey, “Botticelli, Sandro,” *I t q x g ' C r v ' Q p r k p g* (2003)
<https://doi-org.arcadia.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T010385>

⁵ Charles Dempsey. *V j g ' R q t v t c { c n ' q h ' N q x g < D q w k e g n k a u ' R t k o c x g t c ' c p f ' J w o c p k a v ' E w n w t g ' c v ' v j g ' V k o g ' q h ' N q t g p / q ' v j g "*
O c i p h k e g p v 0 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 26.

encouraged to find both universal and internal truth for themselves, and in turn accelerate and amplify their own consciousness.

One promoter of this way of thinking was Lorenzo de' Medici, acting ruler of Florence and head of the Medici family bank from 1469-1492. Lorenzo's goal was to combine the rich literary history of Florence with that of the ancients, ultimately raising Italian expression to the standard of the Greeks and Romans. Lorenzo maintained an inner circle of poets, artists, and philosophers and was one of the most desirable patrons of the arts. Proximity to Lorenzo de' Medici group of scholars and artists gave them a certain degree of power, and in turn maintaining a social group of intellectuals awarded Lorenzo's authority with credibility. Lorenzo's close and working relationship with contemporary philosophers involved the translation of ancient Greek texts and the further incorporation of the works of Plato into Christian thought. This cultivation of antiquity and contemporary places Neoplatonic philosophy as the basis for the positioning of humanism and Christianity within the same atmosphere of a Florence saturated with religious imagery, thoughts, and rituals. Besides ancient philosophy, Lorenzo and his circles were also familiar with and fond of ancient poetry. The increased value placed on the humanities created the practice of inventing and reinventing in the arts. Meaning, the responsibility of the artist, poet, and philosopher was to combine ancient and new ways of thinking that were believed to eventually culminate into a universal truth. The legitimacy of a work was based in the allegorical, moralizing, or aesthetically pleasing qualities which could guide its audience to a higher beauty and deeper knowledge and self-awareness.

The *Primavera* as poetry and the employed conventions of humanist vernacular

The philological importance and humanist qualities of the *Ritorno di Botticelli* lie in the inventive nature of the painting. Rather than illustrating one specific episode, Botticelli drew upon a number of sources, both ancient and contemporary, to provoke familiar stories without necessarily reproducing a single one. In other words, the abundance of textual sources involved in the poetry of *Ritorno di Botticelli* is indicative of Botticelli's ability to adapt his work to fit his present-day conventions in a dual model established in both ancient and vernacular sources.

The *Ritorno di Botticelli* is a refined reflection of the humanist culture that Botticelli took part in while under the patronage of the Medici and Lorenzo's circle. The subject matter of the past is first brought into the present Florentine culture through the figures' contemporary dress. Specifically, Botticelli chose clothing that is aligned with the theatrical costumes worn at masquerades Lorenzo de' Medici held at civic festivals and tournaments as reiterations of the adornment of figures within Renaissance courts. He painted Venus in a dress woven with golden applique with a patterned cape, tasseled with a row of pearls, draped around the curvature of her form (Figure 4). She wears a thin, but still decorated, veil that flows into a long pearl necklace connected to a gold medallion. The Graces are clothed in thin chemises complimented by extravagant brooches (Figure 5). The right-hand Grace wears braided hair extensions which attach to her brooch as well as a tiara of pearls curled into her hair. The chemise of the center Grace is most visibly adorned with gold weaving and tassels while the left-most Grace has a pearl tied into the curls atop her head and wears an extravagant brooch. Flora is covered in flowers, wearing a similarly painted, billowing dress with gold-embroidered sleeves tied across her forearm. Similar glittering adornment and body accentuating details would have been utilized by members of Renaissance courts as a method of presenting their bodies as a light

source. In processions, pageantry and theater this clothing would be employed for the purpose of emphasizing the splendor and magnificence of those in power, and subsequently the standard of eloquence that the city can be raised to. The details of the courtly-coded dress are exemplary of Botticelli's ability to synthesize visual source with literary source. Relying on the duality of humanistically determined mythological imagery, Botticelli invokes intellectual contemplation on contemporary structures. He does not demand critique nor praise for the humanist model, but rather presents an image of the complicated operations of a humanist consciousness.

