

**RENAISSANCE
FLORENCE: BOTTICELLI:
THE BIRTH OF VENUS**



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Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Botticelli's place in early Renaissance Florentine society, how and why he created his masterpiece The Birth of Venus, and why the painting personified such a radical shift in subject and techniques that in many ways helped usher in a new age of humanistic thinking.

Subjects

Art, European History, World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Uffizi Museum, Florence
- Ognissanti (All-Saints) Church, Florence

Essential Questions

- Who was Sandro Botticelli?
- What was Botticelli's place in Renaissance Florence?
- Why is Botticelli's painting The Birth of Venus important to understanding the development of Renaissance art in Florence? Where did he get the idea for his subject?
- How did Botticelli's art change after the rise of Friar Savonarola in the 1490s? Did this change diminish his reputation?

Academic Summary

At the same time with the elder Lorenzo de' Medici, the Magnificent, which was truly a golden age for men of intellect, there also flourished one Alessandro, called Sandro after our custom, and surnamed Di Botticello for a reason that we shall see below. This man was the son of Mariano Filipeppi, a citizen of Florence, who brought him up with care, and had him instructed in all those things that are usually taught to children before they are old enough to be apprenticed to some calling. But 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--nay, almost a constant communication--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.

Having thus come into credit and reputation, he was commissioned by the Guild of Porta Santa Maria to paint in s. Marco a panel with the Coronation of Our Lady and a choir of angels, which he designed and executed very well. He made many works in the hour of the Medici for the elder Lorenzo, particularly a Pallas on a device of great branches, which spouted forth fire: this he painted of the size of life, as he did a S. Sebastian. In S. Maria Maggiore in Florence, beside the Chapel of the Panciatichi, there is a very beautiful Pieta' with little figures. For various houses throughout the city he painted round pictures, and many female nudes, of which there are still two at Castello, a villa of Duke Cosimo's; one representing the birth of Venus, with those Winds and Zephyrs that bring her to the earth, with the Cupids; and likewise another Venus, whom the Graces are covering with flowers as a symbol of spring; and all this he is seen to have expressed very gracefully.

... Pope Sixtus IV, having accomplished the building of the chapel of his palace in Rome, and wishing to have it painted, ordained that he should be made head of that work; whereupon he painted therein with his own hand the following scenes--namely, the Temptation of Christ by the Devil, Moses slaying the Egyptian, Moses receiving drink from the daughters of Jethro the Midianite, and likewise fire descending from Heaven on the sacrifice of the sons of Aaron, with certain Sanctified Popes in the niches above the scenes. Having therefore

acquired still greater fame and reputation among the great number of competitors who worked with him, both Florentines and men of other cities, he received from the Pope a good sum of money, the whole of which he consumed and squandered in a moment during his residence in Rome, where he lived in haphazard fashion, as was his wont.

(He was) ... effected by Fra Girolamo Savonarola of Ferrara, of whose sect he was so ardent a partisan that he was thereby induced to desert his painting, and, having no income to live on, fell into very great distress. For this reason, persisting in his attachment to that party, and becoming a Piagnone [Mourner, or Weeper] (as the members of the sect were then called), he abandoned his work; wherefore he ended in his old age by finding himself so poor, that if Lorenzo de'Medici, for whom, besides many other things, he had done some work at the little hospital in the district of Volterra, had not succored him the while that he lived, as did afterwards his friends and many excellent men who loved him for his talent, he would have almost died of hunger.

It is also said that he had a surpassing love for all whom he saw to be zealous students of art; and that he earned much, but wasted everything through negligence and lack of management. Finally, having grown old and useless, and being forced to walk with crutches, without which he could not stand upright, he died, infirm and decrepit, at the age of seventy-eight, and was buried in Ognissanti at Florence in the year 1515.

Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Artists, 16th century

Florence, Italy was the center of Renaissance art, architecture and humanist thought during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Walking through the city today is like visiting a living museum, where around every corner visitors can see priceless works of art. The Museums like the Uffizi and the Accademia are filled with priceless paintings and sculptures that are the envy of places around the world. The Piazza della Signoria, Florence's central square and the political hub of the city since the days of the Medici family, contains priceless statues such as the Rape of the Sabine Women by Giambologna and Cellini's masterpiece Perseus with the Head of Medusa, which have stood open to the public since their creation in the 16th century. Even the buildings themselves, many of them constructed during Florence's golden age, were designed to be expressions of artistic beauty. People around the world learn the names of artists, architects and writers associated with Renaissance Florentine society: Michelangelo, Donatello, Giotto, Raphael, Machiavelli and Brunelleschi. Florence is even associated with the ultimate so-called "Renaissance Man" himself: Leonardo da Vinci. Ironically, one of the most famous and well-known paintings from the age, The Birth of Venus, was done by a Renaissance artist whose name is not widely known outside the academic world: Sandro Botticelli.

