

“AMERIGO’S NIECE”

KIT KAT ESSAY DECEMBER 16, 2008

By JAMES C. CARPENTER

The World was new. She too was newly born. Her uncle, Amerigo, to his great delight – by total accident – had a new world named after him. America – both South and North. We live today in the land that bears his name. A land which perhaps like Amerigo, exaggerates its importance. For Amerigo, adventure to the New World was part of an overweening quest for fame and wealth. He came for his fantasy his hubris - El Dorado. He came to exploit, to advance himself over others. He lived in the mythology of self.

But his niece, Simonetta Vespucci, ah, well she became the source of a more powerful fantasy – her destiny was fantasy beauty. She comes from heaven. She was beauty to a world that was trying

to find what had been lost. Her birth was a rebirth -we call it the Renaissance.

II Simonetta's Life

I would like to take her hand and introduce her to everyone.

Please join me in saying, Enchanté.



She comes to us, by way of the artist who knew and adored her, Alessandro Botticelli.

Who was Simonetta in real life? She was born in Italy in (1453). She was married at 15 and moved to Florence. She moved into a house next door to a young painter, Sandro Botticelli. Her natural beauty cast its spell him, indeed on all Florence. Two of the many suitors competing for her affections were 2 handsome brothers Lorenzo and Giuliano – they had an advantage, they were Medicis. Both pursued. Each outdoing the other each in displays of affection. But, Lorenzo, the older brother, was burdened with the duties of the family's many businesses and with the burden of the affairs of his City, Fierenze, Florence. His younger brother Giuliano, dashing and romantic, was left to the affairs of the heart.

II The Adoration (Slide 2 – The Adoration of the Magi)



Alessandro Botticelli. *Adoration of the Magi*. c.1475

In this painting – The Adoration of the Magi – we see them all. Here we see Lorenzo handsome. With a regal but caring bearing.

Lorenzo Medici



Next we see Giuliano .

Giuliano Medici



He belongs in GQ magazine. His bearing is martial – and entitled. He is a knight like Galahad ready to be sent on the fantasy quest. All the Medicis have the look of rulers, they have superior eyes. They have hauteur.

Very importantly, we have one of the rare images of the painter himself, Botticelli.





He

paints himself on the edge of the action. Though himself an observer, yet we know by his looking away, that he already knows everyone. Rather it is he who staged the whole scene. He has put Lorenzo and Guiliano's father, Piero Medici, on center stage next to the Christ child's manger. He portrays the Medicis

as the Magi, the biblical kings, bringing frankincense, myrrh, and gold to celebrate a birth, the nativity. If you look carefully though, It appears more as if the Medicis have appointed themselves the Christ child's regent protectors. This is weighty Medici propaganda. Wealth needs a great painter to put on the mask of importance. Botticelli was to the Medicis as David was to Napoleon.

