

Madonna of the Magnificat by Sandro Botticelli, painted in 1481, located in the Uffizi Museum in Florence, Italy



Sandro Botticelli was born, raised, and lived almost all his life in the same house in Florence, Italy during the period of European history called “the Renaissance.” During this span of time (between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century), expansive developments were made in the arts, philosophy, literature, and science, and Florence was the epicenter of this activity. Botticelli belonged to the Florentine School under the patronage of Lorenzo de Medici, and was a contemporary of other artistic geniuses such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael. Popes and wealthy Florentines often commissioned Botticelli to paint religious works for churches and homes, and although he is often cited by art historians of today for his depictions of mythological characters, Botticelli is especially esteemed as one of the greatest Madonna and Child painters of all time. Of all his paintings, many art historians believe his **Madonna of the Magnificat** to be Botticelli’s greatest painting and the most famous painting ever of the Blessed Mother.

To structure and arrange his life-size figures in this large (46 ½” in diameter) painting, Botticelli used a circular format (called a “tondo”), which was unusual at the time. Not only is the “tondo” aesthetically appealing to the human eye, but because the circle is a perfect geometric figure with no beginning and no end, it enhances Botticelli’s theme of the divine Christ Child who has entered into humanity through the Virgin Mary. Upon closer inspection of this painting, one finds several more circles Botticelli adeptly implanted within the scene to more deeply emphasize the presence of the divine: the sun gleaming above the Blessed Mother, the crown being placed upon her head, the ornate decoration of the wooden chair on which she sits, the fruit in her and Christ’s hands, and the stone arc window frame pictured at the top of the painting that opens the scene to look out onto the countryside. Botticelli paints the Virgin Mary as young, beautiful, and in contemplation as she pens the striking words of her “Magnificat” (“*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . .*” —Luke 1: 46 – 53) onto the pages of a book which wingless angels are holding for her. The Christ Child, with His hand upon her and the book, seems to either be guiding her words, or affirming their beauty. On the opposite page are written the memorable words of the “Benedictus,” which Zachariah sung at the circumcision of his son John the Baptist (“*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, he has come to his people and set them free . . .*” —Luke 1: 68 – 79). The pomegranate which the mother and child are both holding is a symbol of the Passion (because of its countless bright red seeds that resemble drops of blood), and explains the melancholy expression on the faces of the subjects in the painting. The joy of Christ’s coming is mingled with the sorrow of His eventual cross. Botticelli acknowledges Mary’s queenship – our Queen of Heaven and Earth, Queen of Angels, and Queen of Peace -- by showing two angels dressed in white placing a resplendent crown upon her delicately haloed head. Upon close examination, we see the dazzling crown is a conglomerate of countless little stars – since Mary is honored as the “Morning Star” and “Star of the Sea” among her many titles. She is dressed in fine royal robes of blue and red, symbolic of her love (blue) and sorrow (red). Her blue mantel is arranged by Botticelli to resemble a tent, from which the Christ Child on her lap is emerging. This tent imagery is highly symbolic in several ways. First, it encourages us to contemplate Mary as the “New Ark of the Covenant.” The old ark was the precious box that Moses built to house the tablets of the 10 Commandments, Aarons’ rod, and bits of manna, which was kept in a special tent. The Israelites devoutly carried the ark and tent around with them in the dessert as they journeyed to the Promised Land. In the Old Testament, the “Ark of the Covenant” kept within this special tent was seen as the presence of God among men. In the New Testament, Jesus Himself came to be physically present to humanity, and since Mary carried Jesus within her womb for nine months, she is often referred to as the new “Ark of the Covenant.” Secondly, throughout scripture much wedding imagery is used, with Christ Himself being described as a bridegroom and the Church His bride. Thus, in this painting, Christ is the bridegroom emerging from His tent coming for His bride. The Christ Child sits lovingly on his mother’s lap, with a sense of mission detectable on His face. Mother and Child seem to have no need to utter a word to each other because His Sacred Heart and her Immaculate Heart are perfectly united. Botticelli places the figures in front of a window that looks out into a lush earthy landscape, which essentially suspends them between two dimensions: earth and heaven, the material and immaterial. We see a human mother and the Queen of Heaven, a helpless babe and the Author of All Creation, temporary things of this world and eternal things of heaven. Notice in Botticelli’s landscape of the material world into which the Son of God has just arrived, the sun is rising, signifying the Light of the World has come among man! During the time in which Botticelli lived, artists would sometimes tint their paint with tiny specks of gold to enhance the beauty of their work, but only very sparingly since this was extremely expensive to do. In this masterpiece, Botticelli used a highly extravagant amount of gold paint, more so than any other painting he painted. Gold is present in the brilliant sun, Mary’s hair and crown, decorative trim of the clothing, delicate halos, and even the highlights in the hair of the attendant angels. It appears that Botticelli felt the subject matter of this painting – the Madonna of the Magnificat – was wholly deserving of liberal use of gold. How fitting to use the most dazzling and prized of earthly elements to depict the most beautiful canticle of Godly praise ever uttered, Mary’s Magnificat:

***“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm. He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.”*** – Luke 1: 46-52