The Venus Problem: An Examination of Botticelli's Venus and Mars

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THE VENUS PROBLEM: AN EXAMINATION OF BOTTICELLI'S VENUS AND MARS

An honors paper submitted to the Department of Art and Art History of the University of Mary Washington in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

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April 2016

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Introduction

One of the most renowned artists of *Quattrocento* Florence was Sandro Botticelli. Admired for both his religious and secular works, Botticelli quickly became a favorite artist of the ruling Medici family and their circle. Perhaps his most mysterious works are the three Venus paintings—the *Primavera*, the *Venus and Mars*, and *The Birth of Venus*. All three were created in the early 1480s for patrons connected to the Medici. Curiously, all three contain a central female figure that actively moves the narrative forward, while the male figures play passive, minor roles in the story. This flies in the face of what scholars believe was the gender relationship in the *Quattrocento*—men played active roles in society, while women were marginalized and relegated to the home and childcare. Although the subject matter of the three Venus paintings is mythological, the works all reflect attitudes and concerns in *Quattrocento* society. The juxtaposition of active female and passive male is most glaringly obvious in the *Venus and Mars*. My research suggests that in this work Botticelli depicts a role model for young women through formal elements and iconography, thus creating an unexpected figure of the Renaissance wife. The message in the painting is an empowering one— if a young wife embodies all the characteristics expected of her, such as fertility, industry, modesty, and eloquence, she may wield power and influence over her husband.

*The Critical Response to Botticelli*

During his lifetime, Botticelli was one of the most popular and celebrated artists in Florence. According to Ronald Lightbown, “in his [Botticelli’s] lifetime, he was acknowledged as one of the great masters of Florence, a second Apelles, in the eulogistic language of humanist poets, comparing him to the greatest painter of classical antiquity But he died just as the time when the
new High Renaissance style was triumphing in painting so that his art suddenly became old-fashioned..”¹ During the High Renaissance and the following three centuries, Botticelli was mainly known as a biography in Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists.*² Vasari acknowledges Botticelli’s achievements and says that as a young man “he soon reached a level no one would have expected.”³ Figures in Botticelli’s works are described as “lively and delightful.”⁴ However, Vasari tends to treat Botticelli with more indifference than he shows to other artists.⁵ His language is not as flowery, nor does he shy away from criticizing Botticelli’s skill as an engraver and printmaker.⁶

Interest in Botticelli grew with the advent of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in the nineteenth century.⁷ The earliest twentieth-century work on the artist was written by Herbert Horne in 1908.⁸ According to Wilhelm von Bode, however, “[Horne] scarcely does justice to the artist and poet in Botticelli. A dry critique is not best calculated to awaken the appreciation due to an artist of such rich imagination and even mystical feeling.”⁹

However, it wasn’t until 1925, with the publication of Bode’s monograph, that Botticelli began to be viewed sensitively by art historians. In his introduction, Bode stresses the indifference with which both Vasari, as well as preceding scholars, viewed Botticelli.¹⁰ He was

² Ibid.
⁴ Ibid. 226
⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ Ibid. 1
not seen as rising above his contemporaries, but rather was criticized for his shortcomings.\textsuperscript{11} Jacob Burckhardt is quoted from his \textit{Cicerone} as saying that “‘Sandro Botticelli never quite achieved the complete expression of his ideas. He loved to express life and passion…and often painted with careless haste. He strove after an ideal of beauty, but never advanced beyond one type of head…it is occasionally extremely attractive, but often quite crude and lifeless.’”\textsuperscript{12}

Bernard Berenson, in his writings on the Florentine painters of the Renaissance, called Botticelli’s works “never pretty, scarcely ever charming or even attractive; rarely correct…and seldom satisfactory.”\textsuperscript{13} However, he points out that the secret to Botticelli’s popularity is his indifference to representation and his intense focus on presentation.\textsuperscript{14} “If we are such as have an imagination for touch and of movement that is easy to stimulate, we feel a pleasure in Botticelli that few, if any, other artists can give us.”\textsuperscript{15} According to Berenson, Botticelli was happiest “when his subject lent itself to translation into what may be called a linear symphony.”\textsuperscript{16} Panofsky, writing in the 1950s, characterizes Botticelli’s art as infusing the antique with Gothic sentiment.\textsuperscript{17}

The most recent definitive work on Botticelli is the monograph by Lightbown, first published in 1978, and then again in 1989. Lightbown takes care to emphasize the historical context of Botticelli’s works, as well as his close connection to the Medici.\textsuperscript{18} Nowadays, Botticelli is

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
  \item\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. 2.
  \item\textsuperscript{13} Bernard Berenson. \textit{The Italian Painters of the Renaissance}, (New York: Phaidon Press, 1952), 67.
  \item\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
  \item\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
  \item\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. 69
  \item\textsuperscript{17} Erwin Panofsky. \textit{Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers In and On Art History}, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955), 233.
\end{itemize}
considered to be one of the great masters of late *Quattrocento* painting. His colors, ethereal figures, and mysterious iconography fascinate viewers and scholars alike.

**Botticelli and the Medici**

Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi, called Sandro Botticelli, was born in Florence around 1444 or 1445 to Mariano Filipepi, a tanner, and his wife, Smeralda.\(^{19}\) He was the youngest of four brothers.\(^{20}\) The family home was located on the Borgo Ognissanti, a neighborhood dominated by the Gothic church and convent of Ognissanti, which belonged to the order of the Umiliati.\(^{21}\) By 1458 the Filipepi family had become more prosperous, and had moved to a house on the Via della Vigna Nuova.\(^{22}\) Sandro’s nickname, “Botticelli” was probably derived from the nickname “Botticello,” meaning “little tub,” given to all the Filipepi brothers.\(^{23}\)

Sandro’s second oldest brother, Antonio, was a goldsmith, and it is likely that he had a decisive influence on his youngest brother’s choice of careers.\(^{24}\) Sandro, who was a reluctant student at best, was put to work in a goldsmith’s shop in 1458, probably under the tutelage of his brother.\(^{25}\) The prestige associated with goldsmithing was beginning to wane during this period, and the young Sandro must have been aware of the emerging supremacy of architecture, sculpture, and painting.\(^{26}\) In order to capitalize on this trend, he was apprenticed to Fra Filippo Lippi, one of Florence’s most popular and highly favored artists, as a child, probably around

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid. 17.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid. 18. The house was rented for eleven florins a year from Niccolò di Pancrazio Rucellai. Mariano Filipepi was at this point a client or friend of Giovanni di Paolo Rucellai.
23 Ibid. This nickname was originally given to the oldest brother, Giovanni, and was used for all four of the brothers.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.19
1461 or 1462. There, Botticelli distinguished himself so, “that Fra Filippo grew fond of him and taught him so thoroughly that he soon reached a level no one would have expected.”

