BOTTICELLI'S VENUS:
ANTIQUE ALLUSIONS AND
MEDICEAN PROPAGANDA

CHARLES R. MACK

For Liana De Girolami Cheney

In the year 1469, the young Lorenzo di Piero de’ Medici reportedly took part in a tournament lavishly staged in the piazza in front of the church of Santa Croce in Florence.1 Embroidered in pearls across Lorenzo’s surcoat was the phrase Le Temps Revient: the “times revived.” This evocative motto, so proudly displayed by the heir to the leadership of Florence, was a general proclamation of a coming Laurentian Age of Festival. It also was one of the first clearly expressed quattrocento allusions to the recreative act that lies at the heart of the Italian Renaissance. That same spirit of “rebirth” likely was the motivating force behind Sandro Botticelli’s famous depiction of the goddess of love (Fig. 1), painted under Medici patronage some fifteen years later.2

Generally entitled La Nascita di Venere or The Birth of Venus but, perhaps, better described as The Arrival of Venus, Botticelli’s celebrated painting now hangs in Florence’s Uffizi Gallery, together with the artist’s equally famous Primavera. Familiar from constant reproduction, the Venus remains pivotal in understanding Botticelli’s artistic approach, the creation and function of “secular” art in quattrocento Florence, the character of the antique revival, and the application of iconography in the early Renaissance. In the following discussion, the circumstances under which the Venus might have been painted will be explored, and literary and interpretive evidence will be offered to substantiate its having been the result of a deliberate effort to recreate “archaeologically” a lost antique masterpiece. It, further, will be suggested that Botticelli’s attempt was intended to extol not only the talents of the artist but also the virtues and the achievements of the leader of the Florentine republic accomplished through layered interpretive readings of the painting—mythological, political, and religious.

The underlying meanings attached to the Venus, passing beyond the sensual, are largely contingent upon a connection with the Medici family.
and, in particular, with Lorenzo the Magnificent. Unfortunately, the history of the patronage and ownership of the Venus is no less complex than that of how it might be interpreted. It is, however, a story of provenance that needs examination and some clarification before any attempt can be made to reconstruct the context of the painting’s execution and then to “translate” its possible iconographical message.

**THE MEDICI CONNECTION**

One wants physically to connect Botticelli’s three great mythological paintings, the Venus, the Primavera, and the Minerva and the Centaur. So few of Botticelli’s secular works survive that it is tempting to see them as having been hung together originally just as they are exhibited today in the Botticelli Room of the Ufizzi. We must remember, however, that Botticelli may well have destroyed many of his “pagan” subjects after he, supposedly, joined the ranks of Savonarola’s followers (Vasari 2: 87). Many more such paintings, likewise, would have been relegated by their owners to one of the preacher’s “bonfires of the vanities.” The existence of additional mythological treatments would have permitted us to regard these now rare works in a broader context. If we can assume that similar secular works by Botticelli once existed, there is no reason, automatically, to see these surviving works as having once belonged to a single program. There is, in fact, no reason to assume that the Venus was painted for the same location as were the Minerva and the Primavera.

Although the Venus and the Primavera have similar formats and are paired both in the Ufizzi and in our general consciousness, they are fundamentally different in conception. The differences go well beyond variation in supports (the Primavera is on panel while the Venus is on canvas) and dates of execution. In the Primavera, according to Charles Dempsey, Botticelli “has combined in a new way several classical texts of quite different natures in order to create an image that simultaneously invokes all of them and reproduces none of them” (Portrayal 24–25). The Venus, on the other hand, is, as this essay hopes to demonstrate, the product of a deliberately recreative intent. It is my contention that Botticelli, in his Venus, specifically set out to reconstruct a lost masterpiece following the evidence of ancient ekphrastic description.

The precise patronage of Botticelli’s Venus, together with that of the Primavera with which it usually is associated, remains uncertain, but