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Botticelli's Marvelous Mystery: Idealized Portrait of a Lady

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Botticelli's Marvelous Mystery: Idealized Portrait of a Lady

Abstract

A detailed visual analysis of Sandro Botticelli's "Idealized Portrait of a Lady" that incorporates gender roles in Renaissance Florence and discusses Botticelli's hidden messages and common themes within his works.

Keywords

Sandro Botticelli, Women in Renaissance, Renaissance Florence

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Art and Design | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Comments

This poster was created based on work completed for FYS 197: Florence: Art, Money, & Power, and presented as a part of the eighth annual CAFE Symposium on February 8, 2023.

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Botticelli's Marvelous Mystery: *Idealized Portrait of a Lady*

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Who is she? Why does her hair look like that? What is she looking at?

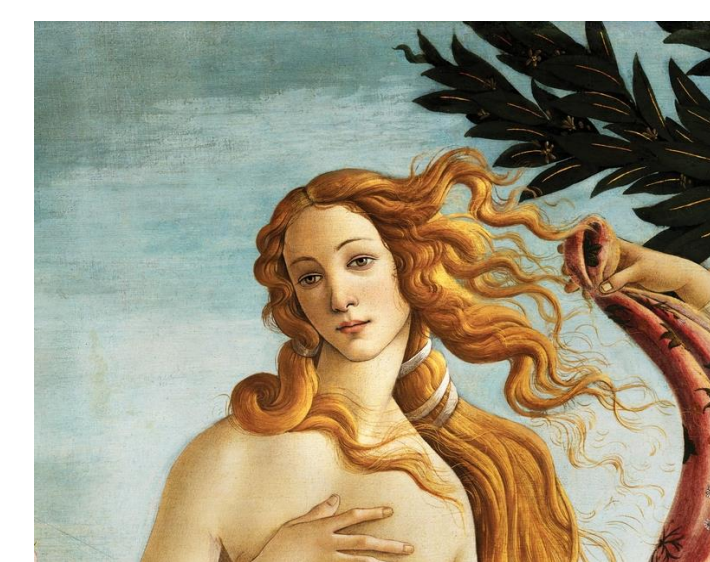
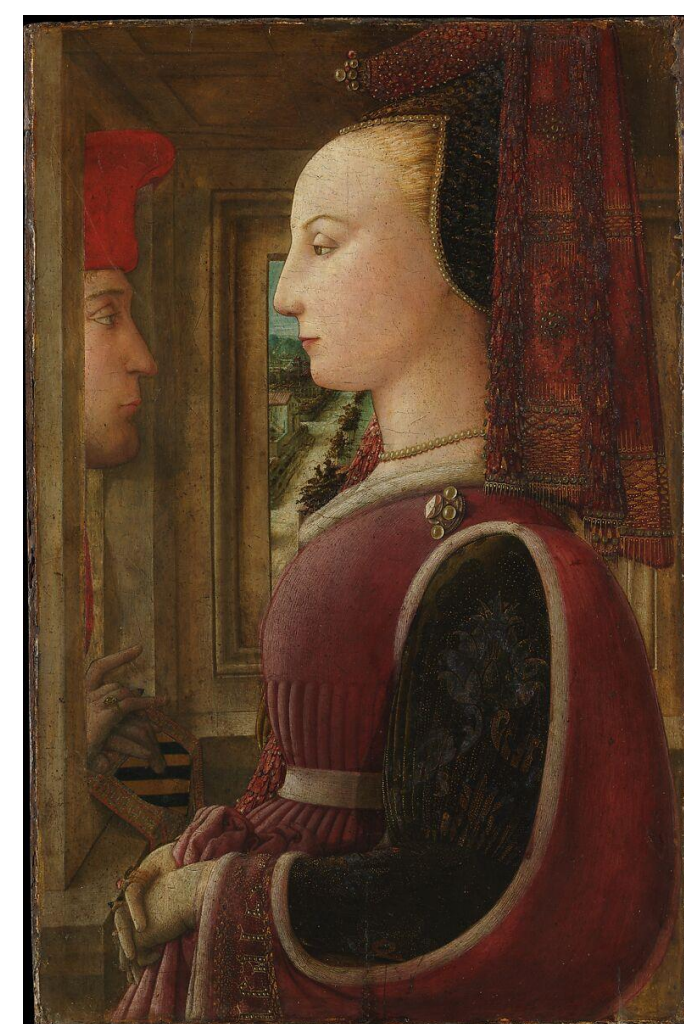
Intro

