

Nativity

Sandro Botticelli (Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi), ca. 1475

Mixed media on plaster transferred to cradled canvas

63 1/2 × 54 in. (161.3 × 137.2 cm)

Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, South Carolina

CMA 1954.29 (K-1410)



FIG. 1. *Nativity*, during 1994–95 conservation.



FIG. 2. *Nativity* (fig. 1), after cleaning and restoration.

Botticelli's *Nativity*

Charles R. Mack

IN 1943, RENAISSANCE ART HISTORIAN, R. Langton Douglas concluded his evaluation of this detached fresco of the *Nativity* (figs. 1 and 2), with these evocative words: "This picture has all the charm, all the gracefulness of Botticelli's style at this period. It is the recorded vision of a painter, a painter who was essentially a mystic, though not without a sensuous appreciation of the beauties of the present world. This lovely pastoral is the Christian counterpart of a spring-tide dream of Theocritus. We see the New Life springing up amongst the ruins of the Old Order, whilst Angels sing the *Adeste Fideles*."¹

Despite the poetic phrasings of Douglas, a true appreciation of the *Nativity*, a part of the Samuel H. Kress Collection of the Columbia Museum of Art in South Carolina, since 1954, has been complicated and hampered by a number of problems involving the history of its ownership, proper attribution, original location and function, and condition. One scholar apparently believed there to be two separate works and wrote of both in the same book.² Such confusion, actually, is not surprising considering the complicated story of its provenance.

PROVENANCE

A reconstruction of the history of the painting might begin with a tantalizingly brief statement, signed in Munich on October 28, 1927 by a certain Franco Steffanoni of Bergamo.³ In this document, Steffanoni stated that he had once transferred a painting called *The Holy Nativity* from wall to canvas.

Steffanoni went on to say that he had made his identification from a photograph that had been sent to him. He added that the dimensions of the fresco he had transferred were 160 × 140 cm. These dimensions correspond closely to those of the painting now in the Columbia Museum (161.3 × 137.2 cm or 63 1/2 × 54 in.), and the photograph sent to Steffanoni showed the Columbia *Nativity*. There is no doubt that the painting began its life as a mural and that it was later transferred to a canvas support.⁴ Unfortunately, Steffanoni's terse testimony provided no information as to when or where he had performed his task.

If Steffanoni's 1927 account is to be credited, it would mean that he removed and transferred the painting at least forty-two years earlier, since a reconstruction of the painting's provenance points to it having been in the collection of Sir William Neville Abdy (1844–1910) of the Elms, Newdigate, Dorking, England by 1885.⁵ In that year, Abdy lent the work to the Louvre for an exhibition to benefit the Franco-Prussian War orphans of Alsace-Lorraine. The exhibit was called *Exposition de Tableaux, Statues et Objets d'Art au Profit de L'Oeuvre des Orphelins d'Alsace-Lorraine; Salle des États au Louvre*.⁶ Listed as number 312 on page 89 of the exhibition catalogue, the *Nativity* bore an unsurprising attribution to Botticelli's pupil, Filippino Lippi. Eventually, this same painting was among works from the Abdy estate sold in London at Christie's on May 5, 1911 (lot 86).⁷ By then it had received its more customary association with the name of Sandro Botticelli.

At this point, there is a bit of chronological confusion since Museum file records indicate that the painting was exhibited at the Szépművészeti Museum in Budapest from 1909 to 1911. How and why it traveled from England to Hungary and back to London for the 1911 auction is unclear. In any case, the person who acquired the painting at Christie's was the well-known international art collector and dealer, Marzell von Nemeš.⁸

While in von Nemeš's hands, the *Nativity*, along with other works from his collection, was placed on public view from 1912 to 1913 at the Städtische Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf, Germany, and listed in

a special catalogue to that exhibition.⁹ During this time, the *Nativity* attracted scholarly attention and was discussed in several articles focusing on the von Nemeš Collection.¹⁰ On June 17, 1913, the painting was among a number of works von Nemeš put up for sale at the Manzi firm of Paris; as item number 4 in the catalogue, it failed to find a buyer.¹¹ Shortly thereafter, the *Nativity* passed through the hands of Parisian dealers Charles Sedelmeyer and Broux Gilbert, but remained the property of von Nemeš, who was, it would seem, attempting to dispose of the work with World War I looming.¹² The whereabouts of the *Nativity* during World War I is unclear, but as that conflict came to an end, the painting was included and illustrated in a multi-volume history of medieval and Renaissance painting written by Salomon Reinach.¹³ In 1921, von Nemeš acquired a castle, Schloss Tutzing, in Upper Bavaria and used it as a private gallery for his extensive collection. The *Nativity* was apparently still in von Nemeš's possession throughout the 1920s and may have spent the decade at Tutzing. It was during that period that Steffanoni was asked to document his involvement; evidently his testimony was part of an effort to authenticate the painting prior to an anticipated sale. At von Nemeš's death in 1930, however, the *Nativity* was still unsold and formed part of his estate.

