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## Botticelli's Dancing Angels: Shaping Space in the Celestial Realm

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Botticelli's Dancing Angels:  
Shaping Space in the Celestial Realm



Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Arts  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2019



*Dedicated to my parents, who are the most supportive, loving people I know*

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## **Introduction**

Set against the stark black forest are the luminous Three Graces who tangle together in a sumptuous dance. Sandro Botticelli paints these beautiful graces in his renowned *Primavera* (fig.1). Their lustrous skin shines through the sheer pearl fabric, clinging to their incandescent bodies. By virtue of the Graces' translucent drapery, their form is on display, and the viewer may rapture at the fragility, and idealistic suppleness of the female body. As the Graces move, their dresses undulate around them, like silver water, cascading down their bodies. Moving in resolute harmony, the Three Graces dance in a circle, one following the other. Their dresses swish like a movement of the past, trailing one step behind the figures, like a negative left in the space. The Graces weave through one another, their swanlike limbs a collection of angles, a sea of movement. With an elegant tilt of their heads, the Graces share the moment with one another. Every finger is activated in a performative, intentional, pose as they hold hands. Botticelli idealizes these figures, with their creamy complexion and golden hair which ripples down their backs, intricately braided together into elaborate plaits. Their faces are lovely, delicate in their peaceful expression, enhancing the lyrical quality of their dance. The bodies themselves bend into the movement, dynamically expressing both ease and angularity. Botticelli's placement of axial movement adds to the intricacy of their dance. Each change in the position of their arms' direction creates energy, giving way to a powerful current which flows within each dancer.

Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* was the first image that captivated me as I began to "soul-search" for my senior project topic. It was over the summer before beginning my senior year that I took to the library, with no concrete direction in mind other than the goal to come out with a topic. Undoubtedly, figuring everything out that quickly was a long shot as even now, at the final stages of writing my senior project, it still seems in flux as I add new layers into my

analysis. The more I consult additional people, the more I realize how Botticelli's work flows intrinsically from the dynamic historical period to a relevant space for me today. I was drawn to Italian Renaissance paintings, a passion developed from the first Italian Renaissance course I took at Bard. I knew I wanted to work with movement and the body. Dance has consistently been a passion of mine, as I first came to Bard as a double major in Art History and Dance. In addition to technique classes, I took dance theory courses during my first two years in college as is required for a dance major. This prompted my interest in the connection between dance and the images I was drawn to in the field of Art History. With this juxtaposition of ideas in mind, and the heat of a sweltering Los Angeles summer day, I flipped through a dense book by Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* and was taken with Botticelli's *Primavera*.<sup>1</sup> Botticelli is known for his beautiful women, and I was sensitive to his complex attention to the movement, ease, and beauty of his bodies. Botticelli's *Primavera* was a painting I had seen before and had always admired on some intrinsic level, but had never studied it in depth. In retrospect, I was convinced I had found my topic but realized, flipping through that colossal book, that perhaps Botticelli was too famous, too known in the mainstream, and therefore impossible to choose; on the other hand, if passion could meet purpose and intention, I felt I had it somewhat figured out.

After I landed on Botticelli, it was impossible to find another artist who, to my eye, matched his artistry of motion in the human form. Botticelli merged the gracefulness of the form with the curious mixture of sheer ideal proportion. My first area of research was to look for the overarching scholarship done on Botticelli himself. Needless to say, this field of research is an

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Hartt and David Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 7th ed. (Pearson, 2010).

extensive one due to Botticelli's fame.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, I attempted to get a general sense of the types of approaches scholars made when examining the vast material. I found that the research on Botticelli focuses on a couple of key factors: his life, his experiences, and his great body of work hold the bulk of his scholarship. It was, however, how these scholars were framing Botticelli's life and influences that caught my interest. Scholars tended to concern themselves with Botticelli's role in the Renaissance, and what he was accomplishing in that time. Scholars tended to arrange Botticelli's life into specific groups, asking, for instance whether Botticelli was a follower of Savonarola? Was Botticelli working within these High Renaissance topics? What was the progression of his style? I didn't realize it then, but these questions would become the foundation for understanding Botticelli in my own terms. Of course, a large majority of the scholarship is on his famous works such as *The Birth of Venus* (fig. 2) or *Primavera*, but because of his fame, the general public's curiosity lies within his life and experiences as well.

In looking through Botticelli's great body of work, I came across two additional paintings where Botticelli uses the circle dance motif of the *Primavera* and I became curious. Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity* (fig. 3) and the *Coronation of the Virgin* (fig. 4) were unique in his work; they were the only two paintings which represented angels dancing in a circle. I began to read Olivia Powell's dissertation entitled *The Choreographic Imagination in Renaissance Art*, blending my interest in dance as it can be connected directly to art, and connecting movement to these dancing angelic bodies.<sup>3</sup> Powell considers dance of painted bodies specifically in response to Leon Battista Alberti's book *On Painting*.<sup>4</sup> Following Powell's investigation, I explored

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars like Ronald Lightbown or Frank Zoellner write these considerable volumes on Botticelli and their focus centers around a general overview of his works. See Ronald Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli: Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). Also see Frank Zoellner, *Botticelli: Images of Love and Spring* (Munich: Prestel Pub, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Olivia Powell, "The Choreographic Imagination in Renaissance Art" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Powell, *The Choreographic*, 9.

scholars who focused their research on visual representations of music, dance, and other topics which grew out of my initial interest in the *Primavera*, but now I was shifting my focus to Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity* and *Coronation of the Virgin*.

It wasn't until my second semester that my true topic really began to come into focus as I questioned what Botticelli accomplished with these dancing angels. How was Botticelli implementing them to create the heavenly space? What was their role with respect to the viewer? I began to notice an ultimate difference between the *Coronation of the Virgin* and the *Mystical Nativity*, in how Botticelli was shaping the space of heaven inside these works. What struck me was how Botticelli was choosing to show heaven in the *Mystical Nativity*, a sheer sliver of space with angels as the only celestial beings working inside the space itself. The *Coronation of the Virgin* had similar angels, but their role in the space was not as persuasive to the viewer. By directing my research towards specific Florentine political and social changes at the time of Botticelli, and exploring the relationship between music and dance, the research I did after my midway became focused.<sup>5</sup> Though a substantial element of this project is research-based, my topic remained grounded in my own close observations. I allowed myself to truly look at the art and value the paintings for what they are which required in some way a separation from the influences of the time. Balancing these two methods of inquiry helped me see the work even more clearly.

This new research and observation helped me form my argument, which sees Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity* as a culmination of his developing ideas about the relationship between corporal bodies and the ethereal realm of heaven. Aspects of Botticelli's depiction of heaven in

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<sup>5</sup> E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and Popular Medicine* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1952). His book is a fantastic historical account on dance and its significance to history. He mentions the abundance of scholarship surrounding the taboo nature of dance, but with further observation, one can understand it as a nuanced field of study.

the *Coronation of the Virgin* are conventional, consistent with altarpieces of his contemporaries. The *Coronation of the Virgin* shows a heavenly space that is given to the observer to witness and perceive. Yet Botticelli accomplishes something new in his *Mystical Nativity*. While he draws upon the same conventions we see in his *Coronation of the Virgin* and in many other religious works of the time, we eventually witness the culmination of his long-standing exploration of the moving body. Botticelli draws from these conventions and ideas current in Quattrocento Florence to explore the complex pressures that surround him.

Chapter One, *Tension of the Times: Botticelli in Florence*, grounds my argument by introducing an open discourse on the political and theoretical areas which were shaping Florence during Botticelli's time. I will discuss Botticelli's life and the public opinion of him, attempting to address the question of Botticelli's place in the Renaissance. The chapter also raises discourse on Humanism, Neoplatonism, and Savonarola to consider how they are significant for our understanding of Botticelli's own character.

Focusing on the example of Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* (fig.5), Chapter Two considers how artists of the Renaissance were representing heaven in their work prior to Botticelli's two paintings. Looking to specific conventions of the Renaissance, including the representation of aroma, light, music, and dance, I will consider how these conventions translate into Fra Angelico's image of heaven. I will frame much of this discussion with Emanuel Winternitz' ideology on the role of an artist, and the framework of imagination, drawing further from conceptions laid out in the first chapter of Vasari's idea of imagination.<sup>6</sup> Chapter Two will also question how angels not only represent the celestial realm but also help create it. The

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<sup>6</sup> Emanuel Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts in the 15th Century: A Critical Approach to Realism and Symbolism in Sacred Painting," *The Musical Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (October 1963): 450-63. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Bull (New York: Penguin Classics, 1965), 250.

chapter will conclude with a discussion of dance which will be crucial in framing the discourse of Chapter Three.

The final chapter will build on much of what is discussed in Chapters One and Two to demonstrate Botticelli's unique approach to representing the heavens in his *Mystical Nativity*. To do so, Chapter Three presents a close visual analysis of Botticelli's *Coronation of the Virgin* and his *Mystical Nativity*. This comparative analysis demonstrates the development of Botticelli's visual ideas over time. The place of investigation in this chapter is what happens when we reimagine the relationship between corporal bodies and heavenly space? How does Botticelli play with this? How does he transform the conventions of his time? Ultimately, we will see that Botticelli's career-long exploration of the elegant, moving, body achieves its pinnacle in the representation of heaven in the *Mystical Nativity*.

## Chapter 1

### Tension of the Times: Botticelli in Florence

In his 1568 edition of the *Lives of the Artists*, Giorgio Vasari offers a picture of Sandro Botticelli that encompasses his skill as an artist. Describing his painting of the *Assumption of Our Lady*, Vasari praises how

the figures which Sandro painted in this picture are admirable for the care lavished on them, and the manner in which he has shown the circles of the heavens, introducing foreshortenings and intervals between his variously composed groups of angels and other figures, and executing the whole work with a fine sense of design.<sup>7</sup>

This and moments like this show Vasari's appreciation for Botticelli's "beautiful" and "admirable" style. Nevertheless, Vasari, caught in the political turmoil of the day and his own motives, proclaims

Botticelli was a follower of Savonarola's, and this was why he gave up painting and then fell into considerable distress as he had no other source of income. None the less, he remained an obstinate member of the sect, becoming one of the piagnoni, the snivellers, as they were called then, and abandoning his work; so finally, as an old man, he found himself so poor that if Lorenzo de' Medici (for whom he had among other things done some work at the little hospital at Volterra) and then his friends and other worthy men who loved him for his talent had not come to his assistance, he would have died of hunger.<sup>8</sup>

Vasari's overall assessment of Botticelli exemplifies a collection of pressures that surround the picture of Botticelli, or any artist for that matter. It illustrates Vasari's impression of Botticelli, but also brings up the political and social issues that scholars frequently mention when discussing Botticelli's life. Savonarola's relationship to Botticelli being the most dominant aspect of the second quote gives view to a key political pressure of early 16th century Florence.

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<sup>7</sup> Vasari, *Lives*, 226. There are two different editions of Vasari but for this, I will use the second edition which is more extensive. The first edition was published in 1550. Lightbrown goes into wonderful detail on Vasari's understanding of Botticelli and how it alters throughout the two different publications of his biography. See Lightbrown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 14-15.

<sup>8</sup> Vasari, *Lives*, 227-228.

Additionally, Vasari places value on the patron. In this case, particularly, Lorenzo de' Medici, as this savior figure to Botticelli in his time of "self-inflicted" hardship. Vasari considers those who surround Botticelli artistically and in a way, this is a focused theme of the book itself. Vasari's odd judgment of Botticelli's character and unmistakable critique of his lifestyle speaks to the tension between these two quotes. Nevertheless, Vasari's vexation over Botticelli runs deeper than his exasperation of Botticelli's profligate attitude.<sup>9</sup> Vasari takes issue with some of Botticelli's choices as an artist, specifically with his time spent working on Dante's *Inferno* which Vasari considers Botticelli having "wasted a great deal of time on this, neglecting his work and thoroughly disrupting his life."<sup>10</sup> Vasari's reasons for painting Botticelli in this light arises from his overall intentions to represent moral lessons and as a result, his *Lives* is a work steeped in his own motives.<sup>11</sup> Vasari spends a measly eight pages on Botticelli in his second edition, compared to that of Michelangelo with one hundred and seventeen pages or even his predecessor Giotto who had twenty-five. Vasari's malignant attitude towards Botticelli initiates a disconnect between Botticelli and his contemporaries.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Stapleford, "Vasari and Botticelli " *Mitteilungen Des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 39, no. 2/3 (1995): 400. His analysis focuses on introducing the lesser known manuscript called Anonimo Gaddiano, which he attributes to Vincenzo Borghini. He argues that Vasari was using this manuscript when he was writing his Botticelli chapter, and he argues this in a couple of ways. The first argument is that of language. His second is how the paintings themselves are ordered. However, this leads him to perhaps his most compelling point. Stapleford argues that since we can see that he used Borghini manuscript, we are privy to what he included and therefore what he chose not to include. Stapleford eventually decides that Vasari purposely chose not to include a specific anecdote, and chose instead to include something that, to Stapleford, seemed simply strange in the picture that it gives Botticelli. This leads him to his final point that Vasari was writing his chapter on Botticelli to get a message to his reader, a message of the "unwise" Botticelli. He calls to this attitude at which we can also see clearly in lines from Vasari.

<sup>10</sup> Vasari, *Lives*, 227. Sandford quotes this as well, though using the first edition, he explains Vasari did not like Botticelli spending his time on this nor did he appreciate the allure Botticelli felt towards Dante. See Stapleford, "Vasari and Botticelli," 400-401.

<sup>11</sup> Stapleford, "Vasari and Botticelli," 400. Sandford discusses in depth how Vasari had an intense motive in his writing, which we can see in Botticelli especially.

Botticelli's further characterization as autonomous to his contemporaries is done by Daniel Arasse in his essay titled *Botticelli's Manner*.<sup>12</sup> Arasse distinguishes Botticelli's style of art as 'ornamental' in that Botticelli does not attempt to create exact realism in his work.<sup>13</sup> This compares to what is envisioned as the true Renaissance style, as we may imagine the famous Pieta (fig.6) of Michelangelo. Michelangelo cuts from pure marble an image of figures with a strong sense of anatomical representation, yet the anatomy is quite imaginative.<sup>14</sup> We find the same focus in Michelangelo's paintings. Take his Cumaean Sibyl (fig.7) from his Sistine ceiling for instance, who dominates with such unusual strength for a female body.<sup>15</sup> Botticelli, by contrast, is not concerned with this anatomical definition.<sup>16</sup> Instead, as we will see, his focus is on the graceful bodies and the movement of figures, delighting in their exploration of the space.<sup>17</sup> Arasse argues that Botticelli's "art never dissimulates what it is; it never hides the fact that it is an artifice, that it is constructing an artificial representation of the reality it is imitating".<sup>18</sup> Botticelli is after something different than the later artists, more taken by expression rather than exact proportion.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," in *Botticelli: From Lorenzo the Magnificent to Savonarola*, ed. Doriana Comerlati (Italy: Skira, 2003). Arasse's essay focuses on the "manner" of Botticelli's work, and the definition of the artist's style. Lightbrown too discusses Botticelli's style, see Lightbrown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 17.

