Part 4
Botticelli now

Introduction

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Twentieth-century hermeneutics have discussed models that perpetuate themselves over a long period of time. I refer to the works of Aby Warburg, Wilhelm Worringer, Meyer Schapiro or Leo Steinberg, but I would particularly like to recall the influential study *The Shape of Time, Remarks on the History of Things* by George Kubler.¹ In view of current developments in the historiography of art I also want to mention Alexander Nagel’s study *Medieval Modern, Art out of Time* in which the author projects the Middle Ages onto modernity and vice versa.²

Such new approaches promotes an alternative model which operates with the categories of either prime object, or series or mutation. The focus has thus shifted from the individual style and topographical context to questions of the function of an object, its iconological layering and common blueprints.

The results from this shift are narratives which spread like rhizomes, to use the apt expression of Deleuze and Guattari.³ They do not evolve in a linear and thus apparently progressive manner, but instead diffuse, resembling a system of bamboo shoots. Yet this new approach to art – specifically to everything that can be called a visual formula (*Bildformular*) – is by no means a privilege of theorists of culture. In particular the artists themselves are often conscious of their own connection with the prime object, or rather prime thoughts when (re)producing today’s world.

While chronology was an underlying principle for designing the exhibition *Botticelli Reimagined*, the universal availability of Sandro di Mariano’s works shaped its concept. The above-mentioned tradition was both its curatorial leitmotiv and its methodological tenet. The three studies that conclude this volume of conference proceedings address that theoretical base. Georges Didi-Huberman refers to Aby Warburg’s early notion of the Nymph or Maenad as a prototype. This figure plays, as we know, a major role in Botticelli’s works. Yet Didi-Huberman extends his view beyond Warburg’s observations when he discusses the syntax of both fluidity and eroticism, intrinsically associated with the nymph.
He demonstrates how one can find a series of poetical references to the interconnection between nymph-like behaviour and fluidity in Warburg’s work, and shows how these references coincide with a proper revival of the *Ninfa ariosa* in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art and literature. He then focuses on the psychomorphic role of air and water – in particular the sea – as fluid substances with sexual connotations, the *flux sexuel*. He thereby analyses the mutual exchange between word and image, extending his view into the sphere of twentieth- and twenty-first-century photography, film and video arts. He thus constructs a cross-media ‘logic of fluidity’ for which Botticelli’s inventions gain the status of *prime objects*.

Didi-Huberman’s observations create a fitting context for Riccardo Venturi’s analysis of Salvador Dalí’s Pavilion for the New York World Exhibition [World’s Fair] in 1939. There, too, the erotically charged motive of the water nymph takes centre stage, again with reference to Botticelli’s Venus. Through analysing the various stages of the design and development process of Dalí’s surreal *Fun House*, Venturi shows how for the eroticisation of the body – namely the body of the emblematic figure of Venus – the artist creates a new meaning: the metamorphic interpenetration of both female forms and marine creatures. In this way Botticelli’s Venus with the head of a fish appears as a vision in Dalí’s imagination. Yet such kinds of hybrids are only *prima facie* original inventions. Bearing Didi-Huberman’s essay in mind as a complement to Venturi’s, it becomes clear that Dalí is perfectly in conformity with the tradition in which the male imagination associates the sea and its creatures, psychomorphologically, with the female body.

Dalí’s reference to Botticelli is hardly surprising if we keep in mind that in the 1930s the surrealist painter made repeated references to Renaissance artists, including Raphael, Leonardo and Michelangelo. His further goal, according to Venturi, was the overcoming of a presumed distance between the Renaissance and modernity. Dalí presumably also wanted to identify surreal tendencies in Renaissance art – in other words to assign a much longer tradition to surrealist imagery, shaped by the subconscious, the grotesque and the absurd. The formulas Botticelli invented for *The Birth of Venus* and the *Primavera* are thus gaining the status of a dream vision which modernity begins to analyse. Above all, however, Venturi demonstrates convincingly, with the example of Botticelli, how images represent constructed realities. Hence while Dalí stressed the surreal notes of Botticelli’s inventions, the Italian government used the same images – thanks to their classical subjects and thus their implicit *italianità* – as political propaganda. Venturi thus points to the concurrence between Dalí’s reception of Venus and the contemporary
show Italian Masters at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which featured the original The Birth of Venus (fig. 1.0). This show had previously toured through the United States as a form of political propaganda.

After Venturi’s discussion of this episode from the 1930s, Gabriel Montua analyses more recent sociocultural adaptations of Botticelli’s works. He quotes several cases to highlight how in feminist debates about femininity and gender Botticelli’s works, namely his Venus and the Primavera, are used as a kind of counterexample: they serve as ciphers for artistic and social conventions and for a typical male, Western system of power. Moreover, Montua’s analysis of contemporary modes of reception of Botticelli’s art even implies that his main pieces have become a kind of synonym for Western social norms and structures. Botticelli’s masterpieces thus seem predestined for critical commentary on Western societies. Only the fact that the artist has apparently gained such status can explain the (at times curious) geopolitical statements by both Western and non-Western artists about these iconic images of the Renaissance.

All three essays lead to the conclusion that the reception of Botticelli in both the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries was based on two major yet alternative systems of reference. These systems allowed the painter to gain the unusual iconic status to which Botticelli Reimagined referred: firstly, the tradition of the ideal, erotically charged female figure with inherent, surreal, psychomorphic elements; secondly the politico-propagandistic constructions that use Botticelli’s paintings – first and foremost the Venus and the Primavera (fig. 1.30) – in a black and white manner to highlight geopolitical imbalances.

As an answer to anyone who looks for a dialectical connection between these two systems, the conclusion from all three essays is that the iconology described by Didi-Huberman and Venturi – that is, the typically Western, male sexualisation of the female and the fluid – contains a certain potential for a political utilisation of Botticelli. Botticelli’s works do, quintessentially, contain Western, paternalistic constructions of the standard (the ideal form of female beauty, the role of the female as object and decoration, the sexualisation of femininity etc.). Some contemporary artistic expressions can thus be seen, as Montua demonstrates, as personal interpretations of the tensions inherent in these systems. They are thus still dependent on the ‘shape of time’ (George Kubler), namely the ramification of time-dependent permutations of the prime object.

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