Botticelli probably left Lippi’s workshop in 1467, and by 1470, had started a workshop of his own. That same year he was given a commission to paint a figure of Fortitude (Fig.1) by the Sei della Mercanzia, a tribunal of six judges that tried disputes between merchants. This commission was orchestrated by Tommaso Soderini, an intimate of Cosimo de’ Medici and the brother-in-law of Piero “Il Gottoso,” to whom Botticelli may have been introduced to by Giorgio Antonio Vespucci, a neighbor of the Filipepis and tutor to Soderini’s son.

At the same time Botticelli was commissioned to paint a tondo of the Adoration of the Magi (Fig.2) for Antonio Pucci, another member of Medicean circles. Pucci had been instrumental in quieting opposition to the Medici after the Pitti conspiracy in 1469, and played an important role in government machinations. Botticelli was a great favorite of the Medici, and flourished in their midst. One of his earliest portraits from the 1470s has been identified as a posthumous representation of Piero de’ Medici. This early patronage by the Medici is not surprising. “His master Lippi had been a protégé of Piero de’ Medici, and a Botticello who was probably his [Sandro Botticelli’s] brother Giovanni was an intimate of Lorenzo Il Magnifico.”

28 Ibid.
30 Ibid. 42
31 Ibid. Tommaso Soderini was married to Dianora Tornabuoni, the sister of Lucrezia Tornabunoi, who was the wife of Pier “Il Gottoso”.
32 Ibid. 47
33 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
Botticelli may only have received recommendations from Lorenzo, it is positive that he worked for both Lorenzo’s younger brother, Giuliano, and their cousin, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, who was a member of the “Popolani” branch of the family. Botticelli was so highly regarded, that an envoy of the Duke of Milan described him as a “most excellent painter on both panel and wall.”

One member of the Medici circle that must have greatly influenced Botticelli was the scholar and humanist Angelo Ambrogini, commonly known as Poliziano (1454-1494). Poliziano, an accomplished poet in Italian, Greek, and Latin, was also “a talented and learned scholar who brought a sharp mind and wide-ranging erudition to the problems of textual emendation and interpretation.” Called by Lightbown “the literary counterpoint of Botticelli’s paintings,” he was the son of a Medici supporter from Montepulciano. Around 1473 Politian joined the Medici household at the invitation of Lorenzo “Il Magnifico”, and was later made tutor to his son, Piero. After a quarrel with Clarice Orsini regarding the content of her sons’ education, he fled to Mantua until he was recalled and reinstated in the Medici household in 1480.

Poliziano’s most beautiful poem is considered to be the Stanze per la Giostra, an unfinished epic poem consisting of two books and 171 octaves. This was written in the vernacular in celebration of the famous joust held in the Piazza Santa Croce on January 29, 1475. The joust was proclaimed by the Capitani di Parte Guelfa to celebrate the conclusion of a

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38 Ibid. The “Popolani” branch of the Medici family stemmed from Lorenzo de’ Medici, the younger brother of Cosimo “Il Vecchio”.
41 Ibid. 61.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid. The poem was left unfinished because of Giuliano’s death during the Pazzi conspiracy in 1478.
45 Ibid. The poem was written between 1475 and 1478, and was first published in 1484.
defensive league between Venice, Florence, and Milan.\textsuperscript{46} Most of the competitors’ expenses, especially their equipment and trappings, were paid for by Lorenzo and Giuliano de’ Medici, as the joust’s ulterior motive was to create an occasion for Giuliano to present his magnificence and chivalric prowess.\textsuperscript{47} During the opening procession, each competitor carried a banner that “bore a device celebrating the amorous thoughts of the jouster, his sentiments of hope or despair, and his treatment by his mistress.”\textsuperscript{48}

Giuliano de’ Medici commissioned his standard from Botticelli.\textsuperscript{49} It measured about six feet by three feet and was made of fringed taffeta.\textsuperscript{50} It was carried during the \textit{comparsa}, or opening procession.\textsuperscript{51} Giuliano rode forth in the parade and outshone the other twelve competitors by far.\textsuperscript{52}

First in his troop came two men at arms; then nine trumpeters on horseback carrying fringed pennons of Alexandrian taffeta bearing the device of a compass enclosing the Medici arms surmounted by a crest of a golden falcon with outspread wings, on a field of olive branches and flames...Next came a horseman in full armor...In his hand this horseman bore a great blue pole with Botticelli’s standard, also of fringed Alexandrian taffeta.\textsuperscript{53}

In the middle of the standard was the figure of Pallas, on a background of a flowery meadow.\textsuperscript{54} The figure was dressed in a white robe under a golden tunic, with blue buskins on her feet.\textsuperscript{55} She stood on two flames, from which issued more flames. These burned along the olive

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid. 61-62.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid.61.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid. 64.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Ibid. 63.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid. The descriptions of the joust are taken from a contemporary description first published by Gaetano Poggi in an article in \textit{L’arte} 5 (1902), pp. 71-77.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid. 63-64.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid.64.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
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branches in the lower half of the standard. She wore a helmet decorated with classical motifs, below which her hair, which was elaborately braided and ornamented, fluttered in the wind. Her right hand held a jousting lance, while a shield with the head of the Medusa was in her left. Her eyes gazed fixedly at the sun, which was depicted at the top of the banner. Beside her stood an olive tree with a single bough; to this bough Cupid was bound with golden cords, with his arrows and quiver broken at his feet. A scroll set in the tree trunk bore the French motto la sans par in golden letters.

The figure of Pallas was meant to represent Simonetta di Cattaneo (1453-1476), Giuliano’s Petrarchan mistress. She was the perfect object of the courtly love celebrated in the Quattrocento because she was chaste, beautiful, noble, and completely unattainable because of her marriage to Marco Vespucci. The symbolism of the standard decrees Giuliano’s lady to be matchless, armed by prudence and chastity against the darts and flames of love. The figure’s identity, which had been a well kept secret, was revealed in the Stanze, which was published after Simonetta’s death. The last octaves of the Stanze describe a dream in which Giuliano sees Simonetta in the guise of Pallas, dressed in white and protected from the arrows of love by the Medusa. “With stern and angry face she binds Cupid to the olive tree of Pallas, plucks feathers

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56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid. The French motto is translated by Lightbown as “the lady beyond compare”.
62 Ibid. 63.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid. 65.
65 Ibid. 64. Pietro Bembo, upon asking the identity of the figure in the standard, was told that “some said it was one, others said it was another.”
66 Ibid.
from his wings, and breaks his bow and arrows.” Giuliano, after refusing to help Cupid, receives the armor of Pallas and goes on to win the joust. On awakening, he invokes Cupid, Pallas, and Glory, and vows to carry them as his device in the field. This symbolism was probably discussed by Giuliano and Botticelli, and Poliziano may have been consulted.

