Botticelli: Love, Wisdom, Terror

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MAY 26, 2016 ISSUE

Botticelli and Treasures from the Hamilton Collection
an exhibition at the Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, October 16, 2015–January 24, 2016; and the Courtauld Gallery, London, February 18–May 15, 2016
Catalog of the exhibition edited by Dagmar Korbacher
London: Paul Holberton, 168 pp., £25.00 (paper)

Botticelli Reimagined
an exhibition at the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, September 24, 2015–January 24, 2016; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, March 5–July 3, 2016
Catalog of the exhibition edited by Mark Evans and Stefan Weppelmann
London: V&A Publishing, 359 pp., $65.00

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence/Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali/Photo Scala, Florence
Sandro Botticelli: Primavera*, 1477–1482*

Sometime around 1490 Sandro Botticelli set out to make a book unlike any ever seen before. Prompted by a patron, and inspired by his own deep love of Dante, the artist planned the first fully illustrated edition of the *Divine Comedy*. Almost since the poem was completed around 1321, painters had decorated manuscripts of it with illuminations of selected scenes. But the very qualities that drew so many readers to the poem—its vivid accounts of the horrors of Hell and the splendors of Heaven, its sprawling narrative, its penetrating descriptions of emotion, its philosophical gravity, and its unequaled mix of realism and what Dante called *alta fantasia*—were all far beyond the skills of earlier painters to convey. Even the most elaborate illuminated manuscripts of the book, including those made for humanist rulers such as Alfonso V of Aragon, king of Naples, were illustrated with comparatively naif and rudimentary images. Botticelli was determined to be the first painter to do justice to the great poem.

An exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery in London allows us to see what he hoped to achieve. It features thirty of the surviving ninety-two parchment sheets he made for the book. The sheets are relatively large—about 12 1/2 by 18 1/2 inches—and they are arranged in what is commonly called landscape format. Each sheet bears on its back Botticelli's illustration for a canto, and on its front the text of the following canto, written in the neat lettering of a Florentine scribe. Most scholars agree the plan was to bind the sheets together in a codex, with its spine on the top, like a modern-day calendar. When opened to a spread it would present Botticelli's picture of a canto on the upper page, and the text of the same canto on the lower page. In all earlier illustrated versions of the *Divine Comedy* most of the images are small and tucked among the blocks of script, or placed at the foot of the page. By contrast, in Botticelli's the pictures and the text were to be given equal space, and the pictures were to go above the writing. This format was unprecedented in Italian book design.

Three of the illustrations—although none in the London show—are at least partially colored, and it is generally thought that Botticelli had originally meant to paint all the illustrations in the book. In the event, however, he never completed the drawings for the project, stopping while at work on Canto 32 of the *Paradiso*, seemingly defeated by the challenge

of depicting the utmost reaches of Heaven, which by Dante's own account are outside the capacity of human representation. It is perhaps fortunate for us that he did not finish. Made with pen and brown ink over faint preliminary sketches, Botticelli's drawings for the *Divine Comedy* are among the most lively, tender, and psychologically searching works he ever created.

Botticelli first made drawings of the *Inferno* around 1480; those served as the basis for nineteen engravings in an edition of the *Divine Comedy*, with a commentary by the Florentine humanist Cristoforo Landino, that was completed in 1481. The prints are small, cramped, and crude, and Botticelli's drawings for them do not survive, so any analysis of his interpretation of Dante at that time is necessarily limited and speculative.

Almost all scholars believe that the extant drawings instead come from the 1490s and were made for a deluxe codex commissioned by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici (1463–1503). He was Lorenzo the Magnificent's cousin, and perhaps Botticelli's greatest patron. Among other works he ordered from the artist was the *Primavera*.

'Inferno XVIII'; Virgil and Dante in the eighth circle of Hell, showing the punishment of panderers, seducers, flatterers, and whores; illustration by Sandro Botticelli, circa 1490

In his commentary on the *Divine Comedy*, one of the achievements Landino celebrated was Dante's power "to place form before our eyes." This praise may come from ancient classical texts on eloquence, and yet it still gives a sense of the daunting difficulties the poem posed for the artist. Despite the fantastical settings, the characters in the poem have a credibility of action and feeling unlike those in almost any earlier work of Western literature. In the words of Erich Auerbach, "Never before—scarcely even in antiquity—has so much art and so much expressive power been employed to produce an almost painfully immediate impression of the earthly reality of human beings." For Botticelli the problem was how to translate such immediacy into actual images of comparable authority.

