

Botticelli – 2014 Higher Level Question 10

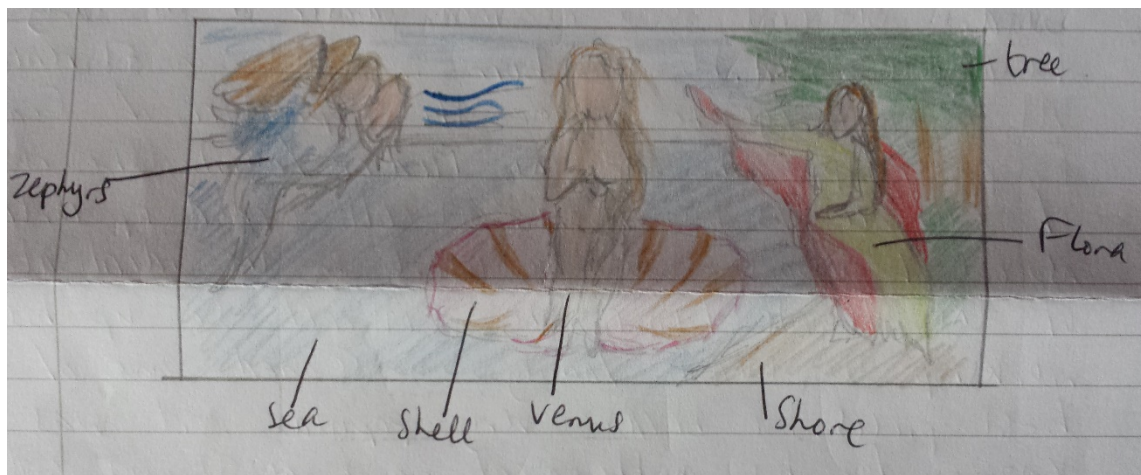
Mythology and symbolism were the main concerns of the painter Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445-1510). Discuss this statement with reference to the “Birth of Venus” illustrated on the accompanying sheet. Refer in your answer to composition, subject matter, treatment of the human figure and the period in which the work was produced. Name and briefly discuss one other work by this artist. Illustrate.

[Image of the “Birth of Venus”]

Sandro Botticelli is a renowned painter of the early Renaissance period. He was born in 1444 in Florence. At a young age, he became the apprentice of Fra Filippo Lippi, who had the Medici family (the rulers of Florence) as his patrons. Botticelli picked up certain aspects of Lippi’s style, particularly in the idealisation of the female figure. When Botticelli set up his own workshop, the Medici family commissioned some of his first pieces. He became very popular and was known for his mythological paintings. Through Botticelli’s connections with upper-class intellectuals he was introduced to Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonists were an influential group of humanists who believed that there were strong links between Christianity and Pagan mythology. From spending time with such people, Botticelli found classical poetry and was inspired to paint mythological themes with hidden symbols related to it. One such painting is the “Birth of Venus” in which mythology and symbolism are both featured.

Composition

Venus – the Goddess of beauty and love in Greek mythology – stands in the centre of this painting. She is on a scallop shell and is being blown across the sea to shore by two zephyrs to her right. On the shore the flower Goddess, Flora, stands waiting for her with a red robe. Botticelli’s composition here is not concerned with space, he focuses solely on divine beauty. The emphasis is on Venus and what she represents and because of this the composition is not realistic, with Flora too close to Venus and the shell situated too easily on the sea.

