The Botticelli Effect

Introduction

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This second part takes a chronological approach to exploring the rediscovery of Botticelli, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. From Rome and Florence to Harvard, South Kensington and Richmond, research takes us from the Vatican Library, where the neoclassical sculptor John Flaxman studied Botticelli’s illustrations to Dante in 1792, to the cosy sofa in the ‘Little Botticelli room’ in Richmond of the lesbian couple Katherine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper, better known by their shared pen name Michael Field. Bridging these research worlds, of the academic artist and Aesthete poets, are the connoisseur historians Hermann Ulmann and Bernard and Mary Berenson. Given their common interests as pioneers of Botticelli studies, these colourful characters could not be more varied in their priorities, nor in what they sought, found and used from studying the artist.

While the exhibition Botticelli Reimagined revealed the influence of a Portrait of a Lady known as Smeralda Bandinelli (fig.1.5) that Rossetti had bought in 1867, this section of the conference drew attention to the contribution to the artist’s rediscovery made by a literary tradition, from Dante to William Roscoe, Rossetti and to Walter Pater. Another theme to emerge from the perspectives of these three papers is the role played by reproductions of Botticelli’s actual paintings. From an edition of Dante’s Divine Comedy with engravings after Botticelli (published in 1481) to chromolithographs published by the Arundel Society and on to photographic prints, the pioneers’ understanding of the artist was formed more through small-scale reproductions than by any dramatic rediscovery and rehanging of large oil paintings in British galleries. The role of photographs as a tool of Berenson’s connoisseurship has long been known, but we may ask how far reproductions on paper became a way of seeing Botticelli in the wider sense. In this way, the visual material culture of Botticelli favoured the intimate study of linear and tonal values over full-scale compositions and the subtleties of his actual palette.

The idea of ownership and portability of Botticelli in reproduction facilitated not only close scrutiny by connoisseurs, beyond the limited
public space and opening times of public galleries, but also encouraged a more relaxed frame of mind – a freedom to dream, to meander through subjective readings of creative reinterpretation. Rossetti wrote a sonnet to the *Primavera* after seeing it in reproduction, but never visited Italy. As Anna Gruetzner Robins observes, when Walter Pater described *The Birth of Venus* (fig.1.0) as a weary prostitute with ‘grey flesh and wan flowers’, he may have only known the painting from the chromolithograph published by the Arundel Society in 1870.

Mark Evans traces the rediscovery of Botticelli in England from the portrait painter Jonathan Richardson, drawing on both a travel guide to Italy and France that Richardson and his son published in 1722 and from his collection of drawings, sold after his death in 1745. Despite English translations of Dante, and paintings and sketches by artists such as Fuseli, Flaxman and William Blake, when Fuseli’s friend William Young Ottley tried to sell the only signed painting by Botticelli, *The Mystic Nativity* (National Gallery, London; see p.99, fig.2.2), acquired by Ottley from the Villa Aldobrandini in Rome, at auction in 1811, it found no buyer. In an edition of Fuseli’s writings published in 1831, Botticelli’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel were described as by ‘Sandro, the least qualified of the group, whose barbarous taste and dry minuteness palsied [...] his associates’.

Francesco Ventrella’s study of Bernard Berenson and Botticelli focuses on the connoisseur’s pursuit of a specific ‘artistic personality’. In 1884, while a student at Harvard, he heard a lecture by Edmund Gosse that prompted him to rush not to a public gallery, but rather to a shop to purchase a reproduction of Botticelli’s *Primavera* (fig.1.30). Berenson’s first publication on art, in 1890, was an article about photographs of old master paintings. He decorated his study with photographs and used visual aids in the series of lectures on the Italian masters that he gave in 1893, not in a public art gallery but at 93 Onslow Square, South Kensington. When the first comprehensive monograph on Botticelli, by Hermann Ulmann, appeared in 1893, Berenson prepared for writing a review by asking his future wife, Mary Costelloe, to check for any gaps in his collection of photographs. This way of studying Botticelli through reproductions must have influenced Berenson’s conclusion to the article (written with Mary Costelloe): ‘Ulmann did not understand Botticelli’s quality, which is the fact that he is a linealist’. Berenson saw Botticelli’s use of line as the key to his character as an artist and to the ‘tonic effects’ of his art. Ventrella invites us to equate Berenson’s attempt at psychological analysis of the artist with his own struggle to reconcile his anti-Semitism with his Jewish identity.
Anna Gruetzner Robins presents the writers known as Michael Field first in Paris in 1890, meeting Berenson on their way to Florence; they had been inspired by Walter Pater’s essay on Botticelli (published in book form in 1873) and by Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s sonnet ‘For Primavera by Sandro Botticelli’. Bradley and Cooper knew Botticelli’s *Mystic Nativity* in London’s National Gallery, and they looked long and hard in the Uffizi and Accademia in Florence. Back home their ‘little Botticelli room’ was hung with framed photographs – until their neighbour Charles Ricketts persuaded them to prefer Burne-Jones; in 1900 they noted ‘Photographs of Botticelli have recently been unhung’. As well as these graphic and literary drivers behind the rediscovery of Botticelli in Britain, the psychology of writers is shown to have been a key factor in his reception, as the Renaissance artist’s paintings of androgynous figures appealed to such aesthetes of flexible sexuality.

The rediscovery of Botticelli can no longer be credited entirely to Pre-Raphaelite painters and to a literary cult in late nineteenth-century England. But while most of his paintings remained in Tuscan churches, houses and galleries, the appreciation of his art spread beyond eloquent texts and artistic emulations – for Botticelli travelled, and was savoured, in reproductions that had their own influence and appeal.