<sup>14</sup> Diana DePardo-Minsky, "Michelangelo: Man/Master/Myth" (Course presentation, at Bard College, Fall 2017). The majority of my background knowledge of Michelangelo comes from a course I took on Michelangelo and discussions I had with the professor, Diana Depardo Minsky. However, the two works which give background information on Michelangelo's life as primary documents are: Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, trans. Alice Sedgwick (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Giorgio Vasari, "Life of Michelangelo," from *Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Bull (New York: Penguin Classics, 1965). Condivi's account of Michelangelo's life can be thought of as a response to Vasari's chapter on Michelangelo. Since Condivi was friends with Michelangelo, we can take this almost as an autobiography, as Michelangelo was whispering in the ear of Condivi what he wanted to change about Vasari's version of his life.

<sup>15</sup> Edgar Wind, "Michelangelo's Prophets and Sibyls," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 51 (1965): 47-84.

<sup>16</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 17.

<sup>17</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 20.

<sup>18</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 20.

<sup>19</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 17.

This all begs the question as to how Botticelli fits into traditional narratives and ideas of the Renaissance? Does Botticelli's style reflect how Botticelli himself connected what he witnessed, playing with contrasting methods as he did so? While many of us imagine Botticelli to be in the thick of the Renaissance, Botticelli is often not grouped alongside Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo despite being their contemporary.<sup>20</sup> The artists whom Vasari includes in his final chapter, Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo, are all considered part of the High Renaissance, a part that did not include Botticelli, even though Leonardo and Botticelli apprenticed at the same workshop.<sup>21</sup> Botticelli shares similar conceptions with them in his attention to mythology and his reaction to the circulating classical literature, but he produced work that is distinctive from these three. What is clear is that the popular conception of Botticelli has his art firmly planted in the Renaissance of Florence; whether or not his work properly fits our ideas of The High Renaissance, Botticelli nevertheless must be considered within the context of this political humanistic and artistic milieu.

This chapter does just that. It introduces the intellectual, political, and artistic climate of Florence during the 15th-century to demonstrate how Botticelli explored different schools of thought in his work. In particular, Botticelli seems to position himself as someone able to mediate different teachings and political spheres, navigating through the conflicting spaces of Florence. In representing himself and his work through these pressures put onto him along with Florentines of the time, I demonstrate that his work illustrates his comfort with ambiguity.

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<sup>20</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 15.

<sup>21</sup> Zoellner, *Botticelli: Images*, 155.

### Botticelli's Life and Character

Sandro Botticelli, originally named Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi, was born in Florence around 1477.<sup>22</sup> Little is known of his mother Smeralda, but his father, Mariano, was a craftsman of leather and in the historical scholarship plays a more prominent role in Botticelli's earlier life.<sup>23</sup> Botticelli is described by Vasari as being from an early age not interested in classical education.<sup>24</sup> Instead, Botticelli was drawn to painting, a passion for which is positively illustrated by Vasari.<sup>25</sup> Before he began what is now known as an exquisite career, he worked as a pupil under a goldsmith.<sup>26</sup> His goldsmithing years is imagined by scholars such as Lightbrown and Ettlinger to have resulted from his connection to his brother Antonio, whom they both make clear worked with metal.<sup>27</sup> However, as Ettlinger recalls this was not Botticelli's passion, and he grew remarkably fond of painting that he was given the opportunity to apprentice for the painter Fra Filippo Lippi.<sup>28</sup> This was around c. 1460; however in c. 1470, Botticelli began looking to the artist Andrea Verrocchio, who is a key figure according to John Pope-Hennessy in his Introduction in *Sandro Botticelli: The Nativity*.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Frederick Hartt, *Sandro Botticelli* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1953), 4. Hartt, cites his full name. However, the Ettlinger's cite that 'Botticelli' comes from a nickname, and therefore is not a birth name. See L.D Ettlinger and Helen S. Ettlinger, *Botticelli* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 7. Vasari then points also to Alessandro becoming Sandro later on. See Vasari, *Lives*, 224. While the complexities as to the bias of Vasari and his inner motives are important to remember, Vasari serves as a nice primary source for much of the facts we do have on Botticelli's earlier life. What is known of Botticelli in many ways comes from Giorgio Vasari's *Lives*, as the first ever published biography of artists of the Renaissance to be made.

<sup>23</sup> Lightbrown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 15. Hartt too cites his father as working with leather. See Hartt, *Sandro Botticelli*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Vasari, *Lives*, 224. Scholars such as Lightbrown and Hartt draw both upon this lack of attention Botticelli had to his classic studies as well. Lightbrown mentions the name of the goldsmith being Botticello. Lightbrown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 17. Hartt, *Sandro Botticelli*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Vasari, *Lives*, 224.

<sup>26</sup> Vasari, *Lives*, 224.

<sup>27</sup> Lightbrown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 16. Lightbrown goes in depth of Botticelli's relationship to not only Antonio, but to his other brothers as well. Also see Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> For date of the apprenticeship of Fra Filippo Lippi, see Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 8. For date of Verrocchio see John Pope-Hennessy, *Sandro Botticelli: The Nativity* (London: Percy Lund Humphries & Co Ltd,

Contrary to popular belief, Botticelli and his work were not constantly saturated with fame which is often the way his works are pictured today. Instead, Botticelli's own relationship to his time is in fact quite complex.<sup>30</sup> Botticelli was involved in the inner circle of the elite members of society, working alongside members of the Medici family, he was soundly understood as an outstanding and desired artist of his time.<sup>31</sup> Vasari's initial quotes highlight his place in society, among the important figures of the time, which also included the Pope.<sup>32</sup> However, the quotes also feature an important instance in which Vasari becomes keen to express throughout his chapters on Botticelli. He highlights multiple times in his text how bad Botticelli was with money, and how he ruined his life because of his inability to maintain or not spend his money. Whether or not this is conjecture, we see a contentious description of Botticelli's character, even in Vasari, who wrote his *Lives* some forty years after Botticelli's death.<sup>33</sup> Daniel Arasse explains the entangled situation which surrounded the perception of Botticelli as an artist in the framework of his own time.<sup>34</sup> He explains a strange pattern in Botticelli's fame, becoming quite famous in his own time, only for this status to drop in the early 1500s.<sup>35</sup> However, Botticelli regains it later in the modern era.<sup>36</sup> We can see this shift from popularity even in how Vasari portrays Botticelli in his *Lives*. The pace at which art was changing in the Renaissance perhaps led to Botticelli's loss of fame in his own time.

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n.d), 3. However, Ettlinger's account of Botticelli's life does not mention any account of Verrocchio's as an influencer to Botticelli. While Pope-Hennessy states that Verrocchio was in fact the main contributor to Botticelli's own style. Argan also cites this. See Giulio Carlo Argan, *Botticelli*, trans. James Emmons (Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1957), 11.

<sup>30</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 13.

<sup>31</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *Sandro Botticelli*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Vasari, *Lives*, 224.

<sup>33</sup> Stapleford, "Vasari and Botticelli," 400.

<sup>34</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 13.

<sup>35</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 13.

<sup>36</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 13.

Safely tucked in the swing of the Renaissance, Botticelli like all other Renaissance artists, maintains a foundation of the classical rebirth in his work. The Renaissance, which translates from French as “rebirth”, was a time and place in which humanists looked back to the ancient examples of literature, art, and architecture to rework their conceptions of life.<sup>37</sup> Art was a place that flourished in this newfound interest in the classics, and visually represented an acceptance of curiosity, of liveliness in the body, and movement.<sup>38</sup> Botticelli engages with the stories of classical antiquity, producing some of his greatest works such as his *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, as well as engaging with the concepts which enveloped Florence during the Renaissance.

The Renaissance was the restoration of Roman and Greek values. It signified the rebirth of retired classical ideologies of ancient literature as well as ancient art, architecture, science, and mathematics.<sup>39</sup> These classic models entirely redefined the ways in which artists painted, and the theories brought from art and literature changed how art was conceived in the Middle Ages. This classical style of architecture, the evocative sculptures of ancient Greece, the remarkable words of Plato, all take on a new life and fresh existence during the Renaissance.<sup>40</sup> Humanists, though the term was coined much later, was a group of thinkers who were drawn to ancient literature.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, it is necessary to mention that these intellectuals were not merely interested in the works of the ancients, but they also worked to translate and theorize the works

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<sup>37</sup> Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary Of The English Language* (Elsevier Publishing Company, 1971), 1326, <https://archive.org/details/AComprehensiveEtymologicalDictionaryOfTheEnglishLanguageByErnestKlein/page/n385>.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Luzzi “Sex, Lies, and the Renaissance” (Course presentation, at Bard College, February 6th, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Hartt and Wilkins, *History of Italian*.

<sup>40</sup> Christian Wildberg, “Neoplatonism,” edited by Edward N. Zalta, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/neoplatonism/>.

<sup>41</sup> Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological*, 749.

themselves.<sup>42</sup> Their engagement was not primarily on the surface, but worked to develop a completely new range of thinkers and as a result, a unique succession of art and architecture. To this, Vasari mentions the role of the great artist, one who draws from nature, not simply copying, but giving it a new breath.<sup>43</sup> He paints the great artist to be imaginative and constantly innovating, adding their own style into a deep study of nature. Vasari assigns value to imitation, the copying of nature, but signals that the artist who is able to join imitation and imagination is the artist who transcends those around him.

These artists being also humanists brought new conceptions of movement as well as representations of space and time to painting and sculpture.<sup>44</sup> Botticelli's work, if anything, is exquisite in his attempt to depict motion. He too separates from the medieval static poses in painting, further representing his figures with such grace to their gestures. However, as we move to Botticelli's later pieces, he gravitates towards a more medieval construction, as in his *Coronation of the Virgin*, which numerous scholars claim is a retraction into a medieval form.<sup>45</sup> Clearly, as an artist of the Renaissance, Botticelli still plays with medieval conceptions, walking the line between two worlds.

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<sup>42</sup> Joseph Luzzi "Sex, Lies, and the Renaissance" (Course presentation, at Bard College, February 6th, 2019). A substantial part of this discussion on humanism comes from my class discussions, during our discussions on Greenblatt's *Swerve*. See Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011). His book is wonderful storytelling in how Poggio discovered Lucretius's of the Nature of Things, and in doing so Greenblatt relates it to the impact it had today. He gives insight into what life might have looked like for a Renaissance humanist, and how they felt about the work of the ancients. See also Charles L. Stinger, "Humanism in Florence," in *Renaissance Humanism, Volume 1: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, ed. Albert Rabil (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988). Stinger also informed the way I thought about humanism specifically in Florence.

<sup>43</sup> Vasari, *Lives*, 250.

<sup>44</sup> Jessamyn Conrad, "Telling Time: Contextualizing Narrative Painting in Duccio's *Maestà* and the Trecento Altars in the Crossing of the Duomo of Siena" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2015).

<sup>45</sup> Kenneth Clark, "Botticelli: The Nativity," in *Looking at Pictures* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 184. Clark describes the work as 'archaic' and argues this is a switch as a result of Botticelli's acceptance of Savonarola beliefs. He argues that the way the figures are drawn as well as the lack of perspective make the work much more medieval. Hartt too writes about Botticelli's return to medieval conceptions specifically when discussing Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity*, claiming the work is the most medieval out of all his work. See Hartt, *Sandro Botticelli*, 22.

Along with a change in the physical nature of painting, humanists brought with them the newfound idea of the self. Without it, we might never have seen such attention to singular stylization in the art as we do in the Renaissance. The shift to the individual resulted in a dramatic turn away from the medieval way of thinking. The classics allowed for redefining of how the individual self worked in everyday life, as well as artistically.<sup>46</sup> Humanists like Burckhardt and Petrarch were redefining the concept of the self, in their own writing, as well as through philosophical writings of what the self meant characteristically.<sup>47</sup> The individualization of a painter for Vasari would never have happened without humanists. While Vasari builds upon earlier transitions, he works to create his own path as being the first to highlight artists to such high esteem.<sup>48</sup> While much of this discussion surrounds that of Florence, these transitions were happening all over Europe. Nevertheless, nowhere did it flourish as deeply as it did in Florence.

### Florence

Why is Florence considered to be the birthplace of the Renaissance, and how did it come to be known as this? A significant part of this was a result of the commerce and the flood of money going into Florence, primarily because of the strong political factors concerning the papacy and the Medici family.<sup>49</sup> Italy during the Renaissance was constructed of not one unified structure, but separate 'city-states' which were independently governed and autonomously vying

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<sup>46</sup> Stinger, "Humanism in Florence," 176. Stinger writes about this new version of the self which was only able to come about through looking to the classics.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Luzzi "Sex, Lies, and the Renaissance" (Course presentation, at Bard College, February 4th, 2019). Jacob Burckhardt, "The Development of the Individual," in *The Civilization of The Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990). Petrarch, "Petrarch Fifty-three Poems from 'The Canzoniere,'" trans. A. S. Kline, Poetry in Translation, last modified 2002, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/Petrarch.php>.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Luzzi "Sex, Lies, and the Renaissance" (Course presentation, at Bard College, February 13th, 2019).

<sup>49</sup> Stinger, "Humanism in Florence," 179.

for power over one another.<sup>50</sup> This structure magnified competition between the cities, which supported greater wealth to populate Italy overall.<sup>51</sup> In Tim Parks book titled *Medici Money*, he identifies the five powerhouses of Renaissance Italy: Florence, Rome, Naples, Venice, and Milan.<sup>52</sup> At the time, these cities were all at odds with one another, continually trying to gain ultimate power through both allies and by the seizing of the smaller, inadequate states.<sup>53</sup> As a result of its centrality when it came to commerce and wealth, Florence emerged as the center for humanism.

Renaissance Florence permeated with turbulent friction in the political and the economic spheres, due to the fractured quality in which Italy organized itself.<sup>54</sup> The Florence wool trade made for abundant commerce throughout the Renaissance, allowing Florence to become one of the dominant players, as it reached beyond Italy.<sup>55</sup> It is within this power structure that the Medici family rose to one of the greatest, most influential families of the Renaissance. Cosimo de Medici (1389-1464) is the man whom we can credit as the figure who propels the nature of banking to new heights, ultimately making the Medici family the dominant force of the Renaissance.<sup>56</sup> Along with the Florentine wool trade came their exceptional management of

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<sup>50</sup> Tim Parks, *Medici Money* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 2005), 66. Parks warns in his text, however, not to fall into what historians of this time like to say in that there was no unification, when in fact Italy did understand that they all had a sense of Italian culture that they had in common.

<sup>51</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*, 68.

<sup>52</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*, 67.

<sup>53</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*, 67.

<sup>54</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*, 65-72. Park's book is a wonderful and insightful discussion around the Medici family and their rise and fall from power. Much of this also then involves an in-depth understanding of the social and political pressures which surround the family. His book, though not written in the style of classic scholarship, will be a great reference throughout the chapter in how I interpret the information of this chapter. This paragraph is closely working with what Parks discusses and paves as the Medici way of life, and the important figures. Additionally, a large portion of my knowledge on Florence and the Medici has been greatly influenced by my literature course. Joseph Luzzi "Sex, Lies, and the Renaissance" (Course presentation, at Bard College, March 4th, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> Stinger, "Humanism in Florence," 176. Stinger calls to the outreach that Florence was able to provide through their commerce.