Poliziano’s Stanze is considered to be one of the most influential literary sources for Botticelli’s works. Indeed, the figure of Pallas from the famous Pallas and the Centaur (Fig. 3) seems to be drawn directly from the description of Simonetta as Pallas in the closing octaves of the poem. The Primavera (Fig. 4) is also influenced by the Stanze. In octave 68 of Book 1 Poliziano describes Zephyr flying behind Flora and deckling the grass with flowers. The setting of the poem, which is meant to be the Garden of Venus in Cyprus, is “a green and flowery meadow.” This recalls the setting of the Primavera- a grassy glade filled with flowers. In octave 40, Poliziano tells how Cupid draws an arrow tipped with fiery gold and shoots it towards Julio, the hero of the tale. In the Primavera, Cupid also shoots a flame-tipped arrow towards the one of the Graces in order “to kindle the flames of love in the Grace’s heart, just as in Poliziano’s Stanze.” The figure of Simonetta, described in octave 43 as “fair-skinned, unblemished” seems to be the direct inspiration for the figure of Flora- “white is her garment,

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68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
72 Ibid. 21.
73 Ibid.
though ornamented with roses, flowers, and grass; the ringlets of her golden hair descend on a forehead humbly proud.”

The subject of *The Birth of Venus* (Fig.5) seems to be taken directly from octaves 99-101 of the *Stanze*:

In the stormy Aegean, the genital member is seen to be received in the lap of Thetys, to drift across the waves, wrapped in white foam...and with, both with lovely and happy gestures, a young woman...is carried on a conch shell, wafted to shore by playful zephyrs. You could swear that the goddess had emerged from the waves, pressing her hair with her right hand, covering with the other her sweet mound of flesh...she was received in the bosom of the three nymphs and cloaked in a starry garment.

This image, drawn by Poliziano from a few lines in the ancient Homeric *Hymn to Venus*, is taken from his description of a relief on the door of the Palace of Venus.

It is easy to see how influenced Botticelli was by Poliziano’s writings. Poliziano, who served as tutor to the patron of the *Primavera*—Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici—must have been consulted on the paintings iconography. Additionally, his *Stanze* was likely widely read in the Medici circles, and therefore, Botticelli would have been familiar with them. Poliziano may also have been consulted on the iconography of the standard for Giuliano de’ Medici. It is no stretch of the imagination to connect the two masters—painter and poet. One can just picture them in the Medici palace on the Via Larga, discussing mythology and exchanging ideas.

*Spalliera Paintings and Marriage*

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76 Ibid. 51-53.
Some of Botticelli’s most famous commissions for the Medici and their intimates were nuptial commissions. These paintings, many of which fall into the category of spalliera paintings, were meant to decorate bridal chambers. Spalliera paintings are generally large scale rectangular panel paintings meant to be hung on the wall. The most famous example is Botticelli’s Primavera from 1482. Commissioned on the occasion of the marriage of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici to Semiramide Appiano, the work was hung above a daybed of similar dimensions.78

Household furniture was an important part of Renaissance culture in general, and Renaissance marriage ceremonies in particular, where the wealth of the bride and groom was put on public display during the wedding procession.79 Furniture was meant to showcase the owner’s social status and wealth. Images were often incorporated into furniture, especially furniture commissioned for weddings. These images were meant to showcase virtues associated with marriage and spousal duties.80 Prior to the Council of Trent in 1545, “marriage required no concessions to religion; only the consent of the couple was necessary to establish a binding match.”81 Most weddings, however, were lavish affairs, that often included a special mass or an oration by a religious figure.82

The ideal Renaissance wife was quiet, efficient, pious and a good housekeeper. She was taught “a horror of waste” and how to train servants and keep beggars away from the door.83

78 Ibid. 122
80 Jacqueline Marie Musacchio. Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace (Los Angeles: The Getty Foundation, 2008), 5
81 Ibid. 2.
82 Ibid.
husband expected the house to be run smoothly. “If a stranger arrives unexpectedly, she is to do the honours of the house without bustle or excitement.” She was also expected to know how to cook and to supervise the servants in the kitchen.

One of the Renaissance wife’s biggest duties was her children. Not only was she expected to bear as many boys as possible, but she was also in charge of their education. In fact, many girls in this period received humanist educations in order to allow them to properly supervise the teaching of their future offspring. She was taught “Petrarch, Ariosto and even such light-minded authors as Aretino.” In addition to the popular Italian authors, many women were taught subjects such as Greek, Latin and other humanist staples. As one jurist observed “the ladies of Florence were so conversant with moral and natural philosophy, and with logic and rhetoric.” This attitude towards the education of women was not limited to Florence. In Northern Italy, families such as the Sforza made it a point to provide their daughters with a comprehensive education so that they could be their husband’s confidante and help-meet.

These qualities were actively sought out by families looking for brides. In her letter to Piero de’ Medici from 1467, Lucrezia Tornabuoni described the potential bride for Lorenzo-Clarice Orsini. “She has a sweet manner, not as refined as ours [our girls], and is very modest.” She told her husband that if Lorenzo would find the girl pleasing, there was no reason

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90 Ibid. The original Italian is “e à j dolce maniera, non però si gentile chome le nostre, ma è di gran modesta”.

not to arrange the match. Lucrezia then continued to describe Clarice as “tall and pale, with a face that is neither beautiful nor common, and a good personality.” The potential bride’s name was not even mentioned until Lorenzo’s approval had been secured. Only then did Lucrezia deign to mention to her husband that their future daughter-in-law was named Clarice. This demonstrates the business-like nature of marriages in the Quattrocento. A marriage was a business transaction conducted by two families, rather than a love match of two individuals. The emphasis Lucrezia puts on the candidate’s manner and modesty also shows how prized these qualities were in young women.

