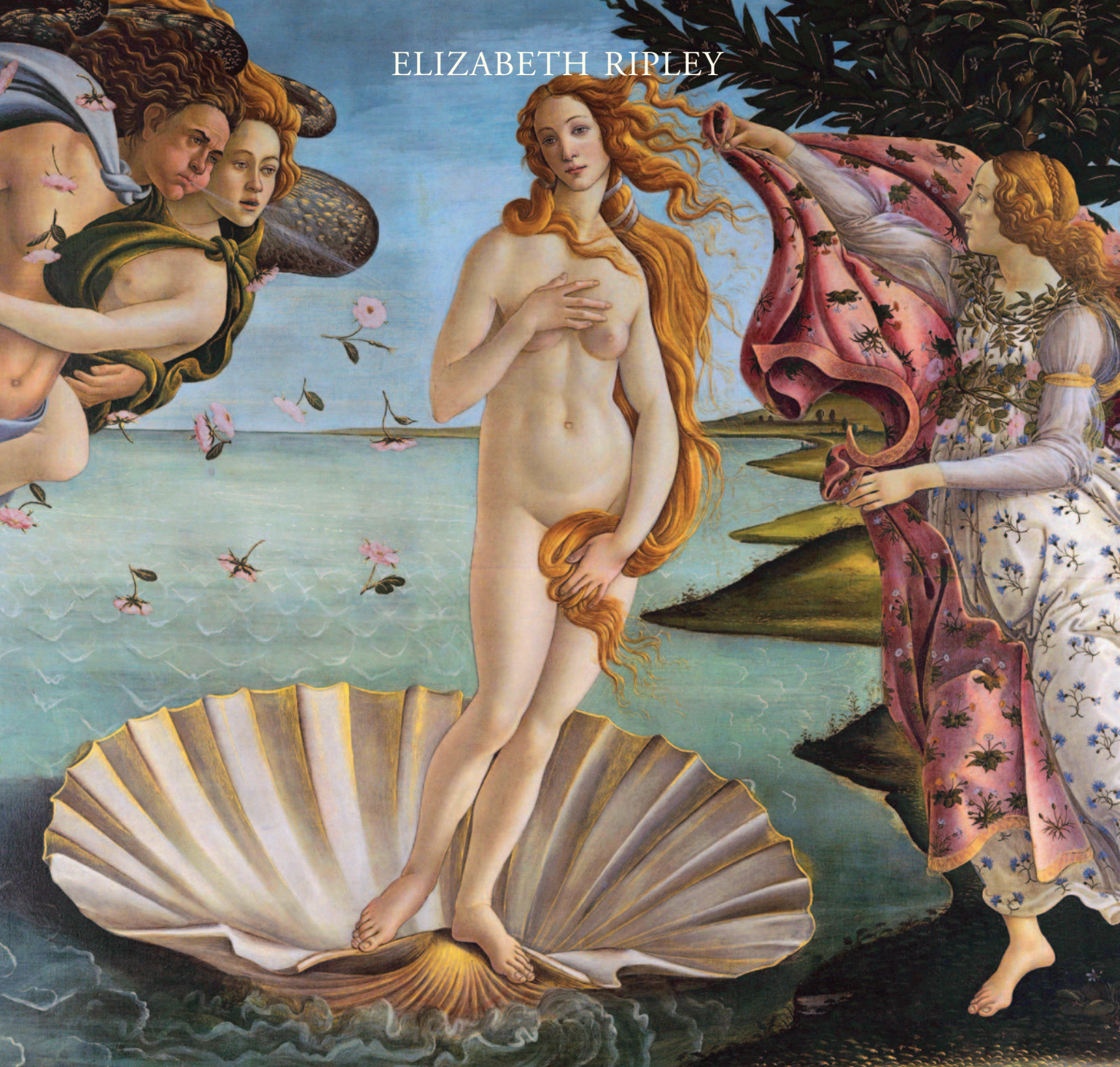


ELIZABETH RIPLEY



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BOTTICELLI



BOTTICELLI

A Biography by
ELIZABETH RIPLEY

PURPLE HOUSE PRESS
Kentucky

Artist Biographies from
Elizabeth Ripley

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RUBENS
TITIAN
VINCENT VAN GOGH
WINSLOW HOMER



THE VIRGIN AND CHILD, c. 1485
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven

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Title page: BARDI ALTARPIECE, THE VIRGIN AND CHILD ENTHRONED, 1484
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

Back cover: DANTE'S PARADISO I, 1492-1495, Staatliche Museum, Berlin

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ALESSANDRO FILIPEPI looked forward to his walk home from school, for there were many beautiful buildings in Florence. When he passed the new palace of the banker, Cosimo de' Medici, he tried to imagine the rooms filled with paintings. Some day, he thought, he would become a painter and the Medici family would invite him to sit at their banquet table with Italy's best artists. He circled Florence Baptistery, a low eight-sided building in the cathedral square, marveling at the pictures carved on the shining bronze doors. He walked by Santa Maria Maggiore wondering if ever he would be asked to paint a picture for this church.

