

Under the Guise of Spring

The message hidden in
Botticelli's *Primavera*

EUGENE LANE-SPOLLEN



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THIS INQUIRY was fuelled by a natural curiosity to discover what remained beyond reach through five centuries. It became a passion as the unfolding of a culture and a currency of thought began to evidence a consistency with what appears but remained unseen in *La Primavera*. Its chapters may be read independently of footnotes for those who seek the historical insights and the journey, and the same may be said of the appendices.

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How the Discovery Came About

FLORENCE 2004

AS A CASUAL VISITOR, I walked briskly along the banks of the Arno, wrapped up against a biting wind and motivated by the prospect of an eventual glass of good Tuscan red. I walked not far from where Botticelli lived and worked and along the narrow streets retracing the footsteps of Verrocchio and Michelangelo, where the workshops of great artists had once teemed with aspiring apprentices. I passed the *palazzi* of the merchant aristocracy and turned towards the austere Medici palace near where the ‘old house’ of Cosimo de’Medici once stood, and then to the famous cathedral where Lorenzo the Magnificent’s brother was murdered during mass. A short distance away I looked up to the windows of the ancient seat of government from which a fully robed archbishop was hanged, and in front of which the Dominican friar Savonarola was burned at the stake. Just beyond the corner of the piazza, I entered the portico of the Uffizi Gallery, anxious to have a better understanding of the *renaissance* and what exactly was ‘re-born’ in those violent but inspiring times.

I took the little elevator to the Leonardo and Botticelli rooms where a scattering of other die-hard tourists drifted from picture to picture. Nobody was standing in front of the famous *Primavera*. Fascinated by the idea that behind its beauty lay some unfathomable meaning, I settled down to absorb its mood. I remember thinking that the room’s own sombre atmosphere shared an ambience with this strangely joyless spring. The figures could be ornaments on a mantelpiece, detached from the moment and also each other. The cadenced dancers, their awkward hand structure, the seemingly remote Mercury and the unusually chaste Venus – all were composed in a different key from my conception of spring.

I was examining the dark, tall trees with their curved tops when a group of latecomers arrived. Though I was still intrigued, the moment had passed. I gathered myself and my questions together and made my way out under the portico to where statues of Lorenzo the Magnificent,

the philosopher Marsilio Ficino and Leonardo da Vinci presided from their alcoves. For them, like the owner of the painting, there would have been no mystery.

My fascination with this famous enigmatic painting persisted through the Provence winter and much of the following summer. Finally I was drawn back, entertaining a hope that my interim reading and a fresh look would deepen my understanding. I took up a position on the same bench and, with the aid of a very small pair of binoculars I was in the habit of carrying, examined an area of the painting which had previously caused me to hesitate. After several minutes Botticelli's extraordinary communication took form. Being in full view, it is there for all to see.

I recall how I hardly dared move in case it disappeared. Surely other people in the room would follow my gaze and see it? As it dawned on me that, by the nature of his message, the painter had revealed his subject – removing the single biggest obstacle to a full understanding of the painting – I knew I was committed. Little did I realise the nature of the journey I was embarking upon or the riches I would encounter.

Before that second visit I had felt that my observations, which many others would have shared, contained a hint of something. That afternoon I knew that they did, and also what that something was.

ELS

I

Introduction

LA PRIMAVERA, more than five hundred years old and one of the world's most intriguing paintings, has remained an enigma despite one hundred and fifty years of research and interpretation. Painted for the powerful but embattled Medici, the *de facto* rulers of Quattrocento Florence, its diverse moods have fascinated and perplexed the millions of people who have stood before it over the years in the Botticelli Room of Florence's Uffizi Gallery and wondered at its meaning.

Understanding *La Primavera* across a void spanning five centuries, to a culture dominated by a pervasive religiosity and with dramatically different priorities from today's Western society, is a challenge. *La Primavera* must be understood in the context of the lives, times, customs, and social currents surrounding the powerful Medici family in the tempestuous politics of late fifteenth-century Florence.

It was a period which we now call the Renaissance, or re-birth, when the re-discovery of Man's worth and dignity, as portrayed in recently discovered classical manuscripts and works of art, ignited the imagination, causing an explosion in creativity unequalled before or since.

