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# A New Look at the Rediscovery of Botticelli in the Nineteenth Century: The Case of Vernon Lee

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The rediscovery of artists from the early modern period in nineteenth-century Europe was a formative phenomenon in the development of the discipline of art history and had a significant influence on the visibility of contemporary cultural processes. One of the outstanding examples of this phenomenon is the rediscovery of the Italian painter Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510) in Britain in the second half of the century. This article examines the response to this phenomenon and especially that of the British author and art critic Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856–1935). Her essay on Botticelli, which was published in 1882 in the *Cornhill Magazine*, followed the transfer of Botticelli's frescoes to the Louvre Museum. I argue that Lee's response reveals her recognition of Botticelli, whose art was undergoing a process of rediscovery, as symbolic capital, bearing the weight of nineteenth-century Britain's new cultural baggage. In order to achieve this, Botticelli's art had been disconnected from its natural source in fifteenth-century Italy, where it was created. While on the one hand, Lee identifies and criticizes the phenomenon of rediscovery, on the other, she exploits the discourse around Botticelli, whose reputation had received a boost as a result of this same process.

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## Introduction

Vernon Lee's essay "Botticelli at the Villa Lemmi" was published in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1882. The reason for its publication was the removal of two wall paintings by Botticelli that had been discovered in a villa in Florence in 1873 and their transfer to the Louvre Museum (Conti, 1881). In this essay, Lee condemns this operation and compares it to the amputation of a body part, a process which, according to her, kills what was once a lively and complete work of art. She argues that detaching the paintings from their original location changes their essence and distorts their interpretation. Her objection to this practice, which had become an accepted and even demanded undertaking in Western culture (Lee, 1882), stressed that she found it repugnant (Lee, 1882, p. 159).

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### Figure 1

Sandro B. (1475-1500), *A Young Man Being Introduced to the Seven Liberal Arts*, [Buon fresco], Paris: The Louvre Museum. Digital Image: Ariela Shimshon.



The wall paintings by Botticelli that Lee describes are today on show in the Louvre, with the titles *A Young Man Being Introduced to the Seven Liberal Arts* (Fig. 1) and *Venus and the Three Graces Presenting Gifts to a Young Woman* (Fig. 2). The wall paintings were commissioned between 1483 and 1486 by Giovanni Tornabuoni, a Florentine banker and businessman with family and commercial connections to the famous Medici family. As far as is known, the purpose of the commission was to celebrate the marriage of Giovanni Tornabuoni's son Lorenzo to Giovanna degli Albizzi. The paintings emphasize the young couple in a manner that flatters their personal characteristics, such as modesty, intellectualism, and beauty (Van der Sman, 2007).

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**Figure 2**

Sandro B. (1475-1500), *Venus and the Three Graces Presenting Gifts to a Young Woman*, [Buon fresco], Paris: The Louvre Museum. Digital Image: Ariela Shimshon.



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Lee begins the essay by stating that Botticelli's works are distasteful and that the artist himself was eccentric and unpredictable. She then makes a rapid transition from discussing the painter to describing the phenomenon of removing an artwork from its original location, focusing on the process of mobilization as a series of interconnected events. They include the discovery of the artist, the removal of his

works from their “natural” habitat, the research on them that was currently taking place, and finally, their exhibition in a new location. Unlike modern practice, Vernon Lee’s comments do not differentiate these different aspects, but rather present them as a comprehensive process that has no benefits in terms of their intellectual contribution to society. In her view, the “exiling” of Botticelli’s frescoes to the staircase of the Louvre caused them to lose their potential greatness, which could be blamed on those who were taking pride in this process. Lee’s conclusion is that the discovery and exhibition of old master works in museums is not something that modern civilization should regard as a victory (Lee, 1882, p. 173).

Lee’s essay reflects a critical view of a process that was rather common in the nineteenth century. For us, her opinion offers an important glimpse into the mechanism of nineteenth-century art criticism. Lee uses Botticelli’s frescoes and their relocation to the Louvre as a case study for advancing an original view regarding the status of old masters. She also uses them as symbolic capital, a modern concept coined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu that can help us to better understand her essay in view of her cultural world and her desire to promote her own ideas.

I maintain that Lee made a conscious decision to write about Botticelli because of the “capricious” features of his work that provided an opening for nineteenth-century ideas and for criticism of previous events in the domain of English art, whose advocates relied on the discovery of old artworks and their transferal to museums.