One of the most important aspects of a marriage contract was the dowry. Detailed in contracts and memoranda, dowries were often divided between cash and goods. The goods included in a dowry, called a donora, included items that would emphasize the bride’s virtues. The gowns and headdresses were meant to highlight her beauty and fertility, while devotional texts spoke of her piety, and household goods aided her in her duties as chatelaine of her new home. The donora was carefully appraised and this value was recorded by the husband. When Caterina Strozzi married Marco Parenti in 1447, her dowry was valued at one thousand florins,

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91 Ibid.
92 Ibid. 64 The original reads “La fanciulla...ch’è grande e biancha, non à uno bello viso nè rusticho, à buona persona.”
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid. The original text is “El nome suo è Crarice.”
96 Ibid. 4.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
with the *donora* coming out to 165 florins.\(^99\) When Nannina de’ Medici, the sister of Lorenzo “Il Magnifico,” married Bernardo Rucellai in 1461, her dowry was valued at 2500 florins.\(^100\)

In addition to the dowry, a groom was expected to provide a counter-dowry, which according to Florentine custom, was technically a loan to the bride.\(^101\) Unlike the dowry, which was meant to support the bride and remained under her name, the counter-dowry remained under the ownership of the husband “so he could resell, rent, or lend…various components once the newlywed period was over.”\(^102\) In addition to clothing, furniture was included in the counter-dowry.\(^103\) Some of this furniture might be included in the bride’s dowry, as in the case of Nannina de’ Medici, who’s *donora* included “1 pair of large wedding chests with painted backrests, very rich.”\(^104\)

The most common type of bridal furniture commissioned in the early *Quattrocento* was the marriage chest, or *cassone*. These were generally commissioned by the groom, and were usually the single greatest furnishing expense.\(^105\) “Large chests like these, painted with courtly, contemporary, historical, or didactic narratives and allegories, carried a bride’s dowry goods to her new home, enhancing the processional- and material- aspects of the event as they did so.”\(^106\)

These painted chests were most popular in the first half of the *Quattrocento*. One example of a *cassone* panel is the *Cassone Adimari* (Fig.6) from 1450. The panel depicts a nuptial parade in

\(^{99}\) Ibid. 2-4.
\(^{100}\) Allison Levy, “Dames and Games in Early Modern Italy” (presentation, University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, VA, March 10 2015).
\(^{102}\) Ibid.
\(^{103}\) Ibid.
\(^{106}\) Ibid.
downtown Florence. In the center a line of noble men and women dance gracefully under a colorful canopy. On the left, a group of musicians play trumpets under a loggia, while two young servants carry a bowl and a dish into a house.

By the 1470s these images had moved from the lids of cassoni to spalliere panels. The term “spalliera” is derived from the Italian word spalla, meaning “shoulder.” This term was used for a variety of paintings and hangings which were installed at shoulder height or higher. Spalliere ranged from tapestries hung above benches to painted backrests of daybeds. Many Quattrocento and early Cinquecento paintings that fit the description of spalliere depict narratives chosen from ancient texts or contemporary literature.

During the fifteenth century the popularity of painted walls in domestic settings waned. The decorative and edifying impulse that prompted these frescoes had been transferred to painted cassoni and spalliera panels. This decrease in the popularity of immovable frescoes is in direct correlation to the rising popularity of “portable but nonetheless sturdy and substantial pieces of furniture for sleeping, sitting, and storage, together with the popularity of independent

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107 “Cassone Adimari” Guide to the Accademia Gallery in Florence, accessed April 1, 2016, http://www.accademia.org/explore-museum/artworks/cassone-adimari/. The panel was probably commissioned for the Adimari-Martelli wedding which occurred in the 1440s. It was painted by Giovanni di Ser Giovanni, who was known as “Lo Scheggia” and was the brother of Masaccio. Recent studies have shown that the panel is not from a cassone, but is in fact a spalliera painting.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.


112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.


116 Ibid.
paintings and hangings.”\textsuperscript{117} These furnishings were all part of the expense of setting up a home for marriage.\textsuperscript{118}

Images for domestic settings were a staple of Renaissance homes. These images ranged from religious depictions of the Madonna and Child to secular and mythological images of eroticized subjects. These latter images, as Rudolph Bell points out, were meant to encourage healthy sexual relations and to aid in procreation.\textsuperscript{119} Early Modern couples believed that gazing at beautiful images while engaging in intercourse would lead to good looking offspring.\textsuperscript{120} Additionally, many guidebooks recommended hanging an image with a masculine subject in the bedroom, in order to encourage the conception of male children.\textsuperscript{121} This advice was not only written in secular guidebooks and pamphlets, but was also mentioned in the writings of ecclesiastical authorities.

Images on cassoni and spalliere could be provocative and meant to stimulate the viewer’s desire.\textsuperscript{122} According to one treatise “there should be masculine paintings on the walls, causing the couple’s minds to be imprinted with virility” in order to encourage conception of male children.\textsuperscript{123} The appearance of children was thought to be influenced by the paintings that were placed in the room where they were conceived.\textsuperscript{124} Imagination was thought to have great power in affecting the gender and appearance of children.\textsuperscript{125} Couples who wanted to conceive a son

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{119} Rudolph M. Bell. \textit{How To Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 21. \\
\textsuperscript{121} Rudolph M. Bell. \textit{How To Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 24. \\
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid. 113. \\
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid. 39. \\
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid. 40. This belief stems from ancient texts by Mercurio and Quintilian. \\
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
were encouraged to look at “pictures of valorous men.” St. Antoninus condemned artists who created “images that provoke desire, not because of their beauty but because of their arrangement, such as naked women and the like.” Others, such as San Bernardino of Siena, who in turn referenced St. Augustine, saw these erotically charged images as a way to encourage procreation. Many people believed that visual beauty would also influence the appearance of a couple’s children.

St. Augustine was one of the first to encourage the use of images in order to increase procreation. For him, procreation is “the human race’s first social union.” Husbands and wives, according to Augustine, “owe each other a mutual service to relieve each other’s weakness, and thereby avoid illicit unions.” Wives do not have authority over their bodies, but their husbands do, and vice versa Procreation and the bearing of children is the ultimate goal of marriage, and what makes sexual relations within a marriage not sinful, but rather pure.

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126 Ibid. 39
130 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid. 57.
135 Ibid. 38-39.
Augustine wrote these observations and ideas in his treatise entitled *The Excellence of Marriage* around 401 CE. His primary point focused on procreation as “the fruit of marriage that is most closely related to the original social purpose of God’s creation.” Augustine argues that since procreation is the most important part of marriage, and is in fact the ultimate goal of conjugal relations, any device that aids in pure and legitimate procreation (that is, procreation within wedlock) is desirable.

San Bernardino da Siena, also known as St. Bernardine, referenced St. Augustine in his endorsement of erotically charged images in order to encourage procreation. “As Augustine says- those that have images of acts of love over their beds, do so in order to have children.” According to Bernardino’s sermon, given in 1425, these visual stimuli were meant for the lower classes, for whom written or imagined stimuli were not enough. However, it is pretty clear that, although he was reluctant to admit it, Bernardino’s main audiences were the middle and upper classes, who could afford to commission such images. Bernardino also condemned homosexuality and sodomy, and sought to encourage traditional marriage.

Not all ecclesiastical sources were in favor of the display of erotically charged images in the bedroom of a married couple. St. Antoninus of Florence, in his *Summa* of 1477, condemned “painters who make images that provoke desire, not because of their beauty, but because of their arrangement, such as naked women and the like.”