La Primavera was created in that extraordinary period when a newly energised and prosperous Florence, largely recovered from the Black Death, had become a cultural centre of the world, having absorbed influences from Northern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean over many centuries, and its own pre-Christian history. It was an age that helped shape today's individualism and self-reliance and one which was gradually prising loose the grip of an unquestioning religious conformity. Under the influence of classical antiquity it restored the dignity of the individual and honoured merit for its own sake. It glorified knowledge and self-assertion and its art evoked a deeply human spirit. The idealised 'Renaissance man' was like a god, without limits, powerful, self-confident, compassionate, just and utterly capable.

A new merchant class had evolved over centuries of political struggle to eclipse the old nobility. Trade flourished and the resulting wealth

was frequently lavished on works of art and architecture that exalted the patron. For bankers, moneylenders and merchant adventurers, art patronage, most of it religious, was perceived as alleviating the final cost of life's misdemeanours.

The story of this painting has its beginnings in the Pazzi Conspiracy of 1478 against the incumbent Medici. Had this conspiracy, approved by Pope Sixtus IV, not resulted in the death of Giuliano de' Medici, *La Primavera* may never have been painted. The concept of the painting had to be appropriate to the man who took his place. Giuliano was brutally murdered during high mass in Florence cathedral, but his brother Lorenzo, called 'The Magnificent'¹ and the head of the family, survived. With Giuliano dead and the Medici under severe political and financial pressure, The Magnificent pursued a financially beneficial and politically astute marriage alliance with the Appiani family, Lords of Piombino, whose ports were coveted by competing powers including Naples and Milan.

The young groom and ward of The Magnificent who stepped in to replace the murdered Giuliano in the family's wider interests, was from a branch of the family uninvolved in the government of the city state. He was Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, or Lorenzo *Minore*, whose father had died a few years earlier when he was thirteen. He became the owner of *La Primavera* which circumstantial evidence suggests was a marriage present. Just fifteen years of age at the time of Giuliano's death, and unburdened by the maintenance of a costly political architecture, he was one of the known world's wealthiest young men.

The search for a sound understanding of *La Primavera* – one that accounts for all we see – has given rise to an immense body of interpretation. During the early Renaissance a language of sophisticated allegory emerged; ideas were expressed by a code of symbolic pictures and little was as it seemed. The smallest detail had a role and the whole spoke volumes to those with insider knowledge and a privileged education.

La Primavera opens a window onto society, religion, philosophy and mankind in general during one of the most influential periods in European intellectual history. In recounting the search for the meaning of the painting, this volume will shed light on a new kind of humanity inspired by the classical age.

The Medici, a family of simple background who had risen to great wealth and power, emerged in the 1400s at the forefront of a small

¹ A respectful address in the absence of an official title.

number of competing oligarchs. They pursued a broadly based programme of cultural renewal of extraordinary scope and ambition, seeking to make the city state the cultural heir to Athens and Rome. Their contribution to the recovery of long-lost classical manuscripts helped illuminate Italy's pre-Christian origins.²

An understanding of the classical age had to a large extent been lost following the fall of Rome to barbarian hordes. Surviving manuscripts lay in obscurity in convents, monasteries and remote outposts across what were once the lands of the Roman Empire.³ The Medici financial resources and network of agents greatly aided an extraordinary effort for their recovery. The works of some of the greatest minds of antiquity were progressively unearthed, brought to Florence and eagerly translated. They shed light on what was perceived as a sophisticated and liberal age in contrast to their own, a lost glory which brought current disillusionment into ever sharper focus. They were captivated by the idea that such a society was their own estranged patrimony, the vestiges of which lay beneath their feet. Sandro Botticelli, the unlettered but sophisticated allegorist whose mystical instincts resonated with the Medici circle, would capture the spirit of these times.

***La Primavera* and the Classical World**

La Primavera features classical gods from a pagan past.⁴ Images of gods and goddesses such as Venus were purged during the struggle for recognition by the fledgling Christian Church. At the beginning of the fifteenth century many ancient works of art, mostly sculptures and manuscripts which are famous today, had yet to be unearthed. It was not until the final thirty years of the fifteenth century, from around the time Botticelli opened his workshop, that classical sculptures began to emerge in substantial numbers and were appreciated for their workmanship and beauty.⁵ How and why the discovery of the classical during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in its myriad expressions, pervaded the spirit of the age in which *La Primavera* was painted and fired the collective imagination is important to this story.

