HUMANISM and the CLASSICAL TRADITION:
EARLY ITALIAN RENAISSANCE:
(Fra Filippo Lippi and Botticelli)
EARLY ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

Online Links:

Sandro Botticelli – Wikipedia

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Fra Filippo Lippi's Madonna and Child – Smarthistory

Man and Woman at a Casement – Smarthistory

Birth of Venus - Uffizi Gallery

Birth of Venus - Google Art Project (for closeup details)
Fra Filippo Lippi. *Madonna and Child with Angels*, c. 1455, tempera on wood

**Fra Filippo Lippi** (c. 1406-1469) was the son of a Florentine butcher with too many children to support. He and one of his brothers were therefore placed in the Camaldolese monastery of the Carmine. Unlike Fra Angelico, however, Filippo lacked the temperament of a friar. At one point, he had several nuns living in his house, allegedly using them as models. When one of the nuns, Lucrezia Buti, produced a son, Filippo was brought to trial and tortured. But he was fortunate in having the backing of Cosimo de’Medici and the humanist pope, Pius II. They arranged for him to withdraw from the Order, marry Lucrezia, and have their son Filippino legitimized.
The prominent rock formations directly behind Christ’s head refer to the Church and the distant city to the heavenly Jerusalem.

At the left, the landscape opens into a body of water, alluding to Mary’s association with the sea. In this painting, there is a particular emphasis on the motif of the pearl, which is a product of the sea. Small pearl clasps hold together the embroidered pillowcase on the arm rest and are repeated in Mary’s hair.

Their spherical shape was related to the ideal Platonic form adopted by Renaissance thinkers and they also symbolize the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the Incarnation of Christ, and the Word of God.
Sandro Botticelli. *Birth of Venus*, c. 1482, tempera on canvas
This pagan scene was painted around 1486 by the Florentine Sandro Botticelli, a devout Christian, whose studio concentrated largely on satisfying the demands of the public for devotional pictures: saints, gentle-faced Virgins and the Holy Child.

Botticelli’s Venus is patently the product of anatomical studies, as well as the artist’s adherence to Classical models. The influence of Greek Classical sculpture is visible in the way the weight of the goddess rests on one leg, in the attractive curve of her hip, in her chaste gesture. The Renaissance artist has drawn her proportions in accordance with a canon of harmony and ideal beauty. This included the measurement of an equal distance between the breast, between the navel and breasts, and so forth.

The Renaissance artist has drawn her proportions in accordance with a canon of harmony and ideal beauty developed by artists such as Polyclitus and Praxiteles. The canon helped form countless nudes, from Classical Greek statues to figures on late Roman tombs. However, it later fell into disrepute and, eventually, oblivion, where it remained until its rediscovery by the Renaissance.
Left: Medici Venus, 1st century BCE marble copy

Right: Praxiteles. *Aphrodite of Knidos*, 360-330 BCE

The iconography of Venus is certainly derived from the classic theme of *Venus Pudica*, covering her private parts shyly. In Florence, another important work of art is the translation in sculpture of the same theme: the famous Medici Venus at the Uffizi Gallery.
The traditional attributes of Venus, her rose for example, were passed on to another dominant figure, whose role was utterly opposed: the Christian Virgin Mary. This is also true of her shell. In connection with the pagan goddess, the sea-shell, like water, represented fertility. Its resemblance to the female genital organs made it also a symbol of sensuous pleasure and sexuality. But as the dome above the Virgin’s head in Botticelli’s St. Barnabas altarpiece, it can only symbolize virginity: it was thought that various kinds of mollusk were fertilized by the dew.
The Neoplatonist philosopher Marsilio Ficino interpreted the birth of Venus as an allegory of the birth of beauty in the mind of humanity. Botticelli has created from the myth an image of grace and beauty which in composition can be likened to the traditional format of the scene of St. John baptizing Christ.

Although Venus is nude here, she is derived from ancient statues of the Venus pudica (modest Venus) type and hides her nakedness with her hands and with her long golden hair, which sweeps about her. The sea itself is simply rendered, with V-shapes that suggest waves.
For Plato— and so for the members of the Florentine Platonic Academy— Venus had two aspects: she was an earthly goddess who aroused humans to physical love or she was a heavenly goddess who inspired intellectual love in them. Plato further argued that contemplation of physical beauty allowed the mind to better understand spiritual beauty.

