

Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur*: Artistic and Metaphysical Conceits*

Liana De Girolami Cheney
University of Aldo Moro, Bari, Italy

For Daniele De Girolami, MD and Riccardo De Girolami, MD

Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur* of 1482-1483, along with his other mythological paintings, the *Primavera*, the *Birth of Venus*, and *Mars and Venus*, remains an iconographical mystery. As such, it is particularly interesting to analyze them. Now at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence and National Gallery in London, these paintings, executed between 1480 and 1490, were commissioned with specific aesthetic and intellectual aims and were intended to be hung in private rooms for personal viewing. Botticelli's mythological paintings reflect the Renaissance humanistic body of thought: the study of antiquity and Neoplatonic philosophy. This essay focuses on one aspect: an interpretation of the influence of antiquity and humanism in Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur*, a conflation of *Minerva pacifica* and *Minerva pudica*.

Keywords: antiquity, humanism, Neoplatonism, mythology, Pallas, Minerva, centaur, Camilla, Botticelli, Medici, conceits, iconography, symbolism, *impresa*

Introduction

For Renaissance humanists, the notion of a “rebirth” meant the recreation of myths and scenes from antiquity. Renaissance humanists, such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Dante believed that their culture was something quite separate from the civilization of Rome as well as to the intermediary centuries succeeding it. Even so, their new age, the 14th century, was partly a recovery of the great classical civilization from the Dark Ages. By the 15th century, literati, artists, and patrons became confident that their period was an Age of Rebirth, as postulated by the Florentine artist, art historian, and writer, Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), in his *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, first published in 1550 and enlarged in the second edition of 1568 (Vasari, 1568/1991; 1550-1568/1986).

However, Vasari knew that a rebirth in art had not occurred simply because artists suddenly began to copy the best classical art of antiquity. He posited that, for some mysterious reason, artists had begun to try to present objects and figures realistically and that they coincidentally had also found this phenomenon occurring in fragments of the antique sculpture they knew. The observation of the art of antiquity guided these artists to

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Liana De Girolami Cheney, Ph.D., Independent Scholar, Visiting Scholar in Art History, University of Aldo Moro, Bari, Italy.

study nature. For Vasari, artists were striving to emulate nature, not classical antiquity. So, when Vasari said that Botticelli perfected nature; he was really pointing out the surprising fact that the rebirth appeared to have occurred because artists had turned to the real world of nature.

In his *Vite*, Vasari highly praised Botticelli for his art. He notes: “Sandro’s drawings were extraordinarily good, and so many, that for some time after his death all the craftsmen strove to obtain some of them; and we have some in our book, made with great mastery and judgment” (Vasari, 1568/1991; 1550-1568/1986, p. 494).

The present study analyzes Botticelli’s interpretation of rebirth in one of his mythological paintings, *Minerva and the Centaur* of 1482-1483, now at the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence (see Figure 1), in which he combined “antiquity or classical rebirth” with artistic inventions of Florentine humanistic culture (Luchinat, 2001, p. 169; Legouix, 2004, p. 213).¹ The first part deals with a brief history of the commission and location of the painting; the second part focuses on the ancient sources; and the third part provides an iconographical interpretation.



Figure 1. Botticelli, *Minerva and the Centaur*, 1482-1483.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.

¹ Before the recent restoration, the painting was touched up during the eighteen and nineteen centuries, and again in 1952-1953 and 1977-1978.

Brief History of the Commission and Location

Botticelli never gave a title to this painting. Scholarship and inventories record other titles based on the various interpretations for the imagery, including *Camilla and the Centaur* in inventory 1498/1499, *Minerva and the Centaur* in inventory 1516, and in subsequent records, *Pallas and the Centaur*, *Pallas/Camilla and the Centaur*, and *Camilla/Minerva and the Centaur* (Lightbown, 1978; Frothingham, 1908; Luchinat, 2001; Nitti, 2003; Cecchi, 2005; Schumacher, 2010).² I will refer to the painting as *Minerva and the Centaur*, signifying *Minerva pacifica* and *Minerva pudica*.

This painting belongs to a group of mythological paintings executed between 1480 and 1490 that include the *Primavera*, the *Birth of Venus* (both now at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence, see Figures 2 and 3), and *Mars and Venus* (now at the National Gallery in London, see Figure 4). Most scholars agree that Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur* was commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici as a wedding gift in 1482 to his second cousin Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici on his marriage to Semiramide Appiani (Luchinat, 2001; Schumacher, 2010).



Figure 2. Botticelli, *Primavera*, 1480.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.

² Lightbown (1978, II, pp. 57-60); Frothingham (1908, pp. 438-444); Luchinat (2001, pp. 167-170), esp. 168 on the inventories; Nitti (2003, pp. 122-124); Cecchi (2005); and Schumacher (2010, pp. 214-220), and for an excellent bibliography on Botticelli. For recent exhibitions, see *Botticelli Reimagined*: Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, March 2016; and *Botticelli and the Search for the Divine*: Exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, July 2017. I was fortunate to visit this exhibit and see Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur* on the day of my birthday, April 24, with my two younger brothers, Riccardo De Girolami, MD, and Daniele De Girolami, MD; to them I dedicate this essay.