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136 Ibid. 17.
137 Ibid.
139 Ibid. “Dice Augustino che so’di quelli che fanno dipingere nelle letiere loro oopere d’amore, e fanno per avere figliuoli”.
140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
from 1446 to his death in 1459, was a member of the strict Dominican Order. Prior to his appointment to the archdiocese of Florence, he was involved in the remodeling and reconsecration of the monastery of San Marco. Although he was close to the Medici, particularly to Cosimo “Il Vecchio,” he did not always agree with their policies and actions.142

Antoninus’ fellow Dominican, Girolamo Savonarola, agreed with this point of view. Born in Ferrara in 1452, Savonarola entered the Dominican Order in April of 1475 in Bologna. As a child he had been educated by his grandfather, Michele Savonarola, a famous physician, and was expected to follow in his [the grandfather’s] footsteps. In the early 1470s, he began to write apocalyptic poetry and to turn his mind to a life of religion.143 In 1482, as a result of a possible disagreement with a superior, Savonarola was assigned to the monastery of San Marco in Florence as a lector.144 One of his supporters was the famous philosopher and Medici confidant- Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who persuaded Lorenzo de’ Medici to bring Savonarola in as Prior of San Marco in 1490.145 Savonarola’s fiery sermons about the apocalypse captured the hearts and the imaginations of the Florentine people, who were suffering from an economic downturn and political problems.146 After the sacking of Florence by Charles VIII and the expulsion of the Medici in 1494, Savonarola became de facto ruler of the city. New laws regarding sodomy, modesty, and other moral transgressions were passed. Savonarola’s followers, called Piagioni, or “Weepers,” patrolled the streets of Florence in order to curb immodest behavior. Due to his fervent preaching against the Church, Pope Alexander VI excommunicated

145 Ibid. 216-217.
Savonarola in 1497. On May 23, 1498, Savonarola, along with his two confidants- Fra Domenico da Pescia and Fra Silvestro Maruffi, was led out into the Piazza della Signoria and hanged. Fires were kindled beneath the scaffolding in order to consume their bodies.

Michele Savonarola wrote many guidebooks regarding fertility, childbirth, and the conception of male children. Like his elder, Girolamo Savonarola also wrote extensively on these subjects. One of his favorites subjects for sermons were so-called “vanities” or luxury goods. Savonarola was intently against the use of erotically charged pagan imagery in spalliera paintings. In 1493, while preaching a sermon based on the psalm *Quam bonus*, he noted that Florentines “have in their home, on the beds and daybeds, dishonest figures of naked girls with men, engaged in dishonest acts and positions that would be indecent in public places.”

Savonarola was a gifted preacher and knew how to play to his audience’s interest. He frequently referred to Aristotle in his sermons in order to demonstrate his points. In the same sermon, Savonarola went on to state that “Aristotle was pagan and prohibited similar pictures from the home so that children did not learn from them.” In a Lenten sermon from 1496, Savonarola continued this theme. He addressed himself to painters in particular: “Aristotle, who was a pagan, says in his *Politics* that you must not paint dishonest figures because of the children, because if they see them they become lustful, but I say to you, Christian painters, who make these shameful figures, that it is not well. Don’t make them anymore. You…must whitewash and

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147 Rudolph M. Bell. *How To Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 25.
149 Ibid.
destroy those figures that you have in your houses…and instead make a work to please God and the Virgin Mary.”150

Savonarola took issue with these images because he believed that if children were educated to be good “it will be difficult to pervert them, and they will be apt to multiply such good in many ways.”151 Rather than pagan imagery, Savonarola advocated the use of biblical narratives in order to teach the desired lessons.152 He complained that “no wealthy girl gets married without transporting her dowry in a cassone, which only with heathenish stories is pictured, so teaching the deeds and deceits of Mars and the tricks of Vulcan, rather than the famous deeds of holy women in the bible.”153 Indeed, Antoninus of Florence also encouraged the emulation of Old Testament heroines such as Esther.154

It seems as if ecclesiastical authorities did not take issue with the production of images intended for marriages per say, but rather with their content. St. Augustine, and later on San Bernardino, did not mind erotically charged pagan imagery if it served a didactic and helpful purpose. After all, procreation is the ultimate goal of marriage, according to Augustinian thought, and therefore any image that aids in conceiving children is appropriate.155 Members of the stricter Dominican order, such as Antoninus, and following him, Savonarola, condemned

151 Ibid. 196.
pagan imagery as lustful and inappropriate, as it could be a corrupting influence on children.\textsuperscript{156} Rather, they advocated the didactic use of Biblical narratives, and encouraged Florentine girls and women to emulate figures such as Judith, Susanna, and Esther.\textsuperscript{157} It is likely that many \textit{spalliera} images were burned on the so-called “bonfires of the vanities” during Savonarola’s tenure as de facto ruler of Florence.\textsuperscript{158} Vasari also notes this dislike in his life of Fra Bartolommeo.\textsuperscript{159} Regardless of subject matter, \textit{spalliera} paintings were treasured household goods, and were kept safe and protected.\textsuperscript{160}

In addition to erotic and Biblical imagery, narratives that appeared on \textit{spalliere} panels were often explicit, didactic depictions of ideals associated with both men and women.\textsuperscript{161} One popular image in the late \textit{Quattrocento} was the Rape of the Sabines. The story comes from early Roman history. The followers of Romulus, the founder of Rome, were mostly male. In order to acquire wives they abducted women from the neighboring Sabine tribe. The men of the Sabine tribe, outraged by the actions of the Romans, declared war. The Sabines managed to capture the citadel on the Capitoline Hill, but were then fiercely attacked by the Roman defenders. At this point the Sabine women intervened. They implored their husbands and fathers to put down their arms. This plea ended the battle and caused the two tribes- Roman and Sabine- to unite into one, with the Sabines settling on the Capitoline Hill. The image of the Sabine women pleading for unity emphasized the role of women “in the unification of rivals and the development of a

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{un} Jacqueline Marie Musacchio. \textit{Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace} (Los Angeles: The Getty Foundation, 2008), 113-114.
\bibitem{un} Ibid. 151.
\bibitem{un} Ibid. 113.
\bibitem{un} Jacqueline Marie Musacchio. \textit{Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace} (Los Angeles: The Getty Foundation, 2008), 150.
\end{thebibliography}
prosperous, fertile, and successful civilization.” One example of this theme is the *spalliera* panel by Jacopo di Archangelo from the late 1480s (Fig. 7). The emphasis on female fertility and procreation was especially important in Florence of this period, due to a high mortality rate among childbearing women, a large amount of stillbirths, miscarriages, and early infant deaths, as well as the devastating effects of multiple plague outbreaks. Therefore, the idea of repopulating the city appealed on both a civic and domestic level. “It illustrated and advocated control over childbearing as a way to achieve success in the state and in the family and constantly reinforced a woman’s identity as wife and mother.”