We can see this problem, and Botticelli's response to it, in the depiction of Dante as a figure in the *Divine Comedy*. Renaissance painters typically only had to represent rulers, heroes, or holy persons—people often portrayed as having an ideal and exemplary moral stature that placed them above the sufferings of everyday life. With some important exceptions, such as scenes from the Passion of Christ, or the Annunciation to the Virgin shown in the instant of change from confusion to obedience, the protagonists in early Renaissance art are rarely presented in moments of pain, doubt, or uncertainty. By contrast, Dante in the *Divine Comedy* may be Everyman, but he is also credibly a specific man, full of complex feelings. In the course of the poem, we see him experience not only love and joy but also fear, pity, hesitation, anger, remorse, curiosity, and bewilderment.

For example, at the end of Canto 17 of the *Inferno*, Virgil commands Dante to ride with him on the back of the monster Geryon. In just eight lines Dante describes the terror he felt at this prospect, then his shame at the thought that Virgil would consider him a coward, then his request to Virgil that the poet hold him tight as they ride—but, as in a nightmare, he is so afraid he cannot even really get these words out. Once on the back of the monster, he is momentarily reassured, only to feel even greater fright as the beast plunges into the abyss.

Botticelli beautifully captures the intensity of Dante's response by drawing this sequence as a series of four scenes arranged in a continuous narrative. First we see Dante, hesitant and afraid, with his head down, eyes closed, and hands crossed guardedly on his chest, as Virgil beckons to him from the beast. Next we see Geryon take off with Virgil clasping Dante, whose shoulders are hunched high in fearful self-protection. Then as the beast plummets we see Dante staring in nauseous horror; and finally as Virgil and Dante disappear below the rim of the seventh circle of Hell, almost all we can make out of Dante's face is one eye glaring further into the frightful depths. I do not know of any other early Renaissance work of art that so convincingly portrays the experience of sickening terror.

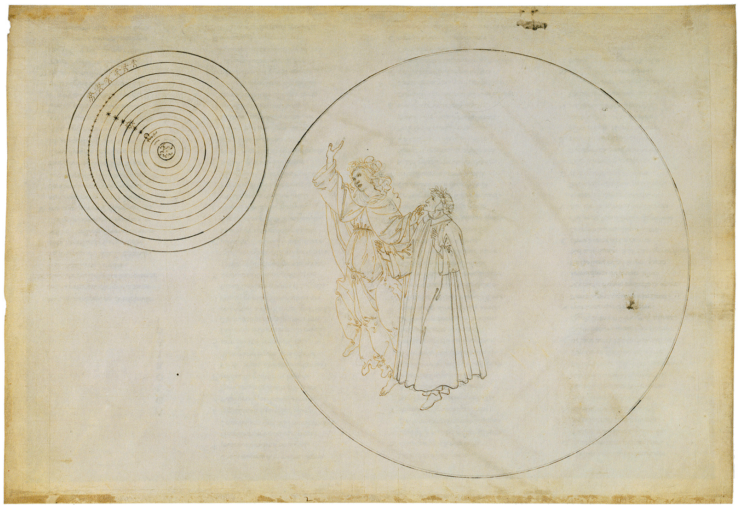
Following Dante's lead, Botticelli depicts many other states of thought and feeling as well. For instance, Dante repeatedly describes how on his journey he had to pause in confusion as he reached his limit of understanding before, with the help of Virgil or Beatrice, he learned to perceive more clearly and to pass on to a higher level of wisdom. We can see how Botticelli illustrates such a scene in his drawing for Canto 2 of the *Paradiso*. Here the painter shows Dante floating with Beatrice inside the sphere of the moon as she begins to explain to him the nature of the heavens. Lost in concentration, Dante's head is back, with his mouth open, and his eyes peering far into the distance. Although Botticelli has drawn his face with just a few quick strokes, instantly you can recognize the great effort the poet is making to comprehend what Beatrice is telling him. In Botticelli's picture, thinking is an action, a movement of the mind and soul, made visible by pose and expression.

The *Divine Comedy* is a love story, most famously of the love that moves the heavens, and the love of Dante and Beatrice. But it also recounts the love between Dante and Virgil. The relationship of a mentor and a protégé is a unique one in the drama of human life: a teacher and pupil are bound together with close ties of affection, but this affiliation is fundamentally different from those between lovers, family members, or friends. As perhaps no earlier writer, Dante celebrates such a relationship in the *Divine Comedy*. He calls Virgil not only master, guide, and teacher, but also "dearest father," and at least once compares Virgil's concern for him to that of a mother for her child.

Botticelli responded powerfully to this portrayal and depicts the affection of the two men with great imagination and sensitivity. In sheet after sheet, we see Virgil exhorting, encouraging, instructing, and correcting Dante; the Roman poet points out to him where to look and tells him what lesson to learn from what he sees. Their bond is especially visible in the way they gracefully move together across the drawings, almost like two dancers on a stage. Botticelli illustrates Virgil's care and Dante's trust with such authority that they seem drawn from life, not just literature, as if the artist were calling upon his own experiences as a pupil and teacher.

