

## BOTTICELLI, 1444—1510.

By E. C. ALLEN.

*(Picture Study for Summer Term.)*

ALESSANDRO, or more usually, Sandro, was the youngest son of a Florentine tanner. He was apprenticed to a "very competent master" goldsmith, but did not do well under him. He was then allowed by his father, at the age of fifteen, to transfer himself to the *bottega* or studio of that most "excellent painter," Fra Lippo Lippi. Here he worked really hard, and his master "took such pains with his training, that he rapidly attained proficiency." The surname "Botticelli," or Little Barrel, he took from the "competent goldsmith," by some authorities considered to be his own brother.

He stayed with Fra Lippo until 1467, and worked with him at Prato and Spoleto, and then returned to Florence. We hear of him having his own workshop, and taking his old master's son as a pupil. Then he seems to have attracted the attention of the great Medici family, and to have been employed by them in the lavish decoration of their palaces, and the churches under their patronage. We read of his summons to Rome. On his return he had further commissions for the city, not all of which seem to have been carried out. At the end of his life he was much crippled by rheumatism, and although he did not die till 1510, we have no record of work by him after 1500.

Before I begin my notes on the Botticelli pictures for this coming term, I just want to say a few words of explanation and warning. First, I do not in the very least pose as an authority on art, nor an art critic. I do not write these notes in any didactic spirit, nor as being the "last word" on the pictures studied. I am a student—of Art as of Life—and of Life as expressed in Art. I offer for what they are worth, my considered opinions and such knowledge as I have, to give what help I can to other people who, like me, are students, but whom fate has turned into teachers.

And that brings me to my second point. I do not write these notes for children, nor to be read to children. If I were

writing for children I should either say much less or much more. In a Picture Talk Lesson the children should do most of the talking. These notes are meant to help the teacher to have something in his mind with which to help the children. They are not meant to be descriptions of the pictures to be read aloud to the children. People ask me sometimes to give more facts and details. But I don't feel like that about pictures. They are not facts. They are the expression of great spiritual ideas. Sometimes a detail of the life and times of the painter helps us to understand and appreciate his ideas. But usually the pictures are better without a ring of facts round them. Sometimes people come and tell me I am wrong in what I have said. Very probably. I only offer you my opinion, quite humbly, and every teacher or child is free to prefer his own and ignore mine. As long as he has one, that's all that matters. And if the expression of my views leads any teacher to crystallize his own, so much the better. Many of you will not agree with what I am going to say about Botticelli. As long as we succeed in helping the children to see the loveliness of these great masters' works, opinions do not matter any more than facts.

And now having cleared the ground, so to speak, let us enjoy ourselves.

Botticelli was a Florentine. By many considered the greatest of the Renaissance Florentines, I think he towers over them all in the delicate beauty of his thoughts, the exquisite play of his fancy, and the breadth and variety of his subjects. He was the friend of Lorenzo the Magnificent, and worked and lived through the best part of the Medici age. He is never monotonous, never stiff. He had heaps to tell, touched the world at many points, and remained an unspoilt artist through all his long life. Florence is pre-eminently the place in which to know Botticelli, but we have some of his loveliest Madonnas in England, as well as the Nativity chosen for the term's work.

I think I should begin with the "Spring." But with it, in the second lesson, or even in the first, keeping "Spring" for the second, I suggest we should show the children the "Birth of Venus." Never shall I forget my own delight as a girl when I first saw that lovely figure. I felt as if all my girlhood's dreams were embodied and drifting towards me on that shimmering sunny sea. Try to get a large one. (Alinari publishes some beautiful reproductions at 2/- each in colour). And let the children realize how this Aphrodite is the very spirit

of the Greek sea-born goddess. Not the jealous creature of the Judgment of Paris, but the delicate beautiful gift of the sun and wind and the sea.

When they have realized the wistful beauty of the classical vision, go on to "Spring"—*Primavera* is its Italian name. Take it as a whole first. Notice the pattern of dark barred background and light, swaying, moving figures. Some of the children may have been to see the Flemish pictures at Burlington House, and will remember the "Madonna of the Rose Garden." Here is a background that reminds us of it, but these are not rose trees, but orange trees. In the real picture, the golden oranges and the grey-green foliage make an exquisitely soft setting for the figures. Sprays of myrtle make a light frame for the figure of Venus, who awaits the coming of Spring. And here she is on the right, her mischievous face full of light. She is ushered in by Flora, goddess of flowers, and Zephyrus, the mild west wind that can still be very boisterous at times. Notice how the lace that edges her sleeves and skirt is like unfolding ferns. In the original, all the flowers are vividly coloured, a great many being blue; and there are anemones in the wreath round her neck. The group on the left is the three Graces, dancing together, while beyond them the young Apollo drives back the storm clouds of Winter. Young Guiliano di Medici posed for that figure.