Similarly, the conventional beauty of the goddesses is specific to the standards of the contemporary as they are informed by the ancient. The Three Graces, for example, all have long and elegant necks, sensuous limbs that move in rhythm with the rest of their bodies with plump breasts that complement their rosy cheeks. The women have serious and captivating gazes, yet soft and welcoming smiles and long, golden hair. Charles Dempsey explains, "It is clear that the ideal portrayed in the *Ritorno della Primavera* is [...] an idea of love invested in Venus, Venus in her fully recovered and understood Classical meaning as the animating spirit of regenerative life in nature and Venus, too, as the spirit animating the revival taking place in the Florentine present."⁶ In this, Botticelli has achieved Lorenzo's main aim of raising the contemporary culture and vernacular to be on par with that of the ancients. The contemporary convention of beauty is relevant to his grounding in humanist principles of beauty and love. His employment of these principles is an effective visual cue to partake in the empathetic experience of poetry being invoked in the *Ritorno della Primavera*

⁶ Charles Dempsey, "Botticelli, Sandro," *Italian Renaissance Art* (2003)
<https://doi-org.arcadia.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T010385>

The *Rtlo cxgtc* may be classified as poetry by its use of conventions that directly correlate with traditions of humanist vernacular poetry. Where the poet establishes his evocations of love, beauty and the beholder through spoken word, Botticelli presents visual evocations through the “separately articulated” personifications of the same themes and positions the viewer as the direct beholder of the beauty of the goddess of Love.⁷ Furthermore, the poem of the *Rtlo cxgtc* may be read from right to left as spring begins with the first wind of Zephyr and ends with Mercury dispelling the last clouds. As the central figure, Venus represents the full culmination of the spring season and acts as the allegorical manifestation of the perfect love.

The *Rtlo cxgtc* is well grounded in both vernacular poetry and mythologies and its impressiveness is in the culmination of both, invoking a sensory and aesthetic response. This is to say, by calling upon and recombining familiar sources, Botticelli has made his audience intimate with a new poetic idea that elicits contemplation of themes of vernacular love and ancient poetry. Such a move would legitimize his position as an artist, similar to the negotiations of power present in Lorenzo’s circle. It is in this marriage of the classical and vernacular that the *Rtlo cxgtc* can be considered one of the most cultivated examples of a humanist painting. Botticelli has utilized imagery and its symbolism to denote layers of deeper meaning which result in shared sensory experience, personal to the audience at which it was directed. Botticelli’s choice to paint the *Rtlo cxgtc* as an imaginative reaction to established vernacular rather than to paint a straightforward imitation of one specific poem or fable is, thus, his most prolific as it places his intellect and inventive intuition as the basis for his manner of painting. The *Rtlo cxgtc* is significant for its function as visual confirmation of both the patron’s humanist

⁷ Charles Dempsey. *Vj g'Rqtvt c{cn'qhlNqyg<Dqwkgnkai'Rtlo cxgtc'c'pf "J wo cplav'Ewmmt g'cv'ij g'Vko g'qhlNqt gp/q'ij g' Oci p'klegpv0*(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 27.

proclivity and Botticelli's own understanding of the culture of eloquence being fostered by elite circles. This makes evident Botticelli's astounding understanding of the humanist culture desired by his patrons, and allowed him to insert his own ideas through strategic imagery informing invocations of ancient and contemporary literary works. The *Ritorno di Ulisse* is a perfect example of the cultivated manner by which Sandro Botticelli was creating his complex work of arts. The marriage of poetry and painting so early in his career is indicative of a strong humanist foundation and desire to reinvent.

The Calumny of Apelles

Botticelli's "crisis of style" is first evident in the *Ecce homo* (Figure 2), but the genre and rhetorical approach to the subject are characteristic of Botticelli's manner as seen in the *Ritorno di Ulisse*. Furthermore, the stylistic choices Botticelli made in the *Ecce homo* are as much a result of the context in which it was executed as it was for the *Ritorno di Ulisse*. Thus, it may be deduced that some aspects of his painting technique remained consistent throughout the shifting values of the men leading Florence in the time of Botticelli's career. Just as the *Ritorno di Ulisse* is reflective of the Florentine humanist values of eloquence and poetic ideas, the *Ecce homo* is reflective of the moral strife happening in the transitional period between Lorenzo de' Medici and then Savonarola's power over Florence. Charles Dempsey calls this work "profoundly humanist," drawing its inspiration from Lucian's essay on slander in which he described the lost painting by Apelles.⁸ Similar to the *Ritorno di Ulisse*, the *Ecce homo* is Botticelli's new moralizing idea in reaction to the values circulating through Florence, and he

⁸ Charles Dempsey, "Botticelli, Sandro," *The Renaissance* (2003)
<https://doi-org.arcadia.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T010385>.

again is drawing inspiration from well-known literary, historical, and mythological sources. The problem with concluding that Botticelli's stylistic shift was a result of an abandonment of his earlier practices is that his manner necessitates that his style change with Florence, rather than him. Furthermore, if Botticelli had abandoned his earlier foundation at this stage in his career, it is odd that the architecture and its reliefs are based on his own imagination but still require at least some background in humanist education.

