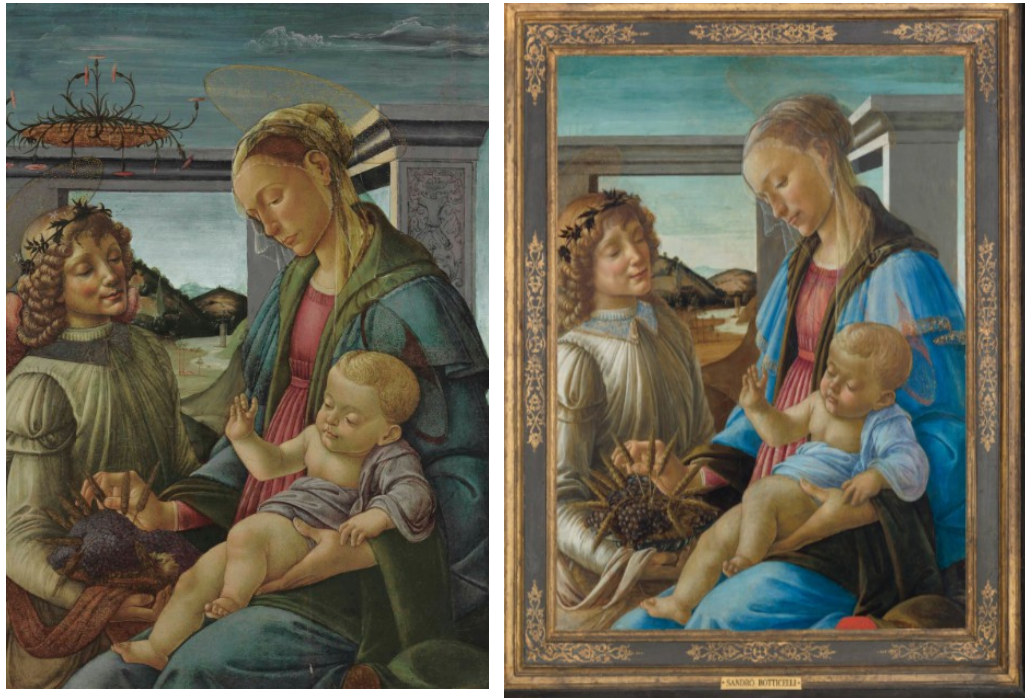


Which Witch is Which?



by Miles Mathis

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As usual, this is just my opinion

If you don't know, my title refers to an old episode of *Bewitched*, where there are two Samanthas. No, it isn't one with Serena, it's the one where Endora makes herself look like Samantha for a dress fitting. I am not implying the Virgin Mary was a witch, I just thought it would be a funny title to lead us in to this mystery.

I outed three fake Botticellis in a recent paper, and I will out another one here. One of those two above is the real one and the other is a copy. What makes it even more difficult is that both have been heavily “restored”, though a better word might be butchered. They were both restored last by the same jerk, a guy named Joseph Lindon (Zozo) Smith, who was hired by Bernard Berenson to do so before a famous sale to Isabella Stewart Gardner in 1899.

I was clued into all this by a reader, who mailed me a book today out the blue which I devoured in one sitting. It is entitled *Artful Partners*, published in 1986 by Colin Simpson. It gives us a treasure trove of information about the formation of the Gardner Museum, and I will be outing more fakes in the near future. As you know, [I recently analyzed](#) the 1990 “burglary” of that museum, showing it was more likely an inside job and con run as insurance fraud. In writing that I showed you that all of the stolen paintings were actually fakes. So this paper is a continuance of that.

The book is a strange one, since while it seems to be a thorough hatchet job on big-time art dealers Bernard Berenson and Joseph Duveen, painting them as a couple of crooks, at the same time it acts as a powerful whitewash of them and many of the paintings they sold. A whitewash, not a blackwash. For

starters, in the opening chapters it sells both of them as being from poor Jewish families from nowhere: the usual sob story. It then segues into slightly meatier chapters where Berenson is shown to be an unscrupulous climber and fraudster, while simultaneously confirming the value of many of these paintings mentioned.

We could have predicted some sort of major spin going in, since that was my first question on picking the book up: why would Simpson or his highly placed sources be trashing these guys? Why would *Newsweek* be quoted on the back extolling it, and why would Thomas Hoving of the Metropolitan be involved? Why would major publisher Macmillan agree to publish it? We also find on the front flap that *Connoisseur Magazine* was involved in promoting the book when it came out, which seems equally strange. Yes, places like Britannica and Wikipedia have since scrubbed Berenson and Duveen of most of this bad press, and the book is now out of print and hard to find, but still.

I may give you a longer book report later, but for now my assumption is that the book was written to whitewash these guys, not blackwash them. In the art world, or the world of finance, being a big crook isn't a shortcoming, it is the ultimate goal. So those revelations are like water off a duck's back to these people. But it is very important to hide their roots and genealogies, and also very important to continue to promote most of the art as genuine, and the book does that.

Anyway, the second painting above is the one Berenson sold to Gardner. It was in far better shape at the time and so required far less work by Zozo Smith to make it presentable. As we learn on page 85, it had been owned by Prince Chigi at his palazzo in Ariccia. As for the first, which was bought from Berenson by Agnews Gallery, which sold it to Wildener, who ended up selling in 2015 through Christie's, in the 1890s it was in horrible shape. It had been in the Panciatichi Collection in Florence. The Virgin's face had been (almost?) completely lost, along with other major parts of it. Because it was available for a song at the time due to that heavy damage, Berenson and his people at Colnaghi bought it at the same time they bought the Chigi Botticelli, using the two paintings—as well as a third copy done completely by Smith—in order to fool the Italian authorities. You see the Italians, then as now, wouldn't let important paintings like a Botticelli leave the country. So these shady dealers had to commission copies and then try to fool the authorities into believing the copies were the originals. With big enough bribes they were usually able to get away with it.

