

Sandro Botticelli

Primavera: Myth and Beauty

THE LYRICAL beauty of Renaissance art is intimately intertwined with the artist Botticelli, and our modern sensibility is still informed by his conception of beauty. Sandro Botticelli, né Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi (circa 1445-1510), flourished in Florence, Italy, his entire life except for 1 year's sojourn to Rome on a papal commission to complete his Sistine frescoes. Contemporary sources revealed little of Botticelli's life to us, and most of our knowledge of his attitudes and ideas may be gleaned only from his masterpieces. Although he achieved remarkable renown as a Florentine master and flowered under the patronage of the Medici, Botticelli's antiquated style fell into disfavor at the blossoming of the High Renaissance. His reputation lay in obscurity for several centuries until a 19th-century revival awakened interest in his works.

His early painterly efforts were undertaken in the studio of Fra Filippo Lippi, whose linear interpretation of the human form would resonate in Botticelli's mature style. Botticelli was intrigued by spiritual mysteries, articulated in Dante's *Divina Commedia* and by Savonarola's pulpit, that would achieve full expression in his religious works. He was also charmed by the physical attributes of passion and participated in the caustic wit and humor of his time. The enormous breadth of his work covered devotional themes—captured in frescoes, altarpieces, and tondi—portraits, illustrations, and secular paintings. What has endured and defined the very identity of Botticelli as an artist for contemporary culture are his late, secular paintings, particularly the great mythical pieces of the 1480s: *Primavera*, *Pallas and the Centaur*, *The Birth of Venus*, and *Mars and Venus*.

Primavera (Figure) stands as a testament to Botticelli's unique style and vision of a world ensconced in pure sensuality. Despite numerous scholarly treatises that have expounded on the philosophical and moral overtones of *Primavera*, the viewer is encouraged to relish the lush beauty of the imagined scene solely as a visual delight. The richly textured landscape of *Primavera* stands juxtaposed against the restrained economy of that witnessed in *The Birth of Venus*, which instead derives beauty from its minimalism.

Botticelli's famous painting *Primavera* has often been likened to a tapestry, which at that time would have carried commensurate stature to painted works of art. The verdant meadow in the foreground is littered with divers fauna, including colts-foot, forget-me-nots, small grape hyacinths, cornflowers, irises, periwinkles, grape-plantains, borage, pinks, anemones, and daisies. The embracing foliage in the background reveals orange trees ringed with white blossoms and bearing ripe fruit. Venus, the central figure, holds court over the Garden of Hesperides, which in ancient times was imagined to be a garden lying in the West, replete with golden apples dedicated to Venus and guarded by the Hesperides, the daughters of Atlas. Over time, the myth of the apples transformed into that of citrus fruits, as manifested in the described painting. The oranges and flowers are clues that spring is the prevailing season, which is the only season enjoyed perpetually in the Garden of Venus.

In quattrocento Florence, Venus was portrayed in dialectical fashion as the goddess of wanton lust and the goddess of orderly love and marriage. The former aspect is glorified in *The Birth of Venus*, whereas the latter, more restrained aspect of her character is exhibited in *Primavera*. The matronly figure of Venus is adorned in a braided white robe, crowned with a white headdress that testified to her conjugal state, and bejeweled with a pearl necklace, which symbolized purity. Her protrusive abdomen, which is accentuated by the fall of her red robes, was a becoming feature for the fairer sex during Botticelli's time. Venus' posture is inclined toward the 3 Graces so as to direct the action to the object of her son Cupid's arrow.

The Graces, circled in a dance, were emblematic of ideal Florentine beauty: statuesque, but not overly thin, golden-haired, fair-skinned, and oval-faced—elements not entirely foreign to our modern conception. The flowing white robes and long, blond tresses were indicative of their virginal state. The pearls that adorn the 2 flanking Graces again allude to purity, more specifically virginal in this context, and the central sapphire connotes chastity, as indicated by the cool, blue hue of the jewel. Despite these symbols of innocence, the diaphanous robes highlight and barely restrain the sensuous forms that lie underneath. The Graces served as attendants of Venus and became recurring motifs in Botticelli's work.

To the extreme left stands Mercury, who is fabled to have fathered Cupid with Venus and who represents eloquence, a condition needed to foster love through delicate, verbal pleasantries. He is also god of Spring and Earth and is the son of the nymph Maia, whose name is ascribed to the spring month of May. Clasped in his right hand is his caduceus, which he brandishes to ward off the encroaching gray clouds. With

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his military cloak and holstered sword, he stands as the guard against any inimical forces that may intrude on the peace and gaiety of the garden.

To the right, Flora advances in garments embroidered in flowering plants and bearing multicolored roses to be strewn before her. Her gentle smile—a rare countenance exhibited in 15th-century painting—brightens her face. Her presence also celebrates the month of May, as the Romans held the Floralia, her spring festival, during that month. Behind Flora, the Zephyr reaches forth to seize the maiden Chloris, who, in turn, looks back aghast at her captor. Chloris, who initially reproached the advances of the god Zephyr, was overcome by his power and accepted his hand in marriage, raising her to the status of goddess, and she came to be known as Flora. The scene of Zephyr and Chloris is therefore temporally set apart from the remainder of the painting, where the newly crowned goddess and wife, Flora, presides. Botticelli isolates the rape of Chloris temporally and spatially by the opposite flow of the garments vis-



Primavera, circa 1482, by Sandro Botticelli (circa 1445-1510). Tempera on poplar on a gesso ground; 10 ft 4 in × 6 ft 8¼ in (203 × 314 cm). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy.

à-vis that of the figures' robes to the left as well as by the presence of the laurel trees that enclose these 2 characters, as opposed to the orange trees that predominate on the left.

The name *Botticelli* has become synonymous with an angelic, rarified beauty, and often the first image brought to mind of the mythic figure Venus is the one created by him.

Although modern aesthetic tastes differ somewhat from 15th-century Florentine ideals, the universality of Botticelli's vision of beauty is unmistakable and enduring.

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