When von Nemeš died, he was in debt to several banks that had come under the control of the German government and which now proceeded to seize and dispose of the collection. The German authorities made an unsuccessful effort to sell the *Nativity* at auction on February 29, 1932.¹⁴ This was a particularly difficult period in the German and world economy, and it is not surprising that a buyer could not be found. In connection with the 1932 auction (location undocumented but probably in Munich), the painting was examined by a certain "Professor Graf, Chief Conservator of the Pinakothek here" to evaluate its condition. It was Graf who left the first condition report for the *Nativity* (see discussion, below).¹⁵

Around 1935, German officials included the *Nativity* among the unsold works from the von

Nemeš estate that were placed in storage at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin.¹⁶ This temporary connection has led, at times, to incorrect provenance entries that indicate that the painting was part of the Museum's collection.¹⁷

Finally, in 1937, the *Nativity* was removed from its Berlin deposit and taken to Munich, where, once again, it was put on auction, this time successfully, at the firm of Julius Boehler.¹⁸ The buyer was the famous English art dealer Lord Duveen of Millbank. Duveen, of course, was interested in a resale, and it was at his behest that in October of the same year the *Nativity* was fitted out with an elaborately carved and handsomely painted and gilded frame commissioned from an Italian craftsman named Ferruccio Vannoni at a cost of 2,500 lire.¹⁹ Vannoni would seem to have produced his frame in Italy, working from dimensions sent

to him. (For more on Vannoni, see Mario and Dianne Dwyer Modestini's paper in this volume.)

The *Nativity's* new owner supplied many works of art to Samuel H. Kress, and it was through Duveen that the *Nativity*, now rather securely bearing the name of Sandro Botticelli, came to the United States and eventually into the Kress Collection in 1946.²⁰ At that point, Kress was enhancing his donation to the National Gallery of Art, and the *Nativity* was placed on public view in Washington from 1946 until 1953. In 1954, after decades of wandering, the Abdy-von Nemeš-Kress *Nativity* found its permanent home in South Carolina when it joined twenty-six other paintings in an initial gift from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation to the newly established Columbia Museum of Art, then housed in the renovated Thomas Taylor Home (fig. 3).²¹ To better



FIG. 3. *Nativity* (fig. 1), in the Ferruccio Vannoni frame as installed in the Columbia Museum of Art (Taylor House location) in 1954.



FIG. 4. *Nativity* (fig. 1), 1962 reinstatement without the Vannoni frame.

approximate the *Nativity's* origin as a mural, Vannoni's elaborate frame was removed sometime in 1961 or 1962, and the painting was set into a wall of the gallery (fig. 4).

ATTRIBUTION

The fresco of the *Nativity* has been associated with the names of both Sandro Botticelli and his pupil, Filippino Lippi. Sadly, neither of the biographies of these two artists in Giorgio Vasari's mid-sixteenth-century *Lives of the Artists*, makes mention of the fresco—an understandable omission considering its relatively small size and its simplicity of statement. When the *Nativity* first entered the literature in 1885, it was ascribed to Filippino Lippi. Since then, however, scholars have united around the name of Sandro Botticelli, differing primarily in describing it as either autograph or a workshop production. Even those who give it to Botticelli have assigned portions of it (e.g., the three hovering angels) to an assistant, perhaps even Filippino Lippi. Opinions in the Kress Foundation files from Bernard Berenson (1932), Lionello Venturi (1939), R. Langton Douglas (1943), Fern Rusk Shapley (1966), B.B. Fredericksen and Federico Zeri (1972), and most recently from Everett Fahy (who saw the painting after its latest restoration in 1994) have supported a definite attribution to Botticelli, with Berenson revising his view in 1963 in favor of a more conservative workshop association, a position taken in 1931 by Raimond van Marle.²²

Several authorities have associated the *Nativity's* style and composition with two works that have been attributed to Botticelli or his circle. One of these is a pen and ink drawing, usually thought to be a school work, of three flying angels in the Gabinetto dei Disegni of the Uffizi.²³ There is a general resemblance between this group and the angels hovering above the stable in the *Nativity*, although the apparent similarity may be misleadingly enhanced by the drawing's semicircular shape that heightens its resemblance to the angels in Columbia. Whether the drawing was made as a lunette or was later cut down to that form is uncertain. Admittedly the fluidity of these

diaphanously clad angels bears greater similarity to the fresco in Columbia than it does to the angelic celebrants floating and dancing above Botticelli's late (circa 1501) *Mystic Nativity* in London with which the drawing has been associated, but an absolute connection cannot be made. The Uffizi drawing has been dated variously within the earlier to middle phases of Botticelli's career, i.e., from the early 1470s to as late as 1490.

