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TRADITION AND INNOVATION: I

The later fifteenth century in Italy

The new discoveries which had been made by the artists of Italy and Flanders at the beginning of the fifteenth century created a stir all over Europe. Painters and patrons alike were fascinated by the idea that art could not only be used to tell the sacred story in a moving way, but might serve to mirror a fragment of the real world. Perhaps the most immediate result of this great revolution in art was that artists everywhere began to experiment and to search for new and startling effects. This spirit of adventure which took hold of art in the fifteenth century marks the real break with the Middle Ages.

There is one effect of this break which we must consider first. Until about 1400, art in different parts of Europe had developed on similar lines. We remember that the style of the Gothic painters and sculptors of that period is known as the International style, *page 215*, because the aims of the leading masters in France and Italy, in Germany and Burgundy, were all very similar. Of course, national differences had existed all through the Middle Ages – we remember the differences between France and Italy during the thirteenth century – but on the whole these were not very important. This applies not to the field of art alone, but also to the world of learning and even to politics. The learned men of the Middle Ages all spoke and wrote Latin and did not much mind whether they taught at the University of Paris, Padua or Oxford.

The noblemen of the period shared the ideas of chivalry; their loyalty to their king or their feudal overlord did not imply that they considered themselves the champions of any particular people or nation. All this had gradually changed towards the end of the Middle Ages, when the cities with their burghers and merchants became increasingly more important than the castles of the barons. The merchants spoke their native tongue and stood together against any foreign competitor or intruder. Each city was proud and jealous of its own position and privileges in trade and industry. In the Middle Ages a good master might travel from building site to building site, he might be recommended from one monastery to another, and few would trouble to ask what his nationality was. But as soon as the cities gained in importance, artists, like all artisans and

craftsmen, were organized into guilds. These guilds were in many respects similar to our trade unions. It was their task to watch over the rights and privileges of their members and to ensure a safe market for their produce. To be admitted into the guild the artist had to show that he was able to reach certain standards, that he was, in fact, a master of his craft. He was then allowed to open a workshop, to employ apprentices, and to accept commissions for altar-paintings, portraits, painted chests, banners and coats of arms, or any other work of the kind.

The guilds and corporations were usually wealthy companies who had a say in the government of the city and who not only helped to make it prosperous, but also did their best to make it beautiful. In Florence and elsewhere the guilds, the goldsmiths, the wool-workers, the armourers and others, devoted part of their funds to the foundation of churches, the building of guild halls and the dedication of altars and chapels. In this respect they did much for art. On the other hand they watched anxiously over the interests of their own members, and therefore made it difficult for any foreign artist to get employment or to settle among them. Only the most famous of artists sometimes managed to break down this resistance and to travel as freely as had been possible at the period when the great cathedrals were being built.

All this has a bearing on the history of art, because, thanks to the growth of the cities, the International style was perhaps the last international style Europe has seen – at least until the twentieth century. In the fifteenth century art broke up into a number of different 'schools' – nearly every city or small town in Italy, Flanders and Germany had its own 'school of painting'. 'School' is rather a misleading word. In those days there were no art schools where young students attended classes. If a boy decided that he would like to become a painter, his father apprenticed him at an early age to one of the leading masters of the town. He usually lived in, ran errands for the master's family, and had to make himself useful in every possible way. One of his first tasks might be to grind the colours, or to assist in the preparation of the wooden panels or the canvas which the master wanted to use. Gradually he might be given some minor piece of work like the painting of a flagstaff. Then, one day when the master was busy, he might ask the apprentice to help with the completion of some unimportant or inconspicuous part of a major work – to paint the background which the master had traced out on the canvas, to finish the costumes of the bystanders in a scene. If he showed talent and knew how to imitate his master's manner to perfection, the youth would gradually be given more important things to do – perhaps paint a whole picture from the master's sketch and under his supervision. These, then, were the 'schools of painting' of the fifteenth century. They were indeed excellent schools and

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Leon Battista Alberti
Church of S. Andrea, Mantua, c. 1460
A Renaissance church

there are many painters nowadays who wish they had received so thorough a training. The manner in which the masters of a town handed down their skill and experience to the young generation also explains why the 'school of painting' in these towns developed such a clear individuality of its own. One can recognize whether a fifteenth-century picture comes from Florence or Siena, Dijon or Bruges, Cologne or Vienna.

To gain a vantage point from which we can survey this immense variety of masters, 'schools' and experiments, we had best return to Florence, where the great revolution in art had begun. It is fascinating to watch how the generation which followed Brunelleschi, Donatello and Masaccio tried to make use of their discoveries and apply them to all the tasks with which they were confronted. That was not always easy. The main tasks which the patrons commissioned had, after all, remained fundamentally unchanged since the earlier period. The new and revolutionary methods sometimes seemed to clash with the traditional commissions. Take the case of architecture: Brunelleschi's idea had been to introduce the forms of classical buildings, the columns, pediments and cornices which he had copied from Roman ruins. He had used these forms in his churches. His successors were eager to emulate him in this. *Figure 162* shows a church planned by the Florentine architect Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), who conceived its façade as a gigantic triumphal arch in the Roman manner, *page 119, figure 74*. But how was this new programme to be applied to an ordinary dwelling-house in a city street? Traditional houses and palaces could not be built in the manner of temples. No private houses had survived from Roman times, and even if they had, needs and customs had changed so much that they might have offered little guidance. The problem, then, was to find a compromise between the traditional house, with walls and windows, and the classical forms which Brunelleschi had taught the architects to use. It was again Alberti who found the

