EPPH - Every Painter Paints Himself
Art's Masterpieces Explained

Botticelli's Birth of Venus (1484-6): Part One

The principal figure in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* is based on a Greek sculpture, Aphrodite by Praxiteles. That fact, long known, is not a detail but central to its meaning. Venus is based on sculpture *to resemble sculpture*: stiff, white and smooth like marble. The others, in motion, are draped or dressed. Venus, symbolizing love as the unifying force of the cosmos, is different.[1] She is an "artwork".

Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (1484-6) Uffizzi, Florence

Ever since the Renaissance female nudes have represented *art* in art. We have seen this in work from Titian (middle), Cranach and Rubens to Manet (bottom), Degas, and Picasso. In general, the nude's attendants turn out to be "artists" as though the subject matter has been fused with a scene in the studio.[2] Thus there is even more reason to think that Botticelli thought of his own Venus as a "work of art" in the process of being conceived. We are watching the birth of his "painting", *Venus,* in his mind.

Top: Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (1484-6)
Middle: Titian, *Venus and Cupid with an Organist* (c.1545-8) Prado, Madrid
Bottom: Manet, *Olympia* (1863) Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Her pose not only has a long tradition in Western art but Botticelli's assistants, certainly on his instructions, painted the same figure on a black background (top right). Emerging from the darkness of the artist's mind she is a statue come to life. Whether painted before or after does not matter much: Venus stands on her own.

The woman on the right (bottom) rushes in to *clothe* her nude goddess. That at least is what most viewers see because Venus is nude and trying to cover herself. However if Venus is actually a "work of art" she needs no clothes. Her modesty is no longer an issue, making it more likely that her attendant *unveils* Botticelli's masterpiece. It was common practice to hide important art behind a curtain and then reveal it, a process resembling how a mystery is unveiled metaphorically. [3]

Top L: Detail of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1484-6)
Top R: Workshop of Botticelli, *Venus* (late 1480's) Gemaldegalerie, Berlin
Bottom: Detail of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*

The flying figures at left blow life into the marble nude as flowers float towards her. [4] *In-spiring* a created figure with life *(ie. breath)* was considered by Renaissance theorists to be art's primary objective. By the time flowers reach the clothed figure on the other side, they fade away, leaving embroidered flowers in the latter's drape and dress, her shoulders wreathed in the laurel of poetic glory. Thus one side conveys in part the creativity of nature (fresh flowers); the other, perhaps, the spirit of creative culture (embroidered flowers).

Two details of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*

Venus, according to the story, was actually born from sea foam, not from a shell, so the change demands explanation. Shells were widely used in artist's studios to hold pigments (top two details) which could mean then that Botticelli's *Venus* emerges from his "paint-pot" holding her exceedingly long hair to suggest a brush. Her other hand touches her breast to combine symbols for craft (hand) and fertility (breast).

Marsilio Ficino, the Florentine philosopher, declared that Venus (or Love) was a creative force leading to self-realization. [5] If so, we may be looking at the creative process as a spiritual journey. Besides, self-realization is often symbolized as a second birth. There is though much more to Botticelli's *Birth* than I can explain here. For further explanation, see Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*: Part Two.

Note: Not long after I published this piece archeologists discovered the oldest extant studio in the world. In a very ancient cave they found art tools and two large abalone shells holding ochre, a colored pigment used in painting (bottom). Thus, though shells have little connection to artists today, by Botticelli's life-time they had been used as paint-pots for over 100,000 years. [6]

From top: *Thamyris* (detail) from Boccaccio, *Des cleres et nobles femmes*. Paris, BnF, ms. fr. 12420, fol.86 and detail of work-table; *Marcia* (detail) from Boccaccio, *Des cleres et nobles femmes*. Paris, BnF, ms. fr. 12420, fol. 101v; Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*; Photograph of a prehistoric abalone shell containing ochre.

Notes:

1. According to the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, then notably influential in Florence. Ficino believed that there was no inherent difference between esotericism in antiquity and Christian teaching, thus making his system yet another example of the Inner Tradition.

2. There are many examples on **EPPH** but the fusion of subject matter with studio activity is most iconically expressed in scenes of the Raising of the Cross where the biblical figures are surrounded by workers in contemporary dress. See Rembrandt's *Raising of the Cross* (c.1633).

3. Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes: Space & Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press) 2002, p. 69; Luba Freedman, "Rembrandt's *Portrait of Jan Six*", *Artibus et Historiae* 6, 1985, p. 101. See also Simon Abrahams, Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (1512).

4. The two figures on the left contain another surprise which I will explain later in a separate entry.

5. Michael Neil, "Shakespeare's Halle of Mirrors: Play, Politics and Psychology in Richard III in *Shakespeare Studies: An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism, Reviews*, Volume 8 (Ayer Publishing) 1975, p. 106

6. See CBS News, "World's Oldest Studio Uncovered in a Cave" (Oct. 14th, 2011) retrieved on Oct.16th, 2011

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