<sup>56</sup> See Parks, *Medici Money*, 3 for introduction on Cosimo. For a more extensive discussion on Cosimo specifically see his chapter three titled *The Rise to Power*.

banking which, in part, became the forefront of Florence when Cosimo de Medici created his banking empire.<sup>57</sup>

Cosimo was a brilliant businessman, essentially building from the ground up the Medicean banking system.<sup>58</sup> The Medici were the dominant family thanks to Cosimo's expertise in banking and attention he placed on the proper way to run a bank.<sup>59</sup> Notably, his sons unmistakably lacked his skill as they ran the bank into the ground, and only 30 years after his death the bank crumbled.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, during Cosimo de Medici's time, he sought to build his empire, eventually bringing Florence a vast quantity of wealth. Their reach eventually developed even further than Florence, spreading their banking system throughout Italy, and even further through Europe.<sup>61</sup>

Florence became the powerhouse of the Renaissance, not only through the politics of the Medici but because it became the artistic center as well. The Medici were tremendous patrons of the arts and their love for the humanities allowed for countless exceptional works to be completed in a brief period of time.<sup>62</sup> It is this prospering state of Florence, if not all of Italy, that brought such an affluent response to art and architecture.<sup>63</sup> The Medici were able to fund projects which emerged from newfound Renaissance notions of classical antiquity. With the blend of power in the form of wealth and the humanist appreciation of ancient literature, which

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<sup>57</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*, 29-50.

<sup>58</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*, 2. Dale Kent, "Cosimo's Oeuvre" In *Cosimo De' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>59</sup> Joseph Luzzi "Sex, Lies, and the Renaissance" (Course presentation, at Bard College, March 4th, 2019).

<sup>60</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*, 4.

<sup>61</sup> See Parks, *Medici Money*, 46-47 on the information on the banks around the world. Also see Linda A. Koch, "Power, Prophecy, and Dynastic Succession in Early Medici Florence: The Falcon Impresa of Piero di Cosimo de' Medici," 516.

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Luzzi "Sex, Lies, and the Renaissance" (Course presentation, at Bard College, March 4th, 2019). Also see Koch, "Power prophecy", 510. See Ettinger, *Botticelli*, 7 on the power of Medici.

<sup>63</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*.

single-handedly awakened antiquity, the Renaissance birthed some of the greatest masterpieces of today.<sup>64</sup> The Medici commissioned countless works, spending a great deal of money on art and architecture, as was expected by ruling families.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the volume of funds the Medici spent on the arts was substantial, and as argued by several scholars, also lead to their fall.<sup>66</sup>

The first patron of the arts in their empire was Cosimo de' Medici, who was born in 1389.<sup>67</sup> Cosimo had a passion for artistic beauty as he commissioned some of the greatest works known in the Renaissance, one being Donatello's *David* (fig. 8). The discipline of architecture was Cosimo's central commission focus.<sup>68</sup> It is safe to say Cosimo's artistic values were transferred to the generations following, as his grandson Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492) became a major patron of the arts as well, even more so than Cosimo himself.<sup>69</sup> His death marked the end of the well-governed banking system of Cosimo and was never the same following the power which fell to his sons.<sup>70</sup> His eldest son Piero di Cosimo (1416-1469) succeeded power upon Cosimo's death, but was unfit to rule the system. Piero ultimately gave the reins to his son Lorenzo de' Medici who became the patron of Botticelli for much of Botticelli's life.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*. Parks hits home this parallel between wealth and the arts. Kent, "Cosimo's Oeuvre," x. Joseph Luzzi "Sex, Lies, and the Renaissance" (Course presentation, at Bard College, March 4th, 2019)

<sup>65</sup> Koch, "Power prophecy," 510.

<sup>66</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*, 61. Also see Kent, "Cosimo's Oeuvre," 9.

<sup>68</sup> Kent, "Cosimo's Oeuvre," 5.

<sup>69</sup> Koch, "Power prophecy," 510.

<sup>70</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*, 153.

<sup>71</sup> Parks describes this transfer of power, see Parks, *Medici Money*, 3. Pope-Hennessy describes then Lorenzo being the patron of Botticelli, see Pope-Hennessy, *Sandro Botticelli*, 3-4. Lightbrown also notes this, see Lightbrown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 14.

## Neoplatonic Thought

The Medici became well known as Neoplatonists and influencers of this line of thought, commissioning works of art depicting Neoplatonic conceptions, as well as requesting the translation of Platonic literature.<sup>72</sup> Neoplatonism was a thread of philosophical thought that incorporated Platonic ideas of the universe into the Christian doctrine.<sup>73</sup> Plato believed there was a space in which ideal forms of the world existed, not in our current world, and we recall these forms through memory.<sup>74</sup> There is no location in which these forms assemble, but our imperfect memory of them over time becomes less and less accurate.<sup>75</sup> Plato's forms are eternal, and the only way we can reach remanences of the forms is through our thoughts and logic.<sup>76</sup> Our memory is a compilation of the lost forms. These forms, which encompass all observable shapes, are permanent, everlasting in the universe but ephemeral in our own minds.<sup>77</sup> Instead, we are left with imperfect versions of what were once perfect designs.<sup>78</sup> As a fragment in our consciousness, mathematics embodies these pure forms, as evidence of their existence. Though we can recognize forms in our world, they are imperfect, and mathematics contains the remanence of perfection.<sup>79</sup> Orienting themselves around Platonism, early Neo-platonists adopted the Platonic notion of absolute forms and transferred it into a Christian framework.<sup>80</sup> They

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<sup>72</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Platonic Academy of Florence," *Renaissance News* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1961). These next couple of paragraphs will be closely working with Kristeller discussion on the Platonic Academy because he lays out a simple and comprehensive discussion of Marsilio Ficino's role in Neoplatonism in Florence.

<sup>73</sup> Wildberg, "Neoplatonism."

<sup>74</sup> Alun Wyn-jones, face to face conversation, March 20th, 2019. I am grateful to Alun for our conversation about Plato and his connection to Neoplatonism which greatly informed my thoughts on the matter and I drew from heavily in the couple of paragraphs on Platonic dialogue.

<sup>75</sup> Wyn-jones, face to face conversation, March 20th, 2019.

<sup>76</sup> Wyn-jones, face to face conversation, March 20th, 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Wyn-jones, face to face conversation, March 20th, 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Wyn-jones, face to face conversation, March 20th, 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Wyn-jones, face to face conversation, March 20th, 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Wildberg, "Neoplatonism."

reimagined the absolute forms to be heaven itself instead of the abstract space that Plato envisions.<sup>81</sup> Neoplatonists envisioned God as the ultimate creator of these ideal forms of the perfected world.<sup>82</sup> However, their absorption of the Platonic dialogue did not only find itself in the heavenly space but in many other areas as well which is especially apparent in the arts. The Renaissance yielded a robust awareness of the beauty in art, representing the idealized state of the human body as a way in which artists embodied these platonic notions visually.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, questions of platonic ethics became apparent in both philosophy and art. Plato discussed ethics extensively, and he mused on not only absolute forms but on ideal ethical behavior as well which he called goodness.<sup>84</sup> Neoplatonists adopted this as a moral connection since in Christianity ultimately aiming to strive for good was a favorable notion.<sup>85</sup>

It is necessary to note that the early Neo-Platonists of around 300 a.d beginning with Plotinus diverged into strands of Neoplatonism, including that of the Neoplatonists of Renaissance Florence.<sup>86</sup> The strand of Neoplatonists in Florence was led by the famous humanist and Neoplatonist, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) who worked closely with the Medici, generating a powerful thread of Neoplatonism that not only rippled throughout Florence but Europe as a whole.<sup>87</sup> Ficino was Florentine-born, and notably intelligent, educating himself in all ranges of study, from medicine to early classical poets.<sup>88</sup> The Medici commissioned Ficino to translate some of Plato's literature in 1462, which aided in the circulation of Neoplatonic thought

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<sup>81</sup> Wyn-jones, face to face conversation, March 20th, 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Wildberg, "Neoplatonism."

<sup>83</sup> Wyn-jones, face to face conversation, March 20th, 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Wyn-jones, face to face conversation, March 20th, 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Wildberg, "Neoplatonism."

<sup>86</sup> Wildberg, "Neoplatonism." For indicating a separation between the two see Kristeller, "The Platonic," 151. He separates both Platonism as well as early Neoplatonists.

<sup>87</sup> Kristeller, "The Platonic," 157.

<sup>88</sup> Kristeller, "The Platonic," 149.

through Italy.<sup>89</sup> Ficino led Florence through a systematic, steady approach of antiquity, allowing people to both embrace pagan ideology while also maintaining a Christian basis of religion.<sup>90</sup>

As previously mentioned, Florence was a flourishing city, however, one thing they lacked was the institutional setting of classical academia which resided in neighboring cities.<sup>91</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller in his article titled *The Platonic Academy of Florence* argues this was by no means a hindrance to Florence, if anything it allowed for diverse thought to proliferate through Florence.<sup>92</sup> Scholars interpret a more casual setting in the experience of the Platonic Academy of Florence which was run by Ficino himself.<sup>93</sup> The Medici were active participants in this Platonic Academy which Kristeller characterizes as:

The Platonic Academy of Florence was not, as historians formerly thought, an organized institution like the academies of the sixteenth century, but merely a circle around Ficino, with no common doctrine except that of Ficino, and closely linked, but not identical with, the circle or court of the Medici. The name 'Academy' was merely adopted in imitation of Plato's Academy.<sup>94</sup>

The Academy, therefore, was more akin to a gathering of like-minded individuals keen on discussing philosophy and the arts than a formal educational system.<sup>95</sup> The Platonic dialogue made its way through the Academy but did not necessarily consistently inform what they discussed. Ficino had strong ties to the Medici family supporting them both politically while likewise acquiring their patronage as a source of his income.<sup>96</sup> However, while his ties to the Medici were intense, he was not exclusive in his friendship, obtaining a large social circle which

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<sup>89</sup> Mark Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians: Marsilio Ficino, Savonarola and the Valori Family," *Past & Present*, no. 183 (May 2004): 47. For the date see Kristeller, "The Platonic," 149.

<sup>90</sup> Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 42.

<sup>91</sup> Kristeller, "The Platonic," 147.

<sup>92</sup> Kristeller, "The Platonic," 147.

<sup>93</sup> Kristeller, "The Platonic," 149.

<sup>94</sup> Kristeller, "The Platonic," 150.

<sup>95</sup> Kristeller, "The Platonic," 150.

<sup>96</sup> See Kristeller, "The Platonic," 150 for political ties. For discussion on Ficino's fiscal choices see Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 43.

included the Valori family.<sup>97</sup> The fall of the Medici not only caused unrest all over Florence, but it also brought with it a change in patronage to Ficino himself.<sup>98</sup> The Valori family, as scholar Mark Jurdjevic argues in his article *Prophets and Politicians*, became the central provider for Ficino after the Medici fell in 1494.<sup>99</sup>

### The Rise of Savonarola

Following the fall of the Medici in 1494, the climate of civic unrest propelled Girolamo Savonarola's rise in popularity.<sup>100</sup> Girolamo Savonarola was the infamous friar who was ultimately burned at the stake for his deceitful claim of being a prophet of God.<sup>101</sup> Savonarola's rise in part occurred as a result of the events transpiring at the time in Florence with the expulsion of the Medici family; however, the way in which Savonarola portrayed his image granted him his newfound status.<sup>102</sup> Once the Medici no longer controlled Florence, Ficino had to flee Florence, giving full access to Savonarola to rise to power.<sup>103</sup> Savonarola was granted authority following the collapse of the Medici family at the end of the 15th century.<sup>104</sup> The Medici had been the power family of the 15th century, but their power was cut short. After their short rule, which kept the peace of Florence for nearly 100 years, their fall in many ways lifted Savonarola to a somewhat sinister popularity, and this was, in fact, a turbulent time for Florence.<sup>105</sup> Savonarola touted that he was a prophet of the lord and preached of the forthcoming

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<sup>97</sup> Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 42. Jurdjevic extensively discusses the Valori's relationship to Ficino, and argues it persisted after the Medici empire. See Kristeller, "The Platonic," 150.

<sup>98</sup> Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 43.

<sup>99</sup> Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 41.

<sup>100</sup> Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 41.

<sup>101</sup> Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>102</sup> Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 41-42.

<sup>103</sup> Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 43.

<sup>104</sup> Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 43.

<sup>105</sup> Parks, *Medici Money*, 66-67. Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 42.

apocalypse.<sup>106</sup> While his preachings were in line with what Christians understood of the coming apocalypse, they were in many respects too passionate and fervent of the impending doom.<sup>107</sup>

Savonarola is known for his 'Bonfire of Vanities' which included a tremendous collective burning of sinful commodities, including that of art, music, and literature.<sup>108</sup> These events took place in February of 1497, only three years after the Medici's decline.<sup>109</sup> This infamous act of Savonarola in many ways paints him as the evil preacher whom we read about today and rightfully feel aghast and stunned at the very notion of him burning art and literature. However, in Alison Brown's Introduction in the *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, she makes it known that there was another, more peaceful side to Savonarola prior to his hatred of everything that the Renaissance promoted.<sup>110</sup> In Savonarola's earlier sermons he spoke of morality and his desire for people to live a plain lifestyle, a call to civilians to not have much in the form of objects.<sup>111</sup> Savonarola's dominant message was he wanted people to go to a simpler life, live away from vanity, which included art itself, and the purging of this sin before Judgement Day.<sup>112</sup> His push to power was quick and reactive, and people believed him because of the chaos that was happening around them.<sup>113</sup> Brown notes that a switch occurs later in his life as his sermons become apocalyptic and anti-pagan in content.<sup>114</sup> In his later life, his sermons took on a completely different tonality, focusing on the coming apocalypse, becoming much more

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<sup>106</sup> Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 46. Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 79.

<sup>107</sup> Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 76.

<sup>108</sup> Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 218.

<sup>109</sup> Alison Brown, Introduction to *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, trans. by Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro (New Haven: Yale University Press), xxviii.

<sup>110</sup> Brown, *Selected Writings*, xvi.

<sup>111</sup> Brown, Introduction to *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, xix.

<sup>112</sup> Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 76.

<sup>113</sup> Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 42.

<sup>114</sup> Brown, *Selected Writings*, xxiii.

cinematic, and taking on deep hatred for anything Renaissance.<sup>115</sup> He began to change from a mere Dominican friar to a powerhouse in the political spectrum.<sup>116</sup> As he began to work his way into politics, according to Alison Brown, he became:

the most influential figure in Florentine politics, as well as an outspoken critic of the papacy: a combination of roles that lead to his being put to death at the stake in June 1498, anathematized and condemned by the Church and the Florentine state alike.<sup>117</sup>

His switch into this role enables us to question what it means in the system of the Renaissance for it to be combated with something so hostile, and what it means for an artist follower to incorporate Savonarola's ideology into their art.

In his path to mobilizing against humanist thought, he attracted many followers, Botticelli perhaps being one of them. Botticelli's relationship to and opinion of Savonarolian thought is subject to prominent debate in contemporary scholarship, some vehemently for Botticelli's relationship, others against.<sup>118</sup> Principally, the debate lacks textual evidence of their link, therefore a substantial part of the scholarship relies on the physical art of Botticelli as it coincides to Savonarola's preachings.<sup>119</sup> It is baffling as to why many scholars consider artists of the time to be followers of Savonarola, however, it does speak to the power-hold he had over many.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Brown, *Selected Writings*, xxi.

<sup>116</sup> Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 43. Brown, *Selected Writings*, xx.

<sup>117</sup> Brown, *Selected Writings*, xv.