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Leon Battista Alberti
Palazzo Rucellai, Florence, c. 1460

solution that remained influential up to our own days. When he built a palace for the rich Florentine merchant family of Rucellai, *figure 163*, he designed an ordinary three-storeyed building. There is little similarity between this façade and any classical ruin. And yet Alberti stuck to Brunelleschi's programme and used classical forms for the decoration of the façade. Instead of building columns or half-columns, he covered the house with a network of flat pilasters and entablatures which suggested a classical order without changing the structure of the building. It is easy to see where Alberti had learned this principle. We remember the Roman Colosseum, *page 118, figure 73*, in which various Greek 'orders' were applied to the various storeys. Here, too, the lowest storey is an adaptation of the Doric order, and here, too, there are arches between the pilasters. But though Alberti had thus given the old city palace a modern look by reverting to Roman forms he did not quite break with Gothic traditions. We need only compare the palace windows with those on the façade of Notre-Dame in Paris, *page 189, figure 125*, to discover an unexpected similarity. Alberti has merely 'translated' a Gothic design into classical forms by smoothing out the 'barbaric' pointed arch and using the elements of the classical order in a traditional context.

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Lorenzo Ghiberti
The Baptism of Christ, 1427

Gilt bronze, 60 × 60 cm, 23⅝ × 23⅝ in; relief on the font of the Baptistery, Siena Cathedral

This achievement of Alberti is typical. Painters and sculptors in fifteenth-century Florence also often found themselves in a situation in which they had to adapt the new programme to an old tradition. The mixture between new and old, between Gothic traditions and modern forms, is characteristic of many masters in the middle of the century.

The greatest of these Florentine masters who succeeded in reconciling the new achievements with the old tradition was a sculptor of Donatello's generation, Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378–1455). *Figure 164* shows one of his reliefs for the same font in Siena for which Donatello made the 'Dance of Salome', *page 232, figure 152*. Of Donatello's work we could say that everything was new; Ghiberti's looks much less startling at first sight. We notice that the arrangement of the scene is not so very different from the one used by the famous brassfounder of Liège in the twelfth century, *page 179, figure 118*: Christ in the centre, flanked by St John the Baptist and the ministering angels with God the Father and the Dove appearing up in Heaven. Even in the treatment of details Ghiberti's work recalls that of his medieval forerunners – the loving care with which he arranges the folds of the drapery may remind us of such fourteenth-century

goldsmith's work as the Holy Virgin on *page 210, figure 139*. And yet Ghiberti's relief is in its own way as vigorous and as convincing as Donatello's companion piece. He, too, has learned to characterize each figure and to make us understand the part each plays: the beauty and humility of Christ, the Lamb of God; the solemn and energetic gesture of St John, the emaciated prophet from the wilderness; and the heavenly host of angels who silently look at each other in joy and wonder. And while Donatello's new dramatic way of representing the sacred scene somewhat upset the clear arrangement which had been the pride of earlier days, Ghiberti took care to remain lucid and restrained. He does not give us the idea of real space at which Donatello was aiming. He prefers to give us only a hint of depth and to let his principal figures stand out clearly against a neutral background.

Just as Ghiberti remained faithful to some of the ideas of Gothic art, without refusing to make use of the new discoveries of his century, the great painter Fra Angelico (brother Angelico) of Fiesole near Florence (1387–1455) applied the new methods of Masaccio mainly in order to express the traditional ideas of religious art. Fra Angelico was a friar of the Dominican order, and the frescoes he painted in his Florentine monastery of San Marco round about 1440 are among his most beautiful works. He painted a sacred scene in each monk's cell and at the end of every corridor, and as one walks from one to the other in the stillness of the old building one feels something of the spirit in which these works were conceived. *Figure 165* shows a picture of the Annunciation which he painted in one of the cells. We see at once that the art of perspective presented no difficulty to him. The cloister where the Virgin kneels is represented as convincingly as the vault in Masaccio's famous fresco, *page 228, figure 149*. Yet it was clearly not Fra Angelico's main intention to 'break a hole into the wall'. Like Simone Martini in the fourteenth century, *page 213, figure 141*, he only wanted to represent the sacred story in all its beauty and simplicity. There is hardly any movement in Fra Angelico's painting and hardly any suggestion of real solid bodies. But I think it is all the more moving because of its humility, which is that of a great artist who deliberately renounced any display of modernity despite his profound understanding of the problems which Brunelleschi and Masaccio had introduced into art.

We can study the fascination of these problems and also their difficulty in the work of another Florentine, the painter Paolo Uccello (1397–1475), among whose best-preserved works is the

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Fra Angelico
The Annunciation,
c. 1440
Fresco, 187 × 157 cm, 73¾ × 62 in; Museo di San Marco, Florence

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Paolo Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano*, *c.* 1450

Probably from a room in the Palazzo Medici, Florence; oil on wood, 181.6 × 320 cm, 71½ × 126 in; National Gallery, London

battle scene in the National Gallery, *figure 166*. The picture was probably intended to be placed above the wainscoting (panelling covering the lower part of the wall) of a room in the Palazzo Medici, the city palace of the most powerful and wealthy of the Florentine merchant families. It represents an episode from Florentine history, still topical when the picture was painted, the rout of San Romano in 1432, when Florentine troops defeated their enemies in one of the many battles between the Italian factions. Superficially the picture may look medieval enough. These knights in armour with their long and heavy lances, riding as if to a tournament, may remind us of a medieval romance of chivalry; nor does the way in which the scene is represented strike us at first as very modern. Both horses and men look a little wooden, almost like toys, and the whole gay picture seems very remote from the reality of war. But if we ask ourselves why it is that these horses look somewhat like rocking-horses and the whole scene reminds us a little of a puppet-show, we shall make a curious discovery. It is precisely because the painter was so fascinated by the new possibilities of his art that he did everything to make his figures stand out in space as if they were carved and not painted. It was said of Uccello that the discovery of perspective had so impressed him that he spent nights and days drawing objects in foreshortening, and setting

