

Bringing *Botticelli* *and Renaissance Florence* to Minneapolis

This exhibition is the result of an unprecedented partnership between the Gallerie degli Uffizi, in Florence, and the Minneapolis Institute of Art. For the first time ever, paintings and drawings by Sandro Botticelli and his circle are displayed alongside ancient Roman sculptures like those that inspired the Renaissance in Florence and the works featured in this show. The artistic achievements of this rebirth have enthralled audiences for centuries.

The Uffizi is home to the world's most celebrated masterpieces of Renaissance Florence. Its three sites are woven into the very fabric of the city's history: the Pitti Palace and Boboli Gardens are the former residence and grounds of the Medici grand dukes; the Uffizi Palace was built by Cosimo I de' Medici to house the city courts, guilds, and other agencies (*uffizi* means "offices"). Art collected by the powerful Medici family—including many works in this exhibition—form the core of the Uffizi's vast holdings.

Joining the Uffizi loans are a dozen treasures contributed by Mia, including Roman marbles and an unsurpassed gilded wedding chest, or *cassone*. Minneapolis is the only venue where this exhibition will be shown.

Florence: Cradle of the Renaissance

The Renaissance was a time of reawakening in Europe, when artists and intellectuals studied excavated artifacts and rediscovered texts from the ancient past to transform the art and culture of their time. The center of these achievements was Florence, epitomized by the astounding beauty and innovations produced by its native son, Sandro Botticelli. He and his fellow artists took up pagan subjects from mythology and reinterpreted them. They took the idealized human forms of classical sculpture and adapted them to Christian themes and values. The Renaissance also saw a rise in humanism, which placed the individual at the center of a new worldview. This fostered interest in the new genre of portraiture and altered approaches to religious art. The stability and prosperity of Florence meant that artists enjoyed remarkable patronage across all sectors of society—from the city's ruling families like the Medici, powerful trade guilds, religious and civic institutions, and members of the entrepreneurial merchant class. Masterworks made for such varied patrons are on display in this exhibition, along with the kinds of classical sculpture that inspired so many artists of the era.

The Medici

The Medici were the leading patrons of art and culture in Florence and the city's de facto rulers. When Florence Cathedral's massive dome was completed in 1436—making it the largest cathedral in the Christian world—Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464) ruled Florence from behind the scenes. He funded churches and convents, supported scholars, and built a major library and antiquities collection. His grandson Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449–1492) consolidated his family's dynastic power, ushering in a golden age of art. His unrivaled collection of antiquities filled a sculpture garden near the convent of San Marco, which artists eagerly studied. Lorenzo likely commissioned Botticelli's celebrated mythological paintings, including *Pallas and the Centaur* (c. 1482) in the next gallery. This reign of largesse and humanism ended with Lorenzo's death in 1492. His son, Piero the Unfortunate (1472–1503), held on to power for two more years, but he was forced into exile in 1494, following a French invasion. Turmoil ensued with the rise and fall of the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola, a puritanical extremist burned at the stake for heresy in 1498. Art became more somber for a time but remained vital to the city's economic, cultural, and religious life.

Alessandro Filipepi, called Sandro Botticelli

Italian (Florence), 1445–1510

The eighth of nine children, Sandro Botticelli was born in Florence to Smeralda and Mariano Filipepi, a leather tanner. Around age 14 he began his apprenticeship with Filippo Lippi, whose luminous works are exhibited here. By his mid-20s, Botticelli opened his own studio and emerged as one of the leading talents of his generation. Except for a brief stint in Rome, where he painted wall frescoes in the Sistine Chapel (1481–82), he spent his entire career in Florence.

Today, Botticelli's outsized reputation is based on his mythological paintings, especially the *Primavera*, *Pallas and the Centaur*, and *Birth of Venus* (1480s), made for members of the Medici family. But he was renowned in his day for his incomparable treatment of sacred subjects and his many altarpieces and devotional paintings.

With the rise of Friar Savonarola, a zealot reformer Botticelli seems to have supported, and the Medici's exile from Florence in 1494, the artist's style became more somber, reflecting the spirit of the age. His circumstances during the final decade of his life—he died at age 65—are somewhat obscure, but he and his workshop remained active, even as a new generation—Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael—emerged with its own ideas for transforming art in Florence and beyond.