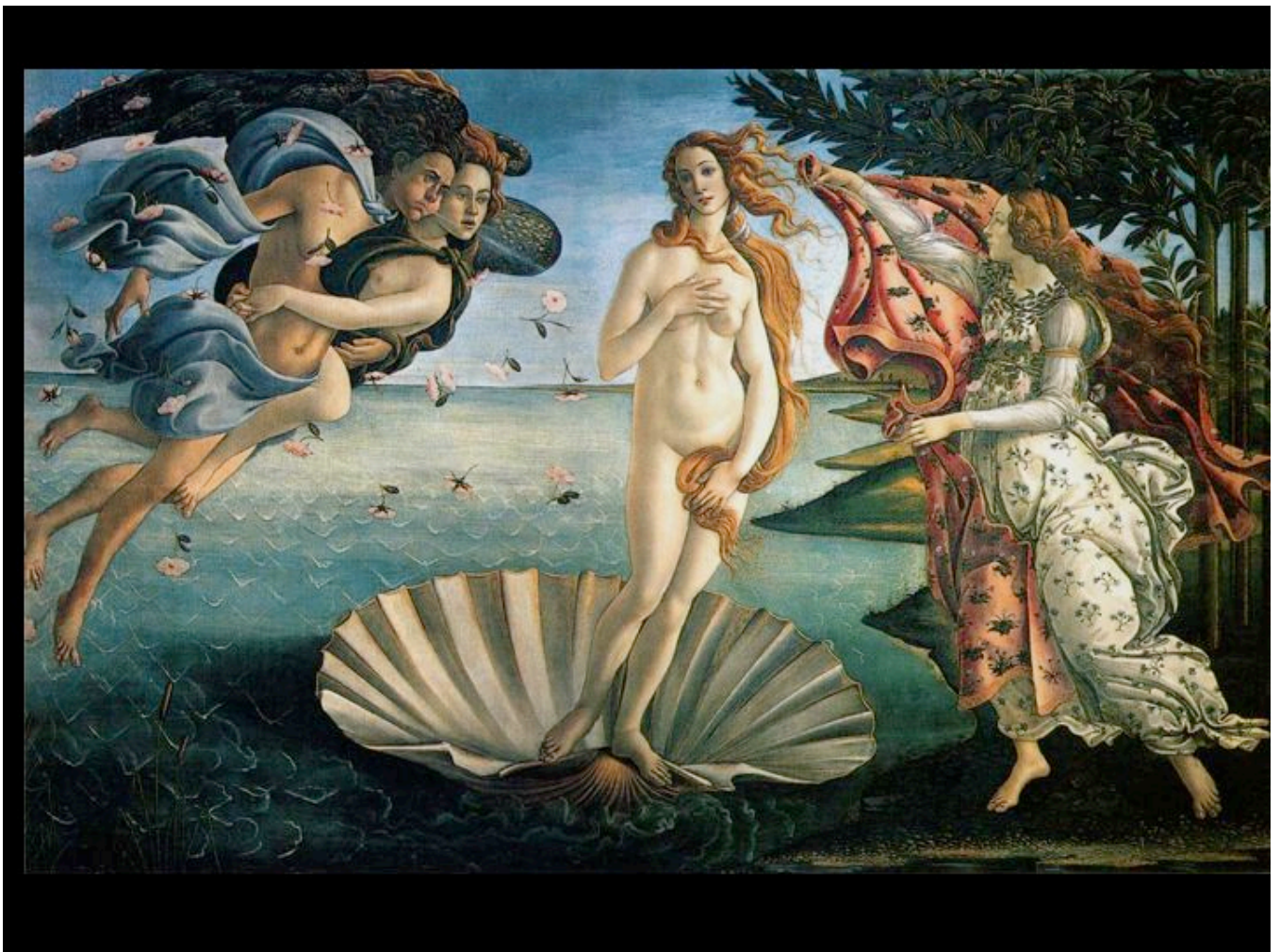
We can see that Botticelli is not overcome by being near this group. He is not gawking at the princes. He obviously knows *them* well. Rather his interest, as he looks backwards into the future, is to observe us. And I think he is asking us, "Do you see her, do you see Simonetta?" *She* is his Mary. *She* is his grail.

Even in the Da Vinci Code, it is Simonetta who graces the cover of Professor Robt Langdon's Treatise on "The Sacred Feminine". It is Simonetta who is his true subject, not *that*

woman, (short pause) Mary Magdelaine. Botticelli knew the truth. Botticelli didn't need a Codex. He knew DaVinci personally, and, more importantly, yes, he knew Simonetta . She was his Annabelle Lee.

III The Classical Past is Reborn Into Humanism-The Painting

And now to the DaVinci Code of the Renaissance – Botticelli's
The Birth of Venus.



This painting quite frankly is ***THE*** archetype image of the Renaissance. Why?

First, when the glory that had been Greece and the grandeur that had been Rome was destroyed almost a millennia and a half earlier, knowledge underwent diaspora. That this was so, was irritatingly staring the people of Florence in the face. In the middle their town was a new cathedral to Santa Maria del Fiore— Il Duomo di Firenze. It was massive. It had been under construction for over a 100 years. But Il Duomo had no dome! Rather it had a gaping hole where the largest dome in the world was supposed to go.

Il Duomo



But no one knew anymore how build such a large dome.

