

A Possible Source for Botticelli's *Venus*¹

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Historians of Renaissance art have all but relegated the art of Lorenzo di Credi to the depths of obscurity. Although some, most notably Giorgio Vasari and Gigetta dalli Regoli, have spoken highly of Credi's work, the majority of scholars consider him to be at best a poor imitator of Leonardo da Vinci.² While Lorenzo's work undoubtedly will remain overshadowed by that of Verrocchio, Leonardo, and Raphael, its importance to the formation of late Quattrocento art in Florence needs to be reassessed. Recent publications, especially those of Dario Covi and Craig Hugh Smyth, have contributed to a greater comprehension of Credi's role in the fifteenth century.³ This work indicates that Credi brought Venetian ideas to Tuscan art. Perhaps the most important image that Credi brought back to Florence was Venus as a nude figure, an image which could have been a source of inspiration for Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*.

The Uffizi *Venus* (Figure 1) by Lorenzo di Credi has been dismissed in the past as a mere copy or study of the Botticelli painting.⁴ Certainly Credi's nude is rendered without any attributes to aid in its identification and is placed before a simple background, but dismissing the work as a preliminary study prevents observers from judging the painting on its own merits. Despite the simple composition, the painting has a finished quality which would not be found in a mere study. In this large scale painting the artist has given his attention to details ranging from the subtlety of expression and the glimmer of light reflecting on the hair to the shadows which are cast at the base of the body. Its breadth and solidity create an imposing figure, much in the manner of the "close-up" studies popularized by the Venetian painter, Giovanni Bellini.⁵

The *Venus* also suggests the appearance of statuary—as if Credi had used a sculpture for a model. The crisp, precise contour lines, the flat modeling and the overall general lighting bring to mind sculptural forms. The elongated proportions of the body, the small breasts, sloping shoulders and the sinuous curving hip which falls heavily into a contrapposto stance, point specifically to Hellenistic sculptural prototypes. The thin diaphanous cloth, which covers the figure, seems oddly ponderous as it falls to the ground. The cloth, which forms a "third leg," is reminiscent of the tree stumps and other objects placed at the base of ancient marble statues to maintain a physical balance.

This way of portraying Venus in the nude is a familiar one today and one which is normally associated with Renaissance art. Yet ironically, one would be hard pressed to name an example of the nude Venus in Florentine art until the 1480s with the appearance of Credi's work and Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (Figure 2). In fact, aside from the early fourteenth-century Christianized Venus on Giovanni Pisano's Pisa Pulpit (thought to represent temperance), the image of Venus in the nude does not appear in the art of the early Renaissance in Florence until the 1480s.⁶

The dearth of ancient examples of nude Venus could be the reason for the infrequent depiction of the subject in the

early Renaissance. Marble Venuses from antiquity known in the fifteenth century were limited to a few isolated examples. The most famous examples today, the Capitoline and Medici Venuses, were not known to the Quattrocento artist.⁷

Only two surviving accounts describe ancient statues of Venus in Tuscany. The first was written by Benvenuto da Imola in the 1370s. He wrote:

In a private house in Florence I saw a beautifully wrought marble Venus, represented in the fashion in which she was once depicted. She was entirely naked, with her left hand covering her private parts and her right hand before her breasts. It was said to be a work of Polycletus, but this I do not believe.⁸

The second account comes from Ghiberti's *Commentaries* written in the middle of the fifteenth century. He writes of a statue of Venus which he knew only from a sketch drawn a century before by Ambrogio Lorenzetti; the statue was discovered by Sieneese workmen who inadvertently dug it up.⁹ Unfortunately, Ghiberti did not describe the pose of the figure, nor mention whether the figure was unclothed.