An epicenter for innovation, creativity, and utter beauty, Renaissance Florence was a city of marvel. Like every shiny object, however, things were not always as perfect as they seemed. From patronage to the patriarchy, the daily happenings in the city were a man's game, and women were viewed as nothing more than a commodity to be traded for the mutual benefit of families. Well-versed in portraiture, Sandro Botticelli brilliantly sheds light on the life of his muse and on typical societal expectations of women within the confines of a frame.

Background: Botticelli with Women and Portraiture

Commonly including "unknown and ungraspable" elements within his works, by comparing three of his most famous pieces, connections between the 15th-century Renaissance and classical times emerge.

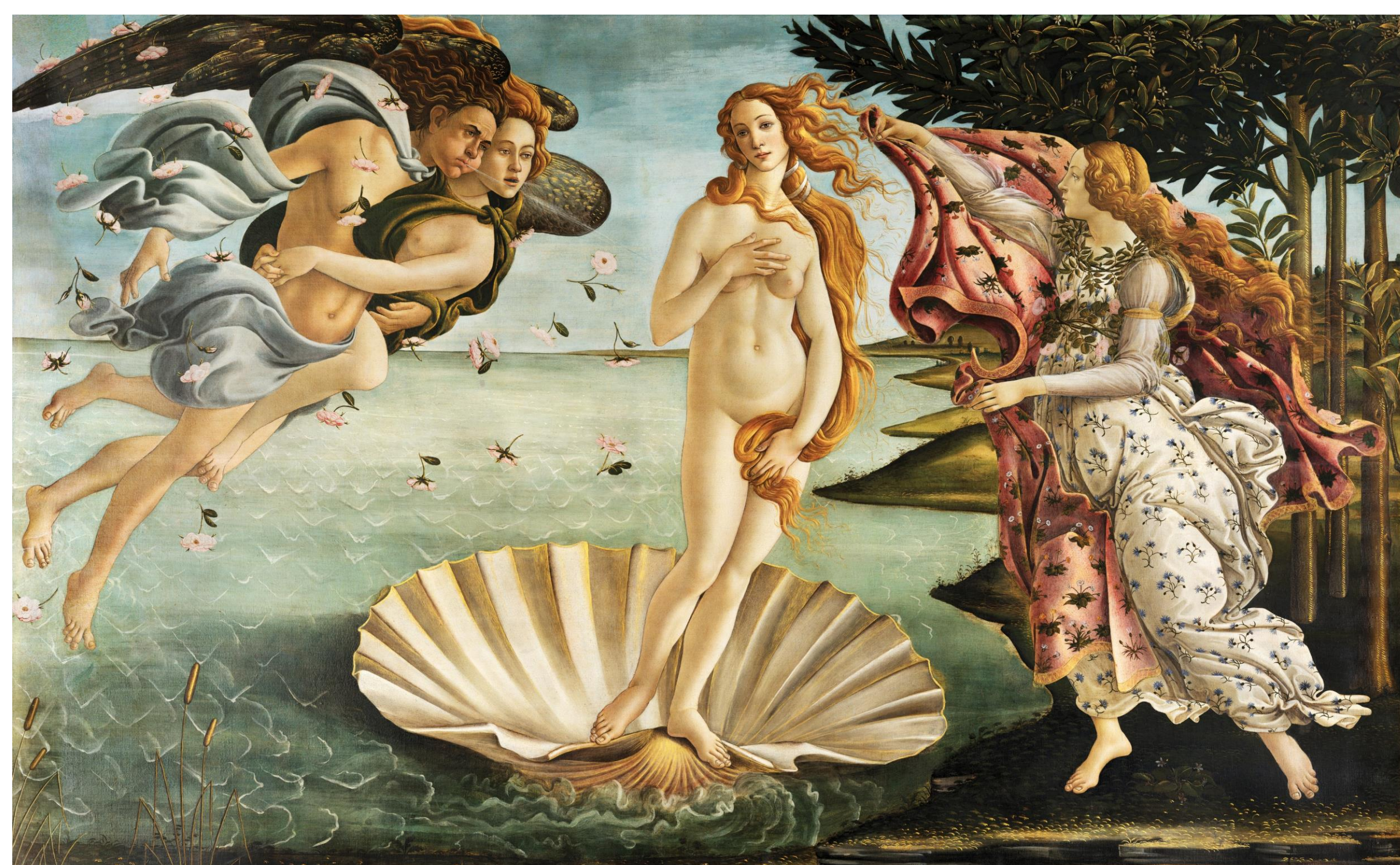
Known to "disrupt fixed interpretations" by using a "rigidity [that] conceals dramatically different and irreconcilable [messages] with the theme," Botticelli chose not to include an elaborate background so as to not detract from the sole focus of the portrait—Simonetta Vespucci (Basta). This artistic choice varies greatly from the status quo of Renaissance portraiture, of which is exemplified below in the Lippi portrait. Although the two portraits of women greatly differ, both communicate much about familial wealth and status, as well as demonstrate how portraits conveyed social values.



"Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement" by Fra Filippo Lippi is licensed under CC0 1.0.

La Bella Simonetta

Simonetta Vespucci perfectly exemplifies how women could be influential, despite societal limitations. The lover of Giuliano de' Medici, yet married to Marco Vespucci, Simonetta served as a political pawn between the families. Due to her impersonal role in joining the families, one can only imagine what Simonetta felt and thought about her true influence and impact on the city. The center of much public attention, her painted features, especially the contrast between her skin and the background, as well as the reflection of light within her eye creates an air of "charged silence" about the portrait (Basta).



"The Birth of Venus" by Sandro Botticelli is licensed under CC0 1.0.



"Idealized Portrait of a Lady" by Sandro Botticelli is licensed under CC0 1.0.

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The Significance of Hair

A true master of his craft, Botticelli understood the complexity of art and how to manipulate the tiniest details to influence the theme of a piece.

The seemingly chaotic and fantastical coiffure of Miss Simonetta features very purposeful nuances that convey a more convoluted yet specific message. Depicting a tasseled hairstyle resembling ropes and levers, a Stanford scholar argues Botticelli attempts to "[pull] the spectator's attention in." With braids representing tension and distance, and women serving as objects of *unravelling* tension between families, Lugli proposes the hairstyle itself challenges Renaissance norms of what is versus is not allowed. Lugli further notes that hair can provide clues for identifying thought patterns and values of a subject—perhaps even suggesting that Botticelli "deliberately blurred the contours between life and dream."

Furthermore, by including such fantastical details uncommon for the Renaissance but not for the classical period, Botticelli once again draws on antiquarian themes, perhaps even suggesting a lack of differences and progression between women's roles in the two time periods (Basta).

Conclusion

Linking his passion for mythological paintings to the modern Renaissance and featuring Simonetta as the subject of not just her portrait but also as nymph-like figures in fantastical settings, Botticelli compares her beauty to that beyond the mortal realm and explicitly connects a typical Renaissance woman to antiquarian one, allowing viewers to find similarities between women's roles during the two periods themselves.

Acknowledgements

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"Mars and Venus" by Sandro Botticelli is licensed under CC0 1.0.