The knowledge used by Caesar Augustus' boyhood friend the great Roman general, Marcus Agrippa, to build the Pantheon in about 25 B.C, with its great dome and oculus – was lost. The knowledge to formulate concrete, which the Romans had invented and used to construct their awe inspiring structures – the Coliseum, the magnificent breakwaters that shielded their ports, their open air

theaters, their Aqueducts, was also long lost. So the Medicis sent scouts and spies (– like Joshua had sent scouts into the promised land)- throughout Italy, throughout Europe to find and recover ancient artifacts, manuscripts, sculptures and remnants of all kind from which they could try to piece together the knowledge that had been lost in the mists of time. The scouts searched out musty old manuscripts from ancient monasteries, they brought back abandoned sculptures from Greece. They read the manuscripts. They studied the art. Crazy geniuses like Filippo Brunelleschi went with Lorenzo to Rome where he sat and stared and contemplated the Pantheon trying to unknot the engineering mysteries of the dome.

Brunelleschi then returned to Florence. He built the great dome, Il Duomo, and the Medicis set out to build Florence as a great City hoping to rival Rome and Alexandria.

In this process, the Florentines developed an awe and reverence for the knowledge of classical times. They believed that

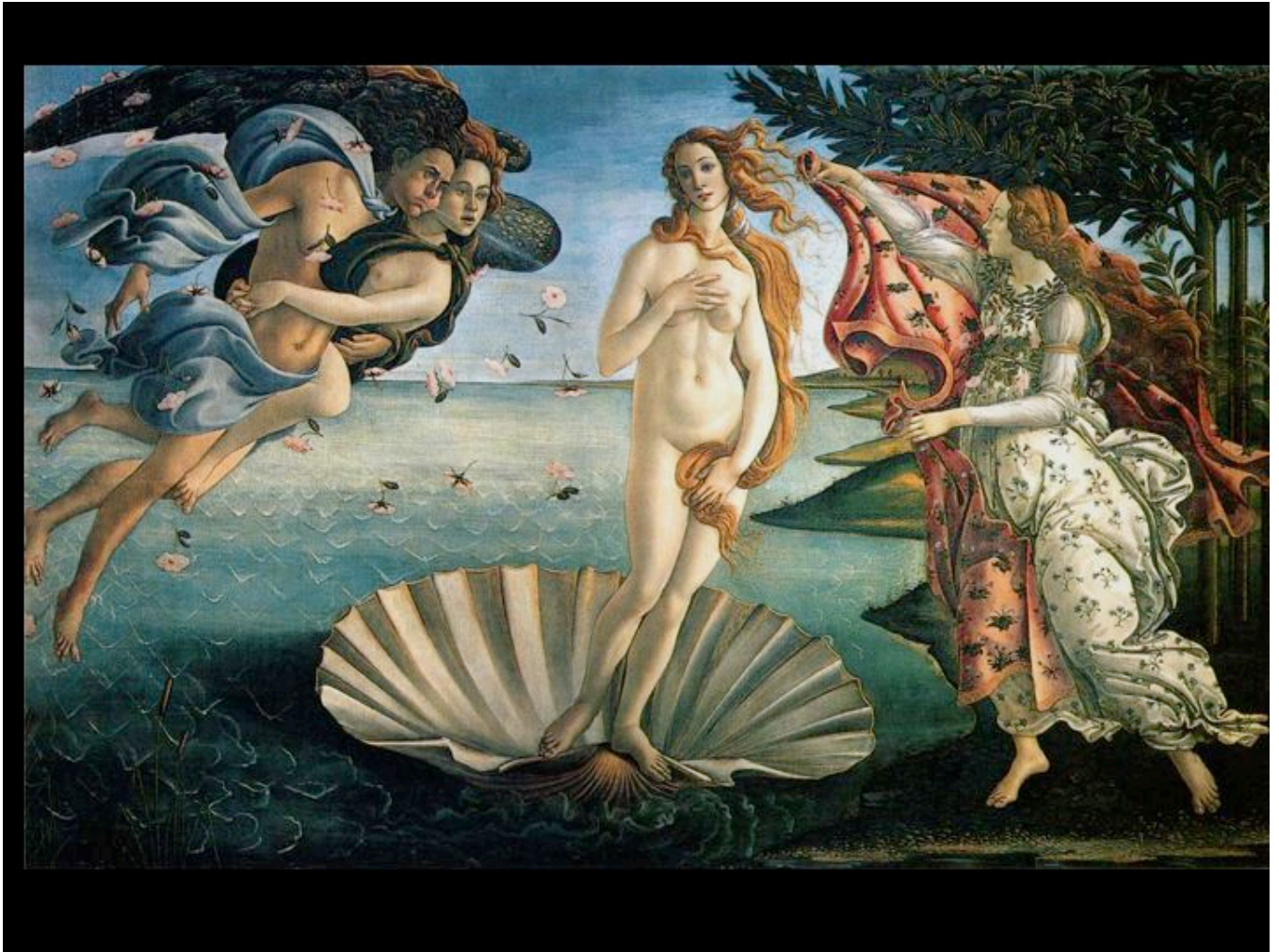
this rediscovered classical knowledge was superior to that of their age. They set up places to study the natural philosophy of the Greeks, to study classical architecture, classical engineering and mathematics, and classical rhetoric and literature, art forms. – the whole universe of classical knowledge. They aspired to be “Universal Men” – that is an individual who was himself expert in all of these areas of classical knowledge. They put these places together under one roof. They called them Universitats. They aspired to be polymaths, and some were – DaVinci, Galileo, Michaelangelo. From the ashes of the old world, was born the New World. By looking back, man could find his way into the future.