2 James Hankins, *From the New Athens to the New Jerusalem. (Botticelli's Witness, Isabel Stewart Gardner Museum.)*

3 Petrarch (1304-74) was the primary initiator of the recovery of Greek texts in his lifetime.

4 Godwin, *The Pagan Dream of the Renaissance*, 2002, p.3.

5 Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 1965, p.187.



The Laocoön, Vatican, Rome, first century BC or first century AD.

Classical marbles unearthed in the ruins of Rome such as the Laocoön, found in 1506 in Nero's Domus Aurea pleasure complex, stunned the erudite with their refinement and naturalistic representation of the human body. The profound humanity and emotion of such works and their exalted portrayal of man, contrasted dramatically with the humbler Christian self-view and greatly engaged Florentine society. These discoveries informed the ideas and art of the early Renaissance, such as Botticelli's, and also the works of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael at its apogee during the *bella maniera* of the high Renaissance in succeeding decades.

The New Learning

The rediscovery of the ancient world fanned the desire of many Florentines to deepen their knowledge of dimensions beyond the confines of artistic expression. Exposure to classical culture brought an understanding of an age when humane values were to the fore and man, not God alone, was at the centre. Eventually called ‘Humanism’, its thirst for insights into the culture and values of the classical age of Greece and Rome planted the seed which would have lasting consequences for Western civilisation in the centuries ahead.

The Humanism of the 1400s was accompanied by a surge of dynamic inquiry into the philosophers, poets, historians and orators of that lost age. The ideas which emerged, first in Latin and later in Greek, became fashionable among the *cognoscenti*, gathering adherents and spreading abroad a new manner of thinking about the human being, his purpose and role.⁶ The Humanists saw this ‘new learning’ as leading man out of a narrow age of decay and ignorance into one bathed in classical enlightenment. The emphasis was on the self and individual merit and achievement, not guilt or sinfulness; on beauty and sensuousness, not austerity. They honoured man and recognised in him something god-like, all of which found expression in painting, sculpture, music and poetry. It brought forth a growing self-belief among many who were no longer satisfied to huddle with the crowd in the shadow of institutions, or remain paralysed by the tyranny of social station. Pinturicchio was to place the sciences, once the vassals of theology, at the feet of a human being, Rodrigo Borgia (1431-1503). On his coronation as Pope, Alexander VI in 1492 he accepted inscriptions which celebrated him as ‘greater than Caesar’, stating that ‘the other was only a man; this is a god!’⁷ Galileo would later assert that God’s knowledge of mathematics differed from our own only in quantity, not in kind.

The convergence of many aspects of the new learning in the pagan revival were described by the Venetian friar Francesco Colonna (1433-1527) in an epic work which elegantly captured the mood of Renaissance intellectuals torn between nostalgia for lost greatness and religious fervour in an age disillusioned with institutionalised religion. The reader was introduced to concepts which emphasised human beauty and

6 Cassirer *et al.*, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, 1967, p.3. See also P.O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts: Collected Essays*, 1990, pp.1-15; refer also to Chapter 5.

7 Sez nec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: Mythological Tradition in Renaissance ...*, 1972, p.137.

creativity. Perhaps more important was the permission these ideas granted to celebrate life and living, and to ‘love the stuff and surfaces of this world’.⁸

In similar vein, a Franciscan monk, whose words ‘shake with the laughter of the human soul’, wrote:

there ought to be no clock summoning the individual to their duties, no monks or nuns, nothing but fair women and handsome men are to be allowed into the abbey of Thelme. All should marry and all should be rich and live at liberty.⁹

The sense of empowerment which took root is well represented by Leonardo da Vinci, a younger contemporary of Botticelli, who was the embodiment of the universal or Renaissance Man, free as a human god who acknowledged no bounds. In this atmosphere Marsilio Ficino championed a new Humanism empowering the individual: his ‘god within’ vision proved deeply attractive to the erudite in late medieval Florence, from where it rapidly spread to engage and uplift. All these elements, when combined with a renewed cultivation of the Tuscan vernacular and revival of the visual arts, represented their world in a new and uplifting light.¹⁰

