

THE LAST BOTTICELLI

Michele Marullo – Soldier Poet of the Renaissance

Trinity Fine Art
Frieze Masters
Stand A3

VIP Vernissage: Wednesday, 2 October
From Thursday, 3 October 2019
to Sunday, 6 October 2019
Regent's Park, London

LONDON –

For the 2019 edition of Frieze Masters, Trinity Fine Art presents a project focused on a single piece: Botticelli's *Portrait of Michele Marullo*.

This is the last Botticelli in private hands outside of Italy and available on the international market. The work hung in the Prado for over a decade, on loan from a notable Spanish collection, and has been exhibited at the Met and other major international museums. Marullo, an exile from Constantinople after it fell to the Turks, was a renowned Latin poet at the Medici court, as well as a mercenary, who fought against Cesare Borgia's armies in Italy. He married an independently minded, classically educated Florentine poetess in a love match that inspired George Eliot's *Romola* centuries later. It is thought that this portrait may be posthumous, possibly commissioned by his wife soon after his accidental death by drowning.

The subject of this mesmerising portrait turns slightly outward as if he is defying the viewer to look at him, but he is aware of another presence, as the pupils of his



eyes have turned to the extreme right and seem to follow the viewer. Marullo's sober dress, unkempt hair and bushy eyebrows suggest a man of action and intellect, with his mind on higher things than his appearance. The painting bears witness to the historian Jakob Burckhardt's famous comment that fifteenth-century Italy was "the place where the notion of the individual was born." At the same time, the simplicity of the composition – with its strong focus on the face, rather than details of dress, place and status – seems strikingly modern.

This rare work is considered one of Botticelli's finest portraits, and arguably his highest quality work ever to come onto the international market. Unlike previous works by Botticelli sold in past decades (including the Rockefeller Madonna which set a record of \$10.6 million in 2013 at Christie's) the *Portrait of Michele Marullo* is painted entirely by Botticelli's hand, as portraits were expensive, personal commissions for specific patrons, in contrast to the more generic religious images produced by the artist with assistants in his workshop.

The Italian art dealer Carlo Orsi, the owner of Trinity Fine Art, is a leading figure in the old master market and a former president of the Art Dealers Association of Italy. Notably, he helped acquire masterpieces – including the last Pontormo in private hands – for the legendary collection of Francesco Federico Cerruti, recently bequeathed to the Castello di Rivoli Museum in Turin. More recently he has sold works by Orazio Gentileschi, Bronzino, Canova and Bernini and worked with major international museums and private collectors.

Provenance

The work had previously been in the collection of Napoleon's adoptive son, Eugene

de Beauharnais. After passing through several hands, it sold at auction in Paris in 1920 and the celebrated art dealer Joseph Duveen lamented missing out on it, always considering it 'the one that got away'. Instead the painting was acquired at this auction by Francisco Cambo, a Spanish politician and philanthropist. He built up an exceptional collection of old masters with impeccable provenance in order to donate them to Spanish museums and 'fill holes' in the public collections. But he kept Botticelli's *Portrait of Michele Marullo* in the Cambo family collection. An exile after 1936 and the rise of Franco, Cambo later said this work was among his favourites because he felt a kinship with Marullo, who was also an exile. The painting hung in the Prado from 2004 for about 12 years, on loan from the Cambo family, and featured in the important exhibition 'The Renaissance Portrait: from Donatello to Bellini' at the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin and the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 2011-12.

Botticelli, Michele Marullo and the Medici Court

This portrait lies at the crossroads of two great minds in Renaissance Florence and tells a story of politics, beauty, poetry and war. The history of this piece began almost 50 years before it was even painted, in 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Turks after a long siege and the infant Marullo's family fled his homeland as refugees, never to see it again. The siege of Constantinople – a city known as the "Byzantine Rome, the second Rome" – had a major impact on the Western world because it represented the fall of an ideal: the end of the Roman, classical way of life at a time when scholars, artists and poets were just beginning to reread the classics and breathe new life into

them, at the start of what has become known as the Renaissance.

Marullo's life was played out against a backdrop of violence from the outset: he took up arms at 17, fighting numerous battles against the Turks across Europe. He later came to the aid of Caterina 'the Tigress' Sforza against Cesare Borgia and finally drowned while trying to ford a river on horseback in storm. But the violence in his life was counterbalanced by his upbringing, his classical education enabling him to become one of the finest poets of the Renaissance. An apt quote from the dedication in his *Epigrams* sums this up:

"...the hand that wields the sword bears books once the sword has been laid down".

By the 1480s, when Marullo arrived in Florence, the Tuscan city-state was the hub of the modern world, with the most sophisticated court ever seen. Lorenzo the Magnificent – a stern ruler, yet at the same time a talented poet – gathered around him the finest minds of his day: Leonardo, Michelangelo, Botticelli, Ariosto and many others. He used the arts to broadcast a carefully crafted image of himself and of his rule, sending artists such as Botticelli and Leonardo to competing kingdoms as his envoys. For him, humanism was both propaganda and an intellectual pursuit, setting man rather than God at the centre of the universe and advocating a life that was guided not by the church but by Plato and Virgil.

Yet Florence was not simply the idyllic cradle of civilisation that we know from history. Lorenzo was never formally appointed ruler of Florence and his tenure as de-facto ruler of the city was constantly rocked by plots to overthrow him, attempted murders and violent acts of retaliation. Little wonder that it was this same *cultural milieu* that

spawned both the otherworldly perfection of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and the gritty realism of Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

Michele Marullo – the soldier-poet – was at home in this environment. Shrewd advisors and commentators, 15th-century poets were not only men of letters: they imparted legitimacy with their learning to this new generation of rulers, playing a central role on the political scene. In this highly charged political climate, Marullo's *Hymns to Nature* sounded positively revolutionary, celebrating the Greek gods and living kings alike: "The Sun governs all things, yet it has only one abode: kings conduct themselves in the same way as gods". Culture was politics and politics was culture, and the Greek classics, rather than the Christian God, showed the way.

By the late 1480s, Pierfrancesco de Medici was becoming an illustrious figure in Florence and was regarded by many, after Lorenzo de Medici's death, as his cultural heir. *Laurentius minor* – as he was nicknamed by the court – was Botticelli's chief patron, commissioning both *Spring* and *The Birth of Venus* from him. So it is hardly surprising that Marullo – having decided to settle in Florence – looked to the younger Pierfrancesco, rather than to Lorenzo, to curry favour at court and dedicated the first edition of his poems to him. According to Dr Carl Strehlke, Curator Emeritus of the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts and author of the catalogue essay on this work, the *Portrait of Michele Marullo* may have been commissioned by one of Marullo's closest friends or by his wife Alessandra Scala, a woman of independent means. Only wealthy patrons were able to afford such personal, secular commissions.

Notes for Editors:

Stand design and catalogue

Trinity Fine Art will present the *Portrait of Michele Marullo* in a single work stand at Frieze Masters, specially designed to maximise visitor experience. A fully illustrated catalogue with an original essay by Dr Carl Strehlke, Curator Emeritus of the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts, will be available on the stand at Frieze Masters.

Web experience: 'A meeting of great minds'

A dedicated and interactive website will provide potential clients with an in-depth experience of Renaissance Florence. We will focus our attention on two exceptional men: Michele Marullo - the soldier-poet - and Botticelli - one of Florence's most prominent painters.

Social Media

Follow the Last Botticelli on social media
Instagram: @trinityfineart
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