The author’s name, “Vernon Lee,” is a pseudonym adopted by the British author and art critic Violet Paget, who took on a masculine persona in order to be taken seriously by the patriarchal British society of the time. Under this name, she later became known for her philosophical essays, books on art history, critical articles, and supernatural novels. Her contemporaries regarded her as “this clever woman who calls herself Vernon Lee” (Colby, 2003).<sup>1</sup> Lee’s use of a masculine name was intended to give greater voice to her opinions in a community that was still rather conservative in its appreciation of women’s ideas.

In modern scholarship, Paget has mainly received attention for her attempts to advance the status of lesbians during the Victorian age and her critical approach to the Aesthetic Movement.<sup>2</sup> This movement developed in Europe and became established in England in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its leading representatives in Britain were the cultural critic Walter Pater (1839–1894), the artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), and the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909). Indeed, Dennis Denisoff points out that the criticism of the Aesthetic Movement with which Vernon Lee’s name is strongly associated stems from class criticism and overconsumption (Denisoff, 2006). Thus, it can be

said that she focuses on aesthetics not only in the context of the canon of beauty, but also on its social aspects. In this way, she treats the subject of rediscovery as an aspect that deals not only with beauty, but also with society.

Botticelli was rediscovered in the nineteenth century and was highly esteemed in British intellectual circles. Vernon Lee was aware that her understanding of Botticelli's art was typical of the new philosophical and intellectual art critic. In her opposition to the process, she critiques the central core of the Aesthetic Movement – the trend toward artists (old masters) from the past. On the one hand, she objects to the transfer of old masters' paintings from their original locations to new ones; on the other, she exploits the discussion of the topic in order to promote her own ideas, such as, for example, enjoying the art object in the place for which it was created.

As I will show, in her essay, Vernon Lee reveals two important points connected to the nineteenth-century artistic rediscoveries. The first is that the essay is a response to the attitude of the leaders of the Aesthetic Movement, whose activists were involved in many areas, such as philosophy, literature, art, and design. Their primary interest was in cultivating esthetic knowledge within the field of art, literature, and philosophy. This aim was expressed by Walter Pater, the ideologue of the Aesthetic Movement, in the conclusion of his book *The Renaissance*, published in 1873, where he wrote: "The desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake" (Pater, 1961 [1873], p. 224). Pater's motto aroused opposition from conservative English factions (Pater, 1961 [1873], pp. 220–224).<sup>3</sup> The chief opponent of this doctrine was John Ruskin, who maintained that the supreme objective of beauty is the education of society (Brake, 2001). The Aesthetes were greatly concerned with the reinterpretation of old masters. Botticelli's works were among those that underwent a process of rediscovery, but opinions were divided concerning their intellectual content.

Vernon Lee's essay is a response to both Pater and Ruskin in that she rejects both men's opinions and suggests her own views. In the essay, she notes that she is never in tune (musically) with Botticelli. The reference to musical pitch can be interpreted as the two extremes of interpretative approach toward which Pater and Ruskin gravitate: Lee calls the higher ethics that Ruskin discusses a "world of dissatisfied sentiment," while she defines Pater's hedonistic world as "unpalatable sweetness" (Lee, 1882, p. 161). Thus, she exploits the debate between these two famous art critics in order to express her personal opinion of the process from an art critic's point of view. One can conclude that the purpose of the essay was not to criticize the Florentine painter's work, but rather to establish Lee's status as a first-class art critic. According to her, for economic and social reasons, large sums have been invested in collecting artworks, a process that empties regions of their intellectual beauty, impedes the understanding of the context and location in

which the works were created, and breaks their connection to the spirit of the place in which they were previously located. She equates the process of discovering artworks and transferring them to museums with that of mummification, whose end product is grandiose, but lacking in vitality and inflates the egos of certain members of society. According to her, this is done in order to serve economic and political ends, whose cost is far greater than the benefit derived from them.

The second important point emerging from Vernon Lee's essay is that it contains all the different perspectives formulated in this period concerning both the rediscovery of Botticelli specifically and the phenomenon of rediscovery in general. One may argue that Lee sees Botticelli as one of the many artists that have become "symbolic capital" to be used in the cultural field thanks to the rediscovery process. This term, which was coined in the twentieth century, provides an interesting way of examining the processes that Lee describes in her essay. Bourdieu's symbolic capital includes cultural, social, and economic domains, all of which are referenced by Lee in her review of the rediscovery of Botticelli (Bourdieu, 1984). Society's taste, as Bourdieu explains, is a social system that permits members of society to distinguish between economic and social classes by means of a system of indicators. In his book *Rediscoveries in Art*, Francis Haskell (1980) explains nineteenth-century rediscoveries in England and France as a process that developed as a result of changes in society's taste and fashions. The same is true for the changes in taste that brought about the fascination with forgotten art from earlier periods.

