

Revisiting the Greco-Roman Myth of Venus in the Paintings of Botticelli (1445- 1510)

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The revival of Greco-Roman ideals and the homocentric individuality of the Renaissance are predominantly reflected in the visual arts of that period when both the artists and the writers drew their inspiration from the Greco-Roman literary world. The Pagan world was rediscovered and recreated in a Christian milieu. In this paper “Revisiting the Greco-Roman Myth of Venus in the paintings of Sandro Botticelli” (1445-1510), the Florentine artist of the early Renaissance, two of his famous paintings- *The Spring* (1482) and *The Birth of Venus* (1486) will be discussed to see how the mythological figure of Venus was reconsidered and appropriated in his paintings, during the Renaissance. During the thirteenth century, Florence, a small business town in Central Italy, emerged as a rich and powerful autonomous city-state or Commune. Zealous and jealous of their individual identity and material success, the Florentines, through uncommon artistic ventures, transferred their city to a vanguard position to realise the Renaissance. The representation of mythological subjects in works of visual arts was part of a broader artistic and literary European culture with its origins in education in Latin and sometimes in Greek classics. During the medieval period, there was a tendency to see a direct and unbroken connection with the Roman past. Thus, Greco-Roman myths were regarded as an integral part of contemporary culture and their artistic representation, like other legends of the past, was based exclusively on literary tradition. In the early Christian period, features of mythological figures did not play a significant role in the development of the Christian artistic tradition. The Medieval scholars or Byzantine artists never adopted a reimagining of the ancient past.

In the Renaissance, the Greco-Roman myths were viewed as something apart, the product of a particular historical period characterised by their distinct forms of visual expressions. Art for the ‘humanistically’ educated elite in Renaissance Italy was one way of understanding the ancient world. Their initial approach to the Greco-Roman culture was through studying Latin and Greek texts, most of which were unknown to Italian scholars a century or two earlier. Very soon, it became a popular practice to visually reproduce classical myths or traditionally familiar stories about Gods and heroes in the manner of the ancients— “*all’antica*”—and decorate private domestic space with those paintings by the aristocrats (Freedman, 2011). During that time, the Roman myths created, in most cases, the base for both literary and artistic revival of the classical models. The humanistic education curriculum recommended learning the myths diligently from reading Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* or *Fasti*, in which ancient myths and histories were treated in considerable detail. In the Renaissance, familiarity with well-known and lesser-known myths indicated a person’s education and, hence, social-standing. The sources of the visual artefacts of antiquity included not only sculpted reliefs in sarcophagi, mutilated statues, coins and gems but also texts that described paintings as the paintings themselves were no longer available. Pliny’s *Natural History*, Alberti’s *Treatise On Art* and Poliziano’s poetical work *Le Stanze per la Giostra* were rich and famous sources of such description (Freedman, 2011).

Thus, in general, paintings of classical myths were created without much help from antique artefacts but on the inventions by contemporary humanists, appropriating according to the tastes and demands of the literate elite of that period. Almost every painting on classical mythology was a commissioned painting, and the choice of a particular episode, or the combination of stories to be painted in a series of pictures, was often done in consultation with a humanist who was at the service of a Patron. Botticelli was admitted at a very early age to the Medici court, where he met humanist philosophers like Marsilio Ficino and Pico Della Mirandola and poets like Poliziano, whose influence can be traced in his mythological representations (Bertelli, Briganti, & Giuliano, 1986). A

study reveals that the Goddess Venus assumes new meanings and symbols different from her traditional role in the paintings of Botticelli. The figures of Venus in both those paintings have an articulated chin, high cheeks and doomed forehead, and it is astounding to see the subtle transformation with which he turned them into markers of ideal beauty considering his age (Gombrich, 1998).

During the Roman period, the goddess Venus (associated with Greek Aphrodite) was thought to be the daughter of Jupiter, the wife of Vulcan or Mars and the mother of Cupid and became one of the most important goddesses of the Roman Pantheon. She was the protector deity of love, beauty, sex, fertility, prosperity and victory. In Roman mythology, she was the mother of the Roman people through her son Aeneas, who survived the Fall of Troy and fled to Italy. Julius Caesar claimed him as his ancestor—the story of which is immortalised in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Venus was central to many religious festivals and was venerated in Roman religion under numerous cult titles.

The Romans adopted the myths and the iconography of her Greek counterpart, Aphrodite, for Roman art and Latin literature. In the later classical tradition of the West, Venus becomes one of Greco-Roman mythology's most widely referenced deities as the embodiment of love and sexuality. Later, under Greek influence, she was equated with Aphrodite and assumed many of her aspects. In myth, Venus or Aphrodite was born of seafoam. Roman theology presents Venus as the yielding, watery female deity essential to the generation and balance of life. Venus was offered an official cult in specific festivals of the Roman Calendar. Her sacred month was April, which Roman etymologists understood to have derived from *aperire* ("to open") with reference to the springtime blossoming of trees and flowers. Images of Venus have been found in domestic murals, mosaics and household shrines (Lararia). Prospective brides offered Venus a gift before their wedding- though the details are unknown. In dice games, a popular pastime among Romans of all classes, the luckiest, the best possible roll was known as 'Venus.'

