

**MASTER OF 1487,
 PROBABLY PIETRO DONZELLO**
THE DEPARTURE OF THE ARGONAUTS

BARTOLOMEO DI GIOVANNI
THE ARGONAUTS IN COLCHIS

These two paintings were made in commemoration of one of the most illustrious marriages of late fifteenth-century Florence. In June 1486 the Florentine patrician Lorenzo Tornabuoni, the eighteen-year-old cousin of Lorenzo the Magnificent, celebrated publicly his wedding to Giovanna degli Albizzi, the subject of a famous portrait by Domenico Ghirlandaio (Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid). The marriage, however, was tragically short-lived: in less than two years the bride had died in childbirth.

The Departure of the Argonauts and *The Argonauts in Colchis* belong to a group of five mythological pictures made shortly after the marriage to decorate the ‘camera di Lorenzo, bella’, the most private of his suite of apartments in the Palazzo Tornabuoni. Painted by very different artists, they demonstrate the diversity of pictorial styles that were fashionable in the highest echelons of Florentine society. Bartolomeo di Giovanni’s picture, with its cool, controlled palette, rigidly planned architecture and busy sequential composition, is intensely Florentine, and recalls the manner of Ghirlandaio and Botticelli (with whom he often worked). Pietro del Donzello’s *Departure of the Argonauts* is more unusual. The ethereal seascape and the dramatic pose of the horseman with a banner in the foreground have affinities with works by Piero di Cosimo, and even Leonardo da Vinci.

This category of decorative picture, often called *spalliere* because they were displayed above shoulder height (*spalle* in Italian), tended to depict narratives with a moral application to the roles of husband and wife within marriage. Jason’s betrayal of his wife, and Medea’s murder of her brother, sons and Jason’s uncle Pelias, made this a surprising choice of subject in such a context. Lorenzo Tornabuoni may have had a special interest in this story: certainly, as a student at the Florentine *Studio* (a university-like institution) in the early 1480s, he attended a series of lectures delivered by the humanist Bartolomeo Fonzio on the Roman epic poet Valerius Flaccus’s retellings of Jason’s adventures. It is thanks to the skill of the painters that the unlikely raw material of Jason and Medea’s tempestuous relationship became an appropriate compliment for the most virtuous and conventional marriage of Lorenzo Tornabuoni and his bride. c c

Master of 1487, probably Pietro Donzello (1452–1509)
The Departure of the Argonauts, 1487
 Oil on wood, 83.8 x 163.8 cm
 On loan from The Mari Cha Collection Limited, L1176

Bartolomeo di Giovanni (active 1488 – about 1500)
The Argonauts in Colchis, 1487
 Tempera and oil on wood, 83.2 x 163.8 cm
 On loan from The Mari Cha Collection Limited, L1175