In the essay "Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic," Bourdieu argues that art critics are the products of the cultural field on the one hand and a part of the field itself and those who maintain it on the other (Bourdieu, 1989). In the context of the rediscovery of artists, Haskell (1980, pp. 3–6) claims that art critics have contributed to the construction and destruction of hierarchies of artists and that they are responsible for rejecting or accepting the artists into the artistic canon. Furthermore, he argues that the art critics' discoveries in these periods often stemmed from a desire for self-publicity and not necessarily from unique qualities found in the rediscovered work or artist. In the case of Lee's response to the process of discovery in relation to Botticelli's art, she did indeed work in service of the discipline of art history, but she also utilized Botticelli's discourse and intellectual aura for the benefit of self-promotion.

From Lee's essay, one can see that the understanding and discussion of rediscovered art comprise the same system of societal codes. The Aesthetic Movement's members' need for rediscovery can be explained by their desire to change the hierarchy within the conscious social structure of art lovers and to establish their own status as intellectuals and progressives. In my opinion, this is why Lee did not step outside this circle, thus allowing duality: on the one hand,

she criticizes the rediscovery process, but on the other, she uses the results of that process to publicize herself and her opinions on the attitude toward art from the past. In his work on the rediscovery of Botticelli, Jeremy Melius claims that Lee's essay discusses features of Botticelli's work that required clarification for the Victorian viewer (Melius, 2010, pp. 3–4).

In his book *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu defines society's taste as one of the hegemony's most important tools in the fields of economics and culture. In the chapter "The Modes of Appropriation of the Work of Art," he refers to the state-run museum as a place populated by objects that can be contemplated, but that on the other hand must be seen by members of society in order that they might acquire the correct "taste" (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 267–273). Botticelli's work became one such object in the 1880s thanks to the Aesthetic Movement. When Lee published her essay, the Florentine artist, who had been quite forgotten for the last three hundred years, was at the peak of his new popularity in British intellectual circles. This popularity emerged thanks to the discussion and continuous rediscovery of his art and its reinterpretation. Several actors were engaged in this process, including members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and art critics such as Walter Pater and John Ruskin, who were responsible for changing the perspective on Botticelli's art and gave his body of work characteristics of interpretation in relation to contemporary modern art.

### **Botticelli's Art under Rediscovery Process**

The appropriation of Botticelli's art is discussed in an article by Wolfgang Lottes (1996), in which he cites examples of how the painter Edward Burne-Jones, the art critic John Ruskin, and the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne interpreted Botticelli's art in different ways in order to support their different agendas. Here, I will address the cases of this kind of appropriation that are relevant to the discussion of Vernon Lee's involvement. In order to understand the perspective from which Lee criticizes the actions taken with respect to Botticelli's frescoes, I will attempt to explain the processes that Botticelli's work underwent prior to the publication of her essay.

Botticelli achieved a successful career in his own lifetime: he studied painting in the ateliers of two prominent painters, Fra Filippo Lippi (1406–1469) and Andrea del Verrocchio (1435–1488), and received commissions from the wealthiest families in Florence. He was also commissioned by Pope Sixtus IV to decorate the walls of the Sistine Chapel, along with other Florentine painters. Many of his paintings were preserved after his death, some in private collections such as that of the Medici family (O'Malley, 2015). One of the interesting suggestions raised by the scholar of the early modern period Charles Burroughs is that the neglect