When compared to Botticelli's previous allegorical and mythological works, the most notable stylistic difference in the *Ecno p{ "qhCr gngu* is certainly in the chaotic grouping and motions of the figures. Furthermore, the central portion of the architecture uses a different vanishing point than the rest, conflicting with the movement of the figures. This deviates from the usual rhythm of Botticelli's works, such as the *Rtko cxgtc* or *Dkt vj "qhXgpwu* wherein the setting moves with the figures in synchronized harmony. The most notable similarity, on the other hand, is Botticelli's refinement of ancient and contemporary literature, which is assimilated into his composition through his choice of provocative imagery.

As in the *Rtko cxgtc*, Botticelli is using the suggestive nature of imagery to guide his audience to a moralizing conclusion on the seductive power of fraud and slander. Botticelli painted the *Ecno p{ "qhCr gngu* between 1494 and 1497. At this point, Savonarola had full power over the Florentine people. Cultural change is inevitable when a society shifts to a new ruler. For Florence, this adaptation was challenged by the conflicting ideals of Lorenzo de' Medici and Savonarola. In other words, Botticelli painted the *Ecno p{ "qhCr gngu* at a crucial turning point in Florence. During this four-year period Savonarola was effectively on a campaign to restore the "soul" of Florence, most relevantly through a call for reformation of the function of the arts and

the responsibilities of artists. He believed that the people of Florence had become so concerned for their material integrity that the city had lost its soul, or moral integrity, and had thus nearly fallen out of proximity to God due to a preoccupation with man-made beauty.

Girolamo Savonarola was a Dominican friar, in 1482 he moved to Florence, where he stayed for five years before returning to Bologna. When he returned in 1490, he began delivering his now notorious sermons on the perceived approaching apocalypse and subsequent second coming of Christ, appealing to earlier Florentine mystical traditions. He called for Christian renewal, proclaiming that the people had been distracted from their virtue in favor of ancient philosophy and the arts, the culture of which was made widespread through Lorenzo's civic spectacle. Savonarola's condemnation of secular art culminated in the Bonfire of the Vanities during the Shrove Tuesday festival.⁹ On February 7, 1497, supporters of Savonarola burned any objects that they believed led one to sin or served as a distraction from morality. These objects included books, art, and cosmetics. Savonarola positioned himself as a prophet, whose role was to lead Florence on its path to becoming the "New Jerusalem" and the perfect image of a Christian capital through moral purification. Furthermore, he positioned himself as a messenger of the Virgin Mary, a direct connection that he claimed was revealed to him through visions and dreams. His divine association was well-known as were his sermons and iconography. His audaciously crafted identity spawned a chasm between those with absolute loyalty to him and those who resisted his movement.

Savonarola was enraged by the corruption of the Church, as well as of the secular rulers of Italy and their exploitation of the poor. He condemned what he perceived as the contrived and

⁹ Shrove Tuesday is the day before Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent. Shrove Tuesday is considered a final day of overindulgence before the fasting period of Lent in which Christians prepare for Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ.

lackluster beauty in art created by humanists. He believed that beauty came only from God, and the overly decorative compositions of artworks distracted their audiences from the silent contemplation and devotion that should come from art. He sought to return Christianity to the simplicity of the early Church and urged artists to abandon their superfluous artistic practices, avoiding any ornamentation or showmanship that does not further inform a Christian message. Among the condemned artists was Botticelli, who at this point was known for his ornamented mythologies and humanist imagery. Savonarola called on artists to contemplate a greater truth and to create art with a distinctly Christian function. According to Savonarola, the painter's only responsibility was to provide aid in spiritual contemplation that could insight mystical experiences. The value of art lay in its ability to bring both the painter and his audience closer to God and, as such, art should not be an indulgence of sensuality or intellect and should be devoid of any artifice. The further the artist strays from the "divinely ordained" function of the arts, the further he/she gets from perfection.¹⁰ Botticelli's work was neither simple or straightforward, and by nature of his patronage served a broader political, cultural, and intellectual function. Botticelli's allegorical works relied upon a prior knowledge of classical sources, while his religious works shared a classically-inspired elegance laying bare the Neoplatonic tendencies of his humanist patrons. The intellectual, rather than spiritual, contemplation this invoked would thus bring the audience closer to their humanistic studies rather than to God.

