

Die religiösen Gemälde Sandro Botticellis. Malerei als 'pia philosophia'. By Damian Dombrowski. 582 pp. incl. 236 b. & w. ills. (Deutscher Kunstverlag, Munich, 2010), €82. ISBN 978-3-422-06945-9.

Reviewed by FRANK ZÖLLNER

THIS COMPREHENSIVE STUDY is devoted to the religious paintings of Sandro Botticelli and fills a gap in the literature on the artist. It is true that the subject has also been addressed in recent publications by Andrew Blume and Roberta Olsen, among others, and that the significance of the artist's religious works, his large altarpieces in particular, has been stressed in standard monographs. Nonetheless, despite forming the largest category in his *œuvre*, Botticelli's religious paintings have not previously been the object of a separate study and have stood too much in the shadow of his more famous (and ultimately more important) secular works.

Damian Dombrowski sets great store by the analysis of formal artistic ('*bildkünstlerische*') composition, thereby distancing himself from more recent trends in scholarship, whose concentration upon the context of Botticelli's works, the intentions of their patrons, their reception by contemporary viewers and their theoretical content has yielded, in Dombrowski's view, a one-sided picture of the artist. He considers that Botticelli's powers of design and composition have been neglected in recent times. But he also examines the context behind Botticelli's religious works and takes account of the relevant theoretical sources and the role of the viewer. As a result, his emphasis on his own approach seems somewhat overstated, which, of course, does not make this thoroughly researched and well-written book the less valuable.

The strength of this study lies in its individual analyses, based as a rule upon a thorough discussion of iconographical and formal questions. The author also pays great attention to the relevant pictorial tradition, particularly rewarding in the case of the large altarpieces. He also reviews practically the entire body of previous research on each painting (sadly no longer an automatic feature of books on famous artists), referencing and commenting upon findings and ideas. As a consequence, in some places the book reads like a review of the literature and at times appears somewhat too opinionated. Academic theories that are long since out of date are restated, discussed in depth and critically assessed. A more exhaustive discussion limited to current thinking and to relevant viewpoints would have been more to the point. This is true in particular of Dombrowski's examination of the large altarpieces such as the Bardi altar, the Pala di S. Barnaba, the Cestello *Annunciation* and the altarpiece for S. Marco.

The book is structured around both the specific genres of Botticelli's works and their chronology. The analyses of the smaller religious paintings are followed by comprehensive

sections on further pictures, on the frescos and large altarpieces and on the late works. After revisiting evaluations of these late works – and in particular of the 'Savonarola problem' – in the literature, Dombrowski examines the status of the religious picture in the final decade of the fifteenth century. A central thesis is that Botticelli's artistic achievement does not consist in having emancipated art from religion and having transported it into a realm of autonomous self-reflexivity, but rather, Dombrowski considers that the aesthetic and the religious cannot be separated: 'the aesthetic appears with the religious' and Botticelli's art is a '*pia philosophia* of a separate order' (p.444). He expressly sets himself against more recent authors who see a fundamental divide between aesthetics and autonomy on the one hand and religious content on the other. The book is an implicit exploration of the arguments put forward in Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history.

Among the book's analyses of individual works, those devoted to the large altarpieces are the most interesting. Dombrowski discusses the Eucharistic significance of the Bardi altar in great detail in which an important function is played by the small imitation Crucifixion tablet, or *pax*, appearing within the altarpiece: one of the *instrumenta pacis*, it is directly linked with the ritual celebration of mass. Regrettably, Dombrowski somewhat neglects the textual character of the Bardi altar, with its multiple inscriptions on a scale found in no other fifteenth-century altarpiece. Inscriptions are present in other of his altarpieces and in particular in his mythological paintings and in their use Botticelli shows himself to be aiming – far more than other quattrocento painters – towards an innovative processing of literary sources. It is in this that his true importance lies.

Just how important Botticelli's references to texts can be emerges from Dombrowski's learned analysis of the Pala di S. Barnaba (Uffizi, Florence). His explanations regarding the context of the altarpiece, the choice of its saints and the literary sources upon which it draws are particularly convincing. Also of interest is his attempt to trace, from literary sources, the motif of unveiling represented in the pala by the baldachin, and link it to the contemporary Florentine practice of furnishing altarpieces with curtains and only unveiling them to the faithful on certain feast days.

The attempt to interpret the Lehman *Annunciation* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) as a predella panel for the Pala di S. Paolino is also interesting. Less convincing, in my view, is the attempt to assign the Milan *Lamentation* to the Panciatichi chapel in S. Maria Maggiore in Florence, as part of a lost Stations of the Cross cycle.

The Pala di S. Ambrogio (Uffizi, Florence), until now always assigned to Botticelli's early *œuvre*, might be one of his late works, as Dombrowski believes, in view of the strange scale of its figures. Stylistic criteria also support his argument that the *Mystic Crucifixion*, probably dating from 1497/98 (Fogg Museum, Cambridge MA), is not an autograph work.

Dombrowski also has a number of interesting suggestions to make with regard to the dating of the smaller paintings of the 1490s whose attribution to Botticelli is in many cases controversial. Almost all the currently accepted datings of works that are not documented are a construct of earlier scholarship, and Dombrowski's detailed, often somewhat long-winded stylistic analyses do little to change this. More interesting is the thesis that Botticelli shows himself, in what the author deems his late works from 1490 onwards, to be the most original inventor of figures in Florence.

This does not resolve the 'Savonarola problem' with regard to Botticelli's late works. The author discusses this at great length, but without arriving at truly convincing or entirely new solutions. The answer probably lies in the fact that the artist was still dependent, in the 1490s, upon commissions – whether these came from Savonarola's supporters or his opponents. He supplied customers in both camps with the stylistic mode they desired. This adaptability was a constituent of his success as a painter, but it makes it difficult to arrive at a reliable dating of his late works based on stylistic criteria alone.