of Botticelli was due to Giorgio Vasari, author of the famous *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1888, pp. 231–240). On the one hand, Vasari lauded Botticelli's talents, but on the other, he stressed his hot and inappropriate temperament. Burroughs (2017) argues that Vasari attempted to play down Botticelli's significance in order to spotlight his own personal abilities, while according to Michael Levey's (1960) comprehensive article on the rediscovery of Botticelli, Vasari left no place for Botticelli in the art of the future. After Vasari, Botticelli was rarely mentioned in the literature. Following the opening of the Uffizi Gallery to the general public in 1769, his paintings were considered in the context of works by Italian artists from the early modern period, and he was seen as continuing the Florentine school and the work of the painter Filippo Lippi (Becherucci, 1983).<sup>4</sup> In 1835, the Catholic writer and moralist Alexis-François Rio referred to him in his book *De la poésie chrétienne – Forme de l'art* and described him as inheriting the vulgarity that typified Filippo Lippi's depictions of women. In Rio's opinion, only Botticelli's Madonnas were worth mentioning, due to their melancholy (Rio, 1836, p. 128). However, his work drew the attention of Elisabeth Eastlake's narrow British circle to Botticelli's Sistine Chapel frescoes (Levey, 1960, p. 295).

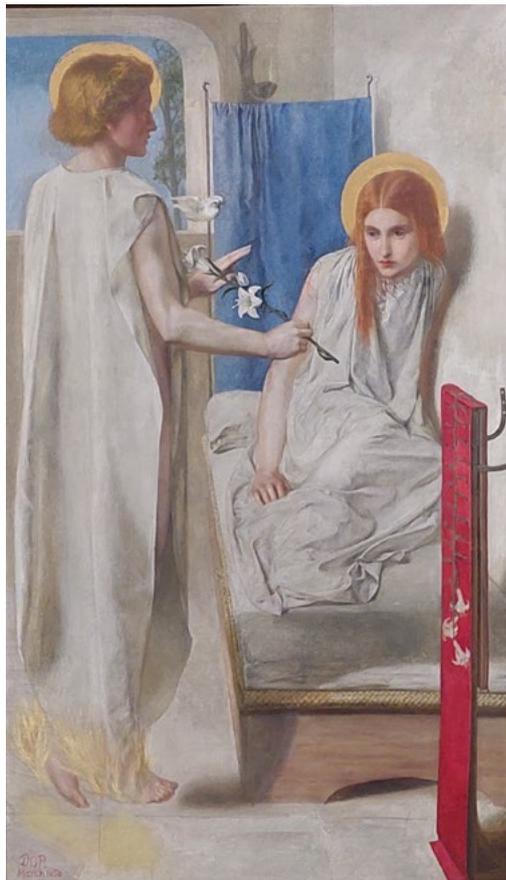
In 1864, the corpus of Botticelli's work was discussed for the first time at length (for fourteen pages) in a work entitled *A New History of Painting in Italy, from the Second to the Sixteenth Century*, which was written by the British journalist and diplomat Joseph Archer Crowe and the Italian painter and art expert Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle (1864, pp. 414–429). The authors' attitude to Botticelli is mostly negative: they claim that they could find nothing in his work to justify Vasari's enthusiasm and that they had searched in vain for profound thought in his coarse paintings. The need for an ambitious project like the *New History* apparently arose as a consequence of the great popularity of early modern Italian painting in nineteenth-century Britain. Crowe and Cavalcaselle attempted to set standards for the appreciation of Italian art, but their work had the opposite effect and writers on Italian art repeatedly attempted to take issue with its content (Levi, 2019). Negative comments on Botticelli's art provoked responses from different corners of the cultural field, such as practicing modern artists, philosophers, and writers.

Vernon Lee arrived in London in 1881, when Botticelli's popularity – or more correctly, the popularity and publicity surrounding the Aesthetes and Botticelli – reached its apex and spilled outside the boundaries of writings by art critics. In William Schwenck Gilbert's opera *Patience*, which deals satirically with the advocates of Aestheticism, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the main character appears carrying a lily, something closely associated with Botticelli's work, and proclaims: "How Botticellian." Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite

Brotherhood played an important role in Botticelli's rediscovery. Alongside Botticelli, the Pre-Raphaelites also extensively researched and investigated other artists from the past.<sup>5</sup> When discussing the influences that the first Pre-Raphaelites

### Figure 3

Dante G. R. (1849-50), *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (*The Annunciation*), [Oil on canvas], London: Tate. Digital Image: Ariela Shimshon.