Florentine artists had little information and few examples of ancient statues of Venus in their immediate environment. Therefore, the revitalization of the image of the nude Venus by Credi raises the question of origins. In the past few years, art historians have given attention to the emergence of Venetian motifs in Florentine art during the last quarter of the Quattrocento. Craig Hugh Smyth raises the possibility that without these connections with Venetian art, the formation of High Renaissance in Florence would not have developed in the manner that it did.¹⁰ In one of his many examples, Smyth mentions that the painting of the Veneto affected the work of Andrea del Verrocchio and others in his circle, most notably Lorenzo di Credi, a student and valued assistant.¹¹ Verrocchio absorbed certain stylistic and iconographic elements found in Venetian art and combined them with Tuscan traditions.

Smyth's thesis has been supplemented by Dario Covi who has discovered documents that place Verrocchio in Venice in June of 1469, almost two decades earlier than formerly believed.¹² Upon his return to Florence in 1470, Verrocchio, still freshly under the influence of Venetian art, painted the Gambier-Parry *Madonna and Child* (Figure 3).¹³ This half-length *Madonna and Child*, represented on a parapet with a landscape background, is unique to the art of Florence, but the formula had been used in Venetian art since the mid-fifteenth century.¹⁴ The landscape, a type often observed in Venetian painting, is traceable to Flemish art and consists of low-lying hills, scattered buildings and a river or body of water which curves into the distance under a calm, luminous sky.

In all probability Lorenzo was too young to have traveled to Venice with his master in 1469.¹⁵ The earliest

recorded date of Credi's association with Verrocchio is 1473, but Verrocchio's presence in Venice at that early date is crucial in the consideration of Lorenzo di Credi's artistic development. As illustrated by this *Madonna and Child*, Verrocchio absorbed these Venetian influences into his art and his continuing enthusiasm for Venetian art undoubtedly affected the rest of his workshop.

The power and influence of Verrocchio on the development of the young artist's style can be seen in Credi's masterpiece, the Uffizi *Annunciation* (Figure 4), painted about 1481, almost ten years after the Gambier-Parry *Madonna and Child*. The Venetian influences visible in Verrocchio's work are also to be found here. The placid, rolling Flemish landscape dominates the composition and becomes an important element contributing to the tranquility of the scene. Like Verrocchio, Credi is equally precise in his handling of the decorative details on the rear wall. The swags of fruit, the leaves, and the flowers which spring forth from urns near the base of the pilasters are depicted with the same detailed precision. The careful painting of the floral decorations on the pilasters and frieze are reminiscent of the details in the Gambier-Perry *Madonna* as well as the linearism normally associated with Verrocchio.

His affinity for the depiction of sculptural forms is not surprising. Credi began his career as a goldsmith and, like Verrocchio, was known and respected as a sculptor. Even though only one sculpture has been attributed to Lorenzo, as Verrocchio's artistic executor he was required by Verrocchio's will to finish the Colleoni monument and the Forteguerri cenotaph, both major sculptural commissions.¹⁶

Although Credi was introduced to Venetian motifs through Verrocchio, his true appreciation and comprehension for the art of the Veneto undoubtedly developed when he traveled to Venice in the 1480s in conjunction with the Colleoni commission. Credi worked in Venice no less than six months and no more than ten.¹⁷ Records do not indicate the precise year of Credi's sojourn, but we know that Verrocchio installed his competition piece in Venice in 1481 and that he moved his workshop there in 1483 after being awarded the commission.¹⁸ As Verrocchio's valued assistant, Credi occasionally acted as a liaison between Florence and Venice carrying messages and supplies between the two shops.¹⁹

A further indication of Credi's presence in Venice can be found in a drawing now in the Louvre which was his entry for the competition for the tomb of Doge Vendramin. Dalli Regoli is the most recent of the scholars to assign this drawing to the hand of Lorenzo.²⁰ Vendramin died in 1478 and the tomb designed by Tullio Lombardo was begun about 1487, suggesting the usual dating for the Louvre drawing as ca. 1483. The console type shown in the actual tomb and in Credi's drawing is found only in Venice, which means that Credi was familiar with Venetian art by the early 1480s.²¹

