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Botticelli's Pallas and the Centaur: Virtue Triumphant

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Abstract

While waiting to see the Duke of Aosta in an anteroom of the Palazzo Pitti, William Blundell Spence, a painter and Florence resident, noticed a larger-than-life painting on the wall. He immediately informed Erico Rifolfi, then the Director of the Uffizi, because Spence recognized the brushwork of Sandro Botticelli in that little-known painting. Upon the announcement in *La Nazione* in March 1895, the forgotten piece created a sensation. However, even when exhibited in public, the painting is still veiled in mystery. Pallas and the Centaur belongs to the same time period as Botticelli's famed *Primavera* and *Birth of Venus*, commissioned by the Medici in the 1480s. The painting draws inspiration from Antiquity, but there are still discussions about the true identity of the mysterious female figure. The painting can be a homage to the prudence of Lorenzo the Magnificent or to the marriage of his cousin Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco. The scene of the painting may even suggest an allegory of the struggle between the mind and the body. Furthermore, the painting also ties in with the relationships between art, the display of wealth, and political manipulations.

Keywords

Botticelli, Medici, Centaur, Renaissance Florence

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Painting

Comments

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Botticelli's *Pallas and the Centaur*: Virtue Triumphant

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Introduction

Pallas and the Centaur is a painting by Sandro Botticelli, c. 1482, now housed at the Uffizi after being rediscovered in 1895. Being one of Botticelli's only mythological paintings, the iconography of the painting still remains an enigma.

Style and theme

- *Pallas and the Centaur* belongs to a group of painting with mythological subjects executed in the 1480s.
- Like Botticelli's other mythological paintings, *Pallas and the Centaur* features idyllic scenes with the elements of soft continual contours and pastel colors.
- The subjects were heavily influenced by Renaissance Neoplatonism.⁽¹⁾

The subjects

- **Centaur:** a hybrid half-men half-horse creature, usually appear in Greco-Roman mythologies. Centaurs were viewed as wild and untamed beasts, barbaric creatures who commit violent acts to indulge their lust.
- **The female figure**
 - **Pallas Athena/Minerva:** the Greek and Roman goddesses of wisdom and strategic warfare.
 - **Camilla:** the virgin daughter of the King of Volsci, Metabus, and a servant for Diana. She appears in Virgil's *Aeneid* (Books VII and XI), and Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus (Of Famous Women)*.

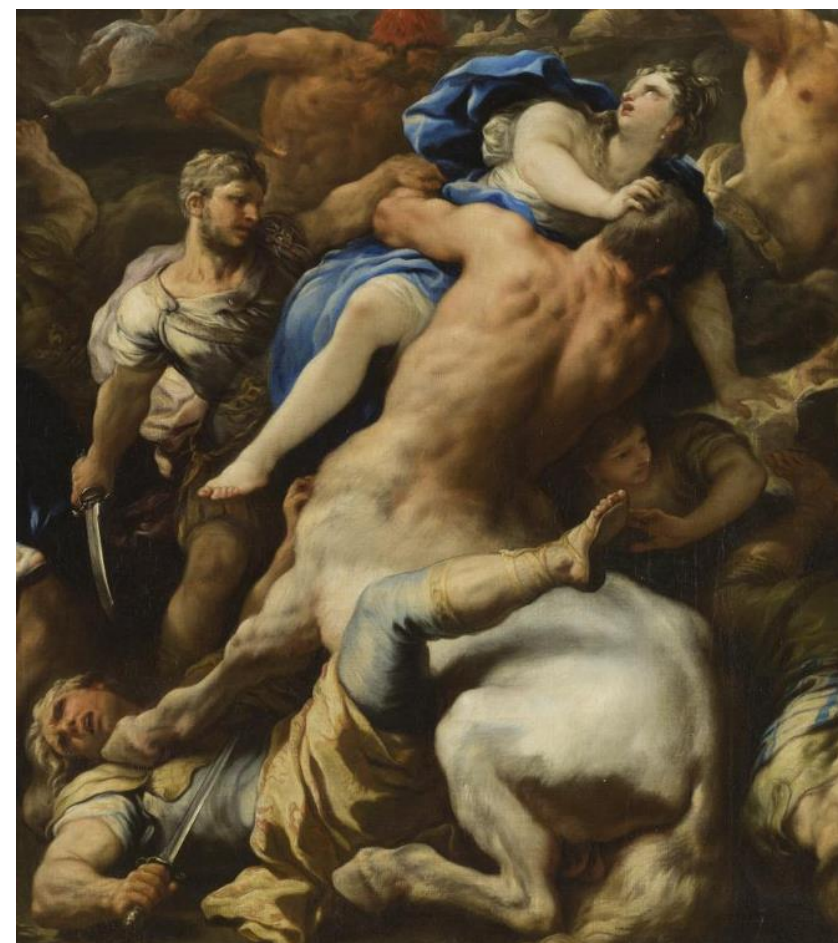


Figure 2. Giordano, Eurytion abducting Hippodamia, *The Battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs*, 1682. The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia. (CC0).