In the Medici palace by firelight at night, they dreamed philosophy. Truth was the ultimate beauty. They revered the classical ideal that by using the talents given to him, man himself could author and accomplish great achievements. The study of the classical world gave understanding to their New World. They called

this idea Humanism. It was an academic idea and ideal. It was a break from the idea that man could not accomplish anything, only God. It was a break from the idea that God kept all the secrets of His creation for Himself .

But it wasn't secular. It was based on the idea that God had given man the ability to unlock the secrets of the physical world for himself. Indeed God expected man to do so, on his own. It was time for man, like Odysseus, to again explore uncharted waters.

And so, with his painting, Botticelli brings the light of truth and beauty back into the world. It is the New Birth. And it is Simonetta Vespucci.



She is born in full youth. She comes without her robe de chambers. Beauty and truth are not to be hidden. Her genealogy is from the gods. She is their gift. She comes in classical Greek form modestly trying to cover herself. She blushes into existence. She is an ethereal being. No doubt based on the classical lines of the many Greek sculptures that Botticelli had seen in the collection that

Lorenzo's scouts had retrieved – god like lines, the perfect human form- think of Michelangelo's David and his Sistine Adam.

She is blown to us by a heroic group of seraphim like winged winds –the West Wind ,Zephyr and Chloris whom Zephyr had abducted and made his wife – both are blowing Venus into the world. Winds represented the original chaos and disorder of the universe. Out of chaos, beauty and truth come into the world. But Zephyr's gentle winds bring the warm Spring winds with their rain. When joined with Chloris, the goddess of new vegetation, (and you will note that they are here intertwined)) they gave birth to new fruits and flowers. Which is here shown by the shower of beautiful new roses which surround them. Each pink rose with a golden heart. Roses are thus born into the world with Venus.

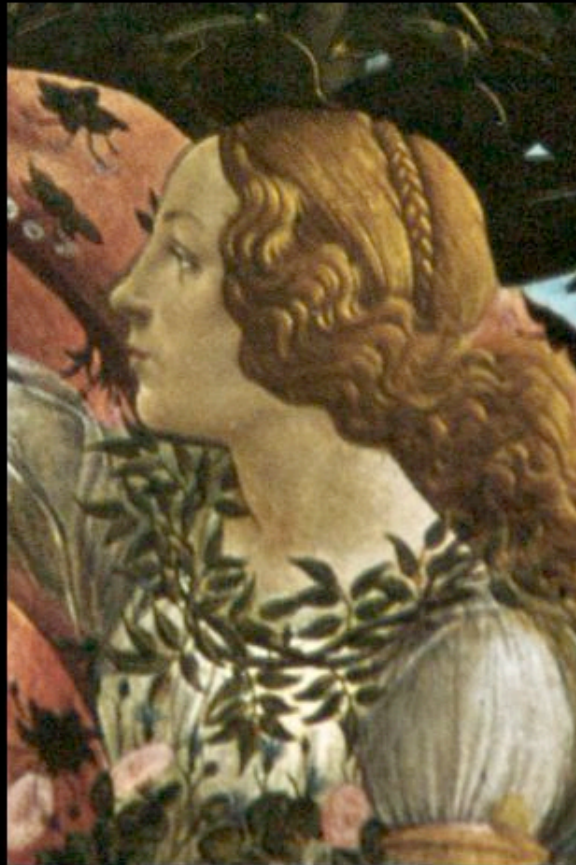
A bright new light was entering the world, center stage. She glides to us as Venus, with gilded hair, the daughter of Heaven and Sea. She is the child of Uranus and Gaius. She is said to have