The composition and stylistic features of the *Nativity* in Columbia are most often connected with a frescoed lunette of the same subject (but without the landscape setting and Florentine youths) in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence.²⁴ This fresco has been relocated within the church—perhaps more than once—and originally may have surmounted the famous *Adoration of the Magi* in the Del Lama funerary chapel.²⁵ This badly preserved fresco reverses the basic composition of the Columbia *Nativity* by placing the Madonna on the left and further differs from it by having the young Saint John rush in from the left rear and having Joseph seated in an attitude of slumber.²⁶ Dated between 1475 and 1477, it has been seen as a stylistic relative of the Columbia *Nativity*.

Based in part on its perceived similarities to the Santa Maria Novella *Nativity*, the Columbia fresco has usually been assigned a somewhat earlier date in Botticelli's chronology, around 1473 to 1475. To support this dating, R. Langton Douglas pointed to a stylistic affinity with the manner of Fra Filippo Lippi.²⁷ Douglas noted that, although Botticelli had received his first instruction in Lippi's shop, he had acquired a more sculptural approach through his later connection with the *bottega* of Andrea del Verrocchio. When Fra Filippo's son, the precocious Filippino, apprenticed with Botticelli in 1472, Botticelli was motivated to revive the manner of his old master. Douglas believed that the *Nativity* in Columbia is one manifestation of the lyrical Lippi revival within the evolving style of Sandro Botticelli.

THE QUESTION OF THE ORIGINAL LOCATION

As noted earlier, the first recorded mention of the *Nativity* placed it in the private collection of

William Abdy in 1885. Some four decades later, the Italian conservator Franco Steffanoni attested to having removed the fresco from what we can assume was its original location and having transferred it to a canvas support (making possible all its subsequent international travels and its eventual arrival in South Carolina). But where had Steffanoni done his work and what, in the first place, had occasioned the transfer from wall to canvas, from a fixed to a mobile condition? The answers to these questions would not only satisfy simple curiosity but would assist in resolving problems of its purpose and attribution.

A search through the old accounts and histories of Florentine art, including Giorgio Vasari's *Lives* (looking under the various possible artists to whom the painting might be attributed—Botticelli, Filippino Lippi, Botticini, etc.) has not produced any record of this *Nativity* prior to 1885. The questions remain. For what purpose could such a fresco with its comparatively small dimensions and with such a subject have been originally commissioned? The subject matter is a common one for an altarpiece, yet frescoes are not generally associated with that particular form. On the other hand, altarpieces in fresco may have been more common than is supposed, with many having been destroyed (not being easily movable) during modernization campaigns or, as in the case with our *Nativity*, converted to a transportable and salable state. One famous example of an altarpiece in fresco, albeit of uncommon type and with a totally different subject, is the celebrated Masaccio *Trinity* from the mid-1420s, above a memorial altar in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella. The Botticelli *Nativity* discussed earlier, still in the same church but in a new location, is another possible example. Still another and more obvious example—one with an identical theme and offering a parallel to the Columbia painting—can still be found in its original location in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. There, between 1485 and 1489, Pinturicchio painted a fresco of the *Nativity* above the altar of the Cappella della Rovere and framed it in such a way that it appears as if it were a normal panel

painting. That intact setting provides a visual key to understanding one context for the *Nativity* in Columbia and how it might be better appreciated today. But even if this hypothesis were true, where were the church and the chapel in which the *Nativity* served as an altarpiece?

Given the clearly Florentine character of the *Nativity*, Florence would be the logical assumption, although no record of such an altarpiece has been preserved. One possible clue, however, is offered by the suggested date for Steffanoni's removal of the fresco and for its appearance in the Abdy Collection at some point prior to 1885. It was just at that time that the city of Florence was initiating a drastic program of urban renewal that would obliterate almost its entire central core.²⁸ In the campaign to modernize the city, much of the medieval and Renaissance district around the old market square was razed to be replaced by the neo-classical Piazza della Repubblica, the central post office, and other structures of the late nineteenth century. Perhaps, the Columbia Museum's *Nativity* was frescoed on the wall of one of the several churches sacrificed to that massive rebuilding campaign.²⁹ Something, but certainly not everything, is known of these churches' architectural character and furnishings. It is just possible that the *Nativity* was salvaged from a church sacrificed to this lamentable nineteenth-century modernization of the heart of old Florence, first rescued and then sold to an English collector.

