

The Symbolism of the Marsh Plant, *Typha latifolia*, in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*

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Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* continues to serve as an iconographic enigma and remains an enduring subject of scholarly analysis concerning the significance of mythological art and its symbolism during the Italian Renaissance. Therefore, it is particularly noteworthy to examine further the symbolic elements embedded within the imagery. This essay focuses on a specific component in the landscape of *The Birth of Venus*—the marsh plant on the riverbank, commonly known as cattail in English, *tifa* or *stiancia* in Italian, and *Typha latifolia* in Latin. Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, executed between 1485 and 1490, is a tempera on canvas with gesso and gold applications. It was commissioned with specific aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual objectives and was intended to be displayed in a private chamber for personal viewing by members of the Medici family. Situated initially within the Medicean Villa at Castello, it has been exhibited at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence since 1815. This mythological painting exemplifies the Italian Renaissance principles of both physical and metaphysical humanism, visualized in a fusion of pagan and Christian iconography and iconology, incorporating symbolism that engages with antiquity and classical mythology. It also incorporates Italian Renaissance Neoplatonic philosophy, reflects Renaissance love poetry, demonstrates inventive patronage, and embodies spirituality directed towards a higher purpose.

Keywords: Antiquity, humanism, mythology, Italian Neoplatonism, Italian Renaissance poetry, Botticelli, Medici, symbolism, marsh plant, cattails

In *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori et architettori*, Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), the Florentine artist and art historian, enthusiastically commented on Botticelli in his *vita*, noting that he was a “pleasant man with a great sense of humor,” “devoted heart and soul to art,” “of a fine inquired mind,” “executing many beautiful paintings in coloring, drawing, and composition, a prodigy of judgment,” “having achieved great fame and reputation, which led to his being summoned to Rome to work for Pope Sixtus IV in the Sistine Chapel.”¹ Furthermore, Vasari observed that when artists like Botticelli visited Rome, they studied ancient art, which inspired them to observe nature more closely. Botticelli's artistic prowess exemplifies a mastery of nature,

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¹ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*, 1550–1568, eds Rossana Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, 6 vols (Florence: Sansoni, 1971–1986), 3, pp. 511–23. Hereafter as BB-Vasari.

characterized by meticulous observation and replication of the natural environment. He underscored the significant concept that the Italian Renaissance advanced primarily due to artists' emphasis on tangible aspects of nature.

Historically, Botticelli's painting has been titled *The Birth of Venus*, a designation originating from Vasari's description upon viewing it (Figure 1). In 1550, Vasari wrote in the *vita* of Botticelli that "[he] painted numerous female nudes, among which two paintings are housed at Castello, the villa of Duke Cosimo. One of these depicts the birth of Venus [or Venus being born], with [accompanied by] Cupids whose breezes and winds transport her to the earthly realm..." ("Fece ...femmine ignude assai, delle quali oggi ancora a Castello, villa del duca Cosimo, sono due quadri figurati l'uno Venere che nasce, e quelle aure e venti che la fanno venire a terra con gli Amorini...").² Recently, scholars have interpreted Vasari's description as suggesting Venus's celestial arrival on Earth, focusing less on her birth.³

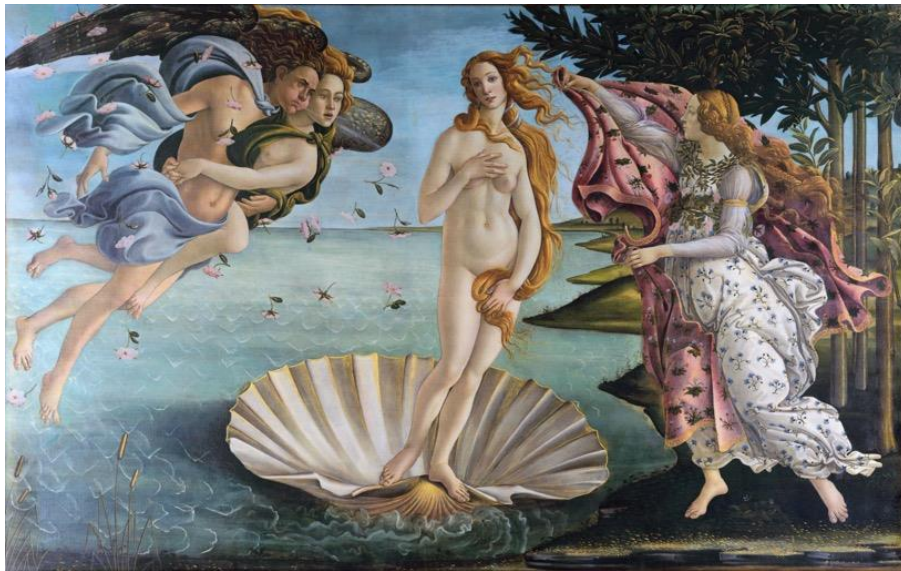


Figure 1. Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1485/1490, tempera with gesso and gold on canvas. Galleria degli Uffizi Florence. Public domain.

