

# The birth of venus: background, controversy and similarities



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## Abstract

*The Birth of Venus* is a work of art with great outstanding popularity. It is a masterpiece of renaissance form of art with great socio-cultural and political relevance. This paper analyzes the painting starting from the contents of what it portrays. This will analyze the elements of the work and the figures it presents. The analysis will be against the historical backdrop that makes up the background of the art. The paper will also consider the meaning and themes of the art presenting the differing opinions and speculations on interpretation. The ensuing interpretation controversies will also make up part of the analysis of the paper to show the reception of the art and the criticism confronting it. Besides, the paper will conduct a comparison with another work of art by the same author to assess the similarities and differences and as well compare with works of other artistes.

### The Birth of Venus

Authors of works of art draw inspiration from various societal factors that influence their work. Usually, the influence emanates from socio-cultural, political and economic circumstances that are coincidental with the author's times. Sandro Botticelli's career premiered during the initial years of the renaissance. He was born in Italy where he grew up to start his prolific career. Given the religious identity of Italy, his earlier works had religious themes and launched him from Florence his hometown to a globally renowned artiste. The most popular works to his name are *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*. The location of the works is Uffizi found in his Florence hometown. He spent a significant part of his life in the Florence and

only a moved away to Pisa where he was painting and later in Rome's Sistine Chapel. The painting under review, *Birth of Venus*, was a work created in 1484 and epitomized the mythological renaissance thought.

## II. Background of the painting

Paintings and portraits were usually done on wood as knowledge and innovation had not developed. The paintings of the dark ages and other classical works were wood-cast. However, the renaissance introduced a new development with the inception of the canvas. Botticelli's renaissance works utilized the canvas and were among the groundbreaking works that introduced the change. The reason was because of the aptness of wood to warp especially in regions that experienced much humid conditions. Wood paintings also had extra costs that could be avoided with use of the canvas (Botticelli 66). The canvas was also appropriate for informal artistic exhibitions such as those in the countryside as opposed to wood that was material for mostly formal exhibitions. The historical foundation of *The Birth of Venus* is in classical Roman mythology that Homer amplified in his poetry. It described the ancient conception of religious mythology focusing on deities and reminiscing the goddess Venus in that cultural context. The basic foundations of this work are therefore rooted in Roman myth only taking it a notch higher by the exposure of the body which was not the practice in the Middle Ages.

Homer's writings provided the storyline of the painting to capture a moment of magic and one that reflects the basis of Roman knowledge and faith exquisitely. In Homer's story of Roman mythology, Venus was moved to the

shores after her birth. A sea shell provide the means by which she was deposited to Cythera, an island. Botticelli therefore depicts the process of her movement to the shores in this work. The renaissance was a return of the interest in ancient roman and Greek knowledge which is the reason why *The Birth of Venus* was, according to (Botticelli 73), a modeling of a lost painting done by Apelles. He was an artiste of ancient Greece whose works only survived through written accounts.

### III. Seeing the Painting

The painting, as indicated, is a depiction of the birth of Roman goddess of love known as Venus. According to the roman traditions, Venus was born out of foam a phenomena only possibly through artistic conception. She rides to the shore on a clamshell. Zephyrus on the left aids Venus as she bears the nymph Chloris by which she fans the wind which blows Venus and guides her to the shore. Another figure known as Pomona who is a spring goddess is on the shores awaiting on the arrival of Venus. She wields, in her hand, a mantle that surges forth from the mouth of Zephyrus (Hardy 34). The mantle is decorated with roses. Controversy, however, exists at to the exact identities of the figures present in the painting. This does not, in any way, touch on the storyline that flows from the painting which presents an intriguing mythological foundation of the romans.

The specific portrayal of the body of Venus is nude. This departs from the conservative art of the middle ages that reflected the Christian values. However, art also changes to depict the progressive social changes that happen in society. Emergence of humanism and which was a movement that

started to drift away from religious dogma introduced in art. Nudity is now presented in this work with Venus' body exposed entirely. It is only her hand that covers up on her genitalia. The boldness in the depiction was heralding the birth of a new era in history where knowledge and the source of it had shifted. Religion is no longer the solitary source of ideological inception. Imaginativeness at this stage has broken the bounds of religious constraints. The secular starts to take a clear line as separate from the religious as opposed to mediaeval times when everything had an underlying religious limitation. Religion dictated upon all industry. There was only the religious and the secular remained hidden and could not be accepted in the limelight without attracting condemnation. In fact, a 1497 instigation caused Christians to burn any paraphernalia that was either ethnic pervasion or tolerating sin including sin (Botticelli 109). *The Birth of Venus* survived this attempt. Due to this historical backdrop, Venus' nudity was a proclamation of a new era, a groundbreaking portrayal. However, the painting given its explicitness was not meant for public exhibition and as a result remained hidden from publicity. In fact, the piece was supposed to be hanged in bedrooms.