sprung from the foam of the sea. Though she is older than the Olympian gods, she is eternally fresh. She was conceived when the Titan Cronus castrated his father, the god Uranus, whose severed genitals fell into the sea fertilizing it. So next time you are wading in the ocean, as the foam of waves hit you, know that you are in the life force of Venus. The Greek word “Aphro” means foam. Hence, Aphrodite.

Venus comes to us on a beautiful scalloped shell with gold trim. The shell was a Greek symbol of fertility. (Some have nicknamed this painting as , “Venus on the Half Shell.)

If you look closely, Venus is not anatomically correct. Botticelli has made her neck is too long, her shoulder is oddly connected and sloped. I think he did this deliberately trying to emphasize her form with long graceful lines he had surmised from the ancient Greek art and statues. His image predicts the ideal lines of today’s supermodels.

As she makes her first step into the world, on Cyprus, she is greeted by an attendant, one of the Ores (Horae), the greek goddesses of the 3 seasons. This attendant is visually stunning. She welcomes Venus with a robe embroidered with spectacularly beautiful flower- red and white daisies, yellow primroses, blue cornflowers - all Spring flowers. She wears a garland of myrtle – the tree of Venus and a sash of Venus’ pink roses. The neoclassical French painter Jean Auguste Ingres, said that this face was the most beautiful face ever painted.



If the attendant appears to be pregnant to you, she is not. It was the dress style of the day. It was “in” for Florentine women to convey through their fashion the idea that they were fertile. Indeed if you were unaware of the fashion mode of the day, you might mistakenly think that every young woman in Florence was with child.

In Renaissance though, beauty was closely linked to virtue. Physical beauty signified an inner spiritual beauty. A beautiful woman could draw a man to love and through love to God. Then and now we love beauty – it inspires us. But in real life beauty is transient, it is short lived. Youth ages, then dies. In real life we exploit beauty, we use it to sell.. Passion's tendency is to degrade rather than elevate. Devine eros is from Uranus, not from bacchanal Dionysius. It is spiritually elevating, not sensually greedy. Venus comes on gentle winds yet uncompromised by the world – not in lustful tempests.

But when truth and beauty come to us, there is a distance. Though we seek them, yet truth stays apart from us, just out of reach. You can see this distance in Simonetta's eyes. As she comes to us, as she enters our world, her gaze is beyond us. She is Mary-soberly pondering and confused by a world that puts truth to the sword. Simonetta's beauty still enchants us. Her still trembling hand

tantalizes us, so close, seemingly in reach. Michelangelo when he saw this painting called it a poem. She is the Renaissance.

However, in fantasy, the thought of beauty transcends and is an eternal flame that inspires us in our night. As Juliet exclaimed of Romeo:

And when he shall die,
Take him and cut him into little stars.
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun. *Act III, Scene 2*

To the Medicis, who commissioned this painting, I am sure this painting represented the rebirth into the world of truth and beauty which they were recapturing from the classical age. But subtly and intentionally I think, Botticelli also was using this painting to celebrate Simonetta. Simonetta had also come to Florence from a city on the sea. (Portovenere) But there was another

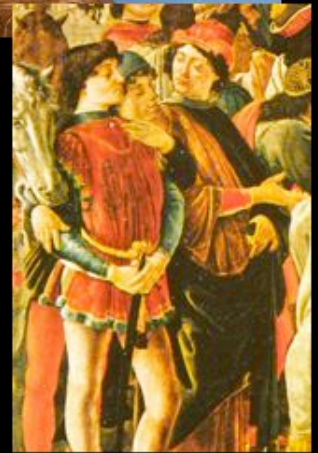
connected with Simonetta. It was with a Medici and it became the stuff of legends.

