Disruption and Recovery in the Work of Botticelli and Piero di Cosimo

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Disruption and Recovery in the Work of Botticelli and Piero di Cosimo

by

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Introduction

The 1490s was an eventful decade for the citizens of Florence. Political, economic, social and religious instability, underscored by doomsday concerns about the approaching half-millennium, conspired to arouse fear and anxiety amongst the populace. The presence in Florence of the dynamic preaching friar, Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), augmented and played off these sentiments. The art produced by artists in the city reflected and expressed themes that preoccupied them and their fellow Florentines. This study will review those changes in life and art, with a specific focus on their impact on two contemporary artists: Alessandro Botticelli (1445-1510) and Piero di Cosimo (1462-1522). Their reactions to the events and tensions of the time, specifically seen through their responses to Savonarola, will become evident through visual analysis of their work during the 1490s, as well as in the years immediately before and after.

Chapter 1 provides an historical context for the analysis, creating a picture of the world in which Botticelli and Piero lived and worked. In this chapter I will briefly review the influence of some of the most significant people, events, and sociocultural phenomena that affected the lives of Florentine citizens during the last part of the fifteenth and early years of the sixteenth centuries. I begin with Girolamo Savonarola because his presence in Florence and his activity there, both in its religious life and in the political sphere, potentiated the impact of other destabilizing forces. Then we look at Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492), his personal qualities, and his political and cultural contributions. All these were so important to the city's life that Lorenzo's untimely death in 1492 heightened and magnified the process of destabilization, which then continued throughout the majority of the period.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the individual artists: who they were, what characterized their work, and the impact of that dynamic period as seen in their art. There have been two major exhibitions of Botticelli's work in the last fifteen years which brought focus to the influence of Savonarola on the
painter. The first, mounted by the Musee du Luxembourg in Paris in 2003, was titled *Botticelli: From Lorenzo the Magnificent to Savonarola*, and produced a catalogue of the same title.¹ In his introductory article Daniel Arasse cautioned that Savonarola's impact on Botticelli can be overstated, as “his fundamental artistic choices were made long before the arrival in Florence of the Dominican friar from Ferrara.”² Nevertheless he concludes that Botticelli must certainly have been affected by the religious ferment stirred up by Savonarola in the 1490s as was everyone else living in Florence at the time.

A somewhat different attitude was espoused by the curators of a more recent exhibition of Botticelli’s work mounted by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Botticelli and the Search for the Divine* (April 15–July 9, 2017), which I was able to see for myself.³ The conclusion of these latter curators was that Savonarola, directly or indirectly, profoundly influenced Botticelli's later works. Twenty-four paintings, fifteen of them by Botticelli, were displayed and interpreted. Taking note of the bifurcation in Botticelli's oeuvre between religious and mythological subjects, the exhibition explores his development and the changes in his style starting from his days as a student of Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) to his later years. The patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici and his family supplied financial support for his best known and most lyrical secular works, such as the *Venus* (1484) (figure I-1), a reworking of the *Birth of Venus*, the former of which was brought to the exhibition from the Galeria Sabauda in Turin. Moving on to the influence of Savonarola, the curators asserted that Botticelli indeed became a follower of Savonarola and made reference to the infamous “Bonfire of the Vanities” of 1497. No catalogue of the show was produced, but the MFA website describes how “Under Savonarola's sway, Botticelli’s graceful manner gave way to a newly austere approach, and secular subject matter

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² Arasse 2003, 16.
³ See: www.mfa.org/exhibition/Botticelli-and-the-search-for-the-divine (last accessed 12/18/17). The largest show of Botticelli's work ever mounted in the United States, it was the joint work of the Boston MFA, the Muscarelle Museum of Art of William and Mary College (Williamsburgh, VA), and the Metamorfosi Associazione Culturale (Rome, Italy).
disappeared. Severe religious paintings dominate the artist's later productions.” Chapter 2 will look at Botticelli in relation to the sociocultural context of late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century Florence.

While Botticelli’s connection to Savonarola has been much explored in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 turns to the work of a different Florentine painter of the same time, Piero di Cosimo. The discussion in Chapter 3 will organize the study of some selected works of Piero according to category. First some religious works will be examined, with tondi and altarpieces as separate subcategories. Second, some of his secular work, inspired by classical authors and Ovid's mythology, will be addressed. Finally, thoughts about whether and how contemporary events affected the works will be offered.

Chapter 4 summarizes and compares differences between the artists' individual responses. My aim in this thesis is to demonstrate first how the work of the artists reflected but also shaped the experience of the contemporary community in which they lived; in this instance the events and the religious, political, social and economic conditions at the turn of the century, which created the extraordinary stress that was shared by everyone. Second, in focusing on the work of two contemporary artists, I have shown how each individual painter reacted according to his own personality and artistic style. For Botticelli, this entailed a more literal visibly engaged response to the presence of Savonarola; for Piero di Cosimo, in contrast, the engagement found expression more through imagery emanating from his absorbed fascination with the natural world as well as in his use of mythological stories, which, I have argued, can be read as metaphorical allusions to the contemporary zeitgeist. Overall it is my goal to involve the reader with the questions which intrigued me as I studied these amazingly gifted artists.

4 Ibid.
Girolamo Savonarola: His Life and Impact

When all three were hung, Fra Girolamo being in the middle ...the scaffold was separated from the *ringhiera* (railing), and a fire was made on the circular platform around the cross, upon which gunpowder was put and set alight, so that the said fire burst out with a noise of rockets and cracking. In a few hours they were burnt, their legs and arms gradually dropping off.

Lucca Landucci, *A Florentine Diary from 1450-1516*  

Thus ended the life of Fra Girolamo Savonarola, the dynamic Dominican preaching friar, who spent his last years in the Florence of the 1490s. In a painting attributed to Francesco Rosselli (1445-before 1513), from around 1498, we find depicted the *Execution of Savonarola* (Figures 1-1 and 1-1a) and his two companions in the public square in front of the Palazzo della Signoria (also known as the Palazzo Vecchia and Palazzo dei Priori). The three Dominican friars are shown three times in a continuous narrative. First we see them kneeling on the balustrade at the front of the Palazzo that dominates the scene on the right; they are identifiable in the simple white tunics they wore after their being stripped from their religious roles. Next, they can be found walking down the raised runway that runs diagonally between the palazzo and the gallows, each accompanied by two black-robed ministering priests of the Compagnia dei Neri (a religious society that provided spiritual comfort and

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6 Attribution by Ludovica Sebregondi, in Arasse 2003. 220. Sebregondi based her descriptions on accounts of chroniclers and biographers.  
7 The process is technically known as degrading. In this context it is a ceremony in which a religious officiant has his special clothing and instruments of his office taken from him, symbolic of removing his special status. See Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 274-275.
aid to those condemned to death). Finally, they can be seen hanging from the scaffold with flames rising up beneath them at the center of the painting. On the left stands the Cathedral, with its dome and octagonal baptistery, as well as the square tower of the Bargello. The piazza is populated by groups of religious men in conversation in the foreground of the painting. We also see servants laden down with huge bundles of wood trudging towards the flaming scaffold, and other people milling about or scurrying away from the scene. The centrality of the piazza to the life of the Florentine people can be surmised by its great size; the proximity of church and government buildings provides visual evidence of the links between those institutions, reinforced by the prison, headquarters of the chief of police.

Girolamo Savonarola was born in Ferrara in 1452. His grandfather Michele, a physician, achieved such renown that he became court physician to the powerful Este family of that city. Girolamo, the oldest of seven, was his grandfather's favorite and received his early education under his grandfather's tutelage. He also absorbed his grandfather's profound religious and mystical attitudes as well as the older man's abhorrence of the cult of pleasure and materialistic worldliness of the Este court. Nevertheless before the age of 20, Savonarola became enamored of a young girl, an illegitimate daughter of the exiled Strozzi family, who broke his heart by rejecting his love; this disappointment was another important factor determining his turn towards religion and asceticism.

Though Savonarola had already received an advanced arts degree from the University of Ferrara, in 1475 at age 23, he entered the convent of San Domenico in Bologna, to the consternation of his father, a failed businessman and money lender. Savonarola wrote very movingly to his father, showing his conflicted attitudes about hurting his father's feelings, but asserting his conviction that he

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was doing what God meant him to do:

Honoured father,

I have no doubt that my departure is very painful to you, … but by this letter I want you to understand my soul and will, so that you may take comfort from it and realise that I have not made this move in so childish a way as some people think. And first of all I want you, as a manly spirit and disdainer of fleeting things, to be swayed by truth rather than … by passion, and to judge in accordance with the empire of reason whether or not I was right to flee from the world and to pursue my own calling.

…Answer me therefore. Is it not some great good for a man to flee from the filth and iniquities of the wretched world, in order to live as a rational being and not like a beast among swine? … So, dear sweet father, rather than weep you should thank our lord Jesus who gave you a son … and deigned to make him his knight militant.11

In these words, one can see how by age 23, in his own mind Savonarola had already become God's instrument. The effect of Michele on his favorite grandson is quite evident here. Both had the opportunity to observe the aristocracy at close range and both found them morally lacking.

By 1482 Savonarola had become an instructor at the Dominican convent of San Marco, in Florence. Given opportunities to preach, he was initially hesitant and unimpressive. He embarrassed himself during his delivery of the Lenten sermons of 1484, when he preached in the grand surroundings of the Medici parish church, San Lorenzo. He had never preached to such a large audience before, nor in surroundings as imposing as San Lorenzo. In his nervousness, his voice was weak, his manner indecisive and fumbling. People also were put off by his Ferrarese accent. Thus he disappointed the skeptical, sophisticated listeners, who could only be satisfied by a polished performance.12 We can assume some of the Medici were in that audience as it was their church. But even an admiring colleague who attended the sermon and who would presumably have wanted to praise Savonarola's preaching gave a dismal review, reporting that during the sermon, many of his listeners left the church. Savonarola became sufficiently discouraged that he considered giving up preaching.13

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11 Savonarola quoted in Martines 2006, 12.
12 Martines 2006, 17.
himself acknowledged that only “only a few simple men” and “some poor women” remained.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1487 he was sent by his order to Bologna, where he taught, and became “master of studies” at the Dominican convent there. Over the following three years, he preached at venues all around the area including Brescia, San Gimignano, Genoa and other cities. His skills improved slowly with experience and with the confidence he gained as a teacher to other friars\textsuperscript{15}. Returning to Florence in 1490, he was placed at San Marco where he taught logic. He became so popular with his fellow friars that in a year, he was elected their Prior.\textsuperscript{16} Also, during his years away from Florence, Savonarola had become a mature teacher, an accomplished theologian, and a charismatic personality, which no doubt contributed to this election.\textsuperscript{17} Considering how Savonarola's republican sympathies developed, there is irony in the fact that it was Lorenzo “the Magnificent” de' Medici himself, the \textit{de facto} ruler of Florence, who arranged Savonarola's return to that city. In so doing Lorenzo was influenced partly by his own close friendship with Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), a friend and an eminent intellectual, who was impressed by Savonarola. But the recall also occurred because Lorenzo had become more devout as he struggled with health problems, and correspondingly more inclined towards piety as his health deteriorated.\textsuperscript{18} Savonarola's transformation into a powerful preacher with highly developed oratorical skills and a magnetic persona created the forceful presence that one sees reflected in the numerous portraits that began to appear. These widely circulated portraits, of course, only increased his spiritual cache.

A painted portrait of Savonarola (figure 1-2) dating to around 1495 by Fra Bartolomeo, a fellow friar, now resides in the Museo di San Marco, formerly the Dominican convent where

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\textsuperscript{14} University Press, 1970, 84. Weinstein quotes from a letter written by Fra Placido Cinozzi, an admirer of Savonarola.
\textsuperscript{14} Savonarola quoted in Martines 2006, 17.
\textsuperscript{15} Martines 2006, 91.
\textsuperscript{16} Martines 2006, 22.
\textsuperscript{17} Martines 2006, 20.
\textsuperscript{18} Martines 2006, 19. “Lorenzo … himself was tilting in a pious direction, as his chronic maladies became ever more grave.”
Savonarola lived during his time in Florence. It bears an inscription at the bottom below the portrait, “Hieronymi Ferrariensis A Deo Missi Prophete Effegies,” which can be translated into English as “Portrait of the Prophet Jerome of Ferrara, Sent by God.” During his time in Florence, Savonarola increasingly styled himself a prophet and was taken as such by many of his listeners. The portrait reinforces the inscription. The painting is almost completely black – except for the profile face of the friar, with its strong aquiline (eagle-like) nose. Fra Bartolomeo presents Savonarola as serious, determined and clear-eyed. The lighting falls directly on the face, highlighting the soft contour of his cheeks beneath the sharp prominent cheekbones and deep-set eyes. The portrait conveys a quality of drama, and the painter has successfully created a sense of the powerful personality Savonarola emanated in his presence. The inscription seems to have been painted as part of the original portrait by the painter, his religious brother and follower. Ronald Steinberg states that the use of the profile portrait at this date was archaic: “The use of the older type for Savonarola's portraits probably had the honorific effect of removing his image from everyday experience.” By this late in the century, styles in portraiture had changed to three-quarter or full-face poses, to make the subject more approachable to the viewer. Even portraits of women no longer retained their earlier nearly exclusively profile format, which had been used to display and reinforce women's social roles. Thus reverting to the profile pose may have been used to increase Savonarola's spiritual authority.

Savonarola believed there was too much attention to the forms of religious observance without

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19 Martines 2006, 108. This point is also made by Donald Weinstein, Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970, 114-116 ff. “Preaching almost daily in the Cathedral to swollen and frightened crowds, he reminded the Florentines that for almost two years he had been warning them of the coming of the divine sword: Ecce gladius Domini super terram cito et velociter.” As we shall see later, these words reappear on a widely-circulated portrait medal of Savonarola.
21 Patricia Simon, “Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture,” History Workshop, No. 25 (Spring 1988), 4-30.
corresponding spiritual and emotional involvement. This was a theme to which he returned repeatedly in his preaching. For instance, in his Advent sermons of 1490 he attacked practices of both the clergy and the rich. He condemned lax “thieving priests” who followed corrupt practices, such as seeking gifts of posts (benefices) because they were lucrative, buying and selling Church offices (simony), being lecherous, and pursuing other practices against official church doctrine. He similarly decried the avarice of the wealthy, condemning them for spending money “on their own comfort while refusing to give to the poor ... the palaces of Rome and Florence are built with the blood of the poor.”

He criticized the rich for their willingness to “spend a hundred florins for a chapel, but not ten florins for the poor, particularly when their purpose ... was to display their coats of arms for their own honor, not to honor God.” He also condemned those of “tepid” religious commitment.

For his passionate denouncement of clerical corruption exemplified in the selling of indulgences and Church offices, he earned the unending enmity of Pope Alexander VI (papacy 1492-1503, figure 1-3), the scandalous Borgia pope. As depicted by Lauro Martines, the “name of Rodrigo Borgia is a byword for the corruption of the Renaissance papacy – corrupt in its unconcealed practice of simony and nepotism, no less than its sexual laxity, careerism, and easy sale of indulgences for release or remission from sin.”

Alexander was also a womanizing charmer who had at least eight children to whom he was passionately attached. In addition he was a consummate politician, who deployed his well-honed skills to bear in bringing Savonarola down eventually. One can understand Savonarola's outrage:

The Lord, angered by the stench, has no longer granted the Church a leader. I declare, in fact, in the word of the Lord, that this Alexander VI, is not pontiff, nor can he be admitted to the pontificate. (...) This I proclaim and affirm with absolute certainty: he is no Christian, he who, believing in no god surpasses the bounds of all faithlessnessand

22 Martines 2006, 25.
24 Hall 1990, 495-496.
26 Martines 2006, 121.
impiety.\textsuperscript{27}

Clearly there was no love lost between these two personalities who sought such extremely opposing ends. But perhaps they recognized in each other the intensity of ambition each possessed, as well as the other's determination to achieve his own goals. Such a recognition on some level of their similarly fanatical personalities may have fueled their mutual hatred and increased each's determination to defeat the other.

Outraged as he was with the pope, the friar did not spare his Florentine rulers from critique either. The following year, 1491, Savonarola preached one Lenten sermon exclusively to the major council body of Florence, the Signory, condemning them for failing to set good moral examples for their constituency. He evoked even more discomfort in his audience when in one of the Lenten sermons he declared “I believe that Christ speaks through my mouth,” thus openly identifying himself as a prophet (a point reiterated in Fra Bartolomeo's subsequent portrait) and virtual incarnation of Christ.\textsuperscript{28} This early statement of his sense of himself as a prophet became more insistent over time, and became one of the nails his enemies used to figuratively seal his coffin. Despite all this, Lorenzo continued to value and respect him and even called Savonarola to his bedside to solicit his final blessings as Lorenzo lay dying in April 1492.\textsuperscript{29}

If Savonarola was able to instill the fear of God in Lorenzo in his final days, he also played on the anxieties of many other Florentines in enlisting support for his religious and political goals during the tense years of the Italian wars with the French (1494-1498).\textsuperscript{30}


\textsuperscript{28} Savonarola quoted in Martines 2006, 27.


\textsuperscript{30} Gene Brucker, \textit{Florence: The Golden Age, 1138-1737}. First paperback edition Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 150: “[a] mood of pessimism and anxiety provided the background for Savonarola's career. He appeared on the scene at the precise moment when Florentines had lost their equilibrium ...The friar' preaching, filled with warnings of imminent doom, struck a responsive chord in the hearts of thousands who flocked to churches to hear him... In his early
Savonarola both enticed and frightened many of his listeners by proclaiming himself a prophet and declaring that God would reward them for spiritual purity as well as punish them for their sins if they did not repent and change their living habits, reverting to behaving according to conservative Christian values such as simple non-ostentatious living. He definitively interpreted the invasion of Italy by the French troops of Charles VIII during these wars of 1494-1498 as punishment for their sins, while simultaneously promising that repentance would secure their future.

Savonarola's predictions of the threat to Florence were captured on medal, the reverse of which depicts a sword suspended over the city of Florence (figure 1-4). The image of the sword and the inscription around it is derived from two revelations experienced by Savonarola. The first occurred on the evening of 5 April 1492, when he was sitting at his desk, searching for inspiration for his sermon the next day. The words “Ecce gladius Domini super terram cito et velociter” (The sword of the Lord over the earth quickly and swiftly) erupted from his mouth as he sat. He delivered those words in his sermon the next day. They are inscribed in abbreviated form around the circumference of the reverse of the medal. The obverse, bearing a profile image of Savonarola, also carries an inscription around the circumference in an abbreviated Latin form: “Girolamo Savonarola of Ferrara, most learned man of the order of preachers.”

The second revelation occurred in December 1492. Again Savonarola was preparing a sermon, this time for Advent, when he had a vision of a hand in the heavens wielding a sword inscribed with the same words that had erupted from his mouth months earlier, in April. The vision continued, in dream-like fashion, to indicate vengeance by pointing the sword toward the image of Florence, threatening it...
with hail, fire, lightning, plague, war and famine if the people failed to repent in time. The vision closed with a command to Savonarola to communicate what he had seen. The reverse includes the depiction of a recognizable image of Florence, with its fortified walls, tower, and dome: there could be no mistaking its identity. As noted by Mark Wilchusky, “Medals were evidently one of the means by which Savonarola could obey that command.”32 Similarly, Julia Valiela suggested that these palm-sized, portable medals could have been used to spread Savonarola's message that the Lord was urgently calling for penitence through his prophet Savonarola. The medal features Savonarola's portrait in deeper relief than that of the prophecy, suggesting that it was the primacy of Savonarola himself that was being emphasized over that of his prophecy.33

The obverse of the medal is different to the painting presented before in that the medal, while also a profile bust of Savonarola, shows his hood, shoulders and forelocks in addition to his face. More of his face is exposed, and it is does not have the intense, almost ferocious expression of the painting. Although a portable medal could allow one to feel they were symbolically carrying the medal's subject on their person, its monochromatic nature does not evoke the same sense of a life that color brings to a painting. The origins of the medal image are not certain; Vasari asserted that it was based on a glazed terra cotta sculpture made by two sons of Andrea della Robbia, who were left “as frati in San Marco [where they] were given the cloth by the reverend Fra Girolamo Savonarola, to whom these della Robbia were always very devoted, and they portrayed him in that manner which is still seen today in medals.”34 Others feel it was “a simple Florentine attribution” or possibly the work of Nicolo Fiorentino, who sculpted medals of Florence's aristocrats, for example, Lorenzo de' Medici.35 There were at least ten different surviving versions of the medal, falling into two groups; one shows

32 Ibid.
34 Vasari as quoted in Wilchusky 2017, 145, and also by Valiela in Christiansen and Weppelmann 2011, 189.
35 Valiela in Christiansen and Weppelmann 2011, 189.
Savonarola with his hair entirely covered, and the other shows the forelock as in the one discussed here. To a certain extent, the identity of the medal maker is not as important as the fact that such portraits were “created to be exchanged and distributed as tokens of identity,” not as works of art. More significantly, “they make the absent present, evoking the fullness of the individuals they commemorate.” In other words, the medals were distributed to spread the fame of the preacher (and not the artist).

As noted above, Savonarola preached to the Florentines that repentance would be rewarded, causing the Virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven, to give birth to “the Florentine people, a spiritual people, a good people.” Many including Savonarola took Charles VIII's invasion of Florence in November 1494 as proof of the punishment promised by the prophecy. Before Charles entered the city, the Signoria had sent Savonarola to parley with Charles as one of a six-man embassy, as an attempt to persuade him not to invade Florence. Savonarola, meeting with Charles alone, apparently told the king that he, Charles, had been sent to Italy to be God's scourge and punishment to sinners, by which Savonarola meant corrupt Rome. He counseled Charles to be merciful to Florence, where there were many good and innocent people whom God wanted to protect. Charles should instead go south, to Rome and Naples, to pursue God's work of punishment. Charles, however, ignored Savonarola's plea and within a few days, entered Florence with his troops. Charles's peaceful entry into Florence, even though with his troops, only intensified the already great sense of chaos and anxiety in the city.

After the death of Lorenzo, Savonarola acted as an advisor to those leaders, such as Piero Capponi, who supported the same pro-republican policies as he did. In this way, he antagonized those

still faithful to the policies of the Medici.  

Savonarola's support of the republican anti-Medici policies hastened his downfall due to powerful opposition from other aristocrats, those who were against the republic and who favored the old-style of rule by themselves, the elite. Furthermore Savonarola's continued support of the alliance with the feared Charles as well as his intensifying struggles with Pope Alexander VI undercut Savonarola's authority with the anxious populace as well as with his more elite supporters and finally enabled Savonarola's enemies to arrest him in 1498. Under torture he confessed that he was a false prophet who had preached heretical policy, and so was hastily condemned to execution. It is this endpoint that is depicted in Rosselli's painting discussed above.

Despite his rapid end, Savonarola's influence upon Florentine society and politics was undeniable and profound; his impact upon the visual arts, too, has been noted. While he evoked the Platonic ideal of beauty's capacity to elevate the mind spiritually, Savonarola also condemned the practices of artists who modeled sacred images on contemporary beautiful women without emphasizing their spirituality: he felt that “ideal beauty” could be evoked in painting and used to illustrate the spirituality of the Madonna and saints. For example, during Lent of 1496 Savonarola preached “Creatures are beautiful in proportion to their participation in the nearness and beauty of God. And the body is more beautiful that houses a beautiful soul.”

Extending his ideas about beauty to encompass and engage all of his listeners, Savonarola preached that Florence could become divine, a beautiful spiritual New Jerusalem, if the Florentine

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40 Martines 2006, 3. “Now the ascetic Savonarola stepped in to become the city's chief agent of republicanism and the implacable foe of dictatorship. This man was not afraid to speak his mind in a setting in which most prominent citizens … were holding their tongues.” Also Weinstein 1970, 131.
41 Brucker 1975, “In collusion with the pope, the Signoria arrested and tortured Savonarola and forced him to confess that his prophecies were not of divine origin.” 270.
42 A number of scholars have noted Savonarola's ideas about using “ideal beauty” to convey spirituality. Marcia Hall, for example, quotes Savonarola as mentioned below. Also Paul Barolsky, “Savonarola and the Beauty of Florence,” Source:Notes in the History of Art, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Winter) 1996, 13. Ronald Steinberg (1977) also supports the notion of how Savonarola's ideas influenced art in his moment, 53-62.
people “rededicated their lives to the idea of civic perfection.” He chided that they had not lived up to the spiritual standards “illuminated by their sacred art and architecture.” In other words, he played on his awareness of the Florentine pride in their city's physical beauty to suggest they might also beautify their system of government.

Savonarola also found fault with the manner in which painters represented holy female figures, making them indistinguishable from ordinary Florentine women:

You painters do an ill thing. You put all the vanities in the churches. Do you believe Mary went dressed this way as you paint her? I tell you she dressed as a poor woman, simply, and so covered that her face could hardly be seen ...You would do well to cancel these figures that are painted so unchastely. You make the Virgin Mary seem dressed like a whore.

