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MNEMOSYNE ATLAS | The botticelliana serie and the “ventilata veste”

Readings of Mnemosyne Atlas, Plate 39

edited by Seminario Mnemosyne, coordinated by Monica Centanni and Katia Mazzucco, with Sara Agnoletto, Maria Bergamo, Lorenzo Bonoldi, Giulia Bordignon, Claudia Daniotti, Giovanna Pasini, Alessandra Pedersoli, Linda Selmin, Daniela Sacco, Valentina Sinico

English version by Elizabeth Thomson

As heralded by the Triumphs of the goddess of love (figs. 2 and 5), and by the central figure of Venus, plate 39 is permeated by the daemon of Eros. The blindfold Cupid (fig. 6), in glory with his mother (figs. 2 and 5) or as a symbol of the love pact between the two young people in fig 9, fires the bonds and exchanges of erotic passion and effusions of love, as he does the violent and passionate abductions which occur in the upper section of the plate (figs. 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). The ultimate effect of the transfiguring encounter with Eros is the return to earth of the desired or abducted female metamorphosed into the form of a plant — fertile in the case of Chloris-Flora (figs. 6,7), and infertile in the case of chaste Daphne who escapes again from Apollo's amorous embrace (figs. 12, 20, 21, 22). Love, an invasive presence in the plate, seems absent in its introductory and concluding images. The plate begins with the image of a simulacrum: a statue of young Icarus on a pedestal (fig. 1). Having fallen out of the sky in his arrogant attempt at flying too close to the Helios-Apollo, he is pointed by the two figures on the left in the tondo in Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, whilst the figure on the right, his posture melancholic and mournful, can only be Dedalus, his father. The plate concludes with another funerary image: a relief from the Della Torre monument representing the Elysian Fields (fig. 23). From a thematic point of view, the initial and final figures, therefore, would appear to be at odds with the corpus of the images in the plate. However, one of the principal signs of a formal relationship with the other images can be found in the figure of the young winged image — Icarus in fig. 1 and the genius psychopompous in fig. 23 — which can also be assimilated

morphologically with the other images of daemons which flit between the figures in the plate, whether they be Cupids or Winds. There is also a strong thematic link between the opening and the closing images associated with glory. In fig. 1 we witness the sanctioning of a gesture of superb value (the flight of Icarus) using art as a medium (the statue of the young man on a pedestal); fig. 23 represents the place in Hades where the Shades who in life deserved glory reside.

The suggested theme of the glory of virtues celebrated in works of art, supplies the key to a privileged reading of the plate's organisation: the theme of the power of love is woven into the theme of art as a medium for immortality. From a Platonic perspective, or rather a neoplatonic perspective — erotic ardour and poetic passion are expressions of the same *enthousiasmos*, but they are also the route to a possible reunion between man — lover or artist — with the divine. Love, Glory and Immortality are concentrated in the image of the winged young man in fig. 23, a hypostasis of Eros who inspires love and the dance of the three Graces (also present in these Elysian Fields); the daemon who unites the world and the world beyond; the genius who seals the victory over death and the perpetuation of the glory with the sound of his trumpet. The central role of the Botticelli's *Kingdom of Venus (Primavera)* (fig. 6) is again confirmed by the complexity of these hermeneutic perspectives, and it catalyses all the themes in the plate and presents the guiding images: Cupid, the winged daemon, in the act of shooting a fatal arrow; Zephyrus, the winged genius, who bursts on the scene fired by passion; the Nymph, become prey, and transformed by love; the melodious choir of the Three Graces; the guidance of Venus and the rhapsody woven by her power. In his dissertation of 1892, Warburg dedicated considerable space to the matter of Medici patronage of Botticelli's paintings: the context of court life, in all its aspects — intellectual, philosophical, literary, ceremonial and worldly — is presented in this plate in a variety of objects: the sculptural tondo (fig. 1), the prints (figs. 2, 5, 10), the paintings (figs. 3, 6, 13), the drawing for the lid of a spice-box, (fig. 9). All of the objects are considered art productions without bias as to their typological value, all useful and invaluable documents for recalling the past. As far as the paintings are concerned, Warburg was the first to connect the *Birth of Venus*, the *Kingdom of Venus (Primavera)*, *Pallas and the Centaur* as part of a cycle, and to relate the works of Botticelli with the events of the 1470's which left their enduring mark on the history and perception of Florence during the era of the Medici. The traumatic and premature deaths of the famous lovers — Giuliano and the nymph Simonetta Cattaneo, married to a member of the Vespucci family — together with