Of course, there is no proof that the *Nativity* had a Florentine origin at all. Both Botticelli and Filippino Lippi, the two artists with whom the fresco has been most commonly associated, also worked in Rome. Botticelli was there from 1481 to 1482, when he worked on the frescoes lining the walls of the Sistine Chapel. The young Filippino Lippi was in Rome from 1488 to 1493 while he was executing the frescoes in the splendid chapel of Cardinal Olivieri Carafa in the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva. Either artist could have accepted a small side commission to paint a *Nativity* on the wall of some Roman church. On the other hand, there is no more evidence for such an altarpiece in Rome than there is in Florence,



FIG. 5. *Nativity* (fig. 1), showing the condition of the fresco following its transfer to canvas and prior to the first series of restorations.

and stylistically the *Nativity* would seem too early to support a Roman hypothesis for either artist.

If an original location and function as an altar-piece within a church cannot be substantiated, what of some external site? The street corners of Florence, even today, abound with outdoor tabernacles.³⁰ Some 1,300 are known to have existed. Over the years many of these have disappeared for a multitude of reasons from floods to street repair to urban renewal. Certainly a number vanished with the demolition of the old market quarter just mentioned. Most of these street-side shrines featured images in fresco. While most of these, judging by the survivors, are considerably smaller in size and less compositionally complex than the Columbia *Nativity*, some larger examples survive, and this suggests another possible origin for the *Nativity*. In support of this “open air” hypothesis is a file photograph of the fresco; although undated, it must have been taken at some point before the *Nativity* entered the Kress Collection (fig. 5).³¹ In this photograph the surface shows

considerable wear of the type one might expect to find in a work exposed to the elements.

It is more than likely that the *Nativity*, whatever its original site or function, received the attention of informal cleanings and even minor restorations long before Steffanoni entered the scene. His interventions were, however, radical in nature. Thankfully, his approach to the problem of mural detachment appears to have been competent. After it had been transferred to heavy canvas (primed on the reverse and reinforced with a lightweight cradle) and had passed from the Abdy to the von Nemeš Collection, the *Nativity* apparently underwent an energetic restoration, by whom we do not know.

When Professor Graf, the chief conservator of the Munich Alte Pinakothek, examined the painting in 1932 he presented a brief but contradictory report.³² He stated that the *Nativity* “has been very well preserved,” but that “the restorations which have been made by Von Nemeš are to be regretted.” Graf went on to note that while a “moderate and orderly restoration” might be undertaken, his conclusion was that “after close scrutiny and experienced consideration, no further restoration should be attempted.” If anything were to be done, he recommended nothing more than “touching up the white places with light coloring, in order to make it more attractive to the eye of the spectator.” If this were done, Graf suggested “photographing the picture in its present state, in order to show to the eventual buyer the exact state of the picture, the parts that have been repainted, and those which have been restored.”

Until recently, conservation records for the *Nativity* have been meager. In addition to Steffanoni’s treatment of the painting after its transfer to canvas, the more aggressive treatment probably done for von Nemeš, and the possible work performed under Graf’s direction, an undated Columbia Museum of Art condition report mentions, without elaboration, minor restorations in 1947 and in 1954, that is subsequent to the *Nativity*’s acquisition by Samuel H. Kress and then in preparation for sending it to Columbia.



FIG. 6. *Nativity* (fig. 1), as presently installed in the new Columbia Museum of Art.

On June 14, 1993, the Columbia Museum of Art's catalogue sheet for the painting rated its condition as good to fair, adding the following comments:

chipping of paint has occurred along bottom and right side. There are many cracks where chips were lost. Also, there are some areas where the top layer of paint is missing. It looks as though work has been done to keep further deterioration from occurring.

In March 1994, Kress Foundation conservator Dianne Dwyer Modestini visited the Columbia Museum of Art to examine the overall condition of its collection and to recommend a program of regular maintenance and restoration. Her report reviewed the condition of the *Nativity* and suggested that it be removed to her conservation studio in New York for appropriate attention to begin that September. In this initial report, Dianne Dwyer Modestini theorized that the major work of restoration on the fresco had been done at the beginning of the twentieth century, an observation that agreed with Graf's notes in 1932. She went on to observe that:

The condition is uneven with some passages well preserved and others in ruinous state. The three angels above are largely reconstructed from existing fragments which can be glimpsed here and there under crude repaint. The architecture of the stable is relatively well preserved with only the beam immediately behind the angels completely repainted. These elements in the upper part of the painting could have been painted in *buon fresco*. The sky is repainted in full. Small fragments of the original blue can be located in a few places. The original blue is a thin wash of what appears to be lapis. The donkey is well preserved; the mouth of the ox, the neck, and the part of the head in shadow have been repainted. The distant landscape and the grove of trees on the left are well preserved. The two youths on the left are worn, especially the heads and hands, and the costumes have been much, but not completely, repainted. The foreground landscape is largely, but not completely, restoration. Some parts of the bushes, including the fruit,

are original; therefore the iconographical significance is valid. The figure of St. Joseph, the bundle in the foreground and the Madonna's head and hands are quite well preserved. Her dress, painted with good quality lapis blue, has lots of restorations but on the whole is in fair state. For the flesh tones, the paint has been applied as a liquid enamel over which thin modeling glazes have been floated. It exhibits a fine craquelure pattern which indicates that there is a binder, possibly a tempera *grassa*. The Child is in good state and the mordant gilding is original. Other areas of mordant gilding are reasonably intact, especially the little curlicues which rain down on the Child from the angelic trio. There has been some reinforcement with shell gold.