This early exposure to Venetian artistic ideas suggests that Venice provided the source of inspiration for Credi's painted *Venus*. Like Rome and Florence, Venice assimilated the art and spirit of antiquity with equal enthusiasm. In fact, the interest in the representation of the nude Venus seems to occur much earlier and more frequently in this northern Italian city, especially in the form of small bronzes.²² Apparently, Venus provided the perfect symbol for the great Republic of Venice, since the Venetians have always held a special fascination for the sea. The city's own unique

formation from the water is akin to Venus' own birth from the sea.²³

The connection between Venice and this ancient deity may have been reinforced by the Venetian man-of-letters, Ermolao Barbaro. Barbaro, concerned with the corruption of the texts of Pliny, established in the early 1490s that Venus was not *dionea*, or "born of Zeus," as transcribed in medieval versions, but was, in fact, *anadyomena*, or "born of the sea."²⁴

This special relationship could explain the early fascination of Venetian artists with the depiction of Venus. Tullio Lombardo, Antonio Rizzo and Antico represented her nude as the ancients did and, more specifically, the images are often of the *Venus Pudica* type. This ancient image emphasizes the gesture of modesty as the goddess covers herself with her arms or drapery.

Among the examples originating from the Veneto during the last quarter of the 1400s is the *Venus Prudentia*, attributed to Tullio Lombardo (Figure 5). Wendy Sheard has described this small bronze figure in the following manner:

The luxurious mass of hair pulled back in parallel waves was familiar from a number of Hellenistic and Roman female head types. . . . The tilted head, with large, expressive eyes, Hellenic nose and parted lips was a combination pioneered by Tullio. . . . They impart a dreamy, distracted expression to the face.²⁵

Sheard's description can also be applied to Lorenzo di Credi's *Venus*, for she shares many of the same characteristics, from the "dreamy," self-absorbed expression on the face to the exact tilt of the head. Yet the kinship with the *Venus Prudentia* goes beyond facial similarities. The contrapposto stance, the firm modeling of the body, the sloped shoulders and the graceful attenuation of the body of the *Venus Prudentia*, are all present in the *Venus* by Lorenzo.

Nonetheless, this bronze version of Venus is lighter and more graceful than Lorenzo's. The heavier, more stately proportions of Lombardo's earlier figures of *Adam* and *Eve* from the Vendramin tomb and the *Eve* of Antonio Rizzo from the Doge's Palace (Figure 6) demonstrate body types closer to the Credi *Venus*. While these examples represent the biblical figures of Adam and Eve and not the mythological goddess, the Eves adopt the gestures of modesty from the *Venus Pudica*. These sculptors, like Credi, are concerned about the subtle placement of visual weight and balance, especially through the classic use of contrapposto.²⁶ Sheard states emphatically that the Vendramin *Adam* and *Eve* and Rizzo's *Eve* represent the "culmination of two independent strands of development, the first being the quattrocento study of contrapposto, in which the weight displacements and axes through the figure remained predominantly two dimensional, and the second, the Venetian antique revival."²⁷

One more consideration, which links the importance of the artistic climate in Venice with a resurgence of the subject of Venus, is that non-Venetian artists who came to Venice also depicted the image. Most notable is Albrecht Dürer, who started his fervent search for the proportions of the ideal beauty after he viewed a drawing of Venus by Jacopo de' Barbari in 1494. Marcantonio Raimondi also incorporated into his oeuvre the image of a Venus with upraised arms, a motif which appears in Venetian art as early as 1507.²⁸

Once the relationship between Credi's *Venus* and the nude figures from Venice is understood, the comparison between his nude and that of Botticelli assumes a new importance. At first glance, the two Venuses appear to be mirror images of each other. They both have lofty proportions, sloped shoulders, elongated torso and the distant, dreamy expression. The contrapposto stance and the gestures of modesty associated with the *Venus Pudica* are also similar.

