

BOTTICELLI AS SEEN BY A FRIEND OF THE  
PRE-RAPHAELITES:  
SWINBURNE'S "NOTES ON DESIGNS OF THE  
OLD MASTERS AT FLORENCE" (1868)

JONATHAN K. NELSON

AN OBSCURE ESSAY BY A FAMOUS AUTHOR, "NOTES ON DESIGNS OF THE Old Masters at Florence" by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909) offers more than a series of perceptive, influential, and beautifully written observations about Renaissance art; it also allows us to eavesdrop on conversations held within the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Although its members wrote little about their views on fifteenth-century painters, they surely discussed the observations in this article. Swinburne based his text on notes he had taken in the Uffizi in 1864, soon after the Renaissance drawings were first put on display, and published it in 1868. The essay was thus written during the very period when Swinburne enjoyed regular contact with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and Simeon Solomon.<sup>1</sup> In the 1860s, these painters were already copying paintings by Botticelli, then little known, and the Pre-Raphaelites evidently communicated their enthusiasm to Swinburne, the first Englishman "to set down at any length an appreciation of Botticelli."<sup>2</sup> In "Notes on Designs," the poet brought his unique sensibility to the Renaissance artist; in many works by Botticelli, he detected "the faint and almost painful grace, which give a distinctive value and a curious charm to all the works of Botticelli."<sup>3</sup>

Profoundly influenced by French Aestheticism, especially the works of Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire, Swinburne explored the reaction of refined viewers to art, expressing disdain for religious and moral messages; famously, he translated and popularized the phrase "art for art's sake" in his 1868 book on William Blake.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, in "Notes on Designs" of the same year, Swinburne wrote of Venetian Renaissance artists that "since the Greek sculptors there was never a race of artists so humbly and so wholly devoted to the worship of beauty."<sup>5</sup> In Botticelli's art, Swinburne found different qualities, and delighted in the "love of soft hints and veiled meaning."<sup>6</sup> This essay became a foundational text for English Aestheticism, an ideal that is now best known from the writings of Walter Pater. In its approach and subject, Swinburne's essay had a profound influence on two studies later published by Pater in the *Fortnightly Review*, one on Leonardo (1869) and the other on Botticelli (1870).<sup>7</sup> The second essay played a fundamental role in promoting Botticelli's fame.<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, of all the Uffizi drawings then attributed to Botticelli, Swinburne devoted the most attention to two now ascribed to different artists: one he described as a cupid with a nymph (*Venus and Cupid*, by Andrea del Verrocchio, fig. 50), and the other as two witches (*Althaea and Her Maid*, by a follower of Botticelli's student Filippino Lippi, fig. 51).<sup>9</sup> The numerous Uffizi drawings by Filippino evidently struck a chord with Swinburne, who wrote the first sensitive appreciation of this artist in English. He even compared Filippino's drawing of Minerva (fig. 52) to "Burne-Jones's nobler drawing of the young Sidonia,"<sup>10</sup> and he probably introduced the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to works by the Renaissance artist. The two figures looking at sheet music in Burne-Jones's celebrated painting *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* (1884, Tate, London) are based on angels in Filippino's *Corsini Tondo* that had been specifically praised by Swinburne.<sup>11</sup> In Filippino, Swinburne detected a "lean and fleshless beauty, worn down, it seems by some sickness or natural trouble rather than by any ascetic or artificial sorrow, in which Botticelli must have taught his pupil to take pleasure."<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, this confla-

tion of pleasure and pain, which reflects Swinburne's early appreciation of Baudelaire, permeates his *Poems and Ballads* (1866);<sup>13</sup> on the other hand, "the provocative image of a lovely young woman wasting away . . . was one also used by the English Pre-Raphaelites."<sup>14</sup> This reading of Botticelli, based largely on drawings by other artists and soon developed by Pater, became the predominant interpretative key for the Victorians' understanding of the artist.