He also decried the expensive, elaborate attire of the rich, who clothed themselves luxuriously in order to show off in the Cathedral: “Look at the habits of Florence, how the women of Florence have married off their daughters. They put them on show and doll them up so they look like nymphs, and the first thing, they take them to the Cathedral.”

He enlisted groups of boys to go round the town soliciting people to give up prideful luxury items, which were collected and burned on the day of Carnival, 16 February 1496, the famous “bonfire of the vanities” (figure 1-5). A painting by the Spanish painter Pedro Berrugue (1450-1504), labeled *Saint Dominic and the Albigensians*, depicts a different episode of book burning but one that in all likelihood was similar to the one initiated by Savonarola. Berrugue's painting illustrates a contest between Spanish Dominicans and Albigensian heretics. In that instance, it was said that the Dominican books survived the fire, thus proving the heresy of the Albigensians. Though it describes a different burning incident, both are examples of

44 Barolsky 1996, 14.
46 Ibid.
47 Martines 2006, 117.
the trial-by-fire principle that was a widely-practiced contemporary method of trying to discern the truth. (The method was also applied to people: in May 1498 a trial-by-fire was scheduled to test the truth of Savonarola's Dominican supporters versus those of the Franciscan clergy of Florence, but it never came off.49) This painting shows only books being burned, whereas the bonfire Savonarola orchestrated included many other types of items including playing cards and dice, wigs, mirrors, cosmetics, 'dirty' books, pictures of nude women, luxury cloth and jewelry.50 In the Berruguete painting, many richly-dressed clerics and wealthy citizens attend the burning, observing and discussing as the fire consumes thick volumes. The event seems to take place in an enclosed stone courtyard, perhaps part of a church. An interesting detail is a bookbinding, or cover, which has broken free of its volume and been lifted off the pyre by the hot air currents. One priest marvels at it in wonder, as though it is rising directly to God.

In contrast, Savonarola's bonfire was held outdoors, in the large public piazza in front of the Signory, and took place after a procession that wove through different streets of the city until reaching it's destination. As it was held on Carnival day, 16 February 1496, it was attended by thousands of Florentine citizens. No image of it seems to exist, but it was described by diarists such as Luca Landucci (1436-1516) and Piero Parenti (1449-1518), and was said to have been witnessed by thousands of participants, estimated to be at between eight and twenty percent of the population.51

The sheer volume of people estimated to have attended the bonfire illustrates the interest that Savonarola stirred up, among both friends and enemies. Through his fiery sermons, his writings, and his active encouragement of republican values, Savonarola evoked both passionate endorsement and equally passionate opposition. The following sections will consider further historical information about Florence at the end of the fifteenth century in order to provide a context for the analysis to come.

50 Martines 2006, 116.
51 Martines 2006, 116-117.
of the works of Sandro Botticelli and Piero di Cosimo, the two Florentine painters at the heart of this thesis.

**Political and Social History of the Period**

Was late fifteenth-century Florence truly full of “tepid,” lax, greedy people as Savonarola believed? What might have caused him to draw such conclusions? Part of what Savonarola reacted against was the political situation at the time, which offended his staunchly republican sympathies. During the last half of the century, though the city remained officially a republic, in actuality Florentines lived under the *de facto* domination of the Medici family (1434-1494).

In 1434 Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464, figure 1-6) established the Medici family in Florence, where its members had functioned as highly successful international bankers. (The bank had been founded in Florence in 1397 by Cosimo’s father Giovanni (1360-1429.) Benozzo Gozzoli (1421-1479) provided us with a wonderful portrait of Cosimo in a detail from a fresco in Cosimo's grand Palazzo Medici-Riccardi. Sitting astride his donkey, the confident quintessential family patriarch, Cosimo simultaneously communicates both his dignified elevated status as well as a wary alertness to potential dangers against his family and his political and financial interests. The fresco wraps around three walls of a chapel in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence (figures 1-7 and 1-8). The fourth wall contains an apse, adorned by Filippo Lippi's altarpiece of the *Madonna of the Forest* (figure 1-9). That same apse also contains angels painted by Gozzoli in a totally different style (figure 1-10). The style of those angels resembles that of Gozzoli's master, Fra Angelico (1395-1455).

The entire fresco series is entitled *The Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem* (1459-61), and refers to the family's membership in the religious confraternity known as the Compagnia dei Magi. The three frescoed walls depict in turn the grand entourages of the three kings, each led by a Magus, to celebrate

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52 Brucker 1975, 256-280. This is the main source of history for this section.
the birth of the Christ Child. Diane Cole Ahl described this painting in the following manner:

A magnificent parade of finely dressed men and youths on horseback winds through the landscape.... [wearing] rich garments of gold and ... brocade ... They disport themselves at different angles so that the variety of their costly garments and finely caparisoned horses may be admired. ... In an age when status was conveyed by elegant dress and fine horses and when sumptuary laws regulated conspicuous displays of wealth, this cavalcade must have awed all who saw it. Only participants in such celebratory processions or kings of the Orient could have been imagined to dress so finely in defiance of the laws. 53

The not-so-subtle implication that the Medici were placed in power by God's intention can be drawn from their choice of subject matter and the fact that they had themselves portrayed as though actually participants in a biblical narrative. One of these frescos (figure 1-8) shows a group led by a Magus identified as the Young King, Caspar, on a white horse. Behind him ride people who have been identified as portraits of Cosimo's son Piero (1416-1469), who precedes Cosimo. 54 Piero's sons Lorenzo (the Magnificent) and Giuliano (1453-1478), who were ten and six years old respectively at the time the fresco was painted, are also thought to be portrayed in this panel of the procession (as the two young people in the lowest row of faces; Gozzoli's self-portrait is just above them (figure 1-11). The extensiveness of their power, wealth and prestige is further emphasized by the landscape behind the procession, which, derived from the Tuscan countryside surrounding Florence, includes images of castles and villas owned by the family. This is exactly the kind of unabashed display of self-aggrandisement to which Savonarola took indignant exception. Ahl suggests that the realistic images of the family as members of the Magi's procession helped imprint their status as royalty, like the Kings from the East, and as people of faith and power. The fact that that they are depicted on the east wall

53 Diane Cole Ahl, *Benozzo Gozzoli*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1996, 88-93. Ahl described this painting as follows: “A magnificent parade of finely dressed men and youths on horseback winds through the landscape … [wearing] rich garments of gold and … brocade. … They disport themselves at different angles so that the variety of their costly garments and finely caparisoned horses may be admired. … In an age when status was conveyed by elegant dress and fine horses and when sumptuary laws regulated conspicuous displays of wealth, this cavalcade must have awed all who saw it. Only participants in such celebratory processions or kings of the Orient could have been imagined to dress so finely in defiance of the laws.” 88,92.
54 Ahl 1996, 95-96, discusses the identifications of the figures and provides endnotes as references (298-299).
The Medici maintained power with the support of a small group of patrician families. The highest governing body was called the Signoria (Signory). It consisted of nine people (eight Priors and one Gonfaloniere (Minister) of Justice, and met in the Palazzo della Signoria (Government Palace) which was situated next to a large and active public square, both of which are seen in the picture of the execution of Savonarola. The Florentine constitution mandated that new officeholders to the various arms of the government be elected by lot at short intervals. The pool of eligible candidates for office was based on those families that had been in residence in Florence for thirty years or more. In effect this meant that power remained in the hands of the wealthy aristocracy. Infighting, personal dislike and disagreements over policy were destabilizing forces, but until the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent in 1492, the Medici grip on power was remarkably secure. Their technique of rule, as of diplomacy, was maintenance of loyal personal relationships. Cosimo in particular had a well-developed talent for behind-the-scenes manipulation, in which he got others to do as he wished, making them obligated to him by lending them money, making gifts and doing favors for them. At times, participation of the larger citizenry was tolerated and even encouraged, but even then they had no real power, as their role was only advisory.

After the death of Lorenzo in 1492, his son Piero (1472-1503) replaced him as leader (figure 1-12). Piero did not command the respect and loyalty that his father had, and seems to have been a less capable and intelligent leader. When in November 1494 King Charles VIII of France crossed into Italy with the aim of conquering Naples, Piero at first defied him in the name of Florence's loyalty to Naples. But then, frightened that Charles would invade Florence itself and cowed by France's military force,

55 Ahl 1996, 93.
56 Martines 2006, xiv-xv.
57 Brucker 1975, 89-90.
58 Brucker 1975, 121.
Piero negotiated with Charles. In that process, Piero gave up to Charles several strategically and economically important ports belonging to Florence, such as Pisa. At this, the exasperated government officers expelled Piero from Florence, thereby ending the sixty year domination of the city by the Medici. The expulsion also created temporary chaos and left the Florentines feeling demoralized and vulnerable. There had been periods earlier in the century during which Florence’s security as a political entity had been shaken, as in the threat of siege by Milan in 1402, as well as the Pazzi conspiracy of 1478 in which Giuliano, Lorenzo “il Magnifico’s” brother, lost his life. But in the whole course of the century up to that time, there had been nothing like the cataclysm of change brought about by the trifecta of the invasion by the French, the expulsion of the Medici, and the phenomenon of Savonarola, with his impact on religious and political life. Though there had been some discontent during Lorenzo's last years, no one expected the kind of collapse that occurred when Piero failed to maintain Medici rule. The consequences were especially felt through the city's demonstrated vulnerability to foreign invasion, in actuality by the French, and potentially by other foreigners.\(^{59}\) 

After the expulsion of the Medici, the city of Florence set about reviving its republican heritage, with the establishment of a Great Council of the less affluent citizenry, such as artisans and shopkeepers, numbering 3000 members. Savonarola actively encouraged and worked for this development.\(^{60}\) A meeting hall for the council was constructed in the Palace of the Signoria, with decorations emphasizing Florence's image of itself as a community committed to preserving its freedom: important among such works was Michelangelo's statue of David, the defender of his Jewish people's liberty. According to the Old Testament, David had taken on and defeated the gigantic Philistine warrior Goliath.\(^{61}\) Thus the David statue symbolized the people of Florence, who saw themselves in him as defenders of republicanism against the tyranny of dictators such as the Medici.

\(^{59}\) Brucker 1998, 221.  
\(^{61}\) 1 Samuel 17.
The work was commissioned in 1501, and it was decided in 1504 by the *Compagnia di San Luca* (the Guild of Artists), including Michelangelo (1475-1564) and Piero di Cosimo, that it should be placed just outside the Palace of the Signoria.  

The artistic styles of the late Quattrocento relied partly on a new kind of humanism, based on Neoplatonic ideals of perfection of the soul, as argued by writers such as Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, which sought spiritual union with God, and devalued the life of the body. The goals of the civic humanism of the earlier fifteenth century, which included freedom, republicanism, civic service and pursuit of the active life, advocated by men such as Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), and Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), were largely displaced by these more “modern” values held by the elite.

There was a clear distinction and tension between the elite and less wealthy classes. The smaller group, elite wealthy consumers of culture, both artistic and intellectual, constituted the circle of Lorenzo de' Medici and considered themselves sophisticated *cognoscenti*. There was also another class derived from the corporate groups of the earlier Quattrocento, the communes, churches and guilds. These latter upheld the value that average citizens should be included and be active in civic life. It was this group that maintained the elevated collective civic, spiritual and secular values and ideals derived from the earlier age, and who were in ideological conflict with the elite.

These newer elite secular values were explicated by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) in his treatise on the family (*I Libri della famiglia*, date?, published 1843). There he described the manner in

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65 Brucker 1975, 265.
which he felt a man should educate his children, by which he meant boys. In addition to attending to their moral character and correct, disciplined behavior, he felt boys should participate in activities such as riding and archery which would promote their “manly” physical development. His recommendations for their intellectual education emphasized the value of studying classical authors, such as Cicero, Livy, and Sallust, “those extraordinary and splendid writers.” Neither the Bible nor any Christian writers were among those foundational works which had formed the basis of his own education nor were they part of his recommendations for the education of elite Florentines. It was an important goal of the “modern” humanists that Florence become the city known and admired throughout the civilized world – as the Roman republic had been in antiquity – for its cultural sophistication and physical beauty. Although the old values of civic humanism were not totally discarded by the more middle class republican factions, those values were more faithfully clung to by those less affluent elements of society who hoped to regain their voice one day.

Savonarola's republican views found tremendous resonance with the feelings of the general populace as the century came to an end. Tied to his call for the revival of the old civic humanism, Savonarola also championed the moral and spiritual regeneration of Florence. In his sermon on Palm Sunday 27 March 1496, for example, Savonarola attempted to demonstrate that the Holy Gospel “is meant for Florence and to signify that the Lord has come to you.” He dedicated the sermon to the children “but also for those adults who want to become like children in purity.” He quoted the Lord

67 Alberti 1969, 69, 72, 83.
68 Alberti 1969, 83.
69 Brucker 1975, 240.
70 Brucker 1975, 269: “The man primarily responsible for stimulating this resurgence of republicanism was … a foreigner and a friar, Girolamo Savonarola,” and Martines, 250-251, 268. “The Friar easily granted that he had approved of the new republic from its beginnings…”
saying through Jesus that all who had been living “blindly with respect to faith” should “be converted to simplicity ... purify their consciences, and let them leave their lasciviousness ...let the girls leave their vanities and attend to living uprightly. For instance, he suggested everyone should dress in white to show their readiness to do good. They should carry red crosses, symbols of Florence; and they should also carry olive branches to show they were “enlightened” with the oil of the Holy Spirit. He preached that God wanted to become Florence's special King and asked the congregation if they did not want this? The sermon ended when the crowd responded “Yes!” to this query and left the church to participate in a grand procession through the streets, a follow-up to the Carnival that had marked the beginning of Lent on 16 February 1496.

This sermon is a prime example of Savonarola's technique of appealing to the Florentines through his promises that they would be rewarded for their piety with a special relationship to God. Such promises of a glorious future were welcome words to a demoralized populace, who were anticipating the half-millennium with superstitious dread; under the influence of these words, many enthusiastically supported his preaching and practices for several years. But Savonarola also made enemies amongst others, those who felt he was a misleading charlatan. Prominent examples of those who held such views were especially and crucially Pope Alexander VI and other clergy who resented his attacks on the moral integrity of the members of the church hierarchy. There were also those who found his fanaticism abhorrent. As Martines noted, “Opponents [of Savonarola] accused the rank and file of his supporters of being a credulous and superstitious lot, misguided fools.” Savonarola also collided with the city's leaders, who felt threatened by the astonishing and explosive development of his popularity. It was ultimately his involvement in Florentine politics that was so offensive and

72 Hatfield 1995, Hatfield argues that the use of these colors in the painting resulted from Botticelli being a follower of Savonarola, 112.
74 Martines 2006,156.
dangerous to his powerful enemies both in the church and the local government. His claim to be a prophet became the Achilles heel through which his enemies worked to drag him down.75

In April 1498 Savonarola was arrested and tried by a committee of seventeen men appointed by the Signoria then in office, who were enemies of Savonarola. The committee included men who hated Savonarola, such as Doffo Spini, the leader of an anti-Savonarolan group known as the Compagnacci (Ugly Companions), men who flaunted their high living as a rebuff to Savonarola's asceticism.76 Torture was used to extract confessions from Savonarola, but the men who tried him apparently felt some remorse; some reports suggest they tried to shift the blame for the decision to convict Savonarola at his heresy trial to the Pope's envoys to the trial.77 Savonarola's downfall was in fact also accomplished with the assistance of Pope Alexander VI, who forbade him from preaching and summoned him to Rome, both of which orders Savonarola disobeyed. The pope had understandable taken grave offense at Savonarola's accusations of corruption of the church and personal attacks on him, and had been angling for years to silence Savonarola and thereby undercut his religious authority. (See footnote 22 supra.) The manipulations, trial and torture by the committee appointed by the Signoria to interrogate him eventuated in the conviction of Savonarola and his two assistants, friars Domenico da Pescia (?date of birth-1498)and Silvestro Maruffi (?date of birth-1498), followed by their public hanging, after which the bodies were burned, as depicted in Rosselli's painting.78

After Savonarola's death in 1498 there ensued a period into the early 1500s in which there was much confusion about who would retain power, and a great deal of political wrangling amongst various factions. Some of these, such as that led by Francesco Valori (1439-1498), supported the maintenance

75 Martines 2006, 159, 247 ff.
76 Martines 2006, 247. “The commission of seventeen was packed with men who loathed Savonarola, beginning with … Doffo Spini... and [including] three others selected from the new War-Office Ten: Piero degli Alberti, Giovanni Canacci, and Benedetto de' Nerli.”
78 Martines 2006, 249.
of a republican government. Others wanted the oligarchic government to remain. Still others favored the return of the Medici. The election of the aristocrat Piero Soderini (1452-1522) placated the oligarchic faction, but they were less pleased when he refused to bow to their wishes, instead trying to maintain a balance among the various factions.

Events outside Florence also exacerbated the prevailing sense of insecurity. The populace was worried by Charles VIII's continued interfering presence and influence in Italy, and by their inability to regain ownership of the port cities they had formerly possessed, especially the port city of Pisa which gave Florence access to trade by sea. France, England and the papal states continued to vie for possession of territories near to Florence. Under Soderini's leadership Florence struggled to maintain its independence. But eventually the republican regime was crushed as the result of a contest between the Holy League, consisting of Spain, England and Venice that was created by the new Pope Julius II (papacy 1503-1513), and the French. When the Medici were restored to power in 1512, Florence lost the long struggle to maintain its republican status.

Social ills and problems also burdened the lives of Florentines at this time. Dennis Geronimus, an art historian who has written extensively on Piero di Cosimo, notes that the city of Florence coped with numerous other demoralizing problems during this last decade of the fifteenth century: it was ravaged by typhus, syphilis ("the French pox") and plague, as well by terrible famines occasioned by a series of poor grain harvests during this decade. When plague struck, for example, shops and workplaces closed down, adding to the stagnation of the economy. Even taverns shuttered their doors, and only a few doctors and pharmacies remained available to serve the needs of the multitude of ill citizens. While the poor suffered the most from all these problems, citywide economic problems also

79 Martines 2006, 291.
80 Brucker 1975, 272.
affected the cultural and general life of many people of all classes.\textsuperscript{82}

The possibility of damnation and eternity in Hell if one did not live according to Christian principles seemed very real to many people. These powerful beliefs and practices were the foundation of Savonarola's power to engage listeners. Lauro Martines captures the mindset of the Florentines who were overwhelmed by the “raw power” of Savonarola's sermons, in which he condemned the “tepid” faith of both laity and clergy. Savonarola called upon everyone to demonstrate their belief through good works of Christian charity and love, self-denial, prayer and correct participation in the Church's sacraments. Accordingly, to him you were either a serious Christian or no Christian at all.\textsuperscript{83} As an example of his effectiveness in frightening people, we can look at one response to his sermon on the September 1494 morning that Charles VIII's troops were rumored to be entering Italy at Genoa. Michelangelo was among the listeners that morning; taking the rumors of the invasion as proof of the truth of Savonarola's predictions, Michelangelo panicked and fled the city.\textsuperscript{84}

Savonarola specifically targeted several groups of leaders whom he viewed as corrupt. One of these was the clergy, towards whom he was particularly outspoken, seeking to intimidate them into reforming with his threats:

\begin{quote}
When the devil sees that a man is weak, he strikes him with a hatchet in order to make him fall into sin; but if he sees that he is strong, he strikes him with an axe. … it is the prelates who should lead the faithful into the Church of Christ. Therefore the devil hath aimed his heaviest blows at them, and hath broken down these fates. Thus it is that no more good prelates are to be found in the Church. Seest thou not that they do all things amiss?\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}

Similarly he preached against corrupt civic leaders, a thinly veiled accusation of the Medici and their allies, who did not govern according to godly principles of justice:

\begin{quote}
[God] has made all that pertains to government imperfect at first, so that with his help we can
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{82} Brucker 1975, 48.
\textsuperscript{83} Martines 2006, 102.
\textsuperscript{84} Martines 2006, 94.
improve it. This government is still imperfect and has many flaws. … It is known that every government comes from God, for everything does. … [F]ear of God … [will cause citizens to] submit to his commandments.86

It was to these corrupt clerical and secular leaders as well as to regular citizens who had slacked off in their religious observance that Savonarola addressed his invective. If Savonarola criticized some of the members of the Florentine elite, the members of the Florentine elite were also critics of Savonarola and his populist rhetoric. The next section will take a look at how the Medici positioned themselves in these late fifteenth-century debates.

**Lorenzo the Magnificent and the Medici before Savonarola**

Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-1492, figure 1-13) was the oldest grandson of Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464), the man who had established his family as the most powerful in Florence. The Medici under Cosimo was among the group of families who began to transform the composition of the dominant social classes. They composed a new aristocracy: a group of businessmen-scholars – merchants, bankers and producers of goods (especially fine textiles) – who came eventually to supplant the landed nobility and clergy from earlier centuries who had been dominant in the past.87 This new group placed a great value on education, elevating the study of humanistic subjects – such as rhetoric, philosophy, literature and the arts – above the basic skills of literacy, which were seen as less cultivated and enlightened, the results of a more plebian education widely available to the less affluent classes.88

Lorenzo was educated in the prestigious humanist tradition by tutors, as well as by exposure to the most prominent intellectuals of his time. His first teacher, from age 5, was Gentile Becchi

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86 Ibid., 222. See also Hale 1983, “Savonarola's sermons had portrayed Lorenzo, in all but name, as a tyrant, a perverter of law, the exploiter of the fisc [public treasury], the oppressor of the poor. …Lorenzo had been unable to divert the friar from using him as the symbol of an unjust ruler.” 75.
87 Brucker 1975, 222.
88 Brucker 1975, 223, 228.
(1420/1430-1497), a priest, Latinist and poet known as “lovable and amusing.”89 An avid student, Lorenzo pursued his studies with enthusiasm; he even taught himself Greek, and began writing poetry by the age of sixteen. At the university (studio) he probably heard Cristoforo Landino's (1424-1498) lectures on rhetoric, and about the “serious nature of the poet's calling.” He was also present at meetings of the so-called Platonic Academy in Florence, a loosely organized informal “club” modeled on the discussions among the ancient philosophers. The Renaissance iteration included the most brilliant minds of the age – Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), Leon Battista Alberti, Giovanni Picolo della Mirandola and others.90 Founded by Lorenzo's grandfather Cosimo around 1462, the Academy met periodically to discuss topics such as “true nobility, the virtues of the active as opposed to the contemplative life, and the nature of God.”91

A major concern of the Platonic Academy was so-called Neoplatonic philosophy.92 Neoplatonic philosophy, much discussed amongst the elite intellectuals of the academy, quite aptly suited the aristocratic society of the time, who had lost some of their fervor for Christian explanations of the nature of God and man and their relationship. These modern Neoplatonists were more interested in the self-expressiveness and perfectibility of man than in his political nature. Though their philosophy was not anti-Christian, they tended to emphasize other explanations of the divine nature of man, by referring to pre-Christian writings such as those of the Greeks ('Hermetics'), the Jewish Cabala, and the Egyptians.93

Marsilio Ficino, the head of the academy during Lorenzo's youth, was a priest as well as a scholar. He too studied members of the ancient Academy as well as more recent Christian philosophers. From his studies, Ficino developed a cosmology of the universe in which he tried to

89 Hale 1983, 49.
90 Ibid.
92 The material of this discussion of the Platonic academy of Florence derives from Kristeller 1964, “Ficino,” 37-53.
93 Hale 1983, 55.
meld the ancient and current Christian beliefs. In his cosmology, the soul, by virtue of its love and intellect, was the center of all nature and the universe. Through contemplation the soul could ascend towards God, where it could become immortal. Thus contemplation became the purpose and meaning of life. Platonic love is divine; love for another person is only a “preparation … for the love of God, which constitutes the real goal and true content of human desire, and which is merely turned towards persons and things by the reflected splendor of divine goodness and beauty as it may appear in them.94 One can see in these ideas Ficino's efforts to incorporate pagan notions into Christian moral values, to bring the ideas of the ancients into line with contemporary Christian understandings. But it was an uneasy melding, and one to which Savonarola in particular took exception, as we have seen. In fact it is to hard to see how the Church itself could accept these views, notwithstanding Ficino's efforts to square the two ways of understanding man's relation to God: Neoplatonism carries within it the suggestion that church doctrine and ritual are not completely necessary to the attainment of salvation. It further challenges the Christian notion that everything comes from God, including the divine nature of man. The real wonder is that the Church tolerated these teachings for as long as it did. Perhaps that was possible because the Church already had such a tight grip on the minds of the majority of the less privileged population, as borne out by the explosion of pious anxiety evoked by Savonarola's preaching. But in fact, even the Neoplatonists thought that only a minority of those enlightened by their beliefs could actually achieve the goal of spiritual union with God, diminishing the threat of these ideas.95

The lifestyle of Lorenzo's family was itself an education in culture and how to manage power. As Galeazzo Maria Sforza's (1444-1476) father had done, Lorenzo's father too sent him as a young man to form connections with the family's powerful allies in other cities. From the age of fifteen father

94 Kristeller 1964, 47. Italics mine.
95 Brucker 1975, 266.
Piero sent Lorenzo abroad to Bologna, Ferrara, Rome, Naples, Milan and Venice. These missions were intended to teach the young man how to handle himself in his diplomatic responsibilities. Piero counseled him: “Act as a man, not a boy. Show sense, industry and manly endeavor, so that you may be employed for more important things, for this journey is the touchstone of your abilities.”