The Medici

- The late 1470s and early 1480s was an eventful period of time for the Medici as just a few years ago, in 1478, Lorenzo the Magnificent narrowly escaped the Pazzi conspiracy.⁽²⁾
- A few months before 1480, he risked his life on an important diplomatic trip to Naples.
- In 1482, Lorenzo arranged a marriage for his cousin, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici and Semiramide Appiano, the daughter of the Lord of Piombino and Elba.
- The painting was probably commissioned by a member of the Medici family

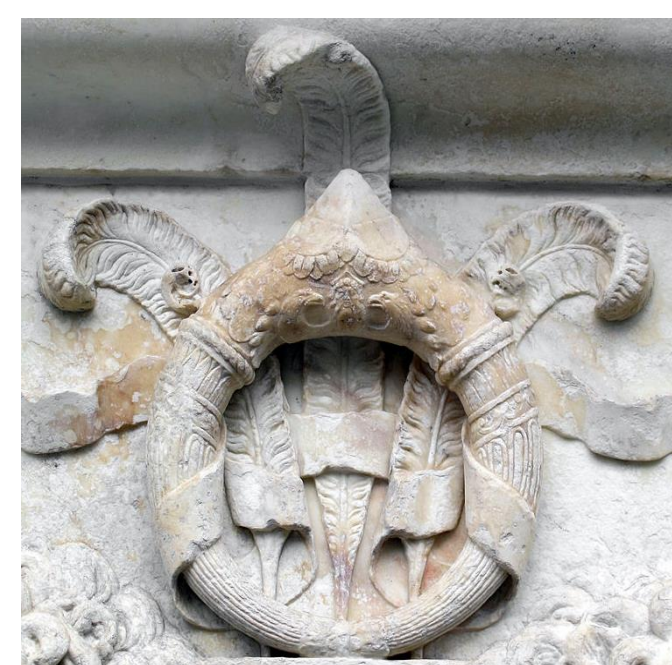


Figure 3.1. Bandinelli, Medici Emblem, Monument to Giovanni delle Bande Nere, 1540-1560, Florence.



Figure 3.2. Aberti, Tile alludes to Lorenzo de' Medici, Rucellai Sepulchre, San Pancrazio, c. 1458-1467, Florence.

Interpretations

Moral Allegory – Virtue of Temperance



Figure 4. Philip Galle, *Portrait of Marsilio Ficino*, 1572. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands. (CC0).

- Ernst Gombrich interpreted the painting as a Neoplatonic moral allegory of the duality of man.
- Marsilio Ficino argued in *Five Questions Concerning the Mind* that the lower part of man is bounded to the physical body and instincts, while the noble part leads to spiritual freedom. Between the two domains is reasons, the tool human use to attain the Divine state of true happiness.

Lorenzo de' Medici's political influence – Virtue of Wisdom

- Lorenzo the Magnificent was the head of the family and the de facto ruler of the Republic of Florence.
- Lorenzo played a major role in dealing with diplomacy and keeping peace for Florence.
- Andreas Schumacher claimed that Pallas, embodies the virtues of the Medici, (rings emblem), for peace (olive branches).



Figure 5. Bronzino, *Portrait of Lorenzo the Magnificent*, 1565-1569. Uffizi, Florence, Italy. (CC0).

- Pallas with the guarding halberd is the state of alertness Lorenzo maintained in Florence, against chaos and cunning adversaries, represented by the Centaur.
- The ship represents the one brought Lorenzo to Naples on the victorious diplomatic trip in 1479.

Florentia – the guardian of peace



Figure 6. Furius Dionysius Philocalus, *City of Treberis and the Barbarian*, in the *Chronography of 354*, 354. (CC0).

- Arthur Frothingham proposed that the female figure is the personification of Florence, "Florentia."
- Botticelli might be inspired by a Roman calendar – the *Chronography of 354* by Furius Dionysius Philocalus, the secretary of Pope Damasus I.
- Frothingham also interpreted this as a political glorification of Florence, guided by the Medici and Lorenzo.



Figure 1. Botticelli, *Pallas and the Centaur*, c. 1480-1485. Tempera on canvas, 207 cm x 148 cm. Uffizi, Florence, Italy. The image is dedicated to the public domain under CC0.

Camilla – Virtuous Woman



Figure 7. Bronzino, *Portrait of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici*, 1565-1569. Uffizi, Florence, Italy. (CC0).

- Possibly a wedding gift to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, Ronald Lightbown focused on interpreting the painting as an allegory of marital virtues over carnal lust.
- The 1499 inventory described "chamilo co[n] uno satilo" (Camilla and the satyr).
- Boccaccio held Camilla as a model for young women in the Renaissance as a chaste virgin who freed herself from the flattery of men.
- Women should get married as virgins since chastity and virginity are not considered violated by marriage.
- The painting is a compliment to Semiramide's rank and virtues as a virgin and a preserver of the family against unchaste temptations.

Implications

- **The Medici's influence and the display of wealth:** Such expensive projects strengthen the Medici's authority and display their finesse, wealth, and dedication to transforming Florence into a center of culture. It also was an intricate piece worthy of a wedding gift for the prestige of the bride.
- **Lorenzo the Magnificent's governance over Florence:** This life-size painting could have served as propaganda for Lorenzo, implanting the role of Lorenzo as the leader that Florence needed to maintain peace and prosperity against enemies.
- **Renaissance humanism:** Rationality is closely linked to the humanism in the Renaissance. Humanism placed value on human and believed that men can be the best of themselves if they had the mind to. Reasons also were at the heart of Medici as the family fortune and power were built on prudence.
- **The importance of political marriages:** The painting might have served as a reminder for the bride and the groom to fulfill their duties and expectations. It calls for Semiramide to "tame" her husband for domestic life, thus strengthening the power of the two families.

Notes

- (1) **Renaissance Neoplatonism:** The philosophy popular in the intellectual circle of Lorenzo. It was a combination of Plato's philosophy with Christianity, which saw myths allegories that can teach moral lessons.
- (2) **The Pazzi conspiracy:** The plot to overthrow the Medici, led by the Pazzi, supported Pope Sixtus IV. An assassination attempt on the Medici brothers was made during mass at the Duomo on April 26, 1478.

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Images Attribution

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- Figure 3.2: "Tempietto, formelle 18 impresa personale di Lorenzo de' Medici" by Sailko is licensed under CC BY 3.0.

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