In the *Ecce homo*, it is clear that Botticelli had begun to move away from the humanist style he had adopted at the beginning of his career for a more straightforward and simple model that mirrors that of the painters preceding Botticelli -- painters who were regarded

¹⁰ Charles Dempsey, "Botticelli, Sandro," *The Renaissance* (2003)
<https://doi-org.arcadia.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T010385>.

as masters of an “unforced religious and moral sentiment.”¹¹ The figures and setting in the *Rtlo cxgtc* are calculated depictions of the conventions of beauty present in the elite circles of Florence. For example, the highly detailed dresses and jewelry that Botticelli adorned his figures with in the *Rtlo cxgtc* appear to have been taken right out of a Renaissance drama or humanist circle. By doing so, Botticelli created a painting that mirrored the sophistication of the Renaissance, and artistic embellishment is there for the sake of embellishment. In the *Ecmo p{*, however, Botticelli stages the scene in an imagined judgement hall that furthered a singular narrative, and exists not to be attractive but in connection to a message. This comparison is not to say that the *Rtlo cxgtc* is absent of a moralizing message, but that the values of his humanist patrons demanded a beauty-obsessed style. Furthermore, Botticelli began to simplify the contour and ornamentation of his figures to more directly create emotional effects, even using brighter colors with purer hue.¹² In other words, where the *Rtlo cxgtc* 'is decorated for drama and the enhancement of poetic beauty, the *Ecmo p{* 'is devoid of any superfluity that does not directly contribute to a moralizing message. The *Rtlo cxgtc* 'was conceived upon multiple literary sources, but Botticelli used them all to create a new story and idea. The *Ecmo p{*, however, is almost an exact reproduction of Lucian's story:

The calumny had been painted with great mastery by Apelles of Ephesus, a most capable painter, in this way: on the right is sitting a man, but with donkey ears like Midas, and is stretching his hand out towards Calumny, who is coming towards him. This man is flanked by two women, one called Ignorance, the other Suspicion; in front of them is Calumny, who is of excellent shape. But she is full of rage and scorn, and with her left hand she holds a torch, and with her right she drags a young man who holds his hands upwards to the sky and calls upon God to testify his innocence. In front of him Envy is walking with a sharp eye but looking pale, as somebody who has suffered a long illness. On either side of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Calumny there are two [women] decorating and adorning her, and these are Deceptions, that is Traps, and Fraud. But behind she is followed by Penitence, dressed in black and torn clothes, full of tears and abashed by shame, and she looks at Truth, who comes to help the wrongfully slandered young man.¹³

While straightforward in style and representation of source, Botticelli maintains his preoccupation with the idea behind the referenced literature, made evident through his presentation of new interpretations. Botticelli would maintain this new style until 1500 when he painted the *O{unk'Pc{kkk}*.¹³ as well as his narrative and imagery-driven manner. Savonarola was, to say the least, suspicious of artifice and openly condemned any showmanship in the arts. With the *Rtko cxgtc*. 'It is evident that Botticelli was working under a humanist model heavily informed by the complexities of classical storytelling. Beginning with the *Ecmo p{ 'qh'Cr gngu*, his paintings remained heavily reliant upon the implications of his chosen imagery. Where the *Rtko cxgtc* serves as a complex or ambiguous poem told by Botticelli, the *Ecmo p{* 'marks a shift into Botticelli's more straightforward work, devoid of artifice for the sake of artifice. In other words, where the *Rtko cxgtc* serves an overarching and multifaceted idea complemented by adornment and classical imagery, in the *Ecmo p{*, and later the *O{unk'Pc{kkk}*. 'Botticelli is focused on a fundamental and moralizing theme and Botticelli's "idea" is made much more explicit.

The Mystic Nativity

It is unclear whether Botticelli burned some of his own mythological paintings in the Bonfire of the Vanities, but according to Giorgio Vasari, Botticelli was an ardent follower of

¹³ Angela Dressen, "From Dante to Landino: Botticelli's *Ecmo p{ 'qh'Cr gngu* and its Sources," *O kvgkwp i gp'F gu' Mwp i j kvqt kvj gp'kpvk wgu'kp' Hrgt gp/ '7; '4239+<328*.

Savonarola, -- so much so that he abandoned painting and “having no income to live on, fell into very great distress.”¹⁴ This is unlikely, if not factually incorrect, considering the evidence proving otherwise. However, Vasari should not be dismissed. Moving forward, I will regard Vasari’s account under the consideration that Botticelli had abandoned his earlier style. For example, as compared to the *Ritorno alla patria*, the *Ecce homo* is much more formulaic in composition and the perspective creates a stern and tense environment. However, I will use the *Ottimo* to argue that Botticelli’s artistic assertions were informed by the same process of thought throughout his career. This is to say, in Renaissance Florence, where religion was inseparable from secular culture, it cannot be assumed that Botticelli chose to produce art either as a function of humanism or Christianity. Rather, it is more likely that his shift in style was due to a larger negotiation with the evolving search for beauty and virtue.

