Pope-Hennessy, John
Sandro Botticelli: The Nativity.

BOTTICELLI

THE NATIVITY

16 ILLUSTRATIONS AND AN INTRODUCTION BY JOHN POPE-HENNESSY

LLERY BOOKS NUMBER 15

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EDITOR: PAUL WENGRAF

SANDRO BOTTICELLI

THE NATIVITY

IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY · LONDON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

JOHN POPE-HENNESSY

AND SIXTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS

THE GALLERY BOOKS No. 15

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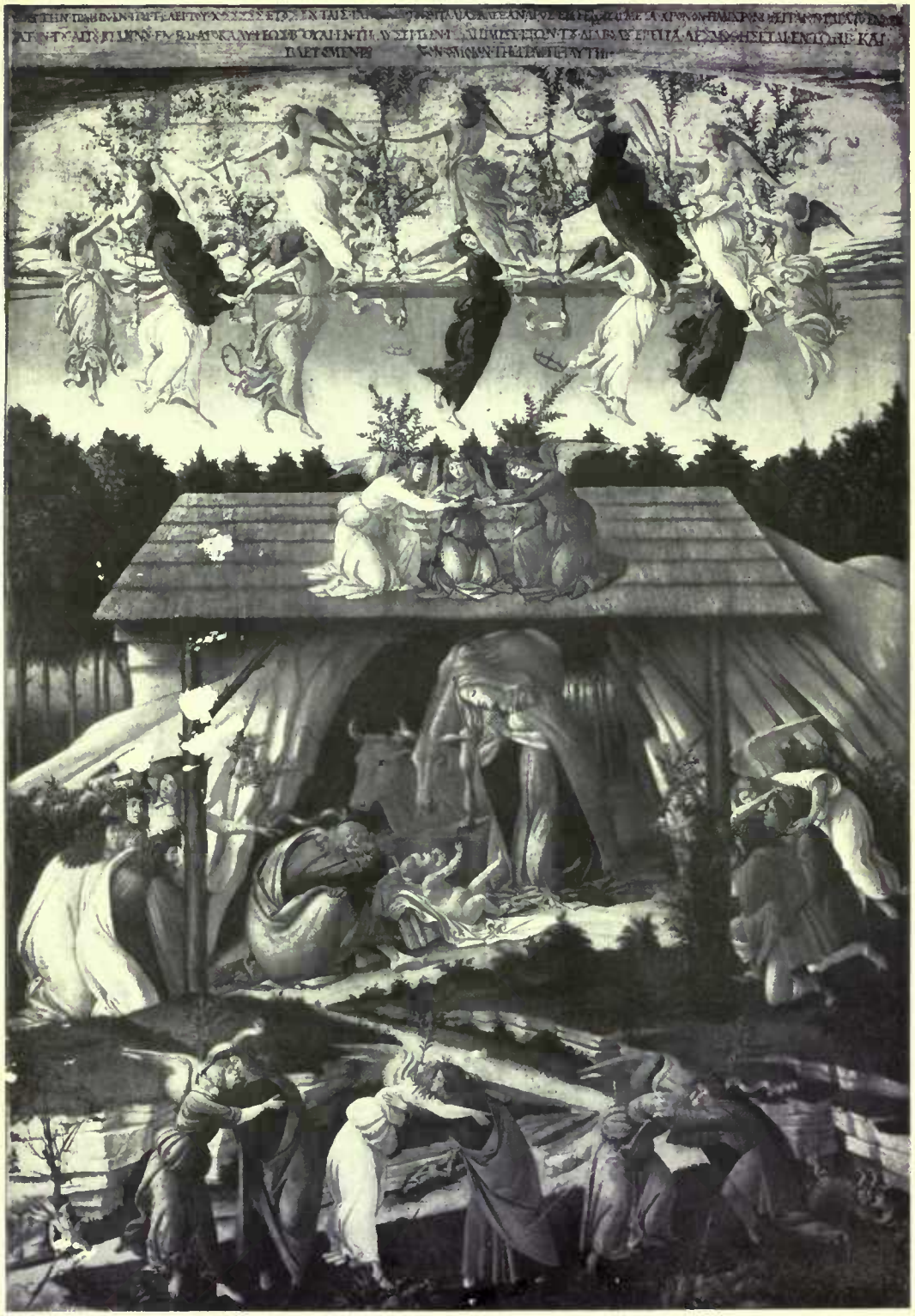


