

## ON BOTTICELLI'S PRIMAVERA



Botticelli's famous work, the first major mythological painting of the Renaissance Primavera most probably was painted as a wedding gift for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, possibly from his famous cousin Lorenzo the Magnificent. The only contemporary source speaking about the work is Giorgio Vasari's description written almost seventy years after its execution, which also gave the traditional title to the painting. Vasari's description is only one sentence - "Venus, the symbol of Spring, being adorned with flowers by the Graces." Most of the art historians now do not agree with Vasari's description, reasoning that it is inaccurate, like so much else in his writing.

Edith Balas, the author of the article **BOTTICELLI'S PRIMAVERA AND THE STORY OF HELEN** (*Gazette des Beux-Arts* 138 no 1593 137-48 O 2001) proposes a new

interpretation of the iconography of the painting. First of all she thinks that there is no reason to suppose that the title Primavera is authentic, at least because the flora of the painting does not consist exclusively of spring vegetation. She notes that "art historians have long suspected that ancient and humanist poetry may provide the key to the Primavera." Because the Florentine Neoplatonists of Medici circle were obsessed with antiquity, and Botticelli could have easily been influenced by them, it is hardly accidental that the subject of this painting has remained enigmatic for centuries. The Florentine Neoplatonists were convinced that the ancient myths were not for everyone's understanding. Balas quotes one of the leading Neoplatonists of the age, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola saying, "The divine subjects and secret mysteries must not be rashly divulged... All must be covered with enigmatic veils and poetic dissimulation ... showing only the crust of the mysteries to the vulgar, while reserving the marrow of the true sense for higher and more perfect spirits". Balas proposes that the key to the explanation is in the Euripides' Helen, supplemented with Lucian's The Judgement of the Goddesses and Ovid's Fasti. She notes, that all these works would have been known to the Medici circle, including Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, whose scholarly interests are well documented.

Edith Balas starts that Euripides adopted an untraditional variant of the well-known story of Helen and the Trojan War. She sees Botticelli's painting as an illustration of that version of the story. Here is her proposed scenario for the painting: the central figure, which supposedly was Venus, is the Mother of the Gods, for whom Zeus contrived the Trojan War in order to reduce the human population that burdened her. At the left,

Aphrodite, Hera and Pallas Athena (previously identified as the Graces) display their charms to Paris (who does not appear in the picture). Hermes, who escorted the goddesses to Mount Ida to be judged, has turned aside from them, and, using his caduceus, has already begun creating the phantom image of Helen on Hera's behalf. To the Idean Mother's right is Helen (previously identified as Flora or Spring) as Euripides describes her at the moment of her abduction by Hermes, gathering roses in the folds of her dress. And, finally, the abduction of Chloris by Zephyrus exemplifies Helen's fate.

Balas states that Hermes' behavior and curious isolation from the others had put "stumbling blocks to a successful understanding of the Primavera". He has his traditional attributes, and his contrapposto stance is similar to the image on the antique Greek vase from Rome, but here he wears a metal helmet, not leather, and also has a sword, which in Balas' opinion is a hint at the coming conflict. There is another clue in Hermes' behavior that is referring to the Euripides' version. At the beginning of the play, Helen states that Hera deceived Paris with "a phantom endowed with life that she made in my image out of the breath of heaven". It looks like that is exactly what Hermes is doing in the painting. He raises his caduceus skyward and stirs the clouds to create the phantom of Helen.

In Greek and Roman mythology the Great Mother was identified with a multitude of goddesses, including Maia, Ops, Athena, Aphrodite, Demeter, Belona, Bona Dea and Fauna. She was the mother of gods, men, animals, and plants. By virtue of her role as the Great Mother of Troy, she came to have a special meaning to the Romans, who believed themselves descended from the Trojans. Florentine artists and patrons very well knew the

mythology of the Mother Goddess from classical Roman literature. Balas refers to E.H. Gombrich, who believes that the program of Botticelli's painting was inspired by the "dumbshow" of the Judgment of Paris in The Golden Ass of Apuleius, a tale whose popularity in the Quattrocento is well attested. The author of the article sees a striking correspondence between Apuleius' description of Venus and the central figure in the Primavera.

