

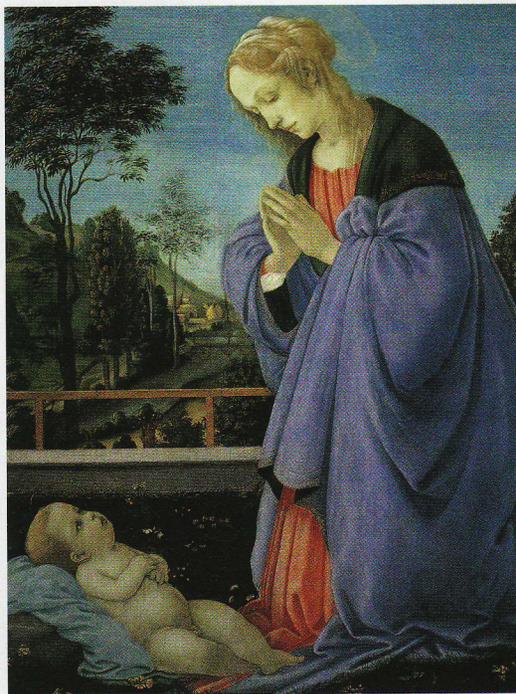
BY LUCY GORDAN

# FILIPPINO LIPPI AND BOTTICELLI IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE

On until January 15 at the *Scuderie* or stables of Rome's Quirinal Palace, once the Popes' summer palace, is *Filippino Lippi and Botticelli in Fifteenth-Century Florence*. It's an appropriate sequel to last month's "Of Books, Art, and People" titled *Celebrating Renaissance Art and Artists*, because Vasari, the subject of one of last month's four reviewed exhibitions, included biographies of both Sandro Botticelli and Filippino Lippi in his famous *Lives of Renaissance artists*.

Of Botticelli (1447-1510), Vasari wrote: "...Although he found it easy to learn whatever he wished, nevertheless he was ever restless, nor was he contented with any form of learning, whether reading, writing, or arithmetic, insomuch that his father, weary of the vagaries of his son's brain, in despair apprenticed him as a goldsmith with a boon-companion of his own, called Botticello, no mean master of that art in his day. Now in that age there was a very close connection... between the goldsmiths and the painters; wherefore Sandro, who was a ready fellow and had devoted himself wholly to design, became enamored of painting, and determined to devote himself to that. For this reason he spoke out his mind freely to his father, who, recognizing the inclination of his brain, took him to Fra Filippo of the Carmine, a most excellent painter of that time, with whom he placed him to learn the art, according to Sandro's own desire. Thereupon, devoting himself heart and soul to that art, Sandro followed and imitated his master so well that Fra Filippo, growing to love him, taught him very thoroughly, so that he soon rose to such a rank as none would have expected for him."

Of Filippino Lippi (1457-1504) Vasari wrote: "...a painter of most beautiful intelligence and most lovely invention... such was the intelligence of Filippo, and so abundant his invention in painting, and so bizarre and new were his ornaments, that he was the first



Filippino Lippi, *The Madonna in Adoration of the Christ Child*, 1478, Florence, Uffizi, is the logo of the exhibition. Below, Sandro Botticelli, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1475-76, Florence, Uffizi



(Florence 1431-Rome 1498) and Piero del Pollaiuolo (Florence 1441-Rome 1496), who later owned their own workshop active in goldsmithing, sculpture, and painting under the protection of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Against the background of these multifaceted workshops able to satisfy the needs of a demanding clientele like the Florentines, we must place Sandro Botticelli right at the beginning of his career. He was soon also favored by the Medici.

who showed to the moderns the new method of giving variety to vestments, and embellished and adorned his figures with the girt-up garments of antiquity. He was also the first to bring to light grotesques, in imitation of the antique, and executed them on friezes in *terretta* or in colors, with more design and grace than the men before him had shown; wherefore it was a marvelous thing to see the strange fancies that he expressed in painting. What is more, he never executed a single work in which he did not avail himself with great diligence of Roman antiquities...and such a variety of other beautiful things, that we owe him a great and perpetual obligation...."

As the exhibition's opening wall panel explains, during the second half of the fifteenth century, from 1434 to 1494 specifically, in Florence all power was in the control of the Medici family: first, Cosimo the Elder (Florence 1389-1464), succeeded by his son Piero the Gouty (Florence 1416-1469) and followed by his grandson Lorenzo the Magnificent (Florence 1449-1492). Their support was the determining factor in politics, in business, and in the arts, for receiving both public and private commissions. The Medicis' favorite artist at this time was Andrea del Verrocchio (Florence 1435-Venice 1488), who enjoyed their patronage. He was owner of a successful *bottega* or workshop just behind the cathedral where sculptors, painters, and goldsmiths were apprenticed, including young Leonardo da Vinci (Vinci 1452-Amboise 1519), and the brothers Antonio

The year 1481 was a turning point; Leonardo went to Milan; Verrocchio was engaged on the Colleoni monument in Venice, and the Pollaiuolo brothers on papal tombs in Rome. Meanwhile other new artists appeared on the Florentine scene: Domenico Ghirlandaio (Florence 1449-1494) and his family workshop led the field in frescoes. Pietro Perugino (Città della Pieve, c.1450-Fontignano 1523) settled permanently in Florence in 1493 and was highly appreciated in the city for his paintings of sacred subjects, and Filippino Lippi became increasingly popular in the first decade of the 1500s, while Botticelli, in the throes of a religious and artistic crisis, underwent an inexorable decline. Also active in the first years of the 1500s were Raffaellino del Garbo (Florence? c. 1470-after 1527), formerly a collaborator of Lippi's in Rome, and Piero di Cosimo (Florence 1461/2-1521), a bizarre and whimsical artist of fantastical chamber paintings.