1 *The Nativity,* by BOTTICELLI — National Gallery, London
$42\frac{1}{2} \times 29\frac{1}{2}$ inches

BOTTICELLI: 'THE NATIVITY'

by

JOHN POPE-HENNESSY

SANDRO BOTTICELLI was born in Florence in 1444. A backward and ailing child, he remained with his parents until, at a more advanced age than was customary at the time, he was placed in the studio of the most respected and conservative painter of the day, Fra Filippo Lippi. But Botticelli was no exception to the rule that painters respond more readily to the influence of a contemporary than to tuition by an older artist, and shortly before 1470 he aligned himself with the thirty-five year old Verrocchio, the painter-goldsmith-sculptor in whose workshop Leonardo and many other artists of the last quarter of the century were trained. When, at the age of twenty-five, Botticelli executed his first public contract (the commission for one of a series of seated *Virtues,* the bulk of which were painted by Piero del Pollajuolo, an artist a year older than himself, under the guidance of a more gifted elder brother, Antonio), it was Verrocchio who provided the mainstay of his style.

Six months earlier Lorenzo de' Medici had succeeded his father, Piero il Gottoso, as lord of Florence. With his accession there opened for painters, architects and sculptors a veritable golden age. In these years Botticelli was in frequent contact with Lorenzo il Magnifico. It is possible that the *Fortitude* of 1470 was commissioned at the instance of Lorenzo, and certain that soon after Botticelli became, in a special sense, the favoured painter of the Medici. For Lorenzo de' Medici he devised the decorations of the Spedaletto at Volterra. For Lorenzo's cousin, Lorenzo Tornabuoni, he painted in 1486 the fresco of *Venus and the Graces,* now in the Louvre. When Piero de' Medici left his chamber, he passed through an ante-room in which there stood a bed adorned by Botticelli. And for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco the now mature artist painted the *Birth of Venus* and the *Spring,* and about 1490 undertook to illustrate Dante's *Divine Comedy.*

In an *Adoration of the Magi* of about 1476 in the Uffizi, we have, in addition to the portraits of Cosimo il Vecchio and his sons, a self-portrait of Botticelli. Above an ochre cloak, the "persona sofistica" of Vasari's uninformative biography looks out at us with sensual lips and wide-set eyes. We may project

his firm, rather feminine figure into the Florence in which Pulci was writing the *Morgante* and Ficino was translating Plato and Plotinus; we may imagine him discussing with Politian the amalgam of Ovid and Lucretius which formed the programme of the *Spring,* or bent over a manuscript of Fontio's Lucian in preparatory study for the *Calumny.* A friend of Leonardo and an acquaintance of Michelangelo, Botticelli for more than twenty years stood on the verge of this humane society, and embodied its ideals in some of the imaginative masterpieces of the Renaissance.

The death of Lorenzo il Magnifico in 1492, and the internal disorders which succeeded it, did not disturb the tenor of Botticelli's work. After the exile of Piero de' Medici in 1494, Botticelli persisted in close association with Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, and this association continued as late as 1497, when Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco withdrew from Florence to discountenance the charges of conspiracy that had been made against him. Seven years previously the spectre of Savonarola had cast its shadow on the Florentine scene. Returning to Florence in 1490, and appointed prior of the Dominican convent of S. Marco in the following year, Savonarola launched an immediate attack on Lorenzo il Magnifico. His political stature increased as the months went by. Amid the excesses of Piero de' Medici, his appeals for austerity in morals and his advocacy of republican reforms enjoyed an ever widening appeal. The development of a French threat to Florence, and the simoniacal election of Alexander VI to the papacy, lent his warnings of divine vengeance a new authenticity, and at the end of 1494 the friar's supporters, the *piagnoni,* assumed control of the machine of government. It was not for two years that the fortunes of the *piagnoni* waned, but once begun the rot spread rapidly, and in May 1497 the claims of their opponents were endorsed by the formal excommunication of Savonarola. Goaded by papal prohibition to new eloquence, Savonarola's sermons continued through 1497 and the first months of 1498. In March the Signoria, in response to a request from Rome, issued an injunction that his sermons should be suspended, and early in the following month, against his better judgment, he accepted a Franciscan challenge to submit his doctrines to the test of fire. Incensed at the failure of this abortive spectacle, popular feeling veered against Savonarola; on April 8 he was arrested, on May 22 he was condemned to death, and on May 23, along with two companions, he was hanged in the Piazza della Signoria.