Most scholars, in their efforts to understand the visualization of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, have examined various dimensions, including cultural, mythological, political, moral, philosophical, and poetic aspects. This author does not intend to address issues related to the title, date, provenance, or patronage of the

² BB-Vasari, 3, p. 513, my translation.

³ Cristina Acidini Luchinat, *Botticelli: Allegorie mitologiche* (Milan: Electa, 2001), pp. 109–14, provides an extensive bibliography concerning the painting and presents an elaborate discussion of Botticelli's materials and technical applications, which were uncovered following its cleaning between 1986 and 1987, including his use of gesso and gold materials. Additionally, see Frank Zöllner, *Botticelli: Images of Love and Spring* (Munich: Prestel, 1998), pp. 82–86, regarding the interrogation of art historical views and interpretation of the scene as Venus's arrival at Cyprus. Both sources reaffirm Mirella Levi D'Ancona's foundational work, *Due Quadri del Botticelli Esseguiti per Nascite di Casa Medici* (Florence: Olschki, 1992). Her recent archival discoveries and observations, including those made before and during cleaning, provide valuable insights into the iconography and interpretation, especially of *The Birth of Venus*, pp. 51–63.

painting, or review the various scholarly interpretations of its complex symbolism.⁴ This study focused solely on the meaning of one element in the painting: the imagery of cattails (*Typha latifolia*) on the riverbank at the edge of the painting.

Description of the Birth of Venus

Botticelli's scene, enhanced through the use of coloration and gold leaf on its surface, is distinguished by gold accents and springtime hues, including celestial blues, soft pinks, golden yellows, and warm greens. This combination accentuates both the significance of the Spring event and the richness of the painting's physical presence (Figure 1).

A brief description of the scene in the painting helps focus on the aquatic landscape in the lower part of the image, the riverbank. In an early spring morning with a celestial blue sky, in an extended blue-green seascape, a beautiful nude female figure journeys—she is the personification of the goddess of Beauty, Fertility, and Love, Venus. She rides atop a scalloped seashell from the sea or ocean depths, where she was born, to reach terrestrial land. Two winged figures, cloaked in veils, are floating gently above her. These mythical Winds are Zephyr and Aura. They warmly embrace each other, providing a gentle breeze with their breath to guide the goddess on her journey.

On the earthly soil dotted with blooming trees, especially orange trees laden with white blossoms, an elegantly dressed and disclad figure prepares to greet the goddess. This is Horae, goddess of the Seasons and Time. She holds a large pink mantle adorned with daisies, symbolizing the benevolence of Spring—a remarkable present from the terrestrial realm conveyed to the goddess's celestial and aquatic realms.

Horae, an earthly messenger filled with life, is dressed in an outfit adorned with blue cornflower clusters. Her waist is adorned with pink roses and rose branches, and her necklace is crafted and encircled by a myrtle wreath that blends with the natural surroundings. The whistling of the wind echoes through swaying tree branches, and the breeze sets the gifted mantle floating and the messenger's garments fluttering.

This natural scene is rich with spring blossoms and flora, featuring pink roses that drift enchantingly from the sky toward the muse of Beauty. During their voyage, the roses accompany the mythical Winds—Zephyr and Aura—ultimately pausing to embellish the torso of Horae, the personification of the season of spring. On the fertile land, orange trees flourish, reminiscent of *Citrus aurantium* or *Citrus medica*, cultivated within the Medicean horticultural areas and gardens.⁵ Wild violet plants bloom in the earthly soil, and riverbank cattails (*Typha latifolia*) grow alongside, showcasing the region's diverse native flora during the spring season.

⁴ For an extensive bibliography on this subject, see Ronald Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 2 vols (London: Paul Elek, 1978; and New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), and citations in note 3 above. For recent studies, see the bibliography in Charles R. Mack, "Botticelli's *Venus*: Antique Allusions and Medicean Propaganda," *EIRC* 28:2 (Winter 2002), pp. 207–37; Jane C. Long, "Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* as Wedding Painting," *Aurora* 9 (2008), pp. 1–27; Stefano Zuffi, *Botticelli: La Nascita di Venere* (Milan: 24 Ore Cultura, 2011); Charles Burroughs, "Talking with goddesses: Ovid's *Fasti* and Botticelli's *Primavera*," *Word and Image* 28 (2012), pp. 71–83; Charles Burroughs, "Botticelli's Stone. Giorgio Vasari, The Tradition of Storytelling, and the Matter of Stone," *Artibus et Historiae*, 76 (2017), pp. 297–325; Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Botticelli's *Minerva and the Centaur*: Artistic and Metaphysical Conceits," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies*, 8:4 (April 2020), pp. 187–216; Frederic Chordá, "Neoplatonic Nature of Love: Marsilio Ficino's Sources for Origin of the Universe and the Elements," *Paragone Past and Present* (BRILL), 5.1 (2024), pp. 1–73; and Frederic Chordá *La Venus de Botticelli: Entre lo mundano y lo ideal* (Madrid: Archivos Vola, 2025).