Old master drawings provided a most unusual subject for a literary essay, and this very novelty surely appealed to Swinburne. Moreover, his connections to artists gave him an appreciation for graphic work,<sup>15</sup> while his essay likely resonated with the draftsmen exploring Renaissance techniques.<sup>17</sup> Swinburne must have been aware of an earlier, now almost forgotten article by French critic Léon Lagrange about the Uffizi drawings.<sup>18</sup> Both authors noted the lack of a proper catalogue of the drawings and offered their comments as useful aids. For Lagrange, drawings showed the original conception for a work "as it emerged from the soul, inspired by the artist," but in paintings, this idea was often obscured by obstacles; he specifically mentioned the "pale color" of Botticelli's works.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Swinburne (followed by Pater) wrote of Botticelli's drawings that the "dull and dry quality of his thin pallid colouring can here no longer impair the charm of his natural grace."<sup>20</sup> The "chief charm" of many Uffizi drawings is the "ability to see for a passage of swift thoughts and flying fancies across the fruitful minds of masters."<sup>21</sup>

We can measure Swinburne's distance from Lagrange by his selection of artists (he virtually ignored Fra Angelico) and original observations. Courting controversy, Swinburne argued that pagan subjects gave Renaissance painters artistic freedom. One drawing by Botticelli "suggests the suppressed leaning to grotesque invention and hunger after heathen liberty which break out whenever this artist is released from the mill-horse round of mythologic virginity and sacred childhood."<sup>22</sup> Pater later developed this idea, and presented even Botticelli's depictions of the Madonna as reflecting his "desire to



FIGURE 50  
Andrea del Verrocchio (Italian, 1435–1488), *Venus and Cupid*, 1475. Metalpoint and black chalk on paper, 5 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (14.8 x 25.9 cm). Gabinetto dei Disegni e Stampe, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence, 212 E



FIGURE 51

Follower of Filippino Lippi (Italian, late 15th century), *Althaea and Her Maid*, copy after original, 1488–1493. Pen and ink on paper, 10 1/8 x 6 5/8 in. (25.6 x 15.5 cm). Gabinetto dei Disegni e Stampe, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence, 203 E

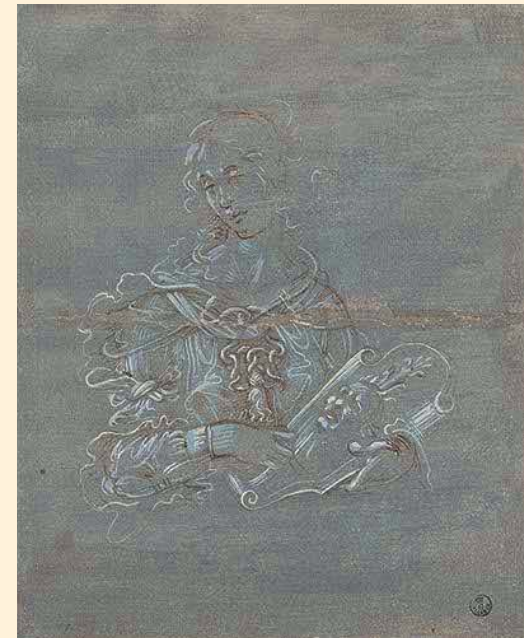


FIGURE 52

Filippino Lippi (Italian, ca. 1457–1504), *Minerva*, 1488–1493. Pen and ink on paper, 9 5/8 x 8 1/8 in. (25.2 x 20.4 cm). Gabinetto dei Disegni e Stampe, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence, 1255 E

break free of the Christian frameworks that were imposed upon him and to pursue aesthetic ends simply for their own sake."<sup>53</sup> Pater found in Botticelli a direct source to the "buried fire" of the ancients,<sup>54</sup> but Swinburne's earlier views bring us closer to the sentiments of the Pre-Raphaelites. In Filippino, and in works by the "romantic school" of his contemporaries, "the clear form has gone, the old beauty dropped out of sight," but the imperfections in the figures make them more immediate to modern viewers; "they tread real earth, and breathe real air, though it be not in Greece or Troas."<sup>55</sup> After discussing the mythological works by Botticelli, Filippino, and Piero di Cosimo, Swinburne concluded that "[m]ore than any others, these painters of the early Florentine school reproduce in their own art the style of thought and work familiar to a student of Chaucer and his fellows or pupils."<sup>56</sup> In Early Renaissance artists, Swinburne found and celebrated the same "charm" he admired in the Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>57</sup>

“The Present System of Obtaining Materials in Use by Artist Painters, as Compared with That of the Old Masters,” *Journal of the Society of Arts* 28 (April 23, 1880): 485–499.