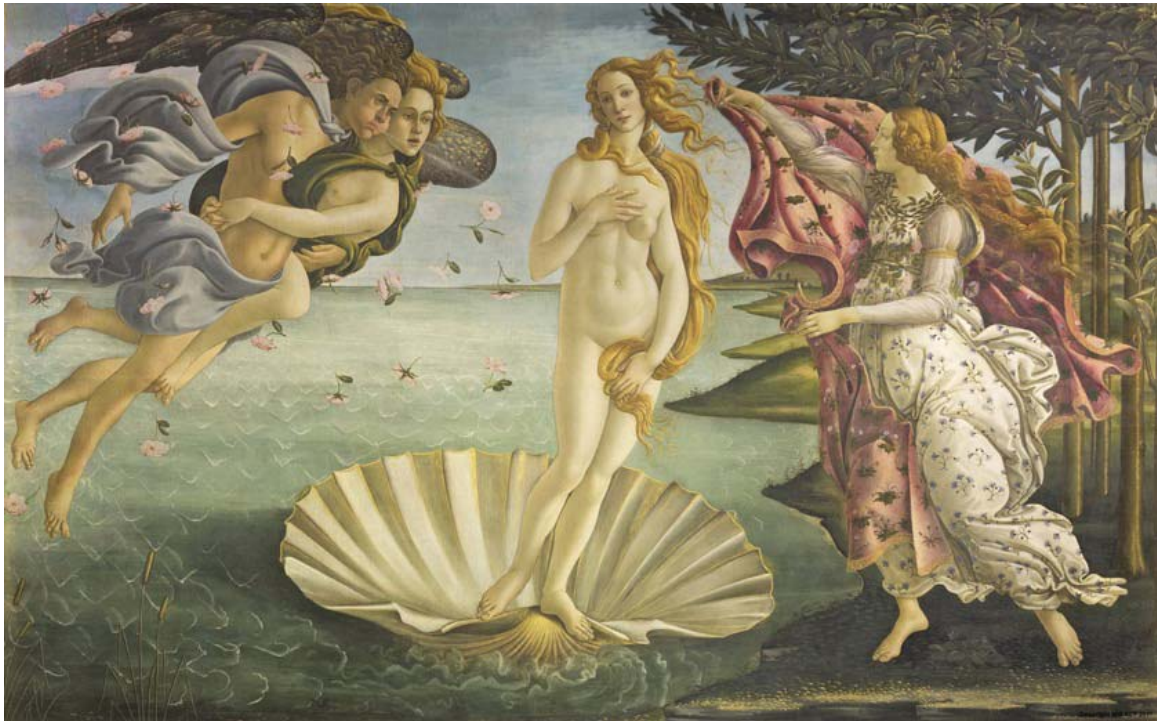


Figure 3. Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, 1485.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.



Figure 4. Botticelli, *Mars and Venus*, 1485-1490.

National Gallery, London.

Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.

According to inventory records dated 1495-1498/1499, 1503-1516, and 1598, the first place of residence for Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur* was in the Medici Palace in Via Larga (now Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Via Cavour). Around 1477, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco inherited the residence occupied by his second cousin, Lorenzo *il Magnifico*, who had move to a new residence at Villa del Castello. An inventory of 1498, discovered in 1975, Lightbown (1978, II, pp. 5, 59, 83-84; I, pp. 146-152), Luchinat (2001, p. 168), and Schumacher

(2010, p. 214)³ recorded the painting hanging

camera terena che è allato ala [alla] camera di Lorenzo... d'ové collocata sopra la porta che comincia con l'anticamera (ground floor room that is next to the Lorenzo's room... where it is located above the door that opens into the antichamber).

Due to the rectangular shape and large size of the painting, the inventory most likely suggests that the painting hung next to a doorway or in a chamber adjacent to Lorenzo's bedroom and "not hanging over (above) a doorway". Curiously, Botticelli's *Primavera* hanged over a daybed in Lorenzo's chamber (Schumacher, 2010). Bearing in mind that *Minerva and the Centaury* was a gift for the celebratory Medicean marriage and was placed near Botticelli's *Primavera*, the two paintings have been considered companion pieces in terms of their iconographical symbolism of marriage (Schumacher, 2010; Burroughs, 1997; 2012).

From its creation, the painting *Minerva and the Centaur* resided with the *Primavera*, first in Via Larga from 1482 to around 1598 and later in Villa del Castello, according to an inventory of 1598, but there at the Castello, they were joined by another beautiful painting of Botticelli, the *Birth of Venus*. In 1830, the three paintings were moved to the Galleria Palatina in the Palazzo Pitti, and finally in 1922, they were established together in the Galleria degli Uffizi (Lightbown, 1978; Luchinat, 2001; Nitti, 2003; Schumacher, 2010).

Botticelli and the Antique

Botticelli was inspired by the humanistic ideas generated in the intellectual circle of the Medici family and their friends Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494), and Giorgio Antonio Vespucchi (1434-1514). But Botticelli's most significant influence for his visual imagery and his taste for the art of antiquity was acquired by studying his fellow artists' creations in Florence, in particular, the sculptures of Donatello, Pollaiuolo, and Verrocchio. These sculptors had developed the new artistic quest of appropriating the imagery of antiquity for their work by studying ancient sculptures and understanding natural forms, as can be seen in Donatello's admiration of the Roman sarcophagus illustrating *The Battle of Bacchus, Centaurs and Amazons* of 160 CE, held in the Museo Diocesano of Cortona, and other antique statues in the Medicean collection, such as *Flora* or *Pomona* (Abundance) and *The Flaying of Marsyas*, an antique statue believed to have been restored by Andrea Verrocchio (143-1488) (see Figures 5, 6, 7) (Bober & Rubinstein, 1986; Haskell & Penny, 1981).⁴

During his sojourn in Rome between 1481 and 1482 to paint the Stories of Moses on the walls of the Sistine Chapel, Botticelli's admiration for and assimilation of antiquity emerged from his own study in the eternal city. Some ancient sculptures attracted his attention, e.g., the *Old Centaur* (a grey and black marble Roman copy of the second century CE after a Hellenistic original) and Roman sarcophagi (see Figure 8).

³ The inventory lists the property of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de Medici. This record includes a painting titled "c/amilo co/n un satiro" (Camilla with a Satyr) hanging in the same room as the *Primavera* in the Medici Villa at Castello (instead of Via Larga). An inventory of 1503 lists the painting as "due figure" (two figures). Another inventory dated 1516 records "una Minerva e un ce[n]tauro" (a Minerva and a Centaur). A later inventory of 1598 from Villa del Castello, lists a painting with "una donna e centaur" (a woman and a centaur) and not the later name of "Minerva", first found in the family inventory of 1516.

⁴ See Bober and Rubinstein (1986, p. 31), on Donatello and the antique; and also Haskell and Penny (1981, p. 263), in particular, the one traditionally claimed to have been restored for the Medici by Verrocchio.



Figure 5. The Battle of Bacchus, Centaurs and Amazons, 160 CE.

Roman sarcophagus. Museo Diocesano, Cortona, Italy.

Photo credit: author.



Figure 6. Pomona (Flora or Hora), first century, CE. Roman copy.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Photo credit: author.



*Figure 7. The Flaying of Marsyas, first or second century CE. Roman copy of Greek second or third century BCE. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
Photo credit: author.*



Figure 8. *Old Centaur*, second century CE.

Grey-black marble, Roman copy after Hellenistic original.

Capitoline Museum, Rome.

Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.