So, looking at Venus, the most beautiful of goddesses, might at first raise a physical response in viewers which then lifted their minds towards the Creator. A Neoplatonic reading of Botticelli's Birth of Venus suggests that 15th-century viewers would have looked at the painting and felt their minds lifted to the realm of divine love.
Once we know that Botticelli’s picture has this quasi-religious meaning, it seems less surprising that the wind-god Zephyr and the breeze-goddess Aura on the left look so much like angels. It also makes sense that the Hora personifying Spring on the right, who welcomes Venus ashore, recalls the relationship of St. John to the Savior in the Baptism of Christ. As baptism is a “rebirth in God,” so the birth of Venus evokes the hope for “rebirth” from which the Renaissance takes its name.
An elegant nymph steps forward to receive Venus. She is one of the four Hours, who were spirits personifying the seasons. Her flowing white robe, which is embroidered with delicately entwined cornflowers, billows in the wind. She represents spring, the season of rebirth and renewal.

A single blue anemone blooms at the feet of the maiden. Its presence here reinforces the idea of the arrival of spring.

A girdle of pink roses, which is worn fashionably high, is woven around the Hour’s waist. Around her shoulders she wears an elegant garland of evergreen myrtle, symbolic of everlasting love.
Sandro Botticelli. *Primavera (Spring)*, c. 1482, tempera on canvas
This painting was appropriately placed outside the nuptial chamber of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, whose wedding was planned for May 1482. One indication that it was painted for the Medici is the plentitude of oranges. To a Florentine Quattrocento eye these golden orbs could hardly have failed to suggest the Medici coat of arms. Oranges were also a Medici symbol because they were called the *mala medica*, meaning the “medicinal apple.”
It goes without saying that Botticelli clothed his Venus in the robes of a married woman: she wears a bonnet and, draped over it, a veil. Hair was considered the weapon of the seductress; only young girls were permitted to let their hair hang loose.

Her graceful pose and chaste clothes are rather more reminiscent of the Virgin Mary than of a goddess of sensual love. Classical antiquity ascribed two roles to Venus. On the one hand, certainly, she was the light-hearted, adulterous goddess, accompanied by her son Cupid, who (painted near the Graces in the picture), blindly excited passion with his burning arrows. On the other, she was all harmony, proportion, and balance. A civilizing influence, she settled quarrels, eased social cohesion.
Mercury perhaps signifies the transience of spring or the fugitive nature of youth. But Mercury was also the god of merchants, and was therefore hardly out of place at a wedding with a commercial background.

Besides this, he—together with the goddess Flora and countless painted flowers—provides a further allusion to the wedding month: Mercury’s day in the Roman calendar was 15th May; his mother was Maia who gave the month its name.

In addition, he also bore the responsibility for doctors, whose symbol, the caduceus, he bears. Medici means “doctors,” and the Medici patron saints were the doctors Cosmas and Damian. The metaphor was standard in any eulogy of the Medici family.
This large canvas was at least in part inspired by a lighthearted poem by the humanist and poet Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494), about the birth of love in spring.

According to one recent interpretation, *Primavera* can be understood on several levels based on Ficinio’s writings. It is, first, a metaphor of Platonic love between two friends: Mercury points the way to divine love in the guise of Venus, which is born of the Three Graces, symbolizing beauty. In contrast is physical love, represented by Flora, who was often thought of in lascivious terms during the Renaissance.
On another level, the painting signifies the immortality of the soul through death and rebirth. This meaning arose by analogy of the Rape of Chloris to the Rape of Persephone, the subject of a poem by the Roman author Claudian that was popular among humanists at the time. Thus Venus becomes Demeter/Ceres of the Eleusian mysteries, with Mercury as the god of the dead. Eros is the vehicle of divine revelation, while the Three Graces stand for the soul.
Sandro Botticelli. *Venus and Mars*, c. 1483, tempera on panel