himself ever new problems. His fellow artists used to tell that he was so engrossed in these studies that he would hardly look up when his wife called him to go to bed, and would exclaim: 'What a sweet thing perspective is!' We can see something of this fascination in the painting. Uccello obviously took great pains to represent the various pieces of armour which litter the ground in correct foreshortening. His greatest pride was probably the figure of the fallen warrior lying on the ground, the foreshortened representation of which must have been most difficult, *figure 167*. No such figure had been painted before and, though it looks rather too small in relation to the other figures, we can imagine what a stir it must have caused. We find traces all over the picture of the interest which Uccello took in perspective and of the spell it exerted over his mind. Even the broken lances lying on the ground are so arranged that they point towards their common 'vanishing point'. It is this neat mathematical arrangement which is partly responsible for the artificial appearance of the stage on which the battle seems to take place. If we turn back from this pageant of chivalry to Van Eyck's picture of knights, *page 238, figure 157*, and the Limbourg miniature, *page 219, figure 144*, with which we compared it, we may see more clearly what Uccello owed to the Gothic tradition,

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Detail of figure 166

and how he transformed it. Van Eyck, in the north, had changed the forms of the International style by adding more and more details from observation and trying to copy the surfaces of things down to the minutest shade. Uccello rather chose the opposite approach. By means of his beloved art of perspective, he tried to construct a convincing stage on which his figures would appear solid and real. Solid they undoubtedly look, but the effect is a little reminiscent of the stereoscopic pictures which one looks at through a pair of lenses. Uccello had not yet learned how to use the effects of light and shade and air to mellow the harsh outlines of a strictly perspective rendering. But if we stand in front of the actual painting in the National Gallery, we do not feel that anything is amiss, for, despite his preoccupation with applied geometry, Uccello was a real artist.

While painters such as Fra Angelico could make use of the new without changing the spirit of the old, while Uccello in his turn was completely captivated by the problems of the new, less devout and less ambitious artists applied the new methods gaily without worrying overmuch about their difficulty. The public probably liked these masters who gave them the best of both worlds. Thus the commission for painting the walls of the private chapel in the city palace of the Medici went to Benozzo Gozzoli (*c.*1421–97), a pupil of Fra Angelico, but apparently a man of very different outlook. He covered the walls of the chapel with a picture of the cavalcade of the three Magi and made them travel in truly royal state through a smiling landscape, *figure 168*. The biblical episode gives him the opportunity of displaying beautiful finery and gorgeous costumes, a fairy world of charm and gaiety. We have seen how this taste for representing the pageantry of noble pastimes developed in Burgundy, *page 219, figure 144*, with which the Medici entertained close trade relations. Gozzoli seems intent upon showing that the new achievements can be used to make these gay pictures of contemporary life even more vivid and enjoyable. We have no reason to quarrel with him for that. The life of the period was indeed so picturesque and colourful that we must be grateful to those minor masters who preserved a record of these delights in their works, and no one who goes to Florence should miss the joy of a visit to this small chapel, in which something of the zest and savour of a festive life seems still to linger.

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Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem*, *c.* 1459–63

Detail of a fresco; chapel of the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, Florence

Meanwhile, other painters in the cities north and south of Florence had absorbed the message of the new art of Donatello and Masaccio, and were perhaps even more eager to profit by it than the Florentines themselves. There was Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506), who worked first in the famous university town of Padua, and then at the court of the lords of Mantua, both in northern Italy. In a Paduan church, quite

near the chapel where Giotto had painted his famous frescoes, Mantegna painted a series of wall-paintings illustrating the legend of St James. The church was heavily damaged by bombing during World War II, and most of these wonderful paintings by Mantegna were destroyed. It is a sad loss, because they were surely among the greatest works of art of all time. One of them, *figure 169*, showed St James being escorted to his place of execution. Like Giotto or Donatello, Mantegna tried to imagine quite clearly what the scene must have looked like in reality, but the standards of what he called reality had become much more exacting since Giotto's day. What had mattered to Giotto was the inner meaning of the story – how men and women would move and behave in a given situation. Mantegna was also interested in the outward circumstances. He knew that St James had lived in the period of the Roman Emperors, and he was anxious to reconstruct the scene just as it might have actually happened. He had made a special study of classical monuments for this purpose. The city gate through which St James has just been led is a Roman triumphal arch, and the soldiers of the escort all wear the dress and armour of Roman legionaries as we see them represented on authentic classical monuments. It is not only in these details of costume and ornament that the painting reminds us of ancient sculpture. The whole scene breathes the spirit of Roman art in its harsh simplicity and austere grandeur. The differences, indeed, between the Florentine frescoes of Benozzo Gozzoli and Mantegna's works which were painted approximately during the same years could hardly be more pronounced. In Gozzoli's gay pageantry we recognized a return to the taste of the International Gothic style. Mantegna, on the other hand, carries on where Masaccio had left off. His figures are as statuesque and impressive as Masaccio's. Like Masaccio, he uses the new art of perspective with eagerness, but he does not exploit it as Uccello did to show off the new effect which could be achieved by means of this magic. Mantegna rather uses perspective to create the stage on which his figures seem to stand and move like solid, tangible beings. He distributes them as a skilled theatrical producer might have done, so as to convey the significance of the moment and the course of the episode. We can see what is happening: the procession escorting St James has halted for a moment because one of the persecutors has repented and has thrown himself at the feet of the saint, to receive his blessing. The saint has turned round calmly to bless the man, while the Roman soldiers stand by and watch, one of them impassively, the other lifting his hand in an expressive gesture which seems to convey that he, too, is moved. The round of the arch frames this scene and separates it from the turmoil of the watching crowds pushed back by the guards.