absorbed from earlier artists, we need an in-depth understanding of their nature and how it was expressed in their works. If we focus, for example, on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's early works, we can identify a specific type of influence: he represents a universal spiritual act in real life here and now. We may see this by comparing Rossetti's 1852 *Annunciation* (Fig. 3)—an early work exhibited before the essays on Botticelli were published—with Botticelli's treatment of the same subject in 1489 (Fig. 4).<sup>6</sup> The painter reproduced the schematism of that painting using minimalist means such as a tree, a window, a lily, and two figures, but from that point, he continued in an independent fashion—his angel has no wings, glimpses of its naked body are visible beneath its robe, and the Madonna is depicted as a young redhead awoken from sleep. The work can be seen as an attempt to use the earlier work as a framework borrowed from fifteenth-century painters into which he inserts a new interpretation of the spiritual event as if it were taking place in the nineteenth century. When Rossetti translated Dante Alighieri's *La Vita Nuova* in 1847, he

did not see his work as conveying meaning from one language in another, but believed that he was recreating Dante's world within nineteenth-century reality (Alighieri, 1899 [1847]). The sublime ideas that Dante had expressed in the thirteenth century could be understood in the nineteenth century through the new intellectual language that Rossetti had created in English. In addition, the almost magical ceremonials that he used in his creative process were an expression of the Pre-Raphaelite conception of the rediscovery of artists.

In the same year that she arrived in London, Vernon Lee met Walter Pater, and they began an intellectual association that continued until Pater's death. Throughout her life, Lee described Pater as a mentor and as the unchallenged

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**Figure 4**

Sandro B. (1489), *The Annunciation (The Cestello Annunciation)*, [Tempera on wood], Florence: Uffizi Gallery. Digital Image: Web Gallery of Art, Public Domain.



expert in the field of esthetics, and Pater in turn became a critical, but faithful reader of her compositions. In her book *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography*, the historian of the Victorian period Vineta Colby argues that this connection influenced Lee in two respects: firstly, it made her change her self-definition from art historian to art critic, and secondly, she learned a lesson from Pater's personal experience (Colby, 2003, pp. 61–77). In spite of the Pre-Raphaelites' great interest in Botticelli, it was the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne who was the first to discuss him in writing. In 1868, he published a critical essay in the *Fortnightly Review* criticizing Florentine art in which he described its female figures as being marred by "painful grace" and "fleshless beauty" (Swinburne, 1868, pp. 23–24). However, the essay is stylistically complex: instead of explaining the importance of Botticelli's work, Swinburne became distracted by decadent ideas with no

connection to Botticelli. Pater published his article “A Fragment on Botticelli,” in which he skillfully describes the controversial elements in Botticelli’s work and imbues them with philosophical significance, in the same periodical (Pater, 1870). This article summarizes the interest in the artist among contemporary art enthusiasts and proclaims Botticelli to be the source of a certain charm among some art lovers. Pater did not relate to Botticelli as an artist who had undergone rediscovery, but rather as the subject of renewed interest. He also made no claims for the centrality of Botticelli’s work, which would not have been true to the facts. Pater focused the reader’s attention on three central points. The first was the explanation of strangeness: he accepted that Botticelli’s figures were strange and that he used pale colors, but he explained this as being due to him being a painter of genius who saw his work through the eyes of the spirit and conveyed the spiritual atmosphere and experience of an event, rather than portraying the event itself in a direct and primitive manner as earlier artists had done (Pater, 1961 [1873], pp. 74–75). The second point is in his description of the *Birth of Venus*, where he compares the figure of Venus, the “goddess of pleasure,” as he describes her, to the figure of Truth in Botticelli’s 1495 *Calumny of Apelles* (Pater, 1961 [1873], p. 76). This comparison was later used in support of the general thesis with which he concludes his *Renaissance*. The third and most important point in Pater’s article points to the role of the art critic: to recognize a genius and to also be capable of explaining what is not easy to understand in his works. This point is directly aimed against Crowe and Cavalcaselle’s encyclopedic documentation and asserts the superiority of an art critic who is a philosopher over one who is merely knowledgeable. No less important than the content of Pater’s article was the fact that it had been published in the *Fortnightly Review*. Ever since its launch in 1865, the editors of this periodical had furthered a broad agenda challenging the authority of the official peer-reviewed journals and essays, and they had included signed articles rather than the accepted practice of anonymous reviews. This approach permitted the establishment of the periodical as a platform for the author himself in which he acquired recognition for his writing ability and rhetoric (Nash, 2010). The combination of Pater’s rhetoric and his essay’s place of publication, which stressed the publication of progressive ideas, enables us to understand his motives: promoting himself as an independent art critic. With the publication of Pater’s essay, Botticelli was officially installed as the poster boy for the entire rediscovery process. His familiarity with and understanding of Botticelli’s work, along with his ability to “normalize” the strange quality of the female figures in his works by British standards, defined the essence of being an art critic.

