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The emergence of Neoplatonism during the Quattrocento gave to Florentine society the humanistic ideals which are now the central and defining characteristics of the period. Once again, following their absence during the Middle Ages, Greek philosophical traditions were translated, discussed, and revived during the diplomatic reign of Cosimo de' Medici and his grandson Lorenzo. No discussion of this topic is complete without Marsilio Ficino. During the Early Renaissance, the resurgence of Neoplatonism by Ficino permeated throughout all of Italy, beginning in Florence, and drove the dialogue and re-evaluation of the Christian doctrine, which had been well-established in the Republic of Florence since the Middle Ages. As the mystical philosophy permeated the arts, Alessandro Botticelli's significance in its visual representation cannot be undervalued. Surely, if not for Cosimo de' Medici's patronage of the young philosopher Ficino, Botticelli's artistry would have assumed an entirely different appearance—both formally and in intended meaning. For, Ficino's description of the Platonic Theory of Love provided the inspiration and theoretical basis for two of Botticelli's most renowned paintings: *Pallas and the Centaur* (Figure 1) (Tempera on canvas, 80 in. x 581 in., circa 1482) and *Primavera* (Figure 2) (Tempera on panel, 80 in. x 124 in., circa 1482). Looking to the aforementioned artworks, this essay will examine the formal qualities associated with the ideology of Platonic Love and use Botticelli's influence to illustrate the presence and balance between the pagan and Christian subjects in the late-Quattrocento.

Alessandro Botticelli (1445-1510) belonged to the Florentine School and his work can be discussed in relationship to that of his contemporaries', such as Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), Donatello (1386-1466), Fra Angelico (1395-1455), and Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1469), Jacopo da Sellaio (1441-1493), among others. Of these, Jacopo da Sellaio, or Jacopo di Arcangel, is most easily compared to Botticelli insofar as formal qualities are concerned; though

it seems that this was because Sellaio was influenced by Botticelli and not the reverse. As pupils, both of these young masters were apprenticed by Fra Filippo Lippi. These artists who, according to Giorgio Vasari, comprised the Florentine School are characterized by the elements of naturalism that stemmed from the manner developed by the Trecento artist Giotto di Bondone. The developments of the earliest master of the Renaissance were undoubtedly influential in the work of those later Florentine painters, especially Botticelli who, as Vasari stated, was one of the foremost masters in the "golden age".

Marsilio Ficino, the humanist philosopher, theologian and linguist, contributed to the visual arts during the Renaissance primarily through the revival of Neoplatonism. In his lifetime, he translated the works of Plato into Latin, the "vulgar" language, and paved the path for the development of a systematic and rational approach to philosophic argument. At this significant moment in history, he helped to reinforce the growing interest in Humanist thought in central Italy. In many instances Plato's writings were not simply translated; they were given new interpretations and elaborations, therefore, the Florentine philosophers are celebrated for having advanced their art in addition to producing the resurgence of the theories.

To give proper credit to the influence of Ficino's work it should be noted that he was the leading philosopher of the Platonic Academy, an elite group of humanist thinkers and intellectuals in Florence. For, at the height of the Early Renaissance and of Ficino's career, the translations of Plato and the ideas of Neoplatonism were available to the leading men of the Republic, and thus highly influential in many realms. Given the philosopher's strong ties to Lorenzo de' Medici, it is apparent that the major Italian artists such as Alessandro Botticelli and the later Michelangelo Buonarroti, Raphael Sanzio, Leonardo da Vinci, and Tiziano Vecelli

gained knowledge of Neoplatonism due to the Medici family's close involvement in the arts as patrons. To these artists, perhaps the most prominent aspect of the ideology to be translated into visual art was the mystical concept of Platonic Love.