Botticelli’s Allegiance to Savonarola

The identification of the *Ottimo* (Figure 6) as confirmation of Botticelli’s ardent support of Savonarola is problematic in that it betrays the notion that style may be a consequence of cultural context. Botticelli’s personal life is not known but, as I have laid out, his place in Florentine culture may be understood through his use of suggestive imagery to combine the echoes of the past with the guiding voices of his contemporary present. The *Ottimo* is perhaps so perplexing as it is a direct consequence of the turmoil in Florence at the end of the Quattrocento, and this turmoil is referenced through imagery executed in a style that indirectly provokes memories of both the lost medieval style and the challenged humanist tradition.

¹⁴ Giorgio Vasari, *Vita di Michelangelo* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 191.

Furthermore, the overlap of imagery used by both Savonarola and the humanists must be assumed to have been known by Botticelli and thus the ambiguity of its meaning must be noted in a study of his style. The *O {uñkē'Pc vñxkñ}* is Botticelli's only signed work, and its size is smaller than his previous works, so the accepted theory is that this painting was meant to be for personal use. In this context, the singular manner of Botticelli in the *O {uñkē'Pc vñxkñ}* functions as his own reconciliation of Florence between the humanist and Savonarolan.

The upper composition of the *O {uñkē'Pc vñxkñ}* includes an inscription in Greek, a choice that implies the interpretation of the work's meaning was reserved only for those educated enough to be able to read the language.¹⁵ The exclusivity that this entails should be noted as a cautionary message from Botticelli to not mistake imagery for ignorance. Beneath this text, twelve angels form a circle above the stable, hovering hand-in-hand and holding inscribed ribbons, small crowns, and olive branches. Below them are three angels kneeling atop the stable, dressed in white, red and green. In the center, the Virgin Mary kneels before the Christ Child, flanked on either side by the shepherds and wise men, as they are guided to the newborn by accompanying angels. In the foreground, three men dressed in robes and laurel crowns are embraced and kissed by three angels. The composition is rather formulaic, unlike that of the *Rtko cxgtc* whose composition is based on the rhythm of the lines as the movement of the figures allows the eyes to freely navigate the scene.

The Greek inscription at the top of the painting reads,

I, Alessandro, painted this picture at the end of the year 1500, in the troubles of Italy, in the half-time after the time, during the fulfilment of the 11th chapter of John, in the second woe of the Apocalypse, in the loosing of the devil for three and a half years. Afterward he shall be

¹⁵ At this point only those given an elite education would have understood and been able to translate Greek. R.W. Lightbown, *Uc pñ tq'Dq wñkēgnk<Nñg'c pñ'Y qtm*(New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 82.

chained according to the 12th chapter and we shall see him [trodden down] as in this picture.

With this, Botticelli identifies his subject as the Second Coming of Christ, foretold in the Revelation of Saint John and later the crux of the warnings that Savonarola gave to Florence. The Book of Daniel refers to the three-and-a-half year battle with the devil that Botticelli refers to as the “abomination of desolation.” In this battle, Satan is at war with the Saints and shall fight for power against two witnesses whom God has granted the authority to give prophecy. Delivering this message in Greek, a language admired by humanists, lends to the uncertainty with which this painting is approached and further complicates the question of if this painting is confirmation of Botticelli’s allegiance to Savonarola, and provides us with a more controversial question: Was Savonarola’s three and a half year rule being likened to Satan’s period of power or was Botticelli positioning Savonarola as a divinely ordained prophet? In their analyses of the *Of the Mystic Nativity*, Rab Hatfield determines that which makes the painting Savonarolan, while Charles Dempsey argues that the painting is simultaneously “humanistically determined” for its mingling of theology and poetry.¹⁶

A Humanist Reading of the *Mystic Nativity*

Charles Dempsey argues that the three kneeling angels and the above twelve angels are noteworthy in the context of Joachimistic prophecy. He notes that the colors worn by the angels are those typically associated with the Three Theological Virtues: Charity (red), Faith (white), and Hope (green) (Figure 7). It had been Joachim who named the three stages of the world as an Old Testament age of Hope, a New Testament age of Faith, and a post-Apocalyptic age of

¹⁶ Charles Dempsey, “Botticelli, Sandro,” *The Art History Journal* (2003)
<https://doi-org.arcadia.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T010385>.