Nonetheless, a number of differences come to the fore upon closer examination. Botticelli has used the same elements as Credi, but has taken these elements further. The sloping shoulders become even more sloped, the already elongated arms in Credi's work become even longer in Botticelli's and the tilt of the head goes beyond nature, as Botticelli angles the head in an unnatural position. Despite the heavy, solid torso of Botticelli's *Venus*, the figure seems to glide towards the foreground weightlessly. Botticelli has pushed the contrapposto to the point that it loses the solidity and firmness normally associated with the stance and becomes a swaying motion often referred to as Gothic. These differences serve to underline the creativity of Botticelli. Though he may have been inspired by Credi's depiction of *Venus*, Botticelli has translated the image into his own terms.

While historians have commented often that Botticelli used an ancient marble *Venus* as a model, they have been unable to identify such a source. No available records remain which indicate that Botticelli ever traveled north. In fact, extant records show that Botticelli left Florence only once when he traveled to Rome in 1481 to assist with the decoration of the Sistine Chapel. Scholars today generally

accept the hypothesis that Botticelli joined Verrocchio's studio in the early 1470s where he would not only have met Lorenzo di Credi but would have been exposed to the Venetian motifs which Verrocchio brought back from Venice.²⁹ Because of Credi's assimilation of the Venetian *Venus* type, his painting would seem logically to come before the *Venus* of Botticelli.

Three studies of a *Venus* before a dark ground have been attributed to the workshop of Botticelli (Figure 7).³⁰ While the proportions of the bodies are close to Botticelli's, the format parallels Credi's work. At the turn of this century, Ridolfi concluded that these studies indicate that Botticelli and Credi were involved in a competition for the commission of the *Birth of Venus*.³¹ Since both Credi's *Venus* and Botticelli's masterpiece were in the Medici collection, his hypothesis is an interesting one. Most other art historians have dismissed Ridolfi's idea, but have failed to explain the similarities of the compositions. Certainly, the use of the *Venus Pudica* type standing before an unadorned background is unparalleled in Florentine art, yet similar works such as Lucas Cranach's *Venus and Cupid* of 1509 and the *Venus* by Lorenzo Costa support Kenneth Clark's contention that such a unique format was not "invented independently."³²

The chronological relationship between Credi's *Venus* and the nude in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* is not clear. The importance of the Venetian artistic environment with respect to the renewed interest in the nude *Venus* image, the recent documentation of Credi's travels to Venice, and more importantly the similarity of his *Venus* to the Venetian examples strongly suggest that Credi's *Venus* came first.

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1 This paper is based upon preliminary dissertation research.

2 For example see S.J. Freedberg, *Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 72-3. Freedberg rates Credi as one of the secondary masters. Fahy says that "It is clear that the art of Lorenzo di Credi does not play a leading role in the line of succession that leads from the brilliant innovations of the Verrocchio workshop to the art of the first decades of the sixteenth century." Everett Fahy, "The Earliest Works of Fra Bartolommeo," *Art Bulletin*, 51 (1969), 142.

3 Craig Hugh Smyth, "Venice and the Emergence in Florence," in *Florence and Venice Comparisons and Relations* ed. Craig Hugh Smyth (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1979), pp. 215-6; and Dario Covi, "Four New Documents Concerning Andrea del Verrocchio," *Art Bulletin*, 48 (1966), pp. 97-103.

4 Gigetta Dalli Regoli, *Lorenzo di Credi* (Pisa: Edizione di Comunità, 1966), pp. 138-40.

5 In this example one is particularly reminded of the close-up, half-length figures of Giovanni Bellini. The idea of placing the subject in the immediate foreground in a "close-up" manner was popular throughout the Veneto. See Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in the Fifteenth Century Devotional Painting* (Abo: Abo Akademi, 1965).

6 Kenneth Clark, *The Nude* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1959), pp. 146-171.

7 Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 16.

8 Peter Murray, "The Continuity of Latinity," *Apollo*, 81 (1965), p. 299.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.

10 Smyth, pp. 215, 223-227.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Dario Covi, "Four New Documents Concerning Andrea del Verrocchio," *Art Bulletin*, 48 (1966), pp. 97-103.