Modestini concluded her preliminary observations by suggesting that in a new round of conservation procedures after cleaning, the old inpainted restorations be removed, and that those areas suffering from the most damage be restored with neutral tones; these areas would include the three hovering angels and the foreground. Following her advice, and with the support of the Kress Foundation, the fresco was transported to New York where cleaning and restoration work was carried out by Mario and Dianne Dwyer Modestini. The *Nativity* was missed in Columbia but, as its absence coincided with preparations for reinstalling the Museum's collection in its handsome new quarters on Columbia's Main Street, this seemed the perfect occasion. Work on the *Nativity* was undertaken in the autumn of 1994, and the painting was back in Columbia, fitted out with a new tabernacle-like frame, ready to assume its pivotal position in the Museum's collection of Renaissance and Baroque art when the building was inaugurated in the summer of 1998 (fig. 6).

TREATMENT

The treatment at the New York University Conservation Center was summarized in a report sent to the Columbia Museum on January 5, 1995. In it, Dianne Dwyer Modestini explained the current state (see fig. 1) of the fresco and outlined the

steps and procedures taken to stabilize the work and optimize its appearance, first noting that:

Of course, the painting is not in good condition . . . important parts are well preserved: notably the head and hands of the Madonna, the figure of St. Joseph, the Child, and, somewhat less, the young St. John. The two figures on the left are badly damaged. Other details are well preserved, while the foreground and sky and the three hovering angels are in ruinous state. Of the angels, only the head of the angel on the right is in good condition. The landscape backgrounds, while full of scattered losses and abrasions, are, nonetheless, original, that is, not completely repainted, whereas the grove of trees on the left is largely reconstructed. The plants along the bottom are mostly reconstructed, with large areas of loss; however, there is some original.

Those who saw the painting during its period of convalescence in New York affirmed the primary authorship of Botticelli but suggested that there was a strong influence present from his apprentice, Filippino Lippi. In addition, “. . . we have noted,” Modestini wrote, “that there is a variation in quality, the principal parts being superbly drawn and painted, while other elements, such as the stable, the animals, seem to be by an inferior hand, a studio assistant.” In all probability, this lesser hand was not that of Filippino Lippi whose abilities matched those of his teacher.



FIG. 7. *Nativity* (fig. 1), detail of angels prior to 1994–95 conservation procedures.

Modestini also explained that, “The painting was transferred from plaster, lined to linen, which was then mounted on some sort of cradled board.” She determined that:

The technique is mixed media on plaster . . . not entirely *buon fresco*. Many passages, especially the flesh tones, exhibit a fine craquelure pattern associated with an aqueous binder, and are minutely executed like a tempera painting. The cracks and deformations of the original plaster support are evident throughout and the pattern of the cradle [of Steffanoni] can be seen in raking light. Structurally, the painting is stable.

Following a discussion of the particular procedures used in the restoration and of the various solvents and chemicals used in the cleaning and retouching processes, she concluded by saying that her:

restoration generally treated the painting as an easel painting, rather than a fresco for a variety of reasons: the poor state, the fact that it was not painted as a true fresco to begin with, and the treatment that it had undergone in the past which has been selectively removed.

RESULTS AND DISCOVERIES

What has been the effect of the recent cleaning and the conservation measures undertaken under the auspices of the Kress Foundation? The most



FIG. 8. *Nativity* (fig. 1), detail of angels following 1994–95 conservation procedures.

obvious result has been to stabilize its condition and to enhance its appearance (figs. 7 and 8). In addition, examination during treatment allowed for a more secure confirmation of Botticelli's primary role in its execution and an opportunity to distinguish between what is autograph and where Botticelli's contemporaries or later restorers have intervened.

The technical and stylistic understanding that the recent conservation measures brought to the *Nativity* have enabled us to re-evaluate Botticelli's working procedures. In 1978 Ronald Lightbown observed that:

the division between Botticelli's autograph works and the paintings from his workshop and circle is a fairly sharp one. Only in a single major panel painting (the *Trinity Altarpiece* in London's Courtauld Institute), do we find important parts executed by assistants . . . Even in the Sistine frescoes, where we might expect considerable traces of help from secondary hands, none has been convincingly demonstrated.³³

Lightbown also noted that "conversely, there are a very few workshop pictures in which Botticelli finished important parts or added finishing touches . . ." The close observation recently afforded the *Nativity* might necessitate a reconsideration of Lightbown's conclusions. At least in the case of the *Nativity* in Columbia, it has been shown that an essentially autograph fresco by Botticelli, even one of small dimensions, could involve the participation of one or more assistants in its execution.

