
EXHIBITION REVIEW

Botticelli: Heroines + Heroes

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston
February 14 - May 19, 2019

Jillianne Laceste

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's exhibition, *Botticelli: Heroines + Heroes*, brings together paintings by the Renaissance master Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445-1510), showing how Roman and early Christian figures were depicted as role models in his own time. Paintings and drawings created by the artist in the last decade of his life appear alongside drawings by the graphic novelist Karl Stevens that provide contemporary commentary on the paintings' subjects. Displayed against fuchsia and grey walls, the Renaissance artworks are contrasted in both style and color to Stevens' black and white graphics.

The highlight of the exhibition is the reunion of two paintings: the Gardner Museum's own *The Story of Lucretia* (Fig. 1) and *The Story of Virginia* (Fig. 2), on loan from the Accademia Carrara, Bergamo. The first gallery of the exhibition is dedicated to the acquisition of *Lucretia*, carried out by Isabella Stewart Gardner herself in 1894 and includes early museum records and correspondences regarding the purchase.[1] A twelve-panel comic by Stevens (Fig. 3) re-envision the narrative of the acquisition, providing context and humor through its dramatic dialogue between Gardner and art historian Bernard Berenson.

The second gallery has an octagonal structure at its center, recalling the iconic Baptistery of St. Giovanni in Florence, the city where *Lucretia* and *Virginia* probably originated.[2] Within the geometric space, the two works are paired side-by-side, facing three paintings with scenes from the life of Saint Zenobius. One of the exhibition's greatest strengths is its treatment of the theme of male aggression and violence against women, a subject with poignant relevance today. *Lucretia* and *Virginia* are Roman heroines celebrated for their mortal sacrifices that preserved their female virtue and familial honor.[3] Botticelli's paintings depict traumatic scenes leading up to the women's deaths by suicide and murder. Steven's drawings augment these themes by providing a sense of female perspective and anxiety, captured, for example, in the man lunging towards *Lucretia* and in the large and powerful hands reaching for *Virginia* (Figs. 4-5). However, the thematic impact of heroism in the face of adversity is downplayed by the display of *Lucretia* and *Virginia* directly across from images of Saint Zenobius. Paired with Stevens' drawings of Florentine landmarks that lack critical commentary on the Zenobius imagery, paintings of the male saint celebrate his life and miracles in comparison to the women's martyrdoms. An opportunity to emphasize the stark visual differences of male and female heroisms seems missed.

Botticelli: Heroines + Heroes asks visitors to rethink the meanings of Botticelli's paintings, whether as parts of a museum collection or as commentary on changing (or unchanging) attitudes towards the treatment of women. Despite its somewhat disconnected themes—heroism, the museum's Botticelli acquisition, and the violent experiences of women—the combination of artworks alongside Stevens'

drawings provides visitors with a visual array of Botticelli's later works and juxtaposes issues surrounding women's experiences today with images from the past.

Jillianne Laceste is a Ph.D. student in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Boston University focusing on early modern Italian art. Her research interests include gender, sexuality, and identity in portraiture and images of the domestic sphere.

[1] Nathaniel Silver, ed. *Botticelli: Heroines + Heroes* (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2019), 101.

[2] The two paintings were "probably commissioned by or for Giovanni di Guidantonio Vespucci (1476-1534) on the occasion of his wedding to Namicina di Benedetto di Tanai de' Nerli, Palazzo Vespucci, Florence." *Botticelli: Heroines + Heroes*, 101.

[3] *Botticelli: Heroines + Heroes*, 96.



(Feature image) Installation view of *Botticelli: Heroines and Heroes*. Image courtesy of Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.



Figure 1. Sandro Botticelli, *The Story of Lucretia*, 1499-1500, tempera and oil on panel, 83.8 x 176.8 cm, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Image courtesy of Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.



Figure 2. Sandro Botticelli, *The Story of Virginia*, c. 1500, tempera and gold on panel, 83.3 x 164.9 cm, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo. Image courtesy of Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.



Figure 3. Karl Stevens, *Mrs. Jack Buys a Botticelli*, 2018, ink on paper © Karl Stevens 2018. Image courtesy of Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

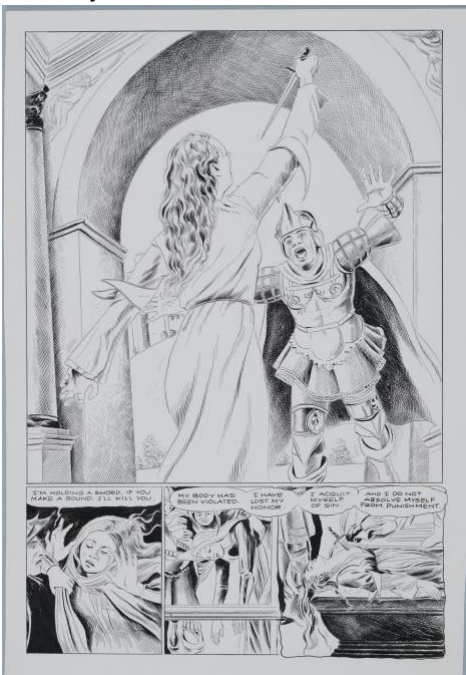


Figure 4. Karl Stevens, *Lucretia*, 2018, ink on paper © Karl Stevens 2018. Image courtesy of Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

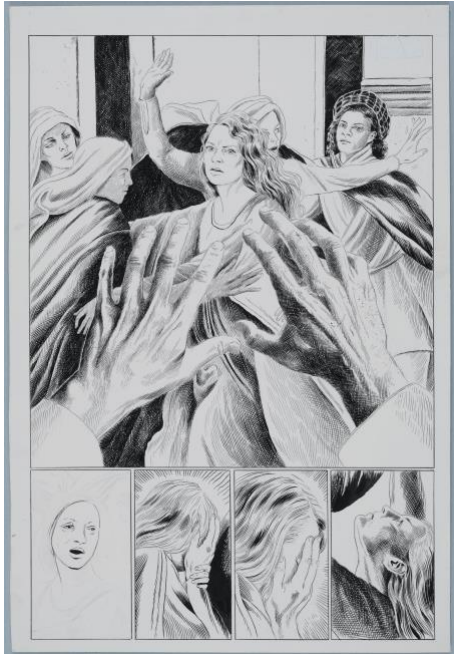


Figure 5. Karl Stevens, *Virginia I*, 2018, ink on paper Ó Karl Stevens 2018. Image courtesy of Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.