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Andrea Mantegna
St James on the way to his execution, *c.* 1455
Fresco; destroyed; formerly church of the Eremitani, Padua

While Mantegna was thus applying the new methods of art in northern Italy, another great painter, Piero della Francesca (1416?–92), did the same in the region south of Florence, in the towns of Arezzo and Urbino. Like Gozzoli's and Mantegna's frescoes, Piero della Francesca's were painted shortly after the middle of the fifteenth century, that is about a generation after Masaccio. The episode in *figure 170* shows the famous legend of the dream which made the Emperor Constantine accept the Christian faith. Before a crucial battle with his rival, he dreamt that an angel showed him the Cross and said: 'Under this sign you will be victorious.' Piero's fresco represents the scene at night in the Emperor's camp before the battle. We look into the open tent, where the Emperor lies asleep on his camp bed. His bodyguard sits by his side, while two soldiers are also keeping guard. This quiet night scene is suddenly illuminated by a flash of light as an angel rushes down from Heaven holding the symbol of the Cross in his outstretched hand. As with Mantegna, we are somewhat reminded of a scene in a play. There is a stage quite clearly marked, and there is nothing to divert our attention from the essential action. Like Mantegna, Piero has taken pains over the dress of his Roman legionaries and, like him, he has avoided the gay and colourful details which Gozzoli crowded into his scenes. Piero, too, had mastered the art of perspective completely, and the way in which he shows the figure of the angel in foreshortening is so bold as to be almost confusing, especially in a small reproduction. But to these geometrical devices suggesting the space of the stage he has added a new one of equal importance: the treatment of light. Medieval artists had taken hardly any notice of light. Their flat figures cast no shadows. Masaccio had also been a pioneer in this respect – the round and solid figures of his paintings were forcefully modelled in light and shade, *page 228, figure 149*. But no one had seen the immense new possibilities of this means as clearly as Piero della Francesca. In this picture, light not only helps to model the forms of the figures, but is equal in importance to perspective in creating the illusion of depth. The soldier in front stands like a dark silhouette before the brightly lit opening of the tent. We thus feel the distance which separates the soldiers from the steps on which the bodyguard is sitting, whose figure, in turn, stands out in the flash of light that emanates from the angel. We are made to feel the roundness of the tent, and the hollow it encloses, just as much by means of this light as by foreshortening and perspective. But Piero lets light and shade perform an even greater miracle. They help him to create the mysterious atmosphere of the scene in the depth of night when the Emperor had a vision which was to change the course of history. This impressive simplicity and calm make Piero perhaps the greatest heir to Masaccio.