Botticelli admired the antique in two ways, stylistically and iconographically, fusing his aesthetic sensibility with the intellectual and humanistic ideals of his time. Although he is careful to maintain accuracy of conception for ancient art, he incorporates antique motifs into active figures, animating them into natural forms. In *Minerva and the Centaur*, for example, Botticelli carefully joined a human torso to the body of a horse in the figure of the Centaur. The figure of the Centaur follows the antique prototype, derived from an antique sculpture or a drawing of an antique sculpture, such as *The Battle of Bacchus*, *Centaurs and Amazons* or the

Old Centaur. It is known that a drawing book of antique sculptures figuring centaurs, fauns and satyrs was in circulation in Florence in the 1470s, as a Florentine agent, Angelo Tovaglia, wrote to the Marchese Lodovico Gonzaga of Mantua to offer it for sale in October 1476 (Nethersole, 2018).⁵

Botticelli would have known of other antique statues from his visits and work in Rome as well as from his familiarity with the Medicean collection in Florence, for example, the already mentioned antique statue of *Marsyas*. Botticelli's appropriation of *Marsyas*'s expression of physical discomfort can be seen in the Centaur's face. A similar facial expression of apprehension or fear is seen in the Devil as he confronts Christ in the *Temptation of Christ* on the wall of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican (compare Figures 1a and 9). Other classical sources that might have had an impact on Botticelli's paintings include antique art that represented a grouping of an animal form with a human being, such as the *Dioscouri of Monte Cavallo* and *Castor and Pollux* (315 CE, Roman copies of the original Greek statues of the fifth century BCE), an antique work in Rome well-known throughout the Middle Ages (see Figure 10) (Pogany-Balas, 1984; Olson, 1978). Botticelli's selection from this composition and the symbolism of the *dioscouri*, or horse tamers, is not accidental, since in his painting Minerva is taming a Centaur—the Centaur being a bellicose mythical creature and Minerva a personification of peace and humanity.

Another more poignant example that will enhance the understanding of Botticelli's assimilation of the antique as visual parallelism can be seen by comparing the Roman so-called sarcophagus of *Trajan's Triumph* or the *Roman Military Triumphs* of the second century CE, now at the Museo Pio Clementino in the Vatican with Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur* (compare Figures 1 and 11). Well-known during the Renaissance, the sarcophagus decorated, in Vatican City, the Belvedere garden of Pope Julius II, replacing the empty niche where the famous ancient statue of reclining Ariadne once rested. In a document dated 1512, it is recorded that the Renaissance Neoplatonic philosopher, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), sat on the sarcophagus while reading and studying (Papafava, 1985). The relief on this sarcophagus illustrates Roman soldiers subjugating the conquered Dacians as slaves. Botticelli closely observed the expression of the suffering Dacians, reflecting it in the facial expression of the Centaur.

The sarcophagus of *Trajan's Triumph* inspired Botticelli with its other artistic motifs, as well (compare Figures 1 and 11). For example, the upper torso structure and stance of the central Dacian slave parallels the figure of the Centaur. The honorific action and *contrapposto* stance of the personification of Peace, holding a large palm with one hand and crowning the emperor with the other, recalls Minerva's stance, holding a ceremonial halberd in one hand while extending the other toward the Centaur for punitive action. Moreover, in the center of the sarcophagus, next to the seated emperor, the standing group reveals a Roman soldier seizing one of the Dacians by the locks of his hair. This action bears a strong resemblance to Botticelli's composition of Minerva clinching a lock of the Centaur's hair.

⁵ See Nethersole (2018, p. 156, No. 34). Also see p. 152, on Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur*, where Nethersole identifies the centaur as Chiron and considers the transformation and duality of his nature: negative, as a son of Saturn who changes into a horse to pursue his infidelities, and positive, as a sagacious being, performing scientific discoveries in using herbs for medicinal use.



Figure 9. Botticelli, The Devil, det. *Temptation of Christ*, 1481-1482.

Sistine Chapel, Vatican.

Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.

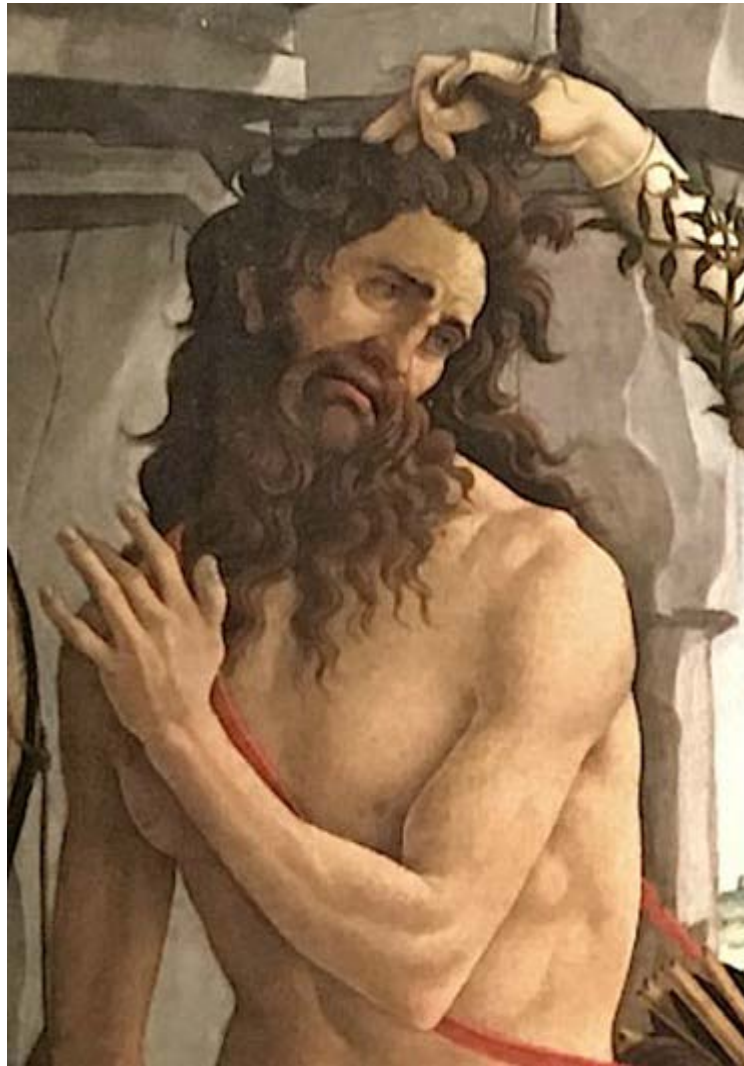


Figure 1a. Botticelli, Centaur, det.
Minerva and the Centaur, 1482-83.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.



