



Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars*, 1485, Tempera
© The National Gallery, London.

This summer, *Venus and Mars* (c.1485) by Sandro Botticelli (c.1445–1510) is leaving the National Gallery for the first time since its acquisition in 1874 to go on display at the Fitzwilliam Museum. The unprecedented loan is one of 12 of the nation's most iconic and well-loved paintings from the National Gallery's collection going on display at museums and galleries across the UK in celebration of their 200th birthday.

Venus and Mars will be exhibited in a new temporary display at the Fitzwilliam Museum. Narratives of sex, nudity, intimacy, gender and power will be explored by presenting the painting alongside masterpieces of Italian art from the 1400s and 1500s from the Fitzwilliam collection, including Titian's *Venus and Cupid with a lute-player* (c.1555-1565) and the spectacular new acquisition of Antico's remarkable sculpture of the god Apollo (c.1520-2), widely considered to be one of the finest Italian Renaissance bronzes ever made. If Venus was thought to be the idealised vision of female beauty, then Apollo was felt by many to capture the male equivalent of the idealised beauty of a young man.

Venus and Mars was originally commissioned as a bedchamber painting. In renaissance Florence, such works were intended for both male and female audiences and commissioned by a person of elite stature, often at the time of a wedding. In the late 1400s, the domestic picture gallery was not yet a feature of grand palaces, though they had been introduced by the time Titian's *Venus and Cupid with a lute-player* was painted. The display includes two objects that once belonged to one of the most learned Italian women of her day, Isabella d'Este, for different spaces, her study-treasury and her dining table, which depict both male and female nudity.

The story of the love affair between Mars and Venus is told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Vulcan would discover the adultery of his wife Venus and her lover Mars, fashioning a fine iron net to catch the pair in bed and publicly expose them to the other gods of Olympus. Botticelli's painting seemingly depicts the moment before their exposure; an unexpectedly youthful Mars lies sleeping, naked, tamed by love or exhausted after sexual congress; Venus reclines clothed in

what would have been understood as a version of an underdress, her hair braided into its collar. The juxtaposition of a clothed woman with a naked man was unusual in art of this time, where the reverse was more often found.

The display is the result of a new participatory research project led by the Fitzwilliam Museum, which invites young people and community partners to explore different perspectives, experiences and interpretations of works of art from its collections and elsewhere.

Sandro Botticelli (about 1445–1510) born in Florence, Italy, is now seen as the archetypal Quattrocento Florentine artist, celebrated especially from the nineteenth century onwards, for the beauty of his line and of the young men and women he included in his celebrated mythological pictures, most famously *The Birth of Venus*, *Primavera*, *Pallas and the Centaur* and the National Gallery's *Venus and Mars*. He spent almost all his life in Florence - growing up there, apprenticed first to Fra Filippo Lippi and then working for the city's mercantile elite. Under Lorenzo de Medici's patronage, he produced some of his most innovative images.

Luke Syson, Director and Marlay Curator of the Fitzwilliam Museum said,

“At the Fitzwilliam Museum, we are all absolutely delighted to be taking part in this wonderful celebration of the National Gallery’s Bicentenary. We are particularly thrilled to be the first museum ever to borrow Botticelli’s extraordinary Venus and Mars since it was acquired for the nation 150 years ago. It is really exciting to display it with Italian Renaissance masterpieces from our own collection, Antico’s newly bequeathed Apollo Belvedere and Titian’s Venus and the Lute Player, that speak to it, to create a display that explores love and desire, nudity and gender expectations, and the delights and dangers of looking. I am confident that visitors to the Fitzwilliam will hugely enjoy this opportunity to see Venus and Mars in this exciting Cambridge context.”

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NOTES TO EDITORS

EXHIBITION ENTRY

The Fitzwilliam Museum is open Tuesday - Sunday 10:00 - 17:00.
Visitors are invited to 'Pay What They Wish' for exhibition tickets.

ABOUT THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

Founded in 1816, the Fitzwilliam Museum is the largest and oldest museum of the University of Cambridge. It houses over half a million objects: ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, medieval illuminated manuscripts, paintings from the European Renaissance to the 21st century, prints and drawings, coins and medals, ceramics and other applied arts from East and West Asia and Western Europe. The Fitzwilliam Museum is an internationally recognised institute of research and conservation.

fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

The University of Cambridge is one of the world's leading universities, with a rich history of radical thinking dating back to 1209. Its mission is to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence. Cambridge was second in the influential 2023 QS World University Rankings, the highest rated institution in the UK. The University comprises 31 autonomous Colleges and over 100 departments, faculties and institutions. Its 20,000 students include around 9,000 international students from 147 countries. In 2022, almost 73% of its new undergraduate students were from state schools and more than 25% from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Cambridge research spans almost every discipline, from science, technology, engineering and medicine through to the arts, humanities and social sciences, with multi-disciplinary teams working to address major global challenges. In the *Times Higher Education's* rankings based on the UK Research Excellence Framework, the University was rated as the highest scoring institution covering all the major disciplines.

The University sits at the heart of the 'Cambridge cluster', in which more than 5,200 knowledge-intensive firms employ more than 71,000 people and generate £19 billion in turnover. Cambridge has the highest number of patent applications per 100,000 residents in the UK.

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THAMESLINK RAILWAY

Thameslink Railway are pleased to be partnering with The Fitzwilliam Museum to help bring people in the surrounding areas of Cambridge to experience one of the National Treasures as part of The National Gallery London bicentenary celebrations. Art can inspire and improve mental health, so Thameslink Railway are delighted to be a part of the journey connecting customers with a fantastic array of art galleries and cultural experiences along the Thameslink network. Thameslink Railway can help plan the perfect day out or long weekend, whether you are travelling solo or with friends and family.

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