Lorenzo's interests however were less single-mindedly in commercial and political affairs than his family had hoped. He was deeply dedicated to the life of the mind. He was recognized as “the premier connoisseur of the arts in Italy,” and his advice about architects and painters was sought by princes. He was a major literary figure as a poet, and the only such person who was also the head of a bank and a state. Here is an example of his poetry:

“Song of Girls and of Cicadas”

*The Girls*

We are women, as you see / youthful lasses fair and gay, and are seeking our delight / for this is Carnival day. Envious people and Cicadas / much resent an alien glee so they vent their evil rancor, / the Cicadas that you see. Most unfortunate are we! / The Cicadas' prey we are: the whole summer chattering, / they still chatter the whole year: and from those who do far worse / comes the worst of gossiping.

*The Cicadas*

O fair lasses, we but do / what within our nature is often, though, the fault is yours, / for it's you who tell all this. One must act, but also know / how to hide one's happiness. One who's quick can run away / from the peril of the word: does it pay to make one die / in a long, long agony? Without chattering too much, / act at once, while you still may.

*The Girls*

What's the purpose of our beauty? / It's worth nothing if it goes. Long live love and gentleness! / Death to envy and Cicadas!

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96 Piero de' Medici quoted in Hale 1983, 49-50.
97 Brucker 1975, 229.
98 Hale 1983, 53.
Want to gossip? Very well: / we shall act, and you will tell.\textsuperscript{99}

In this poem, Lorenzo explores themes relating to beauty and immortality. Carnival occurs just before Lent, with its various restrictions, begins. The girls are enjoying their final day to parade and revel in their beauty, and are mocking the ugly cicadas who envy them. But the cicadas warn that the physical beauty so cherished by the girls is evanescent. And the cicadas, who have the advantage of dying but returning periodically, are in a way immortal, the antidote to death. They will have the last word, the poem warns. In this poem Lorenzo follows the Neoplatonic notion that physical beauty does not lead to immortality of the soul, which can only be achieved by spiritual perfection. Yet Lorenzo also seems to empathize with the girls' desire to enjoy their last fling before the days of deprivation come round. His ability to see both sides of the issue is characteristic of his ability to think from more than a single perspective. Machiavelli described him thus: “To consider in him the flippant and serious aspects of his life … was to see in him two different persons linked in a well-nigh impossible connection.”\textsuperscript{100}

Lorenzo indeed seems to have been an intense man of many gifts. He could act in ways that were beneficial to the public, taking decisive action where he deemed it was necessary, being a generous friend and a shrewd politician. At the same time, he lived in a luxurious and self-indulgent style, ruthlessly pursuing personal aims as well. We can easily see how such a charismatic character wielded great influence in his times, and why he drew such powerful reactions from his contemporaries. Lorenzo remains a subject of fascination for us until this day. But for Savonarola Lorenzo must have been a problem. Despite Lorenzo's actions for the public weal, he also simultaneously engaged in behaviors which Savonarola held to be sinful. And Savonarola was a man

\textsuperscript{100} Niccolo Machiavelli quoted in Hale 1983, 54. Hale finds Machiavelli's formulation “too dramatic,” but rather sees Lorenzo as in fact a modern-style intellectual, a person who could synthesize his mind and heart to function creatively in a variety of endeavors. He could, for example, find inspiration for his poetry in the philosophical ideas of his friend Marsilio Ficino.
for whom things were black and white: you were either a Christian or you were not; you were either virtuous and seeking spiritual elevation or you were an evil God-defying person. Lorenzo could not be pigeon-holed into one type or the other, which must have confused and disturbed Savonarola, making it difficult for him to know how to think about Lorenzo.

Lorenzo's role especially as a patron inspired many of his younger relatives. For instance, it was his younger cousin Lorenzo di Pierofrancesco (1469-1503) who commissioned Botticelli's well-known *Primavera* and *Birth of Venus* (figures 1-16 and 1-17).\(^{101}\) Il Magnifico was interested in philosophy in order to study the ancients as well as to think about contemporary questions such as the purpose of existence and how the soul could get past the human “mesh of sensual appetite and social convention.”\(^{102}\) He wrote both in Latin and in the vernacular Tuscan language, promoting the latter's acceptance as worthwhile. It was within this sphere of the intellectual and cultural life of Florence, part of his ancestral inheritance, that his influence was most keenly felt.

Lorenzo and his circle favored particular conventions in the plastic arts. Charles Dempsey follows other scholars in noting that certain qualities of “restless movement” found in paintings of the era, such as in depictions of windblown hair, “agitated hemlines,” and scudding clouds, demonstrated a set of feelings and wishes common to the aesthetic popular at the time.\(^{103}\) Dempsey argues that these translations from ancient and contemporary poetry into painting, as it were, are more important sources of imagery than highly intellectualized analyses of these paintings based on Neoplatonic interpretations of ancient ideas and mythological symbols. For example, he feels that the *Primavera* of Botticelli fairly literally represents the contemporary celebration of springtime, the *calendimaggio*, based on

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101 Hale 1983, 58. Charles Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love: Botticelli's Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 7, takes issue with this attribution. Noting that Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco was the second cousin and ward of Lorenzo the Magnificent, he also argues with Panofsky's assertion that they were painted as a pair for the Medici villa at Castello, claiming they were not painted for that destination.

102 Hale 1983, 54-55.

103 Dempsey 1992, 12-13. Dempsey mentions Lincoln Kirstein and Aby Warburg among others,
characterizations of ancient gods such as Flora and the Graces. But Dempsey suggests that the more high-flown intellectualized interpretations of artworks proposed by some other art historians presuppose the artists' participation in a certain “elevated courtly culture.” Dempsey objects that they might not have been directly involved in that culture, and that this alternative view suggests that the paintings convey meanings which the artists might not have intended.\textsuperscript{104}

Dempsey however does support the ideas of another art historian, Pierre Francastel (1900-1970), who also believed that artists and poets were responding not primarily to literary sources but more to actual experiences and events in the present. Francastel thought that the artists did this in a multi-layered manner that took into account several things: first, the experiences and events of his time; second, his own imagination; and third, the multiple cultural levels at which the public conceived of artistic refinement.\textsuperscript{105} Thus works of art also had a “public dimension closely connected with the myths enacted in the rituals of the city,” such as poetry competitions mourning the death of a beautiful young woman, or spectacles created for certain public festivals such as religious and peace treaty celebrations, e.g. the calendimaggio. The task for interpretation according to Francastel was to show how the artist's individual imagination as expressed in his work reflected the “structure of the public imagination” of the city, its culture and its leaders, in particular Lorenzo de' Medici.\textsuperscript{106} In other words, like Dempsey, Francastel felt that Neoplatonic interpretations of art placed too much emphasis on the artist's association with contemporary courtly culture. In contrast with Dempsey, however, Francastel places greater emphasis on the artist's own imagination as well as on his engagement with the surrounding culture. Francastel’s approach serves here as my primary methodological model.

As an example of how art can show us the myths and rituals of the city, we can return to the

\textsuperscript{104} Dempsey 1992, 13.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
Rosselli painting, the *Execution of Savonarola* (figures 1-1 and 1-1a). We note that the execution is taking place in the main public square of Florence, where all important public events and spectacles were staged. Locating the execution there, as in the reality depicted in the painting, shows us the power of the governing class, which in this act of public execution demonstrated its dominance over the general population, whose powerful positive feelings about Savonarola the leaders wanted to quash. Public executions served as reminders and reinforcers of their power, also symbolized in the buildings housing the public institutions that surround the square – the Palazzo della Signoria, the Cathedral and the Bargello (the prison). The fact of public execution also gives us some notion of the severity with which offenders against the cultural norms could be punished.

The sociocultural approach as described by Francastel, which finds the artist expressing his “individual imagination” within the context of the general cultural experience of his era, is an important viewpoint from which to understand art works. Since Christianity was a major determinant of the Florentine culture of the time, its influence over not only what artists produced but also how cannot be overestimated. The leaders of church and religion understood the power of images to teach narratives to people who might not be fluent readers as well as how art has the power to affect people's feelings and allegiances. Many of the works of art to be discussed in the following chapters were funded by wealthy patrons, such as the Medici and their peers, who also saw these donations as spiritual capital furthering the likelihood of eternal salvation. Savonarola, through his views, recommended especially stringent restrictions on what was considered proper representation in religious subjects for public spaces, as we have seen.

In contrast, art produced for private consumption could encompass a much wider variety of subject matter, luxuriousness of materials, and incorporation of imaginative elements. So it is here that we find mythological subjects and art based on secular classical models from ancient Greece and Rome. It was in these private works that the Neoplatonic ideas were often utilized. To summarize
what the “sociocultural” perspective on art encompasses in this context and at this time, we see that it includes the impact of religion and the church in much work as well as the departure from religious themes into classical subjects and mythology. It means patronage of those who could afford to pay for art, again primarily the church but also wealthy lay people. It includes the imagination of the artist as well as what he has absorbed from his environment during his development and also his responses to current economic and political events. In short, we can agree with Francastel that the artist expresses himself and his times in ways that illuminate the experience of his moment.

The next two chapters will now proceed to examine some works of Botticelli and Piero di Cosimo, focusing on how these artists responded to the social and cultural conditions of their contemporary environments.
Chapter 2 – Botticelli and Savonarola

Known as Sandro Botticelli, Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi (1445-1510) was the eighth and youngest child of Mariano Filipepi (c.1394-1482), a tanner, and Smeralda (family name unknown) Filipepi (c.1394-?). Of these children only four survived beyond childhood. The oldest surviving brother, Giovanni (c.1421-1493), a broker who dealt in shares of the Monte (the public debt), acquired the nickname Botticelli (derived from botticello, or “little barrel”) apparently due to his physique, and Botticelli came to be the name by which all the surviving brothers were known. The next son, Antonio (c.1430-?), a goldsmith, introduced Sandro to the main techniques of that art – engraving, chasing (embossing) and enameling. But as the fifteenth century progressed, goldsmithing began to lose its former prestige, making it difficult for Antonio to sustain his income. When papa Mariano failed to earn sufficient income as a tanner, the family became battilori (goldbeaters) instead, producing the gold leaf that was laid on in paintings. Though Mariano apparently complained that this business too went badly, the family somehow managed to purchase a new home in which Sandro and most of the remaining family members lived, at least until the end of Sandro’s life. Only Alessandro's next older brother Simone (c.1443-?) continued to use the name Filipepi.

According to Vasari, Sandro was a bright child but an indifferent student: “Although Sandro quickly mastered anything he liked, he always was restless and could not settle down at school to reading, writing and arithmetic.” He was sent to work at around fifteen, about the time his father's tannery failed. Both primary and secondary sources tell that friendly relations existed between the

goldsmiths and the painters that lived in the Filipepis' neighborhood. Exposed to both arts, Sandro became enamored of drawing and painting. Seeing his son's interest, his father arranged for him to be a *garzone* (assistant) in the workshop of Filippo Lippi around 1461. Lippi had established an excellent reputation which he maintained until his death in 1469. In terms of his passion for art, according to Vasari, Sandro “[devoted] himself heart and soul to his art, [imitating] his master so well... [that] he soon attained an excellence that no one would have thought possible.”

Sandro absorbed ideas and practices from Lippi, many of which remained part of the younger painter's repertoire for a long time if not for the duration of his life as a painter. Ronald Lightbown enumerates them, citing for example Lippi's conveyance of technical secrets regarding painting on panels as well as fresco techniques. Lippi also communicated his own version of stylistic devices of the day, such as compositional practices and ornaments, as well as his own linear manner of rendering the human form. Botticelli also absorbed many other aspects of Lippi's style: a penchant for portraying rich fabrics, the effect of transparency when a more translucent fabric covers one of opaque color, techniques for leading the eye more deeply into a space, and certain poses of the Madonna and Child which Lippi favored. Botticelli also learned to use various architectural details such as floors “paved in perspective” as well as “the occasional appearance of a still-life motif for it's own sake.”

Sandro finished his apprenticeship in Lippi's workshop in 1467, when Lippi left for Spoleto. By 1470, Sandro is recorded to have been the proprietor of his own workshop. But even from the time he left Lippi's studio, Lightbown notes, Botticelli had developed “his own manner, one of firm, rounded forms, of sure and expressive line, of stronger modeling and color, of severer spatial clarity and...”

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109 Vasari 1963, 84; Lightbown 1989, 19.
110 Ibid.
112 Ibid. plus page 25.
harmony, … in which intensity of expression is preferred to scattered graces of ornament."\[^{114}\]

Botticelli’s insistence on expressiveness is emphasized here because it is upon the variations in what and how he expressed himself through his work that the argument adduced to understand his reactions to the events of the 1490s depends.

Botticelli never married. In fact an anecdote reported by an early biographer quotes a conversation in which Sandro reacts to a friend's suggestion he marry: "I dreamt I had taken a wife, and I was so struck by grief by it that I woke up, and so as not to fall asleep again and dream of it once more, I got up and wandered up and down Florence all night like a madman."\[^{115}\] Apparently he had a horror of marriage for reasons we likely will never know. Apart from one journey to Rome to work on the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel (1481-1482), Sandro never really left his family and lived his entire life with them in Florence. One could plausibly say however that he was married to his art, to which he devoted himself assiduously until the final decade before his death. In 1505, he was last noted to have been paid for a painting.\[^{116}\] This contrasts completely with Vasari's exaggerated assertion that in old age Botticelli became decrepit and poor, that he "wasted all through his carelessness and want of control. Having become old and useless, he fell to walking with two crutches, as he could not stand straight, and in this state of decrepitude he died at the age of 78."\[^{117}\] Another crucial point: while all that is known of Sandro's older brother Simone's career was the record in a 1481 tax document filed by his father, stating that Simone was in Naples, "without prospects," Simone later became an ardent follower of Savonarola, a *piagnone* (weeper), and may well have influenced Sandro in this regard.\[^{118}\] Simone is of particular interest in this study because of his report of a conversation about Savonarola that took place in Sandro's studio and that clarifies Sandro's attitude towards the friar. This incident is

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114 Lightbown 1989, 26 (italics mine).
117 Vasari 1963, 89.
118 Lightbown 1989, 73, 230.
described more fully below.\textsuperscript{119}

In light of this background, Chapter 2 will look at Botticelli in relation to the sociocultural context of late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Florence. We will now turn to a close reading of Botticelli's imagery. Pairs of paintings, selected on the basis of similarity of form or subject, will be compared and contrasted to demonstrate differences in style and emotion at different dates of execution. By studying works executed before and after Savonarola's appearance in Florence, this analysis will evaluate the impact of contemporary conditions on Botticelli. The discussion will draw on analyses by Ronald Lightbown,\textsuperscript{120} Rab Hatfield\textsuperscript{121} and Paul Joannides,\textsuperscript{122} highlighting their agreements and differences as well as my own reactions to their arguments.

The earliest painting of the group, \textit{Coronation of the Virgin with Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, and Saint Eligius}, known as the San Marco Altarpiece (1490-93) (figure 2-1), is paired with the latest of the group, the \textit{Mystic Nativity} (1501) (figure 2-2). Both contain a multitude of figures and feature the division of the canvas into an earthly portion in the lower part of the painting and a representation of heaven in the upper part. These were the only two paintings in Botticelli's oeuvre that feature this configuration in such a striking manner, although in other paintings, such as the \textit{Virgin and Child with Eight Saints (Raczynski Tondo)} (c. 1481-83) (figure 2-3), the space is divided by the two hands holding a crown over the Virgin's head in a cloud-like space set across the picture near its upper circumference.\textsuperscript{123}

The San Marco altarpiece was commissioned by the guild of goldsmiths in 1490 for their chapel...
in the San Marco convent. Its dimensions – 378 cm by 258 cm. (~149” x 101-1/2”) – are fitting for a large altarpiece. The goldsmiths' patron saint, Saint Eligius (588-660), was French-born, a gifted goldsmith who rose through the ranks of Frankish royalty to become a trusted adviser to the king. Pressed into joining the clergy after the death of the local bishop, Eligius was instrumental in the conversion of many pagans. He also founded monasteries, worked to help the poor and tried to combat the practice of simony (sale of benefices) in the church. The legend associated with him is that he shod a reluctant horse by cutting off its foreleg, shoeing the hoof, and miraculously reattaching the pieces of the leg. In the lower half of the San Marco Altarpiece Eligius in his bishop's garb, on the right, looks out of the painting, addressing the viewer and offering his blessing. John the Evangelist, on the left, points his hand towards the heavenly vision he sees above him. Saint Augustine, to the right of John, writes in his book, his way of responding to John's vision. Saint Jerome, to Augustine's right, responds to the vision with upward gaze and touches his chest in an awestruck gesture.

Above the saints God the Father crowns Mary, joyfully witnessed by crowds of blue and red seraphim and cherubim who surround them completely, even inhabiting the space below the clouds on which God and Mary sit. Angels to their right and left strew roses all around, and a circle of twelve angels in varicolored robes dance around the cloud platform. The atmosphere is one of celebration, meant to inspire wonder and devotion in the human observer like that depicted in the attitudes and gestures of the saints below. Expensive materials are used in creating the painting, appropriate to the patronage of the work. As Lightbown states, “The opulence of gold and color in the picture clearly reflects the opulence of the wealthy corporation for which it was painted.”

While the use of opulent materials, especially gold, was appropriate for the goldsmith's guild, it was the sort of display of luxury to which Savonarola and his followers would have objected. The colors used for the six main figures are intensely saturated, predominantly primary, and rich, while those of some of the subsidiary

124 Lightbown 1989, 198.
characters are somewhat less saturated and of paler hue, perhaps indicative of their lesser status in the scene. The main figures' clothing is executed in large swaths of rich-looking cloth, which drape heavily down from their bodies. The secondary figures' clothing appears of lighter stuff, and tends to swirl about their forms as they move. The overall sense of the scene is joyous, uplifted.

The *Mystic Nativity*, in contrast, a work dating to the years after Savonarola's execution, is a much more complex painting, and depicts many more figures and a variety of scenes within the much smaller painting (108.5 cm. x 75 cm., or about 43” x 29-1/2”). Its patron is not known, but we might speculate that it must have been an educated person, hence a member of the elite, who knew Greek and so could translate the inscription at the top of the painting.

In the center of the canvas (figure 2-2a) a large, elongated Mary, dressed in red with a black-lined blue mantle, kneels in adoration over a plump, active baby Jesus. He kicks his legs and reaches out towards her with his right hand while sucking the fingers of his left – very typical and recognizable infant behaviors. Behind the Virgin and Child a grey donkey grazes on hay obtained from a striped basket. An ox, lying next to the donkey, gazes peacefully out of the painting. These five figures inhabit the front entrance to a cave-like structure which opens as well in the rear, for a grove is visible to the sides of and behind the altar. Trimmed tree trunks support a thatched roof in front. Balding Joseph, whose face we do not see, dressed in indigo with a saffron cloak, sits cross-legged behind the baby, resting his head on crossed arms and gazing at or contemplating the baby.

To the right of the Holy Family a winged angel directs the attention of two shepherds to the nativity scene using an olive branch with a blank fluttering banner, meanwhile cradling the head of one of the shepherds. To the left of the Holy Family, another winged angel holds an olive bough with a banner inscribed “Behold the lamb of God”. This angel also directs the attention of three more men, garbed in wreaths and robes, towards the nativity scene. Each bears a different facial expression: the one at the top seems dreamy and sad; the one on the left, wide-eyed and open mouthed, seems
astonished; and the third seems almost to smile, but with eyes lowered. In expressing their reactions to what they are being shown, two evince surprise and pleasure at His appearance, the Good News, while the third withdraws into contemplative sadness perhaps in unconscious anticipation of Christ's human fate.

In the space below, a serpentine path wends its way from the foreground deeper into the picture, up to the clearing where the Holy Family is positioned, leading the viewer's eye towards the main subject. The path in the foreground, however, is partially accompanied by deep stone-faced crevices on both sides of the path. Small devils have fallen or been pushed into the openings and into the flat grassy surface by Christ's arrival. On the extreme lower right corner the face of a devil whose body, gone yellow, is already buried can be seen.125

Across the lower register three men in gowns and cloaks and wearing olive wreaths embrace angels. Eyes half-closed, the men seem to be in a state of ecstasy. The angels hold olive boughs, which bear fluttering banners inscribed with the Latin salutation of the angels to the shepherds, “On earth peace to men of goodwill.”126 This trio is balanced by the three kneeling angels on the thatched roof; the central one holds a book while the outer two bear olive boughs (figure 2-2b). They look as though they may be singing. Heaven, represented as a golden dome, opens up above them. Twelve angels dance around it in a circle, dressed in fluttering tunics of red, white, and green.127 The San Marco Altarpiece also depicts angels dancing in a circle beneath the holy figures above them. The angels in the Mystic Nativity however are celebrating the Virgin's coronation in their joyful dance while supporting Heaven. Gazing in various directions, they appear entranced. Each grips an olive bough which she shares with her neighbor on both sides. These olive boughs have one or two banners

125 Rab Hatfield 1995, describes this as the one demon in the painting “who has not been transfixed by his own weapon,” 102.
126 Translation in Lightbown 1989, 248.
fluttering from them and a golden coronet hanging from the stem. The inscriptions that are legible
Lightbown translates as praises of the Virgin mixed with the words, “Glory be to God in the
highest.” 128 Hatfield suggests that these circling angels are taking a crown, in the form of worshippers' prayers, to Mary in Heaven. 129 Across the top of the painting a greyish-white panel bears the
inscription (in Greek), “This picture I, Alessandro, painted at the end of the year 1500, in the troubles of Italy, in the half-time after the time, during the fulfilment of the eleventh of John, in the second woe of the Apocalypse, in the loosing of the devil for three and a half years. Afterward he shall be chained
according to the twelfth, and we shall see him [trodhen down?] as in this picture.” 130

In interpreting the meaning of the painting, Lightbown reviews the contents of the eleventh and twelfth chapters of the Apocalypse, also known as Revelations, in which St. John prophesies the woes that are to end the world. The salvation will begin with Christ's casting out “the accuser of our brethren,” i.e. Satan. 131 Lightbown also describes how that same chapter – twelve – was “universal[ly]” pictorially and exegetically interpreted as seeing the Virgin and the church as identical. 132 He asserts that Botticelli has accepted the tradition of the Virgin-Church, but has created a new visual metaphor for it, “represent[ing] the events related in the Apocalypse as a repetition of the first Nativity, adding the defeated devils disappearing into Hell and all the inhabitants of Heaven rejoicing.” 133

Botticelli and many others saw the year 1500 as fraught with the apocalyptic meaning to which the inscription alludes. Like many of his contemporaries, Botticelli interpreted the French invasions as embodying the Biblical woes of the Apocalypse during that anxiety-laden time. Savonarola was only one, though an influential one, among many who believed that in order to be renewed the church, had

128 Lightbown 1989, 250.
129 Hatfield 1995, 96.
130 Hatfield 1995, 106, suggests that because of its placement, on a white band over the blue background at the top of the picture, the inscription might be an “afterthought.” But Hatfield believes that even if it was, it was Botticelli who painted it there.
131 Lightbown 1989, 251.
132 Lightbown 1989, 252.
133 Ibid.
to be destroyed first by the prophesied Apocalypse which they believed was imminent.\textsuperscript{134} Such believers welcomed that destruction. Lightbown thus interprets Botticelli's painting as the post-apocalyptic renovation of the church through the Nativity, or the birth of Christ to Mary, when the church will be reborn and the devils will be buried again in Hell. The twelve crowns similarly represent the Twelve Apostles of the reborn church. In light of this iconography, it has been suggested that “Sandro believed Italy was passing through the two tribulations foretold in the Apocalypse and that the church was sunk in its last days of corruption and decay.”\textsuperscript{135} However, Lightbown believes that even by the year 1500 it may still have been politically dangerous to openly express such Savonarolan ideas.\textsuperscript{136} So given the time and place of its creation, the painting at best “expresses the convictions of an obstinate but prudent \textit{piagnone}.”\textsuperscript{137} The argument is persuasive, especially if one considers the inscription above the picture as translated above, which offers a clear statement of Botticelli's own apocalyptic beliefs.