Figure 10. *Dioscuri of Monte Cavallo*, 315 CE, Roman copies.

Quirinale Hill, Rome.

Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.



Figure 11. *Roman Military Triumph or Trajan's Triumph*, second century CE.

Roman sarcophagus. Museo Pio Clementino, Vatican.

Photo credit: author.

In Botticelli's painting, the figure of Minerva is beautifully composed, deriving her form from ancient Roman statues, such as the nude marble sculpture of *Venus pudica* by Menophantos of the first century BCE, found in the Church of San Gregorio al Celio around 508 CE and now in the Museo Nazionale of Rome (see Figure 12) (Haskell & Penny, 1981). At the base of the statue, there is a notation by the Greek sculptor that states: "Work by Menophantos after Aphrodite in the Troad". Another example is the clothed *Minerva*, a Roman copy of the first century CE from a Hellenistic original of the third century BCE, now in the Chiaramonti Museum at the Vatican (see Figure 13). Botticelli employs these antique images in his paintings of

the *Birth of Venus* and the *Primavera*—Venus and Flora, respectively. He studied these Roman sculptures for their stance, movement, and gestures, as well as for the treatment of the human body, proportion, classical facial features, and rendition of drapery. For example, in the statue of Minerva, her himation or mantle is treated as a “wet drapery motif” designed to reveal and conceal, at once, her body. Her cuirass, helmet, and shield are the attributes of the virgin goddess (see Figure 14) (Warburg, 2003, pp. 15-17).⁶



Figure 12. *Menophantos, Venus pudica*, first century BCE.

From the Church San Gregorio al Celio, Rome.

Now Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome.

Photo credit. [wikimedia.commons.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/)

⁶ See Warburg (2003, pp. 15-17), Figures 6 and 7. He noted Botticelli's interests in composing drawings after ancient sarcophagi, e.g., *Achilles on Scyros* of 250-260 CE. During the Renaissance, this bass relief was located encased in the wall of the steps of S. Maria Aracoeli in Rome but then moved to Woburn Abbey in Woburn, UK. The attributed drawing to Botticelli, now in the Musée Condé in Chantilly, appropriates several female images from the bass relief: one resembles a nude Venus and another a Muse holding a lyre. Warburg suggested that Botticelli employed this type of imagery in his mythological females.



Figure 13. Roman Minerva (Athena), first century CE, Roman.

Copy of a third century BCE Hellenistic original.

Chiaramonti Museum, Vatican.

Photo credit: [wikimedia.commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Minerva_Athena.jpg)



Figure 14. Roman sarcophagus relief of *Achilles on Scyros*, 250-260 CE.

Now Woburn Abbey, Woburn, UK.

Photo credit: Courtesy of Aby Warburg Photographic Collection, SAS, University of London, UK.

The theme of Minerva as a Disarmed Venus or Victorious Venus (*Venus victrix*) (Wittkower, 1987),⁷ achieved great popularity in Renaissance art and literature. Examples include Angelo Poliziano's love poem *La Giostra* (*The Joust*) (Wittkower, 1987)⁸ and Lucian of Samosata's *Dialogues of the Gods*, a satire in which Lucian composed a dialogue between Venus and her son Cupid, where Venus is wondering why "his [Cupid] quiver has no arrows, his torch no fire, and his right hand no cunning" against Athena (Minerva). Cupid explains to his mother that he fears Minerva's bellicose actions. In order to reconcile his anxious state, he prefers peace with the Goddess of War, offering her an olive branch, not arrows of love (Fowler, 1905; von Bartsch, 1843-1982/1997).⁹ In this exchange of arrows for an olive branch, Minerva has left Cupid in a state of submission. Hence, chaste Minerva (*Minerva pudica*) restrained Cupid's passions. In contrast, Venus, the Goddess of Love, who astutely disarmed Mars, the God of War, allowed Cupid and his companions to play with Mars' weapons of war. Examples of *Venus victrix* can be seen in classical and Renaissance art, e.g., the Roman marble copy of *Disarmed Venus*, dating to the second century but restored in the sixteenth century and now at the Louvre Museum in Paris, see Figure 15), and also in Marco Zoppo's *Disarmed Venus* or *Venus victrix*, a drawing of the 1470s now at the British Museum in London (see Figure 16) (Chapman & Faietti, 2011),¹⁰ in which Venus proudly holds a helmet with her left hand and a lance in her right hand, while daring

⁷ During the time of Julius Caesar and after him, Roman coins contained the label of *Venus victrix*, alluding not only to Venus's victory, but also to Venus as a symbol of *Minerva pacifica*. See Wittkower (1987, Chapter 9, pp. 129-142), about Francesco Laurana's medal of *Minerva pacifica* of 1463, commissioned by René of Anjou, see p. 129 for the image.

⁸ See Wittkower (1987, Chapter 9, p. 136), citing Politian's *Stanze, L'Orfeo e le Rime*, ed. Giosuè Carducci (Florence: G. Barbèra, 1863) I, p. 381.

⁹ For the poem, see Fowler (1905), *Dialogue* 19 (23), *Aphrodite and Eros*, n.p. See <http://www.theoi.com/Text/LucianDialoguesGods1.html> (accessed April 24, 2020). And for the engraving, see von Bartsch (1843-1982/1997), XIV, 297, n. 393 G.

¹⁰ See British Museum, London, MN 1920-0214.1.25; for a discussion on how Zoppo's drawings were known in the Emilia-Romagna area, see Chapman and Faietti (2011), "Hugo Chapman has shown that Zoppo's compositions must have been known by artists later in the century, as one of his figurative compositions is copied by Cesare Cesariano in the 1490s in a fresco in San Giovanni Battista, Reggio Emilia", cited in the catalogue from London, 2010, 146-149 and Figures 4 and 5, No. 25 by Hugo Chapman. I am grateful to Professor Lilian Armstrong of Wellesley College (emerita) for this citation.

cupids play with martial attire and weapons.