the celebration of the peace established once more by Lorenzo after the Pazzi Conspiracy — as proved by Warburg and argued further by Wind — are the themes which inspire the three works of Botticelli commissioned by Lorenzo the Magnifico for Villa di Castello. Medici patronage, clearly evidenced by Giuliano's emblem on the garment worn by Pallas (fig. 13), is confirmed in the *Kingdom of Venus* (fig. 6), with particular reference to the fatal theme of the love-story between Giuliano and Simonetta, by Giuliano's emblem; the rekindled stump embroidered in the chlamis of Mercury-Giuliano. The very real difference in quality of the garments worn by the various characters may suggest a further hermeneutic allusion useful for analysing the various compositional and thematic elements of the painting. The delicate wind-blown veils that reveal the bodies of the Graces, Chloris and Cupid, as well as the coloured garments that drape the limbs of Zephyrus, place these figures on the plane of mythology (see the passage from Leonardo da Vinci's *Trattato sulla pittura* cited by Warburg and the commentary of plate 46): these figures can be readily associated with a classical mythographic source.

However, one step ahead of the mythological scene, the 'phantasms of antiquity' are given bodily form in the two real figures in the foreground, the historical heroes of the composition. The characters of Giuliano and Simonetta, the nymph, appear in the guise of Mercury and Flora, with their *all'antica* garments made with the sumptuous fabrics produced in contemporary Florence. In the third level of the scene, framed by a laurel halo, the standing figure that dominates the garden scene is wearing a nuptial gown — which can also be seen in other works of Botticelli — and she is draped in a double-faced cloak, red on one side and blue with stars on the other. This third typological garment alludes to yet a further figural dimension. Behind the historical reality, and beyond the mythological framework, the general sense of the composition is determined and sustained by the principal allegorical figure. Portrayed as a sacred bride, Venus, with Cupid fluttering above her, is Queen of the garden. However, she is also the double face of the Aphrodite of Ficino's theories of love — sacred and profane, red and adorned with stars. Bountiful Venus in her kingdom-*pomoerium* has caused orange trees, still young in the *Birth*, to grow and blossom, and is now directing the scene with the gesture of her hand inviting the Polizianesque Julo-Giuliano to convert from his wild and chaste persona, and enter the kingdom of love. In the syntax of the painting it is possible to recognise, in iconographic contraction, the various phases of a love-story cut short by death but restored to immortality in the celebration of art: the conversion of Giuliano to the dance of the Three Graces and to Venus,

the encounter of Simonetta, the seductive gesture of the Nymph and the kindling of passion, and finally the wedding celebrated posthumously on the same fatal day in April. The composition of the plate suggests another discourse relating to the garments, clearly expounded by Warburg: the evolution, entirely inspired by the Renaissance, of garments 'alla francese' (fig. 2) to the '*all'antica*' garments of the various epiphanies of the Nymph (the wind-blown garment in figs. 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19, 22), which drift, finally, into the hieroglyphic development of baroque theatre costumes, as Warburg reveals in his essay on the costumes designed by Buontalenti in 1589 (fig. 19).

Each Siren also wore a colored satin skirt and above it a shorter garment of the same color: a distant echo of the Greek chiton. Warburg also observes:

"In this period the memory of antique art, already faint, receded even further: the dress, initially simple and kilted up, had transformed itself into an assortment of ornate overgarments, although the veils and the flourishes remained, as relics of the costume of the fleet-footed huntress, even when the nymph had taken on much more of the character of a sentimental shepherdess. [...] The characterization must be conveyed through clear, symbolic visual signs that would be familiar to the spectator as attributes of mythological beings. In the event, however, his excessive zeal in the pursuit of attributes led to some arbitrary and unnatural combinations".

Plate 39, with its formal and thematic ramifications which can be seen in the pervasiveness of plants that burst forth from the characters, is a good example of the shift in complexity that occurs between one of Warburg's essays and the composition of a plate, although both originate from the same starting-point. Notably, in his essay on Botticelli's paintings, there is one point of departure that Warburg does not develop, the assimilation of Venus-Pallas, which however does form a supporting framework in the lower section of the plate from fig. 13, *Pallas with the centaur*, onwards. The iconographical confusion between the two divine characters, originally so very far apart — Aphrodite/love, Pallas/chastity — was already set in motion in the imperial coinage of Rome, in which the two goddesses were superimposed in the display of arms as a symbol of the triumph of peace over war — Pallas against Ares — and as the triumph of love over war — Aphrodite victorious over Ares. The allegorical identification of Venus Pax and Minerva Pax, introduces a shift in the figure of Venus into that of Pallas, explicitly manifest in the direct borrowing of the Venus-Peace of antiquity by Francesco Laurana in his medal of 1463 (fig. 16). Starting from figure 3, Venus, naked at birth, appears in the middle of her garden in

allegorical garments (fig. 6), only to reappear in the guise of Lorenzo-Pallas in figure 13. From here there is a shift of direction: the image of Alma Dea retains her standing posture (one arm alongside her hip and the other gesticulating), but lends herself to interpret the personification of Abundance with cornucopia (figs. 11, 18, 19), of Peace who displays an olive branch and weapons as trophies — arms laid down, taken away or hung to a tree (figs. 14, 15, 16, 17): the image of Venus becomes fused with the images of Fortune and Pallas.