While Botticelli was acquainted with people who were both for and against Savonarola, it is not conclusively known whether Botticelli was actually a follower of Savonarola. Vasari asserts that Botticelli was indeed a \textit{piagnone} but he provides no supporting proof.\textsuperscript{138} The material usually adduced as evidence is indirect, and is drawn from his brother Simone Filipepi's \textit{Chronicle}. Simone reports that people tended to gather in Botticelli's workshop to converse about local events. On at least one occasion Sandro had asked Doffo Spini (dates?), the leader of the \textit{Compagnacci}, and one of those who had interrogated Savonarola, to tell him truthfully “what sins had been found in Fra Girolamo to make him deserve such a vile death;” whereupon Doffo answered him, “Sandro, I'll tell you the truth, we

\textsuperscript{134} Hatfield 1995, “there was a widespread belief that the end might come in 1500.” Hatfield cites Marjorie Reeves, \textit{The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachism}, Oxford 1969, 313.
\textsuperscript{135} Lightbown 1989, 253.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., also Hatfield 1995 concurs with this notion of the danger of appearing too pro-Savonarolan at this time, 103.
\textsuperscript{137} Lightbown 1989, 253.
\textsuperscript{138} Vasari 1963, 87. “Of this sect he was an adherent.”
never found any venial sin in him, let alone mortal.” Spini further excused himself personally, blaming one of the other inquisitors for the decision to kill Savonarola, explaining that if Savonarola had been allowed to live, the wrought-up people of Florence, who expected an execution, “would have taken us and cut us to pieces[;] the matter had gone so far that we decided [Savonarola and his companions] must die to save us.” Botticelli’s remarks about Savonarola's death, as reported by his brother, suggest at the very least that Sandro was appalled at the nature of Savonarola's execution. A second testimony regarding Spini's remarks is provided by Lorenzo Violi (1464-?), a notary who attended and described many of Savonarola's sermons. Violi reported Doffo's conversation in Botticelli’s workshop as saying the Compagnacci hadn't intended to “cast the friar of San Francesco [sic?] into the fire and that they had assured him of this fact.” Instead, Violi claims, the wealthy, influential, pleasure-seeking Compagnacci had only wanted to interfere with Savonarola's activities and harrass him so that he would leave Florence. Regardless of whether Botticelli was or wasn't a piagnone, it is still important to recognize that the desire of his (unknown) patron was equally if not more important in determining the painting’s content.

Rab Hatfield has written extensively about this painting and its interpretation. He takes a different approach from Lightbown, but arrives eventually at the same conclusion. Hatfield attempts to ferret out the sources of the imagery directly from Savonarola's sermons of 1493-96. Following is a good example of Hatfield's iconographical method: he quotes from the Christmas Eve sermon of 1493, in which the friar describes his vision of “a venerable woman with olive branch in hand” who descends from “the bosom of the Eternal Father,” singing of how the earth (the Holy Virgin) is filled with God's compassion, or Mercy (misericordia). The woman implores the holy child (Truth) to be born from the

139 Martines 2006, describes Doffo Spini as the leader of the group. 347
140 See note 118 supra.
142 See note 121 supra.
earth (Virgin Mary). Then, “Now as soon as this Truth [the child] had come forth, Mercy [the earth, the Virgin Mary] met with her.”¹⁴³ Truth as a personification is female [her], but Christ as the embodiment of Truth in the world is male. This birth translates the Nativity into a symbol of the fulfillment of the prophecy that Christ's birth reconciles the apparently opposing heavenly virtues of mercy and truth. Before Botticelli this notion of reconciliation had been associated with paintings of the Annunciation but not with those of the Nativity.¹⁴⁴ In fact the idea of reconciliation as a technique of reform, as preached by Savonarola, was in common usage by others as well. Like Lightbown, Hatfield credits Botticelli with the innovation of using the Nativity to symbolize that same process. Hatfield further relates the crowns depicted in the Mystic Nativity to Savonarola's Palm Sunday sermon of 1497, in which the friar asserted the hopeful idea that Christ and Mary had already entered Florence as the city’s King and Queen.¹⁴⁵ Connections between Savonarola and Botticelli are also drawn to explain the appearance of the devils in the picture. In his Assumption Day sermon of 1496, Savonarola implies that the Antichrist is coming as a red dragon, as described in Revelations. By reforming their insufficiently holy ways, he preaches, the Florentine people can be instrumental in vanquishing evil and saving Florence for God and Mary: she wants to give birth to “the Florentine people, a spiritual people, a good people.”¹⁴⁶ Florence will become the New Jerusalem, and the increased piety of her citizens will cause evil to be banished from the earth, just as the devils sink into the cracks. Hatfield admits that the quotations from Savonarola “appear” to illuminate his own understanding of the symbolism, and acknowledges the speculative nature of his ideas: “To be sure, the correspondence between the painting[s] and the sermon[s] [is] not precise.”¹⁴⁷ Yet he continues along such lines as a means to

¹⁴³ Hatfield 1995, 90. In footnotes throughout the paper Hatfield carefully documents his sources of Savonarola's words. These quotations are drawn from Hatfield.
¹⁴⁴ Hatfield 1995, 91.
¹⁴⁵ Hatfield 1995, 112. “If the Mystical Nativity does represent the Millennium in any real way … it is in this respect unique … and thoroughly heretical.”
¹⁴⁶ Hatfield 1995, 97. In his footnote on this page and others, Hatfield cites his sources for the quotations from Savonarola.
¹⁴⁷ Hatfield 1995, 91.
provide what was at that time a new and fruitful interpretation.

After further discussion of the symbolic elements, Hatfield proposes three hypotheses. The first is that the Mystic Nativity was painted for the boys in a Savonarolan group, to make Biblical references more understandable to young minds. However, Hatfield eventually doubts this interpretation because the leader of this group – Bernardino dei Fanciulli – and his group of boys were forced into exile before the painting was finished.

The second theory is that the painting was a disguised representation of the Millennium, interpreted as meaning that the Apocalypse and the subsequent Second Coming (the Millennium) were actually about to happen. According to this view, the contemporary threats to Italy – the invasion of a second French king Louis XII in 1499, and the rise of Cesare Borgia in 1500 – were seen as the agents of destruction which Savonarola predicted and at times claimed. These forces would bring about the apocalypse and thus allow the renovation of the church to begin. A future messiah, a French king, would arise and found a new church. The reign of Rome would be over and Florence would become the site of the New Jerusalem, Savonarola preached. It is clear that this view would have been taken as heretical by the church in Rome. So Hatfield rejects this Millennial interpretation of the painting because of its heretical implications. Despite Vasari's hints to the contrary, Botticelli was not thought to have been a heretic.

Hatfield's third suggestion is that the painting is allegorical, describing Christ's birth as the solution to the Apocalypse predicted in Revelations, and thus falling within religious doctrine acceptable at the time. Hatfield concludes that “Whatever it is that the Mystic Nativity shows, the

148 Lightbown 1989, 252.
150 Vasaari 1963, 86.
chances are that it took great courage for Botticelli to paint it.”¹⁵¹ In this third interpretation and in his conclusions, he fully concurs with Lightbown in that both writers believe this painting does actually reflect the impact of Savonarola's presence on Botticelli.

Paul Joannides adds a different dimension to discussions of this painting. He finds that it exemplifies a tendency in Botticelli's paintings over the years to increase in expressiveness and “diminish [in] physical beauty.” In his religious paintings, Joannides asserts, Botticelli made smaller volumes, flattened his form and overall used a more “severe” style of execution.¹⁵² Citing the Mystic Nativity as an example, he sees the Virgin “dominating” all the other figures through seeming relatively enlarged in comparison. He also sees flatness in Botticelli’s “turn[ing] the whole painting into a tensely patterned surface” with the dancing angels “as abstract as a fabric design.”¹⁵³ These comments are consistent with the view that Botticelli sought for greater intensity of expression of religious feeling throughout the period of Savonarola's influence.

Why did it take such courage for Botticelli to make this painting, in which he seems to respond to Savonarola's sermons? He may have wished to comply with them because he had been moved to greater piety by Savonarola's doctrines despite the fact that Savonarola had been condemned and executed by the community's leaders. Perhaps it was also the confessions of Spini that Savonarola was in fact innocent of heresy that bolstered Botticelli's faith in his leadership. But because there was such political and social turmoil remaining for a period of time after Savonarola's death, it felt dangerous to support his doctrines in a way as open as this painting appears to.

These paintings show a marked change in Botticelli's approach to his subjects in the approximately ten years between his work on the San Marco altarpiece and the Mystic Nativity. There is a great difference in the emotional content and meaning of the paintings. The former is a simple but

¹⁵¹ Hatfield 1995, 114.
¹⁵² Joannides 1995, 164-165.
¹⁵³ Ibid.
patently devotional celebration of Mary's coronation in heaven. There is no complexity or ambiguity requiring explanation suggested by this well-known theme. In sharp contrast, the *Mystic Nativity* brims over with groupings of figures engaged in different activities that suggest different meanings and responses: Mary and (presumably) Joseph adore the child before them. The worshipers to the right and left of the family are being shown and instructed to understand the miraculous scene. The angels on the roof and in the heavens, already having knowledge of its importance, sing and dance in celebration of the birth. The meaning of the embracing pairs of humans and angels is less clear; their dreamy facial expressions suggest some transitional state, as between sleep and waking or life and death. The small devils sinking or being pulled by unseen forces into cracks in the earth represent the active ejection of evil that is being cast down into Hell.

The structure of the two paintings engages the viewer differently: the San Marco altarpiece pulls our gaze upwards to the coronation scene, in which Mary passively receives the crown while all eyes and bodies incline towards her.\(^{154}\) The *Mystic Nativity* similarly focuses our attention on Mary but as part of the trio with her son and husband, and she is active not only in her role as mother but also through her activity in adoring her son. The focus of the picture is somewhat split between the Holy Family in the center, the heavenly celebrators above, the characters reacting to the event of the birth all around the central trio, and the dancing pairs and disappearing devils below. There is an interesting tension too between the ordered symmetrical static placement of the figures above and below the Holy Family and the motion of those who surround them: a centrifugal force moves from the center, spreading out to the borders, and enhancing the sense of movement of the circling angels at the top and the embracing couples at the bottom, who themselves almost seem to be dancing.

Charles Burroughs wrote about Botticelli’s efforts in the San Marco altarpiece to find a

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\(^{154}\) Borroughs 2014, notes the relative rarity of depictions of the coronation in which Mary is crowned by God rather than Jesus.
compromise among competing pressures while still maintaining his own artistic goals. On one hand, Botticelli was certainly aware of Savonarola's attitudes because the friar had been in Florence before. Botticelli surely knew of the friar's rejection of artists' representing holy figures in the most luxurious clothing of the time as well as the his repugnance for the portrayal of nude Venuses. On the other hand, as part of Lorenzo de' Medici's circle, Botticelli also knew of Marsilio Ficino's “infusion of Neo-Platonist ideas into Christian theology,” which constituted pressure of a different type from a different source. A debate about the proper nature of sacred images had been going on since the late 1480s, importantly powered by the concern about “just how men and women should access transcendence” amidst a plethora of available theories. In a novel way, Botticelli made the depicted saints “operate … as intermediaries between the transcendent event [the coronation] and the beholder,” and in so doing, created in the San Marco altarpiece “one of the most remarkable and innovative images in a revolutionary era of image making, already responding to an atmosphere of gathering crisis and self-questioning.” Burroughs's observations are interesting especially because they show that as early the early 1490s, before Savonarola had come into his full prominence, Botticelli was already trying to juggle the various influences to which he and the rest of the Florentines were subject.

In terms of stylistic considerations, the earlier painting, perhaps because it is so much larger, shows more generously proportioned passages, such as the draping of the fabrics over the figures' bodies. Differences between the paintings no doubt reflect their different functions as well as their sizes. The altarpiece must be able to communicate across the space of a church or chapel and be legible from some distance; the smaller painting, in contrast, is meant for private devotion and examination at close range. Because of the distance from which the works are viewed then, in the

155 Burroughs 2014, 10.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid., 24.
158 Ibid., 12 and 27.
altarpiece fabrics flow more gracefully and fluidly than in the *Mystic Nativity*, where space is more restricted. In the larger picture facial expressions are more fully developed with subtler modeling of facial features, something perhaps not possible in the smaller work where body language has to do more of the work. It could be said that the San Marco altarpiece is more conventionally beautiful in its symmetry and clarity. While the palette in both works is similar, the fewer figures depicted in the larger painting allow for a less claustrophobic sense of the work. The quality of things being packed together in the *Nativity* in such a contained area evokes a sense of urgency or intensity appropriate for private contemplation.

Let us return to Botticelli's inscription: “This picture I, Alessandro, painted at the end of the year 1500, in the troubles of Italy, in the half-time after the time, during the fulfilment of the eleventh of John, in the second woe of the Apocalypse, in the loosing of the devil for three and a half years. Afterward he shall be chained according to the twelfth, and we shall see him as in this picture.” We are stimulated to wonder what the artist is trying to communicate. His inscription clearly alludes to the prophecies of Revelation, but the imagery seems so unusual and, as both Lightbown and Hatfield conclude, the artist's specific meaning is hard to decipher. Botticelli was not the only one in late fifteenth century Florence who might have felt confusion about the exact meaning of the predictions regarding time in Revelations. According to Hatfield, Chapter 11 of Revelations, which “completes the Second Woe of the Seventh Seal,” foretells two holy witnesses, clothed in sackcloth and breathing fire from their mouths, who were to come to prophesy in the holy city before being killed, their bodies ascending in a cloud. Botticelli, like others living through the “troubles” of Italy, may have thought these things had recently happened, and that the two holy witnesses were Savonarola and his colleague, Fra Domenico da Pescia. These men had prophesied for the requisite specified time (three and a half years), with 'fire' and 'thunderings' coming from their mouths, then been killed and ascended to heaven.

159 Hatfield 1995, 98.
in the smoke of the fire in which their bodies had been burned. Donald Weinstein provides a discussion of the confusion generated by efforts to understand the timetable for the Apocalypse predicted in Revelations, which had generated hot debate amongst ecclesiastical scholars since the time of St. Augustine (354-430 CE). It was important to contemporaries of Botticelli to resolve the confusion: even though the view that the Apocalypse was imminent was seen as heretical by the church, many people anticipating the year 1500 nonetheless believed it was at hand, which created much anxiety and a burning desire to be clear about exactly if and when it would happen. It seems that whether Botticelli was a committed *piagnone* or not, whether he even heard Savonarola preach in person or not, he was indeed infected by the anxiety that plagued his generation, and one can find the response to that anxiety in the *Mystic Nativity* and other works he created. In this light, the painting can be interpreted as a gift of thanksgiving to God for having survived the half-millennium, and as a prayer to be kept safe going forward

Botticelli’s response to Savonarola and the half-millennial anxieties can also be gauged in another pair of paintings that both depict the *Lamentation*, one dated 1490-92 (now in the Alte Pinakotek in Munich, figure 2-4), the second dated c.1495 (now in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan, figure 2-5). The first painting was made before Savonarola had become such a force in Florence, while the second was made during the peak of his influence, following the invasion of Florence on 17 November 1494. Thus these paintings may help us evaluate the effect of Savonarola on Botticelli.

The Munich painting, the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ with Saint Jerome, Saint Paul and Saint Peter*, was painted for a chapel in San Paolino, a church at a corner of Botticelli's own street. It depicts the dead Christ draped in a graceful supine arc over his mother's lap as Mary supports his shoulder, with an arm clasped around Christ's hip. The Magdalen meanwhile bends over Christ's feet,

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160 Ibid., 98-99.
holding his lower legs in her arms. Another young woman, kneeling, cradles Christ's head in her hands and presses her tearful face against his. Saint Jerome, holding a rock, and Saint Paul holding a sword stand on the left, while Saint Peter stands erect, off to the right, observing the scene and lifting his right hand in an expressive gesture. The group at the center stands in front of the opening of a tomb, a sarcophagus visible inside. The figures are posed with choreographic elegance; the facial expressions are dramatic and immediately legible. The palette is bright and of intense hue, featuring reds, orange and gold – lively colors which read as a contrast to the mournful subject matter. Lightbown found the painting lacking in passion on the whole, stating that it represents the more coldly ornate aspects of Botticelli's art from around 1489 and 1492, and “suggests satisfaction in a well-wrought artifact rather than any deeper urge of feeling” in contrast to the later Lamentation.162

Indeed, the Lamentation over the Dead Christ of 1495 (figure 2-5) differs greatly from the earlier one in composition, palette, and affect. Whereas the earlier painting leads the eye in a gentle horizontal flow following the arc of Christ's body as it stretches out over his mother's lap, the later one depicts Christ in a flexed posture, folding limply inward in death. Though both paintings engage us instantly with Christ's body, the later painting directs our eye to follow a counter clockwise circle from Christ's legs to his head and up around the other faces. This painting is definitively vertical in comparison with the graceful horizontality of the earlier painting. This difference heightens the emotional intensity of the later painting, commanding our involvement: its verticality and the crowded positioning of figures pulls us more insistently into the scene, increasing the urgency of the appeal to attend to the event displayed there. The close arrangement of the figures in the later painting was partly influenced by the circumstances of the commission, for an altar at the foot of a pier in Santa Maria Maggiore. The figures huddle around the swooning Mary, who holds Christ on her lap. Mary herself is supported tenderly by John the Evangelist, the feeling reinforced in a falling sequence of draping arms:

162 Lightbown 1989, 207.
his right arm is draped over her right, and her right over Christ's legs (figure 2-5a). The waterfall-like cascade of arms underscores the sad affect of the painting, pointing down to the earth. Lightbown identifies two Marys holding either end of Christ's body, Mary Cleophas and Mary Salome, each again tenderly executing her job, supporting Christ's head or feet. Mary Magdalen, to the left of John, bows over in grief, covering her face with both hands (figure 2-5b). Behind this grouping of six, Saint Joseph of Arimathea stands upright and gazes to the heavens, perhaps predicting Christ's joyful ascension, lifting aloft the crown of thorns in one hand and the nails from the cross in the other.\footnote{Lightbown 1989, 209, provides the identifications of the figures. The suggestions of feelings contained in the details of composition – downward and upward – are mine.} The entire assemblage is crowded into a small space before the entrance to the tomb, inside which the sarcophagus can be seen. With the exception of Joseph, all the figures intertwine, their physical entanglement suggesting and perhaps representing their intense, shared grief. Certain hues are less intense, such as Mary's dress, the pale body of Christ, his and the Virgin Mary's faces, the headgear of Mary Magdalen and one of the other Marys, and Christ's shroud, which leads the eye upward from his swathed feet at the lower left to his head at the upper right, which it also encircles tenderly. The somber color black is prominent, and certain passages of orange-red, in this context, suggest the blood of the crucifixion and also participate in another circle begun by the pale shroud on which Christ lies. That circularity is augmented in the faces shown in fig. 2-5a. Overall the facial expressions seem less exaggerated and stilted, more natural and genuine. A sense of quiet, profound grief emanates from the painting. Botticelli here has provided an image one could imagine oneself quietly relating to in a contemplative moment. Overall, the painting seems more expressive than decorative, conveys more intense feeling.

The later Lamentation suggests either a different mood or an intensification of belief, possibly related to the presence of Savonarola in Florence. The two paintings are separated in time by the
invasion of Charles VIII, which as we have seen was read by many as proof of Savonarola's predictions of apocalypse. Did Botticelli's reaction to that event and the friar's prophesies energize and frighten him into moving from a more passive, rhythmic representation of the Pieta to a more militant, vertical one? Though separated by only a few years in time, the two Lamentations are worlds apart in their aim and feeling, with the former being a much more gentle, elegant work in comparison to the greater expressivity and spiritual intensity of the later one.

Another pair of paintings that similarly reflect this shift (and also bracket the invasion of Charles VIII) deals with the Crucifixion: the Trinity with Saint Mary Magdalen, Saint John the Baptist, and Tobias and the Angel, also known as the Pala della Convertite (1491-93) (figure 2-6), and the Mystic Crucifixion (c. 1497) (figure 2-7). The Pala della Convertite was commissioned for the main chapel of Sant'Elisabetta della Convertite, the convent for penitent prostitutes and courtesans of Florence. The Convertite convent was founded in 1329, and the order rebuilt its church and convent beginning in 1466. Due to problems with funding, the painting was not ordered until 1491 and not finished until 1493. The inclusion of only Saints Mary Magdalen and John the Baptist is sufficiently explained by the profession of the group for which the order was founded, for the former was a reformed prostitute and the latter was the patron saint of Florence.164 Mary Magdalen is depicted to the left of the Trinity with Crucifixion, clothed in her body-length hair and posed in front of the cave in the wilderness to which she retired as a penitent hermit. John the Baptist, on the right, is also an appropriate choice as another wilderness dweller. A puzzling feature of this painting is the presence of a much smaller-scale image of Saint Tobias and the archangel Gabriel on the lower left (figure 2-6a): Lightbown attributed their presence to the patronage of a member of the guild of doctors and apothecaries (Arte de' Medici e Speziali), whose patron was the archangel Gabriel.165

165 Lightbown 1989, 206.
The facial expressions of the figures in the painting create an impression of emotional understatement. The palette is also muted, utilizing many browns which range in tone from eggshell to the deeper browns of Mary Magdalen's hair, John's animal skin, as well as background elements such as the cave on the left and the rocky setting in general. The cross seems to emerge from beyond the horizon line of the background, as though erected at some distance below it. Perhaps the muted facial expressions, reinforced by the dull palette, are meant to convey contemplation, especially that of God the Father whose eyes seem focused inward, on his thoughts. The picture is quiet and does not arouse violent emotional reactions but is meant to inspire piety and submission to God's will. Its original purpose, after all, was to provide a neutral object permitting the occupants of the Convertite to emulate Christ's sacrifice and the Magdalene's penitence, to accept God's grace, and to look inward themselves.

The Crucifixion with the Penitent Magdalen and an Angel (Mystic Crucifixion), (c. 1497) was painted in tempera and oil on canvas, and has suffered greatly with time. It has undergone many restorations, leaving some blank areas, so that the image is suggestive rather than complete. Nevertheless, many elements can be discerned adequately to attempt to understand the basic features of the painting. The pigment which remains suggests intense hues, of red in the Magdalen's cloak and the green of her dress, as well as the green area below the depiction of Florence and the white sky subtly deepening into aqua rising above the city.

Lightbown's description and interpretation of the painting was based on close examination allowed to him by the Fogg Museum; I will summarize the key points of his description and interpretation here. Following Lightbown's resulting report, at the painting's center we find Christ on a tall cross, a white loincloth draped around him. The configuration of his bending head, peaceful smile and dripping wounds resemble those of the Pala della Convertite's Christ. Mary Magdalen, prostrate at the foot of the cross, wraps her arms around the bottom of it and gazes up at Christ. A small

animal emerges from a fold in her gown, just above her feet. A white-robed angel alights near the right side of the cross, his gown flowing behind him, his right arm holding a red-handled sword poised aloft, in preparation to strike a brown animal suspended by its hind legs from his left hand. To the left of the cross the city of Florence, nestled between green countryside and mountains, is recognizable by its architectural features: the Duomo, the Baptistery, Giotto's Campanile, and the Palazzo dell Signoria. While the city is bathed in light, the upper right corner of the painting is filled with storm clouds which threaten the city. The upper left corner of the painting is occupied by God the Father holding a book and raising his right hand in a bidding gesture. Barely visible below the mandorla occupied by God are four angels bearing shields featuring bright red crosses, the armorial device of the Florentine population; the shields are more legible than the angels. Within the black cloud area and extending into the grey hills rising to the right beneath it can be seen brown devils and flaming torches falling into a flame-emitting crevice in the center of the extreme right edge of the painting.167

Lightbown bases his identification of the patron on his reading of the symbolic meaning of the shields, and concludes that its patron must have been a *piagnone*, as it shows “the salvation of repentant Florence.”168 Lightbown finds evidence for his interpretation “in the neglected clue [of] the shields borne by the angels,” i.e. that they represent “the true arms of the *popolo* (people) of Florence.”169 Expanding on this interpretation, Lightbown references Savonarola's predictions of the future of Florence as mentioned in the discussion of the *Mystic Nativity*. He adds to that material the fact that Savonarola had supported Republican ideals of the rights of the people to participate in government, somewhat suppressed under the Medici, and a prime reason the anti-republicans of the elite class had participated in plotting Savonarola's downfall. He also mentions the notion that Florence had been saved from conquest by Charles VIII because of God's grace through Savonarola's

167 Lightbown 1989, 242-246. I follow Lightbown, as the elements are so difficult to examine in reproduction.
168 Lightbown 1989, 244.
169 Ibid.
intervention with Charles. Thus Lightbown concludes

...we can see all of these events reflected in [the picture's] imagery. Florence repents beneath the Cross of Christ; violence and fraud [i.e. the animals] leave the city and are smitten by the angel of peace; the hellish destruction that menaces the city is averted at God's command by his angels, who repel it with the shields of the governo popolare. Even the Cross of Christ, planted outside the walls of Florence, may allude to Savonarola's teaching that the city was destined to be the New Jerusalem. The conclusion must be that the Fogg Crucifixion was painted for a follower of Savonarola, probably in 1497.170

This interpretation certainly suggests the attitude of the patron, who remains unknown. While the painting tells us nothing specific about Botticelli's personal beliefs, it demonstrates that he clearly was aware of events in the city and the ideas of Savonarola, especially around 1497, just one year before the friar's death.