In *Minerva and the Centaur*, Botticelli portrayed Minerva as disarming the Centaur and controlling him with her hand gesture of clenching on his hair, yet with a look of forgiveness; after all she is dressed as an honorific and peaceful guardian and not a combative soldier. Botticelli incorporated this conceit of a female deity (Minerva or Venus) disarming a lover or an opponent in another mythological painting, *Mars and Venus* of 1490, now at the National Gallery in London.



Figure 15. Venus victrix, second century CE.
Roman copy restored in the sixteenth century.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Photo credit: wikimedia.org.



Figure 16. Marco Zoppo, *Venus victrix*, 1470, drawing.

British Museum, London.

Photo credit: ©The Trustees of the British Museum, London.

Some Symbolic Interpretations

Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur*, as well as his other mythological paintings, still remains an iconographical enigma (Cheney, 1993; Cassirer, 1965).¹¹ Although scholars who have studied the meaning of Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur* have always agreed on its moral allusions, their interpretations have varied as to the type of moral allusion. In the past, the majority of scholars claimed that the subject matter of this painting revealed a political allegory of good Medicean government (Lightbown, 1978). In an early study, Ferdinand Schevill (1960/1998), in *The Medici*, referred to this work of art as commemorating the deliverance from the peril of the Pazzi conspiracy by Lorenzo de' Medici (Acton, 1979). The historian emphasized the association of this painting with Lorenzo's trip to Naples to quell political problems; therefore, Botticelli's painting commemorates Lorenzo's safe return from that city. *Minerva and the Centaur* was painted following the Pazzi Rebellion and Lorenzo's diplomatic trip to Naples. Thus, the centaur represents the Pazzi family and Minerva or Pallas refers to the Medici family, in particular, to Lorenzo de' Medici, who was known as *il Magnifico* (the Magnificent).

¹¹ Here, *Camilla/Minerva and the Centaur* is viewed as a moral allegory combined with philosophical and political overtones, and finds that this moral allegory must be viewed in the light of Neoplatonic thought in which wisdom triumphs (*studia humanitatis*) over the baser instincts. This concept is stressed by Ficino's teachings: "as intellect is more perfect than sense, man is more perfect than the brutes". Cassirer (1965, p. 207), referring to Ficino's "Five Questions Concerning the Mind".

The preference for Pallas as the deity's name instead of Minerva is for its etymological resemblance to an Italian world associated with the trade of the Medici family. The Medici family's crest is composed of *palle* or spherical balls (Liebenwein, 1977; Frothingham, 1908).¹² The round shape of the *palle* represent coins, used by the Medici in monetary trade and symbol of moneychangers and bankers. The Medici family as bankers belonged to the Florentine guild of the moneychangers, the guild of the Arte del Cambio. Hence, the Medici coat of arms with the balls does not relate to the deity's traditional symbolism but to her name, Pallas.

Traditional views on the interpretation of the figure of Minerva as Pallas or vice versa considered the deity to be the personification of wisdom in political warfare. Her wisdom was associated with the astuteness of Lorenzo de' Medici as a political leader, hence glorifying the cleverness of the Medici family in ruling and achieving cultural, economic, and political power. In *Art et humanisme à Florence au temp de Laurent le Magnifique*, André Chastel (1959/1982) viewed the elements in the picture as Medicean symbolism and, in particular, as an allusion to Lorenzo's wisdom and his "bon gouvernement de la nouvelle Athens" (his good government in the new Athens) (p. 263). Ernest Gombrich, agreeing with Chastel, suggested that Minerva personifies Lorenzo's good government in achieving freedom for *Fiorenza* while the centaur depicts the struggles of Lorenzo to reach this freedom (Gombrich, 1945, pp. 50-51; Berenson, 1968, p. 34).¹³ Rudolph Wittkower (1939; 1987) expanded on this view by focusing on Lorenzo's psychological triumph, hence the painting reveals the wisdom of Lorenzo in overcoming the centaur within himself and was meant to glorify *il Magnifico's* good governance of Florence, Minerva's city.

Some historians (André Chastel, Ernest Gombrich, Rudolph Wittkower) have suggested as well that poetic and moral allegorical notions (Cheney, 1993, p. 101)¹⁴ were the sources for the painting's theme, in particular, Renaissance Neoplatonism, which considered the faculty of "reason as its equivalence of knowledge, to [an individual] acquiring knowledge of the divine through wisdom, and understanding knowledge of nature through his instincts" (Gombrich, 1945, pp. 50-51).¹⁵ In this view, in Botticelli's painting, "reason" or "wisdom" is visualized with Minerva and "nature" and "instincts" with the Centaur.

¹² Liebenwein (1977), repr. and trans. Alessandro Califano and ed. C. Cieri Via (Modena: Panini, 1988, 1992, and 2005), p. 123, for sphere association with *palla*.

¹³ Bernard Berenson also observed that the centaur in the painting represents generalized political disorder and Pallas or Minerva is seen as a counterbalance.

¹⁴ See Gabriel Dette, "Luigi Pulci and Angelo Poliziano", in Schumacher, ed., *Botticelli*, pp. 222-224. In addition, these scholars noted a correspondence with Poliziano's poem, *Le Stanze, L'Orfeo e le Rime*, see Cheney (1993, p. 101):

Dalla più alta stella
Discende a celebrar la tua letizia
Gloriosa Fiorenza
La dea Minerva agl'ingegni propizia:
Con Lei ogni scienza
V'è, chedi sua presenza
Vuole onorarti a ciò sia più bella.

(From the highest star
Descends to celebrate your joy
Glorious Florence
The Goddess Minerva appropriates the talented ones
With her every science
Herein is profited by her presence
She wishes you to honor all beautiful things).

¹⁵ See Gombrich (1945, pp. 50-51), quoting Ficino's letter to a fellow philosopher.

Other art historians (Webster Smith, John Shearman, and Ronald Lightbown) have focused on the moral content of the painting as an allegory of marital chastity—chastity and virtue as victorious over lust and sensuality (Smith, 1975; Shearman, 1975; Lightbown, 1978).¹⁶ This interpretation suggests another type of political power: the importance of marriage-family unions for the purpose of establishing and enhancing the social status and power of the lineage.

Recently, art historians (Cristina Acidi Luchinat, Patrizia Nitti, Alessandro Cecchi, and, in particular, Andreas Schumacher) have unveiled and interpreted new archival documentation about the original patron and commission for the painting, the different recorded names for the painting, and the history of the location of the painting through the years. These scholars have also fused the previously discussed theories of symbolism associated with the imagery, demonstrating the complex and rich collection of meanings revealed in Botticelli's beautiful painting of *Minerva and the Centaur*.