Venus became a popular subject of painting and sculpture during the Renaissance period in Europe. As a 'classical' figure for whom nudity was her natural state as an embodiment of spiritual beauty and physical beauty, it was socially acceptable to depict her unclothed. As the goddess of sexuality, a degree of erotic beauty in her presentation was justified, which appealed to many artists and their patrons. Around 1478, Botticelli was commissioned by the Medicis the great table called *La Primavera* or *The Spring*, the most celebrated mythological painting of the fifteenth century. It is one of the most lyrical creations of the Renaissance but also one of the most mysterious and complex regarding its origin and meaning, despite numerous proposed hypotheses. The message of the work of art can be received on different levels. "The conceptual meaning, dictated by the poet Poliziano—the 'Venus-Humanitas' will be clear only to the philosophers, but the general public can find the pleasantness in the orange-orchard and flower-studded meadow, in the rhythm of the figures, in the attractive beauty of bodies and faces, in the harmonious flow of lines, in the delicate play of colours" (Argan, 2008, 146). There is perhaps a moral lesson hidden in it, too. The young Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, to whom the painting was destined, was supposed to meditate on the unusually chaste effigy of Venus, the queen, contrasted to the carnal embrace of Zephyr, on the right, which transformed his wife Chloris into Flora, the dispersion of flowers, to the delicate dance of graces almost imitating the absorbed Mercury who dispelled the clouds. The figures posed in front of a shady orchard built up the background. The meadow strewn with innumerable flowers in imitation of Flemish tapestry and orange trees laden with oranges created a non-religious atmosphere where the religious connotation of Venus is subjugated so that the painting has been called *La Primavera* or *The Spring* and not the Reign of Venus as some neo-Platonist critics have suggested. Even the figure of Venus placed in the middle as a reigning deity does not resemble any Greco-Roman model. Some critics have attempted to visualise a philosophical message where the manifestation of pagan divinity is appropriated to a neo-platonic re-evaluation of the classical myth. But we can easily discern a point of meditation

characteristic of the Florentine culture: the conscience of living in the present marked by a grave economic and political crisis from which the artist tried to escape idealising a mythical age of Gold at the beginning of human history, avoiding the ugliness & violence prevalent at the time. It is the Florentine dream to return to the lap of nature untouched by civilisation's corruption. *La Primavera* can also represent an ideal human paradise immersed in natural beauty inhabited by the eternally young and beautiful, living in perfect Universal harmony.

The second one—*The Birth of Venus*—is a 1486 painting that Lorenzo il Magnifico, perhaps commissioned for his nephew Giovanni di Pierfranco de' Medici. It depicts the Goddess Venus, having emerged from the sea as a fully grown woman, arriving at the seashore drifted by the Winds where the Hour of Spring waits for her with a cloak. The subject comes from Hesiod's *Theogony* (Graves, 1992) [verses 188-200], published in Italian translation in 1474 in Ferrara and from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who described the Hour handing a cloak to Venus Anadyomene, later from humanist Poliziano.

The iconography of the painting is very similar to a description in a poem by Angelo Poliziano, the contemporary of Botticelli, entitled '*le Stanze per la giostra*,' written between 1475-78; the poem includes a fictional description of reliefs cast by Vulcan, the mythical god of Greco-Roman pantheon for the door of the Temple of Venus.'

The ninety-ninth stanza of the poem reads:

In the stormy Aegean, the genital member is seen to be received in the lap of Tethys, to drift across the waves, wrapped in white foam, beneath the various turnings of the planets; and within, both with lovely and happy gestures, a young woman with nonhuman countenance, is carried on a conch shell, wafted to shore by playful zephyrs; and it seems that heaven rejoices in her birth. (Sharma, 2023).

It seems that Botticelli knew this poem when he painted it, and for Venus, he had in his mind the portrayal of the goddess in antique statues, especially the one popular in Florentine aristocratic homes—a gorgeous nude woman holding her left hand to pudenda, her right hand to her breasts. Botticelli retained the classical features but added long golden hair to make the image more contemporary, connecting it with contemporary images of St Mary Magdalene or Petrarch’s description of Laura, his lady love. Savonarola’s fiery preaching objecting against the revival of pagan culture might have cast gloomy shadows over this painting, making it look rather rigid and pale compared to the earlier one, even contributing to the deliberations of the clear and conscious recall to the *Baptism of Christ* painted by Verrocchio & his disciple Leonardo da Vinci in 1475.

Some critics connect it to the Arrival of Venues, propelled by Zephyrs and Chloris, in Sicily after the anonymous poem *Pervigilium Veneris* of the second or third century A.D. alluding to the coming of Aeneas, the Trojan hero and the son of Venus, to Italy. By the 1950s, famous Art historians like Argan or Gombrich advanced several new neo-Platonic interpretations. However, for Plato, as for his followers of the Florentine Platonic Academy members, Venus had two aspects: She was an earthly Goddess who aroused humans to physical love or a heavenly goddess who inspired intellectual love in them. Plato further argued that contemplation of physical beauty allowed the mind to understand spiritual beauty better. Therefore, Venus, the most beautiful of goddesses, might at first raise a physical response in viewers, which then is lifted towards the Creator. A neo-platonic reading suggests that fifteenth-century viewers would have looked at the painting and felt their minds lifted to the realm of divine love. Another neo-platonic interpretation takes the scene as the birth of Humanities, created by Nature with its four elements and the union of Spirit and Matter.

Recently, questions have been raised about Neoplatonism as the dominant intellectual system of late fifteenth-century Florence, and scholars have indicated that there might be other ways to interpret Botticelli’s mythological paintings. In particular, both *The Spring* and

The Birth of Venus have been seen as wedding presents that suggest appropriate behaviour for the bride and the groom.

Works Cited

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