The Platonic theory of Love can be understood as one's state-of-being and this state's propinquity to divinity. Ficino is accredited with having revived discussion of this theory when he translated *Symposium*. Plato's *Symposium*, an ancient Greek text written in the form of a dramatic dialog during the mid-forth-century BCE, examines the purpose and nature of love. Set in an Athenian social scene, *Symposium* presents the recordings of seven oral speeches delivered by Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, Socrates and Alcibiades. This setting is well-known and suited to conceptual discussions surrounded by entertainment, food and drink. In Plato's account, each speaker consecutively offers a distinct theory on Eros, the Greek god and embodiment of Love. And, as each argument is presented the next speaker refutes the preceding argument by demonstrating a superior theory until we reach Socrates. Socrates, a Greek Athenian philosopher only known through the writings of Plato and Xenophon, argues that Eros is concerned ultimately with the highest good and, thus, is united with immortality. Socrates' speech is followed by that of Alcibiades. Kenneth Dorter writes:

> For reasons perhaps connected in part with relation between wisdom and piety, Socrates had chosen to present his account of the nature of Eros in religious imagery rather than philosophical concepts, and had depicted Eros as a demi-god or daimon. Alcibiades, however, by substituting Socrates for Eros, and portraying Socrates in the terms used to describe Eros, shows how what Socrates had called divine and had presented religiously can be seen in human (philosophical) terms. Man's link with the divine may be seen as within man himself, not requiring the literal intervention of other beings. The description of Socrates as "daimonic"

> may remind us, for example, of the *daimonion* which Socrates claims to have *within* him.[1]

Dorter states that Socrates' account of Eros is distinct from that of those who spoke before him. Socrates returns to the idea of the mythical Eros and the literal interpretation that this suggests; the others had discussed Eros in allegorical and philosophical terms. When Alcibiades replaced Eros with Socrates he surpassed the limitations of allegorical and mythical arguments. For, the highest argument is that which connects man to the divine, and Alcibiades states that the divine may be glimpsed in one's self. Therefore, the content of Alcibiades' speech was more closely aligned with the humanistic ideals of the day than that of his Greek contemporaries, hence, Alcibiades' argument held the most weight. Notably, in Alcibiades' account, he associates Socrates with the *daimon*, a demigod, and, thus, personified the humanist interests held by the Athenians. There is no question that the foundation of the Platonic Love agrees with the position of Alcibiades: divine love can be found within. For centuries, Florentine thinkers had been contemplating and adopting humanistic ideals, so it is not surprising that Plato's *Symposium* supports the Quattrocento notion of Supreme Love.

Ficino's theory demarcates Supreme Love from the fleeting, worldly adorations that are experienced by all thinking beings. However, there are several important distinctions to be made in discussing the varieties of love. In both Christian and Platonic thought, spiritual love, or true love, must always be absent of desire because, in definition, one can only desire what one does not possess. In its place, the concept of Supreme Love, also referred to as divine love, is founded on the belief that an ideal love can be acquired through two means: one, a friendship between

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[1] Kenneth Dorter, "The Significance of the Speeches in Plato's Symposium," In *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 2 (1969), 233.

contemporaries who practice and share ideas based upon exploring introspective reflections, and, two, by the love presenting itself to one's soul in the ephemeral moments where God reveals glimpses of himself. In Christian and Platonic thought, the understandings of divine love have distinct ideals and, on some interpretations, rival in their meaning. In both theologies, however, the basis of similarity is that love must be separated from the psychological and physical feelings generated by lust. For, lust is not always sexual; it can refer to any strong or excessive desire. Just as sexual lust culminates in its highest form as a sexual impulse or experience, the variety of love produced by mental attachment also seeks to gratify the self. As characterized by Thomas Gould:

> To confuse love with mere sexual need is almost the worst mistake a person can make. Sexual need is a tension which is easily satisfied and vanishes with the satisfaction; love is exclusive, predictable, ever demanding, and grows rather than dies when it is fulfilled. As the man who will subordinate everything else to true love is the best of men, so the man who subordinates everything to sexuality is the worst of men.[2]

The morality of Gould's statement presents itself as polarizing, yet that is exactly the message of the Christian doctrine as it upholds self-control, restraint, and abstinence. The Biblical Book of Timothy, chapter two, verse twenty-two, states, "Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart."[3] Here, a pureness of intention is the essential quality. Since the Middle Ages, Christianity had provided the guidelines of morality, and yet the Biblical explanation for instructing communication with God was not clear. Prayer, or inner communication with God, does not have a set of guidelines within the Christian Bible. Therefore, the Neoplatonists, with the notion of Platonic Love, may