<sup>118</sup> For the scholars that argue for Botticelli being a follower see: Hartt, *Sandro Botticelli*, 5; Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 14; Zoellner, *Botticelli: Images*, 177. For scholars who do not agree and argue against Botticelli being a follower see: Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 14; Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 15-16. Vasari's text which claims Botticelli was a follower is a primary document that scholars tend to reference. Steinberg also notes that the scholars who argue for their relationship often look to the relationship Botticelli's brother had to Savonarola as evidence. See Ronald M. Steinberg, *Fra Girolamo Savonarola, Florentine Art, and Renaissance Historiography* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977), 19. Arasse acknowledges that there is an unquestionable influence in Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity*, however, and questions at what length these were a consequence of a following itself or a reaction of the turmoil-filled time. He also goes to then refute Vasari's claim that after the fall of Savonarola, Botticelli ceased painting, saying that Botticelli did, in fact, continue to paint into the 1500s. He then further speculates on the possibility that these are not Botticelli's own attachments, but perhaps those of a patron.

<sup>119</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *Sandro Botticelli*, 4.

<sup>120</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 15-16.

While the Bonfire of Vanities is the most notable incident, Savonarola's sermons amassed a vast following. The bonfire is a direct result of his apparent power in popular thought, as well as popular fear.<sup>121</sup>

As a result of these clearly defined sides constructed by scholars on whether or not Botticelli was a follower of Savonarola, scholars are not seeing the overall picture of Botticelli. Botticelli intentionally moves through Savonarola's beliefs, playing with his sermons in his paintings.<sup>122</sup> The *Mystical Nativity* is often one of the major works cited for this discourse on Savonarola's influence on Botticelli.<sup>123</sup> Savonarola was ultimately against Neoplatonism, classical antiquity, and everything that spurred the onset of the creative movement of The Italian Renaissance.<sup>124</sup> In knowing this, it is hard to imagine Botticelli actively supporting Savonarola's belief systems.<sup>125</sup> Rather, Botticelli comfortably inhabits the space of Savonarola while also maintaining these classic Renaissance conceptions in his art.

Botticelli's open-mindedness is represented through many areas mentioned in this chapter. He was part of both worlds of patronage, taking commissions from the Medici family, while also actively choosing not to work for them. In his work, he plays with ambiguity visually, which will be later discussed in Chapter Three, blending both the lightness of his bodies with the heaviness of their drapery. Botticelli both played with complex Savonarola issues, while also maintaining the highest level of awareness with movement and Neoplatonism philosophies. Botticelli is more flexible than many of his contemporaries as he navigates through the rigorous environment of Florence. He uses art as a means of exploring Neo-platonic and Savonarolian

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<sup>121</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 15. Arasse describes how fearful all of Florence was at the events that were unfolding.

<sup>122</sup> Hartt, *Sandro Botticelli*, 5.

<sup>123</sup> Steinberg, *Fra Girolamo*, 19.

<sup>124</sup> Joseph Luzzi "Sex, Lies, and the Renaissance" (Course presentation, at Bard College, March 13th, 2019).

<sup>125</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 15-16.

ideas rather than prominently expressing his own beliefs or hiding a painting's true meaning.

Botticelli positions himself in this context, intentionally combining these ambiguities.

## Chapter 2

### Art of the Celestial Realm

Whereas Chapter One was devoted to delving into the broader historical and philosophical environments in which Botticelli acted, the following chapter will build upon this to consider the artistic context of his painting. In particular, this chapter will look to Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* (fig. 5) as a visual representation of how artists of 15th-century Florence were designing heaven. Artists like Fra Angelico were regularly commissioned to compose pictures for religious spaces.<sup>126</sup> Heaven sits at the core of Christianity, and therefore what manifests itself in art reveals how an artist or patron valued the space. Artists employ conventions that ultimately serve to draw in the beholder, creating a tangible paradise through imagery, and eventually promoting the promise of salvation. The goal of this chapter is to unearth the conventions Fra Angelico uses as he actualizes the celestial realm. I will use Fra Angelico to represent the conventions of the time. I will do this first by drawing the reader's attention to Fra Angelico's manipulation of the senses, as he uses a comprehensive range of smell, sight, and sound. Next, drawing on sound as the key facet in depicting heavenly space, I will attempt to answer what role angels play once music is involved. Lastly, as it profoundly relates to music, I will address the topic of movement and the history of dance as we see it briefly beginning in Fra Angelico's work. As we will see, this will prove an essential piece to reading Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity* in Chapter Three.

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<sup>126</sup> Justin Kroesen, "Recentring Side Altars in Medieval Church Interiors: The Example of Late Romanesque Churches in Groningen," in: *The Altar and its Environment*, 1150-1400. Ed. Justin E.A. Kroesen and Victor M. Schmidt.

Embedded within Emanuel Winternitz' article *On Angel Concerts in the 15th Century* is a conversation which surrounds the unusual role of the 15th-century painter.<sup>127</sup> Though Winternitz' main interest lies with the ongoing debate between scholars as to whether or not they can accept paintings of musical compositions as offering a genuine insight into actual Renaissance music practices, his discourse on the visionary painter emerges as a place worthy of reflection.<sup>128</sup> Winternitz outlines the task of the Medieval or Renaissance painter in balancing both the structure in which he must work, the textual parameters, while also maintaining his sense of vision inside.<sup>129</sup> Winternitz writes "Yet within these limits, he enjoys the freedom inherent in his role as a painter. Where the poet or theologian uses words, the painter is privileged--and of course compelled--to specify and to detail, or to create a concrete sensuous experience."<sup>130</sup> This eloquent definition of a painter such as Winternitz provides can ground our further discussion of heaven in the works of 15th-century painters, Fra Angelico, and eventually Sandro Botticelli. Winternitz enables the reader to investigate the inner battle of the painter. To what extent is their work based on convention versus how much is individual imagination?<sup>131</sup> Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* is an example of an artist who sticks much more to a clearly defined, conventional heavenly space, and Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity*, as will be argued in Chapter Three builds upon these conventions but relies more heavily on

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<sup>127</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts".

<sup>128</sup> See Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 451. Winternitz traces the immateriality of the musical angel and how artists attempt to show ensembles of the heavens. Also see Katherine Powers, "Music Making Angels in Italian Renaissance Painting: Symbolism and Reality," *Music in Art* 29, nos. 1-2 (2004). Powers perceives a distinct genre of paintings where an artist used the symbol of the musical angel. Powers maintains that the way this musical convention manifests in a narrative scene is unlike an individual scene with Mary. In some ways counter to Winternitz' ideas surrounding the realism of music in these paintings, Powers follows a different path along with Sarah Kraaz. See Kraaz, "Music for the Queen," 88. They propose that angels were often painted quite naturally performing their musical activities to further connect the beholder to the composition. The angel's presence assists the viewing observer in his path of affection to God. While Kraaz draws upon their valuable presence to our faith.

<sup>129</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 451.

<sup>130</sup> See Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 452.

<sup>131</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 451.

imagination.<sup>132</sup> We might look back at Vasari's discourse on the imaginative artist of Chapter One and we see where Winternitz compliments Vasari's interpretation of the great Renaissance artist. Vasari is one who harnesses his own imagination.<sup>133</sup> In using Winternitz as a way into thinking about the role of artists as they employ conventionality, we can frame later what Botticelli is doing differently. Extrapolating from Winternitz this idea of the imagination and how an artist applies it within reason with conventional methods, we may think of imagination as a tool which an artist can use along with the conventions themselves.

The word convention as it applies to Italian Renaissance art is in many ways an umbrella term which encompasses that of iconography, motifs, as well as theological texts and texts on painter methodologies.<sup>134</sup> Simply put, conventions are the elements that all the artists handle, the visual implements that they rely on to connect the viewer to their image, as well as to ground the space in which they are painting. In many images of religious art, artists are asked to use their skills to construct what is unseen by man.<sup>135</sup> The artist, thus, is free to imagine heaven creatively. The beholder can receive these visuals, wonder at the symbolic value, and connect to the piece through specific conventions employed by artists. It is how an artist chooses to

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<sup>132</sup> After writing and structuring these two chapters, Winternitz' article came to my attention, and I began to rethink Fra Angelico's Coronation and Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity* relationship in Winternitz' framework. Though I had already written much of my own discussion on Botticelli's manipulation of the imagination, Winternitz gives a grounded overall setting to examine these two works, and two chapters together. We can think of Fra Angelico as an example of Winternitz' overall point, and Botticelli is more in tune with Winternitz' short example of Geertgen tot Sint *Virgin and Child*, which he meant to juxtapose and then argue for the former. In a way I am doing the opposite of Winternitz, first representing the conventional, or in Winternitz' terms, the expression of what we see as a more earthly space, and the third chapter as representing an artist in the whims of his imagination. Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts".

<sup>133</sup> It seems that Winternitz might be skeptical of Vasari's idea that the complete imaginative painter, like Michelangelo, went beyond nature. Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 451.

<sup>134</sup> I separate the theological and the 'painterly' texts as two different categories, even though they converge because they are concerned with different elements. The theological texts focus is not on painting, painting is a product, a visual representation of what they see in say the bible, or in classic mythological stories. However, texts like Alberti's *On Painting*, or Burckhardt *The Civilization of The Renaissance in Italy*, or even Vasari's *Lives*, are concerned with something different. See Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004); Burckhardt, "The Development"; Vasari, *Lives*.

<sup>135</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 451.

manipulate these conventions when the visual dialogue takes on a new light. Again looking to Vasari's concept of the imagination, and an artist's ability to take what they receive from nature and give it life, then we can say that Vasari's whole *Lives* is about the precise conventions that these artists are expected to be representing, and his claim as to which artist does it the best (it is no secret that Vasari gives Michelangelo this title). However, the scope of these conventions in the Renaissance is immense, ranging from a vast variety of places, often textual but a painter has the ability to translate the textual into their own terms.<sup>136</sup> This chapter will in part look at the role artists have angels play as bodies in heaven by creating the angelic space itself, and will examine how artists use conventions associated with angels to do so. The conventions highlighted in this chapter will be methods an artist uses to connect the viewer to space. The conventions I will concentrate on are ones which connect the viewer through a pictorial evocation of the senses; light as an example connects to a beholder's gaze, smell, and sound.

Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* is a wonderful example of how an artist chooses to render and explore the space of heaven in the Renaissance through certain conventions.<sup>137</sup> The painting, c. 1434-35, was intended to be an altarpiece for the church of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence.<sup>138</sup> Fra Angelico is working amidst other prominent Renaissance artists, and therefore his work is fully steeped in these classic conceptions of heaven, using figures in space to build the heavenly scene. The piece exists purely in the heavenly space with crowds of figures surrounding the central scene of the Coronation. Mary and Christ sit at the center, illuminating the scene with golden rays that radiate from them. These rays signify that the two figures are the

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<sup>136</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 451.

<sup>137</sup> This piece was painting circa 1430-32 and is at The Louvre Museum.

<sup>138</sup> Laurence Kanter and Pia Palladino, *Fra Angelico* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005), 141-142. Kanter and Palladino write that the *Coronation of the Virgin* is a representation of Fra Angelico's later style where he simplified the heavenly space itself.

focal point of devotion but they also help define the space of heaven. Heaven is filled with figures crowding the space with their densely packed bodies. Saints stand amidst angels, creating a semicircle around the center scene. Like a flurry of activity, the figures are layered atop one another, all holding instruments or attributes. Though there is a life to the densely packed bodies, their poses stay relatively static, with little space for movement in the compact space. Fra Angelico gathers the figures together under a golden dome, architecturally crafting the celestial space. Fra Angelico walks the line between a systematic, static heavenly space and a scene which fills with life and activity. The angels crowd around Mary and Christ acting as their framework. They set up the image program of the Coronation with Mary being crowned as queen of heaven by Christ, as they circle.

Renaissance angels in art are complicated creatures of the heavens with their ability to move between heaven and earth. Angels are frequently portrayed as powerful beings of heaven in messenger scenes, scenes like the Annunciation, to which they directly interact within the framework of the biblical narrative. However, for this paper, the focus will be directed towards angels not specifically as messengers, but more as figures used by painters to manipulate the space of heaven. Angels were seen as “creatures” who carried out the will of God.<sup>139</sup> A prominent image of the angel was that of "The Fathers all believed that God confided missions to his angels to help human beings on their way to salvation."<sup>140</sup> Angels were thought to not denote a physical form, but to be more of a figment.<sup>141</sup> During the Renaissance, artists like Fra Angelico and Sandro Botticelli used them as valuable creators of the heavenly space.

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<sup>139</sup> Jean-Yves Lacoste, ed., *Christian Theology* (Great Britain: Routledge, 2005), 30.

<sup>140</sup> Lacoste, *Christian Theology*, 31.

<sup>141</sup> Lacoste, *Christian Theology*, 32.

Fra Angelico unfolds the composition of heaven in his *Coronation of the Virgin* through evoking the senses. Upon entering the scene, two angels, who each hold an incense burner in their right hand, define the space through evocation of the smell (fig. 9). Made from rounded globes, the burners are perforated, allowing a space for smoke to release. The egg-like base is attached to a set of metal or rope cords which the angel can hold. Fra Angelico represents these incense burners in motion, releasing their scent as they drive through the air. The ropes curve as the burner is swung, arching as if about to come down for another swing. The swinging burners would have directly correlated to the experience a beholder might witness at a church, with incense being a regular part of liturgical services throughout the church calendar.<sup>142</sup> The pleasant aroma of the actual space in a church surrounding the beholders as they view a similar experience in a depiction of heaven is tantalizing. It further connects two spaces, that of the church that they are inside, and that of heaven to which the church is connected since it is thought to represent heaven on earth. The altarpiece serves a valuable function in how it connects the two spaces, the physical church to the immaterial heaven.

Moving further into this juncture between two spaces, Renaissance artists use a sense of light to connect the observer to the heavens as well. Relating to a sense of smell, painters can both represent the sense of light as purely theoretical or they can translate it into a real physical quality in the actualized space of the painting as well. Fra Angelico represents a visual experience of light filling the ethereal world, as if the entirety of the composition glows from within. The sheer volume of gold that Fra Angelico uses is responsible for the radiance of the piece. From the golden touches on the figures' dresses to the expansive glittering background, the gold extends to all corners of the piece. All the small details that decorate the figures are

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<sup>142</sup> Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter, eds., *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church* (n.p.: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005).

done in gold, like the intricate ornamental touches on many of the angel's dresses (fig. 10). These details add a sense of abundance and beauty blanketing the space of heaven. There are gilded moments throughout the piece, on many of the figures' halos, as well as round decorative pieces as can be seen on the pin (fig. 9) which holds Mary's cloak together. The gilded elements add a textural quality that comes through as it is a raised medium that Fra Angelico added alongside paint. One can imagine when sunlight hit the altarpiece, how brilliant it would be. The intricate details perhaps would flicker with the changing sun, while the solid golden halos might piercingly shine. The painting glows with celestial power and light. Extending from the central figures are golden rays which not only represent light, but sound and smells as well, a reference to the sheer volume and power of the space. Fra Angelico composes a heavenly space that appeals to the viewers' senses and which he then activates through angels. Their role in evoking the senses, making them palpable to the beholder, further connects us to the piece.

The predominant sense that found its way into the vast majority of Medieval and Renaissance depictions of heaven is the use of sound. The artistic convention of the portrayal of angels singing and performing with musical instruments began around the 14th century.<sup>143</sup> Artists began to employ these angelic musicians into scenes of religious significance, serving to intensify the display of the celestial space on the canvas.<sup>144</sup> Scholars have often discussed the parallel between the music of the heavens and of the earth, and the conception that earth is a mere reflection of what exists in heaven.<sup>145</sup> Heavenly music sets the ambiance for the entirety of a scene, and angels' role as music players helps to create this glorious feeling inside the expanse of paradise. Music was a central aspect of the church experience, and similar to the encounter

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<sup>143</sup> Katherine Powers, "Music Making," 53.