⁵ Paola Maresca, *Giardini e delizie: Segreti, allegorie, metafore e antichi simbolismi* (Florence: Pontecorboli, 2009), pp. 43–45, on the Renaissance myth of the garden of Venus and symbolism of the Garden at Villa Castello; and D'Ancona, *Due Quadri del Botticelli*, pp. 56–57; Mirella Levi D'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting* (Florence: Olschki, 1977), for the identification and meanings of the plants in Botticelli's painting.

Within the natural phenomena of the physical world on the realm of Earth, there is a celebration of the birth, arrival, and participation of this beautiful divine gift. In this moment, the goddess has paused at the seashore, standing contrapposto on a scallop shell, an ancient symbol of cosmic water and life. She was created from the seed, semen, or male organ of Uranus, the god of the Sky, which fell into the sea. Metaphorically, this discarded seed was captured in the mollusk's mantle of a scalloped shell, forming the rarity of a mythical pearl. The cosmic realm, formed by natural elements of air and water, created a remarkable invisible transformation from a seed to a pearl to a *frutto di mare*, now personified as Venus.

From this point onward, the previously concealed shell housing the treasure opens, engaging in the motion and flow of water, thereby exposing within the shell's mantle the genesis of the *frutto di mare*. Unlike the Winds and Horae, Venus is the only figure that is not floating either in the air or on the ground; she stands. At this still moment, referred to today as Lessing's pregnant moment⁶ and Bergson's suspended moment in time,⁷ Venus's feet now rest on the beak or edge of a shell, the umbo, as she prepares to step onto the earth, magically uniting air, water, and land.

Some Literary Source

In brief, most scholars proposed that the mythical narrative of the *Birth of Venus* is based on the Venus-Isis passage of Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2:27) and *Fasti* (V:217), poems of Lucretius in *Venus Genetrix* and in *De rerum natura*; the ancient anonymous poem of *Pirvigilium Veneris*; Poliziano's *Stanze*, influenced by the *Homeric Hymns*, which describe the lost painting *Venus Anadyomene* by Apelles; Ficino's comment on *Philebus*; Pico's comments on *Canzone d'Amore* by Benivieni. These sources are indirectly related to Hesiod's account of Venus's birth and her journey to Cythera and Cyprus in the *Theogony* (730–700 BCE) in lines 188–206.⁸

Traditionally, it is acknowledged that the painting illustrates this passage in Hesiod's *Theogony*:

When Cronos (also known as Saturn) severed the members of Uranus with flint, he cast them from the mainland into the vast sea, where they floated for a long time on the open waters. A circle of white foam formed from the immortal flesh, and inside it, a maiden was born. Her first journey took her to Cythera, then to the sea-swept island of Cyprus, where she landed as a humble and beautiful goddess. Grass grew around her light, slender feet, and she was named Aphrodite by both gods and humans. Eros accompanied her, and the handsome Himeros attended her at her birth and when she became one of the immortal gods.

As the tradition states again, Poliziano's *Stanze* (99–103) reinterprets Hesiod's passage on the birth of Venus that is depicted in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*.

In the stormy Aegean, in the lap of Thetis
One sees the genital trunk received
Under the influence of the different planets,

⁶ Dabney Townsend, "The comparison of painting and poetry. Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim (1729–81)," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Milton Park, Oxfordshire: Taylor and Francis, 1998), Chapter 2. Doi:10.4324/9780415249126-M029-1
<https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/biographical/lessing-gotthold-ephraim-1729-81/v-1/sections/the-comparison-of-painting-and-poetry>.

⁷ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988), pp. 17 and 30.

⁸ For the bibliography on all these sources, repeated several times, see notes 3 and 4 in this essay.

Wanders through the waves rolled up by white foam:
And inside it was born by vague and pleasant acts
A young virgin without a human face,
By lustful Zephyrs, she is pushed ashore
She travels on a shell, and the sky is pleased.

Real is the foam and real is the sea, you would say,
And real is the shell and real is the wind-gods blowing:
In Venus's eyes, you will see thunderbolts.
And the sky laughing around her and the elements:
Horae dressed in white steps into the land;
The breeze ripples her soft and shining hair.
Not one, no different from them she is,
As she seems to be a proper sister, she becomes.