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[2] Thomas Gould, *Platonic Love* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 19.
[3] 2 Tim. 2:22

have sought to answer the old quandary of how to communicate and connect spiritually with the divine. For, Gould seems correct when he states that the feeling of love is expected to grow and never subside; this thinking is in line with the Neoplatonist idea of a divine love. In his statement, Gould does not diverge from the thoughts of Plato, but he does clearly set boundaries on lust and sex as it relates to Platonic Love. Therefore, Plato's acceptance of sexuality is not contradictory to that of the Platonic Academy's, but it does contradict the Biblical description. Here we find the greatest disagreement between the Christian and Platonic interpretation. Platonic Love does not exclude itself to one type of love, but rather it accepts that there is validity in all forms including that which involves a sexual character and activity.

Ficino, in a letter to Giovanni Cavalcanti, wrote:

> Since the soul is the son of God and the body is a limb of the universe, our souls are moved gently and easily by God, as though by a father, through the laws of providence; but our bodies are dragged by the universal body through the forces of fate, as a single particle is dragged by the total mass of which it is a part, under some violent movement. Yet the force of fate does not penetrate the mind unless the mind of its own accord has first become submerged in the body, which is subject to fate…Every soul should withdraw from the encumbrance of the body and become centered in the mind, for then fate will discharge its force upon the body without touching the soul…You cannot rout misfortune, so flee yourself. That is why Plato advises us to retreat from 'here' to 'there'—that is, from attachment to the body and involvement with worldly affairs, to the cultivation of the soul. Otherwise we cannot avoid evil.[4]

Here, Ficino implies that it is characteristically human to embrace the natural manifestations of love, yet it is also necessary to understand the detrimental implications of excess. The soul, our only vehicle for a continued existence, is dangerously susceptible to being consumed by the pleasures offered by the world. Holding this perception that the soul is immortal the Neoplatonists rallied for its protection. Thus, the concept of Supreme Love must be isolated in a

[4] Paul Oskar Kristeller, ed. and trans., *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino: Volume I* (London: Shepheard-Walwyn, 1975), 67.

separate state of purity, and this leads one to discover Neoplatonism's end goal: human perfection and happiness.

The "force of fate" to which Ficino speaks of is comparable to the hereafter and reality of God in the Christian context, which the Neoplatonists were less direct to accept but never really abandoned due to their interlacing of Humanist thought in the theology. Rebecca Zorach stated, "We tend to assume that part of [the Neoplatonists] intention was to reconcile classical philosophy with Christian belief."[5] With the new emerging mysticism and humanist ideals, art was invited to partake in the dialogue, yet arguably on a much larger level as the practicalities of paint allow it to be visually read and understood by those not otherwise granted access. In conjunction with the ancient tradition of high-altar works, the fifteenth-century working-classes could depend on visual narrative for that which can only be found in-text. Other patrons were less concerned with Biblical narrative and wished to explore the new theology in a visual language. In this context, it should be not be surprising that Florentine artists emphasized philosophical contemplation in their images.

Alessandro Botticelli, a prolific painter of the Early Italian Renaissance, came into contact with the Platonic ideology through an association at a Florentine school patroned by Lorenzo de'Medici. In 1482, Botticelli completed the pendant images *Pallas and the Centaur* (Figure 1) and *Primavera* (Figure 2) commissioned by one of the Medici family. Only four years previous, in 1478, the outbreak of the Pazzi Wars and the political panic which followed consumed the Republic of Florence. Pope Sixtus IV, the Pazzi family and their Florentine papal

[5] Rebecca Zorach. "Love, Truth, Orthodoxy, Reticence; or, What Edgar Wind Didn't See in Botticelli's Primavera." In *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 1 (2007): 190-224.

bankers, the Salviati, hatched a conspiracy and proceeded in an attempt to remove the Medici from power. Spurred by the tensions of surrounding providences and the assassination of Lorenzo's brother Giuliano, some scholars have attributed *Pallas and the Centaur* (Figure 1) to be a reactionary work commenting on the unstable Republic and the death of a leader. Additionally, the late-fifteenth-century Florentine Republic was near to meeting its demise with the rise of the Medici principality.[6] Nicholas Scott Baker, on the topic of the swiftly evolving political environment, states:

> The political executions in 1497 were the first such killings of members of the elite since 1481, when the last Pazzi conspirators were hanged. In the decades after the 1497 executions, capital punishment for political reasons occurred more frequently. This increasing cruelty, to borrow Landucci's word, in Florentine public life from the late fifteenth century provides a way to map the changing political culture of the city as the 200-year-old republic slowly became a principality.[7]

Following the Pazzi Wars, Florentine society was likely to have increasingly become aware of the unrest and turmoil encircling central Italy's political state. Given Botticelli's surroundings, it is hardly surprising that the aforementioned paintings feature a representation of Platonic Love intermixed with characters who symbolize violent and untamed humanity.

Originally commissioned to be hung side-by-side in the city palace of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, *Pallas and the Centaur* (Figure 1) and *Primavera* (Figure 2) feature narratives that extend into each other, and they gain a grand meaning when viewed in this context. Based on the location and the coincidence of the wedding in 1482, these paintings were most likely created for

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[6] Nicholas Scott Baker, "For Reasons of State: Political Executions, Republicanism, and the Medici in Florence, 1480-1560," *Renaissance Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2009): 445.
[7] Ibid.

Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco's and his bride's nuptial ceremony. Some scholars have pointed out that the image of Mercury in *Primavera* (Figure 2) may be the patron's portrait.

Of the two paintings, that which was intended to hang to the left was *Pallas and the Centaur* (Figure 1), an image which shows the personification of chastity's victory over lust. In this painting, Pallas Athena holds the centaur by his head's hair to prevent him from hunting innocent nymphs. For this reason, *Pallas and the Centaur*'s (Figure 1) moralizing message of chastity and lust, when paired with *Primavera* (Figure 2), relates to the Neoplatonism ideology of morality and divine love, and ultimately directs the viewer to the notion of the highest good: the happiness that comes from being spiritually joined to the divine.

We begin analysis with the rightmost painting since the viewer reads the narrative from right to left—a device used by the painter for purposes of directing the eye to the culminating message of *Pallas and the Centaur* (Figure 1). As for the display in the palace room, Barbara Deimling states:

> [*Primavera*] was to be found in an anteroom to Lorenzo's bed-chamber. The picture was surrounded by a white frame and hung directly above the back-rest of a sofa, which would explain not only the size of the painting but also the sharply rising perspective of the meadow on which the eight figures in the picture appear.[8]

Upon close observation, the horizon of *Pallas and the Centaur* (Figure 1) and *Primavera* (Figure 2) appear to join with each other. The landscape is also similar as both paintings feature a rising perspective and a similar hue representing the sky and time of day. Additionally, the figure of Pallas Athena shares commonalities with both Mercury and Venus; Athena's pose is very similar

[8] Barbara Deimling, *Sandro Botticelli* (London: Taschen, 2000), 39.

to that of Venus', and her direction of movement and liveliness matches that of Mercury's. These similarities help us to see the artist's thoughts in harmonizing the separate narratives.

For the patron, *Pallas and the Centaur* (Figure 1) was to be placed over the door as a sopraporta, and a third painting of Botticelli's entitled *Virgin and Child* was also within in the room, and, thus, there were three images composing the union.[9] Because the paintings were intended for a bed-chamber, we can rightly assume they were related to the role of the new bride, and meant to serve as a decorative instruction on marital conduct. In *Primavera* (Figure 2), beginning with the last figure on the far right, Botticelli demonstrates an image of unrestrained carnal appetite with the figure of Zephyrus who has set his desire on earthly passions. As he violently forces himself into the clearing of the orange grove, the viewer senses that he is not fully in control of his being and is instead overcome with the desire of possessing the female. As the trees divide and bend, the God of Wind reaches downward to wrap his arms around a frightened nymph who spews a vine of flowers. Barbara Deimling noted that the visual description of a sensual and aggressive Zephyrus shares a similarity with a written source that may have served as a fragmentary model. The philosophical poem "De Rerum Natura" (On the Nature of Things) by Lecretius states:

> For when once the face of the spring day is revealed and the teeming breeze of the west wind is loosed from prison and blows strong, first the birds of the air herald thee, goddess, and thine approach, their hearts thrilled with thy might….so surely enchained by delight…thou dost strike fond love into the hearts of all, and makest them in hot desire to renew the stock of their races, each after his own kind. (I.10-20)[10]

This excerpt coincides with the typical interpretation of Botticelli's work. After captured by the God of Wind, the nymph transforms into the female to her right, a young woman wearing a

[9] Barbara Deimling, *Sandro Botticelli* (London: Taschen, 2000), 39.
[10] Ibid., 43.

flower-patterned garment and crown of flowers. Her transformation is twofold as she was a mythical being, a physical being to the pagans, who became an allegory, a figurative representation of an abstract idea. As Nicolai Rubinstein surmised based on the attribution of this work to the writings of Lucretius:

> Subsequent interpretations vary in the importance they attribute to Horace and Lucretius in providing the literary sources of the Primavera; they all have in common the absence in the painting of Horace's Iuventas from the company of Venus. It will be argued that the figure on Venus's left does in fact represent the Roman goddess of youth, as well as the goddess of spring. At least since the days of Vasari, the subject of the painting has been described as spring, but it is not clear whether Vasari was referring to the entire composition or to one of its figures. Whatever the meaning of his description of a painting of which he evidently had only a vague recollection, that the figure on Venus's left, as Warburg assumed, indeed represents spring, is shown by her floral crown, by the flowers painted on her dress, by the flowers in its fold, and by those she scatters before her.[11]

Rubinstein presents a valuable observation because it leads us to uncover the mystery of the theme. If we follow the mythical narrative, the allegorical figure of Spring stands next to Venus, one of the most modestly dressed and reserved Venuses that had yet been depicted; her posture, dress and gesture may serve as a model for the new bride. Since her encounter with Zephyrus, the young nymph has permanently transfigured. But, because of her initial unwillingness it seems likely that her role in *Primavera* (Figure 2) is to exemplify the character of Zephyrus and not her own.

The figure of Spring flanks Venus who is the center figure of the composition. Both figures are the only who gaze out to the viewer—a visual device which both balances and calms

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[11] Nicolai Rubinstein, "Youth and Spring in Botticelli's Primavera." In *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 60 (London: The Warburg Institute, 1997), 248.

the viewer's perception of the surrounding figures; all the figures except for Venus and Spring are actively engaged in a separate activity.

On the center axis of the picture plane, above Venus, Cupid aims an arrow towards the middle of the three graces, yet the grace does not react to Cupid's folly as her gaze carries us to the character Mercury who points toward the heavens. This direction of line helps solidify the transition to *Pallas* (Figure 1) while also incorporating the message of Platonic Love. Mercury, in turn, leads the viewer out of *Primavera* (Figure 2) and onto the painting *Pallas and the Centaur* (Figure 1) as his body turns and his hand points upward—two signals that are meant to take the viewer's attention away from the mythical subjects and instead display the philosophical meaning. To emphasize this transition onto the next canvas, Botticelli has used a similar pose for both Mercury and the Goddess of Wisdom; they are both right-orientated. Therefore, similar to how *Pallas and the Centaur* (Figure 1) is a showcase of chastity's victory over lust, *Primavera* (Figure 2) exemplifies love's victory over lust. In this way, Botticelli is illustrating Platonic Love through, as Deimling observed, the "renunciation of physical passion" for the preference of "a love orientated towards knowledge".[12] In the composition, the middle of the three graces rejects lust, and, by leading us to the Goddess of Wisdom, she exemplifies Ficino's Neoplatonic ideals: man should avoid the conflict of corporal passions and instead seek higher wisdom and unity with God.

Comparing Botticelli's themes with the philosophy of Platonic Love, we are able to conclude that the artist is presenting a much more philosophical and significant concept than that which is related to pagan subjects or to matrimony, which was the patron's commissioned theme.