Another result has been to reveal and clarify painted elements that allow for a more intelligent reading of the various visual meanings within the seemingly straightforward presentation. One such element, previously only barely visible, is the shower of golden flames (fig. 9) that fall upon the Christ Child from the trinity of angels hovering above. Such flaming bundles (resembling the badges worn by today's Carabinieri, the Italian national police) are to be found in other Botticelli compositions: they appear on the shoulder of Mary in the *Madonna of the Book* in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan, and they sprinkle across



FIG. 9. *Nativity* (fig. 1), detail showing "golden flames," following 1994–95 conservation procedures.

the drapery of Mercury in the famous *Primavera* in the Uffizi. Most telling is the use of this motif in several of the drawings the master executed to illustrate Dante's *Divine Comedy*. They are major pictorial elements in Botticelli's drawings for *Inferno* Cantos xxvi–xxviii and especially for *Paradiso* Cantos vi–viii and xxiii–xxvi. The literary context makes the meaning clear in these connections: they represent "spirits" or "souls." Thus, in the Columbia *Nativity*, the newly clarified golden flames falling upon the *Bambino* might be interpreted as a Heavenly descent of the Holy Spirit as God is made man,³⁴ a reminder of the Virgin Birth.

For the visitor to the Columbia Museum of Art and for those who will be using its anticipated catalogue of Renaissance and Baroque art,

this conservation effort will have a decided impact. Not only has the visual integrity of the *Nativity* fresco been strengthened, but the information we have learned will be used to clarify the presentation. It will now be possible, thanks to the careful art historical and scientific reading of the painting afforded by the Kress-sponsored restoration, to explain the areas of varying quality within the composition—why, for instance, the Virgin’s face can be so lovely while that of the ox is so poorly executed. Such aspects as how little of the angels’ original figures do in fact remain can also be pointed out, allowing for a more discriminating appraisal of the true qualities of Botticelli’s manner and his contributions to the history of Renaissance art. The public “confession” that can be now attached to the *Nativity* and to other works in the Columbia Museum of Art that have benefited from Kress-sponsored conservation will aid visitors in applying these same lessons in appreciation when viewing other Old Master paintings in the Museum’s collection and elsewhere.

Despite what has been learned of the true condition of the *Nativity* in Columbia, the perceptive appraisal of R. Langton Douglas six decades ago still amplifies our appreciation of Botticelli’s gentle scene. His eloquence has only been strengthened by a better understanding of the painting’s complex history and by the thorough attention given to its condition. Restored and handsomely installed as a visual focal point in the Renaissance and Baroque galleries of the new Columbia Museum of Art, Sandro Botticelli’s lovely *Nativity* continues to captivate.

Charles R. Mack is William Joseph Todd Distinguished Professor Emeritus of the Italian Renaissance at the University of South Carolina where he taught art history from 1970 to 2005. A specialist in Quattrocento art and architecture with a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina, his publications include Looking at the Renaissance: Essays toward a Contextual Appreciation (2005) and Pienza: The Creation of a Renaissance City (1987).

