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Botticelli draws freely from mythological figures to create a moral allegory of chaste and pure love controlling the sensual passions.

Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), PALLAS AND THE CENTAUR (c. 1482). Tempera on canvas. 81½" x 58¼". Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Love in Control

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

By the 1480s, Sandro Botticelli was one of the leading painters of the Renaissance and was working for the Medici family. Many works of this period, often considered his masterpieces, use mythological subjects to blend contemporary historical references and moral instruction.

Pallas and the Centaur, which is recorded in the 1498-1499 inventory as “Camilla and a Satyr,” originally was hung in the “old house” of the Medici family in a ground floor room alongside the chamber of Lorenzo, together with the *Primavera*.¹ The old palace on Via Larga was owned by Lorenzo and Pierfrancesco de’ Medici, cousins of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

The female figure with long blonde hair wears a wreath of olive branches with a diamond at the top. Her white, transparent gown is decorated with linked balls or circles, perhaps a symbol of the Medici family crest. She wears leather boots and bears defensive weapons – a diamond-crusted halberd (combined spear and battle axe) and a shield on her back.² The centaur submits to her, despite his having a bow and quiver of arrows.

There are no iconographic precedents for this scene. Botticelli has creatively blended a goddess figure (but without the helmet, aegis, and sword necessary to identify the woman as Pallas) and an archer centaur (who represented wild, sensual instincts and passions in contemporary Florence) to create an allegory of reason ruling over instinct in order to nurture virtue and control vice.³

The painting may be related to the marriage of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and Semiramide in 1482, which is a good date for the painting stylistically. It is suggested that Lorenzo de’ Medici gave the painting to his cousin and protégé on the occasion of his marriage to symbolize “the supremacy of the mind and reason over the senses and earthly temptations, factors that distract a young man from the path of the *studia humanitas*.” The painting then becomes an allegory of chaste and pure love controlling the sensual passions.⁴

NOTES

1 Mediateca di Palazzo Medici Riccardi, [www.palazzo-medici.it/mediateca/en/Scheda_Sandro_Botticelli,_Pallade_e_il_centaurino_\(1482-1485_circa\)](http://www.palazzo-medici.it/mediateca/en/Scheda_Sandro_Botticelli,_Pallade_e_il_centaurino_(1482-1485_circa)) (accessed October 17, 2016).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid. See also, Pierluigi de Vecchi and Daniel Arasse, *Botticelli: From Lorenzo the Magnificent to Savonarola*, exhibition catalog of Musée du Luxembourg, Paris and Palazzo Strozzi, Florence. (Milan, IT: Skira, 2003), 122-127.

4 *Botticelli: From Lorenzo the Magnificent to Savonarola*, 124.