

# Botticelli in Your Own Backyard

ITALY'S RENOWNED UFFIZI GALLERY  
SENDS "ANGELS" TO AMERICA

By Jenifer Mangione Vogt

*"A man who has not been in Italy is always conscious of inferiority, for not having seen what it is expected a man should see."*

—Samuel Johnson



Alessandro Di Mariano Filipepi, called Sandro Botticelli (and restorer from 19th century). "Madonna with Child" ("Madonna della loggia"), circa 1466-1467; oil on panel. Collection of the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

With Samuel Johnson's motivating quote accompanying the introductory message from four U.S. museum directors, the grand exhibit, "Offering of the Angels: Tapestries and Paintings from the Uffizi Gallery," began its much anticipated tour in the United States last November. Never before has an entire exhibit built solely from the world-renown Uffizi's magnificent collection been in the United States.

So, yes, consider this is an exhibit you should see. And, as the museum directors put it, even if you can't go to Italy, Italy is coming to you.

You will have plenty of opportunities to see it. "Offering of the Angels" is scheduled to remain on display at its first U.S. stop, the Museum of Art | Fort Lauderdale, until April 8. It then moves to the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pa., from April 21 through August 10. The third showcase will be the Chazen Museum of Art in Madison, Wis., from August 24 to November 25. On December 7, the show will travel to the Telfair Museum, Jepson Center for the Arts, in Savannah, Ga., where it will remain until March 31, 2013, before returning to Florence.

Thoughtfully curated by Uffizi Director Antonio Natali, the exhibition showcases 43 paintings and two tapestries from the Renaissance and Baroque periods, the 15th to 17th centuries. It includes works by such masters as Sandro Botticelli, Parmigianino, Alessandro Allori, Luca Giordano and Lorenzo Monaco.

The exhibition made its transatlantic journey through the efforts of the Palm Beach-based nonprofit Friends of the Uffizi Gallery (*Amici degli Uffizi*), created in Italy in 1993 in response to a bombing attack on the Uffizi Gallery. The organization grew, promoting "the Medici family's long-standing tradition for all of Florence and the world to enjoy the artistic treasures," says Lisa Marie Browne, its executive director. "The hope is that . . . more people throughout the United States will understand the value of preserving and restoring the amazing treasures housed in the Uffizi for future generations."

With "angels" in the title, expect lots of angels in the art. And there are. But, thematically, the exhibition hinges on the Christian concept of the Eucharist, the belief that bread can be transformed into the body of Christ, and that by consuming that bread sin is forgiven. That's the reference to "offering" in the title, as translated from the Italian "Il Pane," or "bread."

The remarkable art in this show is accessible, however, to visitors of any faith—with "faith" being the operative word. "It's more than just the Eucharist. It's about artists who are depicting the subject of great faith," explains Irvin M. Lippman, executive director of the Museum of Art | Fort Lauderdale.

Drawing on the challenges and victories within the realm of faith, on such universal themes as ►



Pietro Liberi, "Annunciation," circa 1670; oil on canvas. Collection of the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

birth, death, love, sacrifice, suffering and victory, these masterpieces depict Old Testament images as well as scenes from the life of Jesus Christ.

The exhibit's first work, as installed in Fort Lauderdale, is Jacopo Da Empoli's "The Creation of Adam" (1632), which depicts God giving life to Adam. Nearby is Tintoretto's "The Sacrifice of Isaac" (ca.1550), portraying an angel interrupting Abraham as he is about to carry out God's command to sacrifice his only son.

Pietro Liberi's "The Annunciation" (ca. 1670) portrays the moment when an angel startles the Virgin Mary. As with all of these paintings, it has been restored to its original splendor that will leave viewers awe-struck by its sheer beauty, the masterful skill of the painter, the brilliant depth of color, the ethereal quality of this poignant event, and the historic significance of the work.

The 11 nativity paintings alone would make this exhibit worthwhile. These works illustrate the deep bond of love between Mary and the infant Jesus, as depicted in the Botticelli's masterpiece, "The Madonna and Child" (ca. 1466).

The exhibit's remaining segments deal with The Last Supper, The Crucifixion and The Resurrection. One of two tapestries depicts "The Descent from the Cross" (ca. 1546). Woven by Nicola Karcher from a drawing made by Il Salviati, it displays an astonishing intricacy of the weave and details within the border, including images of Christ's face.

Bruce Katsiff, executive director of The James A. Michener Art Museum, says that whether it's Egyptian, Greek or Roman, "art was basically in service to religion. The Renaissance was the zenith

of the Christian art and portraits. This show has excellent examples of art in service to religion . . . . It really is a fabulous exhibition."

Katsiff adds that the exhibit's importance is witnessed in numbers. During its showing in Barcelona in 2009, he says, it attracted 700,000 visitors. And more than 1.6 million people visit the Uffizi itself each year, he says, adding that the Uffizi is on the "Smithsonian Life List: 28 Places to See Before You Die."

The show also proves to be illuminating educationally through its visual tutorial on the restoration of Titian's "The Madonna and Child with Saint Catherine of Alexandria" (1550 to 1560). Besides the actual painting, the Uffizi displays reproductions of the various stages of its restoration.

"Offering of the Angels," ultimately, transports the viewer to a solemnly beautiful realm where religious devotion and faith are paramount, and a period of time that found God at the center of the universe. It's an inspiring journey.

Next stop come mid-April: The James A. Michener Art Museum, 45 minutes north of Philadelphia and an hour from New York City.

"Botticelli in my own backyard!" says Doylestown resident Gina F. Rubel, president and CEO of Furia Rubel Communications Inc., who's serving as Museum Liaison to Italian and Italian-American Communities for the Uffizi exhibit.

Rubel is especially excited because she visited the Uffizi with her parents when she was 6. She remembers the tears in her father's eyes as he gazed upon Botticelli's "Birth of Venus." Had her father not passed away recently, she says, "He would have been one of the first through the Michener doors" on April 21.

Philadelphia-based Consul General of Italy Luigi Scotto also looks forward to the exhibition's arrival. "As I always say, Italy is a cultural super power," he says. "When you mention Botticelli, Tintoretto, Parmigianino . . . all these artists are Italian, but their legacy belongs to the world and the universe."

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Cristofano Allori, "Christ Served by the Angels," beginning of the 17th century; oil on canvas. Collection of the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