The feudal system and role of the old nobility, already long in decline prior to the Black Death (1348), were further weakened by the rise of banking, international trade and a developing urban competence in manufacture. The hold of the Church on society had remained largely unchallenged through medieval times, determining the rhythm of life through a pervasive involvement in all matters public and private.¹¹ It lost some of its authority after its failure to protect the population from God’s wrath – the only possible explanation for the great plague. Further discredit came with the ostentation and worldliness of the Avignon papacy. An inability to fully convince the educated classes that the Church represented moral authority was compounded by its undisguised temporal ambitions, the misdeeds of corrupt and worldly members of the clergy,

8 Godwin, *op. cit.*, p.37.

9 François Rabelais (1495–1553), *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

10 Dempsey, *The Early Renaissance and Vernacular Culture*, 2012, p.26.

11 Barbara Tuchman. *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, 1978, p.xix. The great plague broke out in north-eastern China and killed two thirds of that country’s 8 million population in 1320. It spread to Genoa via the silk routes and by 1420 two thirds of Europe’s population, 80% in some cities, died of it. It took with it much of the artistic talent of the peninsula. (See also Kaborycha, *A Short History of Renaissance Italy*, 2011, p.22.)

and the exposure of forgeries such as the Donation of Constantine which granted rights over Europe to the papacy.¹² Ultimately these developments repelled and dispirited many, paving the road to the Reformation and the emergence of Protestant movements.¹³

Art had served patrons and priests by presenting their message succinctly and memorably, impressing upon the faithful the rewards and penalties of the afterlife and teachings from the New Testament. Painted and sculpted images reinforced the status of the papacy as the single institution blessed by God to be his representative on earth.¹⁴

Humanism

Petrarch (1304–74), a devout Christian, lent impetus to a growing sentiment when he described his age as dark and antiquity as enlightened: ‘Among the many subjects which interest me, I dwelt especially upon antiquity, for our own age has always repelled me.’¹⁵ He felt that he was born too late among Christians who walked like a meandering herd in darkness. For him, the age after Roman emperors embraced Christianity was an age of decay and obscurity, and the pagan era, one of glory and light.¹⁶

The classical era which so inspired him had been an age of inquiry and research, the pre-Christian centuries having produced great minds, inventions, and insights into science, astronomy, philosophy and much besides which shaped ancient society. Archimedes, Euclid, Aristotle, Plato, Pythagoras and Thales were just a few of those who had thrived in an atmosphere charged with inquiry.¹⁷ Under Petrarch’s influence and that of his successors, Florence had become captivated by the classical cultures of the Mediterranean basin, in particular those of Greece, Egypt

12 Valla’s skilful exposure was a triumph of Humanist research, argument and interpretation.

13 *The Donation of Pippin* and the document known as *The Forged Decretals* also contributed to the undermining of papal legitimacy. See Young, *The Medici*, p.259.

14 Sculpted images on the façades of buildings depicting devils devouring deviants had been commonplace since early medieval times. The façades of the cathedrals in Ferrara (1135) and Orvieto (1355) are examples.

15 Francesco Petrarca, *Letters*, 1372.

16 Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renaissances in Western Art*, 1970, p.11.

17 Ancient Alexandria was the epicentre of the intellectual world with a manuscript collection in its library said to be in the order of 400,000 scrolls. Its accidental burning by Julius Caesar and its destruction in the sixth century by the Turks were among the greatest tragedies in the history of knowledge.

and Rome. The Greeks, disillusioned with the unlikely stories surrounding their own gods, had sought more satisfying answers, and philosophy as a discipline was born. They put the physical, spiritual and intellectual abilities of the individual above all other considerations. Truth became their quest, and understanding ‘The Good’ and what it required of them, their goal. Individual responsibility was valued, as were individuals who could free themselves from the shackles of superstition and the ambitions of those who would control by fear. Classical architecture reflected this dignified Being, and artists celebrated his divine nature, recognised by philosophers since Plato. Erasmus (1469-1536) would suggest that the epithet ‘Saint’ should be attributed to Socrates and Cicero.¹⁸ Such ideas flourished among enlightened Florentines, for the ancient perceptions appealed, addressing unspoken concerns.