Giuliano Medici

In 1475 Giuliano Medici had held a jousting tournament in the main piazza of Florence. Famous poems recount this “Giostra.”

On Giuliano’s standard, Botticelli had painted the image of Minerva, the virgin goddess of warriors,(poetry, wisdom, and the inventor of music.) It was Simonetta. And like Helen, it too launched a thousand ships. Giuliano won the tournament and dedicated his victory to Simonetta. She had given him a token piece of her clothing to carry in his armor.

Giuliano Medici



Here is bust of Giuliano Medici by Verrechio. (In the National Museum of Art in Wash. DC). Giuliano 's helmet and armor for this joust were designed by Verecchio. Note the distorted visage and fierce scream of the armorial. It was meant to instill martial terror into one's enemies. And the Medicis had many enemies.

Pazzi Conspiracy

Giuliano was involved in one of the most infamous moments of Italian history. On Easter Sunday, in April of 1478, while attending Mass in Il Duomo with Lorenzo and all of their families, assassins struck hoping to kill both Medici brothers. The brothers were at the altar taking communion. Giuliano was killed on the altar. He was 26 years old. His brother Lorenzo was seriously wounded, but managed, barely, to escape. The whole church saw the assassination. This murder in the cathedral is infamously known as the Pazzi conspiracy. Several leading and competing families had conspired with church leaders hoping to overthrow and take from the Medicis their rule of Florence and their businesses. Perhaps this was the origin of the term hostile takeover. The Medicis made their money thru banking. One of their largest customers was the Vatican. It was in deep debt to the Medicis. Murder was perhaps a way out of debt.

Lorenzo hunted down the conspirators, including priests, and hanged them from the walls of his palace. A young Leonardo DaVinci passed by and sketched the hangings, coldly noting the color of the hanged men's clothes. Lorenzo had Botticelli paint a mural of the hangings on the palace walls so that passerbys would see and remember for years to come. Lorenzo also had inscribed on the palace wall harsh epitaphs. One read, "I am Bernardo Bandini, the new Judas, a murderous traitor in church I was..." (So now you know where some of the storyline in the movie,"The Godfather"

had its birth.) (Slides of the Pazzi Medallions)

Pazzi Conspiracy Medallion



As an aside, Giuliano had a son born after his death, his name was Giulio. Giulio was born to Giuliano's mistress, Fioretta

Giorini



(To maintain propriety, no doubt they were betrothed after Giuliano's death.) Giulio was raised by Lorenzo as one of his own sons. It is of note, that to respond to the unspoken but real threats from the papacy, Lorenzo groomed and positioned his son Giovanni for the priesthood. He bought Giovanni a Cardinalship at age 17. Giulio attached himself to promoting Giovanni's destiny. Giovanni