You could swear that from the waves she emerges,
The goddess pressed with her right hand her hair,
And with the other covers her sweet breasts;
She stands on holy and divine feet,
Lowers and grass cover the sand.
Then, with playful and strange looks
From three nymphs at the edge, she was received
and covered with a starry cloak.

Another group of historians interprets Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* through moral or philosophical lenses, linking the painting's significance to Ficino's Neoplatonism. Specifically, the painting depicts Venus Celeste in line with Ficino's concept of the Platonic *Twin Venuses*—Venus Celeste and Venus Humanitas. Hence, the theme of the Birth of Venus reiterates the meaning of Botticelli's *Primavera* (Venus-Humanitas or civilization) and enhances its symbolism by illustrating in *The Birth of Venus* the emergence of Venus-Humanitas or a new civilization.⁹ Another view, the floral interpretation, has been well documented by D'Ancona.¹⁰

Furthermore, the classical and Italian Renaissance artistic sources concerning Botticelli's composition of *The Birth of Venus* have been extensively examined by numerous art historians, including Cecchi, Lightbown, and Luchinat, and others who have studied this theme.¹¹

Symbolism of the Cattail or *Typha Latifolia*

In the *Due Quadri del Botticelli Esseguiti per Nascite di Casa Medici*, Mirella Levi D'Ancona first elucidated the significant symbolism of the cattail (*Typha latifolia*), known in Italian as *tifa* or *stiancia*, located in the left-hand corner of the painting. Subsequent art historians who discussed Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* only

⁹ Frederic Chordá "Neoplatonic Nature of Love: Marsilio Ficino's Sources for Origin of the Universe and the Elements," *Paragone Past and Present* (BRILL), 5.1 (2024), pp. 1–47; and Frederic Chordá *La Venus de Botticelli: Entre lo mundano y lo ideal* (Madrid: Archivos Vola, 2025), for a comprehensive bibliography on Botticelli's and Ficino's Neoplatonism on Platonic Twin Venuses; See also, Marieke J. E. Van den Doel, *Ficino and Fantasy: Imagination in Renaissance Art and Theory from Botticelli to Michelangelo* (Leiden: BRILL, 2022), pp. 3–13; 131–136; and Berthold Hub and Sergius Koderka, eds, *Iconology, Neoplatonism, and the Arts in the Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 141–47.

¹⁰ D'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance*, *passim*.

¹¹ Ronald Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 2 vols (London: Paul Elke, 1978); Cristina Acidi Luchinat, *Botticelli: Allegorie mitologiche* (Milan: Electa, 2001); and Alessandro Cecchi, *Botticelli* (Milan: Ore Cultura, 2005).

briefly acknowledged this interpretation, if at all. However, some have also made mistakes regarding plant etymology, genus, and identification.¹²

The name of the marsh plant, cattail (*Typha latifolia*), dates to the writings of Greek botanist Theophrastus (372–287 BCE). In his work, *Enquiry into Plants*, he discussed the origin and characteristics of cattails, calling them “tiphe” (τῖφη).¹³ The Italian name for cattail is derived from the Greek and Latin, hence *tifa*, not *arundo*, which is a generic name for reeds and not specific to the Florentine riverbank area.¹⁴

The cattail, as a marsh plant or river aquatic plant, is commonly found on the riverbanks of Florence (Tuscany), the river Po (Padua), and other Italian areas (compare Figure 2 and 3).¹⁵ Cattails are of the genus family of *Typha latifolia*, not to be confused with bulrushes, which belong to the genus *Scirpus* species of the family of *Cyperaceae*.¹⁶

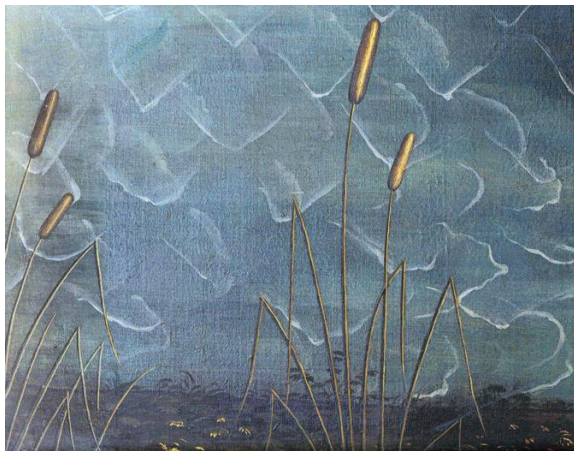


Figure 2. Botticelli, Cattails, det., *The Birth of Venus*, 1485/1490, tempera with gesso and gold on canvas. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Public domain.



Figure 3. Florentine cattails along the river. Photograph. Public domain.