In reference to this painting, Joannides sees potential French influences. He notes that the French invasions of the 1490s “inevitably cut new and unexpected channels of transmission” in both directions from north to south.171 He states that the imagery – the combination of a crucifix with the representation of the defeat of Satan by the angelic army of Saint Michael – can be found in at least two French sources: a Burgundian manuscript made between 1480 and 1490, and a Crucifixion by Josse Lieferinxe (figure 2-8) from around the same time.172 But even without these sources, “a French inflection in the Mystic Crucifixion's iconography could have a political dimension” in that the French invasion of 1494 might have contributed to the fall of the Medici.173

Joannides provides another interesting speculation, that Savonarola himself may have carried a Ferrarese emotiveness of style into Florence, which influenced his own taste in art and to which Botticelli reacted.174 Reported by biographer Fra Benedetto as having been trained in drawing as a child, Savonarola might at that time have been exposed to Ferrarese painters and absorbed their style

172 Joannides 1995, 170-171 (see figure 2-14).
174 Joannides 1995, 174. Cosimo Tura (c. 1430-1498) was active at that time and produced work for the D'Este family of Ferrara, notably the Palazzo Schifanoia.
and taste. An example of such emotion-laden style may be found in the work of Cosimo Tura (1430-1495), a founder of the Ferrarese school (figure 2-9). Given such training and in combination with his personality, Savonarola's “influence would have favored decorative austerity and emotional intensity,” which Botticelli might have incorporated into his work.

In searching to explain the increased spiritual intensity of the later works in general, Joannides hypothesizes that the explanation may lie partly in “the common lot of a regretful and haunted old age.” He finds a “leaden undifferentiation of tone and texture, and a lack of interest in vibrancy of color,” as well as an abandonment of surface beauty replaced by bitterness, a sense of sin, and perhaps a sensitivity to the emotional needs of his patron.

Yet Joannides doesn't take Botticelli's ageing to be the sole factor in the increased spirituality of his later work. He also finds that in these years, Botticelli “must have been undergoing a very profound crisis and perhaps feelings of despair.” Joannides speculates that Botticelli's sense of crisis and despair might also have been caused by the “preaching and then the trial and execution of Savonarola.” He goes so far as to interpret the painting as a “very personal allegory embodied by the foreground figures,” presumably the Magdalen, the angels and the two animals. He doesn't spell out what he means by “personal allegory,” but he does include this statement in a passage in which he describes the inscription over the Mystic Nativity as evidence of the painter's “level of intelligence and mystical fervor that put one in mind of a Blake.” According to this view, we can suggest here that the repentant devotion of the Magdalen and the driving out of the two animals might be seen as

175 Joannides 1995, quotes Fra Benedetto: “imparo anche da se alquanto l'arte de disegno” (he learned something of the art of drawing) my translation, 173.
178 Ibid.
179 Joannides 1995, 172. He supports his assertion with reference to the work of high Renaissance scholar and critic Carlo Gamba, who wrote about Botticelli's “troubled spirits” and a depression, physical as well as spiritual, caused by his loyalties, torn between Savonarola and the Medici circle. Carlo Gamba, Boticelli, Milan 1936, 186-187.
180 Joannides 1995, 171.
181 Ibid.
representations of Botticelli's own sense of sinfulness, which he is trying to overcome. Joannides states his belief that whatever difficulties Botticelli was experiencing, the disruption caused by Savonarola must have played a part in it: “the religious intensity and severity of Botticelli's late work is so extreme that it is difficult to imagine who, other than a piagnone, would have been prepared to commission work from him.”

Reviewing these sources with close examination of the works themselves, the conclusion that Botticelli was influenced by Savonarola, either directly or through Savonarola's impact on the Florentine community at a time of trouble (what Botticelli himself refers to as “the troubles of Italy”), seems inescapable. While we cannot prove that he was a piagnone like his brother Simone, Botticelli's response through the shift in his art from the early 1490s to the years around 1500 is clear. Though his inscription above the Mystic Nativity suggests his personal sympathies, we have also seen that whether or not he was a piagnone, he was sufficiently attuned to the tenor of his time for his work to register his responses to current events and concerns.

Chapter 3 – Piero di Cosimo

Piero di Cosimo was born in Florence on January 2, 1462, approximately seventeen years after

Botticelli. His family had settled in Florence just five years before his birth; he was the eldest of six sons and two daughters. According to tax records, his father was a blacksmith (fabbro) or tool maker (succiellinaio), not, as Vasari claimed, a goldsmith. When Piero was five, his father bought a house for his expanding family, where Piero lived for the rest of his life, and owned probably before the age of thirty two, after his father's death sometime before 1494. There is no record that Piero ever married and until late in his life he lived with family, alone or, near the end of his life, with a pupil-assistant. There is evidence that he was a garzone (apprentice) in the workshop of Cosimo Rosselli by the age of eighteen, or possibly younger. Although not unique in this regard, Piero assumed his master's name Cosimo as his own, showing an unusually close and trusting bond between master and pupil. It is also known that at some point late in life Piero adopted the name, Ubaldini, as a surname. The Ubaldinis were a noble family with whom his connection is unclear, but he may have wanted to raise his social status through these means.

Vasari claims that Piero went to Rome with Cosimo Rosselli in 1481 to work on frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, but Geronimus doubts it, based on lack of any evidence of work demonstrating Piero's characteristic style in the works Rosselli painted there. If he went, it would have been the only time in his life that he ventured beyond Florence and its environs. In any event, Piero was more interested in panel painting, with oil and egg tempera, than in the kind of large-scale fresco that he would have

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184 Vasari's various inaccuracies will be pointed out as they occur. Sharon Fermor, in Piero di Cosimo: Fiction, Invention and Fantasia, (London: Reaktion Books, 1993, 8) assets that Vasari exaggerated his criticisms of Piero because he was concerned that Piero's eccentricities would go counter to his own efforts to raise the status of artists generally. Vasari thus tried to make him an example of how artists should not be. (See Vasari 1963, 177, as the possible source of her conclusion.)

185 Waldman, Louis Alexander, “Fact, Fiction, Hearsay: Notes on Vasari's Life of Piero di Cosimo,” The Art Bulletin, Vol. 82, No. 1, (March 2000), 174: “Piero's adoption of a surname later in life, following the practice of many artisans of the period, indicates that he possessed a degree of social self-awareness and even pretension, as well as a sense of kinship, such as [Vasari's] Lives would never have led us to expect.”

186 Geronimus 2006, 14.
had to undertake in Rome, another argument against this theory. Panel painting, in oil or tempera on a support, on altarpieces, tondi, spalliere and cassone, suited his gifts better and enabled him to develop a group of loyal patrons in Florence including the wealthy Capponi family and various religious institutions. The smaller works he produced were usually suited only for private consumption in the inner chambers of those who could afford to decorate their homes in this manner, such as the Strozzi. His avoidance of Rome also meant he was not exposed to the influence of Raphael, the leading painter in Rome at the time. Vasari criticized him for this parochialism. The relative isolation from Rome's artistic milieu, however, might have worked well for Piero, assisting in the development of his unique specializations.

Piero participated in two guilds. In 1504 he became a full-fledged member of the Arte dei Medici e Speziali (the Guild of Doctors and Apothecaries), which oversaw the organization and professional standards of the local painters, although he had participated in that organization as far back as his early 20s. He was also a member of the Compagnia di San Luca, which, in addition to painters, also included members of other artistic professions such as manuscript illuminators, miniaturists, goldbeaters, and painters on other materials, such as glass and porcelain. There is some evidence that he also practiced manuscript illumination, which involves different skills from panel painting. Yet manuscript illumination, with its demand for attention to detail and involvement with intense colors, overlapped with Piero's capacities for very close observation and an expansive palette.  

As a member of this guild, Piero participated in its committee to discuss and vote on the best location for erecting Michelangelo's David, in 1504. Piero is known to have had at least one student, and certainly had contact with other painters. In contrast to newly-discovered archival information relating to Piero's

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187 Geronimus 2006, “[Manuscript illumination's] demands for exacting patience and gimlet-eyed detail are traits perfectly matched by Piero's meticulous painting technique and tonalities as luminous as brightly coloured glazed porcelain,” 17.

188 Ibid.

189 Geronimus 2006. Piero's “only securely documented pupil, a certain Nicola di Giovanni di Rosa Caprini” came from
personal and professional history, there is limited documentation of his commissions. Piero himself dated only the painting *Jason and Queen Hypsipyle with the Women of Lemnos* of 1499 (figure 3-1). Where it is known and relevant date and/or documentation will be described in the discussion of any such work.\(^{190}\)

With regard to his personality, Vasari branded Piero a true hermetic eccentric:

> He was very abstracted … He was sometimes so absorbed in what he was doing that those who conversed with him were frequently obliged to repeat all they had said for his mind had wandered to other ideas. He was so fond of solitude that his one delight was to wander alone, free to build castles in the air … After his death it appeared that he had lived the life of a brute rather than a man, as he kept himself shut up and would not allow anyone to see him work. He would not allow his rooms to be swept … he would never suffer the fruit-trees of his garden to be pruned … for he loved to see everything wild, saying that nature ought to be allowed to look after itself. \(^{191}\)

And further, that he was so devoted to his art that he barely took care of himself, eating mostly hard-boiled eggs “which he cooked while he was boiling his glue, to save the firing.” He cooked fifty at a time, then consumed them one by one. He also was very sensitive to sounds: “The crying of babies irritated him and so did the coughing of men, the sound of bells, the singing of the friars.”\(^{192}\) He also was so afraid of lightning and thunder that during a storm, he would wrap himself up and hide in the corner until the weather calmed down.

The final part of Vasari's description seems to describe a person with an unusual sensitivity to sounds, and we will see that some of the secular paintings described here can evoke sounds. Vasari's tone here is critical, and as noted by Fermor (see footnote 2 supra), Vasari did seem to want to dramatize, if not make up from whole cloth, stories about Piero's eccentricities because as Fermor suggested, he was concerned that Piero's eccentricities would go counter to his own efforts to raise the status of artists generally.

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\(^{190}\) Geronimus 2006, provides such documentation as is known to exist.
\(^{191}\) Vasari 1963, 176-177.
\(^{192}\) Vasari 1963, 181-183.
But Vasari was not single-mindedly invested in denigrating Piero. He also recognized and admired Piero's gifts and work as an artist. To quote one example, Vasari takes note of Piero's profound delight in observing and painting nature:

Piero's works betray a great diversity distinct from those of others, for he was endowed with a subtlety for investigating curious matters in nature, and executed them without a thought for the time or labour, but solely for his delight and pleasure in art.\textsuperscript{193}

Vasari also highlighted Piero's capacity for “capricious and extravagant invention.” Referring to Piero's creation of masquerades paraded at carnival time, Vasari credits him with having been “one of the first to marshal them [festivals] in the form of triumphal processions.”\textsuperscript{194} Vasari admires the “fine sight at night” of decorated horses and their riders, also footmen, all in livery and carrying torches, followed by “the car or triumph full of ornaments, spoils and curious fancies, which enchanted people and instructed their minds.”\textsuperscript{195} Vasari mentions and describes in detail a particular “car of Death secretly prepared by Piero in the Pope's Hall” which created a “most realistic but a horrid and terrible sight.” \textsuperscript{196}

Although he continued to work well into his later years, Piero apparently was ill for the last several years of his life. During this time he made arrangements for both a devout burial and for commemorative masses to be said on St. Peter's feast day for the subsequent twenty-five years, Saint Peter being his name saint. He also left money to a neighbor who had been helpful to him during his last years.\textsuperscript{197} Piero died of plague on April 12, 1522 at the age of sixty.

Having acquainted ourselves with some facts about Piero's life, it is our next task to investigate

\textsuperscript{193} Vasari 1963, 181.
\textsuperscript{194} Geronimus 2006, 29.
\textsuperscript{195} Vasari 1963, 178.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{197} Geronimus 2006, op. cit. On two occasions, a year before his death and less than a month before his death, Piero bequeathed 50 florins to his neighbor Giovan Simone di Marco di Bartolomeo di maestro Lacha who had helped Piero as he aged by providing him with food and clothing, 18.
the possible influence of events during the 1490s and early 1500s on Piero's work. This task is
compromised by the fact there is only the one painting to which Piero himself affixed a date, the
aforementioned *Jason and Queen Hypsipyle with the Women of Lemnos*, of 1499 (figure 3-1). Other
than this date, possible dates and ranges of dates have been established by several means: first is
documents detailing amounts paid for certain works at certain times; another is visual analyses by art
historians which note stylistic similarities and differences between works, which are then ascribed to
different phases of the artist's career. Other art historical facts, such as noting dates when certain artists
such as Leonardo, were in Florence enables attempts to date works by combining the data of visual
analysis with the speculations about the possible influence of such exposure to other artists or their
work. My argument relies mainly on dates proposed by Geronimus, the major contemporary
contributor to Piero scholarship. Using these dating assignments, an attempt will be made to evaluate
changes over time that might reflect Piero's reactions to his political and social environment.

Piero received commissions for quite a number of religious paintings throughout his career.
The tondi, round in shape as their name suggests, were much valued by clients as private devotional
pieces, and many inspired and were copied by other artists. Piero was not the only artist to paint tondi
during this period. For example, Botticelli made a number of tondi around this time, for example the
*Virgin and Child with Six Angels (Madonna della Melagrana, 1487, figure 3-2)* and the *Virgin and
Child with Three Angels (Madonna del Padiglione, c. 1493, figure 3-3)*. Several characteristics of
Piero's tondi that could be examined are degree of simplicity of composition, greater or less elaborate
costuming of figures, greater or less use of gold in the works, the absence or presence of intensification
of the impression of piety, or of a greater concern for the soul's future in the afterlife. Changes in the
direction of greater simplicity and piety would be in accordance with Savonarola's influential
pronouncements regarding what should be considered beautiful and appropriate in religious paintings.
In light of the previous chapter on Botticelli, the next logical question would be: is there any evidence
of change in Piero's tondi during the decades before and after 1500?

At the start of the period, around 1490, he produced the *Madonna and Child with Saints Mary Magdalen and John the Baptist* (figure 3-4), a finely finished oil-on-panel painting in which the figures are arranged upon first glance in a soothingly symmetrical pyramidal configuration. The Christ child, however, leans to the viewer's left, paralleled in the tilt of John's head and Mary's proper left shoulder, and counterbalanced by the opposite direction in which John's staff points. The background is quite complex: people in the distance ascend a curved road in the left background in addition to a variety of other landscape elements: the unusually ochre-faced clouds; the large rocky outcropping on the upper left which looks as though it might crash down into the water below; a village planted into a hillside in the upper right background. The composition contains many more elements than one notices at first glance, creating a sense of richness of composition.

The figures also are richly dressed in flowing robes of intense hue, decorated in finely-detailed gold. All have halos drawn with fine gold lines and Mary also wears a scarf loosely draped over her shoulder, head, and around her neck, which features delicate filigree bands of gold. All the figures seem somewhat preoccupied, perhaps contemplative, and none of the figures looks out at the viewer. The Baptist turns his eyes heavenward while the Magdalen looks down at the infant whose eyes look elsewhere. Mary and Jesus gaze off into space in opposite directions. Our eye is drawn to an interesting though somewhat confusing grouping of hands surrounding the child, piquing our curiosity: we notice then that he is being held tenderly by both women, while his own hands are engaged in exploring the Magdalen's ointment jar, one hand crossing his body near his mother's right hand while with the other he holds the lid up near his right eye. Despite the distracted air of all the participants, this tondo strikes an emotionally warm note, portraying an appealing moment when a mother and her friend share their care for the child, both enveloping him with their hands. The richness of composition and elegant luxury of the delicately gold-adorned clothing do not compromise the emotional tone, which is
subdued and calm, inviting us to join the participants in contemplation and worship. Moreover, our proximity to them enhances our sense of connection with them. For the pious viewer the tondo may stimulate reflection on fundamental themes of the Christian narrative.

Another somewhat later tondo, from around 1495 to 1500, the *Holy Family with Saint Joseph, Young Saint John the Baptist and Angels* (figure 3-5), presents an emotionally cooler appearance, perhaps partly because the viewer is more at a distance, but also because the figures in the tondo are more remote to each other, and because Jesus is not on Mary's lap but again lies diagonally across her shawl, breaking an otherwise symmetrical pyramidal composition. There is again a special interest in hands here, the pointing finger of Joseph leading our eye across the painting to John's hand, then to the baby's hand touching his mother's hand. The facial expressions of Mary and the young John do not indicate much engagement in the scene or even show a quality of contemplation. Only Joseph and the infant Jesus engage visually with someone or something outside themselves. The tondo similarly has significant gold embellishment of the halos and of Mary's mantle. The emotional temperature and appeal of the piece is somewhat increased by the smiling presence of Saint Joseph, whom we shall see is of a type, that of a simple, humble peasant-like character, which Piero uses for many of his older male saints. We do begin to see here Piero's characteristic interest in nature, though the palette seems more muted and less lively than that of the previous tondo.

In another tondo, the *Adoration of the Child* (figure 3-6), from the same decade, we find a similar pyramidal configuration. The apex consists of a landscape element – a precariously balanced stack of rocks -- completing the triangular form, with Mary praying over the baby Jesus who is asleep on another assemblage of rocks, reminiscent of a tomb. In contrast to the others, this tondo features no gold decoration or lavish costumes. But the fabric colors are intense and bright, for example the warm blue of Mary's dress, and the unusual lavender cloth on which Jesus sleeps. In this tondo one sees Piero's love of both man-made and natural landscape details: Piero has placed a village near the upper
left edge of the middle ground, the facades of a basilica, church and other buildings illuminated by the morning sun. Joseph sleeps in a rocky cleft just below and to the left of the village, accompanied by an ass and an ox. In the right middle ground sheep graze on a hill. In addition, there are many birds, other animals and plants. Piero uses nature's cycle of life – birth, death and regeneration – “in all its mesmerising fecundity,” to symbolize Christ's life. For example, “[a] dandelion, connoting the Passion, grows by the edge of a translucent pool, symbolic of purification, and the Virgin's pristine nature. Wriggling near its pebbly bottom [of the pool], miniscule tadpoles signify new life” (figure 3-6a). The smiling face of the sleeping baby along with the barely noticeable sleeping Joseph suggest peace and quietude, giving this tondo an inviting warmth.

The uncertain dating of Piero's works makes what follows a tenuous hypothesis, but could it be possible that the diminishing use of gold in tondi viewed over the decade constitutes a response to Savonarola's preaching against portraying the Madonna as a fine lady rather than a humble woman? It could be posited that while the varieties and intensity of feeling expressed in the different tondi don't appear to represent a major shift in an expressed level of piety, shifts of mood, either on the part of the artist or at the request of his patrons can be noted. Savonarola would not have been able to take exception to any of these tondi on the charge Piero was portraying the holy figures too grandly or with too luxurious dress. In fact, Savonarola might well have approved of Piero's “parochialism” and lack of interest in keeping up with fashionable representational trends. As a group, it does not appear that in his tondi Piero was responding to Savonarola or other stresses of the decade.

Geronimus does however bring up an interesting point about a possible reference to the death of Savonarola in another of Piero's tondi, the *Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist and an Angel* (figure 3-7) from about 1500 to 1510. Seventeen days after the execution of Savonarola,

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198 Geronimus (2006), 166.
Lucca Landucci noted in his *Diary*:

> On the meadow of the *Servi* and of the *Tiratoia* [large open buildings for drying and stretching cloth] certain caterpillars appeared, which devoured everything...and within the space of four days these caterpillars turned the color of gold. The boys caught them, saying: *These are Fra Girolamo's caterpillars!*... They were as follows: they had a human face, and round their face, a diadem (halo)...whilst between the crown and the head was a little cross; their bodies were golden, and they had a small and slender black tail with which they ate [the] slough bushes.²⁰⁰

Conventionally at the time, the caterpillar was understood both as a symbol of Christ's transformation in the Resurrection – emerging from the “chrysalis of his tomb” – but also as an agent of blight, as a devourer like the locusts of the Ten Plagues in Egypt. Geronimus therefore suggests that Landucci likely concluded that the appearance of the caterpillars symbolically “affirmed Savonarola's 'golden life,' while doubling as an omen of the city's plunge into darkness after his demise.”²⁰¹ In other words, Landucci seems to have accepted the notion that, like Christ, Savonarola had been consumed and destroyed by his enemies. In Piero's painting, a caterpillar is posed near his natural predator, a black bird. Geronimus queries whether Piero may also have interpreted Savonarola's execution in this way.²⁰² Whether this was a common metaphor for the demise of Savonarola, and whether it would have come to Piero's attention, are both matters that can only be food for speculation, but the connection would explain the otherwise somewhat puzzling inclusion of the caterpillar in Piero's painting.

Piero's altarpieces from the 1490s might also reflect an influence of the events of that period. Here too we could look at the emphasis on elegance and luxury of costuming with the use of gold versus evidence of observable simplicity and piety. The earliest of three works to be discussed is *The Visitation with Saints Nicholas of Bari and Anthony Abbott* (1489-90, figure 3-8). The panel was commissioned from the twenty-eight year old Piero for a Capponi family chapel in the Santo Spirito

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²⁰¹ Ibid.
²⁰² Ibid.
The Capponi family was one of Florence's wealthy aristocratic families, silk merchants but also owners of a goldsmith company.\textsuperscript{203} They were longtime allies of the Medici, as were most of Piero's patrons, during this time when the Medici still held power.\textsuperscript{204} They were active in Florentine government over several generations as well as serving in the military.\textsuperscript{205} The choice of Saint Nicholas to accompany the Visitation as the subject of the altarpiece reflects the saint's status as the Capponi family's “protector” of their house.\textsuperscript{206} Saint Anthony Abbott, on the right, was associated with Saint Augustine, to whom the order of Santo Spirito belonged, and who had been praised by Augustine as the father of monasticism. Both Nicholas and Anthony were venerated as miracle workers, and Anthony in particular as a healer. The visitation of Mary and Elizabeth was an unusual subject for an altarpiece, but that seems to have been the chapel's identity in the family's mind.\textsuperscript{207}

In terms of composition, Piero dramatized the meeting between the pregnant Mary and her elderly, miraculously pregnant older cousin Elizabeth, consonant with contemporary practice. Again we find the symmetrical balancing of left and right of both the figures and subsidiary elements. Though densely packed with many miniaturized secondary stories, the painting does not seem crowded or claustrophobic, perhaps because of the open sky behind the two women. As an example of the secondary stories, if we look closely at the middle ground on the right, above Anthony's head, we can make out a Massacre of the Innocents, and above that a tiny Annunciation frescoed on the wall of a church.\textsuperscript{208} On the left, above Saint Nicholas, the Adoration of the Shepherds is depicted below tiny Magi, wending their way down the steep trail emerging from a tall rocky prominence. All these secondary images relate to Christ's birth. Particularly appealing is the lovely humble presence Piero

\textsuperscript{203} Geronimus 2006, 160.  
\textsuperscript{204} Geronimus 2006, 200-201.  
\textsuperscript{205} Geronimus 2006, 200.  
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{207} Geronimus 2006, 202.  
\textsuperscript{208} Acknowledgment for this closely observed detail of the Annunciation is due to Gretchen Hirschauer in Geronimus 2015, 116.
gives to the two male saints in the foreground, who, like the Saint Joseph in the second tondo discussed above, could be local peasant farmers for all their simple attire and quiet absorption in their tasks. All the major figures are simply attired in garments of rich intense hues but there is minimal gold displayed. From the standpoint of piety, the greeting between the two women is unaffected and seems a sincere expression of pleasure in meeting. Their clasped hands in the center of the painting demonstrates recognition of their simultaneous and significant pregnancies.\textsuperscript{209} There is no note of pretense or grandiosity here. One feels the expression of a simple piety.

The second painting, the \textit{Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Elizabeth of Hungary, Catherine of Alexandria, Peter and John the Evangelist with Angels (Pala degli Innocenti)} (c. 1493, figure 3-9) has a completely different character. It was commissioned by Piero del Pugliese for his family's chapel in the church of Santa Maria degli Innocenti, adjoining the Ospedale degli Innocenti (foundling home). As a highly-placed member of the silk guild, Piero de Pugliese participated in the phenomenon of confraternities' support of charitable institutions such as the Ospedale. His choices of figures to be included would have aligned with those of the institution itself, which were the protection of women and children. Saint Catherine and Saint Elizabeth were apt subjects for this altarpiece due to their connections with the care of children: Saint Catherine was esteemed for her learning and her protection of unwed mothers, Saint Elizabeth for her patronage of charity, and of children who died young, nurses, widows and young brides. In fact it was one of the orphanage's functions to find husbands for their female charges when the time was right.\textsuperscript{210}

In comparison with the \textit{Visitation}, the composition is more complex, elaborate and formal though basically still a pyramidal structure. An illusion of depth is enhanced by the three steps rising to

\textsuperscript{209} Item., 115.
Mary's throne off a floor patterned in receding squares. The figures being tightly packed into a relatively small space gives a quality of crowding. This is appropriate to the fact that a more complicated story is being told here, in fact, two stories mingled together: a sacra conversazione is being combined with a Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine to the baby Jesus. Geronimus speculates that the six young people who are not the named protagonists could represent some of the orphans cared for in the foundling home.  