Minerva Pacifica and Minerva Pudica

In *Minerva and the Centaur*, Botticelli searches for virtuosity and aesthetic effects as well as formulating hidden symbolic meanings that provide the viewer with a *clavis interpretandi* (key to interpretation of a meaning) for decoding his artistic conceits (see Figure 1). Branches of the olive tree—sacred to Minerva—wind themselves around her arms and breasts and across the front of her body, where they cross on her arms. Behind her back, suspended from the olive branch, a great tournament shield of gray steel protects her shoulders. In her left hand, she holds a ceremonial halberd. Topping her long flowing hair, whose tresses flutter in the breeze, is a crown of olive branches. A jewel is fixed, just above the forehead, a quatrefoil set with a pointed diamond (Grömling & Lingesleben, 1998; Lightbown, 1978). Thus, Minerva is the goddess of beauty and wisdom.

Botticelli's iconography derives from his affinity with and appreciation of antiquity as well as his fascination with mythological legends, fusing two aspects of Minerva: One aspect is as *Venus victrix* because of her peaceful nature which disarms bellicose intentions and warfare, and as a lover of peace and beauty and an inventor of arts and culture; hence, *Minerva pacifica*. The second aspect is *Minerva* as the virgin goddess, symbolizing chastity and purity of body and heart, and as a protector of maidens, “a sentinel” or guardian of virtue (Lightbown, 1978, I, p. 83; Schumacher, 2010, p. 220),¹⁷ thus embodying both a physical and metaphysical love of beauty and wisdom; hence *Minerva pudica*.

¹⁶ Smith identified Pausanias's description of Minerva (Pallas) as representing an armed Venus of Cythera. A late 15th century edition of Poliziano's poem, *La Giostra*, shows a woodcut of Venus armed with the coat of arms of Giulio de' Medici. It is known that Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici had a copy of Pausanias in his private library. Whereas Shearman (1975, pp. 12-27) and Lightbown (1978, pp. 82-85 and II, p. 59) claim that Botticelli's source for this mythological representation is either Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (Book 37) or Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book VII and XI), where Camilla, a Latin virgin, worships Minerva who is an example of a civilized and virtuous woman.

¹⁷ Lightbown (1978, I, p. 83); and Andrea Alciato, Emblem *Custodiendas virgines* (Maidens Must Be Guarded) in *Emblematum liber* (Augsburg: Heinrich Steyner, 1531). Here, Minerva, the Virgin Goddess and Roman Goddess of Wisdom, is attired with a helmet, spear, and aegis. She guards and protects sacred temples against temptations or impure desires symbolized by a serpent or a hybrid animal (Pausanias, *Periegesis* 1.24.7). See also, Schumacher (2010, p. 220), associating the concept of *Minerva pudica* with the poetry of Poliziano for the joust of Giuliano de' Medici. For an image, see University of Glasgow Library, Archives & Special Collections, <https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A31a043> (accessed April 24, 2020).



Figure 1. Botticelli, *Minerva and the Centaur*, 1482-1483.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org

Botticelli's *Minerva pacifica* is elegantly dressed, with a white transparent cloth encircled by an emerald colored mantel, revealing her golden shoes. She is decorated with olive branches throughout her attire; the olive tree, because of its evergreen color and abundance of fruit, is traditionally associated with peace and friendship. She is not depicted with the traditional military instruments of a helmet, a cuirass, an aegis, a shield, and a lance. On the contrary, Botticelli decorates her overall attire with olive branches, rings, and diamonds, enveloping the figure's body by a large mantel colored olive-green. She carries a joust shield on her shoulder, protecting her long, golden tresses cascades and holds a ceremonial spear.

Minerva's joust shield is complemented by her joust halberd or spear (see Figure 1). The golden lance of the halberd is composed two parts: a wooden shaft and a metal blade. The long shaft is constructed with an elaborate top. The top is decorated with a classical motif of large acanthus leaves with hanging balls or beads. Above it, a frieze with a classical tongue-and-dart or an egg-and-dart motif supports a rectangular prism. Inside

this geometrical design there are three diamonds of crystal color. Above it, another frieze repeats the same classical motif seen below. Botticelli continues to appropriate classical motifs for this conceit, assimilating the use of architectural ornamentations in the Arch of Constantine, which he saw while in Rome.¹⁸ The lance terminates at top with a long metal needle. The second part of the joust halberd is a decorative pattern within the metal blade—a most inventive design. Horizontally intersecting with the staff at right angle and at the level of the rectangular prism, a curved metal blade passes through. The left part of the pointed blade is supported on the staff by a cluster of acanthus leaves. The right side is constructed of a semi-curved blade. The rim of the blade is decorated with a golden edge simulating the shape of the top of a diamond ring motif, which is seen throughout Minerva's attire. A decorative golden line across the center of the blade adds to the design, forming a letter "M" (compare Figures 1 and 1b). The decorative motif of the letter "M" is repeated several times in the painting: on Minerva's left and right arms, just above her bent arms, there is a beautiful design of an arm band forming several letter "Ms", and the "M" motif is repeated on her breastplate, which is composed of olive branches and diamonds (compare Figures 1 with 1c and 1d). The letter "M" may allude to Minerva as the goddess of beauty and wisdom as well as to name of the Medici family.



Figure 1b. Botticelli, Spear, det. *Minerva and the Centaur*, 1482-1483.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.

¹⁸ Botticelli depicted the Arch of Constantine several times in his paintings, e.g., *The Punishment of the Rebels*, 1481, on the fresco wall of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican; *The Story of Lucretia*, 1500, now at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, MA; and the *Calumny of Apelles*, 1495, now at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence.



Figures 1c-1d. Botticelli, Arm bands, dets.
Minerva and the Centaur, 1482-1483.
 Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
 Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.



Figure 1e. Botticelli, Breastplate, det. *Minerva and the Centaur*, 1482-1483.
 Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
 Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.