<sup>144</sup> Powers, "Music Making," 53. Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 450.

<sup>145</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 459.

with fragrance and light, sound too would reflect on the practice inside of the church. In his discourse on the earthly setting of music, Winternitz writes “liturgical music is but an imitation of the celestial liturgy”<sup>146</sup> which calls to the deep synchronization of the two spaces.<sup>147</sup> Earth acts as a foggy reflection in a mirror, a slightly lesser picture than that of the perfect heavenly space. With this play between the mirroring of spaces, a link can be made back to Neoplatonic thought, introduced in the previous chapter, and the forms of heaven. Neoplatonists imagined heaven, unlike earth, was ultimately a place of perfection, and the concept of perfected musical compositions work well alongside this image of heaven.<sup>148</sup> Artists rendering heaven throughout history work to picture the unseen, and to actualize the textual references invisible to our ordinary eyes. Music is a wonderful illustration of the way in which the viewer can begin to see a clearly defined paradisiacal space, an actualized existence the viewer can understand. As we begin to explore heaven as space, as both actualized through artistic methods and ephemeral in the mind's eye, angels playing musical instruments aid in the visual representation of the heavenly space itself.<sup>149</sup>

Music is an element that Fra Angelico clearly defined in his *Coronation of the Virgin*. At the forefront of his canvas the viewer enters through the triangular space in between two angels playing musical instruments. One plays a small string instrument, possibly a rebec, while the other plays a positive organ (fig. 11).<sup>150</sup> They turn their heads in the direction of the central scene, enraptured by its heavenly light, similar to the experience expected of the scene's

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<sup>146</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 459.

<sup>147</sup> See E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and Popular Medicine* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1952), 25. Backman correspondingly notes in reference to Basileios' writing discusses this parallel between heaven and earth in the form of dance. He calls to the dance of heaven is the purest form, and the earthly similarly to Winternitz is simply not as good.

<sup>148</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 459.

<sup>149</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts".

<sup>150</sup> Guilio Ongaro, *Music of the Renaissance* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003), 152-155.

beholder. They lean in, directing us to Mary and Christ. Instruments surround the scene and are spread throughout. Long dark trumpets thrust into the air, acting in stark contrast to the golden light rippling through the scene (fig. 5). These extended trumpets, much grander than they would ordinarily be, project into the upper portion of the space. There are four on either side of the central scene, each held by an angel who gently places the instrument to their lips (fig. 12). The angels puff air into their cheeks blowing or about to blow air into the trumpet. They look up towards the instrument they hold, the trumpets themselves are pointed in, towards the central scene. They are layered on top of one another, jutting out from the crowded space below. Additionally, two angels on either side hold smaller gold trumpets to their mouths (fig. 13). Instead of pointing up like the black trumpets, the golden horns point directly to the central scene. On the viewer's left, another angel in green plucks the strings on a lute (fig. 10), angling the instrument towards the onlooker, while looking towards the central scene.<sup>151</sup> Parallel to this angel on the opposing side stands an additional angel decorated in a mossy green garb holding a rebec (fig. 14), gently tilting its body as it moves the bow down.<sup>152</sup> The left and right sides of Christ and the Virgin mirror one another. The eight angels who hold the black trumpets call to one another. Their musicality suggests a call and response, one side seeks, the other answers. There is a similar mirroring with the angels who hold the golden horns, particularly the two frontmost angels on either side, whom Fra Angelico depicts wearing rich pink floor-length dresses. These angels lean back mirroring each other as they play their instruments.

However, Fra Angelico not only represents the instruments but also suggests sound itself. While the angels surround the space, performing music with their instruments, sound ripples

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<sup>151</sup> Ongaro, *Music of the Renaissance*, 158.

<sup>152</sup> Ongaro, *Music of the Renaissance*, 152.

through space as well (fig. 9). The light which emanates from Mary and Christ suggests the sound of the angel's instruments reverberating through this heavenly realm. This dome of peace vibrates with energy, light, and movement. The music fills the space and surrounds the figures with its harmonious tune and purity. The music the angels play is meant to represent the permanent celestial music playing in heaven.<sup>153</sup> Fra Angelico's composition is vibrating with energy, charged with vitality. The golden rays (fig. 11) emanating from the central figures embody rhythm in their linear repetition. The sound itself, in the purest form, is visually inconceivable to the naked eye. In this painting, Fra Angelico attempts to visualize what the viewer cannot see or hear, through a dramatic sense of sound, light, smell, everything working together to open up the heavenly space and unlock its sheer sense of power.<sup>154</sup>

The final convention to consider is an intricate one, one which holds great value to an artist of the Renaissance, that of movement, or more specifically the dance of the angels. Movement as a convention came in full force during the Renaissance, as the period is now celebrated for its ability to portray exquisite grace in a body. Dance, like music, is another association with angels that persists in many devotional works. The sensory experience of musical compositions, as explained by Winternitz, can be reimagined to think about dance and the bodily grace artists of the Renaissance strove to represent.<sup>155</sup> Guglielmo Ebreo, a 15th-century master of dance as well as an acclaimed dance theorist, thought that music was at the root of heavenly, perfect dance, and therefore the move from music to dance is a seamless

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<sup>153</sup> Sarah Mahler Kraaz, "Music for the Queen of Heaven in Early Fifteenth-Century Italian Paintings," *Music in Art* 39, nos. 1-2 (Spring–Fall 2014): 90. Powers as well makes this connection of the consistent music that plays in the heavens. See Powers, "Music Making," 54.

<sup>154</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 451. Using again Winternitz's idea surrounding the 'invisible' heaven.

<sup>155</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 459.

transition.<sup>156</sup> Ebreo writes “what dance is in general and its true definition; which is none other than an outward act which accords with the measured melody of any voice or instrument”.<sup>157</sup>

Music was the catalyst for dance in a religious setting, and because of this, the two are inherently linked when we look to secular art. Dance is a conceptual experience as well as a physical one, and as such is enigmatic. Today, “dance” can include vast varieties of movement and significances, pulling from a wide variety of global influences as well as kinesthetic qualities. However, for the purpose of this project, we look at the narrower understanding of dance as in a Christian, religious context, and how bodies are represented in graceful motion, rather than the extensive range we imagine dance having today.<sup>158</sup>

In some ways, dance was a much more structured convention than the others mentioned above because of its complex history. It is within the realm of these nuanced complexities that it remains an insurmountable task to track the history of dance and its winding through culture and art throughout the ages. Dance generally encompasses rituals, societal traditions, art, and form in both structured and unstructured areas.<sup>159</sup> Therefore, to understand dance in the context of Fra Angelico or Sandro Botticelli, the subject requires a narrowed version of what dance meant for the individuals living during the Renaissance. In particular, we find historically a focus on the separation of some dance in Christian texts from the Christian experience while others are

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<sup>156</sup> Guglielmo Ebreo, *De Practica Seu Arte Tripudii: On the Practice or Art of Dancing* (Clarendon Press, 1993) 94.

<sup>157</sup> Ebreo, *De Practica*, 94. Thesiger is at the root of translating this concept as to mean that dance is a response to music, something that comes after. See Sarah Thesiger, “The Orchestra of Sir John Davies and the Image of the Dance” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 36 (1973): 286.

<sup>158</sup> Jennifer Nevile, “‘Certain Sweet Movements’ the Development of the Concept of Grace in 15th-Century Italian Dance and Painting,” *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1991). Also see Ebreo, *De Practica*, 94

<sup>159</sup> See Margaret Fisk Taylor, *A Time to Dance: Symbolic Movement in Worship* (The Sharing Company, 1967), 82. Taylor remarks on the structure that arose during the Middle Ages with the Church as they became prominently dominant in their decisions on what was considered appropriate. She notes that there was little actual dance practice happening during this time. While Taylor's book focuses on actual practice, this “real” dance practice is not something which I am focused on for this exploration.

integrated into the experience. Therefore, the attitudes regarding dance during the Renaissance was not black or white but lay somewhere in between.

There was significant debate in Europe surrounding the subject of dance beginning as a controversial topic with the Middle Ages, which spanned the fifth century to the fifteenth century.<sup>160</sup> In a book titled *Religious Dances: In the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, E. Louis Backman clarifies why the topic of dance from the early Christian Church onwards is a point of confusion.<sup>161</sup> He points to the inconsistencies in the Church itself about what aspects of dance were considered acceptable and what kinds of dance were sinful.<sup>162</sup> The Christian Church condemned dance associated with pagan belief and any dance that it considered lustful, but it recognized specific holy dances as demonstrating one's piety to God.<sup>163</sup> Backman notes that the church's reaction against dance would have started around the fourth century with the sermons of Epiphanius, a 4th century bishop.<sup>164</sup> However, there is not much written in early Christian texts that anathematized dance completely.<sup>165</sup> In fact, in many of the textual documents written on dance, scholars do not write about its sinfulness in nature, but about the sin of excess.<sup>166</sup> The negative association with dance is partly due to the immense variability of the dances

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<sup>160</sup> Multiple scholars note these differing attitudes: Françoise Syson Carter, "Celestial Dance: A Search for Perfection," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 5, no. 2 (Autumn 1987): 8; Taylor, *A Time*, 82; Backman, *Religious Dances*, 31.

<sup>161</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 155.

<sup>162</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 155. Backman notes that these two positions ends up being a one-sided vantage point in much of the literature of the time, along with historical research in the current century. They are weighted more towards the negative connotations of dance as opposed to a complimentary observation.

<sup>163</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 13.

<sup>164</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 24.

<sup>165</sup> Alessandro Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial: The Moral Debate 1200-1600," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 128. Arcangeli notes that one of these texts was by the Saint Francois de Sales, but remarks that it was not entirely ruling upon dance in one way or another. It was advised that being wary to one's actions of dance was wise. This contrasts to Backman's point of view to which he has a clear moment where he thinks dance is criticized. See Backman, *Religious Dances*, 24.

<sup>166</sup> Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial," 130. Arcangeli emphasizes that dance was not entirely sinful in its very nature, going as far to say it was a neutral endeavor. It was only with the addition of how and why one was dancing that it became a problem.

themselves.<sup>167</sup> One was thinking of dance as a result of pleasure, which was considered unsuitable.<sup>168</sup> Pleasurable dance fell in line with pagan roots, which was the most popular way of linking dance to a negative. Sexually charged dances were considered to be expressions of paganism, and therefore unrighteous in content.<sup>169</sup> The earliest reference to pagan dance started with Guillaume Peyraut who wrote about the circle dance as a demonic circling around the devil. This line of argument was then reused countless times afterward and became the main accusation deployed by those who opposed dance.<sup>170</sup> Backman says that the objection to dance and the attempt to ban certain types of dance, which continued from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, was never particularly effective.<sup>171</sup>

There was a shift then in the Middle Ages when objections to dancing focused on the inappropriateness of unmarried women dancing rather than on its pagan associations.<sup>172</sup> If there was no marriage involved in the dance, and it was purely sensual love, it was seen as unjustifiable in the eyes of the Church.<sup>173</sup> These different expressions of dance, which in many ways complicate these negative and positive associations, were often by theorists of the time, and were not thought of as separate forms of dance. Instead, everything was grouped into the one category of dance itself.<sup>174</sup> During earlier periods, there was much less room for dance as expression, beauty, and interpretation. However, the Renaissance was a time of change and a time for classical antiquity in all its parts to be brought forward.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial," 130.

<sup>168</sup> Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial," 139.

<sup>169</sup> Alexander, "Dancing in the," 155. Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial", 127. Arcangeli also notes these two elements as being directed towards the critique of dance; sexuality and paganism.

<sup>170</sup> Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial," 144-145.

<sup>171</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 154.

<sup>172</sup> Alexander, "Dancing in the," 155.

<sup>173</sup> Thesiger, "The Orchestra," 280.

<sup>174</sup> Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial," 138.

<sup>175</sup> Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial," 127.

It was thought that if participants danced in a holy manner, then it was not a sinful activity.<sup>176</sup> Many scholars have looked to the groups of figures (male and female, female and female, etc.) and have shown how certain groups were interpreted as positive, but there were, alternatively, negative associations attached to each grouping as well.<sup>177</sup> Backman notes that many scholars focus on the negative connotations associated with dance, ignoring that Christians also considered dance as a way to connect heavenly beings to pious earthly people.<sup>178</sup> This concept of the heavenly beings as part of acceptable dance is integral to how we look at art of the Renaissance, and in thinking about how Botticelli connects the celestial to the earthly.

Nonetheless there were also moments where earthly dance would have been considered acceptable forms of dance. In her article titled, “The Orchestra of Sir John Davies and the Image of the Dance”, Sarah Thesiger states that when marriage is at the core of the dance it was seen as having the approval of the church.<sup>179</sup> While Alexander combines these seemingly delineated divisions into a cohesive discussion of their relevance to one another, he focuses on the depiction of dance associated with love.<sup>180</sup> Thesiger considers the literary discourse on dance through a direct analysis of *Orchestra*, a poem by Sir John Davies from 1594.<sup>181</sup> She begins her investigation by separating this dance text into what she calls “metaphorical literature”<sup>182</sup> and then literature designed to indoctrinate.<sup>183</sup> Thesiger notes that during the Middle Ages the preponderance of literature that represents dance concerns the subject of love, and later during

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<sup>176</sup> Taylor, *A Time*, 79-80.

<sup>177</sup> Alexander, “Dancing in the,” 147.

<sup>178</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 12. Carter, “Celestial Dance,” 8.

<sup>179</sup> Thesiger, “The Orchestra,” 280.

<sup>180</sup> Alexander, “Dancing in the,” 147.

<sup>181</sup> Thesiger, “The Orchestra”.

<sup>182</sup> Thesiger, “The Orchestra,” 278.

<sup>183</sup> Thesiger, “The Orchestra,” 278.

the 16th century it shifts to emblems of marriage.<sup>184</sup> Alexander's argument engages with how the circle is specifically associated with images of love.<sup>185</sup> The positive spectrum of dance contains, as he puts it, symbols of marriage, and a union in the grouping of man and woman surrounded by dance.<sup>186</sup> Following this genre of literature, Thesiger's second section centers around dance manuals of refreshing exercise.<sup>187</sup> Exercise was considered another acceptable source of dance and was thought to be beneficial to the body.<sup>188</sup> This did not go without opposition in that there was also a great deal of text refuting the beneficial effects of using dance as exercise.<sup>189</sup>

Christian religious and spiritual thought on the positive elements of dance typically features a focus on those surrounding divine figures. One of the only accepted forms of dance, from the perspective of the Christian Church, was that of angels dancing in circles. Backman cited that at the origin of Christianity, dance was believed to be a divine dance of the angels who gracefully moved about in a dance for God as an appreciation of his divine being.<sup>190</sup> Even as early as the first century, there was text written about the ethereal dance of the heavens, but it wasn't until later that there was substantial text written on the subject.<sup>191</sup> Highlighted in these

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<sup>184</sup> Thesiger, "The Orchestra," 280.

<sup>185</sup> Alexander, "Dancing in the," 147.

<sup>186</sup> Alexander, "Dancing in the," 147.

<sup>187</sup> Thesiger, "The Orchestra," 280.