In keeping with the theme, then, of concerns about mothers and children, Saint Catherine and Saint Elizabeth were appropriate choices.

There are fewer secondary scenes attempted in the background of this altarpiece, but the details accruing to the main characters and their setting are more elaborate: Mary occupies an elevated throne decorated with tall candelabras on each side, the whole being richly carved like that of a wealthy man's – or a church's – furnishings. Atop the carved arched back of the throne a marble putto supports a red cloth lined with brown, suspended by a thick filament hung around his neck. The cloth creates a canopy over the Virgin's head, the ends of which are caught up and held by two other putti positioned behind and near the top of the candelabras. Saint Catherine is the most elaborately dressed, as befits the celebration of her wedding, with pearls in her hair and a brooch on her shoulder, typical adornments for a bride at the time.

Saint Peter, in another appearance as a simple peasant, belongs in the painting as he is the name saint of the chapel's donor Piero, while John the Evangelist was the patron saint of the Arte della Seta (the silk guild), of which Piero del Pugliese was consul at the time the altarpiece was commissioned. The two women saints with their eager gazes are perhaps the most moving figures in this painting: as Saint Catherine looks wide-eyed at the child, who holds her wedding ring in his left hand, she conveys

211 Geronimus, op. cit (2006), 204.
212 David Franklin, similar to Geronimus's speculation supra, in his catalogue note to this painting (in Dennis Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo: The Poetry of Painting in Renaissance Florence, exh. cat. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2015), suggests that these putti may also symbolize the children cared for in the orphanage, 124.
213 Geronimus (2006), 206; and in footnote 169 on p. 331, Geronimus cites Adrian Randolph as the source of these details (Adrian Randolph, “Performing the Bridal Body,” Art History XXI, No. 2 (June 1998), 182-200.
a sense of wonder and almost disbelief that she has been chosen as his bride. The gaze of Saint Elizabeth, on the other hand, seems less clear in its object; is she looking at Christ or at Saint Catherine? A smile plays about her mouth – of pleasure? reassurance to Saint Catherine? The ambiguity captures our attention and enlivens our interest in this otherwise more emotionally static painting. It is also noteworthy that there is much less concentration on nature in this painting; the landscape depicts a few buildings in the upper left background, and one can just make out an animal form, perhaps a horse or donkey, on the curving road leading to a minute church in the upper left corner of the painting, and a tiny figure positioned between the animal and the church. The lack of emotional engagement we feel in this picture leaves us to wonder about why this painting is less typical of Piero's emotionality. Did he feel less moved by the subject of the commission, or was he too caught up with other concerns to give it his full heart? Vasari reported that the painter was a “great friend” of the master of the Ospedale but tormented him for payments, refusing to let him look at the painting until it was finished and he was paid in full.\textsuperscript{214} Maybe Piero's dissatisfaction with his patron's payment schedule found its way into the tone of the painting. We might also conjecture that Piero himself didn't really like children, if as Vasari reported, “the crying of babies irritated him.”\textsuperscript{215} Thus even though Piero himself may not have warmed to the mother-child theme of the altarpiece, he must have been aware of his patron's connections with Savonarola, who was quite invested in children as both agents to carry forth his reform message and as future pious adults. Luca Landucci reported, for example, on how before the 1496 Carnival, “Savonarola exhorted children to substitute for the usual vandalism [during Carnival] the begging of alms and the subvention [financial support] of the shamed poor.”\textsuperscript{216} Philip Gavitt notes how such processions “helped forge the links among charity, children and moral

\textsuperscript{214} Vasari 1963, 181.
\textsuperscript{215} Vasari 1963, 182.
\textsuperscript{216} Luca Landucci quoted in Gavitt 2006, 156.
reform.” So perhaps we can see in this painting Piero's attempts to dutifully execute the wishes of his patron despite his own reservations about the theme.

The final painting of the three is the *Immaculate Conception (The Incarnation of Jesus)*, (c. 1504, figure 3-10), originally painted for the Servite church of SS Annunziata. Geronimus finds it “Piero's ripest and most fluent composition,” pointing out that Vasari's “spirited description” of it was that author's second longest after his writing on Piero's festival designs in his descriptions of Piero’s work. Geronimus quotes Vasari's description of the [lost] predella of this painting, in which Vasari emphasizes a scene of Saint Margaret emerging from the belly of the Dragon: it was “so monstrous and hideous, that I do not think there is anything better of that kind to be seen, for with its eyes it reveals venom, fire, and death, in an aspect truly terrifying.” Geronimus cites Vasari's admiration for “the painting's soaring invention” which could at times “transcend” reality, and which he could marshal for religious as well as pagan subjects, as we shall see later in the *Liberation of Andromeda*. One sees here again Vasari's admiration of Piero's lively imagination.

The painting's patron was a Dominican Friar, Pierozzo Domenicano di Baldo di Pierozzo Tedaldi, a member of the wealthy family which sponsored the Tedaldi chapel also in the church of the SS. Annunziata across the piazza from the Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence. The Tedaldi chapel was dedicated at first to John the Evangelist and sometime later to Filippo Benizzi, hence the appearance of these people in the painting. It is possible that another patron was an order of Servite nuns, called the Ammantellate for their short-sleeved habits, which made it easier to perform their works of mercy. The order had been established with the consent of the Servite friar Filippo Benizzi, and one of their main responsibilities was to celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception. The

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218 Geronimus 2006, 207.
219 Vasari quoted in Geronimus, ibid.
220 Geronimus 2006, 207.
nuns are documented as having paid the Servite friars to oversee their celebration in 1505, so they may also have contributed to the patronage of the chapel. These facts may help explain the choice of the subject of the painting as well as the inclusion of Filippo Benizzi as a patron. The two female saints were early Christian female martyrs. Saint Margaret of Antioch was said to have been tortured for her refusal to give up her religion to marry the governor of Rome in the early fourth century; one torture was her being swallowed by Satan in the form of a dragon. She escaped the dragon's belly because the cross she was carrying irritated the dragon's stomach provoking her being vomited out. But she was eventually beheaded because the governor feared that her courage in the face of many horrible tortures would inspire others to join the Christian religion. She was only fifteen at her death. The dragon became her attribute, and although not in the painting, it appears in a preparatory sketch that Piero made prior to painting the altarpiece.

In the very center of the painting, Mary stands on a stone or marble plinth which is decorated with a *bas relief* of the Annunciation. Holding her hand across her belly, she gazes up at the dove of the Holy Spirit, indicating that she has understood that she has been impregnated by God – the incarnation, or becoming impregnated with the Saviour by the Holy Spirit. Saint Catherine, kneeling on the left, can be identified by a fragment of her wheel seen close to the ground below the draped fold over her left arm. Saint Margaret kneels on the right. As founder of the order, Filippo Benizzi, holding a lily stem, was given a place of honor to Mary's right. To her left we find Antonino Pierozzi, appointed archbishop in 1446, who was perhaps a member of the Tedaldi family, which founded the San Marco Dominican monastery in 1436. Pierozzo also refers to Saint Peter, the name saint of the painting's patron; Saint Peter, holding his key, stands behind Saint Margaret. Finally, a youthful John the Evangelist, seen to the left of Filippo Benizzi, was the dedicatory saint of the chapel originally.

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Included in the painting as well are scenes which followed from the Incarnation: the Nativity can be seen in the middle ground just above John's head, with a donkey and an ox grazing nearby. The Holy Family pursues the Flight into Egypt above the Saints' heads on the right, laboring up a steep hill towards a church in the background.

What gives this painting its special character however is the otherworldly focus of the participants. Piero has done something special with the light, such that Mary's face is not only illuminated by the light shining from heaven from behind the Holy Spirit, but she herself seems to emit a radiance that touches all the others. Many of the faces are so smooth and simplified that they emanate an almost cartoon-like quality. Geronimus identifies in this painting “the effulgence of light and colour” which peaked in this middle period of Piero's production.\(^ {223}\) One sees in this painting Piero's ability to transform a religious sentiment into an experience that can be transmitted to another pious viewer, encouraging belief and devotion.

What can be said about the influence of the events of the 1490s by a study of these altarpieces by Piero, spanning the years from 1489 to 1504? There appears to be a good deal of fluctuation in the intensity and complexity of sentiment communicated in the three works examined, with the middle painting of 1493 being the least emotional. Did Piero react to the troubled spirit of the times with an increased longing for spiritual comfort, given the surrounding chaos? Did Savonarola's preaching have any part in his increased fervor, which we deduce from the arrangements he made for masses to be said in his name after his death? Did his piety become only more urgent as he approached the end of his life? The religious paintings, as with the tondi, do not give evidence of any dramatic or consistent shift in emotional intensity over the period in the manner that Botticelli's works seem to, yet Savonarola and his followers were often connected to the patrons and institutions for which they were made. Perhaps the friar's impact can be detected indirectly, via his patrons' concerns, or through speculating on Piero’s

\(^ {223}\) Geronimus 2006, 207.
personal shifts in level of piety.

Piero's altarpieces produced later than these discussed have survived only in very damaged states and accompanied by little documentation. Geronimus notes that the latest pieces evinced an “intentional archaism” which he suggests may result from “Piero's own visual intelligence – specifically his growing sensitivity to a different, elegantly pared-down syntax.”

A link may possibly be drawn between the political and religious anxieties of the period and Piero's sacred subjects. But it is nonetheless time to turn our investigation into the possible influences of the contemporary world to the works in which Piero most effectively displayed his unique talents – his mythologies and paintings from what art historian Erwin Panofsky described as the “Early History of Man” cycle. Here he drew from classical sources, such as Ovid's myths and works by writers such as Lucretius, for stories that inspired him. He chose subjects in which he could exercise his fertile imagination and prodigious inventiveness as well as display the results of his close observations of nature. These secular paintings provided Piero the opportunity to greatly enliven his work with details derived from acute observation and his own creativity, and he took full and exuberant advantage of it.

We saw some of this liveliness in several of his tondi but in his secular works he really exploited and developed these gifts. Did the events of the 1490s and early 1500s influence Piero in what he chose and how he expressed himself in these works? I will argue that between 1485 and around 1515 Piero painted scenes exploring man's tendencies to violence and uncontrolled sexuality, along with the losses and mourning resulting from man's failure to tame these impulses. It is possible that one source of Piero's desire to urge men to conquer their animal appetites is his awareness of Savonarola's message, which clearly directed people to return to living in closer alignment to the stringent moral codes and conservative behavior of a previous era, perhaps a link with the “archaism”

224 Geronimus 2006, 243.
of the values Savonarola preached. Visual analysis of Piero's works, especially these secular ones, suggests that Piero was greatly troubled by his observations of men's appetite-driven behaviors. They suggest a belief that trying to control the expression of such passions can enable us to live in greater harmony within the human community. One can see in Piero's choices of subject a longing for restraint of the destructive passions that is analogous to Savonarola's calls for self-restraint and a return to a simpler, more pious, less materialistic life. However although Piero's choices of subject and handling of them may have reflected his reactions to, if not his conscious awareness of, Savonarola and the chaos and disturbances of the times, we will see that these concerns were evident even before the particularly stressful period began. Piero's response to these distressing perceptions showed what he believed can happen when people give way to potentially destructive passions. Scenes of loss of control are paired with others depicting efforts to restore order and harmony, at times even within the same painting. Looking to myth and man's distant past, often the vehicle for moralizing myths, Piero expressed the nostalgic longing for an imagined simpler, more innocent past. This notion is entirely consistent with Savonarola's message to return to the ways of God. For example Savonarola preached “If God, then, conducts everything to its own end and perfection, all the more will he lead you, if you live uprightly, for He loves man more and cares more for him, than for any other creature, since He died for him.”

A particularly good example of Piero's work exemplifying these concerns is a pair of spalliere in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Spalliere were painted panels intended to decorate walls or furniture in private dwellings. The term derives from the Italian word for shoulder, as the panels were usually mounted at shoulder height where they could be easily examined. As noted by Anne Barriault in her volume on the form, these panels “opened windows to the humanist world of history, myth, and

pastoral poetry from antiquity.” At the same time, they provided veiled allusions to proper moral behavior. Gerominus adds that the “prized objects” also functioned to display their owners’ status and erudition to contemporaries.

Because these particular spalliere were commissioned to decorate the bedroom of a patrician couple who married in 1485, namely Francesco del Pugliese and Alessandra di Domenico Bonsi, art historians have suggested 1485 as the earliest probable date for them. Titled The Hunt (A Hunting Scene), (1485-1500, figure 3-11) and The Return from the Hunt (1485-1500, figure 3-12), these two panels manifest Piero's horror at the brutality imagined by classical authors as a feature of pre-historic human life (in the Hunt) as well as his imagined resolution of this brutality as depicted in the Return from the Hunt, where the initial brutal scene is resolved in a second tableau of peaceful community cooperation and interpersonal affection. Gerominus remarks on the patron's republican and Savonarolan sympathies. But he also notes that the “grizzly scenes” might have offended Savonarola's teaching that art should aim to elevate people spiritually, and have raised his objection to the glorifying of man's primitive nature. Piero's patron however might have had quite different reactions: the patron would have appreciated contemplating the “hard-bitten realities” to which early man was subject. Pugliese might well have enjoyed contemplating how the challenge of dealing with those realities provided a “moralizing message ...[of] antimaterialism, privileging mankind's most elemental nature over the vain ambitions, hypocrisy and political subterfuge of contemporary life.” Thus though Savonarola might have abhorred such primitive aggressive scenes, glorifying the struggle against man's baser instincts would also have aligned with his urgings to achieve salvation by overcoming

228 Barriault (1994), 95.
229 Gerominus 2006, 78.
230 Gerominus 2006, 124-125. Despite this, the Metropolitan Museum retains a date of 1494-1500.
232 Ibid.
them. So paradoxically, while Piero's *form* of expressing views consistent with those of Savonarola would have offended the friar, the moralistic resolution depicted in the *content* of the work would have met with the friar's approval.

Approaching the paintings from a different perspective, Erwin Panofsky details the possible classical sources for these paintings; it must be acknowledged that there is no consensus as to how familiar Piero himself was with the sources but it is likely that at the very least, their probable literary sources entered his awareness through his erudite patrons. As one source, Panofsky quotes from Boccaccio's reading of Vitruvius's *De Architectura Libri decem, II*, in which Vitruvius argues that man came to understand the usefulness of fire by accident, as it were. Fire was assumed to occur by tree branches rubbing against each other, or by bolts of lightning striking trees or woods. The phenomenon of fire seems to have fascinated Piero as it occurs in quite a few of his paintings.\(^{233}\) Fire has a complex series of meanings for people, positive in its usefulness to man, but also potentially dangerous, not only realistically but also as a symbol of uncontrolled passion. According to Vitruvius, man initially ran away from fire, perceiving its destructive properties. But eventually man discovered the helpfulness of fire after daring to approach a place where fire had occurred but had now been partially extinguished. At that point, in explicating Boccaccio's translation of Vitruvius, Panofsky talks of Vitruvius' notion that in the activity of keeping fire alive, people joined together into social units, which led to the development of language and eventually to constructing buildings together.\(^{234}\)

Lucretius is another ancient author cited by Panofsky and others as an influence on the intellectual life of the period.\(^{235}\) Lucretius was a first century BCE philosopher and poet and author of *De rerum natura*. In Book V, he describes a conception of humanity's evolution from a more primitive

\(^{233}\) In addition to the paintings discussed here, Piero painted a series of paintings about the human and natural barrenness of Lemnos, which was revitalized when Vulcan, the blacksmith god, brought fire to the island. He also painted *The Forest Fire*, which shows animals fleeing from a fire.

\(^{234}\) Panofsky explicating Boccaccio's translation of Vitruvius, Panofsky 1937, 16.

\(^{235}\) In addition to Panofsky, Geronimus, 2006, also endorses this influence, 127.
state through the rise of civilization and its subsequent moral and social degeneration into anarchy, followed by the re-emergence of a second state of civilized lawfulness.\textsuperscript{236} Whereas Panofsky sees the two \textit{Hunt} scenes as derived from two subsequent stages of human evolution – the earlier, more bestial one followed by a more civilized one – Geronimus interprets the episodes of the two paintings as occurring nearly simultaneously or in a rapid sequence, as the second one depicts the same scene as the first but at a slightly later time and from a different part of the shoreline of the same body of water depicted in both paintings.\textsuperscript{237} Geonimus's view seems more persuasive because we can see evidence of some elements -- smoke and fleeing birds and animals – depicted in the first painting still present in the background of the second painting.

The \textit{Hunt} depicts humans, centaurs, satyrs and animals all attacking each other in a scene of wild savagery. To make his point emphatically through visual means, Piero has placed the most brutal scene at front and center: there a satyr wields a tree branch as a club, preparing to strike a lion positioned beneath him who tears out the heart of a screaming bear he in turn has pinned down. Another bear, possibly the mate of the first, claws at the lion while being restrained by a human wearing a look of horror – this person is the only one who seems to react emotionally with appropriate horror and anguish to the chaotic and violent activities. Another human assists the satyr and the other human by pulling on the tail of the lion (see figure 3-11a). All around this central scene creatures either attack each other or flee. At the left and right lower corners respectively, a dead animal and a dead man lie on the ground, the man foreshortened in the manner of Mantegna's \textit{Dead Christ} (figure 3-13). Meanwhile in the center and left middle ground of the painting, a huge crackling fire consumes the forest. Chaos and violence reign, enlivened by the sounds of fire, of attack, and of wounded and fleeing creatures. It would support dating these paintings to a later date in the spectrum 1485-1500 to

\begin{enumerate}
\item Panofsky provides a nice overview of Lucretius's Book V in a footnote on page 17.
\item Geronimus 2006, 127. Also Geronimus 2015, 108.
\end{enumerate}

\textsuperscript{236}
imagine its contents evince a reaction to the brutality of the execution of Savonarola. In fact both Piero's *Hunt* painting and Rossselli's depiction of the execution of Savonarola demonstrate the human capacity for brutality, although Piero's carries more drama.

The pendant to this panel, the *Return from the Hunt*, is as peaceful, calm and organized as the other panel is violent and chaotic (figure 3-12). In the middle ground, two boats constructed by the people have just returned from the part of the lake in which the first painting is set. We can see smoke emerging from the shore back there while birds fly away from the scene of destruction. The people and mythological creatures in this panel work cooperatively in the aftermath of the successful expedition: they carry the quarry off the boats, help each other disembark from one boat, and work together to construct another boat. Two women, perhaps symbolically placed in the very center of the painting, nurture a young animal: life will go on and new life will be created and will thrive as everyone works together (see figure 3-12a). A couple consisting of a centaur ridden by a naked woman, in the right foreground, gaze at each other affectionately (see figure 3-12b). The only remaining hint of the previous chaos is the fire smoking in the distance from which birds are fleeing, still a potential threat, symbolizing that violent instincts have not been entirely eradicated, only temporarily quelled. If we think of the paintings as done in the latter part of the period, after Savonarola's execution, we might see in the *Return* painting the expression of the longing for peace desired by the populace and Piero among them. We could also imagine that the feelings experienced by the people who returned from the hunt – relief, but tempered by a lingering sense of the horror in which they had participated – might equally express the mixture of relief and sober reflection occasioned in the Florentine populace as they moved away in time from the execution of Savonarola. Such were the sentiments expressed by Doffo Spini, as we saw in the report of Botticelli's brother Simone.

If we accept the earlier dating of this pair, these paintings would likely have been interpreted as *paysages moralises*, or moral landscapes, metaphorically warning the newlyweds to foster harmony in
their home.\textsuperscript{238} This was a common type of message of such panels (see, for instance, Botticelli's \textit{Nastagio degli Onesti spalliere}, in which the “disdainful mistress [of a knight] consents to marry him when she sees the everlasting punishment in hell of another cruel lady whose scorn drove her lover to suicide.”\textsuperscript{239} It was often women who were warned to keep the peace of the household. As mentioned above, though, it is also possible to interpret these \textit{Hunt} panels as expressing Piero's advocacy of the calm and order which occurs after violent destruction. The sequence of a horrible destructive event followed by the return of calm and order that is displayed in the two panels might reflect how the Florentine community reacted to the turmoil aroused by the presence and then violent destruction of Savonarola, followed by the restoration of normalcy, providing further support for a possible later dating of these panels. Again, feelings of regret such as those expressed by Doffo Spini in Botticelli's workshop, might have been something Piero wished to highlight. We can recall the combination of brutality expressed, then regretted, if we compare these paintings with the Rosselli \textit{Execution of Savonarola}: Piero separates the brutality from the recovery by depicting them in two paintings, whereas Rosselli emphasizes more the longing to return to order by downplaying the emotional intensity of the horror in the brutal execution, depicting rather the business-as-usual tone in his cityspace.

Piero also worked with stories from mythology, in which he took the opportunity to express his views of the tragic result of human failure to control ourselves. We will look at three final examples, two about mourning and a third about deliverance from the danger evoked by humanity's hubris. All these paintings display Piero's wonderful imagination and inventiveness. Though they do not seem at first glance to show much response to the events and mood of contemporary Florence, we shall have


\textsuperscript{239} Lightbown 2006, 119.
occasion to reflect on that later.

The first painting is the very poignant *Death of a Nymph* or *Death of Procris* (c.1495-1500, figure 3-14,) which depicts a nymph dying through an unwitting attack by her own husband Cephalus. The second, the *Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs*, set in different circumstances, shows the death of a participant in battle (c.1500-1510, figure 3-15). In both these panels, the issue of jealousy of someone else's attentions to one's mate is addressed. A tragic outcome in both these panels warns both men and women to control their behavior even if they cannot control their feelings. A third painting, the *Liberation of Andromeda* (c.1510-1513, figure 3-16) depicts a hero, Perseus, rescuing the maiden Andromeda from destruction by a dragon, symbolically restoring peace and moral order to a situation in which a daughter is being cruelly punished for a mother's boast. The first two paintings offer no solution to unrestrained jealousy, which eventuates in the death of the loved one. The third offers a solution through the actions of a hero.

The patron of the *Death of a Nymph* is unknown. The sources for it are Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and his later group of tales, the *Metamorphoses*. The later source details the story of a husband, Cephalus, the grandson of the god of the winds, Aeolus. A famed hunter, Cephalus won the love of Procris, the beautiful daughter of Erectheus, an early king of Athens. Several months after their marriage he went out to hunt, and was abducted by Aurora, goddess of the dawn. He rejected her advances and to punish him by making trouble for him, she planted a seed of jealous doubt of his wife in his breast. Arriving home in disguise, in an attempt to reassure himself of his wife's fidelity by testing her, he tried to seduce her while still in disguise. His wife Procris wavered in her response, believing her husband had been lost forever. Thus she did not immediately repel his advances. Seeing her hesitation, Cephalus ragefully discarded his disguise, frightening her so much that she fled and joined the virgin goddess Diana's entourage of nymphs. Diana, the hunting goddess, gave her two gifts: a dog named Hurricane who always caught his prey, and a hunting javelin that never missed its
mark. After his wife's flight, Cephalus realized his error and begged his wife to return home, which she did. She gave him Diana's gifts, thinking them useful to a hunter. But before long he went out hunting again, and Procris, now infected with suspiciousness herself, trailed him. When he called the breeze Aurora to cool him, Procris, overheard him. She believed he was calling his lover and stirred in her hiding place. In so doing she made a noise which Cephalus misinterpreted as the sounds of a deer in hiding. Throwing the javelin at what he thought was a deer, he hit Procris and mortally wounded her. The pair was reconciled as they both recognized their errors, and she died in his arms.\textsuperscript{240} In the earlier version of the tale in the \textit{Ars Amatoria}, Ovid gave the story a different ending: Procris claimed responsibility for her own death by acknowledging she was wrong to suspect Cephalus.\textsuperscript{241} That version excuses Cephalus without blame. In siding with the husband, Ovid by this omission gave all the responsibility for maintaining stability in the marriage to the wife, consistent with the patriarchal values of Piero's time.

No faun appears in Ovid's versions of the myth. The faun derives from another possible source for the painting, a play written by Nicola di Correggio. Corregio's play was commissioned by Duke Ercole d'Este and was performed at the wedding of Lucrezia d'Este and Annibale Bentivoglia in 1477. Subsequently the play became widely known and influential. In the play, the faun functions as the scheming meddler who implicates Cephalus in an affair, then carries the tale of Cephalus's "infidelity" to Procris in order to arouse her jealousy, as he is in love with her himself.\textsuperscript{242} There is a mourning scene in Correggio's play, but the story has a happy ending as Diana magically brings Procris back to life and the couple continues their life together. The mourning scene and the faun may have inspired

\textsuperscript{241} Geronimus 2006, 86. Geronimus references Ovid \textit{Ars Amatoria}, lines 727-735.
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid.
Piero, but the two were not put together in Correggio's play—this joining was invented by Piero. Similar to the bedchamber *spalliere*, the play also carried a warning to restrain jealousy, but the story as Piero tells it instead highlights the sadness of the loss rather than the subsequent moment of restoration.