12. John D. Batten, “A Meeting at Holman Hunt’s Studio,” *Papers of the Society of Mural Decorators and Painters in Tempera: Second Volume, 1907–1924*, ed. John D. Batten (Brighton, UK: Dolphin Press, 1925), 6.

13. Viola Borradaile and Rosamund Borradaile, *The Student’s Cennini: A Handbook for Tempera Painters* (Brighton, UK: Dolphin Press, 1942), 5.

14. The tempera revivalists directly influenced the next generation of tempera painters in Britain, including Edward Wadsworth, Augustus Lunn, and Maxwell Armfield, as well as artists in America, such as Andrew Wyeth and Thomas Hart Benton.



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1. Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence,” in *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1875), originally published in the *Fortnightly Review*, n.s., 4 (July 1868): 16–40. The most important studies are by three literary scholars, each of whom kindly assisted me on this essay: Catherine Maxwell, *Swinburne* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2000), 81–105; Lene Østermark-Johansen, “Swinburne’s Serpentine Delights: The Aesthetic Critic and the Old Master Drawings in Florence,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 24, no. 1 (2002): 49–72; and Stefano Evangelista, “Swinburne’s Galleries,” *Yearbook of English Studies* 40, no. 1/2 (2010): 160–179.

2. John Christian, “Speaking of Kisses in Paradise: Burne-Jones’s Friendship with Swinburne,” *Journal of the William Morris Society* 13, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 14–24; Henrietta Ward, “‘The Rising Genius’: Simeon Solomon’s Unexplored Interpretation of Sandro Botticelli,” *British Art Journal* 12, no. 3 (Winter 2011–2012): 62; and William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family-Letters with a Memoir*, 2 vols. (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1895), 1:228.

3. Michael Levey, “Botticelli and Nineteenth-Century England,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23, no. 3–4 (July–December 1960): 302.

4. Swinburne, “Notes on Designs,” 327.

5. On Swinburne’s aesthetics, see Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art’s Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 37–69; Maxwell, *Swinburne*, 81–105; Østermark-Johansen, “Swinburne’s Serpentine Delights”; and Evangelista, “Swinburne’s Galleries.”

6. Swinburne, “Notes on Designs,” 344. In contrast, the schools of Michelangelo and Leonardo “had more of thought and fancy, of meaning and motive.”

7. *Ibid.*, 328.

8. In a letter of 1873, Swinburne wrote to a friend that after he praised Pater for “his first papers in the

Fortnightly, he replied to the effect that he considered them as owing their inspiration entirely to the example of my own work in the same line”; Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Letters*, ed. C. Y. Lang, 6 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959–62), 2:240n476.

9. Walter Pater, “A Fragment on Sandro Botticelli,” *Fortnightly Review* n.s., 8 (August 1870): 155–160, reprinted in 1873 in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. For two recent studies of this fundamental volume, with brief references to Swinburne, see Sara Lyons, *Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater: Victorian Aestheticism, Doubt, and Secularisation* (London: Legenda, 2015), 178; and Stephen Cheeke, “‘Fantastic Modernism’: Walter Pater, Botticelli, and Simonetta,” *Word & Image* 32, no. 2 (2016): 200.

10. Swinburne, “Notes on Designs,” 326, on Uffizi drawings inv. nos. 212 E (*Venus and Cupid*) and 203 E (*Althaea and Her Maid*).

11. *Ibid.*, 330, on *Minerva* (inv. no. 1255 E); in his essay, Swinburne made numerous references to contemporary art.

12. I explore this hitherto unnoticed citation in Jonathan K. Nelson, “Filippino in the 19th Century: Swinburne, Berenson, and the Birth of the ‘Amico di Sandro,’” in *Filippino Lippi: Beauty, Intelligence and Invention*, ed. Paula Nuttall and Geoffrey Nuttall (Florence: Centro Di, forthcoming). Swinburne also discussed another painting in the Palazzo Corsini, a *Wheel of Fortune* then attributed to Michelangelo; this too must have captured the attention of Burne-Jones when he painted the same subject (pl. XX).