Botticelli's brother, Simone, had been a relatively early disciple of Savonarola, and was the author of a chronicle which is frequently cited by Savonarola's followers. There is no evidence that Botticelli himself enjoyed any such

position; as an adherent of the Medici and an exponent of the humanist painting of which Savonarola disapproved, he would have found the new teachings at best uncongenial, and such slight indications as we have suggest that in February 1498 he was still to be counted among the friar's adversaries. That he had opportunities to inform himself as to Savonarola's doctrines we cannot doubt, and he may well have been present at the sermons of Lent 1498, whose fiery eloquence burns through the transcriptions made on wax tablets by Violi while the prior stood in the pulpit at S. Marco. It was at this time, or in the months immediately after the execution of Savonarola, that Botticelli, like the humanist poet Acciaiuoli, abandoned the lax standards of the liberal-minded Medici and submitted to the friar's teachings. Of the earnest discussions of the Frate's personality which took place in Botticelli's studio we have a contemporary account, while Vasari (who regarded the decision as an act of political apostasy) affirms that the artist became a *piagnone,* ceased to paint, and subsisted till his death in 1510 on the charity of patrons who had known him in better days. In the second of Vasari's statements there is a demonstrable factor of exaggeration, and we should have no firm grounds for supposing that Botticelli suffered a change of heart, were it not for two paintings. These paintings are a *Crucifixion* (Fig. 3) in the Fogg Museum at Cambridge (Massachusetts), and the *Nativity** which is the subject of this book.

Before a semi-circle of green trees rises a hillock of striated rock. Upon the rock is set the thatched roof of a pent-house, the corners of which rest on severed tree trunks. A cave pierces the centre of the rock, whence we look out on to the trees and field behind (Fig. 5). Outside the entrance to the cave is the kneeling figure of the Virgin, her head in profile and her fair hair and light blue cloak offset against the grey flank of the ass. From the ground, supported on a pannier covered with a cloth, the Child, with one hand in His mouth and one leg raised, looks up at her; beside Him, wearing a saffron-coloured cloak, there sits St. Joseph, his head relaxed in sleep or contemplation and his face hidden by his hand (Fig. 13). To the left, before a hedge of olives, kneel three men in pink, dull green and yellow robes, each with an olive wreath, their attention directed to the central scene by a pink-clad angel holding a spray of olive in his extended hand (Fig. 8). On the right are two more kneeling figures, wearing the same wreaths and the russet and grey dresses proper to artisans;

*The first picture by Botticelli to reach Great Britain, the painting was purchased from the Villa Aldobrandini, Rome, by William Young Ottley in the last years of the eighteenth century. On Ottley's death it passed in 1837 to the well-known collection of Italian primitives formed by Fuller Maitland, and was secured for the National Gallery from the Fuller Maitland collection in 1878.

2 Detail of the *Nativity*, by Botticelli

one of these figures raises his right hand to his head, as a white-clad angel, with one hand on his shoulder, points towards the Child Christ (Fig. 9). From this central plane a rocky path leads down to the foreground of the painting, where on the green turf we find three men, once more with olive wreaths and holding sprigs of olive, embraced by three angelic figures (Figs. 10-12). To right and left of the foreground and along the lower edge of the painting are five devils, some slipping through the crevices of Hell, some with their prostrate bodies lanced (Figs. 10-12, 16). On the gold thatch of the pent-house roof there kneel three angels, two of whom, clad in white and green, hold sprays of olive, while that in the centre, in a dull pink dress, reads from an open book (Fig. 7). Above, in a blue sky "of inimitable depth and loveliness", the pink- and grey-flecked clouds open to reveal a circle of gold light, below which there revolves a ring of twelve angelic figures, four clad in white, four pink, four golden brown, their hands joined on a sprig of olive from which dangles a gold crown. A ribbon with the words "Gloria in excelsis Deo" and fragments of a hymn or litany is wrapped round each spray (Figs. 6, 14, 15). Along the top edge of the painting runs an inscription in Greek characters (Figs. 2, 2a), which, translated, reads:—

> This picture, at the end of the year 1500, in the troubles of Italy, I, Alessandro, painted in the half-time after the time, at the time of the fulfilment of the 11th of St. John, in the second woe of the Apocalypse, in the loosing of the devil for three and a half years: then he shall be chained according to the 12th, and we shall see him trodden down as in this picture.