Upon further analysis of the cattail, it is observed to be a perennial herbaceous plant that grows in marshes along riverbanks, typically blooming in late spring or early summer. It consists of two parts: a cluster of green foliage and a central stem. The elongated, slender stem comprises two sections: a substantial, brown, cylindrical

¹² Zölner, *Botticelli: Images of Love and Spring*, p. 94, while Luchinat, *Botticelli: Allegorie mitologiche*, p. 112, briefly refers to the Italian word *tife* (*canne*) for cattails.

¹³ Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 136; and Daniel F. Austin, “Sacred Connection with Cat-Tail (*Typha*, *Typhaceae*)—Dragon, water-serpent, and reed maces,” *Ethnobotany Research and Applications* 5 (2007), pp. 273–303, esp. 275 on the name’s origin. <https://ethnobotanyjournal.org/index.php/era/article/view/137>.

¹⁴ L. Lastrucci, F. Paci, and M. Raffaelli, “The wetland vegetation of the Natural Reserves and neighbouring stretches of the Arno River in the Arezzo province (Tuscany, Central Italy),” *Fitosociologia*, 47(1) (2010) pp. 31–61, esp. 37.

¹⁵ Steven I. Apfelbaum, “Cattail (*Typha* spp.) Management,” *Natural Areas Journal* 5 (3), pp. 1–16, with an extensive bibliography on the subject. https://www.naturalareas.org/docs/10NAJ0503_9-17.pdf; J.B. Grace and R.G. Wetzel, “Phenotypic and genotypic components of growth and reproduction in *Typha latifolia*: Experimental studies in marshes of differing successional maturity,” *Ecology* 62 (3) (1981), pp. 699–801; and J. B. Grace and R. G. Wetzel, “Variations in growth and reproduction within populations of two rhizomatous plant species: *Typha latifolia* and *Typha angustifolia*,” *Oecologia* 53 (1982), pp. 258–63.

¹⁶ R. R. Yeo, “Life History of Common Cattail,” *Weeds*, 12(4) (October 1964), pp. 282–88.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/4040755> (reprint in Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), with an extensive bibliography on the subject.

segment with a spongy texture, regarded as the female component, and a smaller, tassel-like segment at the apex, recognized as the male counterpart. In the cattail's natural reproductive cycle, the male part separates from the female to start pollination. This moment marks the release of male seeds or pollen, which is a yellow powder produced by the plant. The wind easily disperses these small, light, and airy seeds that travel down to the female part of the plant. Hence, the female area is fertilized by the male seed, transforming it into a brown, cylindrical shape which will eventually burst open to release white, fluffy seeds that the wind will carry away to continue the pollination process.¹⁷

Interestingly, in the painting, Botticelli depicted only the female part of the cattail, a brown cylindrical shape, suggesting that the male part broke off and sank into the water or scattered in the air. Meanwhile, blown by the wind, yellow seeds drift along the riverbank. Botticelli portrayed these as diminutive seeds, depicted by golden short, curved lines resembling commas, which drift from the cattail plants along the riverbank into the terrestrial soil (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Botticelli, Riverbank with cattails' pollination, det. *The Birth of Venus*, 1485/1490, tempera with gesso and gold on canvas. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Public domain.

Botticelli also drew a parallel between the cylindrical shape of the female part of the cattail, which he depicted in gold, and the tall, elongated form of Venus decorated in gold tints. Therefore, Botticelli shifts from emphasizing the physical details to exploring the metaphysical symbolism of natural and mythical fertilization or pollination present in both female elements—cattail and Venus.

Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* illustrates the natural convergence of salt water from the ocean or sea with fresh water from a river, resulting in the formation of an estuary, a tidal inlet of the sea. "This mixture fosters a prosperous and fertile environment in marshes."¹⁸ In his study of the four elements depicted in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, Frederic Chordá noted that "the water of the sea, besides being rippled by Air, forms foam together next to Venus in the terms described by Marsilio Ficino, in *Mercurii Trismegisti Liber de Potestate & Sapientia Dei, cui titulus Pimander*," and that "water presents itself in a dual and contradictory manner: a large body in the salt seawater, and a narrow current of fresh water on the Earth."¹⁹

Ingeniously, Botticelli has depicted another parallel moment within the physical realm. The lower part of the painting shows a natural estuary where the turbulent, cold waves of seawater are adjusting to their encounter with the warm river current and terrestrial ground. Venus, too, has paused. She stands still on the shell, the realm of

¹⁷ Jordan E. Ahee, Wendy E. Van Drunen, and Marcel E. Dorken, "Analysis of pollination neighbourhood size using spatial analysis of pollen and seed production in broadleaf cattail (*Typha latifolia*)," *Botany*, 93(2) (2014), pp. 91–100. DOI:10.1139/cjb-2014-0169.