#### IV. Controversy Surrounding the painting

The controversy that characterizes the painting comes from its interpretation against its cultural background. As such, some people usually perceive it in terms of its deviation from the prevailing Christian norms. As such, the nudity is clear deviance from Christian values of the middle ages. However, some people usually think that the painting had imagery that is related to Christian themes. In one interpretation, Platonic school of thought perceived <https://assignbuster.com/the-birth-of-venus-background-controversy-and-similarities/>

the painting as physically having an arousal that lifts the mind to the spiritual realm. Plato usually believed that beauty has spiritual symbolism and that when people contemplate physical beauty as presented in the eyes, they gain the understanding of the godly. In line with this, they understood the painting portraying the physical beauty of a goddess was a stimulation to appreciate the divinity of love and admiration. Others in similar vein interpreted the painting as relating to the baptism of Jesus given the figures placed on the sides of Venus have wings (Hardy 61). This understanding emanated from the portrayal of the baptism in traditional iconography in such a way. They understood the painting as symbolizing the start of Venus' mission of advancing the practice of love.

However, Christians repudiate such an interpretation claiming there should not be an association of the painting with Christianity when interpreting it. Later attempts of interpretation also depart from the platonic perceptions claiming it is difficult to appease the paintings subject with Christianity on any grounds. The attempt by Christians to even include the painting among the items that were consumed in an inferno of 1497 demonstrates the difficulty in associating the painting with Christianity. The exact interpretation of the painting therefore remains a subject of divergent counteracting perceptions that are often subjective.

#### v. Similarities/differences to Primavera

The two paintings are similar since they epitomize the contemporary artistic thinking of the renaissance. As such, Primavera just fit into the conceptual scheme of thought that emanated from *The Birth of Venus*. This is the reason

why the characters in both paintings are similar and the paints used are similar. The composition is the same and the overall subject flow into each other (Leonard 19). In essence, the storylines of the two have been designed around the roman mythology of the goddess of love. This means that they have similar socio-cultural influences and are different acts of the same piece. The relationship can be deduced from the fact that they draw a lot of inspiration from poetry and hence may comprise a storyline that continues to espouse diverse interpretive paths. In terms of composition, the colors for the two painting have similar intensity and evince brightness that can easily make a person relate them to each other. Overall, the two paintings are similar in subject, composition, and style while articulating concurrent socio-cultural themes of the renaissance reformation.

They however are different in a way starting from how one sees them. Primavera does not have an exquisite paint that *The Birth of Venus* has. In the latter, there was a conservation vanish which initially made the portrait quite illusionary in appearance. When it started to wear out, the intended appearance came out revealing the definitive paint applied around the contours of the image of Venus. This detail is not found in Primavera. In Venus, the image of Venus defines her body organs more explicitly and making her stand out in a spectacularly beautiful way. The other fact of difference is the fact the subject of Primavera is clearer given that it was purposely created for wedding celebrations (Leonard 19). However, *The Birth of Venus* is quite obscure in subject and has been treated to speculation. Besides, *Primavera* was a painting cast on wood while *The Birth of Venus* is a canvas work.

## VI. Similarities/Differences to other “ The Birth of Venus” paintings

### 1. Compare to Nicolas Poussin The Birth of Venus

*The Birth of Venus* paintings by the two authors are similar in subject and in depiction of the subject and theme. Poussin takes from Botticelli to make his nudity rendition. The paintings by the two both demonstrate emphasis on strong contours that define body organs. The color applications are cool but illusionary. The differences are in the content of the paintings. Poussin’s art depicts Venus who is riding on dolphins as opposed to Botticelli where a clamshell is used (Hardy 143). These content means that the symbolic meaning and subject of the two paintings is different and reflect different subjects. This is because the inclusion of more detail in Poussin’s art with a lot of figures when Botticelli’s art is lesser in detail and plain.

### B. Compare to Alexandre Cabanel

In this painting, Cabanel shows a similar art composition as that of Botticelli in how he uses color to create the illusion of the sky. The background in both arts is painted to aid visibility of the figures that are again nude in both cases. However, Venus is portrayed totally different while lying down with crossed legs. She uses her hands to cover her pubic region with explicit exposure of the bust area (Hardy 167). This may appear similar to Botticelli only that in his case, a cloak is used in covering the pubic region.

Accordingly, the themes that are being depicted are also different.

## VII. Conclusion



*The Birth of Venus* is a work of art that captures the socio—cultural transformation of the renaissance. The dogmatic dictates of religion had begun to decline and hence artists were freer to be explicit. Botticelli created his work to capture the rise of humanism by portrayal of nude pictures of goddess of love. The painting utilizes strong illusionary colors and the composition is also reminiscent of the renaissance artistic invention as limited as it was. Nonetheless, the execution of the paint advances a strong theme of historical progression as the influence of religion started to decline. The interpretation of the theme of the painting espoused great controversy emerging from associating the painting to religious issues. Speculation still abounds with regard to the interpretation of the painting. In researching about this work, I have been challenged about how culture and ancient mythology shaped part of the works of art the time. The creation of replicas of the birth of goddess Venus by different artistes only highlights this fact the more. It is a work that is inspired by ancient roman mythology.

## Works Cited

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