These words provide the proof, if proof be needed, that this is no orthodox *Adoration of the Child* by the shepherds or the kings. What, then, are the mysterious figures who kneel outside the stable? What does the foreground signify? And, above all, what does the inscription mean?

Let us pass at once to this last question. The picture was painted in the second half of the year 1500, that is, according to the Florentine reckoning, between October 24, 1500, and March 24, 1501. This period is equated with the second woe of the *Apocalypse*. The *Apocalypse* of St. John describes the sufferings and the ultimate triumph of the militant church. From very early times there had been a tendency to interpret the events foretold in the *Apocalypse*

2a Detail of the *Nativity*, by Botticelli

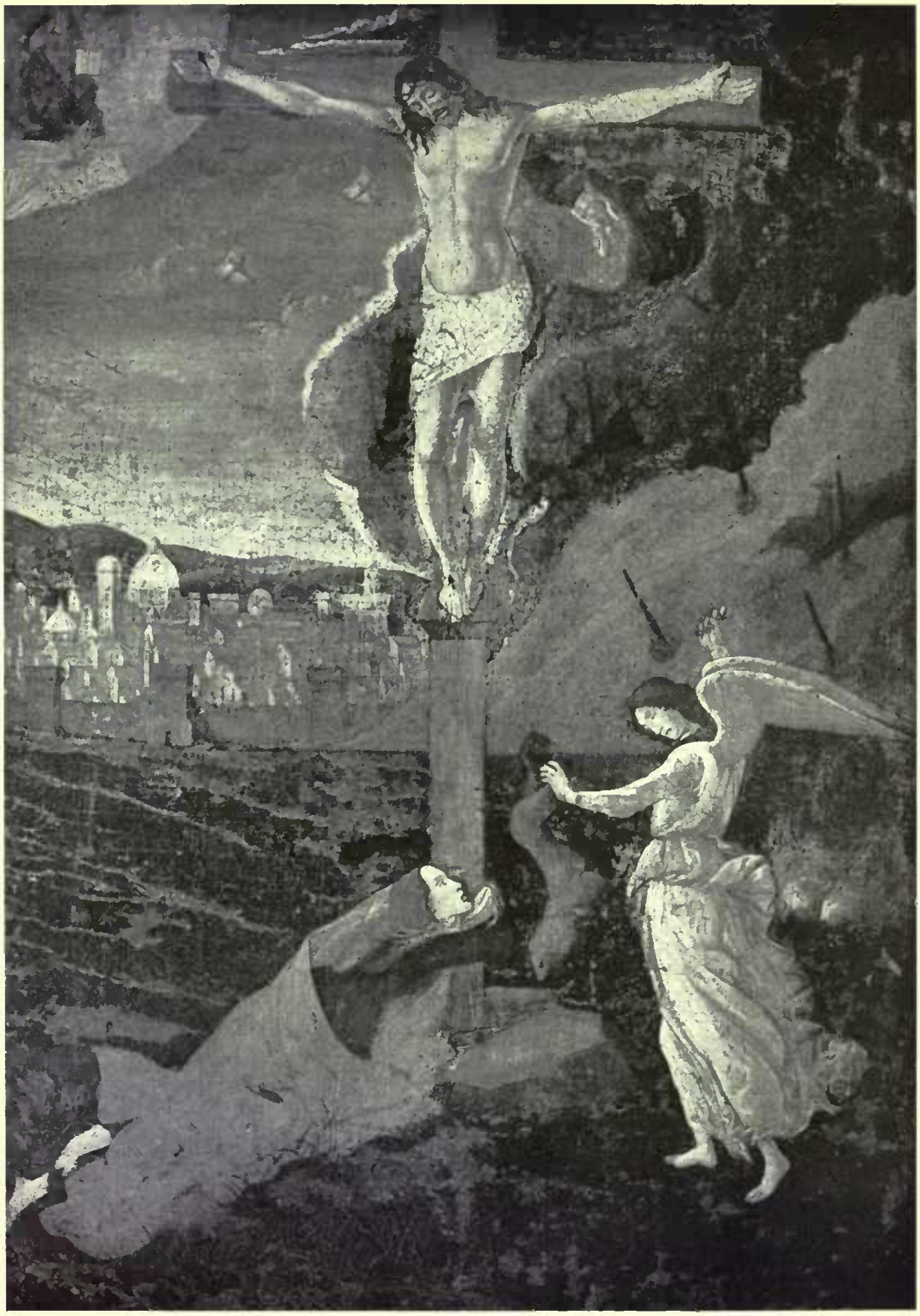
in terms of contemporary history; in the thirteenth century Joachim asserted that the woes of the *Apocalypse* were shortly to commence, and in the fourteenth Nicholas of Lyra claimed that the millenium had begun. Whether any prediction of the fulfilment of the apocalyptic revelations within a specified term from his own death was made by Savonarola in the forty-four lost sermons on the *Apocalypse*, which he delivered in Florence between August 1490 and January 1491, we cannot tell. But the accuracy of his prophecies of the exile of Piero de' Medici, of the failure of Charles VIII, and of his own death, lent authority to his more esoteric pronouncements, and it was natural that his prediction of the flail with which Italy was to be lashed, should be referred to the accepted system of apocalyptic interpretation. It was natural, too, that his supporters should identify Savonarola and his companion, Fra Domenico, with the two witnesses whose death was to herald the second woe of the *Apocalypse*, and that they should go on to regard this apocalyptic phase as dating from Savonarola's martyrdom. As in the middle ages men's minds turned to the *Apocalypse* in periods of distress, so in the early months of 1501 the events which had ensued since May 1498 may well have seemed a working out of the apocalyptic prophecies. Italy was fast lapsing into anarchy. In Florence depravity had spread, and corruption was once more rife. Milan had fallen in October 1499 to the victorious French troops. Cesare Borgia, the natural son of the Pope against whom Savonarola had made his stand, was prosecuting a campaign in the Romagna which must ultimately wheel towards Tuscany. And the man who alone had proved able to protect the city from external peril and to show the way to her salvation, had been disowned and martyred almost three years previously. What wonder that observers in March 1501 should predict the conclusion of the second woe of the *Apocalypse* in eight months' time, when the devil had been chained and peace was once again established through a regenerated church? This was the view entertained by Botticelli when he painted the National Gallery *Nativity*.