Although these images were extremely popular, particularly in the bedroom, the use of ancient narratives did not appeal to everyone. Many families commissioned images of Biblical narratives, especially those involving Old Testament heroines such as Esther, Susanna, the Queen of Sheba, and Judith, as seen in the panel from around 1500 depicting the *Condemnation of Susanna* (Fig. 8). Iconography from a variety of sources was incorporated into *cassone* and *spalliere* images in order to promote beauty, fertility, piety, and duty among Florentine brides. It was also common to incorporate heraldry into an image in order to connect it to a particular marriage. One example of this is the inclusion of the Pucci and Bini coats of arms in the four panels by Botticelli depicting Boccaccio’s story of Nastagio degli Onesti (Fig. 9), as well as the coat of arms of Lorenzo de’ Medici, who served as the marriage broker. Botticelli was given

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162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
164 Ibid. 151.
165 Ibid.
166 Ibid.
167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
169 Ibid. 159.
the commission by his old patron, Antonio Pucci in 1483.\textsuperscript{170} The four panels were meant for the marriage chamber of Giannozzo Pucci and his second wife, Lucrezia Bini.\textsuperscript{171} Although the actual painting was done by his workshop, Botticelli was responsible for the designs of the panels.\textsuperscript{172} The theme of courtly love and the fruition of this love is one that is consistent with the type of imagery popular in marital commissions.\textsuperscript{173}

Although the relevance of certain imagery to \textit{cassone} and \textit{spalliere} is not clear, paintings that speak of the poetic imagery of epithalamia are clear depictions of the pleasures and hopes of marriage.\textsuperscript{174} Epithalamia are “the marriage songs in poetry or prose invented by the Greeks, adopted by the Romans, and revived on a grand scale during the Renaissance.”\textsuperscript{175} Many of the epithalamia of the \textit{Quattrocento} were inspired by the poetry of Catullus and Claudian.\textsuperscript{176} These orations praised the institute of marriage and its importance, both to society and to personal satisfaction.\textsuperscript{177}

One of the key figures in these poems about marriage was the goddess Venus, who came to play the primary role as the patroness of marriage.\textsuperscript{178} Like in antiquity, Venus embodied two aspects in the \textit{Quattrocento}- the goddess of lust and the goddess of love and marriage.\textsuperscript{179} “She unites the couple, sanctions the passions that brought them together, and increases their amorous

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid. 119
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid.
In an epithalamia Venus is usually described as resting in a bower. Cupid, who is sometimes armed with his arrows, comes to rouse her and escort her to a wedding. The imagery of epithalamia is evident in Lorenzo Lotto’s *Venus and Cupid* from the mid-1520s. The painting contains all the traditional imagery associated with Venus, such as the myrtle, the roses, and the seashell, as well as contemporary symbols of marriage and fertility - the tiara and pearl earring, as well as the image of Cupid urinating. The bride was often compared to Venus and associated with her attributes, and therefore images of the goddess were deemed appropriate for nuptial furniture and commissions.

*Interpretations of the Venus paintings*

Although many Pre-World War II scholars, such as Panofsky, attempted to interpret the mythological paintings, particularly the *Primavera*, through a Neoplatonic lens, there is no firm historical evidence that support this view. Additionally, there is no evidence that these works were later moralized or allegorized to a higher philosophical key, as was often the case with love poetry in the *Quattrocento*. To further this absurdity, Neoplatonic interpretations are only applied to Botticelli’s more famous works. If one takes into account neglected works such as the National Gallery of Art’s (London) *spalliera* panel from 1490-1500 that depicts Venus with

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181 Ibid.
182 Ibid.
184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.
cupids (Fig. 10), it is plain that Botticelli’s mythological works were associated with marriage and the compliments and expectations given to a bride on her wedding day.\textsuperscript{186}

The work that epitomizes the didactic nature of Botticelli’s \textit{spalliera} paintings is \textit{The Venus and Mars} (Fig. 11), created around 1483 or 1484. The context of the commission of the work is mysterious. The records of the National Gallery of London indicate that it was purchased from a private collector in 1874, but nothing else is known of the painting prior to this date. The curators speculate that the work was probably a “piece of bedroom furniture, perhaps a bedhead or piece of wainscoting, most probably the 'spalliera' or backboard from a chest or day bed.”\textsuperscript{187} It is considered to be the earliest surviving painting that is based on literary descriptions of ancient paintings, rather than just being inspired by classical mythology.\textsuperscript{188} The theme of the painting, commonly understood to be “love conquers all,” is traditional for nuptial commissions.\textsuperscript{189} The depiction of Mars asleep on the right and Venus reclining on the left, attended by cupids, was well known in decorative arts of the period (Fig. 12).\textsuperscript{190}

Venus and Mars are depicted in a myrtle grove.\textsuperscript{191} Through an opening in the center it is possible to see a grassy plain, terminating in a range of blue-green hills, with a walled town lying beneath them.\textsuperscript{192} In the foreground, the two gods rest after an act of love. Venus reclines on her left, supported by a red pillow. “Because she is a nuptial Venus she is shown habited: over a

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid. The mirror frame is shaped like a diamond ring, a symbol of both eternity and the Medici. The figure of Mars is probably modeled after a sarcophagus depicting Endymion, who was condemned to sleep forever (Victoria and Albert Museum website, \texttt{http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93042/mirror-frame-in-the-form-mirror-frame-pollaioulo-antonio/}). Botticelli would have been familiar with works such as this, as his brother was a goldsmith and the young Sandro probably got his start in goldsmithing workshops.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
transparent underdress, through which her left thigh shows with tender warmth, she wears a
loose white robe with slashed sleeves. Both have broad borders of brown, richly decorated with a
zigzag design in gold; the robe is braided with the same border beneath the breasts and over the
shoulders.”

There is a clear and deliberate contrast between the delicate white folds of the
robe, which are more minutely detailed than any other drapery in Botticelli’s oeuvre and the flat
contours of the border.

She wears a large circular brooch with rubies and pearls at her neck.

Two braided plaits of golden hair fall from a braided bun and cascade onto the cushion.

Four other locks of hair, two short and two long, curl at the front. Botticelli exhibits the beauty of hair
in all its forms—plaited, loose, and “waving in its own natural grace.”