It is very difficult to get any real impression of the beauty of this wonderful picture from a small reproduction like this. Really it is about seven feet long and ten feet wide, and the whole canvas glows with subdued light. When one enters the room in which it hangs, one seems to see nothing else. The mantle of Venus is red, and Mercury's cloak a dull magenta. The grey-blue drapery of Zephyrus adds mystery and space to the picture. The children are sure to ask about the central figure. She seems sad and out of place in this joyous scene. Let them give their own explanation first. Usually this serious lady is called Venus—awaiting the birth of Summer—I think perhaps Fortune would be a better name for her. Notice all the softness of the moving lines, the position of the feet, and the graceful modelling of the limbs. They are all characteristic of the master, and we shall find his treatment of soft drapery repeated over and over again.

Sometimes I think she is meant for the Year, grieving a little for the short life of her children. Cupid overhead, pointing

his arrow at handsome Mercury, does not seem to have much to do with her. Perhaps she is just the beautiful Simonetta, who was loved by Guiliano. We don't know. Only, as we let the picture sink into our consciousness, that wonderful central figure has a special meaning, quite other from the gaiety of Spring herself. Spring is so elfish, so wanton. She has got the bite of the east wind in her character as well as the delicacy of the flowers she brings. "Not always good," we may say—and quite ready for rough games. The ground is a carpet of flowers, meticulously drawn and coloured. It is a "flowery meadow" like the one the child-angels played in. Time has altered some of the tints, and there is now a mellow goldenness over the whole picture which enhances its beauty. Try to think of it as more in shades of yellow than in black and white.

I think "Tobias and the Angels" would be good to take next. This is in the Uffizi Gallery and is quite a small picture, which perhaps is one reason why it reproduces so well. I think I should read the story to the children from the book of Tobit.\* It can be condensed, but the setting forth of the young man attended by the angels, and his fishing and his dog, is all beautifully given.

How happily they all walk along, over the barren paths of Palestine! The lad talks, and Raphael answers and the other two keep pace with them. The angel carries the reel for the line. But apparently they did not use a rod. St. Michael holds a ball very daintily, but as far as I remember, there was no indication why he should. Delightful rock plants occur, and beyond one catches glimpses of a charming lake and mountain. It is a very happy picture, in every way.

Gabriel's cloak is blue, and that of Raphael is pinkish, and Tobias's green lined with blue, and very nice gold embroidery, and his boots are dark red. The whole picture is gay and restful and comforting.

The next one I think should be the Tornabuoni fresco, and should be so much easier for us to see as it is in Paris, which does not sound so far away as Florence. It is really one of a series, painted by Botticelli in 1481, for Lorenzo Tornabuoni's villa, and now, much damaged and mutilated, hangs on one of the walls of the Louvre. Those two white patches are new plaster, and the scar—so tragically placed—is damp and destruction.

\*From *The Apocrypha* (Oxford Press, 1/6).

The subject is Donna Giovanna Tornabuoni, a very gracious and beautiful lady, receiving a visit from Venus and the Three Graces. The arm and shoulder of Venus are destroyed, but a great deal of her is there. She gives her girdle to Giovanna, who stands to receive her lovely guests. The lower part of the fresco is very much damaged, so that all their feet seem wrong and blurred. But a little careful study will show you that the feet with sandals belong to Venus; all the Graces are bare-footed. Her drapery falls in a delicate straight line from her elbow. The Graces all seemed filled with wonder and admiration at her magnanimity, especially the fair-haired one in front. The colours are all most delicate and soft. Giovanna wears a reddish robe, and there is a good deal of blue about the Graces. I suppose there was a kind of throne behind her, or a doorway, but that has gone completely. She has a beautiful dignified face, and carries her head well, her veil falling gracefully from her hair.

I think Venus is giving her an apple as well, and holds more in her drapery. It seems as if there was weight there—what a pity we have only half of her! We must make the most of what we have. Notice the balance of the grouping, and the perfect curves of the fountain. What look like bits of stick are really streams of water from a beautiful carved aperture-covering in the original.

When he was about forty-five, in 1482, Botticelli's fame had reached Rome, where the Palace of the Vatican was slowly reaching its full splendour, under the labours of all the most renowned artists of the time. Now the summons came to Botticelli to add his quota, and he was asked to illustrate the life of Moses on a wall of the Sistine Chapel. The scenes were to illustrate the parallel between the Old and New Testaments.

This is a section from one fresco. To me it is a very curly picture. The rams' horns, the maidens' curls, the water bottles, all repeat the same curve. Moses is quite young, and goes about his task very simply. It is not an English well, but an eastern one, or perhaps more truly an Italian one. The maid on the left is holding a very long curious stick—it might be a distaff. Jethro's daughter has a crook. The sheep at the back are excellent; too frightened to stay, and too thirsty to go. We have seen them in that pose over and over again. It is terribly tantalizing not to be able to see what all that drapery means. Really it is part of another scene in

the picture, where Moses is leading the Israelites into the wilderness, and is very sharply cut off from this central scene by the dark hillside.

