

Chloe's Crash Course

'The Birth of Venus,' c. 1486

By Chloe McGee
Arts & Life Editor

Since its creation in 1486, Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" has become one of the most recognizable images of Renaissance Art. Consciously or not, odds are you've probably seen it.

For centuries, "The Birth of Venus" has resonated with its audiences as a capstone of feminine beauty, both physically and spiritually. However, Botticelli's piece encompasses much more than its visual aesthetics. "The Birth of Venus" is an image that reflects the lasting modernity of classical antiquity and humanity's ever-changing response to art.

In fact, Botticelli's piece frequently appears in contemporary media, which include the work of famed pop culture artist Andy Warhol.

"The Birth of Venus" is not only grand in a cultural sense; its physical size is equally as massive. The dimensions are approximately 5.7 ft x 9.0 ft, which allowed Botticelli to

paint with captivating detail and depict his figures on a realistic scale.

The title is misleading as this painting is not actually of the birth of Venus—Aphrodite in Greek mythology—but rather the scene that follows.

Botticelli illustrates the newly-born Venus, Roman goddess of love, as she emerges from the ocean upon a giant scallop shell. Though she is the focal point, Venus is not the only character who appears in Botticelli's narrative.

Zephyrus, god of the west wind, is present, entangled with a young nymph who is widely accepted to be Aura, the personification of a light breeze. Together, the winged deities assist Venus to shore by the force of their breaths. Streams of wind are visible on the canvas, giving the illusion of movement to the hair and clothing of the figures on the right.

The final character in this scene is one of the three Horae, goddesses of the seasons and attendants to Venus. Her floral dress suggests that she is the Hora of Spring. She appears holding a cloak to cover Venus as she arrives.

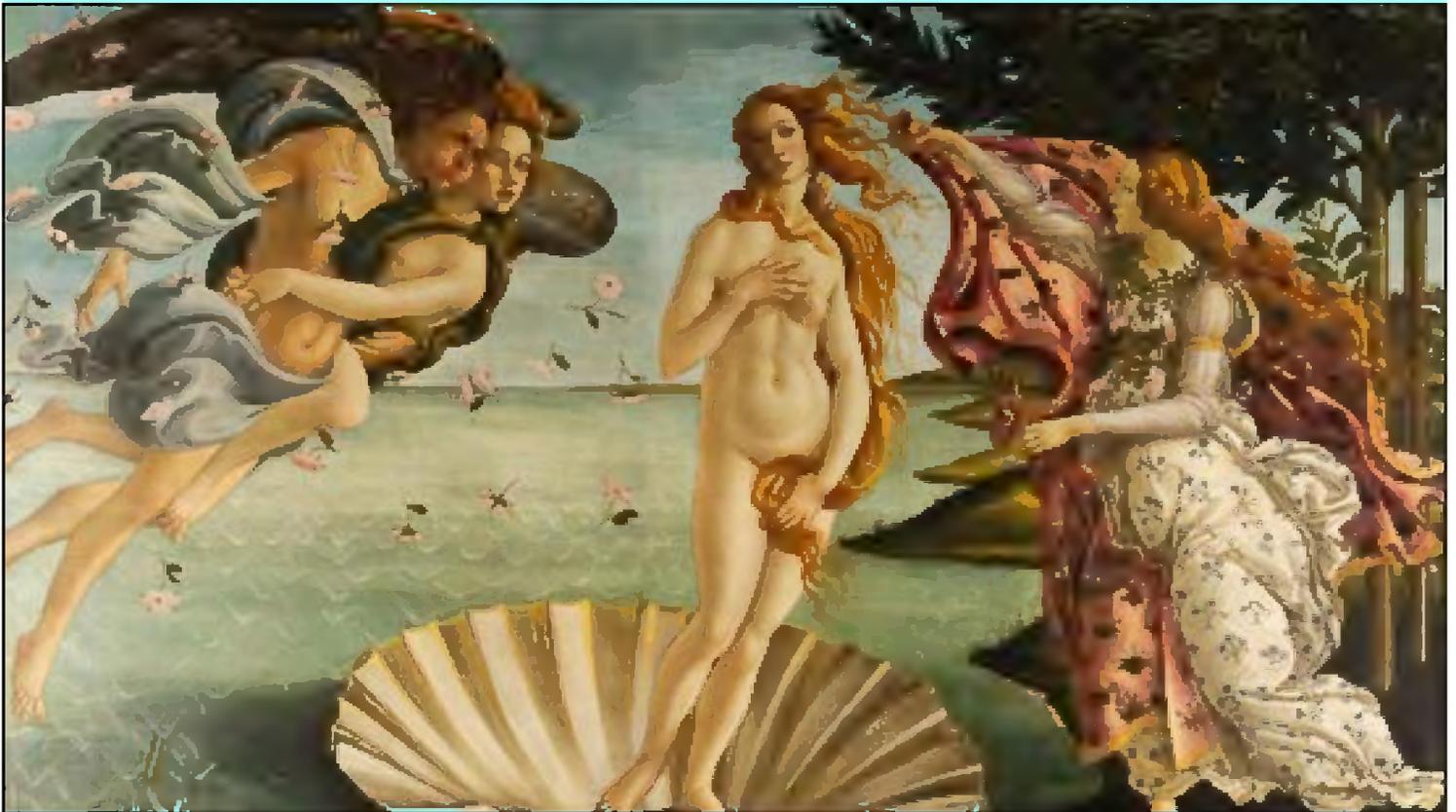
Christian interpretation often considers

"The Birth of Venus," especially in regards to its nudity, as an homage to the biblical account of Eve's creation. Whereas others speculate that Venus is a personification of the Christian Church.

"The Birth of Venus" is an imaginative image that shows little concern for realism. Rejecting contemporary ideals, Botticelli seldom gave volume and weight to his figures and rarely used perspectival depth in his landscapes. This is incredibly true for "The Birth of Venus."

Though Venus holds herself in a classical contrapposto stance, her body is not anatomically proportionate, and her weight is too shifted to feasibly stand. Like Venus, the other figures' poses and proportions are also unnatural, and none cast shadows upon the flat background.

But where Botticelli lacks in realistic quality, he makes up for in iconography, style and ultimately, his masterpiece "The Birth of Venus"—a piece that provoked enduring curiosity and reflection, transcending both time and culture.



Sandro Botticelli, "The Birth of Venus," c. 1486, tempera on canvas.