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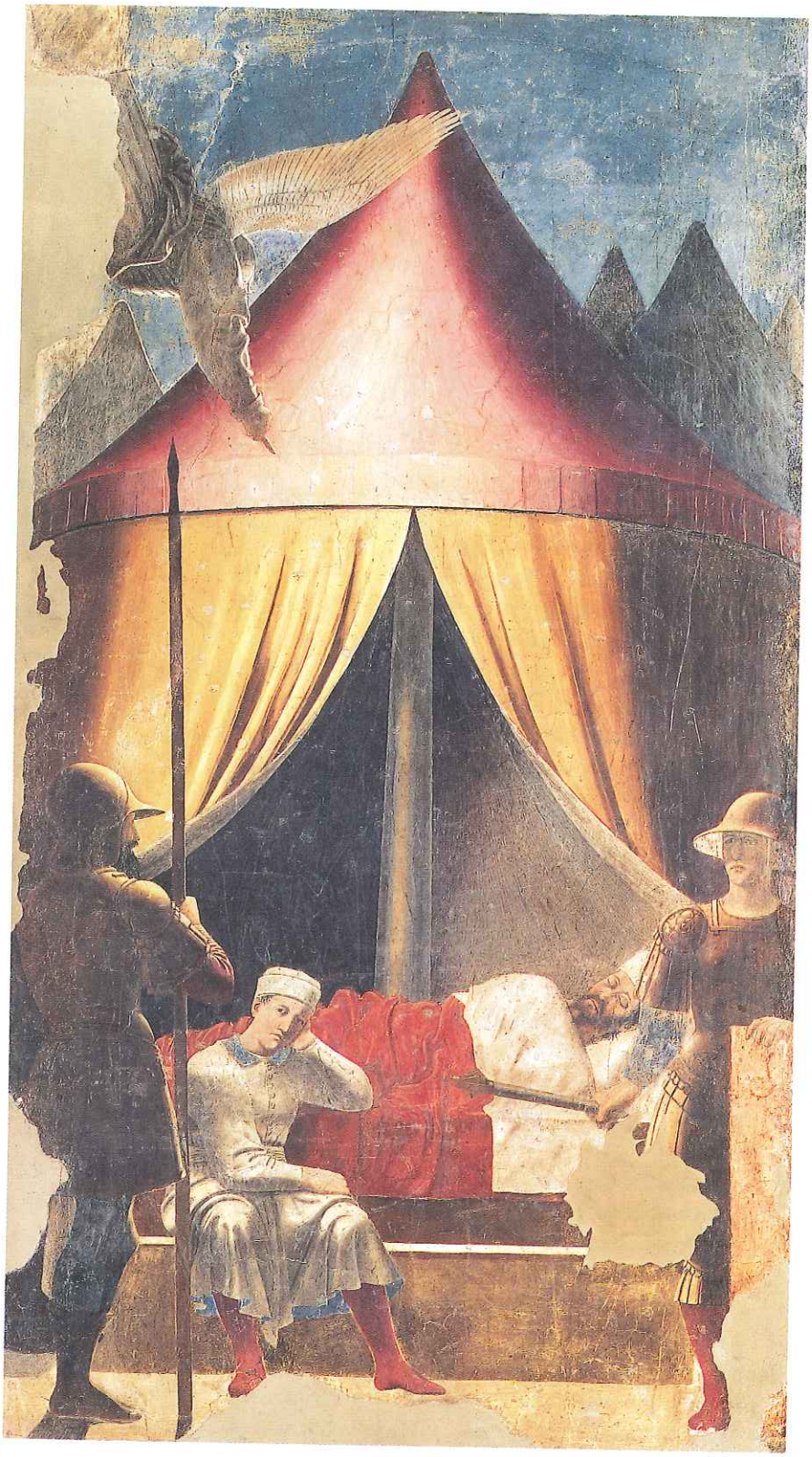
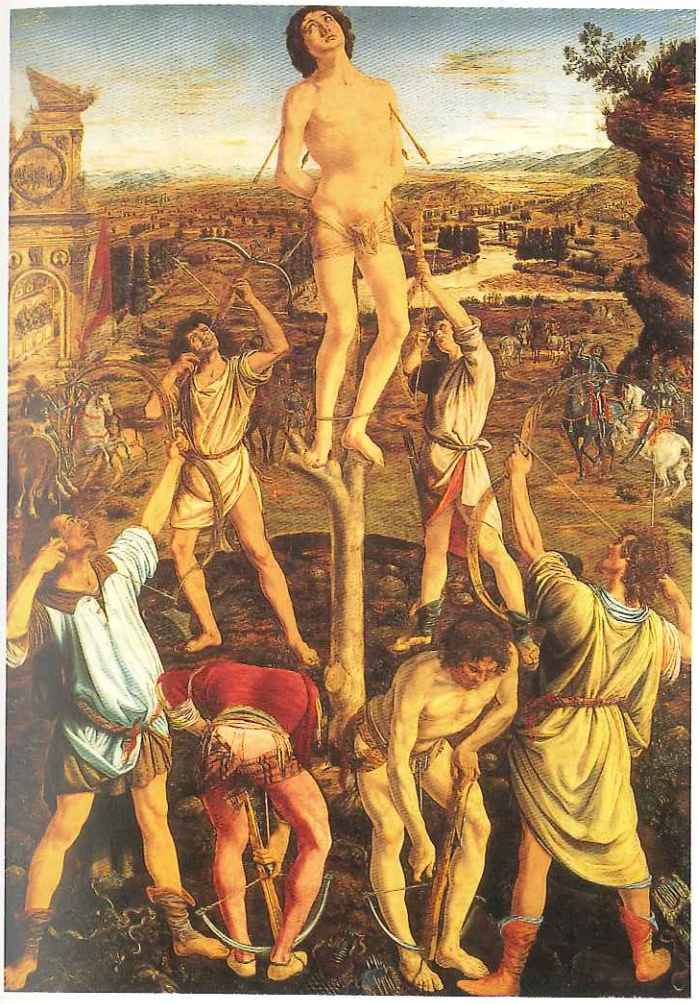
Piero della Francesca
Constantine's dream, c. 1460
Detail of a fresco; church of S. Francesco, Arezzo



While these and other artists were applying the inventions of the great generation of Florentine masters, artists in Florence became increasingly aware of the new problems that these inventions had created. In the first flush of triumph, they may have thought that the discovery of perspective and the study of nature could solve all their difficulties. But we must not forget that art is altogether different from science. The artist's means, his technical devices, can be developed, but art itself can hardly be said to progress in the way in which science progresses. Each discovery in one direction creates a new difficulty somewhere else. We remember that medieval painters were unaware of the rules of correct draughtsmanship, but that this very shortcoming enabled them to distribute their figures over the picture in any way they liked in order to create the perfect pattern. The twelfth-century illustrated calendar, *page 181, figure 120*, or the thirteenth-century relief of the 'Death of the Virgin', *page 193, figure 129*, are examples of this skill. Even fourteenth-century painters like Simone Martini, *page 213, figure 141*, were still able to arrange their figures so that they formed a lucid design on the ground of gold. As soon as the new concept of making the picture a mirror of reality was adopted, this question of how to arrange the figures was no longer so easy to solve. In reality figures do not group themselves harmoniously, nor do they stand out clearly against a neutral background. In other words, there was a danger that the new power of the artist would ruin his most precious gift of creating a pleasing and satisfying whole. The problem was particularly serious where big altar-paintings and similar tasks confronted the artist. These paintings had to be seen from afar and had to fit into the architectural framework of the whole church. Moreover, they had to present the sacred story to the worshippers in a clear and impressive outline. *Figure 171* shows the way in which a Florentine artist of the second half of the fifteenth century, Antonio Pollaiuolo (1432?–98), tried to solve this new problem of making a picture both accurate in draughtsmanship and harmonious in composition. It is one of the first attempts of its kind to solve this question, not by tact and instinct alone, but by the application of definite rules. It may not be an altogether successful attempt, nor is it a very attractive picture, but it clearly shows how deliberately the Florentine artists set about it. The picture represents the martyrdom of St Sebastian, who is tied to a stake while six executioners are grouped around him. This group forms a very regular pattern in the form of a steep triangle. Each executioner on one side is matched by a similar figure on the other side.