Cosimo de’Medici’s palace on Via Larga became a magnet for the Humanists.¹⁹ Under his influence, Humanism, which took man to be the measure of all things and had heretofore concerned itself with the individual’s responsibility to his society, altered course to emphasise the reconciliation of the Christian faith with the Hermetic religion of pre-Christian times. In seeking to make Italy’s classical past both relevant and enlightening, they embraced new concepts of religion, culture and society derived from the pre-Christian age. For the Medici circle, the two most influential figures were Hermes-Mercurius, who represented the divine word, and Plato, the last in a line of sages to pass on the torch of ancient wisdom. The members of this erudite group were nonetheless devout Christians who did not contemplate a challenge to the established religion. On the contrary, they sought to strengthen it, rendering it less vulnerable to a rising chorus of detractors.

Images and ideas spread rapidly, encompassing all fields of cultural activity. By the 1400s, and most notably its second half which is our focus, the infectious, empowering message had spread far beyond Florence’s refined salons. ‘From Italy it quickly advanced and became the breath of life for all the most instructed minds in Europe.’²⁰ Of this spreading interest, Seznec wrote: ‘The ancient poets were by this time in every hand. The Humanists drew their nourishment from Virgil and Ovid, profane

18 Stephen Kreis, ‘The Medieval Synthesis and the Discovery of Man’ (lecture), 2009.

19 Humanists generally favoured political neutrality as they had done in the era of Petrarch (1304-74) when the focus was on the discovery and translation of ancient manuscripts such as Plato’s *Republic*, which was translated from Greek into Latin by Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481).

20 Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1990, p.121.

bibles that they knew by heart.²¹ They sought to infuse their society with the perennial wisdom of the ancients, and through art seed its essence.²²

An Inspiring Horizon

Renaissance scholars looked to the horizon with an optimism born of their own liberation of mind and to a world of renewed possibilities with man at the helm. The ancient Pantheon, whose gods were like men, with strengths and very human passions, descended once again into a Christian society to inspire artists, expand horizons and grace the city's palaces and gardens.

A stranger unfamiliar with the city might have been misled into believing that the citizenry had abandoned their faith in favour of the ancient deities, given the profusion of ancient and *all'antica* art. However, many Florentines saw no conflict between their own essential beliefs and philosophical traditions, which were widely accepted as pointing to the Christian ideal that they perceived as an evolution from a much more ancient tradition.

The educated elite embraced this patrimony with pride and passion. Ancient gods, heroes and muses appeared in pageants and plays, and artists were commissioned to embellish domestic surroundings, fountains, statues or pieces of furniture with representations of pagan subject matter. Expressions of the classical past presented themselves in many forms. It had long been the fashion for rulers and leading citizens to be buried in re-used ancient sarcophagi or in wall tombs that used a combination of ancient and Christian motifs.

In 1464 a group of painters including Mantegna explored Roman ruins at Lake Garda. So intoxicated were they by the classical mood that they called each other by classical names and Roman titles, wore laurel wreaths on their heads and rowed on the lake singing to the accompaniment of Orphic lutes.²³ This acceptance of the classical within a Christian society is not difficult to understand given the pride which citizens felt in their ancient heritage. For the more erudite, little seemed to separate them from the famous men of classical antiquity. Petrarch wrote a letter to Cicero as if the Roman statesman had been living in a different city rather than a different era. Classical manuscripts were regarded as friends: Machiavelli dressed in his finest clothes to read them.

²¹ Sez nec, *op. cit.*, p.219.

²² Voss, Introduction to *Marsilio Ficino*, 2006.

²³ Godwin, *op. cit.*, pp.1-13.

UNDER THE GUISE OF SPRING



Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem*, Palazzo Medici-Ricardi, Florence, 1459-61.

Lorenzo the Magnificent leads on a white charger. Cosimo (*il Vecchio*) de' Medici, like another famous person, enters on a donkey. This painting provided a pretext to paint many famous personages attracted to Florence by Cosimo from Ferrara for the 1439-40 Council of Florence.