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[12] Barbara Deimling, *Sandro Botticelli* (London: Taschen, 2000), 45.

Therefore, both the concept of Platonic Love and the allegory's message communicate that knowledge, God, and a relationship between two persons leading and sharing a contemplative life are the highest form of love.

Paul Oskar Kristeller has described Marsilio Ficino's definition of Platonic Love as "a love for another human being as a preliminary form and disguise of the basic love that each human being has for God and that finds its fulfillment only in the direct enjoyment and knowledge of God."[13] Likewise, and as Botticelli's work suggests, the realization of divine love occurs in the fleeting moments while on earth, but, due to the soul's immortality, those few people who are able to see glimpses of it may experience it in its entirety once they have transcended into the afterlife. Botticelli has also used beauty in order to illustrate a divine presence. Therefore, as the message aligns with Neoplatonism, beauty is what we love, and love is always a love of beauty.

In philosophy and the arts, metaphorical beauty is oftentimes associated with living a virtuous life, and according to Neoplatonism a virtuous life would include the form of love that is platonic. Ficino seldom alluded to the construction of visual art, but he spoke much about love and beauty, which are the representative meanings of human figures in many Renaissance works. Within the *De Amore,* Ficino states:

> The function of the eye is to allow an appreciation of beauty, this being not so much a material entity but rather an image of it, comprehended or grasped by the soul through the sight.[14]

Ficino's ideology of beauty is observable in Botticelli's image of Venus as she is relatively modest to other depictions. Yet, she is still able to communicate the virtues of love and beauty as

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[13] Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 52.
[14] Liana Cheney and John Hendrix. *Neoplatonic Aesthetics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 193.

she is shown to be, as Liana Cheney states, "beautiful because of the presence of the beauty of intellect," and not by something on the surface, or literally seeable.[15] In this way, the painted figures are greater than their physical components as they are intended to inspire the viewer with mystical awe. Also, as many scholars have noted and as Liana Cheney states:

> Botticelli would not have been able to accomplish his achievements if he had not the qualities mentioned, and if he had not had at least some knowledge and understanding of Neoplatonic theory.[16]

With reference to *Primavera* (Figure 2), in the *De Amore*, Ficino refers to a "beauty of simple colors, sound, and bodies where beauty can by no means be explained through the relation between several parts" and claims that "beauty's origin is in God himself. Beauty is the reflected splendor of God's goodness".[17]

Fundamentally, Platonic Love is a triangular concept. The two people who divinely love one another do so because of their attraction to beauty, and this form of love is a reflection of the pure love associated with God. Even without cross-referencing the themes within *Pallas and the Centaur* (Figure 1) and *Primavera* (Figure 2), *Primavera* (Figure 2) still offers a display of Platonic Love as the middle grace connects with Mercury and he points towards the heavens. Therefore, he and the middle grace can be interpreted as a triangular prism which disperses light and direction to the divine. This image demonstrates the type of contemplation that the Platonic Academy so greatly revered. In following the example of Mercury and Pallas Athena, one ought to achieve the greatest good: happiness and the highest perfection attainable by a human being.

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[15] Liana Cheney and John Hendrix. *Neoplatonic Aesthetics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 193.
[16] Ibid., 194.
[17] Ibid., 192.

To conclude, Ficino's philosophy of love is summarily one person loving another for the part of their character that is beautiful. When engaged in moments provided by divine love, one's soul connects the person, whom they love, to the perfect and supreme form that is materially absent from this world. The paintings we discussed are noticeably symbolic of this concept. On a much grander scale, the images produced by Botticelli are a complex assimilation of mythical subject with the intertwining values of both Christianity and Neoplatonism. Similar to the glimpses cast in *Primavera* (Figure 2), the principles within the Platonic Theory of Love state that spiritual affections for one another afford us with glimpses of God.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1

Sandro Botticelli

Pallas and the Centaur

Tempera on canvas

204 cm x 147,5 cm (80 in x 581 in)

Circa 1482

Uffizi, Florence

Figure 2

Sandro Botticelli

Primavera

Tempera on panel

202 cm x 314 cm (80 in x 124 in)

Circa 1482

Uffizi, Florence

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