But while the inscription explains the torrid intellectual climate in which the picture was brought to birth, it does little to elucidate its subject, since Botticelli's words bear an analogical, and not a direct, reference to the scene below. It is at this point that the *Crucifixion* in the Fogg Museum (Fig. 3) comes to our aid, for here the programme of the painting has been fully and successfully ex-

plained. In the centre is Christ on the Cross: to the right we see divine anger, in the form of a storm cloud, descending on the earth, as the Angel of Justice flays the Florentine *marzocco:* and on the left we have a view of Florence, bathed in divine light, while the Magdalen, a symbol of the Church from whose skirt the wolf of ecclesiastical corruption slinks away, reaches towards the Cross. In a negative sense the Fogg *Crucifixion* serves as a warning against misinterpretation of the National Gallery *Nativity*. In particular it acts as a corrective to the zeal of over-literal critics who would regard the devil of the inscription as Cesare Borgia, the kneeling men beside the manger as the Magi, and the secular figures in the foreground as the risen forms of Savonarola, Fra Domenico and Fra Silvestro. In a positive sense it points out the lines along which the *Nativity* should be interpreted.

One of the secrets of Savonarola's hold over his followers rested in his ability to transmit the actuality of his religious experience. Within the convent of S. Marco the methods he employed were not confined to discourses, and we read in a contemporary narrative of a pious charade, organised at his direction, in which three brothers, dressed as the Magi, searched through the convent corridors for an image of the Infant Christ. Outside S. Marco his sermons served to kindle the religious imagination of his listeners. So graphic were they, and so great was the impression that they made, that many months after his death a widow of Prato professed that in her sleep she had received a vision of the birth of Christ, in which the Child, attended by the martyred friars, demanded the renewal of His Church. In a sermon preached at Christmas 1493, Savonarola takes his listeners in spirit to the crib, to which all who are at peace with God will come, and where, attended by Mercy, Truth, and Justice, they will find Mary "in sweet ecstasy" adoring the Child Christ. "Having confessed thy sins, thou wilt be justified in the sight of God, and peace will kiss thee, for thou wilt be worthy to be introduced by these fair maidens to the holy stable. Then wilt thou kneel beside the shepherds and adore thy God. Then will thy bones exult and thy heart rejoice". In the manger, the focus of justice and truth, true peace, he adjures, is to be found. "Be assured that thou wilt not have peace, so long as thou hast not visited the manger and been illuminated by the faith of Christ". It is to the manger, he continues at Christmas 1494, that those who would make Florence a new Nazareth must come, and into the mouth of the Angel of Peace he puts the words inscribed on the scrolls held by the figures in the foreground of the painting in the National Gallery: "Et in terra pax hominibus".