¹⁸ D. S. McLusky and M. Elliott, *The Estuarine Ecosystem: Ecology, Threats and Management* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), Introduction and Chapter on Life in Estuaries.

¹⁹ Chordá "The Neoplatonism of Marsilio Ficino in *The Birth of Venus* by Botticelli," pp. 25 and 26, citing Marsilio Ficino, *Mercurii Trismegisti Liber de Potestate & Sapientia Dei, cui titulus Pimander*, in Brian Copenhaver (ed. and trans.), *Hermetica, The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 53; and Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 2 vols (Basel: Officina Henricpetrina, 1576) (facs. repr, Turin: Bottega D'Erasmus, 1962), 2, p. 1856. See also, Van den Doel, *Ficino and Fantasy*, pp. 3–13; 131–136.

cold water, before stepping onto the land, the realm of the warm water of the riverbank, where the cattails also stand. Thus, Horae eagerly welcomes the precious gift from the sea, the *frutto di mare* (Venus), onto the land, along with the cattails by the riverbank. Botticelli depicted them in the far-left corner of the painting as the first to observe the transformation in the sea. They serve as the initial natural elements that introduce the viewer to the seascape and landscape scene.

D'Ancona's other significant observation that has passed unnoticed is that, after the cleaning of the painting in 1986 and 1987, the reflection of Uranus's male member in front of the cattails was removed, a significant connection between the water, the scallop shell, and the symbolism of the cattails in art and mythology (Figure 5).²⁰ Hence, this further confirms and links the symbolism of fertility described in classical and Italian Renaissance literary sources (Hesiod's *Theogony* and Poliziano's *Stanze*). Botticelli was also inspired by another classical literary source, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which the physical transformation of deities into human, animal, or plant forms was often linked to the metaphysical symbolism of seduction and fertility. This humorous and poetic source was highly popular during the Italian Renaissance and was frequently referenced by artists and humanists.²¹



Figure 5. Botticelli, Water reflection of Uranus's male member, det., *The Birth of Venus*. Photograph before the 1986 cleaning of the painting. Bettina Wadia's *Botticelli* (Verona: Mondadori, 1968), p. 32.

²⁰ D'Ancona, *Due Quadri del Botticelli*, pp. 53, 54, and 61, Fig. 9 on Uranus's male organ and Poliziano's poem on the myth of castration; page 54 on the scalloped shell symbolism. See Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library), Book IX, p. 235, on the symbolism of the pearl and shells, DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.pliny_elder-natural_history.1938; and Michael Witzel, "Water in Mythology," *Daedalus*, 144(3) (2015), pp. 18–26, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00338.

²¹ Malcolm Bull, *The Mirror of the Gods, How Renaissance Artists Rediscovered the Pagan Gods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 7–36, esp. 36; Angela Dressen, "Botticelli's *Primavera* and Contemporary Commentaries," in Berthold Hub and Sergius Kodera, eds, *Iconology, Neoplatonism, and the Arts in the Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 141–47.

Ovid's text offers two examples that show how cattails are portrayed in mythological stories as part of the fecundity of natural formations. In *Metamorphoses* (Book 6), Ovid narrated the story of Leda and the Swan, where Jupiter, the god of the Sky, desires the beautiful Queen of Sparta, Leda. To seduce her, he transforms into a white swan swimming along the riverbank, but an eagle eagerly chases him. Seeing the distressed swan, gentle Leda offers it shelter. Jupiter then takes the opportunity to seduce her, leading to Leda laying two eggs from which Helen, Pollux, Castor, and Clytemnestra are born. Curiously, Lorenzo de' Medici, one of Botticelli's patrons, owned a Roman sarcophagus and an antique gem on this subject.²² This saga's visualization is famous in a drawing by Leonardo, *Leda and the Swan* of 1504, created with ink on paper, using black chalk, pen, and brown ink, housed at the Drawings and Prints collection of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.²³ Leonardo depicted a graceful, nude Leda kneeling by a riverbank, tenderly touching a large swan (Jupiter) and shielding her egg-newborn children with cattail foliage.

Another example in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book 1) is the tale of Pan and Syrinx—a saga of seduction and transformation. Syrinx, a lovely River nymph, pleads with her River Sisters to transform her into cattails along the River Ladon to escape seduction by Pan, the god of Nature.²⁴ She achieved her wish when Pan arrived at the riverbank. He found himself embracing a cluster of cattail foliage instead of the beautiful Syrinx.