This work was probably a piece of bedroom furniture, perhaps a bedhead or piece of wainscoting, most probably the “spalliera” or backboard from a chest or day bed. The wasps (“vespe” in Italian) at the top right suggest a link with the Vespucci family, though they may be no more than a symbol of the stings of love. A lost Classical painting of the marriage of Alexander and Roxana was described by the 2nd-century Greek writer, Lucian. It showed cupids playing with Alexander's spear and armor. Botticelli's satyrs may refer to this. Mars is sleeping the “little death” which comes after making love, and not even a trumpet in his ear will wake him. The little satyrs have stolen his lance - a joke to show that he is now disarmed.
In the painting Venus watches Mars sleep while two infant satyrs play carrying his armor as another rests under his arm. A fourth blows a small conch shell in his ear in an effort to wake him. Although the work draws from classical sources, it diverges in important aspects, and is a product of early renaissance allegorical teaching. The scene is set in a haunted forest, and the sense of perspective and horizon extremely tight and compact. The sea from which Venus emerged can be seen in the distant background. In the foreground, a swarm of wasps hovers around Mars' head, possibly as a symbol that love is often accompanied by pain. Another possible explanation is that the wasps represent the Vespucci family that may have commissioned the painting; the symbol of the Vespucci house is the wasp. (The Italian word for “wasp” is “Vespa”)
The image may be based on the *Stanze* of Poliziano. *Stanze* 122 describes how the hero found Venus "seated on the edge of her couch, just then released from the embrace of Mars, who lay on his back in her lap, still feeding his eyes on her face". Poliziano was one of the humanist scholars in the court of Lorenzo de' Medici, and in his stanze he alludes to Giuliano di Piero de' Medici's prowess in a jousting tournament his older brother Lorenzo had organized to celebrate a treaty with Venice.

**Giuliano di Piero de' Medici** is most likely the athletic model for the war god who slumbers next to the goddess in this work. However, the description, with Mars in Venus' lap, gazing up at her, is a poor fit to the painting. Venus may have been **Simonetta Vespucci**, a great beauty of the time, married to the cousin of Amerigo Vespucci. Botticelli, who portrayed her many times after her death, asked to be buried, as she had been, in the Church of Ognissanti in Florence.
Domenico Ghirlandaio. *Giovanna Tornabuoni (?)*, 1488, oil and tempera on wood

The development of the portrait and the dawning of the Renaissance are closely connected. The main purpose of Medieval painting was the depiction of people and events from the Bible and other holy or devotional texts. Artists sought to represent what could not otherwise be seen in normal life. The idea of painting representing daily reality rather than supernatural or miraculous events involved an enormous cultural shift.
The interrelationship between character and physical appearance, between the spiritual and physical aspects of beauty, is the subject of the Latin epigram by the poet Martial which is inscribed on the portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni painted in 1488 by the Florentine artist Domenico Ghirlandaio. The epigram runs, “If the artist could have painted here the character and moral virtues, there would be no finer painting on earth.”

There is probably a degree of social convention as well as political expediency involved here (the marriage of Giovanna degli Albizzi with a member of the Tornabuoni family, allies of the Medici, resulted in a period of peace for Florence), but the elegant Latin motto also affirms an important belief: for Renaissance man there was a profound relationship between physical and spiritual perfection.
Domenico Ghirlandaio. *Birth of the Virgin* (Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella), 1485-1490, fresco
Ghirlandaio’s last great fresco cycle in the chancel of Santa Maria Novella was commissioned by Giovanni Tornabuoni. It represents scenes from the life of the Virgin and John the Baptist, the latter being Giovanni’s name saint. As the brother-in-law of Piero de’ Medici, treasurer to the pope, and head of the Medici bank in Rome, Giovanni was a powerful figure in the late fifteenth century. His taste for the appearance of consciously constructed perspective, rich brocades, and Classical architectural details is evident in the *Birth of the Virgin*. 
At the top of the stairs, the earlier scene in which Anna (Mary’s mother) and Joachim (Mary’s father) embrace alludes to the apocryphal Meeting at the Golden Gate. The main event takes place in the right foreground and, like the frescoes in the Sassetti Chapel, merges contemporary figures with those of the past. Classical details abound in the pilaster reliefs, the garland frieze (possibly a reference to Ghirlandaio’s name) above the molding, and the exuberant frieze of putti depicted in grisaille.
Leading the group is **Ludovica**, the youngest daughter of Giovanni, and at the rear is Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Giovanni’s sister, who had died in 1482. Ludovica stands dispassionately with four attendants, dressed in splendor that surely violated the Florentine sumptuary laws.
Mary’s mother, Saint Anne, reclines in a palace room embellished with fine intarsia (wood inlay) and sculpture, while midwives prepare the infant’s bath. The “grotesque” architectural border conforms to the very latest in sophisticated Roman design. It can also be seen on the columns and in the paneling around the room and is based on the recently discovered Golden House of Nero in Rome. So exciting was this discovery that Ghirlandaio sent all the members of his workshop to take drawings of the relief decoration which had survived almost 1,500 years in cave-like ruins, known as grotte in Italian.
Above: Studiolo of Federico da Montefeltro at the Ducal Palace in Urbino, 1476
Girolamo Savonarola, Dominican friar and puritan fanatic, became moral dictator of the city of Florence when the Medici were temporarily driven out in 1494. Sent to Florence originally a dozen years before, he made a reputation for austerity and learning, and became prior of the convent of St Mark (where his rooms can still be seen).