Born Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, "Botticelli", a nickname meaning "little barrel", was given to the artist when he was a young apprentice. Although originally learning to be a goldsmith, the "little barrel" wanted desperately to train as an artist. Eventually, his father relented and Botticelli was apprenticed to Friar Filippo Lippi, a well-known master painter in Florence at the time. At the height of Medici power and

prestige, Botticelli was one of the artists supported by the family's patronage, and many of his works were specifically done for the family's villas and churches around the city, including his 1475 masterpiece Adoration of the Magi, originally commissioned to hang in the church of Santa Maria Novella (it is now in the Uffizi museum), a painting in which Botticelli painted members of the Medici family as the Magi (wise men) from the story. By 1481, the artist had attracted the attention of Italy's largest and wealthiest patron, the Vatican, and he was summoned to Rome along with other Tuscan artists by Pope Sixtus IV to work on the walls of the Sistine Chapel, where he produced the panels titled Temptations of Christ, Punishment of the Rebels and Trial of Moses before returning to his native Florence. It is after his return from Rome that Botticelli produced his two most important paintings for Lorenzo di Medici's villa at Castello, Primavera and The Birth of Venus.

The Birth of Venus shows the Roman goddess emerging from the sea as a fully grown woman, a story going back to the ancient Roman Republic, where the goddess was seen as the mother of the Roman people. There is little doubt the artist had been inspired by statues and images he saw while he was in the old imperial capital. Images of Venus graced the walls of homes and temples all over ancient Rome, including Pompeii (there is a famous image of the goddess from Pompeii in the Archeological Museum in Naples today). Botticelli's Venus, perhaps inspired by Simonetta Vespucci (a woman many in Florence considered to be the personification of beauty), embodies the Renaissance ideal: red-hair, voluptuous and pale-skinned. The painting, however, is not just important for its beauty (although that is what it is known for around the world). By turning back to antiquity and pagan themes, the painting also represents a radical shift in artistic expression from Christian themed subjects to more humanistic ones. The style eventually became known as "neo-platonic" as artists would spend their entire lives searching for "ideal" beauty. The fact that Botticelli chose to paint a pagan goddess at a time when the Church still controlled society and people shows a real break with the time as well, although careful examination of the work shows that Venus' body is anatomically unrealistic and that her pose is impossible. Clearly the image was pure fantasy. Perhaps that is exactly what the artist wanted.

Late in life, in the 1490s, Botticelli got caught up in the movement surrounding Girolamo Savonarola, a deeply moralistic Dominican friar who came to power in Florence in November 1494. Savonarola instituted a puritanical campaign, during which he denounced everything connected to the Medici and everything he considered "modern" and "corrupt." Savonarola's rule lasted only 3 years, but when it ended with his execution in 1498, anyone connected with the movement suffered as well, including Botticelli. He subsequently had a hard time finding work and what commissions he did get were often characterized by darker and more-distorted figures. According to sources from the time period, Botticelli died in 1515, an old, frail, infirm and "useless" man. Apparently at the end he was also broke, living off friends. Botticelli never married, and thus had no family. He is buried at the foot of Simonetta Vespucci (perhaps showing his undying love for the married beauty who died 34 years earlier) in the Vespucci Chapel in All-Saints Church in Florence.

It is natural for students studying the Florentine Renaissance to be drawn to Leonardo, Michelangelo and Donatello, but it is also important to remember that during that

“golden age” other artists produced important masterpieces. Botticelli was one such Florentine. *The Birth of Venus* was one such masterpiece.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Botticelli’s place in early Renaissance Florentine society, how and why he created his masterpiece *The Birth of Venus*, and why the painting personified such a radical shift in subject and techniques that in many ways helped usher in a new age of humanistic thinking.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain Botticelli’s place in early Renaissance Florentine society.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why Botticelli created his masterpiece *The Birth of Venus*.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why Botticelli’s painting *The Birth of Venus* personified a radical shift in subject and techniques that in many ways helped usher in a new age of humanistic thinking.

