

Botticelli

Sandro Botticelli, or more properly, Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi was born in the Ognissanti parish of Florence in 1445. His father was 50 at the time of his birth and his mother 40 and on registering the birth of Alessandro, his father also registered the birth of 3 other sons. Botticelli suffered ill health for much of his life, something his doctors attributed to the age of his parents. His brothers were all successful men, the eldest, Giovanni, would be a Florentine bank broker; the second, Antonio, would be a goldsmith; the third, Simone, would spend the greater part of his career in Naples with the Florentine Rucellai family in the cloth business with Spain. Most sources agree that Sandro was probably brought up by Antonio. The family was of the upper middle class and probably lived quite comfortably in 15th century Florence.

How did he come by such an interesting nickname? Botticelli means "little barrel" and is believed have been the nickname of Antonio (the goldsmithing brother) or the goldsmith to whom he was first apprenticed. In support of this idea is the Tuscan word for goldbeater - battigello - a task that his brother would have Sandro perform for him in the course of his work. There is another theory that says his eldest brother and family patriarch, Giovanni, was known as "bottocello" or "the keg" in Tuscan due to his massive obesity. So the theory goes, those close to him then become "botticelli". There appears to be more support for the former theory over the latter, but like most historical trivia we will never be entirely sure.

He was apprenticed to Fra Filippo Lippi (1406 - 1469) and trained as an artist under his guidance. Following Lippi's death in 1469, Botticelli took on the training of his son, Filippino. Naturally enough, working in Florence meant that he was in contact with a number of artists are the forefront of the Florentine Renaissance. Not only did he learn from Lippi, but he worked with the painter and engraver Antonio del Pollaiuolo and was influenced by Andrea del Verrocchio.

By 1470 he Botticelli had his own workshop and spent almost all of his working life in Florence. His first commission, the Allegory of Fortitude met with critical acclaim from those champions of conspicuous consumption, the Renaissance Florentines. His star rose to its greatest height in 1475 when the Medicis hosted a joust as they did every 5 years and Giuliano de' Medici carried a banner painted by Botticelli. Indeed, Botticelli found particular favour with the Medici family for whom he painted portraits and other works. Most notable among the portraits is one of Giuliano de' Medici (1475-6). He also included members of the family as subjects in his works. Adoration of the Magi (1476-7) was painted on commission for the chapel of Guasparre Lami (agent of the Bankers Guild whose members included the Medici) in the church of Santa Maria Novella, and contains likenesses Lorenzo de' Medici (the Magnificent) and his family as well as a likeness of himself (he is standing on the right looking out to the viewer).

As favourite of the Medicis, Botticelli now had access to the select group of humanists patronised by Lorenzo de' Medici. These men surrounded them selves with likeminded friends and made it their passion to have the classical past live again. Of key importance to the Florentine humanists were the works of Virgil, Homer, Hesiod and Pindar and to update them for a Christian world. The thinkers and writers in the group influenced artists to the extent that they sought to capture in paint the stories and philosophies that they discussed. It was out of such philosophical discussions that Botticelli's most famous works, the Birth of Venus and Primavera were born. These paintings were first suggested by Lorenzo the Magnificent himself, the great man's favourite writer Ange Poliziano set the stories to verse, after which it was handed to Pico della Mirandola for interpretation, approved by Marsilio Ficino and finally delivered to Botticelli for painting.

Botticelli remained for most of his life in Florence at his workshop, but between 1481 and 1482 he accepted an commission from Pope Sixtus IV to join Perugino, Ghirlandaio and Rosselli (the most celebrated painters of the day) to paint frescoes for the Sistine Chapel. He chose as his themes "The trials of Moses", "The punishment of Korah, Dathan and Abiram", and "The temptation of Christ", stories taken from the Old and New Testaments, the scenes developing in sequence on a background of luxuriant vegetation and imposing architecture (the Arch of Constantine and renaissance buildings).

In the 1490s, the Medici were expelled from Florence and the fanatic Dominican monk Girolamo Savonarola preached austerity and reform. Savonarola condemned anything that wasn't, in his view, necessary to the life of man, going so far as to destroy

writings and works of art, in his "bonfire of vanities". Florentines were split between his followers and his complainers, a situation that persisted until 1498 when the monk was burned at the stake in the Piazza della Signoria. These events affected Botticelli deeply, and his works of the time showed a dramatic force, not previously scene.

Botticelli died in 1510 leaving a corpus of work spanning religious, literary and mythical themes. Where possible I have attempted to provide more information about the paintings alongside them for easier reference.

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