13 Shearman is the most recent historian to attribute this work to Verrocchio. Even if historians do not agree on its authorship, the painting is obviously from the workshop of Verrocchio. See John Shearman, "A Suggestion for the Early Style of Verrocchio," *Burlington Magazine*, 109 (1967), pp. 121-27.

14 Smyth, p. 224.

15 The actual birth of Credi is still under discussion. In the Catasto of 1480-81, Credi's mother gives her son's age as 21, but recently discovered documents establish the fact that Credi worked for Verrocchio in 1473 and gives credence to the inscription of the National Gallery *Self Portrait* in Washington, D.C. (which states that Credi was 32 in 1488); Covi, p. 99. See also Georg Gronau, "Lorenzo di Credi," in *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler*, 8, pp. 73-4.

16 Günther Passavant, *Verrocchio* (London: Phaidon Press, Ltd, 1969), p. 40. Vasari-Milanesi, *Le Vite de' piu eccellenti Architetti, Pittori et Scultori Italiani*, III (Florence, 1879), p. 25; and Raimond Van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*, Vol. 13 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1931), pp. 269-334.

17 Covi, pp. 97–9.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Sheldon Grossman, "An Early Drawing by Fra Bartolommeo," *Studies in the History of Art*, 6 (1974), p. 13.

20 Dalli Regoli, p. 148.

21 Wendy Sheard, "The Tomb of Doge Andrea Vendramin," Diss. Yale University 1971, pp. 81–3.

22 Wendy Sheard, *Antiquity in the Renaissance* (North Hampton, Mass: Smith College of Art, 1979), pp. 37–38.

23 In addition, Venice held a special festival on an annual basis, called the *Sposalizio del Mar*, or the 'marriage to the sea.' On the day of ascension, the Doge would sail to the Lido and toss a gold ring into the water with the words, "We wed thee, sea, in token of our perpetual rule." See Sheard, "The Tomb of Doge Andrea Vendramin," p. 222.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 81–3.

25 Sheard, *Antiquity in the Renaissance*, p. 37.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*, p. 36. See also Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955).

29 Smyth, p. 224.

30 For a discussion of art historians and their attributions for these paintings, see Michael Levey and Gabriele Mandel, *The Complete Paintings of Botticelli* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1967), p. 96.

31 Dalli Regoli, pp. 138–40.

32 Clark, p. 157.



Figure 1, Lorenzo di Credi, *Venus*, ca. 1480s, Uffizi, Florence; Gigetta dalli Regoli, *Lorenzo di Credi*, 1966, plate IV.



Figure 2, Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, ca. 1486, Uffizi, Florence; Luciano Berti, *The Uffizi and Vasari Corridor*, 1978, p. 48.



Figure 3, Andrea del Verrocchio (attrib.), *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1470, Gambier and Parry Collection, Courtauld Institute Galleries, London; *Art Bulletin*, 109 (1967), p. 21.