In numerous influential texts referenced by Italian Renaissance artists and humanists, and collected by enlightened patrons such as the Medici, the symbolism of cattails possesses poetic affinity, moral significance, and associations with endurance and strength. This symbolism evolved from a hieroglyph to an emblem and then to an enduring impresa. For example, the ancient fifth-century BCE writer Horapollon Nilous compiled in *Hieroglyphica* (*Hieroglyphs*) a text about Egyptian allegorical symbols or emblems inscriptions.²⁵ Horapollon also linked wetlands to fertility and renewal because they are naturally and regularly pollinated and renewed by rain, as shown in Horapollon's Hieroglyph IV, which depicts rain in the wetlands.²⁶ The Medici acquired two copies of this manuscript, which were brought to Florence from Egypt in 1419 and in 1435 by collectors.²⁷ Andrea Alciato (1492–1550), a Milanese emblemist and lawyer, in his emblem *Insignia poetarum* (Badges of Poets) from one of the versions in *Emblemata* (1550), linked his homeland river, the Po River, and the marsh to symbolize imagination, connecting the water's flow and the swan's voice with poetic inspiration.²⁸ Alciato adopted from Ovid's *Metamorphose* (Book 2) the story of Cyncus, King of Liguria, who was transformed into a beautiful singing swan and floated in the river marshes and plains. In Alciato's *pictura*, cattails are visible along

²² Bull, *The Mirror of the Gods*, p. 167.

²³ B. H. Meyer and A. W. Glover. "Botany and art in Leonardo's *Leda and the Swan*," *Leonardo* 22 (1) (1989), pp. 75–82; for the image, see https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Leonardo_da_Vinci_-_Leda_and_the_Swan%2C_I_466_%28PK%29%2C_circa_1504-1506.jpg; Bull, *The Mirror of the Gods*, p. 170, on Ovid in the Italian Renaissance, Leonardo's *Leda and the Swan*; and Zöller, *Botticelli's Images of Love and Spring*, p. 97.

²⁴ This Ovidian saga, unlike in the Italian Renaissance, was frequently depicted in Northern Renaissance drawings and engravings in the late sixteenth century; for the image see, Dutch engraver Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617) <https://www.nga.gov/artworks/156184-pan-and-syrinx>; and <https://www.nga.gov/artworks/156184-pan-and-syrinx>, p. 18.

²⁵ Ludwig Volkman, *Hieroglyph, Emblem, and Renaissance Pictography*, trans. Robin Raybould (Leiden: BRILL, 2018), pp. xii–xiv. For an online English version of Horapollon's *Hieroglyphs*, see <https://archive.org/details/b29304775/page/n3/mode/2up>.

²⁶ Jesús Marín González de Zárate, ed., *Horapollon Hieroglyphica* (Madrid: AKAL, 1991), pp. 114–15.

²⁷ Volkman, *Hieroglyph*, p. 19, nn. 36 and 37.

²⁸ Santiago Sebastián, ed. *Alciato Emblemata* (Madrid: AKAL, 1993), p. 226. For the image see <https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A21a184>.

the riverbank, specifically the banks of the Po River. Another Italian humanist and scientist, Paolo Giovio (1483–1552), in his *Dialogo dell'impresa militari et amorose* (1559), composed an impresa that states *Flectimur non frangimur undis dom* (We bend to the waves but not break,” or “We are bent but not broken by the waves”).²⁹ The *pictura* depicts an oval cartouche containing a central image of a resilient bunch of cattails, surrounded by foliage amidst turbulent river waters and strong winds. The large scroll that follows the shape of the oval design displays the moral motto about physical and spiritual strength in adversity—hence continuing the symbolic representation of cattails as a natural symbol of water manifestation and mythical endurance.

Unlike Leonardo, our understanding of Botticelli's scientific background is limited. However, within his circle of humanistic patrons, including the Medici, he likely was aware of horticultural practices in Florence, given his involvement with their patronage. The Medicean appreciation for culture, the humanities, science—including alchemy and astrology—and their advocacy for nature, vegetation, and the cultivation of their gardens in their Florence villas are well documented.³⁰

Following Medicean scientific interests and the influence of emblematic and mythographic traditions, an intriguing rebus of letters can be seen in Botticelli's cluster of cattails (Figure 6). For example, the letter *M* (red and white colors) represents the Medici family and patronage, while *V* (blue color) stands for Venus, the goddess of Beauty, Fertility, and Love. The initial *A* (violet color) represents the Florentine River Arno, where cattails drift. Additionally, the Latin word *aurum*—meaning shining or the glow of sunrise—serves as a metaphorical allusion to the Golden Age of Medici rule in Florence.³¹ *Aurum* (also represented by the letter *A* in violet) symbolizes spiritual enlightenment and transformation within alchemical contexts. In astrology, it is associated with coloration, thus representing the sun, light, and divine power. Not coincidentally, Botticelli embellished his painting with gold highlights, inviting viewers to appreciate both the treasured nature of the art and its deeper significance. Therefore, Botticelli alluded to the fusion of beauty within the painting, reflecting wealth and creative genius.