Charity.¹⁷ These three stages culminate in the perfect Love, a stage initiated by the Second Coming of Christ and identified by Joachim as the age of the eternal Evangel (the book held by the central angel kneeling atop the stable). During the age of the eternal Evangel, Hope and Faith shall unite in perfect Charity, and the Second Coming of Christ shall bring the expulsion of the devil when angels and men shall live in harmony for thousands of years in a state of Christian love until the day of the Last Judgment.¹⁸ Botticelli has indeed painted five devils as they are being crushed and further cast out, all the while the pairs in front of them embrace in perfect ecstasy, the mortal figures of these pairings resembling contemporary poets crowned by laurel. The twelve-angel ensemble bears strong resemblance to nymphs in Botticelli's mythological paintings, especially the Three Graces of the *Ritko cxgtc*, who join hands in a familiar dance. Furthermore, the personification of the idea of Love, which was previously Venus, has been replaced with an idea of Love personified as Charity. Where Venus represents a desire for the lost "age of perfection" achieved by the ancients, Charity expresses a longing for the yet unattained age of perfection. Dempsey further connects this reconciliation of the two ideas of Love to Botticelli's investment in the poetic theology of Dante at the end of the artist's career. He concludes his analysis by stating, "the *O{wke'Pcwxkx}* is Botticelli's most ambitious late painting, conceived on the basis of a Dantean assimilation of theology into poetry."¹⁹ However, Dempsey does not make note of the Savonarolan imagery employed in the *O{wke'Pcwxkx}*.

¹⁷ Joachim of Fiore was an Italian theologian and one of the most important apocalyptic thinkers of the medieval period. He believed that history was divided into three fundamental stages in conjunction with the trinity: the Age of the Father, the Age of the Son, and the Age of the Holy Spirit where it is finally possible to truly understand the word of God. Ibid.

¹⁸ In this context, the Last Judgment refers to the day of the second-coming of Christ during which people of all nations will receive their final and infinite judgment from God. Ibid.

¹⁹ Charles Dempsey argues that with the assertion of a "new Venus" and the incorporation of theological theory, Botticelli is marrying theology and poetry. A similar combination is seen in Dante's *Fkxkpg'Ego gf}*, a narrative poem that details an imagined vision of the afterlife. Ibid.

which makes the work representative of the conflicting ideals then circulating in Florence. The duality of the *Of the Pictorial*'s conception is thus evidence of the problem of the prescribed "two halves" of Botticelli's career -- a separation that not only belittles Botticelli's intellectual manner of painting, but disrupts an understanding of the conclusive discourse that takes place during an exchange of (sometimes conflicting) knowledge and ideas during the Renaissance.

Savonarolan Distinctions in the *Mystic Nativity*

Botticelli has previously painted a Nativity scene, namely the *Cf the q'gh'g'oci k'* (1475) (Figure 8). Hatfield and Weinstein determine that the *Of the Pictorial* is Savonarolan due to its distinctions from the previous version of the similar iconography. The Savonarolan features as laid out by Hatfield are the angels accompanying mortals to show the newborn Christ; angels together with mortals in an embrace; the wreath of twelve angels above the stable (Figure 9); the Greek inscription; and finally, the five demons portrayed at the bottom of the scene.²⁰ Most profoundly, Hatfield makes note of the Latin inscriptions of the ribbons held by the twelve angels, inscriptions that correspond exactly with what Savonarola calls the "twelve privileges of the Virgin" in his *Ego r gpf k'f k' g'gr v'qpg* (1495). The twelve privileges are listed in pairs, with two in relation to the Everlasting Father, two in relation to the Son, two in relation to the Holy Spirit, two in relation to her virginity, two in relation to the Church Triumphant, and two in relation to the present Church Militant. These "privileges" are part of an allegorical crown that Savonarola claims shall be offered to Mary by the Florentine people, the vision of which he spoke of in a sermon given on Assumption Day (Figure 10).²¹ Savonarola was the only one to

²⁰ Rab Hatfield, "Botticelli's Mystic Nativity, Savonarola, and the Millennium," *Lqwt p'cl'gh'g'Y ct dwt i "cpf "* *Eqwt v'wf "K'p'kw'gu'* 58 (1995): 89.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

refer to these invocations as “privileges,” so it is unlikely that Botticelli drew this imagery from another source. Savonarola’s image of these “twelve privileges” came from a vision of a singular, multi-tiered crown. The second tier of the crown has ten hearts, corresponding with the ten small crowns that the circle of angels in the *O { unke 'Pc vkkv }* are carrying up to Heaven. As he did with poetry in the *Rtko cxgtc*, Botticelli is producing a unique version of the Nativity based on a well-known sermon by Savonarola. In Savonarola’s vision, he has entered heaven to present the crown to Mary when he is met by angels each carrying small crowns surrounded by written tags, attached by gold thread.²² In the *O { unke 'Pc vkkv }*, it is the angels who bring these prayers, or crowns, to Heaven. Furthermore, Botticelli does not surround the crowns with the ribbons, but instead has the crowns attached by gold thread as the inscribed ribbons billow against the branches. Similarly, Savonarola connects the “privileges” to the Book of Revelation, which Botticelli makes reference to in the inscription, but Botticelli has placed the crowns within the context of the Nativity. As Hatfield states,

What we are looking at here does not seem to be simply a cryptic illustration of some of Savonarola's ideas. Rather, it appears to be a manipulation of those ideas, in which Savonarolan images are not only paraphrased but also interpreted in a way that [Savonarola] himself had never envisioned.²³

In both scenarios, humanist or Savonarolan, Botticelli is determined to have created a retrospective image of the Nativity in which there is an expressed nostalgia for past traditions that could perfect contemporary morality. On one hand, Botticelli reworks the idea of love as it is associated with Venus to present a yet unachieved and perfected love in the eyes of God. On the other hand, Botticelli utilizes Savonarola’s model to express an urgency to renew medieval

²² Ibid., 95.