Mars lies on the right, continuing the line of Venus’s left thigh with his own and is
portrayed as a youth in his sexual prime. His head is thrown back against a tree trunk and his
lips are parted in deep sleep. His back and left arm are supported by his cuirass, over which a
pinkish-red cloth is thrown. The color of the cloth sets off the browns in his body, which are
echoed by the rich chestnut brown of his curling hair.

Mars wears only a loincloth.

“He is Botticelli’s most perfect male nude, a masterpiece of draftsmanship in which every difficulty of
expression as well as of perspective and foreshortening is surmounted with such well-pondered
mastery that our most lasting impression is of the naturalness of the whole as well as the beauty
of the single limbs.”

This beauty is achieved both through modeling and the remarkably

193 Ibid.
194 Ibid.
195 Ibid.
196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
198 Ibid. 165.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
201 Ibid.
202 Ibid.
precise moving outline.\textsuperscript{203} The face and upper side of the body are emphatically lit in order to create a greater contrast to the darker forms that surround the figure.\textsuperscript{204} The flexed left elbow and right knee balance each other, while the hands echo each other’s lines in a counterpoint to those of Venus, which rest on her body.\textsuperscript{205}

Between the two gods are three satyrs, identified by their chubby infants’ bodies and their goats’ legs and horns. They are depicted playing with Mars’s weapons— one wears his helmet as he helps the other two carry the great lance.\textsuperscript{206} Both the helmet and the lance are based on fifteenth-century weaponry, a fact that points to the limited archaeological knowledge of the period.\textsuperscript{207} The satyr holding the tip of the lance tries in vain to wake Mars by blowing a conch shell. The conch shell is not only associated with Venus, but also has a special association with Pan.\textsuperscript{208} In antiquity called a \textit{ceryx} or \textit{buccina}, these shells were used as trumpets.\textsuperscript{209} “In the battle between the gods of Olympus and the Titans he [Pan] aided the gods by blowing on the shell. Its fearful sound filled the Titans with the terror called panic and put them to flight.”\textsuperscript{210} This myth was known through commentaries made on the \textit{Phenomena}, a Greek astronomical poem written by Aratus.\textsuperscript{211} These commentaries were collected by Poliziano, who bought them in 1482.\textsuperscript{212} Botticelli probably heard of this myth from Poliziano, and therefore the earliest likely date for the \textit{Venus and Mars} is 1483-1484.\textsuperscript{213}
In the right foreground a fourth satyr pops his head out of Mars’s cuirass. All four satyrs are the infant satyrs known as satyrisci. They engage in pranks, in keeping with ancient myth. This playfulness creates a teasing mood in the work, rather than a terrifying one, and therefore the conch shell should be seen as the shell-trumpet that ancient Roman treatises on agriculture claimed was used by shepherds to call their herds. The motif of the playing satyrs was drawn from a description by Lucian of an ancient painting by Aëton depicting the Nuptials of Alexander and Roxana. According to Lucian, the painting showed cupids playing with Alexander’s armor: “two are carrying his spear as porters do a heavy beam; two more grasp the handles of the shield, tugging it along with another reclining on it, playing king, I suppose; and then another has got into the breast plate, which lies hollow part upwards; he is in ambush and will give the royal equipage a good fright when it comes within reach.” This is simply an inspiration. Satyrs were chosen for the Venus and Mars because they symbolize lasciviousness and belong to the grove and field. They are subjects of Pan and attendants of Bacchus. These satyrs are among the first to be depicted in Renaissance art, although they were familiar in the Quattrocento from etchings on ancient gemstones.

In the upper right foreground is a swarm of wasps that buzz around Mars’s head. Some postulate that these symbolize the commission of the work by the Vespucci family, since vespe in Italian translates to “wasps.” However, no documentation has been found to support this

214 Ibid.
215 Ibid.
216 Ibid.
217 Ibid. 168 This painting was lost in antiquity and was only known through descriptions, such as the one quoted above from Lucian’s dialogue Herodotus.
218 Ibid.
219 Ibid.
220 Ibid.
221 Ibid. 165.
theory. Other scholars, such as Lightbown, think that the wasps are simply there to illustrate that Mars’s sleep is so deep, no noise can wake him. 222 “But not even the swarm of wasps flying in and out of the hollow bough of the tree trunk wakens the god from his deep sleep…the failure of Mars to waken at their buzzing and at the noise of the shell-blowing satyr is intended as nothing more than a joking illustration of his amorous exhaustion.” 223 It is evident that Botticelli puts too much time and effort into the wasps for them to simply be the symbol of the patron or an emblem of noise. As Lightbown points out, the wasps are highly naturalistic and painted with careful observation from life, although the section of the painting in which they are located is dark. 224 “Botticelli even marks the characteristic indentations of the black stripes on their glowing yellow bodies.” 225 This close attention to a relatively miniscule detail in a large painting seems superfluous, unless one considers that this detail may be imperative to the overall symbolic meaning of the painting. Wasps can be seen as symbols of fertility and springtime because of their pollination activities, which are prevalent in the spring and summer. Wasps and bees may also be seen as symbols of industry, productivity, and eloquence. These qualities are closely associated with the Quattrocento’s feminine ideals. Botticelli is using the wasps as symbols of these ideal feminine qualities, which are, more importantly here, ideal qualities that should be found in a wife. The wasps buzz around Mars’ head as a symbol of the wife’s voice, which whispers in her husband’s ear. From this, a young woman is meant to understand that if she embodies the qualities of fertility, industry, and eloquence, she may gain influence over her husband.

222 Ibid.
223 Ibid. 165-168.
224 Ibid.
225 Ibid.
In octave 122 of the *Stanze della Giostra*, Poliziano describes how Julio comes into the Palace of Venus and encounters the goddess herself: “He found her seated on the edge of her couch, just then released from the embrace of Mars, who lay on his back in her lap.”\textsuperscript{226} This recalls the pose of the figures in the *Venus and Mars*. Moreover, the next octave describes cupids playing around the couple.\textsuperscript{227} Clearly Botticelli was heavily inspired by Poliziano when he created this work. Not only did he make use of the myth of Pan blowing the conch shell to scare the Titans- a myth that he was likely exposed to through texts collected by Poliziano- it also seems that the pose of the figures is inspired by the aforementioned lines in the *Stanze*.\textsuperscript{228}

The figure of Venus in the work seems to have a direct connection to the figure of Simonetta, as described in both the *Stanze* and the standard painted for the joust. Like Simonetta, Venus wears a white dress trimmed with gold.\textsuperscript{229} In the *Stanze*, Simonetta’s hair is described as “ringlets of golden hair” which curl on her forehead.\textsuperscript{230} In the description of Giuliano’s standard, Simonetta as Pallas wears her hair elaborately braided and fluttering in the wind.\textsuperscript{231} Venus’s hair is a combination of both. Two braided plaits of golden hair fall from a braided bun and cascade onto the cushion.\textsuperscript{232} Four other locks of hair, two short and two long, curl at the front.\textsuperscript{233}

Botticelli’s close link with the Medici and their circle meant that he likely observed the working partnership of couples such as Piero de’ Medici and Lucrezia Tornabuoni, as well as Lorenzo de’ Medici and Clarice Orsini. These observations would have made him well aware of

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\textsuperscript{227} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid. 64.
\textsuperscript{232} Ibid. 164.
\textsuperscript{233} Ibid.
the influence a wife could have over her husband. The *Venus and Mars*, with its didactic iconography, eroticized narrative, and active female figure, is likely a statement about the power that a wife who embodies the ideal characteristics proscribed to brides by fifteenth-century society may wield over her husband.

