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HIRAI, Ayaka. Sandro Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity*: The Meaning of the 'Embrace' of Angels and Men

The Mystic Nativity painted by Sandro Botticelli during 1500–01, today in the National Gallery, London, is one of the most important works of the artist's late period. Due to the apocalyptic content of the Greek inscription at the top of the painting, its iconography has often been interpreted as influenced by the reformist thoughts of Girolamo Savonarola. For a representation of the Nativity, the painting clearly contains many unusual and enigmatic motifs, but they have not necessarily been fully explained. One notable instance is the motif of the three pairs of angels and men who embrace each other in the foreground. In this paper, I posit an appropriate interpretation of this curious motif.

Previous studies have proposed a variety of interpretations of the three mortals who receive an angelic embrace and kiss. M. Ferrara and R. Salvini have suggested that they represent Savonarola himself and his collaborators, equating them with two "holy witnesses" in chapters 11 and 12 of the *Book of Revelation*; H. P. Horne saw the embrace as the combination of Heaven (angels) and Earth (mortals), alluding to the passage "the Peace on Earth" (Luke 2: 14); most recently, R. Hatfield associated the motif with the theological concept of Mercy, based on Savonarola's sermon on the Nativity. None of these interpretations seems entirely convincing. The present writer therefore proposes that here the motif of embrace had a different semantic function, representing the reconciliation of sinful mortals with God. In this sense, the motif seems to be closely connected with the concept of penitence and the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

We find an almost identical motif of embrace in Botticelli's illustration for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, canto XII of *Purgatory* (Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett). According to commentaries on Dante from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this embracing figure represents Dante himself who—having repented for his own sin of *superbia* (pride)—was purified and forgiven. As discussed by Jacques Le Goff, Dante envisioned the Earthly Paradise as the place located on the top of the mountain of Purgatory where purified souls come to rest. Painters like Giovanni di Paolo and Fra Angelico depict mortals embraced by angels in a Paradise that is obviously of the earth, because only souls purified through penitence may be allowed to enter the Heavenly Paradise.

In Florence at the time of Savonarola, penance was one of the most vital and prominent of religious attitudes. In the unusual figures in the foreground, Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* evokes not only the concept of Redemption by the Savior, but also that of purification based on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Botticelli may have expressed these concepts in dialogue with his close study of Dante.

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