²³ Ibid., 103.

traditions of simplicity to subsequently return to perfect medieval morality. Within this framework, there is no Renaissance concept of dual classification. Botticelli does not make a clear statement that he has decided humanist thought is the inferior counterpart of Savonarolan thought. In this sense, his manner neutralizes his stark stylistic shift.

In conclusion, the *O {unke'Pc vkkk}* is a synthesis of humanist and Savonarolan ideas cultivated to be a new idea presented by Botticelli. While Botticelli's style from the *Rtko cxgtc* to the *O {unke'Pc vkkk}* undoubtedly shifted, Botticelli's approach to the shifting culture of Florence remains the same. Botticelli's style in the *O {unke'Pc vkkk}* does in fact match the tone of Savonarola's Florence, and has explicit connections to Savonarolan sermons, but this is not because of a reformation in the way he operates as an artist. The significance of his late change in style is intrinsically connected to his manner and what it can reveal about the effects of context on style. In this sense, both Dempsey and Hatfield are correct in their reading of the *O {unke'Pc vkkk}*, but the singularity of their approach does not provide a clear understanding of the cultivation taking place within the painting. When the arguments of Dempsey and Hatfield are synthesized, a new vision of both interpretations manifested in Botticelli's dynamic new iteration is more clearly articulated. The circumstances of Botticelli's stylistic change and its relation to both humanism and Savonarola thus leads to the conclusion that his manner when approaching the *O {unke'Pc vkkk}* was to foster a marriage between Lorenzo de' Medici's Neoplatonic practice of Christianity and Savonarola's Medieval model. Thus, Botticelli's reframing of Savonarola's ideas in negotiation with the *O {unke'Pc vkkk}*'s humanist inspiration can be said to be a new idea of the fundamental differences between Neoplatonic thought and Medieval thought.

Conclusion

For the first half of his career Botticelli was regarded as a prolific humanist artist with great popularity. Among his most valuable patrons were the Medici family, and Botticelli was close to Lorenzo de' Medici and his circle. With works such as the *Rtko cxgtc*, Botticelli was among the most refined and inventive painters creating mythological works in humanist circles. At the end of his career, Botticelli's works no longer had the elegance and adornment of his earlier works, and the artist had begun to shift into obscurity. Beginning with the *Ecmo p{ 'qh' Cr gngu*. Botticelli was no longer indulging in the stylistic evolutions taking place in the Renaissance and instead reverted back to an older, less courtly or fashionable style. At this time, Florence was under the rule of Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola.²⁴ Savonarola condemned artists for making works that served no Christian function. He believed beauty was divinely ordained and attained and created only through proximity to God. The *O { unke 'Pc vxxk}* marks the peak of Botticelli's shift into a more straightforward and calculated style. It is devoid of any of the earlier adornment and theatrics of Botticelli's previous works and figures. Thus far, scholarship on the artist has offered no reconciliation between the two different stages of Botticelli's career. Giorgio Vasari claims that when Savonarola really came to power, Botticelli had abandoned painting entirely and fell into despair due to his ardent support of the Friar. However, Botticelli did not abandon his earlier manner, only his style has shifted. With no reconciliation, the artist's career cannot be wholly studied and he subsequently is placed into two different categories, either humanist or Savonarolan.

²⁴ While Florence was not an actual court, much of the fashion and art that came out of Florentine circles was aligned with the courtly ideas circulating around Italy during the growth of humanism.

The *Ritratto di Cristoforo Colombo*, *Il Cardinale de' Medici*, and *Il Cardinale de' Medici* provide a linear evolution of Sandro Botticelli's style throughout his career. His manner of painting allowed him to stylistically represent the differing ideas surrounding his career without firmly adopting them. The artistic proficiency of Botticelli is in his implementation of powerful imagery to reimagine the ideas behind his sources. The narrative value of Botticelli's work is not derived from a specificity of which social circles Botticelli aligned himself with that could have fostered this stylistic shift -- but rather from the contentious quality of Botticelli's work which offers insight into the polarity of humanist and Savonarolan narrative. Furthermore, an understanding of Botticelli's stylistic shift may be productive to an understanding of the interactions and negotiations of ideas which took place between the humanists and Savonarola and his followers. In conclusion, Botticelli's manner may be defined by his borrowing of literary, religious, and secular ideas and imagery to represent his own ideas; his stylistic shift was not due to an abandonment of practice, but is a result of his cultural context.