The arrangement, in fact, is so clear and symmetrical as to be almost too rigid. The painter was obviously aware of this drawback and tried to



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Antonio Pollaiuolo
The martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, c. 1475

Altar-painting; oil on wood, 291.5 × 202.6 cm, 114¾ × 79¾ in; National Gallery, London

introduce some variety. One of the executioners bending down to adjust his crossbow is seen from the front, the corresponding figure from behind, and the same with the shooting figures. In this simple way, the painter has endeavoured to relieve the rigid symmetry of the composition and to introduce a sense of movement and counter-movement very much as in a piece of music. In Pollaiuolo's picture this device is still used rather self-consciously and his composition looks somewhat like an exercise. We can imagine that he used the same model, seen from different sides, for the corresponding figures, and we feel that his pride in his mastery of muscles and movements has almost made him forget the true subject of his picture. Moreover, Pollaiuolo was not wholly successful in what he set out to do. It is true that he applied the new art of perspective to a wonderful vista of the Tuscan landscape in the background, but the main theme and the background do not really blend. There is no path from the hill in the foreground on which the martyrdom is enacted to the scenery behind. One almost wonders whether Pollaiuolo would not have done better to place his composition against something like a neutral or golden background, but one soon realizes that this expedient was barred to him. Such vigorous and lifelike figures would look out of place on a golden background. Once art had chosen the path of vying with nature, there was no turning back. Pollaiuolo's picture shows the kind of problem that artists of the fifteenth century must have discussed in their studios. It was by finding a solution to this problem that Italian art reached its greatest heights a generation later.

Among the Florentine artists of the second half of the fifteenth century who strove for a solution to this question was the painter Sandro Botticelli (1446–1510). One of his most famous pictures represents not a Christian legend but a classical myth – the birth of Venus, *figure 172*. The classical poets had been known all through the Middle Ages, but only at the time of the Renaissance, when the Italians tried so passionately to recapture the former glory of Rome, did the classical myths become popular among educated laymen. To these men, the mythology of the admired Greeks and Romans represented something more than gay and pretty fairy-tales. They were so convinced of the superior wisdom of the ancients that they believed these classical legends must contain some profound and mysterious truth. The patron who commissioned the Botticelli painting for his country villa was a member of the rich and powerful family of the Medici. Either he himself, or one of his learned friends, probably explained to the painter what was known of the way the ancients had represented Venus rising from the sea. To these scholars the story of her birth was the symbol of mystery through which the divine message of beauty came into the world. One can imagine that the painter set to work reverently to represent this myth in a worthy manner. The action of the picture is quickly understood. Venus has emerged from the sea on a shell which is driven to the shore by flying wind-gods amidst a shower of roses. As she is about to step on to the land, one of the Hours or Nymphs receives her with a purple cloak. Botticelli has succeeded where Pollaiuolo failed. His picture forms, in fact, a perfectly harmonious pattern. But Pollaiuolo might have said that Botticelli had done so by sacrificing some of the achievements he had tried so hard to preserve. Botticelli's figures look less solid. They are not so correctly drawn as Pollaiuolo's or Masaccio's. The graceful movements and melodious lines of his composition recall the Gothic tradition of Ghiberti and Fra Angelico, perhaps even the art of the fourteenth century – works such as Simone Martini's 'Annunciation' *page 213, figure 141*, or the French goldsmith's work, *page 210, figure 139*, in which we remarked on the gentle sway of the body and the exquisite fall of the drapery. Botticelli's Venus is so beautiful that we do not notice the unnatural length of her neck, the steep fall of her shoulders and the queer way her left arm is hinged to the body. Or, rather, we should say that these liberties which Botticelli took with nature in order to achieve a graceful outline add to the beauty and harmony of the design because they enhance the impression of an infinitely tender and delicate being, wafted to our shores as a gift from Heaven.

The rich merchant who commissioned this picture from Botticelli, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, was also the employer of a Florentine