Recounting the sources for the painting illustrates how Piero used such sources but adapted them for his own ends, picking elements that appealed to him in order to construct an original narrative, influenced by the mythological sources but shifting the emphasis, focusing especially on the tragedy of the loss of a young and beautiful nymph. From the painting itself one has no way to directly understand the relationship between the faun and the nymph, but the body language and facial expression tell us that he seems deep in sorrow. His feelings are echoed in those of the dog that sits by the nymph's feet, also in sorrow over her loss.

Piero has made a lovely landscape as the setting for the faun and nymph, lining up a horizontal and emotional parallel between the foreground green meadow and the nymph's body—as if the landscape itself mourns the nymph's loss. Behind the foreground figures he paints a further receding series of parallel elements: first comes a beach in the middle ground where other (living) animals—three dogs—interact with each other, while on the slightly more distant shoreline plane, water birds fish. A white bird takes off or lands in the water that can be seen between the shoulder of the mourning dog and the other three dogs on the beach (figure 3-14a). Beyond the shore a pale blue body of calm water serpentine off into the distance, interrupted by low mountains in the left near background; another point of land can be seen on the right, sloping down from behind the largest dog's head. A feeling of sadness predominates, along with the more subtle message of the wastefulness of loss of a youthful life; we can see that the nymph has not died a natural death but rather is dying from a wound to her neck, which still spurts blood. Piero's humane sympathies and critique of violence are quite evident. In this scene, the price of reconciliation is death, a sad outcome indeed. Given the context of

243 Ibid.
late fifteenth-century Florence, we may again recall the regret expressed by Doffo Spini over the murder of Savonarola.

*The Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs* also tells a tale of jealousy unleashing violence. But in this instance, it sparks a melee which spreads like wildfire and ends in tragedy. The painting's provenance appears to be untraced before the twentieth century, at which time it was bequeathed to the National Gallery, London, by Charles Haslewood Shannon (1937). The painting employs a continuous narrative to recount the story told by Ovid in Book XII of *Metamorphoses.*

According to Ovid, the centaurs, distant relatives of the Lapith Pirithous, are invited to Pirithous's feast celebrating his marriage to Hippodame. The centaurs become drunk and rowdy and one of them, Eurytus, attempts to abduct the bride, at which point all the male centaurs begin grabbing other women, resulting in a huge and bloody fracas described with abundant, not to say gleeful, gore by Ovid. In Piero's painting many of the attempted abductions take place on a white blanket spread out in the middle ground. There we find several tangles of bodies, some being fleeing Lapith women, while others are rescuers or their would-be abductors (figure 3-15a). These groupings may remind us of the central scene of entangled figures found in the *Hunt.* There is another tableau left of center in which a centaur holds a woman around her hips, meanwhile having his head jerked back sharply by a Lapith, who braces himself against the centaur's hindquarters (figure 3-15b). A tangle of hands crossing the woman's lower back nearly defies description.

Again Piero has focused on hands, reminding us of the intertwined hands in the tondos, *Madonna and Child with Saints Mary Magdalen and John the Baptist* and *Holy Family with Saint Joseph, Young Saint John the Baptist and Angels,* both discussed above. To the left of this grouping we note a Lapith raising his club preparing to strike a centaur, reminiscent of the prominent satyr of the

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245 Thanks to Daniel Birger, an alert reader, who reminded me that “hippos” is Greek for horse, which may add a nice nuance to Eurytus's attraction to the bride Hippodame.
Hunt. An extremely dense and complicated grouping of figures further to the right includes the mustachioed Eurytus, dragging Hippodame by the hair with one hand while preparing to strike back at the person behind him – Theseus – who raises a large wine vessel to strike him (figure 3-15c). Behind this grouping a centaur lifts a smoking altar, about to “pulverize” two Lapiths with a single blow.246

Piero now springs a surprise. Front and center where it cannot escape the viewer’s notice, two reclining centaurs create an island of stillness and sadness: in the midst of the noisy and wild battle scene, the dying Cyllarus is being held and soothed by his wife, Hylonome (figure 3-15d). These two embody the more positive and mature human capacities – for caring, for love, for grieving over a lost partner. Here is the implied antidote --love-- to the violence and lust that can be stimulated when humans feel desperate and out of control of feelings evoked in their environment. Perhaps Piero is being pointedly ironic in assigning the restoration of civilized human behavior to mythical creatures who are only partly human and who are usually characterized as impulsive, especially when drunk, as on this occasion. In fact, this semi-human centaur pair has participated in battles together before as a couple, creating an additional irony that they, like their fully human counterparts, have participated in creating the situation which has destroyed their life as a couple. In this scene, Piero again finds healing compassion and empathy that can work to repair damage done when the more destructive aspects of human nature have been in ascendance during a time of disruption.

The final work of Piero’s to be discussed is the remarkable and highly innovative Liberation of Andromeda (figure 3-16), which dates to the decade after 1500 has come and gone. If Vasari was quick to criticize Piero’s personality, Vasari also did Piero the service of cataloging and beautifully describing a number of his works, such as this painting:

Piero never did a more lovely or better-finished picture: no more curious sea-monster can be seen than the one which he drew there, while the attitude of Perseus is fine as he raises his sword to strike. Andromeda’s beautiful face is torn between fear and hope, as she stands bound,

246 Geronimus 2006, 97.
and before her are many people in various costumes...rejoicing at seeing her release. The landscape is very lovely and the coloring soft, graceful, harmonious and well blended. Piero finished this work with the greatest care.247

The patron has been identified by some scholars as Filippo Strozzi the Younger, the third son of the powerful banker-merchant and scholar of humanism, Filippo Strozzi the Elder.248 In 1508, the younger Filippo married Clarice de' Medici, the granddaughter of Lorenzo de' Medici, a bond that strengthened the Strozzi alliance with the Medici family. The relations between the two families varied through time as the Strozzi sometimes supported the Medici faction and at other times came out strongly as republican partisans, anathema to the Medici.249 Melissa Bullard has written on this marriage as a “case study in the political, social and economic consequences of Florentine patrician marriages,” in which she describes how the marriage became a major issue in Florence, polarizing public opinion between support for the ruling government and opposition to it, thus uncovering a problem in the governing coalition which eventually resulted in its downfall and thus facilitated the return of the Medici to power in 1512. Suffice it to say here that at the time of the marriage, both the Strozzi and the Medici believed that the marriage of Clarice and Filippo would further their political aims.250 The couple married and moved into the Strozzi palazzo in 1510; this panel was most likely created for the wall of their bedroom or an ante-chamber to it, or possibly even to fit into the back of a huge and grandiose throne-seat that the Medici family gave the couple as a wedding gift.251

The painting is innovative in that it employs a continuous narrative, that is, sequential scenes are presented separately within the same canvas but not in a linear progression. This requires the viewer to be familiar with Ovid's tale from Metamorphoses, where it is told in Book IV, lines 908-

249 Geronimus 2006, partially describes and provides ample references in footnotes to the complex and variegated history of the Strozzi and their shifting relations with the Medici, 108-109.
As detailed by Ovid, the antecedent story to the rescue of Andromeda is as follows: Queen Cassiope of Ethiopia boasts that her daughter Andromeda is more beautiful than Poseidon's nymphs, the Nereids. To punish Andromeda's mother, Poseidon has Andromeda stripped naked and chained to a rock, to be ravaged by the sea monster Cetus. Perseus, flying home from having slain the Gorgon Medusa, sees Andromeda's plight and immediately falls in love with her. He arranges with her parents that if he saves her, he will win her in marriage. The distraught parents agree, and Perseus flies in and kills Cetus with his “hooked dagger.” Thus he wins his maiden.

In the painting, the first episode of the rescue occurs in scenes at diagonally opposite corners: Perseus takes off from the earth at the upper right (figure 3-16a) while Andromeda's family and followers attend at the lower left (3-16b), both witnessing events through their presence there while simultaneously not looking, hiding their eyes in horror. Andromeda's father King Cepheus wears a kind of white knobby turban and a blue cloak, which he raises to shield his eyes from the scene. Her Uncle Phineas, who wants to marry her himself, stands just behind the king, wearing a red turban and wing-like red cloak, similarly averting his gaze. Queen Cassiope reclines on the ground near her husband's feet, holding her cloak aloft as though to push away the dreadful scene she has engendered. Two other women accompanying her bury their faces in their arms, in order not to look at what's occurring. Andromeda herself, in white, just above the whole group, writhes against the red cloth that binds her hand, turning her face and body away from the dragon as she struggles to free herself; the stumpy tree to which she is bound curves in the same direction as her body, as though to protect her from the dragon's advance.

The central action, the rescue, is placed in the center of the picture, where Perseus stands on the monster's shoulders, repeatedly striking him with his curved dagger – we can see wounds in both its

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253 This is Geronimus's translation of Ovid's *Harpe*. Geronimus 2006, 111.
shoulders -- as Perseus twists around to his left, winding up his weapon-bearing arm behind him as he prepares to strike again (figure 3-16c). The sea monster itself is a fantastic and unique product of Piero's imagination, with its feathery red ruff, tusks emerging from its lower jaws, and spiky eyebrows. It shoots liquid from its nostrils toward Andromeda, its eyes looking in anguish and frustration towards its promised victim, which it will now never have. It paws at the ocean bottom with its many-toed flippers; its curling tail visually echoes Perseus's gesture. The waves lapping at the shore echo the monster's slithery toes and curly tail. We can imagine the dragon's frustrated complaints and the noisy lapping of the water as he clutches with his feet.

At the lower right the denouement of the episode can be seen (3-16d). The joyful Andromeda stands close to her rescuer Perseus and claps her hands in delight. King Cepheus stands on Perseus's left. Phineas and Queen Cassiope do not appear in this grouping, but a number of anonymous rejoicing followers replace them, gazing heavenward -- one wonders what they see or seek there; perhaps they are thanking the gods for the rescue. Two musicians play imaginary non-functional instruments, hypothetically adding music to the celebratory atmosphere. Geronimus has speculated that the red-garbed person standing behind King Ceteus and looking out at the viewer is Piero di Cosimo himself, eyebrows knowingly raised, as he invites the viewer to investigate and delight in his painting.254

In the middle ground near the painting's left edge a couple embraces, possibly a hopeful prediction of the couple's future happiness (image contained within 3-16b). It is not hard to see how the successful romantic rescue makes this painting a fit subject for a marital chamber, in which the hero must overcome dangers -- in this case, external --to achieve his goal. Geronimus considers a possible political reference: that, as noted, the marriage of Clarice de' Medici and Filippo Strozzi in 1508 reaffirmed the bond between the great Florentine families, the notion expanded upon in Bullard's article about the marriage cited above. For the Medici, who had been evicted from Florence when Piero di

254 Geronimus, 2015, 204.
Francesco cooperated in the invasion of Charles VIII in 1494, the marriage helped solidify their political position and helped in their re-ascendance to power in 1512. For the Strozzi, the alliance with the Medici put them on the right side – that of power – as the return of the Medici developed. We could see in the painting, as in the marriage, a “liberation” from exile and the hope for return to power the Medici sought. So in this regard we might take issue with Geronimus's conclusion: “Above all, mythological stories remained stories and the Perseus tale was a popular one... Religious or political meaning remained either implicit or absent.”

Even if one sets aside the political implications, as Geronimus recommends, this painting could be interpreted as embodying a degree of resolution of the distressed feelings of the times. In this, it participates with the Hunt paintings, as well as with the Death of Procris and the Battle of the Centaurs and Lapiths. The Liberation offers a calmer, more optimistic and less melancholic tone than the others, though all depict a reassuring return to order. This search, especially in the decade after Savonarola's shocking execution, may represent Piero's response to the disturbed ambience of the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth centuries, that is, a longing for resolution of chaos and conflict and a return to feeling safe. In this regard, the Liberation, Piero's final major work, restates and magnifies the message communicated in Rosselli's the Execution of Savonarola: even after the horrible event of the friar's execution, depicted in Rosselli's image, the city of Florence continues to persist, rising all around in its solidity; just so does the peaceful pastoral landscape of Piero's Liberation of Andromeda after the maiden's rescue by Perseus, carry a message of recuperation from traumatic events. In both instances, threats to the populace's security are removed, and order and calm are restored.

256 Geronimus 2006, 115.
Chapter 4 – Execution, Liberation and Return

In this chapter I will develop themes discussed in earlier chapters, sometimes bringing in
discussions of other works in order to further my argument. Artworks by Rosselli, Botticelli and Piero di Cosimo will be compared in order to illustrate and characterize their distinct individualized responses to life in Florence in the late Quattrocento and early sixteenth-century.

In every time of crisis, some things remain relatively stable despite whatever turmoil may be occurring. The two paintings immediately following initiate a discussion of a major point, which is how the desire to conserve a certain basic order persists, even and perhaps especially strongly, in the midst of chaotic social conditions. The first of these two paintings is Francesco Rosselli's *Execution of Savonarola* which we already saw in the first chapter of this thesis; the second is Piero di Cosimo's *Liberation of Andromeda*. Both paintings demonstrate the striving for the restoration of stability even while chaos reigns, during the decades before and after 1500.

The period begins in a time of greater social order under the rule of Lorenzo de' Medici (r. 1469-92); continues through the disruptions of a more tumultuous time after his death, disruptions exacerbated by the rise of Savonarola; and then returns to a still shaky but somewhat calmer time after the demise of Savonarola (d. 1498), the passage of the year 1500 without an apocalypse, and the temporary restoration of republican institutions. All these allowed the development of a sense of relative calm, of having been saved from disaster. The foundations of this stability can be discerned in Rosselli's painting, but are expanded and elaborated in a mythological work of Piero. Botticelli's responses to the same time period will also be further discussed but first let us look again at Francesco Rosselli's *Execution of Savonarola* (figures 1-1, 1-1a).

The drama of the Dominican preacher's hanging and burning naturally engages our eye immediately, placed in the center of the painting exactly for that purpose. The setting for this scene, a ground of brick paving, is interrupted by parallel lines of stone running from foreground to background, leading the eye backwards to their vanishing point in the open street visible just above the scaffold. This topographical regularity offers a solid perspectival grounding that makes us feel we are
in the secure rectangular space of the piazza, with a viewpoint slightly above the participants in the scene. All the buildings are drawn in schematic detail, windows and doors placed in their correct lines, with an architect's or draftsman's careful linearity. It may not surprise us to learn that Francesco Rosselli was a cartographer by profession, owner of the oldest shop of this type in Florence, and perhaps all of Italy at the time, specialists in the printing and sale of engravings, especially geographical maps and town plans. Francesco's father Lorenzo was an architect, and his brother Cosimo was the same person in whose bottega Piero di Cosimo trained to be an artist. The interpersonal connections – the network, if you will – gives us a flavor of how the artisans in allied fields were known to and communicated with each other.

To understand more about Rosselli's painting of Savonarola's execution we begin by looking at a map of Florence also painted by him c. 1489-95 (figure 4-1). A map known as the Carta della Catena (figure 4-2) is believed to have been based on Rosselli's map of Florence. The Carta della Catena is a woodcut, and as such, more schematic than Rosselli's map, which is in tempera painted on wood. In the detail of Rosselli's map shown here one finds some of the same buildings included in the Savonarola painting, such as the Duomo and the Palazzo Vecchio (figure 4-1a). The great stylistic similarity between the Savonarola painting and the map supports the hypothesis that they were produced by the same person or in his workshop. The map, however, shows the buildings as they would appear to a person entering them, not as they would be seen realistically from this vantage point. Both paintings take a view from above looking down, and the character of the buildings is identical.

How is it that this painting of Savonarola's death has been attributed to a man primarily known as a cartographer and cosmographer? Apparently Rosselli began his artistic career as a miniature

painter, and continued to work as such into the early 1480s.\textsuperscript{259} As both a painter and a cartographer, he could well have later painted a scene in which both dramatic and topographical elements were prominent. The firm grounding displayed in the painting conveys permanence – perspective reflects the laws of sight in the physical world, and gravity also keeps things securely planted in the earth. The stability of the setting shows that the world has not yet gone physically awry, or been destroyed, as had been feared in the upcoming half-millennial year of 1500.

In addition to topographical solidity, another element harking back to the calmer life before the chaotic decade is the casual attitude of many of the figures in the painting. Many figures appear to be conducting themselves as on a normal day. For example, a small group in the right foreground, among which are two Franciscan and two Dominican friars, habitual rivals, look like they are having a quiet conversation. But despite their calm demeanor, they might well be discussing the proposed 'ordeal by fire', intended to prove whether Savonarola's views were correct, and which had stirred up great consternation and fear among the people.\textsuperscript{260} The possibility that this was their subject was suggested by art historian Ludovica Sebregondi, writing in an exhibition catalogue for the 2003 show focusing on Savonarola's impact on Botticelli. This depiction of the conversation does not communicate passionate discussion, perhaps because in keeping with the overall message of the picture – namely, the survival and continued greatness of the city of Florence -- the violent and cruel aspects of the scene are generally underplayed. Another example showing life continuing as usual is the workmen who carry bundles of wood to feed the flames under the scaffold. According to Sebregondi they “look like they are just doing a routine job,” but in the words of Botticelli's brother Simone, these figures could also be among the “poor craftsmen and others, who believed in the Father and his teaching” and were being

\textsuperscript{259} Almagia 1951, 27.
\textsuperscript{260} Sebregondi in Arasse 2003, 220. The failed “ordeal by fire” was integral to the build-up of feeling against Savonarola that led to his execution. See Martines 2006, 219-230.
forced to carry that wood to his pyre.\textsuperscript{261} So this is a scene in which we see a blending of elements suggesting order and stability as the background to an unusual and highly charged event, the execution, which is also depicted with understated emotion. This one painting chronicles both the disturbance stirred up by Savonarola as well as the sense that despite what occurred, life will go on in the usual way. It is an eerie and unsettling yet in some ways reassuring depiction that reflects both the changing and unchanging character of life in Florence. The painting hints at the turmoil created by Savonarola's presence in Florence, but the disruptive aspects are downplayed by the painting's calm tone, orderly setting and unexcited people. Does this calmness represent purely the painter's characteristic way of working or is it rather a reluctance to show any sympathy for Savonarola's plight in the setting of the friar's very recent condemnation and execution? Created by a contemporary Florentine artist, we can see both his desire for the instability of the current situation to return to a normal state and perhaps also some denial of how disrupted life actually was at the moment.

If we now reflect on Piero di Cosimo's \textit{Liberation of Andromeda} (figure 3-16) with Rosselli's cityscape in mind, we find another scene of crisis, but one that is far removed from what was actually happening in the here and now of current events, at least on the surface. The story is ostensibly about a mythological Ethiopian princess and her family. The situation has become a very dangerous one to the community due to Queen Cassiope's prideful boasts, that her daughter's beauty outshines that of Neptune's Nereids. By these means she has cavalierly offended Neptune and unleashed powerful destructive forces of a strength she may never have anticipated. These take the form of a dangerous dragon, sent by a vengeful Neptune, who threatens to rape the beautiful child on whom she places so much value. The fact that Cassiope's daughter is to be punished for the sins of her mother adds an ironic twist to the tale. Piero follows Ovid in resolving the crisis by \textit{deus ex machina}, in the form of a hero, who flies in to the rescue: that figure is Perseus whom we see at the center of the painting

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standing on top of the dragon. The dragon is slaughtered, but what happens to the enraged Neptune? That element is ignored in this story of a happy ending, a return to order. But the fact that Neptune's desire for vengeance remains unsatisfied leaves open the possibility that despite the happy outcome in the moment, further trouble can still arise in future.

The future trouble could possibly come from Andromeda's uncle, who also wanted to marry her and was also, like the dragon who represents Neptune, left deprived of his satisfaction by Perseus's rescue mission. As in Piero's *Hunt* paintings, all the disruptive social forces are at least temporarily held at bay by the resolution achieved in the *Return* painting. In the *Hunt* paintings, calm is restored by physically leaving the scene of violence and brutality while here it is by the hero's rescue. In the former, it is raw aggression which must be tamed and restrained to permit the community to develop. In the latter, the problem is more delicate: here socially disruptive feelings of pride, greed and envy drive the action.

By the same token, just as the story in the *Hunt* finds resolution in the further development of community, the Andromeda myth deals with more subtle communal phenomena analogous to those that were at play in the Florence of the 1490s. We recall that this painting was made in celebration of the marriage of Clarice de' Medici and Filippo Strozzi, an event which helped solidify the alliance between the two rival families. As in the Medici-Strozzi marriage, the Andromeda tale finds the solution to social disruption in the marriage of the lovers, i.e. of the hero Perseus and the victim Andromeda. Not only is he her savior, he is also the son of Jupiter and Danae. Consequently, the mother appropriately gives up her daughter to this semi-divine suitor. In this instance, strategic marriage, a time-honored way to repair social disruption, has saved the day.

Scholars have studied how marriages functioned in Renaissance Florence – what considerations were taken into account when they were contracted, what meanings they had for the individuals, the
families and the community, and what happened when there were problems. Most marriages were among people of same social class and were worked out by the families of the couple, sometimes with the assistance of marriage brokers. Helping broker a marriage carried social capital and redounded to the credit of the successful broker and sometimes to that of the family, who could claim honor if an elite personage was the broker. For example, Lorenzo de' Medici was known, among other things, as a successful marriage broker who helped arrange the marriages among young people of the upper class.

Romance usually had little to do with the arrangement of a marriage. Certainly there were also extramarital sexual liaisons based on desire, which were more acceptable between upper class men and women of lower status than was the reverse. A religious officiant at a marriage was not considered necessary and in fact most marriages were conducted by notaries, who functioned in that society in a broader fashion than they do now, performing many of the functions we usually think of as belonging to lawyers. The church was called in only when there was trouble in the marital arrangement. Gene Brucker has written a delightful book about a case of a contested affair/marriage which ended up in the court of the archbishop of Florence. In that particular situation, the archbishop settled in favor of the aggrieved woman, but the pope later reversed the decision. Families were considered the most important social unit, and this included the extended family. Families had a great stake in the marriage for financial reasons, as the man's family expected the bride to bring an attractive dowry to the family. Thus a large dowry could stimulate interest and competition among suitors, making the prospective bride more desirable. Also in the case of the upper classes, political considerations often played an important role.

Melissa Bullard's fascinating study of the union between Clarice de' Medici and Filippo Strozzi


fills in details of the marriage's complicated history.\textsuperscript{264} The majority of the Strozzi family were initially against the marriage, because Cosimo de' Medici had exiled his rivals, the Strozzi family, from Florence when he had taken over control of the government in 1434. But the timing of the marriage of Clarice and Filippo in 1508, almost seventy-five years later, coincided with the time when Piero Soderini, then the \textit{gonfaloniere} (government leader) was in the process of losing his support among the upper classes, particularly amongst those who had been Medici supporters. In fact, the entire population of Florence became involved, at least on the level of gossip, in the conflict between the various factions, perhaps due to an underlying fear of the danger a Medici return to power posed to the survival of the republic. The issue had very important political meaning and consequences: those who supported the Medici favored the marriage, and those who were against the Medici opposed it. Soderini was in the latter group, fearing that the marital alliance would undermine his control and make him more vulnerable to Medici supporters. When it took place, the marriage was understood as an indication of Soderini's failure and was an important part of the set of circumstances that ultimately enabled the Medicis' return to Florence and to power. The Strozzi family, having become aware of the fluidity of the shifting political situation, reversed their opposition and welcomed the marriage. Thus the marriage liberated the Strozzi from their fear of the Medici and also temporarily restored calm to the Florentine community.

The potential that a Medici resumption of power presented to the continued existence of a republic in Florence can perhaps be analogized to the threat that Neptune's unsatisfied revenge presented to the legendary Ethiopian community of Andromeda and her royal family. Bad times could always come again, given man's (and the gods') power lust. How aware Piero was of all these elements is hard to say, but his painted Ovidian fable certainly presents the opportunity to be understood as a political allegory.

\textsuperscript{264} Bullard 1979, 668-687.
The allusion made to the rivalry between the Strozzi and the Medici families evokes and was emblematic of other aristocratic family rivalries. Soothing this particular rivalry through the Strozzi-Medici marriage not only calmed the tensions between these two families but also served as a contemporary example of harmony between families achieved by strategic marriages. As noted, the struggles amongst the families of the aristocracy for prestige and power, as well as amongst the various social classes over the right to participate in government, were chronic problems in the Florentine republic.

The painting also, however, addresses symbolically the longing for relief from the sense of distress experienced by the population in those decades. As has been noted, in addition to rivalries between and among classes, Florence was also destabilized by famine, plague and economic unrest. The context for these problems was the upcoming half-millennium. Just as fears of technological breakdown – the much-hyped Y2K bug – troubled our own society before the turning of the year 2000, in the 1490s people feared that the apocalyptic destruction of the world prior to the Second Coming of Christ might occur in 1500. This context helped augment and enable Savonarola's power, promising as he did both religious redemption and political stability through a revitalization of religious practice and the revival of republican civic life. Beyond relief of their immediate troubles, Savonarola promised the establishment of Florence as the post-apocalyptic New Jerusalem. This was a heady analgesic!