Since the exhibition revolves more around Filippino Lippi than around his father's best student, Botticelli, the visitor is told about young Lippi's childhood and youth. He was born in Prato around 1457, though the exact date is uncertain, the result of an illicit tryst between Fra or Carmelite Brother Filippo Lippi (Florence 1406-Spoleto 1469), a distinguished and admired painter, and the Augustinian nun Lucrezia Buti.

Nicknamed Filippino to distinguish him from his father, he worked alongside his parent on the frescoes in Spoleto's cathedral and soon became an artist of the first rank. At his father's death in 1469, young Lippi completed the frescoes and entered Botticelli's workshop. Again, right from the start, the young artist's role, to judge from his early production, was not that of a mere apprentice. He soon began to collaborate on an equal footing with works permeated by a melancholy grace and a capricious restlessness that distinguished them from the style of his master, although until recently many of his early works were attributed to Botticelli. Between the 1470s and the beginning of the 1480s, Filippino branched out on his own, obtaining in 1483 the coveted job of completing the frescoes of the Brancacci Chapel in the Church of the Carmine in Florence begun by Masolini and Masaccio. While Botticelli, before and after his work on the Sistine Chapel, was increasingly in demand with the Medici and their supporters, Filippino made a name for himself, firstly outside Florence in Lucca and San Gimignano, and then again in Florence with the Strozzi (the family chapel in Santa Maria Novella) and del Pugliese (*The Apparition of the Virgin to St. Bernard*) families, then again in his hometown of Prato, and finally in Rome, where in 1488, he obtained the commission to paint the Carafa Chapel in Rome's Santa

Maria Sopra Minerva for this powerful Neapolitan Dominican cardinal, thanks to Lorenzo the Magnificent's recommendation.

At the end of the fifteenth century, a strong supporter of the deeply moralistic monk Savonarola, Botticelli's star was setting following an existential and religious crisis that compromised his artistic production and the chance of new commissions. On the contrary, appreciated by the Medici and their supporters especially for his mythological subjects as well as by Savonarola and the Republicans for his religious subjects, Filippino was ever more successful and received numerous prestigious projects in Prato, Pavia, Bologna, and Genoa. When he died prematurely at the height of his career in 1504, all the artistic workshops in Florence were closed for a day of public mourning. Botticelli died six years later, a sick and debt-ridden pauper.

The exhibition, divided into six sections: "*Fra Filippo del Carmine, His Father and First Teacher (1457-1469)*," "*Sandro's Friend. In the Workshop of Botticelli (1472-1478)*," "*His First Independent Initiatives and Then Under the Protection of Lorenzo the Magnificent (1478-1488)*," "*The Chapel for Filippo Strozzi in Santa Maria Novella and Other Works (1483-1485)*," "*In Rome, His Studies of Antiquity and the Frescoes for the Carafa Chapel (1488-1494)*," and "*His Last Years, Among Mythological Fantasies and Religious Paintings (1494-1504)*" and shown in chronological order, opens with the elder Lippi's *Madonna and Child With Stories from the Life of St. Anne* ((1452) on loan from Florence's Pitti Palace, and ends with Filippino's many late religious works. In between, Filippino's works are in constant comparison with those of Botticelli. They also show Filippino's influence on Raffaellino del Garbo and Piero di Cosimo. It's noteworthy that in their early works Botticelli painted large figures and Lippi small figures as if for borders or background; in their later works their styles reverse; Botticelli's figures are small and Lippi's almost life-size.

This exhibition aims to emphasize Filippino's greatness and worthiness of art critic Bernard Berenson's attribution of "Friend of Sandro." His panels of glazed colors, some of them like the "Nerli Altarpiece" (commissioned in 1494 for the Church of Santo Spirito in Florence) restored for this occasion and displayed here in its original shining gold frame; his refined drawings on colored papers, masterpieces in their own right; and his studies for decoration, the fruits of his inexhaustible and whimsical imagination, allow the visitor to rediscover a leading figure on the artistic scene of his day, the creator of astonishing modernity, unfairly overshadowed until now by Botticelli. ○



Filippino Lippi, *Apparition of the Virgin to St. Bernard*, Florence, Badia Fiorentina, is Lippi's most popular painting. Below, Filippo Lippi's *The Madonna and Child With Stories from the Life of St. Anne*, Pitti Palace, Florence, opens the exhibition