The *Nativity* is rooted in these homilies. On the stable roof are three angels



3 *Allegory of The Crucifixion*, by BOTTICELLI Fogg Museum, Cambridge (Mass.)

4 Illustration to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, by BOTTICELLI
Bistre ink, $12\frac{1}{2} \times 18\frac{1}{2}$ inches

Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett

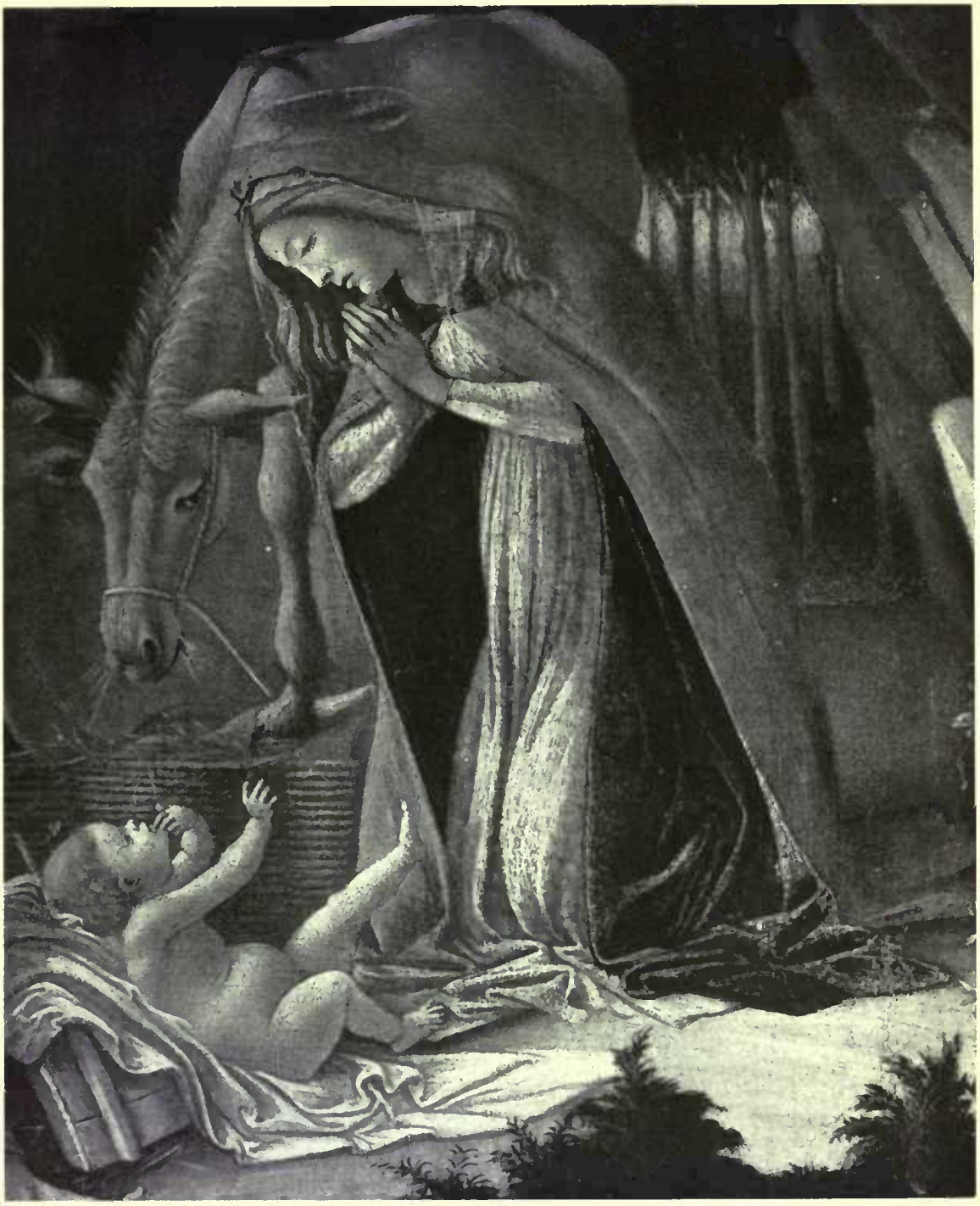
dressed in the symbolic colours of faith, hope, and charity. In the foreground, men of goodwill, from whose minds the demon of discord has been cast out, receive the ritual kiss of peace from three more angels dressed in the symbolic robes of these same virtues. On the left, through angelic agency, three kneeling men, a post-figuration of the Magi, participate in the Nativity; and on the right two labourers, a post-figuration of the shepherds, are introduced to the same mystery. Above, in the vault of Heaven, the angels, wearing the traditional "bianco, rosso e framezzato" and holding the olive branch of peace and the gold crown in which the just man reaps his reward, proclaim the power of the Redeemer to sow peace in men's hearts. Here then we have an allegory, not of terrestrial peace imposed by some ecclesiastical dictatorship, not of the peace of Paradise, but of the spiritual peace, to which the Christian, humbling himself before the manger, may attain. And precisely because it treats the birth of Christ as an event recurring in the souls of men, no painting communicates more fully the exuberant joy of the Nativity. On earth peace reigns, while in the sky the angels shout their praises of the new-born Christ, as if responding to the invocation chanted by Savonarola's followers at Christmas in the streets of Florence:—