13. Swinburne, “Notes on Designs,” 329. Here and elsewhere, Swinburne stresses the naturalism of late fifteenth-century painters, whereas Pater presented Botticelli as a visionary, a fundamental difference explored by John Coates, “Variations on the Oxford Temper: Swinburne, Pater and Botticelli,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 40, no. 3 (1997): 260–274.

14. Evangelista, “Swinburne’s Galleries,” 167. On Swinburne’s fascination with female figures who cause pain, also see Østermark-Johansen, “Swinburne’s Serpentine Delights”; and J. B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 266–268.

15. Adrian S. Hoch, “The Art of Alessandro Botticelli through the Eyes of Victorian Aesthetes,” in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, ed. John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 64.

16. Catherine Maxwell notes that Swinburne’s “A Christmas Carol” was suggested by a Rossetti drawing (“In the Artist’s Studio,” *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 728.

17. Stacey Sell, “‘The Interesting and Difficult Medium’: The Silverpoint Revival in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *Master Drawings* 51, no. 1 (2013): 63–86, without reference to Swinburne.

18. Léon Lagrange, “Catalogue des *dessins* de maîtres exposés dans la Galerie des Uffizzi, à Florence,” *Gazette*

*des beaux-arts* 12, no. 6 (January–June 1862): 536–554. Ignored in Swinburne studies, this essay is briefly mentioned in Hoch, “The Art of Alessandro Botticelli,” 62.

19. Lagrange, “Catalogue des *dessins*,” 544.

20. Swinburne, “Notes on Designs,” 326. In a celebrated passage about Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, Pater (1870) observed that “the colour is cadaverous.” Though sometimes seen as evidence of Pater’s debt to Swinburne, this might indicate Pater’s knowledge of Lagrange; both authors, moreover, compare Botticelli’s *Venus* to Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. See Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Modern Painters, Old Masters: The Art of Imitation from the Pre-Raphaelites to the First World War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 157, without reference to Lagrange.

21. Swinburne, “Notes on Designs,” 338, in reference to Pollaiuolo.

22. *Ibid.*, 327; the passage continues “in which at all times he worked with such singular grace and such ingenuity of pathetic device.” Swinburne was taking a polemical stance in opposition to authors such as Alexis-François Rio, who praised the Early Renaissance artists for their piety; see Hoch, “The Art of Alessandro Botticelli,” 56–60.

23. Lyons, *Swinburne and Pater*, 173.

24. See Prettejohn, *Modern Painters, Old Masters*, 147–166.

25. Swinburne, “Notes on Designs,” 344. Similarly, “the forms and voices of women and men . . . are actually audible voices and visible forms.”

26. *Ibid.*, 330. For Swinburne on Piero di Cosimo, see Caroline Elam, “*La fortuna critica e collezionistica di Piero di Cosimo in Gran Bretagna*,” in *Piero di Cosimo 1462–1522: pittore eccentrico fra Rinascimento e Maniera*, exh. cat. (Florence: Giunti, 2015), 176–177.

27. Most of the observations made by Prettejohn on Swinburne’s reactions to modern art (*Art for Art’s Sake*, 37–69) also apply to his comments on Renaissance drawings.



#### HIGH RENAISSANCE INSPIRATIONS: RAPHAEL AND THE VENETIANS ELIZABETH PRETTEJOHN

1. Peter Funnell and Malcolm Warner, *Millais: Portraits*, exh. cat. (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1999), 71–72 (entry by Malcolm Warner); Jason Rosenfeld and Alison Smith, *Millais*, exh. cat. (London: Tate, 2007), 60 (entry by Alison Smith). For a fuller account of the painting, see Catherine Roach, *Pictures-within-Pictures in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 114–121.

2. For the traditional reputation of the painting see the classic essay by E. H. Gombrich, “Raphael’s *Madonna della Sedia*,” in *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1978), 64–80. (Originally presented as a lecture, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1955.)