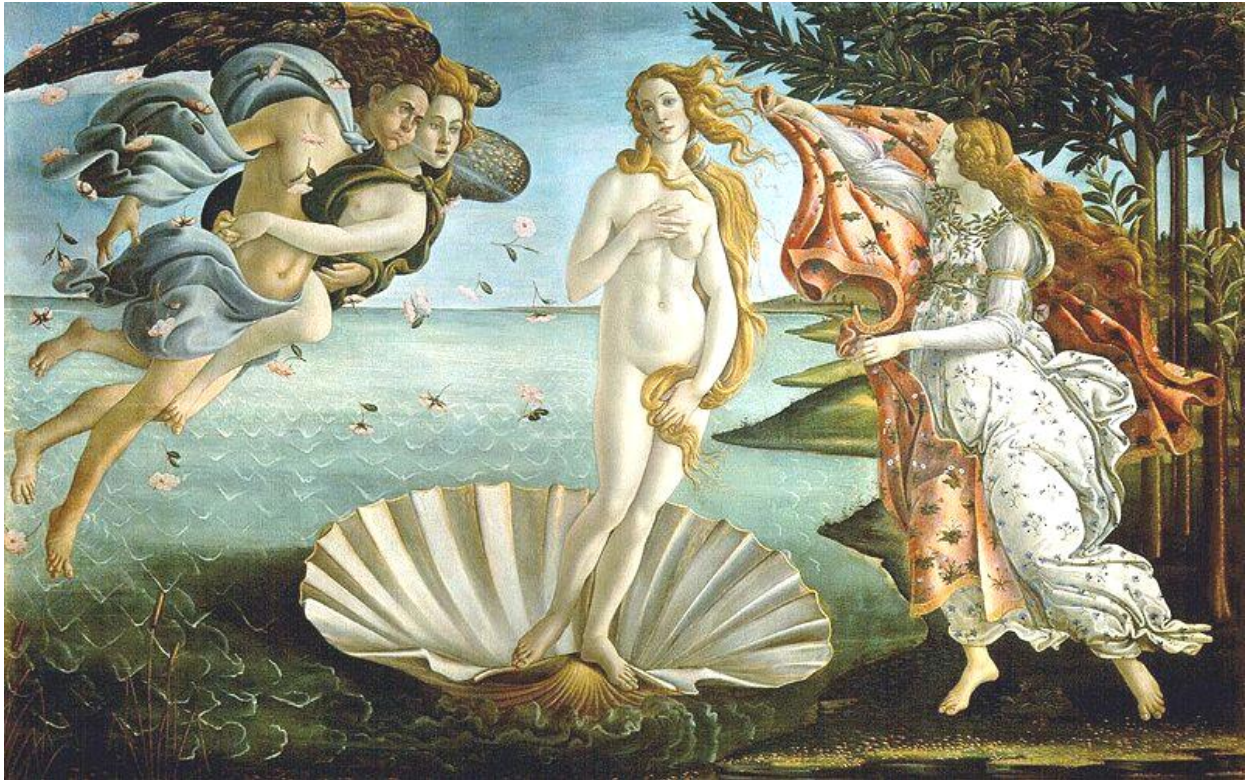# Critiquing the Birth of Venus: The Feldman Method

Sandro Botticelli: *The Birth of Venus*, **Uffizi Gallery, Florence Italy** -- You should always identify the artist, the title, and the location of the piece (museum, gallery, private collection etc.).

I.   Description

Start from general to specific: The painting is a large horizontal rectangle (well over six feet by nine feet). It was executed in tempera on linen canvas. It presents us with an outdoor scene, the shoreline that becomes a meeting point for water, earth and sky. Four figures occupying most of the picture plane. The nude female figure standing on the oversized shell occupies the center of the painting commanding our attention. From the title of the painting we learn that she is the Roman goddess Venus, being born out of a seashell as the myth would have it. She has struck a contraposto pose, reminiscent of classical sculptures. Her elongated body seems a bit off-balance and slightly tilted to the right. She is flanked by a clothed female figure to our right and a floating couple to our left. In the top left corner we find Zephyr, the god of wind, and his wife float above the surface of the water and tenderly blow at Venus to help her get to the shore. The female figure on the right is Flora, the personification of spring. While clothed in a floral pattern dress herself, she is also holding a cape with larger floral patterns and is ready to cover up Venus as she emerges from the water.