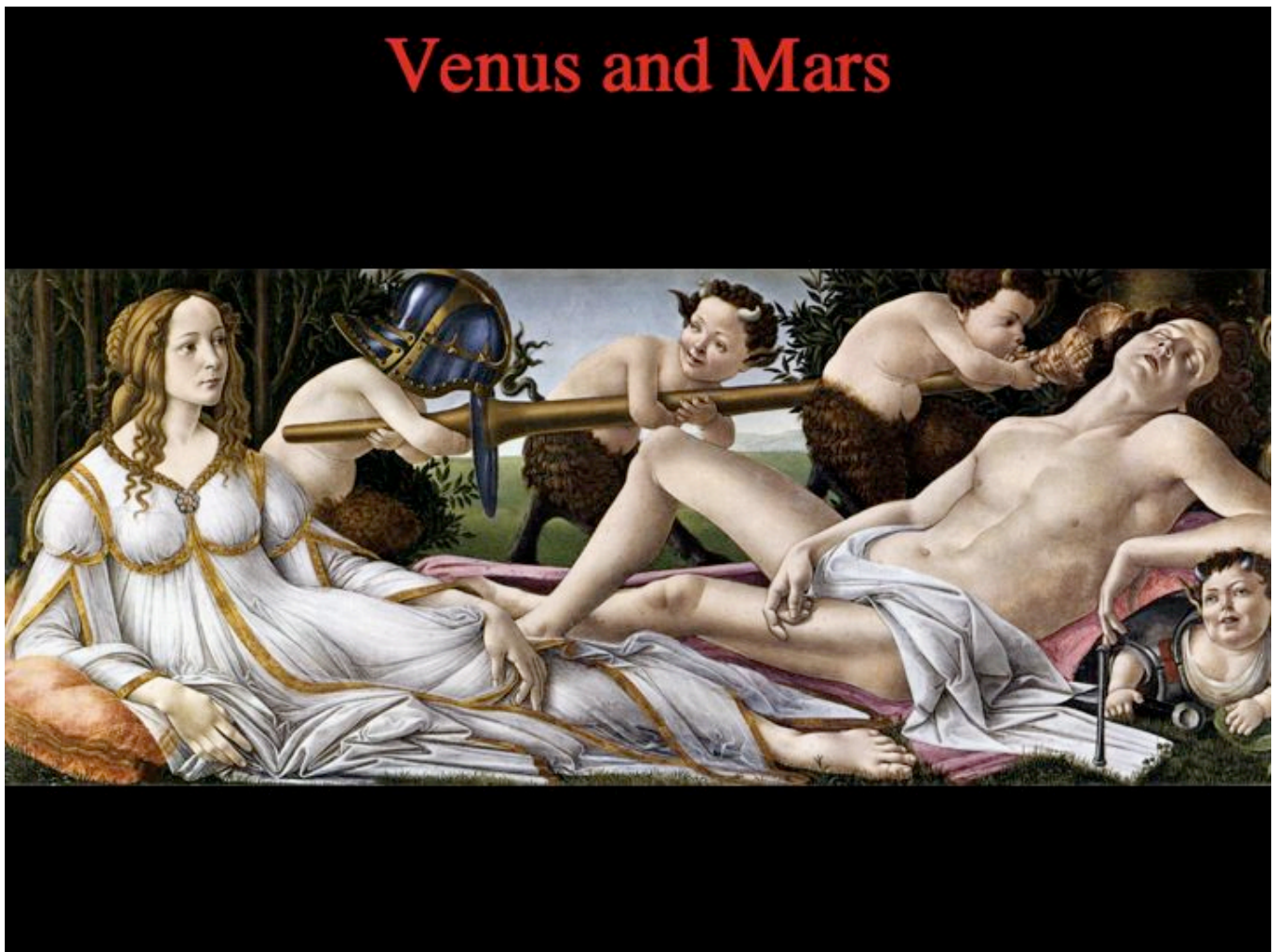
became Pope Leo X in 1513.(succeeding Julius II) When Giovanni died in 1521, Giulio succeeded him as Pope, becoming Pope Clement VII.

This was prescient, because several years after Giuliano's death in 1478, the church found another way that eventually led to the unseating of the Medici's from their power in Florence. It began via a fiery Dominican monk named Savaranola. Savaranola developed a mass following through sermons which damned the ostentatious wealth and new culture of learning and art of the Medicis. The people of Florence had to repent and return to simple, poorer lifestyles if they were to receive God's blessing. The religious fervor led to an inquisition style questioning of the Medici's and their followers. They were forced to throw their books and other "vanities" into a huge Bonfire in the main Piazza of Florence. This event became known as the Bonfire of the Vanities. All of Florence came and to throw objects of their materialism into

the fire. Botticelli himself came and threw into the fire several of his paintings.

Mars and Venus (about 1485)

But years before this bonfire, no doubt as a result of the notoriety of the joust, Botticelli created a painting called **Mars and Venus**. (Slide)



It is one of my favorites. (It is in the National Gallery in London)

Venus is obviously Simonetta. And Mars is Giuliano. Mars, god of war, was one of the lovers of Venus. Here Mars is asleep and unarmed, while Venus is awake and alert. Mars is sleeping the "little death" which comes after making love, and not even a trumpet in his ear will wake him. The little satyrs have stolen his lance - a joke to show that he is now disarmed. Here love conquers war. No doubt a reference to the "martial" Giuliano,. Also, perhaps, a metaphor to Giuliano's murder.

While no doubt the notoriety of the martyred Giuliano and the beauty Simonetta sold paintings, yet I think Botticelli was

commemorating his 2 friends both of whom he had loved.