After the publication of *The Renaissance*, Pater was the object of severe criticism which maintained that he elevated beauty above morals, and when his own personal reputation was called into question, he was not appointed to teaching positions at Oxford. In consequence, Lee, who at the beginning of her career had

been a believer in the supremacy of pure beauty, began to have doubts and wrote that such a belief would be interpreted negatively by society. It is important to understand the character of Lee's criticism of Pater, as she nevertheless adopts the stylistic structure of Pater's writing, and her reactions are a kind of open dialogue about the concepts of Aestheticism.

The famous opponent of Pater's interpretation of Botticelli's work was John Ruskin. Ruskin began to include extensive discussions of Botticelli's work in his lectures at Oxford from 1871 onwards. According to Jeremy Melius, before Pater's book was published, Ruskin had made only isolated references to Botticelli, all of which were negative in character: in 1845, he mentioned him in his travel journal as an artist who never gives him pleasure (Melius, 2010, pp. 52–54), while in 1855, he wrote that one of the Pre-Raphaelites' mistakes was the attempt to imitate the religious art of the past, such as Botticelli's. Nevertheless, in his 1871 lectures, Ruskin responded to Pater's claims and adopted his method of focusing interpretation on strange-seeming elements. However, he gives a completely different explanation of these elements: in his opinion, what seems strange to the viewer is not the product of Botticelli's unrealistic vision, but rather a precise depiction of reality in which the figures have a moral character. According to Ruskin, the Florentine painter captures the same high morality in his paintings, which the viewer needs to learn from him. Although the *Birth of Venus* became the prime example of Botticelli's work in that period, Ruskin almost completely ignored it, and so it became a defining work for Pater and the process of rediscovery among art critics (Melius, 2010, p. 83). The debate between Ruskin and Pater revolved around their ability to explain the "strange" in Botticelli's work—an ability that characterized the new generation of art critics.

Vernon Lee made a conscious choice to involve herself in the debate surrounding Botticelli, with its links to British intellectual factions, so that she could exploit it for self-promotion as an art critic. She was aware of the symbolic capital of the "new Botticelli" and the esthetic and cultural connections that had been forged around the artist over the previous two decades. Botticelli's appropriation by the Aesthetes made him into a kind of hallmark characterizing those who showed appreciation of him as progressive intellectuals. This is why Lee opens her essay on the transfer of Botticelli's frescoes to the Louvre by demonstrating that she is capable of making her own independent analysis of the artist's images. Throughout her literary career, she deliberately adopted self-promotional tactics (Fraser, 2004). A typical example of her awareness of the use of marketing techniques is the publication of her novel *Miss Brown* in 1884, which caused a scandal among British intellectuals. In order to increase her readership, she deliberately changed her style from pseudo-historical criticism to a more popular style derived from French novels: fiction. Another marketing technique Lee employed to publicize

the novel was her dedication of *Miss Brown* to the famous novelist Henry James (Colby, 2003, pp. 97–98). The novel is full of not-so-obscure references to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and stringent criticisms of them (Brake, 2006). The Brotherhood's representatives did not turn the other cheek, and a large number of them broke off relations with her. One of the models used by the Pre-Raphaelite painters Edward Burne-Jones and Ford Madox Brown, Marie Stillman, was portrayed in the novel as a grotesque hostess in a comic allegory of a home owned by some of the Pre-Raphaelites. In 1885, Stillman's husband William James Stillman, an American artist and art critic, composed a venomous attack on Vernon Lee in which he explicitly stated that she was ignorant about art, that her field of interest was decadent pornographic literature, and that the same was true of her personal life. The novel also created a crisis in the warm relationship between Lee and Pater, who felt that the scandal surrounding the novel might damage his personal reputation, which he took care to maintain. According to the historian of Victorian art Leonee Ormond, *Miss Brown's* main line of criticism of Aestheticism was directed against the Aesthetes' extravagant lifestyle and the institution of marriage (Ormond, 1970). The novel was published two years after the publication of the essay on the removal of the frescoes from the Villa Lemmi, but was written almost immediately afterward. Thus, Vernon Lee attacked Aestheticism on two simultaneous fronts: firstly in *Miss Brown*, with reference to the lifestyle of British Aesthetic society and their personal connections, and secondly, in the essay under discussion here.

