

Mythological Themes in Botticelli's Work

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Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi also known as Botticelli is known as one of the greatest Florentine painters of the Renaissance. He was born around 1445 in Florence.¹ He discovered his love of painting at a young age and attended the Florentine School. He worked with the artist Antonio Del Pollaiuolo. Botticelli adopted his sense of line from him. He developed a personal style categorized by elegant execution and he painted with a personal and poetic style. Within a few years Botticelli had the powerful Medici family as his patron. As a result he was influenced by the Medici belief, Christian Neoplatonism, which tried to reconcile classical and Christian views. Botticelli painted some of his most splendid and mysterious paintings for the Medici family. In addition he was influenced by the early Greek and Roman culture, especially ancient mythology. As a result, many of his works focus upon mythological themes. He is most famous for these paintings.

Botticelli created his finest and most well-known mythological works for the Medici family. He brought together the expressive content and forms of paintings with those of the humanists' poetic culture commissioned by Lorenzo Medici.² *The Primavera* is probably his most important. It was commissioned by Lorenzo the Magnificent for the wedding of his cousin named, Lorenzo in 1482.³ This painting is an allegory of spring, life, beauty and knowledge united by love. The imagery in the painting expresses the

¹ Nathaniel Harris, Great Masters of World Painting: Botticelli, Canaletto, William, Cezanne Telian, (London: The Humlyn Publishing Groups, 1974) p. 3.

² Jane Turner, The Dictionary of Art, v.4 (New York: Macmillan Publisher, 1996), p. 498.

³ Frederico Zeri ed, Botticelli: Allegory of Spring, (Milan: Desktop Publishing, 1998), pg. 2.

Neo-Platonic philosophy of love.⁴ Botticelli relates ancient Greek and Roman mythology with the present view of love and the marriage that will take place.



The Primavera

He creates the setting of a spring morning with the light shining through the tall trees, with golden fruit. The mythological figure the West Wind blows warm air over the spring day. Botticelli places Venus (Aphrodite) the Greek goddess of love into the center of painting. He places her in the Garden of the Hesperides, which is sacred to Venus. She does not symbolize the same lusty lady of mythology, but an innocent being who radiates tenderness.⁵ Her look is one of blessing and spiritual joy.

The scene in the right-hand of the painting depicts the metamorphosis of Chloris into Flora. Chloris is a Greek wood nymph who is transformed into Flora the Roman goddess of spring and Flowers. The inspiration for this story is the mythological story

⁴ Turner, p. 498.

⁵ Harris, p. 5.

Fasti by Ovid.⁶ In the painting Zephyrus, the God of the west wind grabs the nude Chloris whom he impregnated and weds her. Chloris is transformed into the goddess Flora.⁷ She now is dropping flowers to the ground in the painting.

The scene in the left-hand of the painting shows the Three Graces dancing in veiled garments. The Graces were the daughters of Zeus and Hera in Greek mythology. They represented the images of beauty, charm, and grace. The Graces were often associated with Aphrodite (Venus), which is the link between Venus and the Three Graces in this painting. In the painting the Graces represent the three states of love: chastity, sensuality and beauty. Voluptuousness is represented by the grace on the left, chastity by the one in the center and beauty on the right.⁸ They symbolize the love that is given, received and returned, in this case in marriage. Mercury is on the far left, who in mythology is the son of Zeus and Maia. Zeus appointed him the messenger of the Olympian Gods. He is covered by red Chlamys in the painting. He lifts his caduceus toward the treetops to drive out the clouds to make a sunny spring day.

Another mythological figure depicted in this painting is Cupid. Cupid in Greek mythology is the god of love and son of Venus (Aphrodite). Cupid is ready to shoot his flaming arrow toward Chastity, one of the Three Graces. This may represent the soon to be marriage of Lorenzo and his fiance.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Zeri, p. 5.

⁸ Zeri, p. 9.

The second most popular mythological themed painting of Botticelli is the painting *The Birth of Venus*. Botticelli painted the *The Birth of Venus* around 1487. The theme of the painting is taken from the poem by Poliziano.



The Birth of Venus

In the painting Venus is just born from the sea foam of the wave and is transported by the west winds (Zephyrus) to her sacred island of Cyprus.⁹ Welcoming Venus is one of the hours (Horae). They are the Greek goddesses of the seasons and were followers to Venus. Horae holds a cloak to hide her nudity.¹⁰ The subject matter is almost exactly the same as *The Primavera*. *The Birth of Venus* contains Venus in the centre who is not depicted in a Greek conception and is modest. Zephyrus carries Chloris whom he appeared with in *The Primavera*. Together they puff and blow Venus ashore. The trees on the shore correspond to the sacred garden of the Hesperides in Greek mythology.¹¹

⁹ Fred S. Kleiner et al, Gardner's Art through the Ages, ed. 11 (USA: Wadsworth Thomas Learning, 2001) p. 615.