²⁹ Paolo Giovio, *Dialogo dell'impresa militari et amorose* (Lyon: Guglielmo Roviglio, 1559), p. 64, for the image, see <https://archive.org/details/impresemilitarie00girov/page/64/mode/2up>.

³⁰ Paul Strathern, *The Medici* (New York/Cambridge: Pegasus, 2016); Paul Holberton, “Classicism and Invention: Botticelli's Mythologies in Our Time and Their Time,” in *Botticelli Past and Present*, ed. Ana DeBenedetti and Caroline Elam (London: UCL Press, 2019), pp. 53–72; Paola Maresca, *Giardini e delizie: Segreti, allegorie, metafore e antichi simbolismi* (Florence: Pontecorboli, 2009), pp. 43–45, on the Renaissance myth of the garden of Venus and symbolism of the Garden at Villa Castello; Paola Maresca, *Simboli e Segreti nei Giardini di Firenze: Storie, aneddoti, personaggi* (Florence: Pontecorboli, 2008), pp. 23–26, the Garden of Venus at the Villa Careggi, pp. 27–29, the garden's secrets of the Medici in Villa Castello.

³¹ F. W. Kent, *Lorenzo de' Medici and the Art of Magnificence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

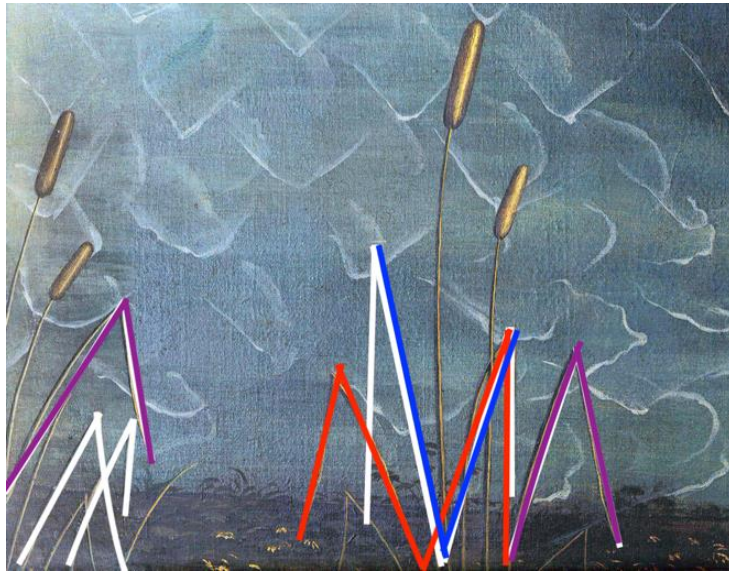


Figure 6. Cheney's Initials Rebus, M (Medici=red and white colors), V (Venus=blue color), A (Arno River and Aurum= violet color), in Botticelli's depiction of cattails in *The Birth of Venus*.

Additionally, Botticelli's poetic visualization offers the enlightened viewer a painting rich in hidden symbolism, such as the transformations of fertility in nature represented by cattails and the scallop shell. This can be compared to collecting biological color pigments from plants and stones, which are then processed into color powders. These powders are mixed with water, oil, or tempera and applied to surfaces to create paintings. This process illustrates the transformation of natural pigments from their use in the production of the final visual image. Therefore, Botticelli is symbolically transforming something from an ordinary physical material into a metaphysical idea about the creation of a form, a painting. He symbolically compares the mythical transformation of being, as described in literary sources, to that of an animal (a scallop shell) or plant (cattails), blending the physical act of creating the painting with his detailed creativity.

Conclusion

In *The Birth of Venus*, Botticelli added cattails (*Typha latifolia*) at the edge of the painting to symbolize both physical and metaphysical aspects. The cattails in the left corner represent the natural flora and the fertility of the vegetation along the banks of the River Arno in Florence. This feature signifies the abundance of Florentine aquatic plant life and its connection to the horticultural efforts of the Medici family. The placement of cattails in the freshwater is also linked to aquatic species that live in salty water, such as oysters in scalloped shells—both plant and animal symbols of natural richness.

At the metaphysical level of the painting, the aquatic and pollination formations of cattails serve as a metaphor for natural fecundity, associated with ancient myths of natural procreation, much like the formation of a pearl within the mollusk of a scallop shell. This metaphor is linked to the aquatic fertilization of the semen of Uranus, the god of the Sky, in the sea, creating Venus, the goddess of Beauty, Fertility, and Love, a parallel to the cattails' pollination and fertilization of the land.

Therefore, by incorporating classical myths, Italian Renaissance poetry, and philosophy, Botticelli utilized cattails as a symbol of flourishing Florentine horticulture and aquatic fertility, a symbol that represents the Medici family's insignia and support for environmental growth, reflecting their promotion of intellectual culture.

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