Vernon Lee continued her critical engagement with the issues surrounding "The New Botticelli" and his discoverers and developed her ideas in another direction. In her 1890 story *Dionea*, there is a discernible criticism and tension that is full of references to Pre-Raphaelite art, Pater's ideological attitude, and Ruskin's opposition to it. In this work, Lee describes a re-envisioning of the painting of the *Birth of Venus* by a modern sculptor. She moves along the axis between a genre that today we would call fanfiction and the philosophical genre dealing with Beauty and its limits. It was easy for her contemporaries to identify and characterize the book's cast of characters and to concentrate on the story's central moral, in which she focused her criticism of the first generation of Aesthetes and their doctrine: ritual worship of Beauty without moral boundaries and an attempt to revive the past in the present by breaking the laws of time. The heroine of the story is a child who is pulled out of the sea by fishermen in one of the Italian villages in the region of the ancient temple of Venus near Porto Venere (according to one belief, this was the birthplace of Simonetta Vespucci, who has been cast in the role of Botticelli's muse).<sup>7</sup> Doctor Alessandro De Rosis, who raised Dionea, is the narrator of the story through letters to his patroness Lady Evelyn Savelli, the Princess of Sabina. Dionea rapidly becomes an outstanding beauty who engages in witchcraft, and her murderous allure causes the deaths of many men. The young

women educated with Dionea rebel and run off with men. The story comes to a climax when the modern sculptor Waldemar and his pregnant wife arrive in the village and Dionea is persuaded to model for his new sculpture. Waldemar sets up his studio in the ruins of the Temple of Venere, drags an altar stone there, and day by day invests more effort into his attempts to achieve an unsuccessful objective: using his sculpture as a means of expressing Dionea's beauty, which he describes as many times more beautiful than all his attempts. For his part, Doctor De Rosis extols the power of art, which makes him tremble with fear when confronted by Dionea's beauty. Shortly afterward, the sculptor sets fire to his studio and commits suicide, and his pregnant wife is found lying lifeless on the altar of Venus. Thus, Lee uses the mystery genre to point to the immediate dangers of the commitment to Beauty, the attempt to revive dead art, and the life combining creativity and ritual that the first generation of Pre-Raphaelites aspired to create. This is a reference to the attempt at "reviving" pictures found, for example, in John Everett Millais's work of 1852, *Ophelia*, for which the model Elizabeth Siddall spent long hours lying in a bath in order to resemble Ophelia on the point of ending her life by drowning herself in a river. In *Dionea*, Vernon Lee does not propose an alternative and leaves the question open. Her own solutions opposing the revival of the art of the past can be found in her later writing.

### **Genius loci as Opposed to the Rediscovery of Art**

When her essay was published, Vernon Lee was twenty-six years old. She was an ambitious and well-known writer, but one whose beliefs concerning art and its objectives were not yet well-formed. Her ideas crystallized into a systematic doctrine at a later stage. In her book 1899 *Genius loci: Notes on Places*, one can understand the alternative she proposed to the rediscovery of earlier artists, historical research concerning their works, and their transferal to museums (Lee, 1899). In her essay, she maintains that visiting the Louvre cannot lead to an understanding of a work of art that is located there as a consequence of the process of isolating art from life. In order to obtain an accurate assessment and a true appreciation of art, one must walk around old cities such as Padua, Siena, or Verona (Lee, 1882, p. 171). *Genius loci* is structured like a travel guide, which was a popular genre in British society due to British aristocrats undertaking the Grand Tour, which was part of a young person's training in the "correct" taste of society (Burke, 2016). In her book, Lee explains how one can identify art's place within architecture and the history of its locations, adopting the Roman concept of *genius loci* to explain the existence of a kind of ecosystem in which nature, atmosphere, buildings, the artwork created for an area, and the area's history exist in a complete and rational unity. By recognizing this rational element (she rejected anthropomorphism and personalization of the *genius loci*), one can also understand and recognize the quality of the works found there. Thus, Vernon Lee