Unfortunately, there is very little evidence besides the Medici inventory of 1499 that places painted *spalliere* with beds and daybeds. According to the inventory the painting “was set above a *lettuccio*, a kind of settle that stood against the wall, indeed was often fixed to it.” When these images were installed on walls and considered part of the building they were rarely mentioned in inventories, and even when they were listed, their iconography was not. However, it is reasonable to assume that these images were connected to beds and daybeds, or hung on the walls.

All three of the Venus paintings were probably commissioned by members of the Medici circle, if not the Medici family. The *Primavera* and the *Venus and Mars* were likely both nuptial commissions. They are both *spalliera* paintings, and the themes of springtime and love are appropriate for this context. *The Birth of Venus* however, was probably commissioned for a villa. It is on canvas, a cheaper material, and if one judges from the 1492 inventory of Lorenzo “Il Magnifico,” one that was preferred for the decoration of villas. The subject matter is also fitting for the decoration of a *sala*, or state chamber, in a villa. “The subjects preferred for

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234 Jacqueline Marie Musacchio. *Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace* (Los Angeles: The Getty Foundation, 2008), 115 The inventory of the Palazzo Medici from 1499 on Via Larga describes Botticelli’s *Primavera* attached above a daybed.


237 Ibid.


239 Ibid.

240 Ibid.
secular paintings that were to be hung in villas were cheerful and gay, suitable for country
retreats to which the owner escaped from the business, heat, or plague of the town to recreate
himself with the tranquility and pleasures of a rural retreat."

Both the Primavera and the Venus and Mars are clearly derived from the same tradition.
Both paintings are painted on panel, and share a common theme. In both works, the central
figure of Venus is dressed in contemporary costume- in the Primavera she appears as a richly
attired matron, while in the Venus and Mars she appears in her underdress. This casual
costume emphasizes the intimacy of the scene. The Primavera depicts an image of spiritual love.
By depicting Venus in her aspect as the goddess of love and marriage, as inspired by the late-
antique allegorical novel Of the Marriage of Philology and Mercury by Martianus Capella,
Botticelli creates an image of the perfect love inspired by Neoplatonic philosophy- a balance
between spiritual and carnal love. Venus as the goddess of love and marriage is the one
responsible for inflaming the couple with desire. In the Venus and Mars Venus is clearly the
goddess of lust. However, she is not a wanton Venus, she is clothed, as is befitting a high-born
bride. This Venus is a role model for young brides, since she embodies the perfect
Renaissance bride, who was described by contemporary thinkers as combining chastity and
amorous abandon.

Conclusion

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241 Ibid.
242 Ibid. 127; 164.
243 Ibid. 127.
244 Ibid. 128.
245 Ibid. 164.
Household furniture played a central role in the marriage rituals of Renaissance Florence. The images on marriage chests and *spalliere* panels were meant to convey messages and exempla to both brides and grooms. These images were drawn from a variety of sources—ancient text, biblical narrative, and contemporary iconography. Many of these images were eroticized. They were meant to induce amorous feelings in a couple and to encourage procreation. However, numerous members of the clergy condemned this practice and called for strictly biblical and religious narratives in the bedroom. One of the most popular themes for *spalliere* images was the goddess Venus. As patroness of marriage, and the ancient goddess of love, her image was invoked as a role model for young women. Just as the Virgin Mary was meant to be a model of devoted motherhood, Venus was the embodiment of sensuality within the permissible boundaries of marriage.

Botticelli’s *spalliere* panels, especially the *Venus and Mars*, epitomize the idea of Venus as role model. In these works, meant specifically as didactic works targeted at young brides, Venus is the central figure, the “star of the show,” per say. By using didactic imagery, iconography, and formal elements, Botticelli provided his young audience with an empowering message. Young women who embodied the characteristics of the ideal wife could wield power and influence. Although most women exercised their influence within the family patronage system, they were still considered to be a powerful avenue through which one could access a patron. This empowering message contributes to our growing understanding of the importance of women in the *Quattrocento*. By looking at paintings such as the *Venus and Mars*, one can see

248 Ibid.
that although women were not permitted to officially hold office, they had great power and influence over civic, ecclesiastical, and domestic matters.
1 Sandro Botticelli, *Fortitude*, 1470, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, tempera on panel, 66”x34”. (photo credit: in the public domain)

3 Sandro Botticelli, *Pallas and the Centaur*, 1482, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, tempera on canvas, 80”x58.1”, (photo credit: in the public domain)

4 Sandro Botticelli, *La Primavera*, 1482, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, tempera on panel, 80”x124” (photo credit: Artstor www.artstor.org)
5 Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1484-1486, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, tempera on canvas, 68”x110” (photo credit: in the public domain)

6 Lo Scheggia, *Cassone Adimari*, 1450, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, tempera on panel, 34.8”x119”, (photo credit: in the public domain)
7 Jacopo di Archangelo, *The Reconciliation of the Romans and the Sabines*, late 1480s, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, tempera and gold on panel, 23.75”x67.25”, (photo credit: in the public domain)

8 Unknown Venetian Painter, *The Condemnation of Susanna*, 1500, Walters Museum of Art, Baltimore, oil on panel, 23”x65”, (photo credit: in the public domain)
9 Sandro Botticelli, *The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti (fourth episode)*, 1483, private collection, tempera on panel, 32.6"x56", (photo credit: n the public domain)

10 Sandro Botticelli?, *Venus with Cupids*, 1500, National Gallery of Art, London, tempera and oil on panel, 36.2"x68". (photo credit: National Gallery of Art www.nationalgallery.org.uk)
11 Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars*, 1483-1484, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, tempera on poplar panel, 27"x68" (photo credit: in the public domain)

12 after Antonio Pollaiuolo, *Mirror Frame*, 1470-1480, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, painted and gilded stucco in a gilt wood frame, 64.2x50.8x5.5 cm, (photo credit: Victoria and Albert Museum)
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