¹⁰ Zeri, p. 32.

¹¹ Sister Wendy Beckett, The History of Painting (Canada: Little Brown, 1994) p. 94.

The painting *Mars and Venus* is one of the paintings that is most inspired by poetry.¹² It was painted around 1485 and for his friends, the Vespucci's. This is recognized because there are wasps that fly above Mars' head and Vespucci mean little wasp.¹³ It is inspired by Poliziano's poem *La Giostra*. Mars and Venus are in love in mythological myths. Mars who is in the right-hand of the painting is the god of war in Roman mythology (Ares in Greek). He is asleep, dreaming because of the spell Venus has put upon him.¹⁴ Venus who appears once again in Botticelli's work is now a powerful enchantress. She is dressed as a Florentine nymph and surrounded by myrtle bushes that were sacred to her. Baby satyrs, who are demons of nature in mythology, play with his armour, helmet and spear. They dangle a red flute on one of his fingers, which represents his weakness. They also blow into his ear with a conch shell. Mars and Venus sit in roman sarcophagus representing Bacchus and Araidne.¹⁵ The theme is Venus as the personification of love conquering Mars, who symbolizes discord. It shows humanistic and Neoplatonic principles.



Mars and Venus

¹² Stephan Spender, *Botticelli* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, MCMXIV), p.18.

¹³ Frederick Hart, *Sandro Botticelli* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1953), p. no page.

¹⁴ Hart, p.(page not given).

¹⁵ Zeri, p. 30.

Pallas and Centaur is another mythological painting by Botticelli in 1482 (tempera on canvas). It was painted for Lorenzo Medici as *The Primavera* and *The Birth of Venus*. This was the last mythological painting he drew for the Medici family. Botticelli took humanist symbolism once again and incorporated it into the *Pallas and Centaur*. It is also a secular allegory.¹⁶ Pallas (or Athena) was born from Zeus's head in Greek mythology. She was the Goddess of Wisdom (reason) and was crowned the protector of the city of Athens after giving the city the gift of the olive tree. Pallas holds the centaur by the hair in her hand. She is also holding a guards halberd. The centaur was a wild beast that was half man and animal. Botticelli took the humanist symbolism as the theme; wisdom overcomes instinct. Pallas represents wisdom and instinct is the centaur.¹⁷ Pallas in the painting overcomes the Centaur by grasping him by the hair. The strong look of Pallas can be traced back to classical times.



Pallas and the Centaur

¹⁶ <http://www.artonline.it/eng/opera.asp?IDOpera=272>

¹⁷ <http://keptar.demasz.hu/arhp/html/b/botticel/allegory/pallas.htm>

A Florentine Lady before Venus and the Graces contains mythological figures and themes. It was painted around 1468 and is not as well known as Botticelli's other popular mythological paintings. On the left-hand of the painting stands a bride. She extends her wedding veil to Venus and the Three Graces who stand on the left hand side. They are giving the bride their blessings. The theme in the painting is the favours bestowed by the Venus upon her votaries.¹⁸



Calumny of Apelles

The *Calumny of Apelles* is the last mythological painting Botticelli painted (1495, tempura on wood).¹⁹ Botticelli was inspired by the humanist work based on Lucian's *De Calunnia*'s rhetorical essay that was based on slander.²⁰ The setting is an ancient building. On the right of the painting King Midas is seated on his throne. He was the king of Phrygia and is the most important king of Phrygia. He often appears in Greek and Roman mythological legends. He is depicted with ass's ears and is listening to the whispers of Suspicion and Ignorance. King Midas extends his arm to Milace. Hatred brings in Calumny, followed by envy and Fraud. The victim slander is dragged in nude women

¹⁸ Hart, no page.

¹⁹ Zeri, pg. 36

²⁰ Turner, p. 500.

(truth, innocence), who is begging for mercy. An old woman, repentance turns towards her pointing towards heaven.²¹

After painting the *Calumny of Apelles* Botticelli started to focus more on Christian symbolism and themes in his painting. However, Botticelli painted some of the best mythological paintings of his time. He was inspired greatly by the Lorenzo Medici views and Neoplatonic thoughts of his time and put them into mythological paintings. His mythological paintings are some of his best known and most popular works.

²¹ Zeri, p. 37.

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