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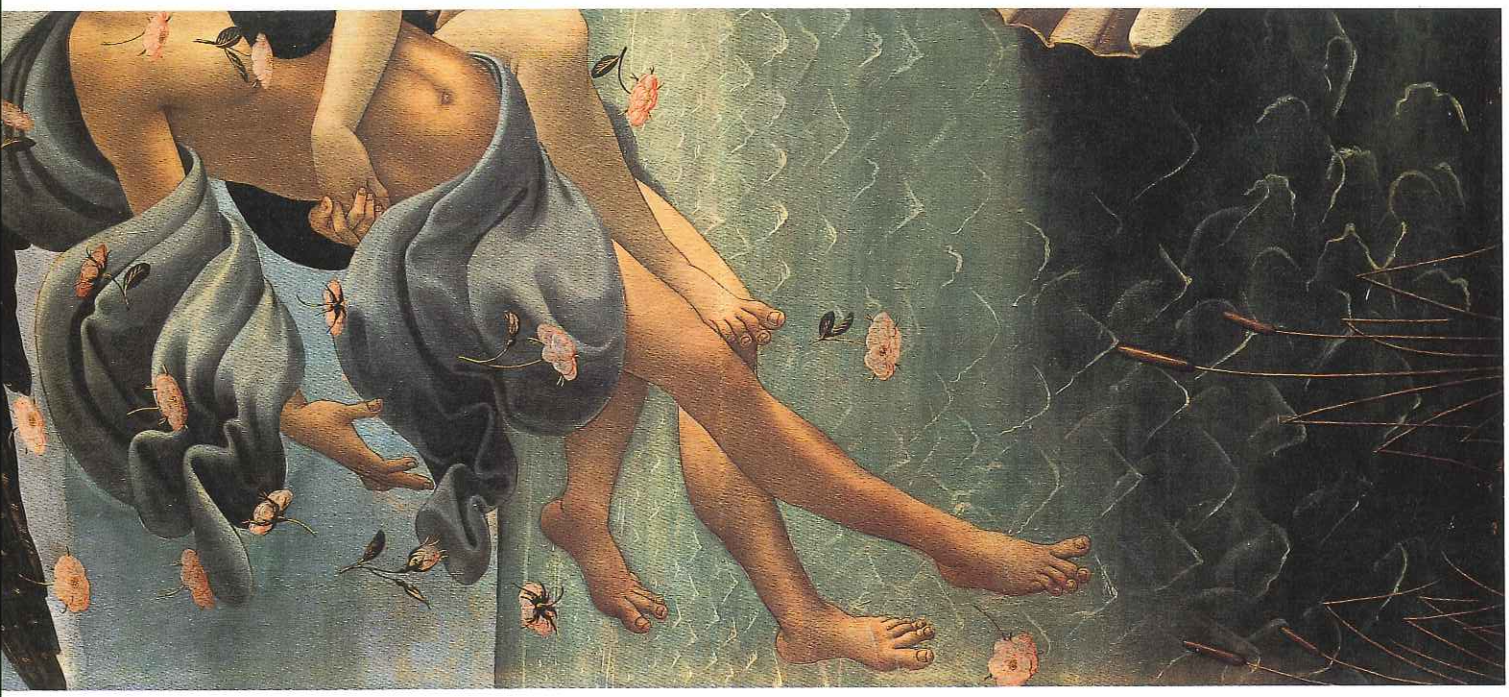
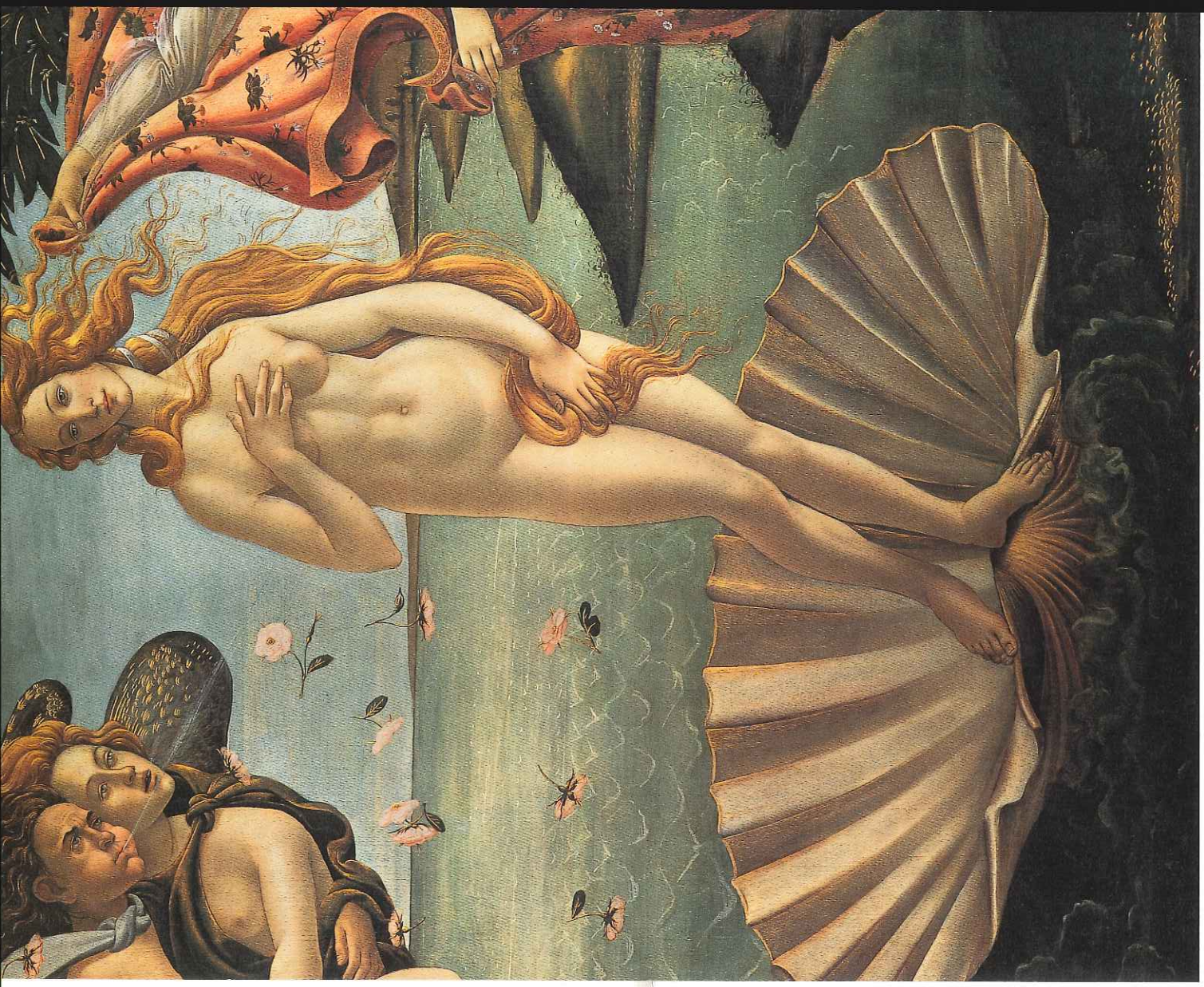
Sandro Botticelli
The birth of Venus,
c. 1485