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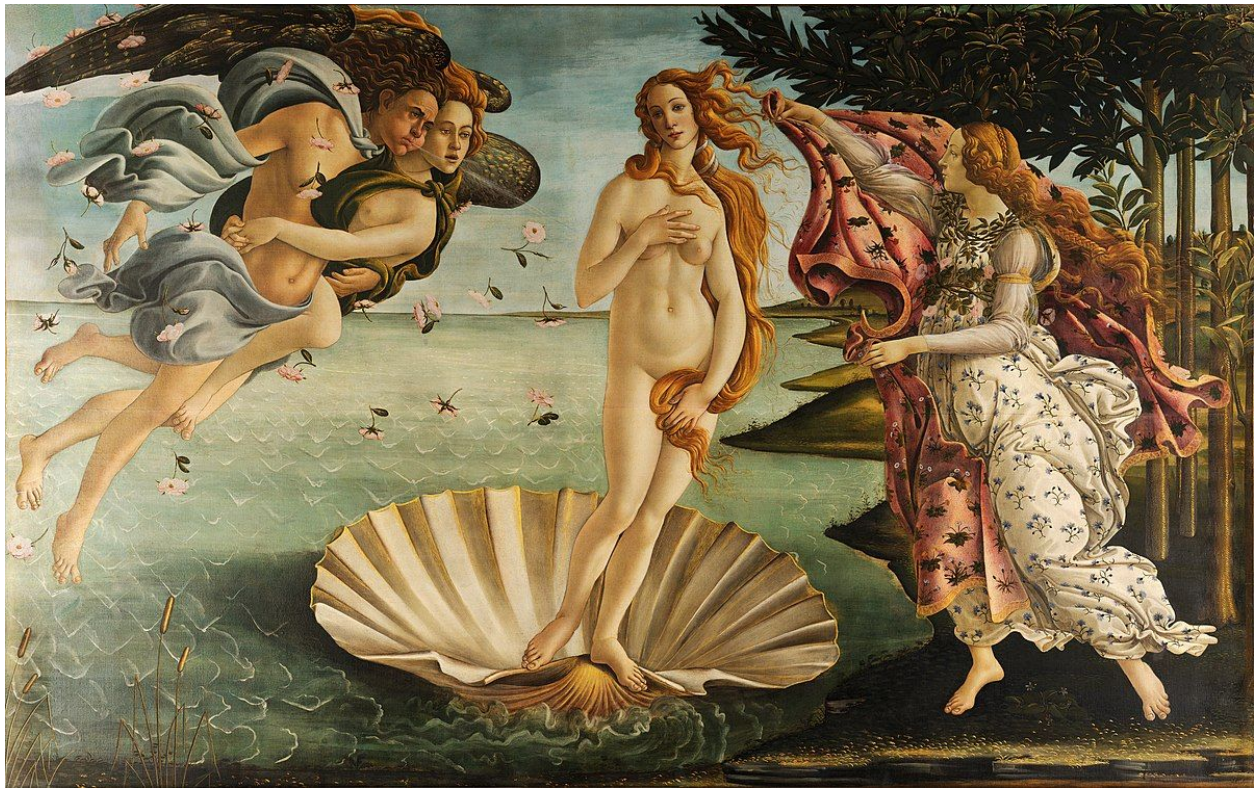


Fig. 1. Sandro Botticelli, *Vj g'Dk vj 'qhXgpwu*, 1485-86, Tempera on canvas, 172.5 cm × 278.9 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.



Fig. 2. Sandro Botticelli, *Vj g'Ecno p{ "qhCr gngu*, 1490s, Tempera on wood, 62 cm × 91 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 3. Sandro Botticelli, *Ritorno exilico*. 1478, Tempera on panel, 202 cm × 314 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 4. Sandro Botticelli, Detail of Venus in *Ritorno di Ulisse*, 1478, Tempera on panel, 202 cm × 314 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 5. Sandro Botticelli, Detail of Three Graces in *Ritorno caxgtc*, 1478, Tempera on panel, 202 cm
× 314 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 6. Sandro Botticelli, *Olympian Gods*. 1500-1, Oil on canvas, 108.5 cm × 74.9 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 7. Sandro Botticelli, Detail of three angels in *Outline of the Pentecost*. 1500-1, Oil on canvas, 108.5 cm × 74.9 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.



Fig. 8. Sandro Botticelli, *Cfqt cvkq'qhly g'Oci k*, 1475-76, Tempera on panel, 111 cm × 134 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 9. Sandro Botticelli, Detail of twelve angels in *On the Prophecy*. 1500-1, Oil on canvas, 108.5 cm × 74.9 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