<sup>188</sup> Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial," 138-145. These next couple of positive conceptions of dance are not as emphasized throughout scholarship, but still require mention. All follow the thorough account of Alessandro Arcangeli as he goes in depth on each of these different methods of agreeable or disagreeable dance. Theatrical performance was considered an acceptable form of dance, however, this did not begin until the late Renaissance. He mentions this not to solidify another argument onto the positive side, but to more take notice of the fact that dance was considered an enjoyment. Social dancing was also admissible, and a practice in Renaissance culture to engage with new people. However, these social gatherings were not fully received by the church in that they did not consider them to be the soundest approach to meet new people. These connotations of dance depended on the circumstance the dance was taking place in which would then deem it either good or bad.

<sup>189</sup> Arcangeli, "Dance under Trial," 144.

<sup>190</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 13.

<sup>191</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 18. Backman extensively follows these early text, citing *The Shepherd* by Hermes as an important piece of early literature on dance.

texts is the close proximity of angels to religious dances of the church.<sup>192</sup> In the third century, Christian Gnostics were an early sect who worshipped through the round dance.<sup>193</sup> Round dance was the symbol of celestial harmony. Backman cites their Neoplatonic ideas of the stars and planets dancing through the heavens alongside the creation.<sup>194</sup> Christian Gnostics thought the act of dance itself replenished the balance of the world, away from sin.<sup>195</sup> In Syson Carter's article titled, "Celestial Dance: A Search for Perfection," she says, "The pagan idea of the choral dance of the gods was assimilated gradually to Christian thought. The move from dancing gods to dancing angels was a natural easy transition"<sup>196</sup> and is at the root of the type of dance that surrounds the celestial and pure angelic figures in 15th-century Florentine paintings. These figures are a translation from early pagan, platonic thought transcribed into a Christianized method of thinking.<sup>197</sup> The circular dance of the angel proves to be a key area not only in the thought of the angelic form in general, but is also relevant in specifically thinking about Botticelli's interpretation of this classic motif. The round dance was depicted in art, for the most part, with a relationship to the heavens.<sup>198</sup> The frolic of the angels was the purest form of this dance.<sup>199</sup> Carter notes St. Basil (330-379 A.D. ), a bishop , as saying that the height of perfection is the angels' circling dance.<sup>200</sup> The conception of the heavens as spheres originates from the Platonic dialogue of the dancing cosmos.<sup>201</sup> Carter meticulously explains the circle in

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<sup>192</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 19.

<sup>193</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 16-18

<sup>194</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 16.

<sup>195</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 16.

<sup>196</sup> Carter, "Celestial Dance," 7.

<sup>197</sup> Carter, "Celestial Dance," 8.

<sup>198</sup> Taylor, *A Time*, 90.

<sup>199</sup> Taylor, *A Time*, 80.

<sup>200</sup> Carter, "Celestial Dance," 8.

<sup>201</sup> Carter, "Celestial Dance," 4. Carter has a fantastic synopsis of Platonic thought surrounding the circular dance.

conjunction with the dancing planets.<sup>202</sup> She highlights Platonic thought surrounding the idea of unity and clarity in movement embodied inside these “planets and stars as gods dancing”.<sup>203</sup> This ancient idea of the dancing cosmos was thought by Plotius (205-270 A.D.) to be the universe dancing in adoration of God.<sup>204</sup> However, it wasn’t until Plotius that Neoplatonism was founded, which centers around celestial hierarchy.<sup>205</sup> The dance of the cosmos was imagined to be the absolute nature of being, with its unity in its “oneness”.<sup>206</sup> As angels dance they follow the original, pure path to salvation.<sup>207</sup> In this religious context, it is the oneness of God and the whole universe which is symbolized through the unifying circle.<sup>208</sup> The circle dance of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was called *chorea* and was typically paired with music.<sup>209</sup>

How does Fra Angelico compare as we understand how the layers in which dance was imagined inside? Dance has a place in Fra Angelico’s *Coronation of the Virgin*. Fra Angelico’s *Coronation of the Virgin* hints to this motif of the angelic circle dance. Immediately surrounding Mary and Christ, angels move clockwise as if whirling around them (fig. 5). To the viewer’s left, the angel dressed in deep blue represents clearly the dance-like movement Fra Angelico is drawing upon. The angel’s dress swishes out as if the air and sound underneath catch it as the angel moves through space. Again, the viewer is directed to the expanse beneath the angel who is suspended in air, anchored only by a small cloud under its feet. The dark contrast of the angel’s body to the golden abyss sparks a feeling of air, sound, and light holding this space

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<sup>202</sup> Carter, "Celestial Dance," 4.

<sup>203</sup> Carter, "Celestial Dance," 4.

<sup>204</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 16. For the date of Plotius see Carter, "Celestial Dance", 5.

<sup>205</sup> Carter, "Celestial Dance," 5.

<sup>206</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 17.

<sup>207</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 17.

<sup>208</sup> Carter, "Celestial Dance," 5.

<sup>209</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances*, 13.

together. To the viewers right, the frontmost angel dressed in black shares a similar flurry of air licking at the bottom of its dress. All the angels sway in contrapposto, shifting as they move in a circle. These small but defined movements represent the sheer power that radiates from the center of the scene, pushing past the angel. Both angels sway to the side, countering their steps as they shift from one side to the other. By suggesting movement, an artist can enhance the liveliness of the space. In Fra Angelico's painting, the angels circle around the divine figures and the surrounding figures stand behind them. There is an openness to the circle between the angels and the figures, which creates the shape of heaven.

Botticelli, at the pinnacle of success, and in some sense an embodiment of the beauty of painting during the Italian Renaissance, introduces a more complex use of angels. What Botticelli creates with his depiction of angels is far from the circle dance of Fra Angelico's circular dance motif. Fra Angelico's work is between states, that of movement and that of the pure motif of angelic dance. Fra Angelico shows angels moving, gently dancing, but it is not as pronounced as that of the *Mystical Nativity*. The artistic choices that emerge from Fra Angelico's conventional method of depicting heaven drive a question about how Botticelli, working within the same formula, instead aims to expand these conventions into his *Mystical Nativity* and his notions of heaven.

## Chapter 3

### Botticelli's Dancing Angels

In Chapter One we covered the space in which Botticelli was being explicitly influenced by, and the ways that Florence shaped its political and social principles. In Chapter Two we then transitioned to the artistic context, looking to representations of heaven and the conventions that circulated during the Renaissance. In this chapter, we will explore how Botticelli works in conjunction with these customs, building upon them to culminate in his beautiful *Mystical Nativity* (fig. 3). In developing these themes, Botticelli designs a work distinctive from that of the *Coronation of the Virgin* (fig. 4), though they share a resemblance in his handling of the motif of the dancing angels.<sup>210</sup> Nowhere else in his entire body of works does Botticelli represent angels who dance in a circle. The patron of the *Coronation of the Virgin* is universally understood to be the guild of goldsmiths.<sup>211</sup> However, the question of the patron of the *Mystical Nativity* is not as straightforward and a subject up for debate. Several scholars claim that the work had no patron which itself leads to gripping questions about Botticelli's character.<sup>212</sup> The chapter will first begin, however, with a close visual analysis of the *Coronation of the Virgin*, with a focus on how Botticelli composes the space of the heavens and dancing angels. The chapter then turns towards a focused analysis of the *Mystical Nativity* in comparison to the *Coronation of the Virgin*. In comparing the two works I hope to demonstrate the novelty of

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<sup>210</sup> Carter, "Celestial Dance," 7.

<sup>211</sup> Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 74. Ettlinger's notes the commission as being from the guild. Zoellner seconds this, writing that the goldsmith put a good portion of money into the making of the piece. Zoellner is the scholar who names the specific goldsmiths as *orefici* as patrons. Zoellner, *Botticelli: Images*, 154.

<sup>212</sup> Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 100. The Ettlinger's surmise that because Botticelli signs the painting at the top of the piece that we can then assume that there was no patron involved in the creation of its conception. Also see Rab Hatfield, "Botticelli's Mystic Nativity, Savonarola and the Millennium", 89. Hatfield makes the case for this lack of patron as well, however he also sights the possibility of the patron being for a family friend.

Botticelli's representation and the way he reimagines the role of angelic bodies as shapers of divine space.

Botticelli created a vast amount of work including angels, as did other Renaissance painters, in classic scenes such as the Annunciation and the Nativity. Botticelli's style in how he chooses to depict the angelic form changes when looking through the entirety of his work. Botticelli painted angels in two distinctive styles, each being molded and reproduced throughout his career as an artist. We can consider Botticelli's *Coronation of the Virgin* to be the moment in his career where there is a clear decision to depict the angelic circle dance. This motif manifests once again ten years later in his rendition of the *Mystical Nativity*. While these may be two isolated examples of the round dance, we do in fact see numerous depictions of angels in Botticelli's work. The majority of these angelic bodies move with a certain sense of grace, but none of the others dance in the same manner as that of the *Coronation of the Virgin* and the *Mystical Nativity*. Unlike the angels in both the *Mystical Nativity* and the *Coronation of the Virgin*, the first variety of angel is frontal and more a part of the central scene. These angels are at the forefront of the painting. We can see an example of this type of angel in Botticelli's famous work, *Madonna of the Magnificat* (fig. 15). These angels (fig. 16) lack the telltale qualities of an angel, as they are dressed quite modernly and have no wings. We see the second variety of angel in paintings such as his c.1485 *Virgin and Child with Two Angels* (fig. 17) and his other Nativity scene of c.1475 (fig. 18). These representations of angels recede in the background, usually occupied in a task, and covered in rippling dresses.<sup>213</sup> Botticelli constantly experiments with a sense of playful movement and undulating fabric with his angels, but nowhere else does he engage with the circular dancing angel. This type of angel fits with the

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<sup>213</sup> Powell, *The Choreographic*, 28.

angels in the *Mystical Nativity* and the *Coronation of the Virgin*. This then leads us to wonder what the significance of these two scenes are and why Botticelli includes this motif? We can look to this dancing motif as a way to visually describe what Botticelli is working with through their placement in, or around heaven. What role do these angels play as shapers of space, crafting the heavens physically with their bodies, but becoming part of the expanse as well? Botticelli's choice of motif is direct, a choice that connects with the political, social, and artistic significances already discussed in the last two chapters. To understand how the angels in the *Mystical Nativity* breathe the life of heaven itself, we must first look to the *Coronation of the Virgin* in which Botticelli stays consistent with the standard of religious paintings.

The *Coronation of the Virgin* (fig. 4) is an exemplary illustration of the conventional Renaissance altarpiece with its clearly defined spatial formula and arrangement of figures.<sup>214</sup> Painted in circa 1480 to 1490, it was placed in the church of San Marco.<sup>215</sup> Botticelli depicts God and the Virgin as the principal figures who occupy the heavens. As an indication of the scene's context, the Virgin is in the process of being crowned and kneels down in front of God. The painting's spatial composition is more or less evenly divided between heaven and earth.<sup>216</sup> Botticelli's systematic inclusion of the four saints, as well as the central figures, illustrates a standard that was represented in Renaissance art and reached back into medieval times.<sup>217</sup> Upon entering the painted space, the beholder could from either side comfortably track the transition from the material world up to the immaterial, celestial world through the four mighty saints, (fig. 19), who stand at the foreground. Botticelli favors the saints as they occupy more space in the

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<sup>214</sup> According to Zoeller, this was Botticelli's physically largest altarpiece he ever made in his career. Zoeller also mentions the important fact that the piece did have a predella, which relates to the life of the Saints. See Zoellner, *Botticelli: Images*, 154.

<sup>215</sup> Zoellner, *Botticelli: Images*, 154.

<sup>216</sup> Hatfield, "Botticelli's Mystic." Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 74.

<sup>217</sup> Clark, *Looking at Pictures*, 184.

picture plane than the figures of heaven, only this is not unexpected given the context of the piece itself. The piece is for the altar of St. Eliguis, who is shown on the right looking directly at the viewer, his right hand raised which points to heaven.<sup>218</sup> From left to right the rest of the saints go as follows, Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Augustine, and Saint Jerome.<sup>219</sup> Botticelli arranges these four saints against an elegant backdrop of the countryside. The landscape itself is uncomplicated, with moderately flat ground apart from for the occasional gentle hill. A couple of charming houses rest beside a modest lake which expands to both sides of the landscape. Botticelli depicts a pastoral scene made from muted browns and greens, but certainly nothing spectacular or grand.<sup>220</sup> What it does, however, is set the earthly scene in a discernible place. These four saints stand with their feet planted on the landscape, clearly within an earthly space. The Saints extended bodies lead the viewer up from the earthly space into the heavenly.

Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* (fig. 5) is known to have been an inspiration for Botticelli's own *Coronation of the Virgin*.<sup>221</sup> This becomes fairly obvious if compared side by side, and what becomes fascinating is what Botticelli chooses to depict within his Coronation. The shape of the heavens in Botticelli's *Coronation of the Virgin* looks reminiscent of the apse of a church. It's dome-like shape sparkles with gold paint. Botticelli paints the gold of heaven as uniform which contrasts with the detailed focus put on the figures of God and Virgin. Botticelli sets up the heavens with an assemblage of layers, all working to create the impression of depth. The angels who dance at the front of the Virgin and God are the figures closest to the viewer, and the frontmost layer of the piece. Botticelli represents the foreground with their wings and parts

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<sup>218</sup> Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 74.

<sup>219</sup> Zoellner, *Botticelli: Images*, 154. See also Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 74.

<sup>220</sup> It is frequently noted in a large part of scholarship the critique Leonardo de Vinci places on Botticelli's landscapes, saying that Botticelli's lack of detail in his landscape was not ideal. Zoellner, *Botticelli: Images*, 155.

<sup>221</sup> Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 74-76. Ettlinger's notes specifically to the angels in Fra Angelico and says that Botticelli has elongated this chain into what we see as the circle dance his *Coronation of the Virgin*.

of their bodies in front of the Virgin and God. Following this, the next layer is God and the Virgin, who sit atop a thin cover of clouds. Botticelli includes several angels on either side that are within the same the plane as the central figures, and as a result, the angels appear tiny compared to the immense bodies of God and the Virgin. Behind the central figures is an extensive circular decoration. Botticelli depicts the design as perfectly circular, though its base is concealed by bodies of the Virgin and God who sit slightly in front. Botticelli executes the design from orange and blue putti, who are simply reproductions of the same angel, with wings drawn back and faces looking straight. Botticelli draws the angels in this pattern quite differently than the angels circling below which are highly detailed and human-like. These are small, and baby-like, with rounded torsos. The furthest depth of the heavenly space comes from the angelic figure (fig. 20) residing behind the central scene, in between the Virgin and God, looking up to them with awe. In front of this angel, golden lines emanate from a point directly in-between the Virgin and God.<sup>222</sup> This radiating light reaches the edge of decorative angelic design, adding another layer to the decorative piece. This time, however, these streaks are less of a physical presence in their placement but more environmental. This golden texture acts as if radiating from the two figures, and functions as the atmosphere as a whole.

