NEOPLATONISM AND THE VISUAL ARTS
AT THE TIME OF MARSILIO FICINO

Francis Ames-Lewis

Over the past fifty years or so, debate on the issue of the significance of Florentine Neoplatonic philosophy, and of Ficino's philosophical ideas in particular, for the visual arts in his time has primarily revolved around paintings produced for members of the Medici family, and most particularly two of Botticelli's great panel-paintings in the Uffizi, the *Pallas and the Centaur* and the *Primavera*. This debate reached its height around 1960 when Edgar Wind and Erwin Panofsky proposed variations on the classic Neoplatonic reading, Ernst Gombrich's celebrated article of 1945.\(^1\) Gombrich understood the *Primavera* in the light of a letter from Marsilio Ficino to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, second cousin to Lorenzo the Magnificent, in which Venus is equated with the concept of *humanitas*. However, this does not really help to elucidate the meaning of the Venus who stands at the centre of the *Primavera*. Moreover, Gombrich's hypothesis was further compromised by his unsatisfactory attempt to identify the figures and their interrelationships in the light of the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius, which in its somewhat coarse character does not well match the lyrical, pastoral quality of Botticelli's pictorial treatment.

In 1958 Edgar Wind suggested, citing Ficino at frequent intervals, that the two groups on either side of Venus may represent two consecutive phases of one consistent Platonic theory of love.\(^2\) Since Vasari had seen the *Primavera* and the *Birth of Venus* hanging in the villa of Castello, which then belonged to the heirs of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, Erwin Panofsky proposed in 1960 that they were pendants (despite the fact that one is on panel and the other on canvas), both painted for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, the first

---


showing Natural Venus and the second Celestial Venus.³ At this point, with the authority of Gombrich, Wind and Panofsky behind it, the theory that the two paintings were based on Neoplatonic textual programmes written for Botticelli by Ficino was widely accepted.

However, fashions in interpretation change; and such changes may be stimulated by new evidence becoming available. In 1975 a previously unexplored inventory was published more or less simultaneously, but independently, by John Shearman and Webster Smith.⁴ This inventory, a list of the possessions of Lorenzo and Giovanni di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici in 1499, shows that the Pallas and the Centaur and the Primavera hung not at Castello but in one of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco’s rooms in their town house in Florence. Moreover, the 1499 inventory includes no painting that can be identified as the Birth of Venus. This then was apparently not a pendant to the Primavera; and since it is painted on canvas in relatively inexpensive pigments, especially in comparison with the Primavera, it seems likely that it was painted as villa decoration, and not necessarily for the Medici at all. The Primavera on the other hand was set into the wainscotting of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco’s anteroom, above a fine lettuccio, or daybed. That this painting was made to be seen in association with a piece of high-quality domestic furniture casts it in a rather different light from that in which it was seen at the time when Neoplatonic interpretations of its imagery were most enthusiastically received. Since the publication of the inventory in 1975 there has been a tendency to seek other cultural contexts in which to understand the Primavera.

It is true that one recent interpretation of the Primavera has once more seen it in the light of Ficinian Neoplatonism. In 1989 Joanne Snow-Smith published a lengthy and complex analysis of the painting that takes as an initial premise that it was Marsilio Ficino who wrote the literary programme for Botticelli to depict.⁵ This programme, Snow-Smith wrote, received its immediate impetus from the Hermetic concept of a visionary revelation of Divine Truth. The purpose of this ‘seemingly enigmatic programme’ was ‘to proffer to

---