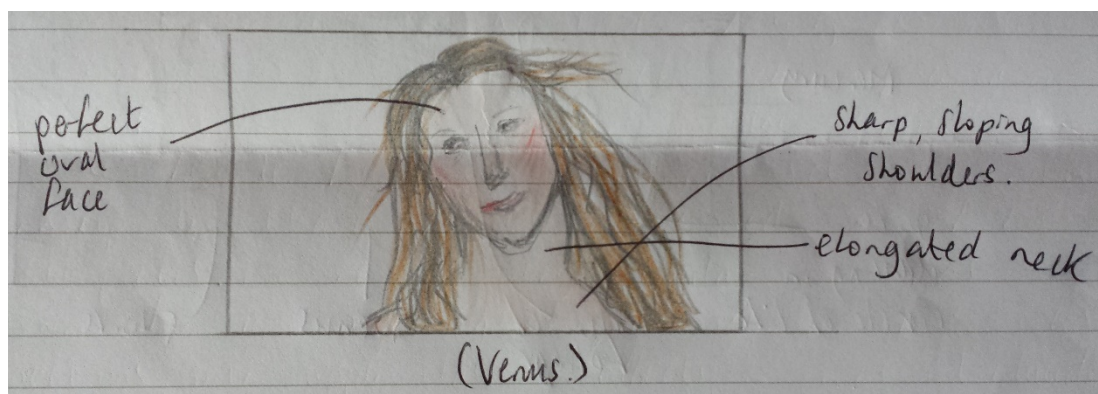


Subject Matter

This painting is essentially Botticelli's interpretation of the classical poem about the legend of Venus's birth and arrival from the sea. It is an allegorical painting containing many hints at Neo-Platonist beliefs. Venus stands nude on a scallop shell, which is a symbol of fertility. In humanist thinking Venus was the personification of beauty and Neo-Platonists believed that truth was beauty. It is clear from this that Botticelli is not presenting his nude subject as an object of lust or temptation, but as a symbol of untouched innocence.

The Human Figure

The figures in this piece, particularly that of Venus, are typical of Botticelli's style; slightly elongated with a long neck and sloping shoulders. He was much more concerned with the idealisation of his female figures than anatomical accuracy. Venus is portrayed as the perfect image of graceful elegance, with her hair flowing in the wind and standing in a pose typical of Greek statues at the time, contrapposto posture. Although such a pose is unrealistic for somebody standing on the edge of a shell, it adds to the sense of calm and serenity that is found in Venus's facial expression.

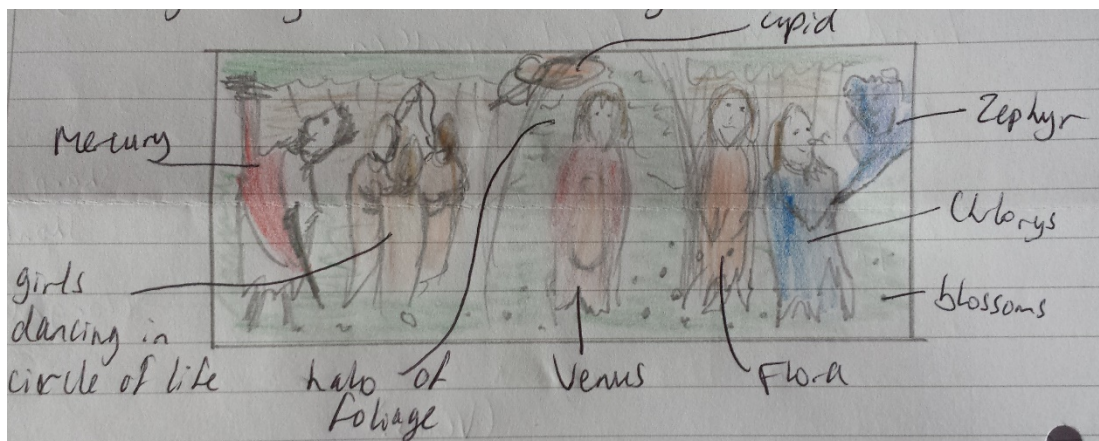


Period of Time

The “Birth of Venus” was created during the Early Renaissance, specifically the “Golden Age” in Florence, under the rule of Lorenzo de’ Medici. Secular paintings were becoming more common and Neo-Platonism was on the rise. Botticelli was adored amongst the upper-class citizens of Florence because his paintings were a type of “insider art” with their many symbols and mythological references to Greek literature. Patrons such as Lorenzo de’ Medici commissioned paintings like the “Birth of Venus” to show off their distinctive and extensive knowledge of humanism, thus freeing themselves from the power of religion in their lives.

The Primavera

One other famous painting by Botticelli is “Primavera”. This painting was surrounded by controversy due to its Neo-Platonist leanings. “Primavera” celebrates the arrival of spring. Venus is once again in the centre of the painting, surrounded on her left and right by seven other figures.



On Venus’s right Zephyr tries to capture Chloris, the wood nymph, before she transforms into Flora, who represents the fertility of nature here. She scatters blossoms as she walks. All women in the painting are pregnant. Mercury, the messenger of the Gods, stands to the extreme left of the painting. Cupid can be seen above Venus, who appears to have a halo of foliage around her head, with the trees separating and forming an apse directly behind her.

Conclusion

Botticelli was known during the “Golden Age” of Florentine Renaissance for his focus on mythology and symbolism in his work. “Birth of Venus” and “Primavera” are some of the best examples of Early Renaissance masterpieces we possess to this day. Unfortunately, Florence went through a phase in which paganism was condemned and Botticelli was largely forgotten about until the 19th Century, long after his death.