The angels at the center of this discussion of the *Coronation of the Virgin*, are the sixteen angels who dance in a ring around the central figures. They both fill the space on either side of the central scene, as well as fly across the foreground of the scene. Their progression of movement seems to slow at the edges of the piece only to quicken as they draw closer to the center. However, the figures (fig. 21) on either side are not inactive, but move and twist around one another, progressing forwards and eventually jumping into the air. They all hold hands with

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<sup>222</sup> Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 76. The Ettlinger's note this angel as being one way that Botticelli creates a representation of space and perspective in the painting.

one another, each of physical connection varied and intricately involved. The angels shift their weight forwards as if to accelerate their momentum in the places where it is lacking. The angels generate energy by the push and pull of their hands, dragging or pushing each other across the sky. The angel on the left-hand side of the scene dressed in pink tips nearly into the angel next to her. They clasp hands as if the pink angel is giving the force to the other to push her across the sky. As a result, the angel in green accumulates speed and looks as if jumping off of the large thumb of the saint, Saint John the Evangelist. There is a sliver of space between the foot of the angel and the thumb of the saint which is full of simmering energy and pressure. The angel in green becomes lost amidst the push and pull on either side, with the drive from the angel in pink, and the dragging of the angel in blue (fig. 4). This mixture of energy between tension and resistance is a different connection to the angels at the front of the scene. These frontal angels fly not in heaven, but around heaven. The angel in blue leans fully into its momentum, pulled completely by the angel in white. Their fingers stretch desperate to maintain their connection with one another. Their energy whips across the center stage, with both of their arms outstretched.

What can be gleaned from this close examination of the *Coronation of the Virgin* is that its composition follows a clear path. As a viewer, we are guided to take in the saints at the foreground, and then follow the path up to behold the sharply described heavens. With its traditional formula and profoundly religious iconography, little is left to the imagination of the viewer. Though Botticelli paints the bodies with the beautiful movement he is famous for, the relation of their movement to the heavenly scene above acts as a frame. The angels in the *Coronation of the Virgin* are dynamic, but bulky and work more as the enhancers to heavenly

space. Botticelli alters this in his *Mystical Nativity*, extracting from the places in his earlier work which lack dynamic grace and perfects this for his later work.

Botticelli begins to alter these elements mentioned above in his angels in the *Mystical Nativity*, and in doing so reconstructs the nature of heaven itself. The *Mystical Nativity* followed soon after the *Coronation of the Virgin*, in c.1500, the gap leaving ample time for Botticelli to have an extended interest in the subject matter. Botticelli deeply engages with the nativity scene, resulting in a unique interpretation of the classic rhetoric. He incorporates a considerable fraction of the social and theological experiences that were previously discussed in the first two chapters but then goes beyond. We witness Botticelli's contemplation in how to depict the heavenly space, and while the iconography is relevant, it is not the main focus of this chapter.

Botticelli's composition of the *Mystical Nativity* (fig. 3) is quite distinct from the structure of the classic altarpiece. The *Mystical Nativity* is deeply complex in its structural approach in conjunction with Botticelli's addition of numerous figures and components. Botticelli layers the piece upon itself, with three areas that are delineated through the bodies which occupy these spaces of the heavens, the earth, and the intermediary.<sup>223</sup> Compositionally the piece is highly systematic with its geometric architecture but carries a lively quality to it as well. Our eyes follow the path that cuts through the foreground of the scene and leads to the central scene. We then can follow up through the Madonna herself to the three angels who reside atop a trapezoidal roof.<sup>224</sup> In the end, our eyes trail towards the dancing angels directed by the line of the green angel's leg to the pink angel's body. We are then wrapped around to observe the continuous circling of the figures which could continue forever, consistent and never

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<sup>223</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan, *Botticelli*, 11. He discusses the structural elements of the piece.

<sup>224</sup> Clark, *Looking at Pictures*, 179. Clark makes a rather insightful note that the 'angular' architecture stops once we reach the tree's, which softens the harshness and transitions us into the heavenly space.

changing. The space of the dancing angels and the heavens is in many ways the end and the beginning, where our eyes are first drawn and stay the longest. Compared to the circle of the *Coronation of the Virgin* where the dance itself is less explicit, the angels in the *Mystical Nativity* are unmistakably dancing in a circle. It is only upon closer examination of the angels in the *Coronation of the Virgin* who reside further back in the scene that the viewer can see their linking hands and the continuation of their circular dance.

In the two pieces, their respective heavens contrast one another. The *Coronation of the Virgin's* heaven bustles with activity, with lots of moving parts; pleasant pink and white roses splash onto the lower half of the heavens, scattered there by the angels on either side who carry large bundles of flowers (fig. 21). The entire experience is filled with tactile activity, with angels flying in and out of the scene, large figures sitting at the center, and rays of light billowing from the interior. However, because the experience of heaven is so richly described, the viewer can easily apply the heavenly space into their own practice. In the *Mystical Nativity*, however, there are no figural representations that occupy the space of heaven, these figures appear on earth. Therefore, the bodies that make up the heavenly space are none other than the angels who circle heaven. Though this is not to take away from the heavenly figures on earth, the concentration of the nativity scene is on the transition from heavenly to earthly. Since the focus of the *Coronation of the Virgin* is the opposite passage, the figures taking up the majority of the space of heaven makes sense. With the absence of figures in the *Mystical Nativity*, Botticelli must consider how one depicts heaven without the leading figures. What additional properties can be utilized to design heaven? How does one represent these qualities without central figures but with something other?

In the *Coronation of the Virgin*, the shape of heaven itself is preconceived.

Notwithstanding this being a traditional shape of an altar, the rounded top aids in unifying the sensations of heaven and helps to enhance Botticelli's delineation of space. It arches over the top completing the circle of the heavens and molding it to be a perfected form. While the heavenly space is rounded and unified, the rectangular base fits the earthly space, as it is more angular and less perfected. Kenneth Clark in his book, *Looking at Pictures*, defines the heavenly space of the *Mystical Nativity* as being that of a 'dome'.<sup>225</sup> While the gold of heaven in the *Mystical Nativity* is vibrant, like the golden mosaics of a dome, the term itself seems slightly out of place. I would build upon his interpretation and argue further that the *Coronation of the Virgin* is more attuned to his phrasing particularly in how the shape of heaven is configured. The heavenly space is contained within itself through the dome-like shape. The *Mystical Nativity* opposes this, with the attention to simplifying the heavenly space into a pure form. Botticelli shapes heaven as a perfect oval, as opposed to the rounded heaven which appears in the *Coronation of the Virgin*. Heaven is a perspectival circle, much like what would have been seen in the Renaissance as a halo and the transition from a flat, one-dimensional halo into that of the Renaissance perspectival halo. Its shape, like an elongated egg, stretches out just out of reach of the frame of the piece. The impression gained from cutting off both sides of the oval is that the viewer can visually experience the expansiveness of heaven. Even though Botticelli portrays heaven as quite a small shape, there is no limit to its size or power, expanded not by purely being visual, but through imagination. The heaven in the *Mystical Nativity* opens up, and breathes life with the simplicity in form. This is precisely how Botticelli delineates the tangible outline of heaven, as fundamental yet expansive.

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<sup>225</sup> Clark, *Looking at Pictures*, 179.

What is captivating in Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity* is the relationship the angels have to the shape of heaven. Through another illustration of purity, the angels in the *Mystical Nativity* mirror the heavenly elegance of form. They follow the contour of heaven with their circular dance. As one unit, one breath, one entity, they dance in a perfect circle. Breathless motion propels their bodies forwards, exciting the viewer with its kinetic energy. Their dance is graceful, yet driven, with a current rippling with powerful ease. As they swirl, one can imagine the energy reverberating in heaven from their flight. Their bodies bend and loosely dangle down from the heavens as if caught in a weightless suspension of time and space. Botticelli had the opportunity to paint the angels below the heavens, yet he chose to paint them on top of the space, superimposed over the heavens themselves. Botticelli modifies how the angels relate to the pure shape of heaven in the *Mystical Nativity* from that of the *Coronation of the Virgin*. In the *Coronation of the Virgin*, the ring of angels opens up towards the viewer, presenting us with heaven. These angels take on a subordinate, role which surrounds the central scene. While in the *Mystical Nativity* they are central to the heavenly design, assuming the role as sole figures in the heavens themselves. They weave in and out of the space, both part of the breadth of heaven and the intermediary.

The angels' complex relationship of existing as bodies of both earth and heaven is accounted for in this painting.<sup>226</sup> Botticelli displays the depth of heaven through the small sprigs of olive branches (fig. 22) that the angels hold, which disappear at the edges as if going inside of the heavenly space. Botticelli blends the angelic bodies of the *Mystical Nativity* to heaven through several approaches; one beautiful connection he makes is through color. Along the lower half of heaven, Botticelli paints a border of pale pink (fig. 23). This thick rosy pink haze

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<sup>226</sup> Lacoste, *Christian Theology*, 32.

matches the dress of several of the angels. Botticelli uses a gentle tone, a pale pink that subtly acts as a border, serving as a transition shade from the brilliant gold of heaven to the yellow halo of light which surrounds it. Botticelli is working with how to shape the heavens in the *Coronation of the Virgin* through this line (fig. 4) as well, but it is less convincing in his first attempt. Botticelli's arrangement in the *Coronation of the Virgin* of the boundary acts rather differently than what he was accomplishing in the *Mystical Nativity*. The dark orange around the heavens of the *Coronation of the Virgin* is a harsh separation between heaven and earth. Botticelli transforms the border of the *Coronation* in his *Mystical Nativity* into a gentler separation, unifying the spaces rather than creating an intense division. The *Coronation of the Virgin* alters the space dramatically through its harshness as Botticelli outlines heaven as if following the contours of an object. The dark line of the *Coronation of the Virgin* tonally matches the decorative angelic prints above the Virgin and God. This links the outline of heaven not to the circling angelic bodies, but to an ornamental element directly within the heavenly space, acting as more of a decoration than the pure forms of the dancing angels. We witness Botticelli reflecting upon the methods to not only define space but to define the heavenly space. This can then be seen in how he chooses to play with linear design, as well as his choice of who he connects color to. He shapes both of the heavens in part from contour lines. However, his *Mystical Nativity* is more convincing through its brushiness. His choice to lighten the color and connect it directly to the dancing angels is one way he shapes the space, to unify with the heavens and a perfect whole.

Another means Botticelli uses to equate both the angels and heavens is through light. Botticelli pays attention to the light that radiates from heaven touching the angelic figures. The heavens themselves are glowing from within, as they burst with the sheer beauty of vibrant gold.

The gold is textured and worn from age, cracking in places, but once was most likely a consistent gold all around. Tonally, the gold is the brightest part of the piece, shimmering above the scene, grabbing the viewers attention. This shimmery tone is different from that of the *Coronation of the Virgin*, which is much more brilliant as it looks to have been created from gold leaf. This is evocative of its nature as an altarpiece. There is an apparent contrast to the darker colors that surround it, and as a result, creates a heavier heaven. With its lighter tone, the heaven in the *Mystical Nativity* is lofty, effortlessly floating in the sky. The heaven, however, in the *Coronation of the Virgin*, adds a visual weight which pushes down onto the earthly figures below. For both pieces, Botticelli appears to be drawing upon a medieval construct with the gold, more so with the *Coronation of the Virgin*.<sup>227</sup> The pale tone in the *Mystical Nativity* serves to highlight the shift between the gold of heaven and the yellow of the clouds. The pale yellow clouds (fig. 23) articulate a connection between divine light and the light which illuminates our world.<sup>228</sup> Our light is a pale reflection of the vibrant gold. It echoes across space falling upon the angels themselves.

Additionally, we see a contrast in the angels of the *Mystical Nativity* (fig. 3) in which Botticelli represents them as having bare arms. As a result, the full anatomy of the angel's arms are visible and they, in fact, are quite delicate and thin compared to the rest of their bodies which hold a deep sense of volume. These remarkably smooth arms, though quite beautiful, are disproportionate in several of the angels.<sup>229</sup> This to me signals more of a choice of the artist rather than a mistake from the artist, as Botticelli was no stranger to perfecting the beautiful

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<sup>227</sup> Hartt, *Sandro Botticelli*, 22.

<sup>228</sup> Winternitz, "On Angel Concerts," 454. Winternitz talks about music on earth being not compatible, imperfect to that of heaven. We see here something similar here but with light.

<sup>229</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 17.

female body as anyone will say in looking at his *Birth of Venus* (fig. 2).<sup>230</sup> We can see this change of proportion in the angel to the back of the chain (fig. 23) whose upper arm extends out, too long for her body, but the effect is meaningful. It elongates the body, and easily flows past the joint of the elbow, extending the angel's reach in one sweeping motion. Botticelli's choice to make them sleeveless allows for the viewer to see their arms more clearly than in the *Coronation of the Virgin* (fig. 4). The thickness which the sleeve provides for the *Coronation of the Virgin* celestial figures makes a pronounced impact in the general weight of their gravity. However, Botticelli's choice of color additionally aids in the sensitive feeling of the angels of the *Mystical Nativity*. They are painted in gentle lighted tones of white, pale pink, and emerald green.<sup>231</sup> The colors in the *Coronation of the Virgin* are deeper, with purples, royal blues, pinks, vibrant greens, and a much more grey tones white. These jewel-like tones aid to the heavy feeling of the angels which is in part due to the fact that deeper colors appear heavier.

Botticelli attentively engages where the light of heaven shines delicately on the angels, pulling the viewer to see a bodily representation of the heaven. The golden light gently caresses the faces and the arms of the angels. The contrast between the shadows of the side that does not reach the light highlight this, a gradient rests between the dark and the light, a smoothness to that transition. The leftmost angel is a perfect example to see this light (fig. 24). The illumination gently falls upon her face, her mouth slightly parted in awe of the heavens. Other angels in the circle have these touches of heavenly light as well. Botticelli not only plays with light on their bodies, but their clothing too. He adds flecks of gold in their dresses, which envelopes their bodies into the space, flickering across the surface. The angel at the back (fig. 25), beautifully

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<sup>230</sup> Arasse, "Botticelli's Manner," 17.

<sup>231</sup> Clark, *Looking at Pictures*, 184-86. Clark writes that the colors of the *Mystical Nativity* became much richer after the painting was cleaned. Perhaps most interestingly he says that the cleaning enhanced the parallel of the two worlds.

represents this as she glitters as if being both a mirror to the light while simultaneously being folded into space.

The transition between how the intermediary figure was theorized from chapter one, how it was actualized in practice through chapter two, and now how it is embodied through Botticelli's own translation. In his ring of dancers, the leftmost angel (fig. 24) as discussed above, is the only figure who is on a completely vertical axis, which directly leads us into heaven. From her face to her foot, one can draw a line straight through her body, which proves to be equally balanced on either side. She does not sway to one side but is pointed on a central axis which then follows her gaze, a linear path to heaven. There is this impression of a vertical body, even though Botticelli adds moments of asymmetry. When looking to her right foot, it is not entirely pointed, but pushing up through the toes in a *relevé*.<sup>232</sup> Her foot breaks this balanced line, and we may question what the reason was for Botticelli's choice of this tension? It can be imagined as an incorporation of the intermediary space. He presents illusions of a “floor” or a space in which these angels push off from. However, Botticelli goes beyond simply planting the figures on a floor, but embodies the movement with the utmost grace and nimbleness. She places her weight on the ball of her foot, peeling away from the floor. Botticelli places her in a moment in between states, pushing from the floor, while moving to land.

The angels in the *Mystical Nativity* (fig. 3) are moving in the space of heaven and are both part of heaven while also not being inside of heaven. They act like a reflection of the space, as well as shape the space. While heaven is only depicted as the golden realm in its simplistic form, the space of the sky underneath it counterbalances the oval heavens. The blue sky is shaped ovally by both the edges of the clouds which are connected to the heavens, and then the

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<sup>232</sup> A term meant to describe the raising of the heel up in ballet.

treeline below. The sky's the angelic transitory space, and is shown as such, reflecting like a pond reflects, as opposite but the same. This intermediary space houses the angelic bodies, as their feet and lower torsos dangle down into the space. Their feet dangling down, suspended while also lifting themselves up through the invisible floor, hopping and jumping as they dance through their intermediary space.