Tempera on canvas, 172.5 × 278.5 cm, 67¾ × 109⅝ in; Uffizi, Florence





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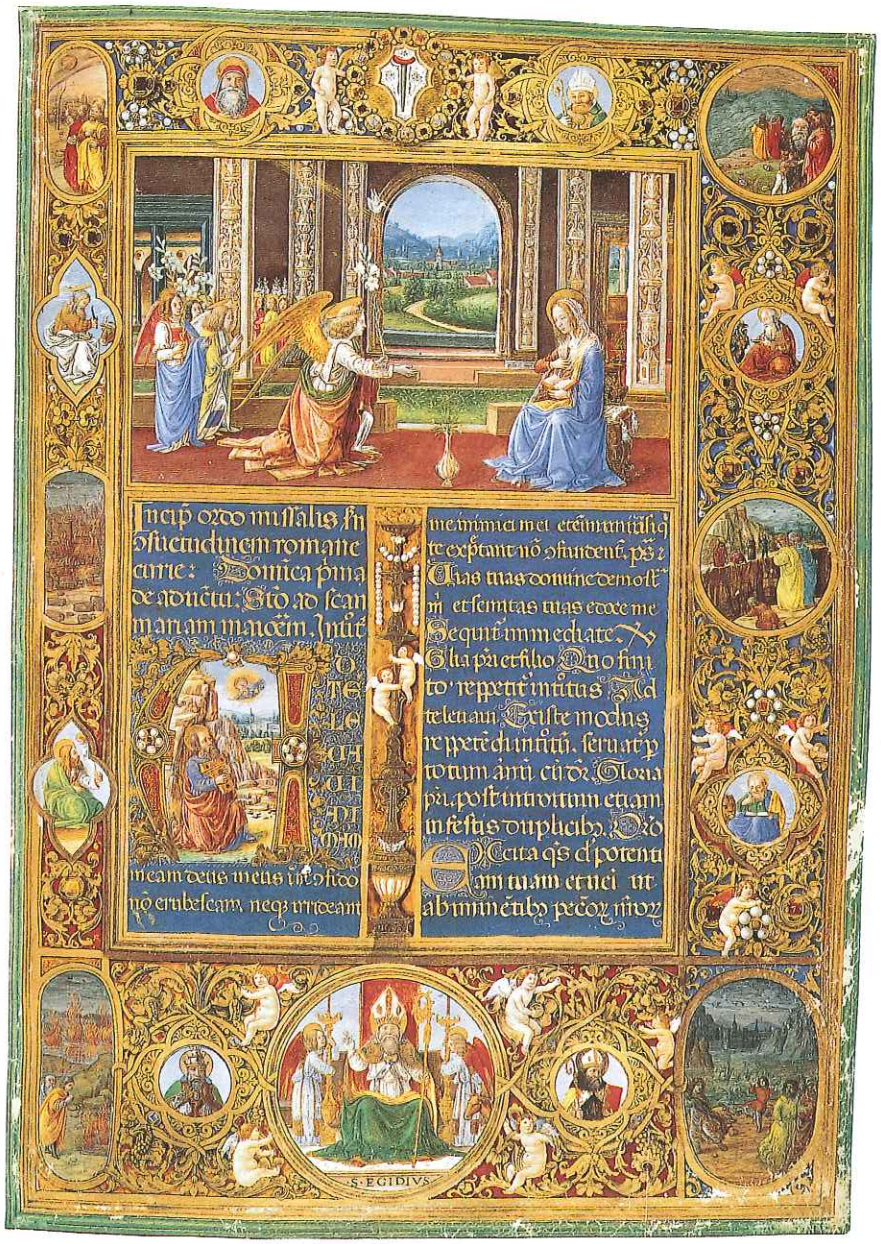
e gentle sway of the body and the exquisite
flow is so beautiful that we do not
ow, the steep fall of her shoulders
ge to the body. Or, rather, we
w Botticelli took with nature in order
ve the beauty and harmony of the design
ppearance of an infinitely tender and delicate
ve a gift from Heaven.
ecovered this picture from Botticelli,
Medici, was also the employer of a Florentine

172

Sandro Botticelli
The birth of Venus,
c. 1485

Tempera on canvas, 172.5 × 278.5 cm, 67⅞ × 109⅝ in; Uffizi, Florence



173

Gherardo di Giovanni
The Annunciation and scenes from Dante's 'Divine Comedy', c. 1474–6

Page from a Missal; Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence

who was destined to give his name to a continent. It was in the service of his firm that Amerigo Vespucci sailed to the New World. We have reached the period which later historians selected as the 'official' end of the Middle Ages. We remember that in Italian art there were various turning-points that might be described as the beginning of a new age – the discoveries of Giotto round about 1300, those of Brunelleschi round about 1400. But even more important, perhaps, than these revolutions in method was a gradual change that had come over art in the course of these two centuries. It is a change that is more easily sensed than described. A comparison of the medieval book illuminations discussed in the preceding chapters, *page 195, figure 131* and *page 211, figure 140*, with a Florentine specimen of that art made about 1475, *figure 173*, might give an idea of the different spirit in which the same art can be employed. It is not that the Florentine master lacked reverence or devotion. But the very powers his art had gained made it impossible for him to think of it only as a means of conveying the meaning of the sacred story. Rather did he want to use this power to turn the page into a gay display of wealth and luxury. This function of art, to add to the beauty and graces of life, had never been entirely forgotten. In the period we call the Italian Renaissance it came increasingly to the fore.

Fresco painting and colour grinding, c. 1465

From a Florentine print showing the occupations of people born under Mercury