Many scholars have also noted a resemblance between Botticelli's Venus or Mother Goddess and his own images of the Virgin Mary, the Christian Mother of God. Balas also notes that "as a mixture of Christian and pagan themes is central to Renaissance ideology, the equation of Venus-Cybele with Mary is not surprising".

Aby Warburg was the first scholar to connect the figures at the right with the passage from Ovid's Fasti in which Flora, originally a beautiful nymph Chloris, explains how she became a goddess. Balas sees a connection between Helen and Flora, mentioning that Helen was at one time a vegetation goddess and her sanctuary was at Therapnai, near Sparta. Therefore, Flora and Helen had close mythological connections.

If the figure of Helen was directed specifically to Semiramide Appiani, the future wife of young Medici, the figures of the three goddesses alluding to the Judgement of Paris may have been directed to young Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici. The absence of Paris is implying that Lorenzo himself was supposed to play the role of the judge. During the Renaissance, the Judgment of Paris was traditionally read as a moral allegory

exemplifying the need to choose a moral course of life. In her article Balas refers to Marsilio Ficino's writings to assert that idea. In a letter to Lorenzo Bonincontri dated May 1476, Ficino interpreted the three goddesses as Providence, Fate and Freedom. In his commentary on Plato's Philebus, he interpreted them as three ways of life among which the Soul (Paris) was obliged to choose. Athena represented the contemplative life, Hera - the active life, and Aphrodite/Venus - the voluptuous life.

The author probably has a firm ground to consider the Primavera as the illustration of Euripides's version of the famous story. She may be right to consider that all the works of antiquity, particularly Euripides' Helen, Lucian's The Judgement of the Goddesses and Ovid's Fasti would have been known to the Medici circle, including Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici. Probably she is right that Boticelli as part of the Medici circle also could be genuinely aware of that literature. As Vasari himself notes "Sandro was also a learned man, he wrote a commentary on part of Dante's poem, and after illustrating the Inferno, he printed the work".

It makes a lot of sense to see in Helen Semiramide Appiani, also that thus it was hoped that she would emulate the same domestic virtues in her marriage with Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici. It also makes sense not to have Paris in the picture, implying Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici in his role of the judge. Renaissance people were fond of tricks like this, such as they were mingling the values of antiquity with Christianity. That is why it is convincing for them to see the Venus as the Mother Goddess in the center. Because she was considered the Great Mother of Troy and

consequently came to have a special meaning to the Romans, who believed themselves descended from the Trojans, she was special for Florentines also because they believed themselves descended from Rome. She was particularly special for the Medici, as they were the most powerful in Florence. The only thing that does not make very much sense is the depiction of abduction of Chloris by Zephyrus, which supposedly exemplifies Helen's fate. Particularly, why to do it through Chloris and Zephyrus? The blind Cupid brings a lot of confusion too, because even according to Euripides' version of the story his blind shots bring to abduction of Helen and eventually to the Trojan War. I don't think that the artist or someone else who had drew up the program for this painting had a war in mind. It is also confusing that Edith Balas states that Hermes' behavior and curious isolation from the others had put "stumbling blocks to a successful understanding of the Primavera". Right the opposite, it is only Hermes' presence that demands a different explanation than the traditional. It is also very possible that Vasari's description is pertaining to a different painting, not this one, particularly because Venus, the symbol of Spring, is not being adorned with flowers by the Graces. The Graces are busy in their dance hand-in-hand.

Actually, it will be reasonable to believe that whoever contemplated this project, faithful to the spirit of the time, intended to create a puzzle-rebus covered with layers of mystery, which still puzzles us today. It seems to me that the Italian Renaissance Neoplatonists were the initiators of the contemporary ideology - "the less they understand the more they will appreciate".