NOTES

1. Letter from R. Langton Douglas, dated March 5, 1943, in the painting’s files at the Columbia Museum of Art.
2. Gabriele Mandel, *The Complete Paintings of Botticelli* (New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1967) where it is described on page 91 as a fresco copy of the *Nativity* fresco in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella, measuring 150 × 250 cm, which “went from the Boehler Gallery, Munich, to the Kress Collection, New York, which transferred it to the Columbia Museum of Art” and on page 109 (cat. no. 149), it is illustrated with a line drawing reproduced from Reinach. In its second appearance in Mandel’s book, the painting is described as “The *Nativity*, formerly Budapest, Von Nemeš Collection” and listed as a workshop production, executed in tempera on a wood support. The same entry also associates it with the Abdy Collection and says that “its present whereabouts are unknown.”
3. The text of this statement reads: “*Io sottoscritto Francesco Steffanoni di Bergamo (Italia), traspositore di dipinti, dichiaro: di aver trasportato il dipinto ramp.¹⁶ il Sacro Presepio, di cui è oggetto codesta stessa fotografia, dal muro su tele tel delle dimensioni di m. 1.40 x. 1.60. In fede Franco Steffanoni München, 28 Ottobre m.c.m. XXVII.*” [Translation: “I, the undersigned Francesco Steffanoni of Bergamo (Italy), a specialist in the transfer of paintings, declare: to have transferred the painting representing the Holy Nativity, which is the object in this photograph, from the wall to canvas whose dimensions are 1.40 × 1.60 meters. In fede Franco Steffanoni Munich, October 28, 1927.”] A copy of this document is in the painting’s files at the Columbia Museum of Art.
4. The recent restoration of the *Nativity* concluded that it had been transferred to a linen canvas mounted on a cradled solid support. Letter in the files of the Columbia Museum of Art from Dianne Dwyer Modestini dated January 5, 1995.
5. Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi, *Art of the Renaissance from the Samuel H. Kress Collection*. Columbia, SC: Columbia Museum of Art, 1962, p. 68; Ronald Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli: Complete Catalogue*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1978, II, p. 33.
6. Contini-Bonacossi 1962 (cited in note 5), p. 68.
7. Lightbown 1978 (cited in note 5), II, p. 33.
8. Von Nemeš’s first name also appears in the literature spelled as “Marcel” or “Marzell.” His portrait, painted in 1928–29 by Oskar Kokoschka, hangs in the Wolfgang-Gurlitt Museum in Linz, Austria.
9. Contini-Bonacossi 1962 (cited in note 5), p. 68.
10. Ibid. Six separate publications dealing with the von Nemeš Collection during this period are cited in the files of the Columbia Museum as having included the *Nativity*. They are: Gabriel von Terey, *Katalog der Sammlung des Kgl. Rates Marzell von Nemeš, Budapest* (Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1912), No. 3; August L. Mayer, “Die Sammlung Marzell von Nemeš in Budapest,” *Westermann’s Monatshefte* 133 (December 1912), pp. 495 and 540 (illus.); Georg Biermann, “Die Sammlung Marzell von Nemeš,” *Der Cicerone* (1912), p. 374 (illus., fig. 5); Gabriel Mourey, “La Collection Marzell von Nemeš,” *Les Arts* (June 1913), pp. 2–3; François de Miomandre, “Les Idées d’un amateur d’art,” *L’Art et les Artistes* (March 1913), p. 251 (illus.); and