But we get the big clue when Simpson tells us on page 86:

Haskard then contacted Agnews' agent in Italy, a colorful character called Fairfax Murray, murmuring that the Chigi picture was a copy and that the Panciatichi version was the genuine article. Agnews innocently purchased the Panciatichi in May 1900 for around \$25,000, believing it to be the original, and sold this version in good faith to P. A. B. Widener for a substantial profit.

As you see, our author Simpson wants us to believe this was a clever con, the Chigi being real and the Panciatichi being the copy. The Panciatichi just sold for \$845,000 through Christie's in 2015, as I said, but that is a fraction of what the original at the Gardner is now worth. But of course I immediately thought to myself, “what if the [Panciatichi version](#) really *is* the original?” So I took a close look. Fortunately, both paintings can currently be viewed on the web in high detail. Both the Gardner museum and Christie's have magnifying glasses you can apply to the paintings.

Which allows me to be the bearer of good tidings to whoever bought the Panciatichi version: in my opinion **it is indeed the original**. I recommend they have a real restorer remove the Smith additions, which will reveal the true painting beneath.

The problem there is that this restoration will likely remove the Virgin's face completely. It will also remove extensive additions to the angel's face, including a correction of the mouth to cover a hint of teeth. It may remove the baby's hair and parts of his face as well. Overall, it will be a shocking obliteration.

This is why they chose to promote the copy as the original. The Virgin's face in the copy isn't anything like a real Botticelli, lacking all its sweet grace, but it is fairly attractive. The blue in her cloak is also a big selling point. It looks to me like Smith touched up everyone's cheeks here to make them rosier, repainted the pillar to the right, and retouched the angel's hair, but most everything else looks period. Meaning, Renaissance, though maybe not 15th century.

So how do I know this Chigi version is the copy? Many ways, but we will start with the background. The background of the Panciatichi version is much better, and looks far more like an original. It is the oldest part of this painting. It has the little deer, which aren't in the Chigi version. The architecture is painted with much more virtuosity, except for the deco Smith added to the front of the pillar, which is awful. The architecture in the Chigi copy is a bland derivation of the original. Then we have that weird plant resting on the architecture in the Panciatichi version, which the copyist couldn't figure out. He just ignored it as an eyesore, though it is also obviously 15th century. Botticelli liked those flat little mushroom or pancake shaped flowers, though I don't know what they are. You can see them on the forest floor in his *Primavera*. The little clouds we have floating above look far more like 15th century clouds, and have far more character than the Chigi copy. Plus, the Chigi copy has pentimenti all over it, even in the background. It looks like some trees may have been painted out, indicating this panel was reused by the copyist. The angel's hair and garland is another place to look, since the Chigi is markedly inferior. The angel has tiny flowers in his hair in the Panciatichi, and we know Botticelli liked to do that—see the *Primavera*, etc. In the Chigi copy there are no flowers, only leaves. And in the Chigi, the leaves are too dark for the hair they are in: they jump off the screen in the image above, don't they?

Here's another big clue: notice that the Chigi version is cut down compared to the Panciatichi version, missing areas top and left. Although the heads are the same size, the Panciatichi version is three inches taller and two inches wider. So who makes a copy and makes it *larger* than the original, extending its background and painting in weird flowers and cute little deer? Nobody does. That by itself seals the deal. Berenson sold Gardner a later copy. That is not surprising, since the book admits Berenson used Gardner as a place to dump all his trash. Expensive trash, since she paid \$65,000 for it, which would be \$2.2 million now. A fair price for a real Botticelli, I guess, but a gouge for a copy.

Another problem is that the Panciatichi version was sold in 2015 as being from the *studio of* Botticelli. So they are implying it is a studio copy of the Gardner version, I guess. But if a copy had been made out of Botticelli's studio, he would have painted the heads of the copy. That is why it is called Botticelli's studio: he was there. If he wasn't there, it wasn't his studio. Yes, artists make copies of their own popular works, and I have done that myself. But if they do, the copies are done like the originals—with the involvement of the master himself. To say it again, Botticelli would have done the heads and probably the hands, even in a copy from his studio. In which case the attribution would be full Botticelli, not “studio of”. So in most cases, this “studio of” stuff is just blather to fool the credulous and ignorant. The difference in quality between these two paintings we are looking at means one of them is the “original” of the other, and that the one of lesser quality was painted later, probably much later, NOT in the studio of Botticelli. If it had been painted by the studio of Botticelli, it would be as good or nearly as good. Since it is not, it clearly wasn't.

I sort of wish that whoever bought the Panciatichi Botticelli would hire me to repaint the Virgin's head. I could certainly create something better than that awful tan head of Smith, with that ghastly beige scarf. Smith's drawing isn't even right, with the mouth too low and glum, and the jaw too fat. I could at least match the Chigi head, and might even be able to improve on that, by studying other Botticellis. I could even paint the head first on a separate panel, to prove I could do it. But I suppose the best thing would be to wipe the painting down to original paint. I can't really criticize repainting while proposing more. Though perhaps a restored head is better than no head at all.