A visionary, prophet and formidably effective hellfire preacher, obsessed with human wickedness and convinced that the wrath of God was about to fall upon the earth, he detested practically every form of pleasure and relaxation.
His opponents called Savonarola and his followers “Snivellers” and he grimly disapproved of jokes and frivolity, of poetry and inns, of sex (especially the homosexual variety), of gambling, of fine clothes and jewelry and luxury of every sort.

He denounced the works of Boccaccio, nude paintings, pictures of pagan deities and the whole humanistic culture of the Italian Renaissance.

He called for laws against vice and laxity. He put an end to the carnivals and festivals the Florentines traditionally enjoyed, substituting religious festivals instead, and employed street urchins as a junior gestapo to sniff out luxurious and suspect items.

In the famous “bonfire of the vanities” in 1497 he had gaming tables and packs of cards, carnival masks, mirrors, ornaments, nude statues and supposedly indecent books and pictures burned in the street. The friar also disapproved of profiteering financiers and businessmen.
Not surprisingly, Savonarola made many powerful enemies. Among them was the Borgia pope, Alexander VI, who had good reason to feel uncomfortable with the Dominican’s denunciation of the laxity and luxury of the Church and its leaders, and who eventually excommunicated the rigorous friar. On Palm Sunday in 1498 St Mark’s was attacked by a screaming mob and Savonarola was arrested by the Florentine authorities with two friars who were among his most ardent followers, Fra Dominico and Fra Salvestro. All three were cruelly tortured before being condemned as heretics and handed over to the secular arm by two papal commissioners, who came hotfoot from Rome for the purpose on May 19th. “We shall have a fine bonfire,” the senior commissioner remarked genially on arrival, “for I have the sentence of condemnation with me.”

On the morning of May 23rd a crowd of Florentines gathered in the Piazza della Signoria, where a scaffold had been erected on a platform (a plaque marks the spot today). From the heavy beam dangled three halters, to hang the friars, and three chains, to support their bodies while they were subsequently burned to ashes.
Fra Salvestro and Fra Domenico were hanged first, slowly and painfully, before Savonarola climbed the ladder to the place between them. The executioner made cruel fun of him and then apparently tried to delay his demise so that the flames would reach him before he was quite dead, but failed, and Savonarola died of strangulation at about 10am. He was forty-five years old. With the piles of wood below the scaffold set alight, the flames quickly engulfed the three dangling bodies while a trick of the heat made Savonarola’s right hand move so that he seemed to be blessing the spectators. Some of them burst into tears, but others, including excited children, sang and danced delightedly around the pyre and threw stones at the corpses. What little was left of the three Dominicans was thrown into the River Arno.
Like much of Florence, Botticelli had come under the sway of Savonarola and his art had transformed from the decorative to the deeply devout - *The Mystical Nativity* (c. 1500-1501) (shown left) bears all the signs of this change.

The story that he burnt his own paintings on pagan themes in the notorious "Bonfire of the Vanities" is not told by Vasari, who nevertheless asserts that of the sect of Savonarola "he was so ardent a partisan that he was thereby induced to desert his painting, and, having no income to live on, fell into very great distress. For this reason, persisting in his attachment to that party, and becoming a *Piagnone* he abandoned his work."
HUMANISM and the CLASSICAL TRADITION: EARLY ITALIAN RENAISSANCE: (Fra Filippo Lippi and Botticelli) ACTIVITIES and REVIEW
STUDENT PRESENTATION #1:

In what way does the painting on the right by Sandro Botticelli appear to have been stylistically influenced by the works of Fra Filippo Lippi, whose work appears on the left? Also citing specific evidence from the work on the right, how and why was Botticelli influenced by a growing interest in the revival of Greco-Roman classicism?
Who created these works? Discuss both how and some probable reasons why the artist was influenced by a revived interest in Greco-Roman classicism.