Suddenly Sandro realized that he had reached the church of Ognissanti next to his home. He found his father in his workshop dipping hides in a vat of brown liquid. Mariano Filipepi looked at tall sturdy Sandro standing in the doorway. He could hardly believe that his youngest son was once a frail little boy who dreamed away his time at school. Sandro was now sixteen years old and ready to start work. His brother Simone, one year older, had a job in a bank in Naples, and another brother was a goldsmith. Mariano's oldest son, round and fat like a barrel, was a pawnbroker in Florence. His friends nicknamed him "little barrel," or Botticello, and because his youngest brother was often with him, they called little Sandro, Botticelli.

Sandro was delighted when his father decided he should work in the studio of the popular painter, Fra Filippo Lippi. The genial master taught Sandro to draw the human figure, grind paints and mix colors. Soon the boy was able to paint parts of his master's pictures.

Sandro worked in Fra Filippo's studio for six years. Then in 1467 he set up a workshop in his father's house. He was twenty-two years old.

Botticelli painted pictures for merchants' palaces, and long narrow panels to decorate their furniture. One panel showed *The Adoration of the Magi*. Copying the composition of older artists, he placed the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child on the right end of the picture, arranging the long procession so skillfully that the small panel did not look crowded.



ADORATION OF THE MAGI, 1468
National Gallery, London

Botticelli loved to visit Antonio Pollaiuolo's workshop where he admired the paintings of powerful nude figures which were now so popular in Florence. Antonio and his brother Piero spent hours dissecting corpses in order to find out how the human body was constructed. When the government of Florence decided to decorate their Council Hall with pictures of the seven virtues, they chose Piero to do the job. Other artists would be appointed to help him, Piero explained to Botticelli. Sandro wondered who these other artists would be.

A few days later a messenger called at Sandro's studio with a letter from the governors of Florence. Alessandro Botticelli had been chosen to paint one of the seven virtues, Fortitude, for the Council Hall. He hired a model whose majestic figure and dreamy expression attracted him. He watched her as she rose from her chair. In his picture he would try to show the graceful movement of her body under the long red cloak which covered her knees.

The panels of the seven virtues were set up in the Council Hall one day in 1470. Florence's new ruler, Lorenzo de' Medici came to see the pictures. The twenty-two-year-old grandson of Cosimo de' Medici was a brilliant statesman, poet and scholar. He was far from handsome. His big nose was wide and flat, his skin dark, and his eyes small, but the people of Florence worshiped their charming new ruler who entertained them with tournaments and pageants, who danced with them in the carnivals and who rode in processions on his gray thoroughbred. They called him "The Magnificent."

Lorenzo stood for some time in the Council Hall, examining the paintings behind the judge's bench. Six of the seven virtues, carefully painted in bright colors, looked stiff and lifeless. Only one, Fortitude, seemed alive. This figure with a long torso and short legs was about to rise from her chair and step from the narrow panel. The artist who painted Fortitude would some day be a famous painter, Lorenzo decided as he left the Council Hall.



FORTITUDE, 1470
Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Lorenzo de' Medici did not forget the name of Sandro Botticelli. He spoke of him to art lovers who wanted to buy pictures. One of them visited Sandro's workshop hoping to find a painting to give to Lorenzo's sister. He admired some Madonnas, passed on to a picture of an Adoration, and then paused for a long time in front of a painting of two women walking on the brow of a hill. Sandro told his visitor that it was a scene from the Bible story of Judith and Holofernes. Many other artists had painted the story of Judith and how she saved her city from destruction. This beautiful Jewish widow stole into the enemy camp one night and cut off the head of the sleeping general Holofernes. Then she returned across hill country to her home, followed by her servant girl who carried the general's head on a platter.

It was hard to believe that the beautiful blond girl in Botticelli's painting had just cut off a general's head. She was dressed in the style of Florentine women of Botticelli's day. Pearls were wound into her wavy hair and decorated the bodice of her light blue dress. She held a sword in her right hand and in her left the olive branch of peace. A coarse-faced servant girl in an orange dress walked behind, carrying Holofernes' head. In the valley below, armed horsemen and foot soldiers were pouring out of the gate of a fortified town in pursuit of the fleeing enemy.

Botticelli's visitor was charmed by the lovely Judith who walked so lightly over the hillside, the folds of her dress billowing behind her. This painting, so different from others he had seen, he would present to Lorenzo's sister.



JUDITH WITH THE HEAD OF HOLOFERNES, c. 1464-1475
Cincinnati Art Museum