While there are some notable exceptions, such as Botticelli's forceful early fresco of Saint Augustine and the intensely emotional pictures of Saint Zenobius, many of his paintings show comparatively little concern for the depiction of expression. In works such as *The Birth of Venus* or the *Madonna of the Magnificat* the faces of the figures often appear idealized, placid, and remote. By contrast, the illustrations of the *Divine Comedy* display a sustained effort in the close examination and telling dramatization of the interior life of thought and emotion. Perhaps no other Florentine painter of the fifteenth century, not even Leonardo, made a work of comparable distinction about such experience.

In the treatise *On Painting*, written in the 1430s, Leon Battista Alberti stated that a narrative painting "will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul." It is often said that the wind-blown gossamer gowns of the nymphs in the *Primavera* were partly inspired by a passage from *On Painting*; and it was this text too that supplied Botticelli with the subject of his picture *The Calumny of Apelles*, made at about the same time as the Dante drawings. So it is possible that reading Alberti in these years was one reason for Botticelli's passionate focus on the illustration of thought and emotion in his *Divine Comedy*.



'Paradiso II'; Dante and Beatrice in the sphere of the moon, with Beatrice explaining the nature of the heavens; illustration by Sandro Botticelli, circa 1490

Dante more than once discusses the visual arts, and it seems likely that Botticelli was inspired by his words as well. The most important instance is in Book 10 of the *Purgatorio* when Dante describes three narrative reliefs in gleaming white marble. Made by God, they are ideal works of art, with powers of expression beyond the capacities of mere mortals. The first of these is an image of the Annunciation, in which Gabriel's and Mary's poses and actions allow the viewer to know exactly what they are saying and feeling. Another is a relief depicting Trajan speaking with a widow who begs revenge for the death of her son. Although a still image, it has the power to convey their dialogue in full and

show the emperor's change of heart between the beginning and end of the scene. Dante calls it "speech made visible, new to us because it is not found on earth." One can only imagine how tantalizing this description was for Botticelli. Certainly his drawing of Virgil and Dante studying these reliefs is the greatest representation I know from the Renaissance of anyone looking at a work of art.

Remarkably, seven more of Botticelli's drawings for the *Divine Comedy* are on view in a separate show across town at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Entitled "Botticelli Reimagined," this exhibition is a study of the celebrity of the artist from the present day back to his own time. Unfortunately, both the exhibition and the catalog are overflowing and scattershot assemblies of wildly disparate materials, and while there are many interesting objects on display, and some excellent essays in the accompanying catalog, it is rarely clear what point the curators are trying to make.

The first room is dedicated to contemporary works, not only silkscreens by Andy Warhol and photographs by David Lachapelle that riff in some manner on Botticelli, but also dresses by Dolce and Gabbana and others, and a wheel for a car from the "Botticelli" product line of an Italian manufacturer. The catalog entry for the wheel, by one of the principal curators of the show, states that the "reference to Botticelli hints at the Renaissance ideals of modernity and innovation." This sort of indiscriminate thinking all too often undercuts what otherwise is a fascinating exhibition.

The second room examines the obsession with Botticelli that began in the late nineteenth century. It was launched in part by Walter Pater's essay on the painter, which first appeared in 1870 and was republished a few years later in his immensely influential book *The Renaissance*. At about the same time John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites first began to study and imitate works of Botticelli; they were initially drawn to him because of his reputation as an illustrator of Dante. The fad was international, however, and the room shows not only pictures by English artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones, but also works by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Edgar Degas, and Gustave Moreau.

The third section contains nearly seventy works by Botticelli and his studio. The level of quality varies dramatically, from the sublime to the routine, and the attributions on the wall labels, which obviously reflect the wishes of the lending institutions, are inconsistent and unreliable. Still, this part of the show makes a point: Botticelli's distinctive style was in such great demand in the late fifteenth century that the artist needed to direct a workshop of perhaps unprecedented scale. The catalog says it produced "several hundred" pictures that survive today. In the view of the organizers of the show, Botticelli had already become a brand.

The exhibition at the Victoria and Albert includes Botticelli's great drawing for Canto 28 of the *Paradiso*. We see Dante and Beatrice aloft in the Primum Mobile—the sphere of the heavens closest to God—looking up, and surrounded by a chorus of seraphim and cherubim. One of these angels holds a tablet bearing Botticelli's name. His only signature in all the drawings, it is an expression of his hope that, like Dante, his "desire to know shall gain its end in this rare temple of angels." Here, Beatrice tells Dante that all find "delight in the measure of the depth to which their sight can penetrate the truth…. From this it may be seen, beatitude itself is based on the act of seeing." One can imagine that Botticelli took these words as a guide for his life and art.

—In memory of Walter Kaiser

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