The Medici's *impresa* is a conceit of the diamond motif, which is composed of a design of three intertwined diamond rings with the motto "Semper" (Forever). The earliest conception of the Medicean *impresa* of the diamond was initiated by Cosimo II Vecchio de' Medici, Lorenzo de' Medici's grandfather, with his insignia of three diamond rings symbolizing the connection of the Medici with France and Spain. His son,

Piero Il Gottoso de' Medici, elaborated on this emblematic device of a diamond ring to symbolize divine protection for the Medici family or the Medici family's love for God. The selection of the diamond is from the Italian word *diamante*, which is a contraction of two words: *di* (Dio, which refers to God) and *amante* (love or lover); hence the *impresa* alludes to love of God or a lover of God—a metaphysical conceit about the Medici (de Tervarent, 1997, pp. 181-182). Years later, Lorenzo *il Magnifico* added three colored plumes to the three-ring diamond to symbolize the Christian Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). The three plumes refer to the three theological virtues, each of which is associated with a specific color: Faith with white, Hope with green, and Charity with red. In the 16th century, in honor of the Medici family and Cosimo I de' Medici, Duke of Florence, the humanist, emblematic, and physician Paolo Giovio (1483-1552) composed *Impresa* 36, elaborating on and explaining further the signification of the insignia about the Medici family (Giovio, 1559; Gelli, 1976; Lightbown, 1978; Cheney, 2010).¹⁹

The attributes of the olive branch, green mantel, and white dress associate Minerva, as the personification of Peace (*Minerva pacifica*), with Chastity (Camilla, Diana or *Minerva pudica*), as cited in Books 8 and 11 of Virgil's *Aeneid* and in Book 37 of Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (*Of Famous Woman*) (Shearman, 1975; Lightbown, 1978; Smith, 1975; Schumacher, 2010).²⁰ Moreover, Renaissance humanists, and as seen in the ancient writings of Pausanias (III, 23, I), understood that the goddess of wisdom, Minerva, was a triple divinity: as an armed Venus of Cythera, the goddess of peace; as the chaste Diana, the goddess of virtue; and as the earthy Hecate-Lucina, the goddess of childbirth (Smith, 1975).²¹ In Renaissance art, when these deities personify the moral allusion of chastity triumphing over lust, they carry similar attributes, such as a shield to protect against love or lust's arrows and a transparent white dress to allude to their purity of body and spirit. Also, these goddesses are paired with an animal form such as an owl, bull, deer, or centaur.

In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Amazon-virgin Camilla, chaste heroine as well as Latin virgin, worships Minerva, who symbolizes a cultivated and virtuous woman. Minerva as the goddess of peace carries the attributes of the olive branch and the shield, which are depicted in the painting so as to support Botticelli's image of Camilla impersonating Minerva. Botticelli's fusion of the role of Camilla as Minerva is revealed in a series of drawings that he executed in relation to the theme of peace in the early 1480s. For example, in the Ambrosiana drawing, probably for the Medicean commission, Botticelli portrayed a *Minerva pacifica* (see Figure 17).²² He draws a harmonious image of Minerva. She holds the traditional attribute of a shield with Medusa's head but wears no helmet and carries a ceremonial lance. In classical *contrapposto*, she stands on a fancy pedestal, her body is covered with a soft veil—revealing and concealing her nude figure—the wind blowing effect in the treatment of the folds accentuates her gentle pose. The loose movement of her long tresses parallels the flowing movement of the attire. Botticelli represented an image of peace. In other drawings at the Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe in the Galleria degli Uffizi (Inv. No. 201.BB 575) (see Figure 18) and a later one at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (BB 581, Verso of D17) (Lightbown, 1978). These drawings of Minerva for a tapestry banner for Count Guy de Baudreuil, abbot of the monastery of Saint Martin-aux-Bois in Picardi of

¹⁹ See also Giovio's *Impresa* 35, honoring Cosimo Il Vecchio de' Medici.

²⁰ Shearman (1975, pp. 12-27); Lightbown (1978, I, pp. 82-85); and Smith (1975, pp. 31-39); and Schumacher (2010, p. 220), associating the concept of *Minerva pudica* with the poetry of Poliziano for the joust of Giuliano de' Medici.

²¹ See note 16.

²² From the Collection of Codice Resta, f. 14. BB 568, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan.

1491 (now in a French private collection) can be considered as studies for a *Minerva pacifica* (Lightbown, 1978; Wittkower, 1987; Schumacher, 2010).²³



Figure 17. Botticelli, *Minerva (Pallas)*, 1480s, drawing.
Ambrosiana Library and Museum, Milan.
Photo credit: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan.

²³ Lightbown (1978, II, pp. 165-176); Wittkower (1987, Chapter 9, pp. 138-139), and Schumacher (2010, pp. 218-220), on *Minerva pacifica*, a woven tapestry composed after a cartoon designed in Botticelli's atelier. Count Guy de Baudreuil commissioned this work as indicated by the representation of his coat of arms.



Figure 18. Botticelli, *Pallas*, 1480s, drawing.
Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org.



Figure 19. Andrea Verrocchio, *Baptism of Christ*, 1472.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Photo Credit: en.wikipedia.org.

Minerva's white, transparent dress, "according to the wont of Diana", as well as the halberd, are symbols of exemplary behavior and her guardianship of her chastity, further alluding to Minerva and Camilla's association with the virginal goddess Diana. For Boccaccio, too, Camilla is a model of virtue for women about to be wedded. Lightbown (1978) associated Camilla—a devotee of virtue and chastity contrasted with the centaur, a personification of lust and sensuality—with Semiramide, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici's bride. This interpretation suggests that the painting represents an allegory of chaste marriage.

Lightbown's thesis can be expanded further and connected with other symbolic imagery, such as the rings and olive branch decorations represented in the white dress of the female figure. In looking carefully at the design created by the circular movement of the olive branches around the breasts and torso of the figure, a shaped vest or cuirass is created, recalling Minerva's cuirass as wardress or armed Venus. Following the lines created by the olive branches in the vest and around the breasts, the initial "M" (for Medici as well as for

Minerva) along with the initial “C” (for Camilla as well as for the virtue of chastity, *Castita*) are designed into the female’s torso (compare Figures 1 and 1e).²⁴ This interpretation reaffirms the importance of the Medici lineage and, in particular, the new bride’s chastity—a victory over sensuality. Camilla abides by this moral virtue and will continue the family descent.