But it didn't work out for Savonarola. Why? As we saw, Savonarola's control in this overheated social climate fell apart when he challenged the aristocratic and religious leaders too far. Richard Sennett proposed a very interesting theory about why the populace, which had been so enamored of Savonarola, turned against him when the “ordeal by fire” failed to occur. Sennett argued that people identified themselves with Savonarola's power when he came across as very strong. But on the occasion of the stalled “ordeal by fire,” he failed to act and thus showed himself to them as weak,

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threatening their sense of their own power through the identification with him. This they could not tolerate, and turned against him in rage. His credibility as a savior had been destroyed.

How does all this relate to the Liberation of Andromeda? In contrast to Savonarola, Perseus did not disappoint his constituency. In his story, he did not fail to perform the deed that rescued the princess, her family and the Ethiopian society from their troubles. Queen Cassiope's boast triggered Neptune's rage; the sacrifice to right this wrong was to be attained via the dragon's rape of the girl. Had the dragon succeeded, the social fabric would have been damaged by divine retribution. But it doesn't happen; rather, the prior social order is restored through the action of Perseus, allowing the community to move forward in order to repair the potential damage through the marriage of Andromeda and her rescuer. A hint of how this solution by marriage will occur is even shown in Piero's composition. As mentioned, on the upper-left edge of the painting, a couple affectionately embraces, thus foreshadowing the upcoming marriage. Further evidence of Perseus' power to restore peace to the community can be found on the upper right, where he has built three altars to his patron gods in an open space among the buildings of a village: Mercury's altar is the left one, where a calf waits to be sacrificed; the middle altar is dedicated to Jupiter, where a bull similarly waits; meanwhile the right altar, dedicated to Minerva, depicts the slaughter of a cow. These sacrifices are Perseus's attempt to square the offense to Neptune, one would think, by showing himself the gods' devotee. He operates according to the given social order of that mythological world. This message, in the religious terms of that world, is analogous to the renewal Savonarola hoped would be brought about after the apocalypse through greater piety on the part of the Florentines.

Savonarola, however, was unable to achieve this resolution. In fact, Savonarola might better be compared with Neptune, a powerful god who has the power to do good but instead, through his inordinate desires, has rent the fabric of this society. Savonarola wanted to bring society to a better place, according to his lights, though that was to first require its apocalyptic destruction. Subsequent to
that, he imagined, the society would be reconstituted as a better place, in fact, the New Jerusalem. But perhaps Savonarola was more comparable to Queen Cassiope, whose grandiosity and hubris brought the society to a place of great danger in the first place. Thus we might more aptly see Filippo Strozzi as the hero Perseus, who, through his marriage to Clarice de' Medici, his Andromeda, helped rescue Florentine society from the social damage done by the conflict between the two great families. It is also possible to see Andromeda herself as a politically allegorical figure symbolizing the good, virtuous people of Florence who have had their innocence defiled by the rapacious upper classes, members of their own community, as Andromeda was endangered by the hubris of her own mother and the lust of her uncle. Her rescue then becomes a victory for the good people of Ethiopia, standing in for Florence.

The two paintings, then – Rosselli's *Execution of Savonarola* and Piero's *Liberation of Andromeda* – allow us to consider different ways that art can be read as reflecting social rupture and its subsequent repair. In Rosselli, the potential for repair is there in the physical solidity of the city and the unperturbed attitudes of its citizens in the presence of a horrendous event occurring in their midst. In Piero, the restoration is performed by a semi-divine figure performing a *deus-ex-machina* rescue operation in full sight of the community and restoring order through the upcoming marriage of the semi-god with the human woman.

What about Botticelli? How did his work reflect the fluctuations of anxiety and reassurance we find in the paintings of the two artists we have just considered? In his *Mystical Nativity* of c.1501 (figure 2-5), for example, we found Botticelli still heavily preoccupied with Savonarolan themes of salvation through Christ's sacrifice and the piety of the people. But some of his few later works show a more ambiguous relationship to the Savonarolan episode in their themes, as will be made clear in the discussions below. His late style is also quite different from earlier, when Savonarola was in ascendance, but it is problematic to attempt to tie stylistic changes so clearly to the demise of Savonarola: Botticelli was approaching, and then entering, his sixties, considered old age at the time, so
possibly some of the stylistic changes could be considered as due either to his ageing or his reaction to it. We can approach the question of the meaning of Botticelli's late changes of style and subject matter by thinking about several other paintings from the years between 1500 and 1510, the year of Botticelli's death.

Prime examples of his late work are a pair of decorative panels for palace walls whose subjects are stories from Livy's *Ab urbe condita liberi* (History of Rome), legends of the early female heroines Lucretia and Virginia. Like the virgin martyrs of early Christianity, these ancient Roman women sacrificed their lives to protect their maiden or married sexual virtue, and in so doing stimulated revolts against dictators. These were secular legends of a type Botticelli had never painted before, his previous secular works having all been based on mythology, with the exception of the *Calumny of Apelles*, based on a legend of the renowned ancient painter Apelles. The identity of the patron of these panels is not firmly established, and this lack is significant because having such knowledge might influence how we interpret the panels. Vasari reported that a number of panels were commissioned by Guidantonio Vespucci to decorate his palazzo, and these panels have been thought to be among them.266 The hypothesis suggesting Vespucci as patron is that he commissioned them for the wedding of his son Giovanni to Namicina di Benedetto di Tanai di Nerli in 1500. But Lightbown questions this attribution of patronage, noting that the Vespucci had always been staunch allies of the Medici and therefore would never have commissioned work with such blatant implied anti-Medici sentiment.267 Jaynie Anderson, in exhibition notes to the painting, states that Guidantonio Vespucci continuously altered his politics regarding the Medici: from the time of the expulsion of Piero de' Medici in 1494, he opposed them; then from 1496 to 1500, he favored their return. However by 1500, she avers, he was promoting the virtues of republicanism to his son and daughter-in-law, thus hypothetically supporting the type of

266 Vasari 1963, 85.
267 Lightbown 1989, 269.
revolt against tyranny that can be read into these paintings. 268

Vasari asserted that Botticelli had been a favorite of the Medici; and even though there is no evidence of any specific commission accorded to him by Lorenzo, he is known to have painted portraits of some of the Medici and other works for Medici family patrons. 269 How would these interpersonal political antipathies have affected Botticelli in creating these works? We really don't know, but these paintings could in any event reflect the vicissitudes of the sociopolitical situation in early sixteenth century Florence. We begin with the Lucretia painting.

The History of Lucretia (figure 4–2) tells the story of the shamed wife of Collatinus, a Roman soldier. Collatinus had asserted to a group of his fellow soldiers, while all were drinking, that his wife was the most virtuous among women and took the group to his home to demonstrate this. Lucretia and Collatinus offered hospitality to the group, among whom was Tarquin, son of the last Roman king. Tarquin, inflamed with lust, returned later and raped Lucretia. Lucretia sent for her husband and father and reported the event to them when they arrived. She then committed suicide right in front of them rather than live with the shame of having been defiled. Junius Brutus, who was among the group of soldiers present then, vowed to overthrow the Tarquin family's rule. Thus the rape was one of the factors triggering the revolt that led to the formation of the Roman republic. 270

Botticelli placed Brutus, in the act of inciting the people of Rome to revolt, in the center of his panel. There is great activity all through the panel. In the left bay Tarquin confronts and threatens Lucretia, who throws up her hands in protest. He pulls at her cloak as he prepares his right hand to strike with his knife. On the right of the panel we see her slumped over after her suicide, her body supported by soldiers, including Junius Brutus. A man not in soldier's uniform at the back of this group

269 Lightbown 1989, 11, 58.
270 Livy, Ab urbe condita liber, 1:lvii-lix.
raises his hands in a gesture which balances that of Lucretia on the other side of the painting. Both episodes take place in partially enclosed spaces, as distinct from the depiction of Junius Brutus in the center: he stands in an open space on the base of a column topped by a statue of David with the head of Goliath, in front of an arch which recalls the Arch of Constantine in Rome. Brutus holds his sword aloft as he looks down on the body of Lucretia, knife still in her breast, laid out on a bier. (Florentines always identified themselves with David, taking pride in their independence and lack of subjugation to other Italian states, just as David saved his people from subjugation to the Philistines through his victory over Goliath.) Soldiers rush towards Lucretia's body, their faces and bodies expressing horror, shock and grief.

The outdoor scene takes place in bright sunlight, so we can see sky and both urban and natural landscapes behind and through the arch. The bright daylight brings out the intense colors worn by everyone, underscoring the passions of the participants. Significantly, the *bas relief* panels set into the architecture, above the scenes of Lucretia being assaulted and of her suicide, depict other scenes of revolt; in the one above Lucretia and Tarquin, Judith carries the head of Holofernes, an Assyrian general who would have destroyed Judith's home city had she not saved her people by killing him. In the *bas relief* panel above Lucretia's suicide, the warrior Horatius Cocles is defending Rome against the intervention of an ally of the last king of Rome, Tarquinius.271 So references to revolt abound in at least three places in this panel – the two *bas reliefs* and the statue of David.

Looking now at the *History of Virginia* (figure 4-3), Botticelli has deployed a continuous narrative format, with the significant exception that a group of soldiers initiating a revolt is placed in the center foreground. Virginia, the daughter of the Roman consul Virginius, has evoked the lustful passion of Appius, a Roman judge. She has been stolen by Appius's client Marcus Claudius in order to obtain her for Appius. Though Virginia's fiance tries to claim her, his argument is ignored by Appius,

271 Livy, *Ab urbe condita liber*, II.ix-x.
as is that of Virginia's father Virginius, who returns from the front to add his voice to the fiance's claim. Appius ignores them both. At this point, Virginia's father stabs her, claiming that this is the only way he can obtain her freedom.272

The events of the Virginia legend are alleged to have occurred later than those of the Lucretia legend, and in fact to have precipitated the end of the Roman republic. This end came about because the group appointed to institute reforms in the republic had become corrupted and was abusive of the power allocated to them, resulting in the uprising which has its beginnings in the group of soldiers depicted here. The narrative proceeds from left to right, rising in an upward arc to the center, where the corrupt Appius sits on his official seat under a basilica-like half dome. The other main characters are represented several times, moving dramatically across the panel as the story evolves. This panel, as with other of Botticelli's late works, expresses emotion much more through action than did his earlier works, for example, the mythologies the Birth of Venus and Primavera. In those earlier works, expression of emotion is more understated, the panels being delicately and elegantly painted. This late Virginia panel is replete with broad gestures, and faces express the emotions of participants and witnesses in a somewhat exaggerated, almost melodramatic manner. The depiction of the story itself seems to practically race across the picture surface: on the left Marcus Claudius grabs at Virginia, right hand around her waist while his left hand clutches her thigh as her ladies try to wrest her away from him. In the next grouping, Marcus Claudius drags Virginia by her gown, pointing up the steps to the seated Appius. Directly to the right of and below Appius, Virginius gestures towards Appius with pleading hands. Back on the ground, in the next grouping to the right, Virginius raises his knife to kill Virginia, who has thrown up her arms. Virginius appears once more, as the furthest right figure, now holding his face in an agony of grief and perhaps remorse. In the center foreground of the painting the group of mounted soldiers gathers, in preparation for beginning a revolt against the corrupt government.

272 Livy, Ab urbe condita liber, III.xliv-lviii.
of which Appius is a member. The whole painting is executed in tones of red, olive green and many browns and off-whites, creating a sense of coloristic unity in this panoramic view. As noted by Lightbown, the capitals of the columns “image with their mockery the sinister mockery of justice” that is going on here; additionally the scenes of violence painted to represent bas reliefs, in the spaces above the entryways on the far left and right, also contribute to the sense of disturbing wrongdoing going on and justify the revolt in progress.273

As secular stories of (feminine) heroism against tyranny, these two panels can and have been seen as political allegories of Savonarolan anti-Medici sentiments.274 Like these women, Savonarola had rebelled in his actions and his preaching against tyrannical government, promoting republican government in Florence in his belief it would benefit the people. Like those women, he gave his life for his beliefs. His strong republican sympathies, preached to the entire body of Florentine citizenry, had put him on a collision course with the Medici and their supporters. The virtues he promoted were the secular ones of greater power for the citizenry, which he conflated with religious “virtues” such as piety and charity. And for a brief period, during the exile of the Medicis, the republic seemed to have had a chance of rebirth, until the Medici were able to regain control in 1512. Parenthetically, it may be worth noting regarding the panels that whereas Lucretia sacrificed her own life, Virginia was murdered by her father, also in the interest of preserving her reputation for purity. Presumably this revived legend is in accord with views of Florentine culture of the time about a father's responsibility to protect his daughter's chastity.

It is remarkable that Botticelli's panels evince such great durability and versatility in the ways their themes can be interpreted; each successive regime co-opted the imagery for their own message. If the panels are viewed as supportive of Savonarola's preaching republicanism, they work as symbolic

273 Lightbown 1989, 269.
274 Ibid.
expressions of those sentiments in the contemporary populace, as protests against the tyrannical Medici. Savonarola tried to evoke these sentiments in his preaching, telling the Florentines that they were a good people, innocents, perhaps in some ways victims of the tyrannical upper classes. To this extent the victimized women can be read as symbols of the good innocent people of Florence. As noted above, Andromeda's story could also be read this way, she being the innocent victim of her mother's hubris and Neptune's subsequent revenge. Thus even after Savonarola, the republic and even the Medici were gone, these heroines could still be read as morally pure images of virtuous women in general, without need of the specific historical reference. The same can be said of Michelangelo's David, which in the 1490s and until the return of the Medici was read as protesting the power of tyrants, but after the Medici restoration, it became simply a symbol of the Florentine spirit of independence and strength against powerful potential invaders. It seems clear that the way a painting is experienced can vary with the sociopolitical context: it can be read, and even intended to be read, according to the agenda of the patron, the artist, the viewer, or some combination of all three, and can vary with the passage of time and changes in the sociopolitical situation. In these cases, as noted, during the time of the Medici, paintings with a theme of rebellion can be viewed as anti-tyranny, while at a time when tyrannical leaders are not an issue, they can simply be stories of virtuous women, possibly symbolizing the good innocent nature of a people, who stand up for moral rectitude.

Botticelli's last painting, an unfinished furniture panel, an Adoration of the Magi (1500-1505, figure 4-4), returns to a religious subject, but with marked differences from his previous four Adorations of the Magi (1465, 1470, 1475, 1481-82). Comparing the 1500 Adoration with that of 1475 highlights these changes.

The 1475 Adoration (figure 4-5) was commissioned by Guaspare del Lama as the altarpiece for his funerary chapel in Santa Maria Novella. Guaspare is an Italian form of the name Caspar, one of the Magi, which perhaps helps explain the patron's choice of subject. The patron appears in the painting as
the elderly white-haired man in a blue gown standing on the right within a line of men, looking out at
the viewer. But he is not the only identifiable person in this painting. As an avowed Medici supporter,
he probably endorsed if not suggested having Cosimo and his sons Piero and Giovanni included as
representations of the Magi. Cosimo kneels before Mary and Jesus, cradling the baby's foot in his
hands; Piero and Giovanni, wearing red and white respectively, kneel further forward in the picture
plane, below and to the right of the Virgin's gown. Surprisingly, they look at each other, rather than at
the beings they have journeyed to adore, which almost seems a tip-off to the worldliness of the Medici.
Lorenzo, the next heir in line after his father Piero, poses with a look of disdain in the left foreground
while his brother Giuliano stands just in front of the patron, appearing contemplative. Most famously,
Botticelli has included himself in the picture on the far right, looking out at the viewer with an almost
haughty, cocksure confidence. In fact many people seem haughty and self-involved; everyone is richly
dressed in the luxurious manner which would be decried by Savonarola fifteen years and more later.
The self-promotion of the Medici as Magi, similar to that displayed in the Journey of the Magi frescoes
they commissioned for their chapel in the Palazzo Medici, would also have enraged Savonarola.

Far different is the *Adoration of the Magi* (unfinished, 1500-1505, Galleria degli Uffizi,
Florence, figure 4-4). Little has been written on this preparatory study for an unfinished painting,
about which little seems to be known. For example, we know nothing of the identity of the patron.
Acquired for the Uffizi in 1779, it is believed that the coloring was done anonymously in the
seventeenth century. It has been speculated that the figures of Savonarola and Lorenzo de' Medici are
included, to the left of the Holy Family.275

Unique in Botticelli's oeuvre, at 68 x 42-1/2 inches, it his only *Adoration of this size and in this
sprawling format, and the only one which shows so many viewpoints and episodes, such diverse foci of

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Wilson (1880) as having suggested Savonarola and Lorenzo de' Medici as portraits in the painting.
interest. Hundreds of figures swarm about in a barren landscape; many individuals interact specifically with each other, as though in separate conversations. We can imagine that people are responding in confusion and excitement to viewing the Holy Family, questioning what is going on and how to react. Some people gesture towards the Holy Family, others towards the sky, perhaps seeing there the Star of Bethlehem which led the shepherds to the Nativity scene.

Who are all these people? They mill about, gesture, and crowd together, swirling in an almost circular fashion, coming in from all sides, perhaps symbolizing all of humanity or at least the general body of Florentine citizens. We are no longer mainly in the presence of the upper class but rather in a more socioeconomically varied group. It is as though Botticelli is making a point of including everyone, proclaiming a republican ideal. The busyness of the scene threatens to obscure the focus on the central figures of the Holy Family. We can distinguish them by their haloes as well as by a characteristic pose in front of a hollowed-out rock concavity, which sets them apart literally and figuratively. Otherwise they are not distinguished by their dress, which is simple and quite similar to that of those around them, i.e. they are not made special by their clothing. They are pointed out, however, by a hooded and robed friar to the left of the Holy Family who wears the Dominican habit. Though he doesn't bear much resemblance to the known portraits of Savonarola, he acts in a way we might plausibly expect of Savonarola: he gestures towards the Holy Family but doesn't literally touch them. Yet his hand, highlighted against a dark background, connects him visually with them and draws attention to them all. In this way his hand drawing our attention, to him and to the Family, distinguishes him from the many other less featured pointing hands in the paintings. Even if the figure is not literally Savonarola, his habit identifies him as a Dominican, thus of Savonarola's order. It would be interesting if indeed Botticelli included Savonarola here, suggesting a continuing involvement with him in his mind and some support for him and for republicanism at a time when such an attitude might have evoked censure from pro-Medici factions. The Magi themselves are not clearly identified: seven.
men kneel before the Holy Family in adoration, so some of those who are more richly dressed might represent the Kings. The figures in the painting whose clothing has been colored in wear reds, blues and blacks, and though thought to have been added by a later hand, the artist seems to have attempted to follow the color scheme of Botticelli's 1475 *Adoration*. The rugged background, also unique in Botticelli's oeuvre, consists of a rock-covered peak rendered in brown and yellow hues and set within a somewhat more verdant, gentler landscape which stretches back into the distance. There is no trace of human intervention in this landscape, only the harsh and unwelcoming stones. The undeveloped detailing of the painting no doubt attests to its being unfinished.

Yet despite its preliminary state, a number of stylistic elements in this work link it with the paintings of the stories of the two Roman women. The major one is the emphasis on rapid movement and gestures to convey meaning and emotion. But all three are different from his earlier work: the two Roman heroine-revolt paintings in particular feature palettes tailored to the meaning of the story. All three paintings manipulate space as part of the story-telling process, and use a variety of formats for that same purpose, to communicate intense feeling, exemplifying the prominent features of Botticelli's altered late style.

The stylistic changes common to these three last works of Botticelli indicate that the artist has developed a new freedom of artistic experimentation, or maybe returned to a pre-Savonarolan efflorescence of creativity which includes secular subject matter. The Roman works (Virginia, Lucretia) in particular are very dramatic, the participants moving about and gesturing with their whole bodies in an almost frenzied manner. In them, Botticelli employs disrupted narrative formats to focus the viewer's attention on the revolts, which are the climactic outcome of these tales, positioning those scenes out of sequence in the center, so as to provide emphasis on the eruption of revolt. All three panels contain many figures, but the Roman scenes, as distinct from the *Adoration*, represent some important characters multiple times as the action progresses.
As mentioned above, the inclusion of a Dominican friar, possibly Savonarola, in the _Adoration_ panel would seem to indicate that the friar was still on Botticelli’s mind, and/or that of his patron, because memories of Savonarola were still fresh, still reverberating throughout the community. So we might understand Botticelli as trying to find a middle ground between continuing support for Savonarola and a simultaneous distancing from the artist's previous intensified focus on religious work that had been so characteristic of him since Savonarola had begun to preach in Florence. On the one hand, the move towards secular subjects with a theme of revolt can be seen as continuing support for Savonarola and his policies. But the turn towards secular themes can also represent a manifestation of exhaustion occasioned by the emotional turmoil Savonarola had stirred up in the population overall, which Botticelli may have expressed in a relative distancing from religious subjects. We don't know for sure how Botticelli felt about the political changes that had kept the Florentines in such a state of disequilibrium, but we can imagine that he may have had a mixture of feelings: relief that Savonarola was gone and that the half-millennium had passed without an apocalypse, mixed with distress about the political turmoil that still ensued and possibly a sense of loss of Savonarola's inspiration. His work thus may reflect his complex reaction to the evolving mixture of social and political changes that occurred during the 1490s and the early 1500s. Though he had always used motion to express feelings in his work, after 1500 he went even further in that direction. He also developed a more dramatic style and re-broadened his subject matter to include the portrayal of secular themes.

Returning in closing to Piero's _Andromeda_ (figure 3-16), we find that, in stark contrast to Rosselli and Botticelli, Piero takes an entirely different tack. The painting was made some time after Savonarola's death and also after the passing of the year 1500, which may account in part for its lighter, even exuberant retelling of a tale of danger overcome and perhaps tyranny overthrown. The focus on marriage here, a joyous celebration of the human capacity for overcoming difficulties, conveys a less bleak view of the human predilection for misbehavior and misplaced passion than the violence and
destructiveness portrayed in the *Hunt* pictures, which were most likely painted some years before, even before Savonarola's ascendance. But we are not faced with reality here except through allegory and analogy, expressed through the lens of Piero's imagination. The hero flies in on winged feet from a great height to rescue his maiden, his cape soaring behind him like a modern cartoon superhero. The girl's family and friends rejoice in the felicitous outcome. All is right with the world, except maybe for the still-unsatisfied Neptune and the frustrated uncle, hinting of further potential problems, just as the distant smoke in the *Return from the Hunt* suggests continuing threat to the restored calm. As with the Roman panels of Botticelli, the innocent virtuous woman can be read as a politically allegorical figure representing the innocence of the body of Florentine citizens, or in a more general sense, a heroine being sacrificed to protect the integrity of her community and its values.

To gain an impression of how events in Florence were seen shortly after the period under discussion, when the dust had somewhat settled and order been restored, we can consider the report of a contemporary well-known and articulate historian and public figure, Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540), who wrote about these transformations in his c.1512 *History of Florence*. Addressing Savonarola as a man and a public figure, Guicciardini acknowledged the good Savonarola had brought to Florence. He praised the friar's erudition, his achievement in bringing Florentine citizens to a more pious and sober living style, his charismatic preaching, and his commitment to improving life for the average non-elite citizen. His influence had made Florence a place of more “decent behavior” and had helped cushion it from the infighting amongst the various political factions, pro- and anti-Medici, through his introduction and support of the Great Council. Guicciardini wrote “Without doubt these efforts saved the city and, as [Savonarola] so truly said, worked to the advantage of those who now governed and those who had governed.”

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had actually been a prophet, “for time clears up everything. But I do believe this: if he was good, we have seen a great prophet in our time; if he was bad, we have seen a great man.”

One senses his admiration but also his skepticism of the man. So, too, do we see this in Botticelli's and Piero's works between the 1490s and 1510s.

**Conclusion**

To summarize and reiterate the argument of this thesis, each of the three artists studied here – Rosselli, Botticelli and Piero di Cosimo – had a unique way of demonstrating *via* their art their reaction

277 Ibid.
to the events through which they lived. Rosselli's response, quite different from that of either Botticelli or Piero di Cosimo, was to depict an actual event emerging from the disturbed conditions in the city, while simultaneously asserting through his portrait of the public city center, the continuation of the city and its life despite the turmoil. His was a literal depiction of the city, a stable Florence, temporarily disturbed in particular by Savonarola's influence, but still with its basic identity intact, surviving all vicissitudes. In Botticelli we saw a specific response to Savonarola as evidenced by changes in his style and subject matter over time: at first he accommodated to Savonarola's endorsement of a simpler, more pious and less luxurious lifestyle in the simplification of depictions of holy figures and in the temporary abandonment of secular subject matter; to a great extent he somewhat freed himself from these constraints after Savonarola's death and after the turning of the half-millennium proved to be a non-event, failing to bring with it the dreaded apocalypse. Throughout this same period Piero di Cosimo responded less concretely to Savonarola and the other distressing events; but after 1500, we note in his work rather an overall sense of the lifting of the tension and anxiety that the entire community had lived through. We can thus find in all the artists' work signs of their individual responses to the sociopolitical environment, each in his own characteristic manner.

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