

The Critical Fortunes of 'Vasari's Botticelli' in the Nineteenth Century

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Almost everything earlier scholars thought they knew about the life of Botticelli came from the pen of Giorgio Vasari. In his *Lives* of Italian artists, first published in 1550, 40 years after Botticelli's death, the painter was attributed a rather ignoble end.¹ During the power vacuum in Florence in 1494 Botticelli became – according to Vasari – so in thrall to the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola that he abandoned painting, thereby losing his source of income and getting into terrible difficulties.

Savonarola's followers, referred to by Vasari as cult members, were known as 'whiners' (*piagnoni*) and opposed the hedonistic excesses of the powerful and the vogue for 'pagan' antiquity. Naturally Vasari also had something to say about the symptoms of Botticelli's alleged decline: after his return from Rome in 1482 – being a 'sophisticated person' (*persona sofisticata*) – he began to waste time studying the poetry of Dante Alighieri.

Vasari's caricature has little basis in recorded fact,² and was doubtless part of the reason why Botticelli was largely forgotten until around 1800. In the nineteenth century, however, it was precisely the story of the whiners and the 'sophisticated person' that captured attention. Various influential authors, motivated by different interests, transformed Vasari's

eccentric late Botticelli into a positive individual with considerable religious, cultural and social impact on an essentially medieval culture. This was portrayed either as a kind of internal cultural and spiritual renewal or as the first signs of an epochal turn towards the early modern era.

This new assessment of the painter was given significant impetus by the French author Alexis-François Rio, whose large-scale survey of Christian art (*poésie chrétienne*), in which he credited Girolamo Savonarola with a decisive role as a religious reformer, was first published in 1836. Its author reached this reassessment in the context of the nineteenth-century revival of Catholicism in France and Germany. Rio saw the arts as the quintessential realization and agent of the Christian mysticism that had emerged under Savonarola's influence. Botticelli, he believed, had become a Christian mystic,³ and as a follower of Savonarola had deliberately renounced painting, distancing himself from the 'pagan' images so popular with his former patrons in Florence. Rio echoed Vasari's claim that Botticelli had executed one final work, a print inspired by Savonarola's teachings titled *The Triumph of Faith*. This, he said, had surpassed all his previous endeavours, and after the Dominican friar's death he remained so resolutely loyal that he would rather

starve than pick up a paintbrush again. Rio's conception of a pre-Renaissance religious style, whose exponents included such painters as Fra Angelico and Botticelli, had important consequences for the English Pre-Raphaelites.

A few decades later, in 1870, the English art critic Walter Pater wrote an essay on Botticelli that approached him from a very different perspective, and which was explicitly critical of the Church. What interested Pater was how an artistic genius could thrive despite the religious and ecclesiastical shackles of his day, and the restrictions that 'the religious system of the Middle Ages imposed on the heart and imagination'.⁴ Botticelli was, for him, the epitome of the poetic painter⁵ and, in terms of artistic development, a shining example of the 'outbreak of the human spirit'.⁶ He embodied 'the freshness, the uncertain and diffident promise, which belong to the earlier Renaissance itself, and make it perhaps the most interesting period in the history of the mind'.⁷

Like Rio, Pater based his argument on 'Vasari's Botticelli', but took a thoroughly critical stance. He called into question the notion that Botticelli had been a 'sophisticated person', and played down the painter's alleged interest in literature and theory. Instead he emphasized the aesthetic aspirations of his engagement with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, claiming that in them Botticelli had achieved 'a true painter's vision'.⁸ He explained Botticelli's apparent religious conversion and its disastrous consequences described by Vasari as 'a sort of religious melancholy'. He was also – rightly – sceptical of Vasari's claim that he remained artistically inactive for so long.⁹

Just as Rio believed that Botticelli had reinvigorated Catholicism in France, the English critic of art and society John Ruskin declared him to be a historical forerunner of the Reformation, much like Dante and Savonarola, whom he called the 'southern reformers' and likened to the northerners Hans Holbein the younger, Martin Luther, King Henry VIII and Oliver Cromwell.¹⁰ Indeed, many Anglicans identified

Savonarola as a proto-Protestant, and he was commemorated as such in 1881–3 beside the English Lollard John Wycliffe and the Czech reformer Jan Hus among the alabaster roundels at St Stephen's, Hampstead, a Gothic Revival church endowed by a friend of Ruskin.¹¹ In his lectures of the 1870s Ruskin drew on some important aspects of Rio's 'epoch' model, in particular his idealized notion of a fundamentally religious pre-Renaissance. Botticelli represented 'the most learned theologian, the most perfect artist, and the most kind gentleman whom Florence produced';¹² he was the universal painter *par excellence*, possessing an understanding of both pagan and Christian thought.¹³ In a letter dated 1872, Ruskin quoted some key passages from 'Vasari's Botticelli', lending the painter an added socio-political dimension: his alleged membership of the 'whiners' is adduced as evidence of a charitable commitment, to which the author is clearly sympathetic.¹⁴

In the 1890s the newly established academic discipline of art history started to discover Botticelli for itself. The positive reinterpretations of 'Vasari's Botticelli' now gave way to an attempt to fully comprehend the various phases of Botticelli's artistic career. While in 1878 the National Gallery's acquisition of Botticelli's so-called *Mystic Nativity* (cat. 101) was widely applauded, by the start of the twentieth century this same religious painting, a dated late work of 1500 (after the Florentine calendar), was generally viewed as a retrograde withdrawal from the achievements of the Renaissance into pious irrationality. The ageing painter's purported religious radicalism was identified – again echoing Vasari – as the cause of this retreat.¹⁵ This rejection of Botticelli's later works often went hand in hand with growing disapproval of the increasingly unfashionable Pre-Raphaelites. Wilhelm von Bode's verdict on the *Mystic Nativity* was typical: 'to a decadent art movement like that of the English Pre-Raphaelites, this picture ... must have seemed like a revelation.'¹⁶