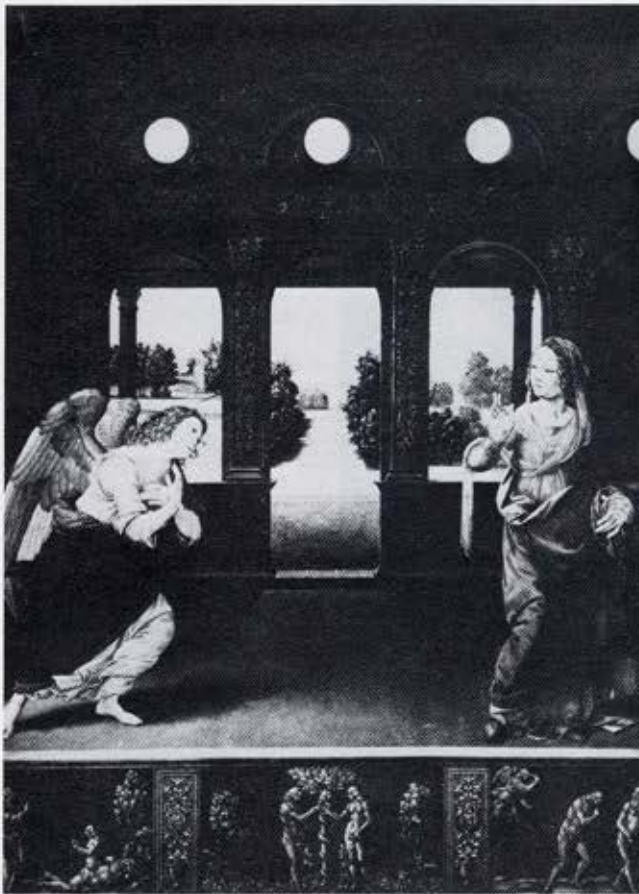


Figure 4, Lorenzo di Credi, *Annunciation*, ca. 1481, Uffizi, Florence; Luciano Berti, *The Uffizi and Vasari Corridor*, 1978, p. 23.

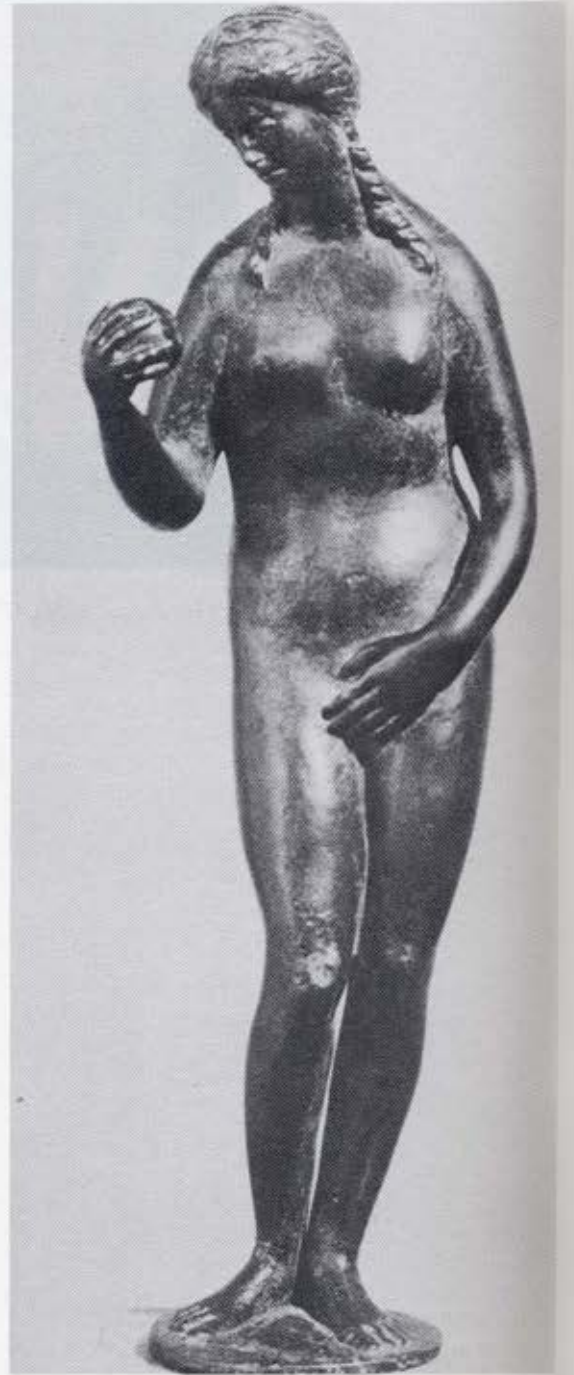


Figure 5, Tullio Lombardo (attrib.), *Venus Prudentia*, ca. 1455, Cleveland Museum of Art; Wendy Sheard, *Antiquity in the Renaissance*, 1979, p. 38.



Figure 6, Antonio Rizzo, *Eve*, ca. 1488, Palazzo Doge, Venice; Charles Seymour, *Sculpture in Italy 1400–1500*, 1966, plate 143.



Figure 7, Sandro Botticelli (workshop), *Venus*, ca. 1486, Galleria Sabauda, Turin.