Theme 2: Leonardo da Vinci and the Italian Renaissance

Lesson 5: Botticelli (continued)

Part 1

On the left is the image of Botticelli’s *Primavera* as found on the CGFA web site. Although it may have its charms, the real painting—as the Web Gallery of Art suggests in its description, however badly written—contains an element unseen in the CGFA version: the chubby little son of Venus (below).

The ekphrastic text from the Web Gallery of Art clearly indicates the presence of a “Cupid straining a dart to the three Graces,” a key part of the painting that CGFA has cropped out. Had CGFA been the first and only stop on the Internet, you would have been left with a distorted notion of Botticelli’s masterpiece. Of course, you might have wondered why a great painter of the Renaissance cut off Flora’s left foot and one of the generous hips of her previous incarnation as the nymph Chloris. Or why Zephyr seems to poke into the picture plane. Or what Mercury is really looking at. But such intensity of observation and curiosity probably asks too much of most surfers on the Internet. The actual painting looks like this, taller and broader (almost ten feet wide), more spacious and more golden:

Note how the light passing through the orange trees creates a halo in the shape of a peacock’s fan and how Cupid floats above his mother’s head like a heavenly crown. More importantly, note that now Venus really does occupy the center of the composition, whereas in the CGFA image she is shunted off a bit to our right. The visual center of the picture plane now plants itself in her slightly rounded abdomen, right over her womb, that ancient symbol of fertility. Venus, like Eve and the Mary we have seen in Annunciation images, is very often depicted as just pregnant. In fact, and not coincidentally, all the women in this painting show the same signs because that is what springtime is all about, nature brimming over with new life in the plant and animal kingdoms. All the women may be a little pregnant, but only Venus raises her hand in benediction like a Christian saint. She alone—and she is alone in the painting, untouched by the other figures—is holy, the harmonious, stabilizing, unifying element. Finally, consider the number of figures in the composition. Is the number symbolic?
Part 2
For someone considered by family, friends, and enemies alike as devoid of education and scarcely able to read or write, Botticelli moved easily in the exalted intellectual circles of Renaissance Florence and managed to pick up a rather sophisticated awareness of the currents of the humanist philosophy around him. The Primavera is said to be inspired by verses from Angelo Poliziano, an acquaintance who composed a long poem for the virtual ruler of Florence.

Ma fatta Amor la sua bella vendetta, ma fatta Amor la sua bella vendetta, mossesi lieto pel negro aere a volo, mossesi lieto pel negro aere a volo, e ginne al regno di sua madre in fretta, e ginne al regno di sua madre in fretta, ov'è de' picciol suoi fratei lo stuolo: ov'è de' picciol suoi fratei lo stuolo: al regno ov'ogni Grazia si diletta, al regno ov'ogni Grazia si diletta, ove Biltà di fiori al crin fa brolo, ove Biltà di fiori al crin fa brolo, ove tutto lascivo, dietro a Flora, ove tutto lascivo, dietro a Flora, Zefiro vola e la verde erba infiora. Zefiro vola e la verde erba infiora.

But Love, having accomplished his fair vendetta, flew lightly through the black air and arrived in haste to the realm of his mother and little brothers: to the realm where every Grace delights, where Beauty weaves a garland of flowers about her hair, where lasciviously Zephyr flies behind Flora and decks the green grass with flowers.

In addition to a broad, if idiosyncratic, understanding of classical mythology evident in allegorical paintings like Primavera, Botticelli won a competition to illustrate Dante’s Divine Comedy in Dante’s hometown, which must have been quite an honor. Justly famous in his own time, he made a lot of money and squandered it again and again, neglecting his painting to pursue other interests. His somewhat headstrong, unruly life makes the serenity and delicacy of his painting even more astonishing.

“Sandro Botticelli once went to his parish priest and, in jest, accused a friend of heresy [an offense punishable by torture and burning at the stake]. When duly summoned, the friend demanded to know the precise nature of the charge. Being told that someone had declared him to hold the opinion of the Epicureans—namely, that the soul is not divine and dies with the body—, he required that his accuser appear with him before the judge. Sandro was summoned accordingly, at which point the accused man exclaimed, “Him! Then it is true that I hold the opinion of which I am accused, but only as regards the soul of this man, who is a blockhead.”

Part 3
Although Botticelli painted quite a number of religious works in his lifetime, he is far better known today for two paintings devoted to the pagan goddess of love,
the Primavera previously discussed and the Birth of Venus, completed a few later, probably in 1485. In the Birth of Venus (below) Botticelli captured the Renaissance principles perfectly in form, color, and composition. The Greeks knew Venus as Aphrodite, whose name suggests her origin: αΦρός = aphros, foam. According to the myth that inspired Botticelli, sea foam gave birth to the goddess, who then floated to the nearby isle of Cythera (or perhaps Cyprus) in a seashell propelled by Zephyr, the western breeze. In fact, she landed on the first day of spring, the season most clearly associated with her.

The same poem by Poliziano may well have inspired this painting as an illustration to a number of verses. In the case of a naked goddess, a picture is better than a thousand words. Can you find the pertinent verses? Click here.

Poliziano’s poem and Botticelli’s Venus paintings are expressions of a Neo-Platonic philosophy that enjoyed enormous prestige in the Renaissance. As described by Janson, such Neo-Platonists “believed that the life of the universe, including that of man, was linked to God by a spiritual circuit continuously ascending and descending, so that all revelation, whether from the Bible, Plato, or classical myths, was one. Similarly, [...] beauty, love, and beatitude, being phases of this same circuit, were one” (345).¹

Although helpful to a fuller understanding of what Renaissance artists and writers may be thinking, or even adding to our enjoyment of their works, what we learn about the historical and cultural circumstances should never interfere in what we actually see in visual or literary texts. First we see; then we analyze and interpret what is there. Only after this are we justified in weaving in extraneous information. Botticelli’s Venus is, first and last, one of the most remarkable images in Western painting.