- Emile Dacier, "La Collection Marzell de Nemeš," *Revue de l'Art Ancien et Moderne* (June 1913), p. 458.
11. Lightbown 1978 (cited in note 5), II, p. 33.
 12. Contini-Bonacossi 1962 (cited in note 5), p. 68 and Lightbown 1978 (cited in note 5), II, p. 33. The former lists the Sedelmeyer Gallery catalogue as Charles Sedelmeyer, *Catalogue of the Twelfth Series of 100 Paintings by Old Masters* (Paris, Sedelmeyer Gallery, 1913), p. 62, No. 39 (illus.).
 13. Salomon Reinach, *Répertoire de Peintures du Moyen Age et de la Renaissance* (Paris, 1918), IV, p. 76 (illus.). Thirteen years later Raimond von Marle included the *Nativity* (as a Botticelli school piece) in his authoritative *The Development of the Italian School of Painting* (The Hague, Nijhoff, 1931), XII, p. 272.
 14. This information is contained in a translated document in the Kress Foundation files with a copy at the Columbia Museum of Art.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. This is attested to in a Columbia Museum file copy of a Western Union Telegram from Paris to the Duveen Company in New York, dated Tuesday, August 8, 1939, that reads: "Botticelli Nativity came from Nemeš Collection. When Nemeš died he owed money banks which were taken over German Government who gave pictures to Kaiser Friedrich Museum who kept them stored several years until sold auction Munich."
 17. This is the impression given in Lightbown 1978 (cited in note 5), II, p. 33.
 18. This is documented in the sales catalogue *Kunstwerke aus dem Besitz der Staatlichen Museen* (Munich, Julius Boehler, 1–2 June 1937), pp. 104–5, No. 654, plate 48. The title of this auction catalogue may have contributed to the misunderstanding of the *Nativity's* status while in Berlin.
 19. See the copy of a letter in the Kress Foundation files and those of the Columbia Museum of Art, dated October 29, 1937, sent from New York and requesting information regarding Vannoni's prices. Vannoni's frame was still on the painting when it arrived in Columbia in 1954 for its initial installation in the new Kress wing of the Columbia Museum. Notations on the reverse of file photographs in the Columbia Museum indicate that the removal of Vannoni's frame and the reinstallation of the *Nativity* took place between late 1961 and October 1962. The Vannoni frame was subsequently deaccessioned and its present whereabouts are unknown. A photograph published in the *State and Columbia Record* of December 19, 1965 (copy in Museum files) shows the *Nativity* in its new frame and setting. The *Nativity* remained so displayed until the Columbia Museum moved into its new quarters in 1998.
 20. On this see R. Langton Douglas, "Recent additions to the Kress Collection," *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 88 (April 1946), p. 82, plate ivb.
 21. The former Taylor residence, with its gallery wing additions, was home to the Columbia Museum of Art from 1950 until 1998 when the collection was transferred to its present location. The initial Kress donation was augmented in 1964 by the gift of forty-four works of art, consisting of seventeen paintings, four sculptures, ten objects of decorative art, nine textiles, and four pieces of furniture. These seventy-one works from the Kress Foundation form the core of the Columbia Museum's holdings in Renaissance and Baroque art, now more than 200 in number.
 22. Copies of these opinions are in the Kress Foundation files and at the Columbia Museum of Art. Most of them are given in summary form in Contini-Bonacossi 1962 (cited in note 5), p. 68. Berenson's initial attribution was based on a photograph of the *Nativity* on which he wrote "Sandro Botticelli, about 1475. B. Berenson." That of Fredericksen and Zeri was contained in their *Census of Pre-Nineteenth-Century Italian Paintings in North American Public Collections* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1972); that of Shapley in her *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection, Vol. 1: Italian Schools, XIII–XV Century* (London, Phaidon, 1966), p. 117, fig. 318. The most recent observations of Everett Fahy are summarized in the restoration report submitted to the Columbia Museum of Art by Dianne Dwyer Modestini on January 5, 1995.
 23. See the discussion of this drawing in Lightbown 1978 (cited in note 5), II, pp. 161–2. Another drawing in the Uffizi collection, not cited in the literature but possibly related, is a badly damaged rendition in pen and ink of the *Adoration of the Child*. See the discussion in Lightbown 1978, p. 163. This drawing, over which there is considerable debate as to authorship and dating, depicts an animated Christ Child between a dozing Joseph on the left and an adoring Mary on the right. The attitude of the Virgin resembles that in Columbia, and there is some similarity between the *bambini* as well.
 24. See the discussion in Lightbown 1978 (cited in note 5), II, pp. 32–3. His treatment of the Columbia *Nativity* is appended to this entry. Also see Caterina Caneva, *Botticelli: Catalogo Completo dei Dipinti* (Florence, Cantini, 1990), p. 46.
 25. This was the opinion of Carlo Gamba, *Botticelli* (Milan, Ulrico Hoepli, 1936), pp. 115–16.
 26. The general character of Botticelli's composition in the *Nativity* fresco, as well as the representation of such elements as the wood-beamed stall, might be compared with a now ruined fresco by Paolo Uccello in the cloister arcade of the former hospital of San Martino della Scala in Florence, dated around 1446. Botticelli would have known Uccello's fresco since he is documented as having worked at the same institution in the spring of 1481, when he executed a fresco of the *Annunciation* for the tomb of the hospital's founder Cione Pollini; Botticelli could have been familiar with it much earlier.
 27. R. Langton Douglas, letter dated March 5, 1943 in the files of the Columbia Museum of Art.
 28. On this project, see Giovanni Fanelli, *Firenze: Architettura e Città* (Florence, Vallecchi, 1973), I, pp. 447–52.
 29. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 10 and 68. The churches then swept away in the *risanamento* of old Florence included S. Andrea, S. Pier Buonconsiglio, S. Tommaso, S. Maria in Campidoglio, S. Leone, S. Miniato fra le Torri, S. Salvatore, S. Ruffillo, S. Maria degli Vigni, S. Donato dei Vecchietti, and the Oratorio di S. Maria della Tromba. On these destroyed churches and their furnishings see Walter and Elizabeth Paatz, *Die Kirchen von Florenz*, 6 vols. (Frankfurt, Klostermann, 1940–1954). Plans published in vol. 6 show the sites of dozens of churches throughout the city that have either

vanished or been converted to secular use. The Columbia *Nativity* could have come from one of these or from a countryside parish in the outskirts of Florence.

30. On these outdoor devotionals, see “i tabernacoli” in *Aspetti Minori di Firenze*, ed. Piero Bargellini (Florence, Azienda Autonoma di Turismo, n.d.), pp. 29–41.
31. This photograph may have been taken in response to the suggestion made in 1932 by Professor Graf; see the discussion below.
32. Report copy in Registrar’s files, Columbia Museum of Art. This document, dated February 29, 1932 is a translation of Graf’s report; the translator is not identified.
33. Lightbown 1978 (cited in note 5), I, p. 155.
34. On Botticelli’s use of this motif see Horst Bredekamp, *Sandro Botticelli: La Primavera* (Frankfurt, Fischer, 1988), pp. 40–46. A similar motif can be seen on the Virgin’s shoulder in the *Madonna del Libro* in Milan and on Mercury’s cloak in Botticelli’s *Primavera* in the Uffizi.

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

- Figs. 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, and 9, pp. 78, 86, 88, and 89. Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC, Samuel H. Kress Collection (CMA 1954.29).
- Fig. 3, p. 81. Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC, Samuel H. Kress Collection (CMA 1954.29). Museum file photograph dated fall 1961.
- Fig. 4, p. 82. Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC, Samuel H. Kress Collection (CMA 1954.29). Museum file photograph dated October 1, 1962.
- Fig. 5, p. 85. Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC, Samuel H. Kress Collection (CMA 1954.29). Undated Museum file photograph.