continues the idea of Victorian paganism proposed by Pater (Denisoff, 2021). The removal of art from this framework, in her opinion, actually disconnects the conceptual context of artworks and the influence that they should have on the viewer. In *Genius loci*, she also raises ideas that recall the concepts of modern anti-globalization: hedonistic tourism as Lee knew it was pure consumerism, which was not correctly integrated into the organic framework of nature, inhabitants, and location (Lee, 1899, pp. 197–200). In her 1909 philosophical work *Laurus nobilis*, she claims that there is no worse place for getting to know art than a gallery (Lee, 1909, pp. 164–168). Walking from room to room in museums, Lee argues, is the wrong way to get to know art; it is calcification, comparison, and analysis. The disassociation of an artwork from the location in which it was created disconnects it from the tradition within which it can best be understood. Thus, one may conclude that in her essay opposing the transfer of the frescoes to the Louvre, Vernon Lee was criticizing both the methods of knowledgeable critics who make catalogs of artworks and the cadre of Aesthetes who endeavored to use the disconnection of artworks from their source and their transfer to museums in order to “paste” an interpretation relating to themselves and their esthetic principles onto the works. So it was with Botticelli’s old frescoes and with Botticelli himself: interpretations of his life and works came to define the taste of intellectual British society. The alternative proposed by Vernon Lee in her later critical writings is to leave the old artists of the past in the regions where their works were created. In this case, the fifteenth-century Florentine painter should have remained outside and should not have been used as a cultural tool.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Vernon Lee’s essay on the transfer of Botticelli’s wall paintings from the Villa Lemmi to the Louvre sums up the process of the rediscovery of artists as it appeared in the 1880s, when it was already a widespread phenomenon. Lee exploits Botticelli’s popularity in order to express a criticism of the method as a whole. She does not refer to an isolated aspect of rediscovery, but lists all the features of the process, which derive from economic motives, social concerns, and personal ego. From her essay, one can see that she was examining rediscovery as part of the process of transferring artworks to museums and the development of research concerning them. Unlike the approach of the Pre-Raphaelites, and in contrast to Pater and Ruskin, who attempted to use rediscovery to promote their own approach to the interpretation of art, Vernon Lee was not interested in explaining the painter’s ideology, since from her point of view, as soon as an artwork is disconnected from the place where it was created, it loses most of its context. She criticizes the Louvre’s exploitation of the *quattrocento* artist and his transformation into one of its flagship commodities. A proof of the realization of Lee’s concerns may be seen in the 1894 work *Au Louvre* by the French painter

Étienne Azambre (1855–1933) (Fig. 5). In this painting, we see the figures of two women in the museum, copying one of the frescoes discussed in Lee's essay. The work's name shows that the process by which the Louvre had appropriated Botticelli's art had reached a successful conclusion. The painting exemplifies a progressive vision in which female artists could freely benefit from copying a distinguished artist whose name had been enlisted in support of the very gallery in which it was displayed.

— **Figure 5** —  
Étienne A. (1894), *In Louvre (Deux Femmes Copiant la Fresque de Botticelli, "Vénus et les Grâces Offrant des Présents à Une Jeune Fille")*, [Oli on canvas], Paris: The Louvre Museum. Digital Image: Artlex, Public Domain.



## Notes

- 1 Colby (2003, pp. 130–151) describes how Lee attempted to build her own reputation in the literary world by choosing to review topics that she considered interesting and important. She took advantage of the stigma in Victorian society whereby cleverness was a pleasing feminine attribute that could prove an entertaining diversion for men.
- 2 See, for example, Burdett (1987), Robbins (1992). Her critical approach to the Aesthetic Movement is discussed in Ormond (1970).
- 3 For Pater's conception of esthetic criticism, see Ippolitova (2012) and Williams, Higgins and Brake (2002).
- 4 For English art lovers, Botticelli was mentioned in two seventeenth-century English sources: Aglionby's *Three dialogues* (1685) and Henry Peacham's *The compleat gentleman* (1622).
- 5 On the links between the Pre-Raphaelites and Italian artists, see Prettejohn (2017) and Buron (2018).
- 6 In this article, I discuss examples of the interpretation of Botticelli's art by the thinkers and artists of the nineteenth century. I see the painting *Annunciation* (*Ecce Ancilla Domini*) as a good example to show Rossetti's approach to the old masters. Besides Botticelli, there were a number of old masters who influenced the iconography of the painting. For more about the iconography of Rossetti's version of the *Annunciation*, see Magee (2011). One of the most important old masters for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was Fra Angelico. He is officially listed among the Immortals; a list written by Rossetti in the early days of the Brotherhood. For the list, see Prettejohn (2012, pp. 277–278). For the artists who influenced Rossetti's art, see Ormond (2006).
- 7 On the connection between Botticelli's art and the legend of Simonetta Vespucci in the nineteenth century, see Cheeke (2016).

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