Venite, Angeli sancti,
E venite sonando:
Venite tutti quanti
Iesu Cripsto laudando,
E gloria cantando
Con dolce melodia.
Ecco il Messia,
Ecco il Messia,
E la madre Maria.

But while it owes much to Savonarola, the treatment of the painting is not exclusively Savonarolan, and the Greek characters of the inscription are only one of several indications that for Botticelli the abrogation of the old was not implied in the adoption of the new. Even the angels, with what Ruskin regarded as their Grecian robes, recall the maenads surrounding the triumphal car in a print of *Bacchus and Ariadne,* once attributed to Botticelli. In particular the painting is related to the later of the Dante illustrations, in which Botticelli, influenced by Neo-Platonist commentators on the *Comedy,* interprets the imagery of the poem as the subjective expression of a spiritual state, and this thread of Neo-Platonism links the Dante illustrations in turn with that pagan masterpiece, the *Spring.*

Despite the intervention of Savonarola, Botticelli's literary approach to painting remained constant through these years. But his style, his compositional procedure, even his sense of form suffered a change. That he responded consciously to the ill-defined æsthetic predilections of Savonarola we may question, unless it be that in substituting the generalised types of the *Nativity* for the portrait types of earlier *Adorations,* he was obeying Savonarola's injunctions against the use of realism in religious art. But for a parallel to the most striking feature of the picture, the disparity in scale between the Virgin and the adoring figures, and between these latter and the still smaller figures in the foreground of the scene, we must look back to the Dante illustrations (Fig. 4). Here, in an attempt to devise a visual equivalent for the mystical course of Dante's narrative, Botticelli abandoned accepted methods of space representation, and adopted instead a mediæval system, by which the page is treated as a decorative surface and linear perspective is sparingly employed. This system is perpetuated in the flat, pyramidal design of the *Nativity*. At the same time the Dante illustrations imposed on Botticelli the discipline of a long period of work in monochrome on a white ground; to a greater extent than any of the paintings which preceded them, they were evolved in terms of line, and line alone. Hence the linear urgency evident in the painting in the National Gallery; hence the gold filigree which plays over the angels' rippling robes. It has been argued, with some substance, that in painting line is the language of the mystic, the idiom to which the artist instinctively turns as his hold on reality slackens and his interest switches to a supernatural world. Always a supreme master of line, Botticelli in his late works expresses his emotions through linear emphasis. In the passionate figure of the Church clutching the Cross in the painting in the Fogg Museum, and still more in the angel to the right of the painting in the National Gallery, bending forward to reassure one of the shepherds and gesticulating with a fantastically long right arm, we return to the spirit, and to some extent also to the forms, of Gothic art.