This lightness Botticelli is aiming to create in the *Mystical Nativity* is different from what we see in the *Coronation of the Virgin* and extremely significant in how we read the scene. The angels' gentility and grace is a reflection of heaven, they are the figures who define heaven. Their motion is part of the heavenly experience which helps to shape the sound and the rhythm of heaven. While the angels in the *Coronation of the Virgin* are bulky in their transition through space, the angels in the *Mystical Nativity* are anything but that, embodying a lightness of being. The stunning beauty Botticelli endows upon these dancers is unusual. Botticelli works to create a balance between the material and immaterial, a weight to their bodies while also maintaining a lightness. This motion is apparent in the activated drapery that envelopes their bodies, their flowing hair, and the forward tilt of their figures as they lean into one another. They are lighter than those of the *Coronation of the Virgin*. In the *Coronation of the Virgin*, the bodies of the angels drop down into the space of earth with tremendous energy and force. They feel bulky as Botticelli builds up the drapery, filling the space with mass. The *Mystical Nativity*, they are in the place in between worlds. They are both light and heavy. Botticelli maintains the effect of a weighted body through drapery which gives them a physical presence while keeping them angelic. The angels fly effortlessly through the sky as if the air is picking them up, fluttering through the sky like the ribbons they hold.

While Botticelli paints an irregularity to the angel's movement in each piece, the *Mystical Nativity* fractioning is more intentional than the *Coronation of the Virgin*. The *Mystical Nativity* dance is much more rhythmic and consistent, with singular space and inaudible beats that count the dancers as they move in unison. They twist into one another as they link arms, moving towards each other in tandem with a rhythmic invisible pulse. There is a moment in the *Coronation of the Virgin* where the angels in the front possess a similar cadence to the *Mystical Nativity* angels. However, the invisible beat of their dance is lost further into the perspective when the figures group together and withdraw behind the central figures. The irregularity in the *Mystical Nativity* comes from the changing positions of their heads as well as the various patterns of their feet. A couple of the figures look up into heaven while others shift their gaze down, nodding along to this noiseless beat. Some of the angels draw their feet in to spring forwards while others drag their feet behind to land. Botticelli plays with this exchange the sensation of momentary expression and an almost palpable joy.<sup>233</sup> This rhythmic quality can be drawn further in the *Mystical Nativity* in how Botticelli positions their bodies. Their directionality, first moving to the left, then to the right, acts as a call and response, together in perfect harmony. They are perfectly in sync with one another. Their arms as well combine as a counter rhythm (the after beat), their bodies like a metronome.

Botticelli draws from biblical conventions while transcending to something existentially and visually greater in his later work. As discussed in the first chapter, Botticelli works within juxtaposing ideologies of 15th century Florence. This interpretation can further incorporate what Botticelli does with the conventions set out in Chapter Two. The angelic rhythm adds to the larger context of Botticelli's heaven in his *Mystical Nativity*. He transforms these conventions

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<sup>233</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *Sandro Botticelli*, 8.

into the physical embodiment of the angelic form, and the role of the dancing angels is highlighted in the *Mystical Nativity*. At first glance, we might imagine this heaven is simple in its pleasing circular form and overall conception while in fact, it is a physical embodiment of these ambiguities in which Botticelli is placing himself inside. The narrative of the *Mystical Nativity* itself is a moment where the heavenly figures come to earth, leaving heaven behind in their wake. We are left then to question heaven's physical form without the figures themselves. Since the angels are the only figures who appear in heaven, their function of occupying the space is embodied through their dance, through light, music, and shape. The angels are responsible for creating the experience of heaven; they are the sound of rustling fabric, the smells of the olive branches, and the breadth of space itself manifested into the bodily form of the dance of these angels. As they dance they create. Although they are similarly an aspect of a larger whole, an ambiguous middle which aids the viewer to contemplate the heavenly space in this larger context, they are the amplitude central to the conception of this heaven. Hence, Botticelli's 'simple' heaven invites the viewer to imagine this heaven by leaving it open to interpretation. The viewer may rapture at its beauty of balance, and the physical manifestation of heaven transformed into an angelic figure meant to represent both worlds of heaven, and earth. As we saw earlier with Botticelli's attention to the light of heaven and what it illuminates, we might see this essence as a transfer of energy; heaven itself manifests onto the bodies of the angels, materializing in our own space.

Botticelli both invites the viewer, as well as he invites himself to play with ambiguity. As noted by several scholars, there is a possibility that the *Mystical Nativity* had no patron at all.<sup>234</sup> If we take this to be true, and there is indeed no patron for this piece, it may speak further

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<sup>234</sup> See scholars: Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli*, 100; Hatfield, "Botticelli's Mystic," 89.

to Botticelli's own character as an artist who experiments within the lines of reason. Ultimately, it is a genuine response to his own creative exploration. His breadth of creativity is more significant when we recognize that Botticelli is working from his own imagination, rather than having it dictated by a patron. Kenneth Clark indicates this work was the only piece Botticelli signed.<sup>235</sup> Clark asserts that Botticelli may have made this piece of his own accord, a concept that heightens much of what has already been discussed in the previous chapters. Botticelli is creating this painting for himself and his own exploration. Even if we assume that the patronage gave the artist a sense of freedom in the subject matter, there still exists an immeasurable difference between the creation of art as an expression of personal artistic achievement, and a work done with a patron in mind who commissions the subject matter. Botticelli claims this piece as his own, furthering this idea of his curiosity of exploration for its own sake, and leaves room for his own subtle interpretations onto the piece itself. The *Mystical Nativity* is the visual space for him to work through, and delight in the scope of experiment with these moments of ambiguity. Botticelli plays with the notion of heaven and angels, and conceptually magnifies their role in human spirituality.

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<sup>235</sup> Clark, *Looking at Pictures*, 180.

### Conclusion

The description of the recent Museum of Fine Arts Boston exhibition, *Botticelli and the Search for the Divine*, claims that

Perhaps more than any other painter, Sandro Botticelli (about 1445–1510) exemplifies the artistic achievement of Renaissance Florence in the 15th century. “Botticelli and the Search for the Divine,” organized by the Muscarelle Museum of Art at the College of William & Mary and Italy’s *Metamorfosi Associazione Culturale*, explores the dramatic changes in the artist’s style and subject matter—from poetic depictions of classical gods and goddesses to austere sacred themes—reflecting the shifting political and religious climate of Florence during his lifetime.<sup>236</sup>

The current discourse is in line with much of the discussion in the previous chapters: Botticelli’s place in the Renaissance, how he organizes himself into the milieu of Florence, and above all how Botticelli embodies this quintessential Renaissance artist. A desire to define Botticelli’s achievements is on the minds of scholars and the public alike. As we move away from these chapters and look to a modern discourse, have we witnessed a shift in Botticelli’s own characterization? It is hard to discern if this question can be answered, but intriguing to imagine that Botticelli himself evolved throughout his life as an artist.

As I began this topic, much of what I gleaned regarding Botticelli’s life, and artistic influence, fit into neat boundaries. Once picturing Botticelli’s work for his beautiful women and the idealized nature of their bodies, I believed the narrative was entirely established for Botticelli. The *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera* stand out in the mind’s eye as emblems of ‘mainstream’ Botticelli because as a society we value those images and the discourse that surround these emblematic paintings today. The two iconic paintings that make their way onto cosmetic bags and hard-case luggage in airports, where tourists wander around aimlessly waiting for their flights, is not the Botticelli deep within the artist of this time. Instead research and

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<sup>236</sup> The Boston Globe, “Exhibition: Botticelli and the Search for the Divine,” Museum of Fine Arts Boston, <https://www.mfa.org/exhibitions/botticelli-and-the-search-for-the-divine>.

deeper excavation of his intent is revealed to a greater extent by looking into his process as a broadly successful Renaissance artist during his time. It is not simply that his work was beautiful, or that he was centered in a time of artistic change, or that he lived in a period where patronage was commonplace, but it was also important to know who he was, how he changed, and to deeply look at the work that demonstrated these possibilities. Botticelli was initially planted within the confines of history that scholars anchored him in. Although an artist is not working with the intent of being analyzed by Art Historians, there is a blending somehow in the afterglow of a period with such dynamic attention as the Italian Renaissance, so that how we perceive the artist's life and work is bound by its history. Botticelli allowed himself to work within both the beauty and the turmoil of his time. He fiddles with the mixture that makes up the Renaissance and near the end of his life he creates a piece that epitomizes that of the Renaissance, the *Mystical Nativity*. Botticelli constructs within this infamous piece: Neoplatonic dialogue, Savonarola preachings, the grace of classical antiquity, the dance of pagan decent, and angels who lift up the heavenly space. These constructs both hold Botticelli in place, and lift him to his own nuance which is revealed in his growth from *The Coronation of the Virgin* to the *Mystical Nativity*.

Delving into Botticelli's shifting identity, we can appreciate what makes an analysis of art and its artists so compelling. A combination of both looking to the art itself while also drawing upon Botticelli's life and experiences expands the view of what is seen. Just as the spaces and rhythms the angels establish composition in Botticelli's versions of heaven, so do we visually gather information of the undercurrent in this visual narrative. The beauty of history is that there will most likely never be a document regarding the patron for Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity*. What is lost may never be found. Therefore it is the job of the historian to place their

own characterization of the work and the artist's life, and to try and piece together the narrative based on writing and history that does exist.

Focusing on Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity* as a source for modern discussion, if we assume it is patronless, as discussed earlier, we can then assert that it exists within itself as a blooming of complex thought. It pulls the viewer to witness a refreshing twist of the angelic dance, shaping space in the light of the heavens above while commanding us to reevaluate the artists ownership of his ideas. Botticelli's body of art entices the viewer to reflect on the works' beauty and depth. Botticelli's two paintings framed in this thesis look at an artist in flux, an artist firmly seeded in one of the most influential artistic periods of the millennia.

Figures



Fig.1 Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, c. 1478, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 2 Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, c. 1482, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 3 Sandro Botticelli, *Mystical Nativity*, c. 1500-1501, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 4 Sandro Botticelli, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1488-1490, <https://www.wga.hu/>



Fig. 5 Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1435, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 6 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, c. 1498-1500, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 7 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Sistine Chapel: Cumaean Sibyl*, c. 1508-1512, <http://library.artstor.org>.



Fig. 8 Donatello, *David*, c. 1430-1432, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 9 Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1435, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 10 Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1435, <http://library.artstor.org>

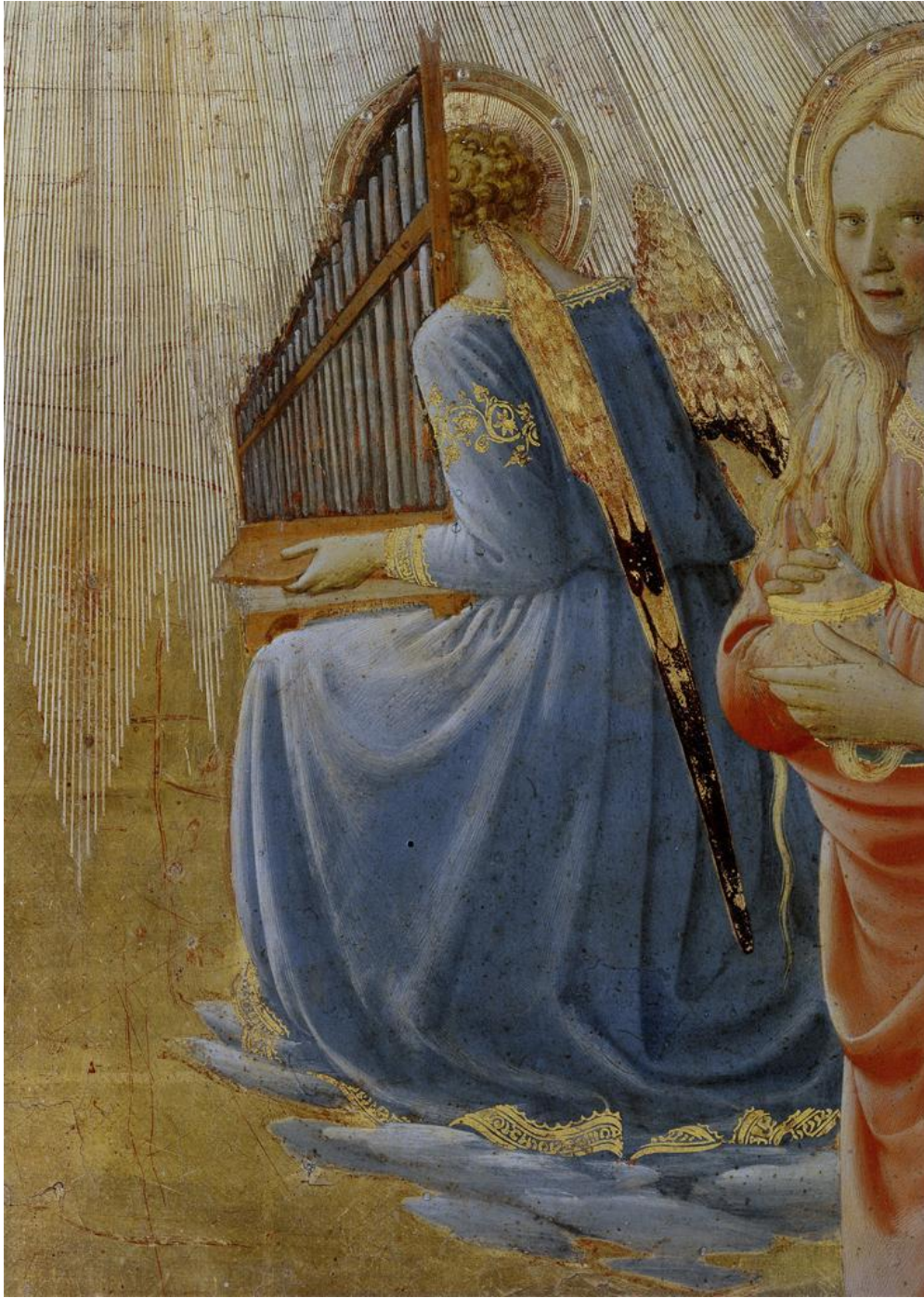


Fig. 11 Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1435, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 12 Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1435, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 13 Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1435, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 14 Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1435, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 15 Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna of the Magnificat*, c. 1483, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 16 Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna of the Magnificat*, c. 1483, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 17 Sandro Botticelli, *Virgin and Child with Two Angels*, c. 1485-1495,  
<https://www.artic.edu/>



Fig. 18 Sandro Botticelli, *The Nativity*, c. 1475, <http://library.artstor.org>



Fig. 19 Sandro Botticelli, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1488-1490, <https://www.wga.hu/>



Fig. 20 Sandro Botticelli, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1488-1490,  
<https://www.bridgemanimages.com>



Fig. 21 Sandro Botticelli, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1488-1490, <https://www.wga.hu/>



Fig. 22 Sandro Botticelli, *Mystical Nativity*, c. 1500, <https://www.wga.hu/>



Fig. 23 Sandro Botticelli, *Mystical Nativity*, c. 1500, <https://www.wga.hu/>



Fig. 24 Sandro Botticelli, *Mystical Nativity*, c. 1500, <https://www.wga.hu/>

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