Botticelli, Sandro (1445 - 1510)

born Alessandro di Moriano Filipepi, is one of the outstanding geniuses in the history of Western art. He began his training under Filippo Lippi, alongside Filippino, and seemingly worked for a time with Leonardo in Verrocchio's workshop. His understanding of perspective and foreshortening, of architectural design and, indeed, of anatomy, were all that might have been expected of a man with such a background, but it is to the pure visual poetry of the outcome that he owes his fame. His manipulations of the visual facts for artistic purposes should no more be put down to ignorance or inability in these respects than in the case of Picasso in the 20c. Although he was a superb colourist, delicate at times, strong at others, and capable, in his last years, of harsh and powerful effects, the essence of his art lies in the unsurpassed, singing quality of his line. This can be seen at its purest in the drawings with which he illustrated Dante's *Divine comedy* (Berlin, Dahlem museum; E. Berlin, Staatliche Museen; Rome, Vatican).

A series of Adorations of the Magi painted in the 1470s and early 80s, notably those in the National Galleries in London and Washington and the Uffizi, Florence, show Botticelli experimenting with the new pyramidal, centralized form which was taken up by Leonardo. They also show the ability as a portraitist which he demonstrated in a number of full-scale works, for they contain, particularly in the case of the Uffizi panel, a whole gallery of Medici portraits. As with the technical aspects of his art, so in terms of the ideas which underlie it Botticelli moved in the highest circles: much of his work is imbued with the ideas of the Florentine neo-Platonists surrounding Lorenzo de' Medici, and particularly of Marsilio Ficino. But just as he was neither a 'perspectivist' nor an 'anatomist', so he was clearly not a neo-Platonist in the sense that his work could be taken as a straightforward transfer into visual terms of particular philosophical precepts.

His great series of mythologies, also of the 1470s and 80s, the *Mars and Venus* (London, National Gallery), the *Primavera*, the *Birth of Venus*, the *Pallas and the Centaur* (Florence, Uffizi), have been the subject of innumerable essays in interpretation without ever losing that essential, multi-faceted ambiguity which is characteristic of his approach to visual description. The central figure in the *Primavera* is as much a Christian Virgin as a figure from antiquity. The classic group of the Three Graces owes as much to gothic as to antique linear sensitivity. Indeed, however deeply he may have been involved in the particular attempt at Christian-classical synthesis which was characteristic of the humanist Medici circle, he was later intimately involved with Savonarola, and the intense religious feeling characteristic of such late works as the *Mystic Nativity* in London (inscribed, 1500) or the *Pietà* in
Munich owes its power to this conversion. John White

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