

**From *Faith and Freedom, a journal of progressive religion*, Volume 67, Part 2, Number 179, pp.128-130.**

Eugene Lane-Spollen, *Under the Guise of Spring: The message hidden in Botticelli's Primavera*, Shephard-Walwyn, London, 2014, xii + 207 pp. ISBN 978-0-85683-296-3. £25 hardback.

This was a delightful book to read and review. It is beautifully produced, with a large number of excellent colour photographs, together with a separate colour print of *La Primavera* included for reference. Throughout the book are close-ups of the parts of the picture under discussion, as well as a number of other works of art which are of interest. Not being a lover of art of this period, I was at first a little dubious as to whether I would find anything in it to excite me. I need not have worried.

*La Primavera*, which hangs in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, was painted by Botticelli for the marriage of Lorenzo de' Medici *minore* to Semiramide d'Appiano in about 1480-82. Such marriage paintings contained themes which were tailored to the families involved. The Medicis were a banking family and the dominant family in Florence, which was the banking capital of Europe, at this time of political tension. Botticelli's background and ideas are important to our understanding of the symbolism of this painting. He was not simply the fifteenth century equivalent of a portrait painter! He was much more than that. He was fascinated by religion and mysticism. Ruskin refers to Botticelli as "one of the most learned theologians, the most perfect artist and the kindest gentleman Florence has ever produced". The Medici circle was deeply interested in Neo-platonism, Hermeticism and the classical age, the Perennial Philosophy in short. Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino were convinced that Christianity and Paganism were compatible; a single harmonised faith was a possibility, since true philosophy and true religion must be the same. A human being has an innate divinity (the Catholic Church, of course, taught the opposite) and the soul is unfulfilled in the world of materialism. Ficino felt that the Church had lost its way. His letters tell us more about the problems of such liberal thinkers at the time, and make interesting reading.

We should not assume that art of the early Renaissance is to be taken at face value. After the Black Death the Church lost some of its authority, and power began to shift from the Church to the educated laity. However, the Church was still as intolerant as ever, so there was a need for prudence. Indeed, Botticelli himself had some of his paintings burnt on the orders of Savonarola. One way of expressing ideas of an esoteric or heretical nature was by means of allegory, where ideas were conveyed by means of a pictorial code. Allegorical thinking has been around since the third century AD, when Origen taught that Scripture did not have to be regarded as literally true. Instead there were several layers of meaning, any one of which might help one to understand the Bible passage in question. Eugene Lane-Spollen's book describes the background to *La Primavera* and shows how the pictorial code works and what it would have meant to Lorenzo and his bride. The painting appears to be consist of four panels side by side, with no real connection between them. From the left they show Hermes/Mercury, the three graces, Venus and Cupid and, on the right-hand side, Flora, Chloris and Zephyr.

At first glance the picture is oddly sombre, "a strangely joyless spring" as Lane-Spollen describes it. One thing which strikes the viewer is the absence (apart from flowers) of all the usual symbols of spring, such as birds and rabbits. The attempted rape of Chloris by Zephyr also adds a dark note which seems out of place in a marriage painting. The author refers to the oranges hanging from the trees; they look more like peaches or apricots to me.

Lane-Spollen examines the symbolism of the circle (a symbol of eternity and perfection), the head and hand gestures, the flames on the dress of Venus and the colouring of her garments, which are those used to portray Mary (Mary and Venus were seen as interchangeable to the Florentines) and many other tiny details which might well be overlooked by those who do not know how to read the painting. In fact, every aspect of this picture, even down to the smallest details, is full of hidden meanings. In the centre of the picture, Venus is standing in a circle of foliage. The circle was a symbol used by other artists, but only in religious art. The Virgin Mary is often depicted in a circle. The lines of trees resemble pillars in a church. Another motif, the circular eight-sectioned window, seen in the decorations in Flora's hair, is the same shape as Fortune's wheel, and was used by Botticelli in his work on the

Sistine Chapel. It indicates the unpredictability of life. The dance of the graces, with hands intertwined, indicates generosity of spirit, liberality and reciprocity. The central figure of the three is thought to be modelled on Lorenzo's bride and that of Mercury (on whom she is gazing) has a physical similarity with Lorenzo himself.

There is much more in this painting which Lane-Spollen unpacks. You need to read the book for yourself to find out about the rest of the picture language.

This book is certainly beautifully produced, but the index leaves a little to be desired. The Sistine Chapel does not appear in the index, resulting in a frustrating search for the reference to it in the text. There were other such instances of omissions. In the discussion of the flame motif, a footnote refers to Salaman's *The Way of Hermes*, but this does not appear in the Bibliography. There may be other omissions of this sort, annoying to a scholar, but possibly not a problem to other readers.

ROSEMARY ARTHUR