It seems to me as if Botticelli had thought very deeply as to what he should make the important parallel between the life of Moses and the life of Christ. And his own gentle, beautiful spirit led to this lovely thought. Moses was a prince, a soldier, a learned man, a fighter, a lawgiver; a man of a long and very busy life. But those are not what we think of as the Christ qualities. Jesus lived among men "as one who served." When did Moses serve as Jesus served? And here in this tiny little episode in the great leader's life, Botticelli finds the keynote of the parallel to the life of Jesus—when Moses was a shepherd, and served the sheep of Jethro. The children will work out the details, but give them time to realize the beauty of the idea, and the lovely meaning there is in every thought of this great painter. If possible, show them a picture of the whole fresco, that they may see the artist's emphasis on what he think is the guiding idea of Moses's life. Then they will feel the meaning of the wistfulness of the maiden's face. I hope they feel now what to me is so insistent in all Botticelli's figures, that they have a vision further than ordinary people. Their real dwelling-places are the fields of Elysium, and their lights are from within.

When Botticelli was getting an old man, Florence went through one of her great tragedies. The great Dominican preacher, Savonarola, called men and women to repent of their wickedness and follies, and live simpler and holier lives. For a time his voice governed the city, and Botticelli was among his most ardent supporters. But jealousy and malice prevailed, and the preacher was deserted by his friends, imprisoned and killed by his enemies. A terrible story, that shakes the heart of all who read it even to-day, when it is nearly four hundred years old. The death of the great teacher was a bitter grief to the painter, and he found his feelings expressed in an account of a picture by an old Greek painter, Apelles. He calls it "Calumny."\*

I think it is a most dreadful picture,—the power of an evil tongue, the embodiment of discord. In vain Truth, or Innocence, calls for justice. That old hag Remorse sneers at

\*See also *Ourselves*, by Miss C. M. Mason. Book I., pp 151—152.

her, while the Fury drags the helpless victim to the Throne of Midas, into whose ass's ears Ignorance and Suspicion shout their evil thoughts. Of course it is wonderful. There is not one peaceful line in it, not one restful form, except the cold marble arches, and the distant horizon. "See what you have done," says Botticelli, "you have turned Truth out of doors and filled your halls with strife." Gone is the gaiety of spring, the serenity of those chaste and pure Madonnas. His heart is full of grief for his lost teacher and his sinful city. Calumny and Rancour stand before the seat of justice waited on by Hypocrisy and Deceit. The very names of these attributes are foreign to children, and so they should be. What have our children to do with "evil speaking, lying, and slandering?" Let us hope the ideas here expressed remain as foreign to their thoughts as the words to their tongues. It is not a picture to dwell on with them. In fact, if possible, I should substitute in Forms IB. and IA., one of the many lovely holy families that are quite easy to get. It seems too cruel a picture for tender hearts.

But the London "Nativity" everyone will enjoy to the full.

We are glad that the great painter's work did not end on an unhappy note, and that he was able to believe that "wrong shall perish, right prevail." Our last picture, painted 1500, shows he has recaptured his old serenity. It is very delightful, very charming. The play of the old man's fancy is as true and delicate as it was in his glorious youth. It is said by some critics to be "one of the most fervently religious pictures ever painted by any artist." It is the only one, apparently, he ever signed. His name, Alessandro, may be made out with great difficulty and a magnifying glass, in the Greek inscription at the top of the page. There are three separate parts to the subject. First, the Nativity group before a cave with a shed in front of it; an adoring Madonna, and Joseph doubled up and asleep. Three shepherds brought by an angel on one side, and three kings on the other. On the shed-roof three angels sing the "gloria in excelsis." The second subject is the dance of the angels in Paradise, beautiful light creatures who appear to be playing with their crowns. And below, the third subject, three pilgrims welcomed by three angels, and drawn along the path to Paradise. It is rather difficult to see them, but there are two little devils hiding under the paving-stones in a truly mediæval fashion. They are quite amusing, and have no

connection with the horrors of reality. The angels' dresses are alternately white, pink, and bronze-gold.

The Madonna wears a blue cloak over a pink dress with a kind of bronze-coloured lining to her cloak. All the three pilgrims wear red cloaks and wreaths of myrtles, and are being most affectionately greeted by the angels.

The kings at the left are crowned with wreaths, not gold crowns, and their robes are yellow, pink and green. One of the shepherds on the right has his hand up to his hood, just pushing it back reverently. The angel's arm is outstretched with a myrtle branch in it. I find after studying it carefully, that the crowns are all daintily tied on to the branches of myrtle and scrolls are wound round them too, but I could not read what was on them. The straw of the thatch seems to glow, and the sky one can see through the shed is also very bright and luminous. There is a gesture of adoration about the whole picture. It seems to come near to the spirit of Fra Angelico. Evidently the animals did not interest Botticelli. They are quite flat, as if they were not finished. But we may forgive a great artist such a detail as that, in gratitude for the many lovelinesses he has revealed to us who have tried to understand his spirit in the half-hours we have spent with him this term.

[The following pictures by Botticelli can be had in colour (size 8 x 11 in. at about 1/- each, 16 x 22 in. at about 2/- each) from FRATELLI ALINARI, Via Nazionale 8, Florence, Italy:—

Spring, No. 39.

The Adoration of the Magi, No. 99.

The Birth of Venus, No. 95.

Calumny, No. 65.

Judith, No. 120.

The Madonna of the Baldechino, No. 624.]