Writing three-quarters of a century ago, Pater declared that Botticelli "conveys into his work something more than painting usually attains of the true complexion of humanity". Time has heightened the human no less than the æsthetic appeal of the *Nativity*, and to-day, perhaps more fully than at any period since the painting was conceived, we find ourselves in sympathy with the pæan in praise of peace of mind, to which a great artist committed his distress at the suffering around him, and through which he affirmed his faith in miracles to come.



5 Detail of *The Nativity*, by BOTTICELLI

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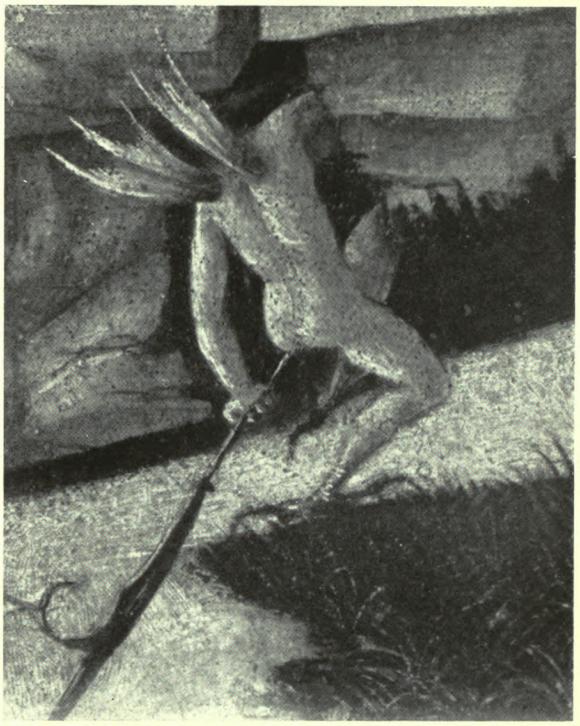
3 *Allegory of The Crucifixion,* by BOTTICELLI — Fogg Museum, Cambridge (Mass.)

4 Illustration to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, by BOTTICELLI — Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett

5—16, and cover Details of *The Nativity*



16 Detail of *The Nativity,* by BOTTICELLI

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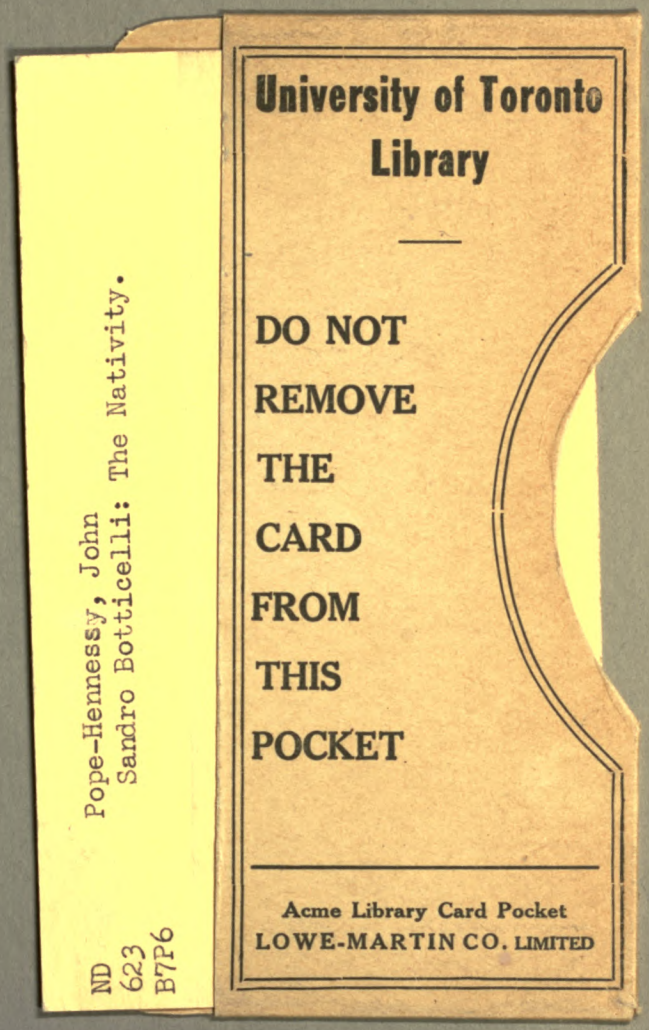
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