



## Masterworks

*La Primavera* c.1482 (Uffizi, Florence, Italy)

*The Virgin and Child Enthroned (Bardi Altarpiece)* 1484 (Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany)

*The Birth of Venus* c.1485 (Uffizi, Florence, Italy)

*Venus and Mars* c.1485 (National Gallery, London, England)

*St. Augustine in His Cell* 1490–1494 (Uffizi, Florence, Italy)

*Calumny of Apelles* 1494–1495 (Uffizi, Florence, Italy)

*The Descent of the Holy Ghost* c.1495–1505 (Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, Birmingham, England)

*Mystic Nativity* 1500 (National Gallery, London, England)

ABOVE: Portrait of Botticelli from Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, first published in 1550.

RIGHT: *La Primavera* was painted before Botticelli's involvement with Savonarola.

## SANDRO BOTTICELLI

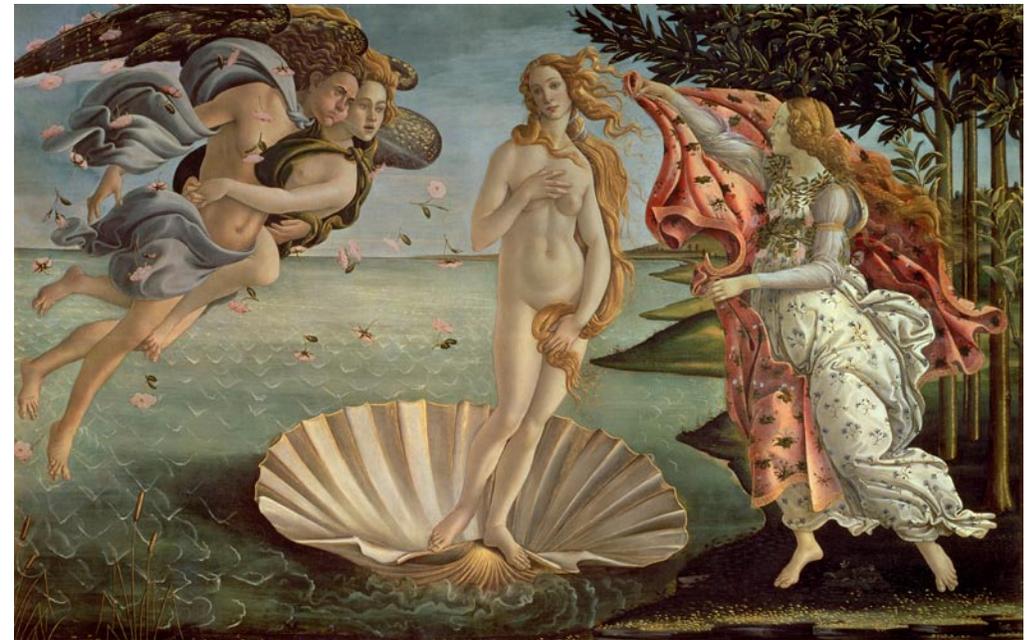
**Born:** Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, c.1444 (Florence, Italy); died May 17, 1510 (Florence, Italy).

**Artistic style:** Classical and mythological themes; allegorical figures; strong linear perspective; depictions of divine beauty and love.

Botticelli's paintings are timeless: their heavy use of allegory renders them as much an enigma as their creator. Yet had the young Alessandro not persuaded his father to end his training as a goldsmith, the world would have been robbed of one of the greatest painters of the Florentine Renaissance. Thankfully, the boy known as Botticelli, meaning "little barrel," was apprenticed to the Early Renaissance master Fra'Filippo Lippi, who set his protégé on the way to greatness.

Lippi's own style is evident in much of his pupil's early work, as Botticelli absorbed his master's taste for extravagant decoration and a strong linear sense of form. When Fra Lippi left for Spoleto, Botticelli went to work with the painters and sculptors Antonio Pollaiuolo and Andrea del Verrocchio. Both artists favored naturalistically portrayed, muscular figures; Botticelli admired and copied their sculptural approach.

By 1470 he was an independent painter in Florence with his own workshop and had his first commission: *Allegory of Fortitude* (1470). His talents soon attracted the mighty Medici family who—enamored with his secular historical works,



ABOVE: *The Birth of Venus* is one of the world's most recognizable paintings.

treatment of mythical and religious themes, and portraiture skills—showered him with commissions. They were not alone. In 1481 Pope Sixtus IV summoned him to Rome to fresco the Sistine Chapel walls. He studied Florentine art forms, painting altarpieces, frescoes, and tondi of all sizes, creating harmonious compositions of fantastic landscapes and emotive, vital figures. Many of the Medici commissions mirrored the family's taste for classical antiquity represented by mythological figures. This unique style of secular painting peaked with *La Primavera* (c.1482) and *The Birth of Venus* (c.1485), in which the artist employs typically ambiguous allegorical forms.

Botticelli's style and attitude radically altered in his later years under the influence of the Dominican priest Savonarola. His paintings became smaller, the themes apocalyptic and anguished. Toward the end of his life, he dedicated himself to a lifelong ambition of illustrating Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (1308–1321), but ill health curtailed his dream. **SG**

### Bonfire of the Vanities

The relationship between Botticelli and the fanatic Dominican monk Girolamo Savonarola has provoked much debate throughout history. According to the chronicler Giorgio Vasari, Botticelli became a devotee of the priest and abandoned pagan themes in his art. A new school of thought now suggests that Botticelli's subordination to the will of Savonarola was so complete it led him to throw some of his own paintings on to the notorious Bonfire of the Vanities, on February 7, 1497. Such a notion defies belief. Like a raging fire, though, the theories continue to gather speed.