The Academy and Ancient Truths

The coming together of a tightly knit group of intellectuals to form an ‘academy’ had its beginnings in discussions between Cosimo de’Medici the Elder, under whom Florence had become an artistic and intellectual powerhouse, and George Gemistos who arrived from Byzantium in 1437 as an emissary to the Council of Ferrara (1438-9). The Council sought to resolve the differences between the Eastern and Western churches.²⁴ Gemistos was the foremost thinker of the last decades of Byzantium. In 1453 the city fell – but not before many precious documents were dispatched to Florence. His sea voyage was to prove fortuitous, because he travelled in the company of one of the most brilliant minds of the age, Cardinal Nicholas of Cues or Cusanus.²⁵ On arrival in Florence, Gemistos expounded to Cosimo de’Medici the tenets of an ancient pre-Christian religion in which he perceived universal and ‘perennial truths’ known since the dawn of man’s capacity to wonder.²⁶ These truths were compatible with Christianity because its Jewish founder held them inviolable. Cosimo was enthralled. Burckhardt acknowledged that ‘To Cosimo de’Medici belongs the special glory of recognising in the Platonic philosophy the fairest flower of the ancient world of thought.’²⁷

24 This renewed urgency to reconcile differences was largely driven by the imminence of a Turkish invasion of Constantinople. Ferrara had been favoured with an influx of theologians, poets and philosophers, but an outbreak of plague there gave Cosimo an opportunity. Conscious of the prestige of hosting such an event, he offered Florence as an alternative venue. The change of location had a lasting effect on the intellectual development and consequent reputation of his city.

25 It would be two hundred years before the scientific discoveries of Copernicus and Kepler would fully validate much of what he maintained as true.

26 The Perennial Philosophy, also called *Philosophia Perennis* or *Prisca Theologia*. See Voss, Part 2, p.41 (Thesis, 1992), Gemistos and Cosimo.

27 Burckhardt, *op. cit.*, p.145.



The concepts were revolutionary. Central among them was the reconciliation of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, countering their evolution along parallel and opposing tracks. Twenty years later they were inspired by an antique document, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, believed to have been written by the Egyptian sage Hermes ‘Trismegistus’ (meaning the thrice greatest, god, priest and king) at the time of Moses. Its content was interpreted as confirming a single primal source of revelation and it became their basis for the pursuit of the reconciliation of which Gemistos had spoken. In 1463 Marsilio Ficino, who from that time led the Medici Platonic Academy, saw himself as the last in the line of sages and philosophers, starting with Hermes (known to the Egyptians as Thoth; Hermes-Mercurius to the Renaissance), followed over time by Zarathustra, Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato, each of whom relayed the tenets of the ancient religion naturally inherent in the human species.

Florence had become a hothouse of intellectual pursuits and the fall of Athens, five years after Constantinople, added to the intake of learned men and Greek culture. Those arriving from Byzantium brought with them cortèges of huge black slaves, exotic costumes and extraordinary animals, and also the religious inheritance of the antique world. With the Turks at their backs, they were drawn to Medicean Florence, a community which welcomed them with alacrity.

Following the return of the papacy from Avignon, fifteenth-century Rome had to re-establish itself as an important centre for artists and intellectuals.²⁸ Papal claims to temporal power however, and the employing of mercenary armies to expand the Papal States, fed the impatience of the Humanists for a return to a more christian Christianity. Sez nec writes: ‘In the light of the new learnings, the Humanists discovered in mythology

28 The transfer of the papal court to Avignon in 1309 had an immediate negative impact as Rome lost its most important employer. Rome, once an opulent city with a million people, packed with ambassadors and dignatories from all over the known world, had only 17,000 inhabitants by 1400 and was a wasteland, dangerous and lawless. Goats grazed among the ruins of the Forum as cardinals and their retinues picked their way through its toppled columns and fallen statues (see Godwin). Meanwhile, Florence had been rapidly transforming itself, growing in size and reputation as an artistic, commercial and intellectual powerhouse. With the return of the popes from Avignon, Papal authority was reasserted over a rising tide of heresies and Florentine artists were greatly in demand to promote the pope’s message. See Welch, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, p.241.