II. Analysis

The format of the painting, thoroughly pre-planned and mathematically structured, seems to be divided in thirds, both horizontally and vertically. The horizon line appears to be placed at the exact line of the upper third of the composition, with sea and land occupying two lower thirds, while the sky occupies the upper third. In addition, the shore and the trees occupy roughly one third of the painting on the right. With Venus placed in the dead center of the composition there is an implied symmetry. Although there are two figures on the left, they are balanced by a visually heavier right side (Flora and the dark background form a unified visual gravity field that actually outweighs the left side. Note that the figures on the left had to be raised to increase the tension pull in order to counter balance the heavier right side). Because of this implied balance, the composition feels very static. There is little movement besides the flowing drapery and ripples in the water. There is a sense of single light source coming from the upper right side giving the entire picture a unified look (note the placement of highlights on the left side and shadows on the right side of the forms). While the modeling (use of highlights and shadows) gives the forms a sense of volume (three-dimensional appearance), the light outlines tend to deny this illusion of depth and flatten these very same forms (this would seem counterintuitive and against Renaissance principles. Yet Botticelli, still considered one of the greatest masters of line of all times, was praised for his use of these outlines and set a standard that all other contemporary artists of Florence had to follow). The light and use of color seem naturalistic at first. The sky is blue, the grass is green, the water has a blue-greenish hue, etc. The open landscape gives us an indication of deep space. Yet, at closer inspection, they do not yield a sense of great depth. Instead, the sea and sky seem like a shallow backdrop you would expect to see in a theatrical production. I imagine this is in part due to the lighting conditions (artificial light) in Botticelli's studio. Another element in Botticelli's painting is his extensive use of pattern and repetition: from floral patterns on the garments, to flowers floating around the couple on the left, to the rhythmic lines on the seashell, to the wavy lines in the sea, to the lit pebbles in the very foreground of the picture. These repetitive patterns serve a double fold purpose: they unify the overall pictorial space and they also give the painting a certain ornamental quality (taking away from the narrative naturalism that we observe at the first glance).

III. Interpretation

Without the background story (i.e. context), we would be mystified by the possible meaning of such an outlandish scene. A naked woman floating in an oversized shell, accompanied by a mysterious woman in a floral dress and a couple that seem to defy the very laws of gravity. Even if we verse ourselves in Classical mythology, we are left wondering why a 15th century Italian artist, a devout Christian, would make an image telling a story of a pagan goddess. What possible relevance can a story of a goddess have in fifteenth century? Again, we have to look back, digging deeper into the culture of the 15th century Italy and especially the city of Florence. Both the Artist, Sandro Botticelli, and the patron, Lorenzo De Medici, belonged to a Neo-Platonist circle. The primary aim of Neo-Platonist movement was to correlate the classical legacy (especially Plato's teachings) with Christian theology. Now, all of a sudden a painting retelling the story of Venus becomes filled with Christian references. In Neo-Platonist thought, Venus was identified with both Eve and the Virgin Mary. Yes, she is "nude," but one might argue she is not "naked." Her nudity seems to refer to purity (like that of a newborn) rather than something that conveys shame or lust. So this purity born out of water carries a strong reference to the Christian rite of baptism.

*(For an absolutely mind-blowing interpretation of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" and how it forms a single narrative with his other well-known painting, "Primavera," **click here**)*

IV. Judgment

The very essence of Neo-Platonist philosophy dictates that the painting has to be formalist. Plato's central theme is the concept of the ideal and, as a Neo-Platonist, Botticelli has to strive for that idealism. We already analyzed the format in the second step. The way the painting is divided into thirds, making a reference to the golden rectangle, is a clear indication of Botticelli's staying true to the philosophy's principles. Furthermore, the Venus (whom he based on a Roman Statue in Medici's collection) reflects Platonic notion of ideal beauty. But Botticelli did not merely copy a marble statue: her fragile quality, her lightness, her delicate beauty and billowing hair are Botticelli's own inventions. With her elongated neck, long blonde hair flowing in the wind, and her voluptuous and curvy body, she becomes the Italian Renaissance ideal of beauty and femininity itself. For Plato, as well as for the members of the Florentine Platonic Academy, Venus had a double meaning. She was an earthly goddess who inspired humans to physical love. But she was also a heavenly goddess who aroused love of all things intellectual. Plato's argument was that contemplation of physical beauty allowed one's mind to better understand spiritual beauty. To look at Venus, the most beautiful of all goddesses, was to provoke a physical response in viewers, which would then elevate their minds towards the Creator.

But, by conforming to the Neo-Platonist philosophy, it also serves an instrumentalist purpose. Botticelli's contemporaries needed to understand how an ancient, pagan culture could have been so much more intellectually advanced than their own medieval Christian predecessors. By drawing Christian references from Plato's teachings and Classical mythology, they could argue that ancient Athenians, although Pagans, were still inspired by the divine spirit.