Art all'Antica: Virtue, Passion, and Pleasure

The rediscovery of Greco-Roman antiquity breathed new life into Florentine art, architecture, and literature. *Art all'antica*—art rendered in the manner of the ancients—could be decorative, fantastical, playful, or spiritual. Artists studied the excavated ancient sculptures as fertile sources for subject matter and motifs. At the Medici court in Florence, Lorenzo the Magnificent formed an exceptional collection of antiquities, including sculptures, medals, and gems, and expanded his library of rare classical manuscripts. He supported a host of humanists, poets, and artists who, like him, sought to gain deep knowledge of ancient Greek philosophy and literature. In art, mythological subjects personified the humanist ideas cultivated by Lorenzo's circle. Thus, in this context, even Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, with her nude or barely covered body, could represent virtue and the embodiment of physical and moral perfection. Botticelli emerged as a particularly original and nuanced interpreter of classical sources and contemporary philosophy, fusing pagan and Christian imagery in paintings that entranced with their beauty and complex symbolism.

The San Marco Sculpture Garden and Antiquities in Renaissance Florence

Lorenzo the Magnificent chose a picturesque setting, an enclosed garden near the Dominican monastery of San Marco, to store his growing collection of Greek and Roman antiquities. The garden also served as an informal academy, a place of artistic learning and inspiration, where artists studied the collection under the guidance of the sculptor Bertoldo di Giovanni. Leonardo da Vinci, a young Michelangelo, and likely Botticelli, a favorite of Lorenzo's, spent time here too, working among these revered classical models, which they adapted for both mythological and Christian subjects.

After the Medici fled Florence in 1494, a mob looted the garden, dispersing the never-catalogued collection. Yet through the artwork made by the artists who studied there, we can identify some, like *Three Satyrs Wrestling a Serpent*, on view in this gallery, that were probably displayed in the now-lost garden.

Sacred Beauty

Religious art dominated the art market in Renaissance Florence, commissioned for churches, guilds, confraternities, civic institutions, and homes, and painted for the open market. Most popular were depictions of the Madonna and Child, accompanied by angels and saints, a subject that has a long-established tradition in Roman Catholic art. The tondo (roundel) was a format favored in Florence. The two examples included here are of particularly high quality, suggesting they were commissioned for patrician homes or palaces. Each represents an amiable group of heavenly figures as a loving family. Placed in the bedroom, these paintings were meant to bestow numerous children on their owners and a happy continuity of their family lineage.

Artists used ancient sculptures of baby Cupid and Eros, like the one in this gallery, as models for the Christ child. In Renaissance Florence, where classical art was venerated as perfect, these were ideal representations of the holy infant.

The Renaissance

Interior: A Setting of Virtue and Magnificence

Florentine interiors, whether within private homes or palaces, guild halls or civic buildings, were often sumptuously decorated spaces with paintings, sculptures, and furnishings coded with meaning. Important rooms in patrician houses featured wooden panels (*spalliere*) applied to portions of the wall. This wainscoting might be decorated with paintings representing a range of subjects, including religious scenes, secular narratives, and allegories that served as models of virtue. Likewise, furniture such as chests, daybeds, headboards, and cupboards might be embellished with painted panels, carvings, or gilded reliefs that sparkled in candlelight. Some of the painters in this gallery specialized in the production of *spalliere* and painted furniture. Such household objects were thoughtfully commissioned and arranged to create a setting of virtue and magnificence.

From Life: Florentine Faces and People

The portraits and paintings in this gallery immortalize a few men, women, and children who lived in Florence over 500 years ago. Many of their identities are now lost, but their faces were meticulously recorded for patrons wishing to celebrate these particular individuals—a family member, friend, political ally, workshop assistant, or even oneself. Portraiture emerged as an independent genre in 1400s Florence. Over the century, artists moved away from portraying sitters in profile, like emperors on ancient coins, in favor of the three-quarter view. This allowed for more lifelike and psychologically engaging depictions. Of course, only the wealthiest people could afford to have their likenesses painted, but gradually members of the middle class were deemed worthy subjects, including women and children, and portrayed less formally, even looking directly at the viewer. Such an approach went beyond recording a sitter's physical traits, capturing their character and spirit as well. Portraits were also a prominent feature of Florentine altarpieces and church frescoes, where patrons' families were included in religious scenes. Such public displays, like the two paintings of the Adoration of the Magi, proved powerful in promoting a family's reputation or alliances.