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How does society today portray the “ideal” woman? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Botticelli and *The Birth of Venus* (20 min)
- Video – Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about Botticelli. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: What was Botticelli’s place in Renaissance Florentine society? How and why did he create his masterpiece *The Birth of Venus*? What impact did that painting have on humanistic thinking (20 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: explain Botticelli’s place in early Renaissance Florentine society, how and why he created his masterpiece *The Birth of Venus*, and why the painting personified such a radical shift in subject and techniques that in many ways helped usher in a new age of humanistic thinking.

Extension

On tour: Uffizi Gallery, Florence

While on tour, students in Florence can visit the Uffizi Museum, where they can see for themselves some of the greatest paintings of all time, including works from Giotto, da Vinci, Raphael, Titian, Michelangelo, Rembrandt and others. Among the masterpieces are multiple works from Botticelli, including his two most famous and critically acclaimed works, *Primavera* (1482) and *The Birth of Venus* (1486). Commissioned by the Medici family for their private villa, *The Birth of Venus* was moved to the Uffizi Gallery with many of the other works owned by the once-powerful family, when the last Medici ruler fell from power in the 18th century.

On tour: Ognissanti (All-Saints) Church, Florence

While on tour, students in Florence can visit the Ognissanti (All-Saints) Church, where they can see for themselves Botticelli's burial place. Before the artist died in 1510, he asked to be buried in the All-Saints Church at the foot of Simonetta Vespucci, a beautiful woman from Florence who had died at age 22 years earlier (legend says she was his inspiration for "Venus"). The Vespucci family chapel in the Ognissanti also contains the burial site of Amerigo Vespucci, the Florentine navigator who went on four voyages to the New World between 1497 and 1504. "America" is named after him.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariBott.html
Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists: Sandro Botticelli (primary source)
- www.sandrobotticelli.net/
Sandro Botticelli – The Complete Works (website). Outstanding resource on the famous Renaissance painter. Contains digital images of his entire body of work.
- www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/sandro-botticelli
Sandro Botticelli (website) – from the National Gallery (UK)
- www.uffizi.org/artworks/the-birth-of-venus-by-sandro-botticelli/
The Birth of Venus by Botticelli (website) – from the Uffizi Gallery Museum website
- www.botticellibirthofvenus.com/index.php
Birth of Venus by Sandro Botticelli (website)
- www.artble.com/artists/sandro_botticelli/paintings/birth_of_venus
Birth of Venus (website) – from Artable.com. Great site on the painting. Has multiple sections analyzing everything from the composition of the painting itself to its possible meanings, but it is also easy to read. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- totallyhistory.com/the-birth-of-venus/
Birth of Venus (website)
- www.slideshare.net/hw22grl/sandro-botticelli-1533532
Botticelli (PowerPoint)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR3uSk3BeR4
The Birth of Venus (Painting of the Week) (video)

Background Information

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandro_Botticelli
Sandro Botticelli – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_Venus_\(Botticelli\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_Venus_(Botticelli))
The Birth of Venus (Botticelli) – Wikipedia article
- passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/florence
On the Road: Florence – from Passports Educational Travel
- passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/florence_sightseeing
On the Road: Florence Sightseeing – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-botticelli-birth-of-venus

Renaissance Florence – Botticelli: Birth of Venus

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-brunelleschi-dome-on-the-duomo
Renaissance Florence – Brunelleschi: Dome of the Florence Duomo
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-donatello
Renaissance Florence – Donatello
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-giotto-father-of-renaissance-art
Renaissance Florence – Giotto
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-machiavelli-the-prince
Renaissance Florence – Machiavelli: The Prince
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-medici-family
Renaissance Florence – Medici Family
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-michelangelo-david
Renaissance Florence – Michelangelo: The David
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-verrocchio
Renaissance Florence -- Verrocchio
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-leonardo-overview
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: An Overview
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/renaissance-europe-leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa
Renaissance Europe – Leonardo da Vinci: Mona Lisa
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-italy-leonardo-last-supper
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: The Last Supper
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-last-judgment
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Last Judgment
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-sistine-chapel-ceiling
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Sistine Chapel Ceiling
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-pieta
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: The Pieta
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-raphael-school-of-athens
Renaissance Rome – Raphael: School of Athens

Key Terms

- Apprentice
- Botticelli
- Florentine
- Medici family
- Neo-platonic movement
- Plato
- Renaissance
- Venus (goddess)

