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ART REVIEW

'Botticelli: Heroines and Heroes' Review: Harrowing Scenes of Women's Sacrifice

A tightly focused show in Boston centers on two panels in which the painter artfully orchestrates the ancient, violent stories of Lucretia and Virginia.

By Cammy Brothers

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Boston

Murder, rape and suicide are not generally terms that we associate with Botticelli. His most famous paintings, "Primavera" and "The Birth of Venus," both at the Uffizi in Florence, evoke a world of ethereal beauty, wood nymphs, and gently flowing garments. But in "Botticelli: Heroines + Heroes," a small show currently on view here in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum that comprises six paintings by Botticelli and two of his drawings, another side of the artist emerges. In the two panels at the heart of the exhibition, depicting the ancient stories of Lucretia and Virginia, Botticelli artfully orchestrates violent stories of women's sacrifice. The Lucretia panel is the Gardner's own, and was the first Botticelli in America.

The protagonists of these stories are held up as heroines. But they are troubling ones, given their fates. Worse still, they were frequently the subject of paintings presented to brides, as a way of encouraging virtue and honor.

Botticelli: Heroines + Heroes

*Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum
Through May 19*

In the case of Lucretia, she had the misfortune of attracting the lascivious gaze of the king's son, Tarquin. He rapes her, and in her shame she kills herself. On the panel's left edge, we see Lucretia's dismay when she sees Tarquin, sword in hand, on her doorstep. The right edge shows the aftermath of her rape, when she collapses into the arms of her father, Spurius Lucretius, her husband,

Collatinus, and his friend Brutus. In the center of the composition her lifeless body is laid out at the base of a column, surrounded by soldiers led by Brutus, who raises his sword. The emphasis on the soldiers at the center of the composition and the staging of the action in a public square rather than an interior point to a political reading of the narrative. Specifically, outrage at Lucretia's fate stirred the soldiers to rise up and overthrow their tyrant king, paving the way for the establishment of the Roman Republic.

Virginia's story, shown in a pendant panel from the Accademia Carrara, Bergamo, also ends badly for her but well for the Romans. She is abducted by the henchmen of a powerful judge, who wishes to claim her as his slave. She collapses in tears before the judge, while her fiancé and father attempt to rescue her and fail. Her father, realizing the consequences of his failure, chooses to murder his daughter rather than allow the judge to take her. The story ends with her father's soldiers vowing to overthrow the corrupt judge, and the revolution results in the restoration of the Roman Republic.



Botticelli's 'Story of Virginia' (c. 1500) PHOTO: ACCADEMIA CARRARA, BERGAMO

The message is clear:

Attracting the lustful attention of a powerful man can have dire consequences. Although the contemporary resonances are hard to miss, the stories are dense, and even in Botticelli's hands they are not easy to read visually. To bridge the gap, curator Nathaniel Silver commissioned a graphic

novelist, Karl Stevens, to reimagine the stories on his own terms.

This is a bold move, and Botticelli is a tough act to follow for anyone, much less a graphic artist. Putting a small contemporary ink drawing next to a Renaissance painting wouldn't be fair to either one, and the curator worked around this by enlarging the drawings and printing them, so that they appear in the guise of didactic panels rather than as art. While effective, they are also visually jarring and might have worked better on a nearby but separate wall. Nonetheless, Mr. Stevens does a wonderful job in bringing the stories to life in a contemporary idiom, as well as in envisioning the action from the viewpoints of Lucretia and Virginia.

Whether in a Renaissance or contemporary guise, the stories are gruesome. But the paintings are beautiful and beautifully composed, every inch of their surfaces filled with delightful details, whether animated horses, spry demons, or richly colored architecture. In Botticelli's hands, neither story is directly violent: The rape, suicide and murder happen "offstage." Yet their beauty poses something of an ethical problem. What exactly are we enjoying in looking at them?



Botticelli's 'Adoration of the Magi' (c. 1500) PHOTO: GALLERIE DEGLI UFFIZI, FLORENCE

While these two panels, believed to have been commissioned by Giudantonio Vespucci on the occasion of his son's wedding, and never before displayed together in a museum, are the centerpiece of the show, it also includes three other similarly shaped panels by Botticelli, as well as an unfinished and larger fourth panel. The three

panels depict scenes from the life of St. Zenobius, and provide further illustration of Botticelli's deft navigation of complex narrative scenes. The relation between these panels and the stories of Lucretia and Virginia is an unexpected one: All of them are *spalliere*, a distinctive type of furnishing in a Renaissance home, designed to be displayed at eye level, sometimes above storage chests. The last panel, an unfinished "Adoration of the Magi" from the Uffizi, provides some insight into Botticelli's process and technique.

These are all fascinating paintings. But the point Mr. Silver makes about them in the catalog, that they demonstrate the revolutionary character of the *spalliere* format in shaping the look of European history paintings to come, may be hard for anyone but specialists to grasp in the galleries themselves. In any case, many visitors, once they have delved into the stories of Lucretia and Virginia, may have a hard time thinking about anything else. In these two panels alone, there is much to excite contemporary viewers, intrigue and repel them.

—Ms. Brothers is an associate professor at Northeastern University and the author of "*Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture*" (Yale).



From top: Botticelli's 'Tragedy of Lucretia' (1499-1500), a detail of the work, and his 'Story of Virginia' (c. 1500). Preparatory study for Botticelli's 'Adoration of the Magi.' 'Men Conversing and Two Magi' PHOTO: THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE

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