(**Slide re Wasp's**) But let's look at a close up of Mars. It is Giuliano ! Let me point to the wasps buzzing around his head. The Italian word for wasps is "Vespe" , the root word for Vespucci. So yes, Botticelli has the sleeping martyr still dreaming about Simonetta. And so was Botticelli.

Simonetta's Death

By the time of this painting, Simonetta was also dead. She had died of consumption, tuberculosis on April 26th, 1476, shortly after the famous jousting tournament - She was only 24. When Giuliano died on Easter Sunday 2 years later, the date was also April 26th. Throngs of Florentines participated in the funeral march to the Vespucci family burial vault at the Abbey Church of Ognissanti. (Slide of church).

Abbey Church of Ognissanti



The legend that developed after her death was that as her consumption entered its final stages, a distraught Giuliano, unwilling to lose his beloved, decided that keeping Simonetta alive as a vampire was better than letting her die. It was said that he summoned Dominic Salcedo, the city's foremost vampire hunter, and gave him a top secret mission: capture a vampire and bring it back to the palace. Salcedo, unwilling to disobey one of the city's most powerful men, complied and, the following night, an unfortunate vampire was brought to the room in the palace where Simonetta lay dying. The vampire bit her and was then destroyed. Within two days, Simonetta herself had turned.

Giuliano was shocked when he first saw Simonetta, with her black eyes and ghastly color, he was pleased to discover that she recognized him and remembered their life together. Like many a hopeless romantic, Giuliano mistakenly decided that the love Simonetta had for him would trump any bloodlust she felt. And so

when she beckoned him with kind words, he eagerly went to her, and was bitten. That night, Lorenzo de Medici discovered his brother in the throes of transformation, with telltale wounds on his neck. For a second time, Dominic Salcedo was summoned. Salcedo and his team searched the enormous palace for Simonetta, eventually finding her in the bell tower. Cornered, Simonetta jumped to her death on the plaza below, the same plaza where, a short time before, hundreds had jousting in her honor. Per his request, the story goes, Giuliano was buried at her feet.

After Giuliano's death 2 years after Simonetta's, Botticelli painted this panel. **(Slide of 2 Portraits)**



Using their death masks for models. In the picture, Giuliano faces the pale, shadowy Simonetta before an open window, a well-known symbol of death. The dove perched on the dead branch in the lower left of the painting is rich with symbolism. Doves mate for life and, according to Renaissance lore, will perch only on dead branches after their mates have died.

Final Portrait

What is the truth about Simonetta and Giuliano? To me the secret clue that answers this question, for me at least, is found in my favorite portrait of Simonetta. **(Slide Simonetta**



The beauty of this portrait is stunning to my eye. Again, Botticelli has Simonetta dressed in mythological attire, as the goddess Athena. (The ultimate patron of the arts). You will notice the pendant she is wearing. **(Slide close up of pendant).** It alludes to the sad story of

the death of the satyr Marsyas who claimed that he was a superior musician than the god Apollo. By having Simonetta wearing this tale around her neck, he has beauty again conquering a mere mortal's hubris.

About 3 years after Simonetta's death, a detailed listing of Giuliano's estate was performed. And guess what, this pendant was listed in his estate.

Conclusion

Botticelli began painting Simonetta when she was only about 18-19 years old. For the next 40 years of his career, she served as his model for all of his Madonnas and all of his Venuses. Botticelli used Simonetta's image alone. She became in her age - and remains in ours- the archetypal image of beauty.

And one final note, earlier I spoke of the legend about Giuliano being buried at Simonetta's feet. That is wrong, he is buried with his brother Lorenzo in the Medici tomb executed by Michaelangelo in the

church of San Lorenzo in Florence. If you go to the Abbey Church of Ognissanti, you will find that buried in the Vespucci tomb is her uncle Amerigo Vespucci. whose name is forever attached to the New World.

But at her feet, you will find buried, as his final wish, her most ardent admirer, Sandro Botticelli.

(HERE, WHEN I AM DONE, PUT ON SLIDE SHOW OF SAMPLES OF THE MANY BOTTICELLI PAINTINGS IN WHICH HE USES SIMONETTA)