In Botticelli’s painting, Camilla’s white dress is decorated not only with olive branches and twigs, but with embroidered diamond rings as well. The complex design of these rings reveals Botticelli’s fascination with ornamentation. For example, some small single rings hang from olive twigs, while other large rings interlace with olive branches. Some rings are grouped to create a continuous chain—as seen around Camilla’s neckline—while others interlock as triple-diamond rings, alluding to the *impresa* of the Medici (Cirlot, 1962; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994).²⁵ Another inventive metaphysical conceit is found when joining together the signification of the word *diamante* (diamond) *di-amante* or *amante-di* meaning “lover of” with the initial letters “C” and “M”, which imply the names of Camilla and Minerva; with the virtue of chastity or purity embedded in these two personae, the message refers to both Camilla and Minerva as lovers of chastity and modest—these qualities or virtues to be emulated or ingrained in a bride-to-be.

In Camilla/Minerva’s depiction, Botticelli fuses betrothal symbolism through the white attire or wedding dress (purity), the shoes (willful submission), the long and flowing hair (virgin) and, in particular, the ring (union). The ring reflects the traditional meanings of eternity, authority, union, and vow because of its circular shape. From ancient times, rings have symbolized betrothal and marriage. In addition, Aristotle recounts the ancient oracle’s belief that the sound of rings suspended by threads (olive branches) announced that it was time for military action (Biedermann, 1989; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). Botticelli’s painting reflects this ancient belief by portraying an alert Camilla/Minerva wearing a necklace decorated with rings and olive twigs, to warn the lustful Centaur about unwelcomed intentions and paradoxically announcing a marriage celebration. Dressed and decorated in her finest, Camilla—representing Semiramide, bride-to-be of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici—is prepared for a blissful betrothal and a fruitful union: a matrimony (“M”).

Other symbolic *paragoni*—analogies and disparities—unveil the complex interpretation of Botticelli’s painting. For example, Minerva’s finest attire contrasts with the Centaur’s unrefined hybrid suit. Minerva’s feet are covered with golden boots, in contrast to the brownish hooves of the Centaur (Lightbown, 1978). Their hand gestures are parallel, but convey different meanings: Minerva’s left-hand gesture may allude to her victory while her right-hand seizes the beast, but the Centaur’s gestures have other innuendos. Furthermore, Botticelli contrasts two different types of landscape for the figures—rocky for the Centaur and marine for Minerva—abiding with the mythical origin of the protagonists (Acton, 1979).²⁶ Botticelli frames the grouping of *Minerva and the Centaur* with the instruments they each hold. The Centaur carries actual weapons, a bow and arrows, while Minerva holds an oversized ceremonial weapon, a Renaissance halberd (Hale, 1990; Balent, 1991; Cropper, 1998). The nude hybrid animal, the Centaur, is bewitched and subjugated by the beautifully dressed maiden, Minerva. The mythical creature impersonates Cupid by carrying similar instruments of Love,

²⁴ Not by accident is the curve blade of the halberd also in the shape of a flipped letter “C” for Camilla, while horizontally it forms the letter “M” for Medici.

²⁵ But what do the four interlocked diamond rings signify? Perhaps the design alludes to eternal unity because of the circular construct, while the concentric circles refer to the single movement of each circle but always bound to the whole larger circle.

²⁶ Perhaps the Roman ruins, which Botticelli uses frequently in his painting after this trip to Rome, placed behind the centaur might refer to the unsuccessful papal action to destroy the Medici family by supporting the Pazzi conspiracy.

the arched bow and arrows. However, the Centaur's intentions are dishonorable, his gaze reflecting his lustful desire to disgrace Minerva's purity and to capture, metaphorically with arrows, her maiden virginity. But his evil actions are stopped by the chaste Minerva (*Minerva pudica*) who seizes him by the hair and forces him to bow and surrender. With reluctance, the Centaur suspends his action but continues to gaze lustfully directly at the maiden's abdominal area, which is protected with an emerald colored mantle and encircled by a large olive branch, symbolic of her virtue. The Centaur expresses his submission to the control of the virtuous Minerva.

Botticelli's affinity with ancient art and ideals is revealed in *Minerva and the Centaur*. By integrating all of these interpretations regarding the symbolism of this painting—the interpretation of the female figure as Camilla/Minerva, the symbolism of her wedding attire, and her horse tamer association to the lustful Centaur—Botticelli portrays a moralizing story about a virtuous marriage and a family bond and, in particular, a Medicean marital allegory of chastity and lineage, fusing the symbolism of *Minerva pacifica* with *Minerva pudica*; that is, metaphysical conceits about purity, modesty, love, and family honor.

Minerva is an honorific guardian of Medicean moral endeavors. Her attire with white and green colors alludes to purity of heart (white) and physical and mental balance or harmony (green), traditional Christian symbols of faith and hope. Her white apparel is embroidered with the Medici devices of three interlocking diamond rings, while olive branches embrace her body. The diamond motif is repeated as a collar of hanging rings on her neckline, reveals her breast line, and culminates in the center of her crown formed by olive branches. Minerva as *pacifica* and *pudica* is the eternal guardian of Medicean legacy.

Coda

In the composition of his mythological paintings, Botticelli was strongly influenced by the antique. However, he also observed the religious imagery painted by his fellow artists and teachers, such as Andrea Verrocchio's *Baptism of Christ* of 1472, now at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (compare Figures 1 and 19) (Hartt, 1983).²⁷ When comparing the compositional design of Verrocchio's *Baptism of Christ* and Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur*—although one is sacred and the other profane as well as being thematically different—one sees visual analogies in the stance and movement of the extended right arm of John the Baptist as he baptizes Christ with *Minerva's* stance and her right arm, extended to subjugate the unruly centaur. Similarly, one can compare the action of John's left hand and arm embracing the cross with Minerva's left hand embracing of a halberd or spear whose top forms a Christian cross motif as well. The landscape design with rock formations and seascape expansions are further indications of Botticelli's admiration for Verrocchio's artistic innovations. In his other mythological paintings, Botticelli appropriated religious constructions as well; for instance, the stance and hand gesture of Venus in the *Primavera* derives from a type of Annunciation as seen in paintings by Fra Filippo Lippi and Alessio Baldovinetti, while the composition of the *Birth of Venus* recalls paintings of Christ's baptism in Florentine art. Italian Renaissance painters, like Botticelli, saw no intellectual or spiritual incongruity in fusing pagan and Christian traditions. These artists were eager to emulate and fuse classical imagery with their existing Christian religious tradition in order to create an individualistic appropriation of classical art and produce innovative artistic imagery.

²⁷ Hartt (1983, p. 324), noting that Botticelli was active in Verrocchio's workshop.

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