INTRODUCTION

something other than and much greater than a concealed morality: they discovered religious teaching – the Christian doctrine itself.²⁹

The thing itself, *res ipsa*, which is now called the Christian religion, was with the ancients [*erat apud antiquos*] and it was with the human race from the beginning to the time when Christ appeared in the flesh: from then on the true religion, which already existed, began to be called the Christian. (Augustine, 354-430 AD)³⁰

With the door thus ajar, the light of a pagan sun warmed the cold grey flagstones when they knelt. These ancient sources were accepted by the Church Fathers as presaging the coming of the new religion and were welcomed as its historical justification.³¹ In the Renaissance, pagan mythology became a vehicle for the expression of ancient concepts which were progressively Christianised. André Chastel, on the subject of using one subject to symbolise another, wrote, ‘The use of double meanings became a common practice, as natural in the handling of images as the devising of iconographic programmes’³² Thus in the Renaissance a visual language expressive of a new manner of thinking served to span concepts and epochs. Fuelled by confirming interpretations of fable and mythology, the line between the two became indistinct to the point that ‘Christian dogma no longer seemed acceptable in anything other than an allegorical sense.’³³ Christian and Platonic sources became interchangeable. When we come to decipher the figures in *La Primavera*, in particular the pagan Venus who dominates it, this point will emerge as central.

Some progress in understanding *La Primavera* has been made, though we have no commissioning document or confirmed patron (see Appendix 2, page 173). One has to rely on a multitude of sources including the private correspondence of the scions of the Medici family, speeches, tax records, marriage documents, commercial contracts, the visual language of the time, religious symbolism, marriage culture, and the everyday metaphors in the writings of the Medici circle.

This inquiry will endeavour to show that *La Primavera* emerged from the circle around the owner and painter at a time charged with a mission for religious fusion validated by revelations in the rediscovered works of Hermes-Mercurius. The personages of Venus, Hermes and the esoteric

29 Seznec, *op. cit.*, p.98.

30 *Retractationes*, I, 13.3.

31 Snow-Smith, *The Primavera of Sandro Botticelli: A Neoplatonic Interpretation*, 1993, p.5.

32 Chastel, *Art Ideas History*, 1969, p.64.

33 Seznec, *op. cit.*, p.99.

Graces, and theories of love and immortality, were being eagerly absorbed and had become subjects for intense and spontaneous everyday interchange.³⁴

La Primavera was painted at a time when leadership in learning, art patronage, education and most aspects of society were already long in transition. Power continued to shift from the Church to an educated laity whose prosperity and consequent erudition and enlightenment were eclipsing the old hierarchy.

During the early 1480s, the time of *La Primavera*, the atmosphere in Florence was still largely undisturbed by religious extremism. *Le fin de siècle* would change all that. Centuries of tragic experience forged in the flames of intolerance continued to validate the need for prudence.

This long-established tradition of veiling the esoteric against intolerance stood protectively between *La Primavera*, which was intended only for the eyes of a young Medici and his close associates, and a general audience they termed profane.

The allegorical visual language in *La Primavera* arose from this prudent tradition. In the closing decade of the fifteenth century, apocalyptic sermons culminated in the purifying bonfires of the Dominican friar Savonarola. These purgings of vanities consumed works by great masters. After more than five hundred years, during which time works of art have drawn the attention of zealots of all stripes, this extraordinary and beautiful painting has preserved its mystical treasure under the guise of spring.

34 The concept of immortality was confirmed at the Lateran Council of 1513, fourteen years after the death of Ficino, presumably to counter the views of detractors such as Pomponazzi. See P.O. Kristeller, *The Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, p.106.

Interpretations



Hermes-
Mercurius

The Three Graces

Venus and
Cupid

Flora, Chloris and Zephyr

IT WILL BE SHOWN that the four distinctly different scenes above, each sufficiently complete to be separate paintings, appear to have little connection on a purely visual level. Unified by flowers, trees and a shared mystical ambience, they have however an undeniable visual harmony. When the meaning of each emerges, we will see the four scenes unite seamlessly and unambiguously to show us what Lorenzo *Minore* would have seen and understood.