The justification for this symbolic and figurative shift is supported by the historical facts, related by various sources according to which Giuliano's impresa in the joists of 1475 bore a figure of "Pallas Citaeraea" — i.e. Minerva Venus — on kindled stumps — his emblem. The image symbolised protection, but it was also a sublimated evocation of Simonetta. The plot of the plate was woven not only with images of changing garments, but with images of garments that transform the principal identity of the wearer. In fig. 4 the wind-blown garment transforms Achilles into a nymph, who becomes indistinguishable from the other young girls from Scyros. It is not so much about the myth as about the garment, the wind-blown hair, and posture — once again a standing figure(P1) slightly turned — that determine the relevance of the portrayal of Achilles amongst the nymphs. Even Daphne in the moment she is seized by Apollo (fig. 12), is infused with the breath of life which swells the Nymph's clothing; the potent semantic vitality of this engram is such that it does not cease, not even in the moment of transition to vegetal rigidity. At the moment in which she roots herself in the bosom of welcoming Mother Earth, and from her wooden arms the first leaves begin to shoot (figs. 20, 22), the image of the young girl is still stirred by the movement of her garments and hair. Another starting point provided by *Pallas and the Centaur* inspires a path of dynamic progression which unravels itself via the figures on the right in the lower section (and once again overtakes and belies the rigid distinction between male and female). The gesture of Pallas-Lorenzo, who tames the beast by grasping it by its hair (fig 13), continues in Apollo's erotic surge towards Daphne, by now uncapturable (fig. 20), and becomes more exasperated, rhetorically emphatic and vain in the subsequent posture of fig. 22. In other sequences in the plate, the figures can be related to each other by the attitude of their arms. However, whilst the left arm appears to serve the function of outlining the posture, the right arm is the performer of the eloquent gesture. Between figures 3, 6, 13, 11, 14, 15, 17, 19 the dynamic progression proceeds from the seductive composure of the so-called Venus Pudica — her modesty belied by the erotic context in which her gesture in fig. 5 is performed — to the

invitation of the Lady of the Garden in fig. 6, to the decisive force exercised by Pallas over the Centaur; and also the presentation of the cornucopia in figs. 11, 19, becomes a display of the warrior helmet in figs. 15, 16, 17. At this stage in the reading, a necessary distinction within the inventory of forms, gestures and postures collected in the Atlas becomes increasingly evident. A typological division based on Warburg's notion of *Pathosformel*, able to account for the diversity of semantic intensity and communicative register between *Pathosformel*, (F), posture (P), and eloquent gesture (G) becomes increasingly necessary. Warburg defines the *Pathosformel* as the identification of form and content in an image conveyed in a unique constituent (a superior unity) of expressive valence which goes beyond stylistic variations, a "gesture in superlative degree" that finds in that particular form, and in no other, its model expression (see *Introduction to Mnemosyne*).

According to Salvatore Settis, the word '*Pathosformel*' is an oxymoron in as much as it fuses in the same term both the motion of pathos and the rigidity of a formula or pattern. *Pathosformel* (F) is, therefore, a re-emergent impression in the cultural tradition of the West, and as such, if not instinctive, it is nonetheless easy to interpret. The formulas of pathos involve the entire body and have a value that remains constant within the context of a cultural code. They express, for example, the iconographic formulas of the entrance of the nymph, the ecstasy of the maenad, the depression of the melancholic, the despair of the grieving, or the violent aggression.

Posture (P) is another aspect, persistently recurring in the same compositions albeit chronologically distant: they designate *status* not *pathos*, and in them one can observe the extent of the body's representative capacity to the anatomical exhibition. For example, conventional postures are those of majesty (the Sovereign, the Virgin); the standing figure around whom the syntax of the work revolves; the foreshortened or rear view of the posing male figure; the bent figure of an old man in funeral scenes.

The eloquent gesture (G), however, requires a definition which is more precise and semantically contextualised — an *actio pro verbo*, which has an intrinsic communicative capability, quite contextual, and that can be desemanticised to the extent of becoming unintelligible. The eloquent gesture does not involve the entire body, but whether it is allegorical, ritualistic, ceremonial or conventional, it is concentrated in the movement of the hand. For example, an eloquent gesture is the invitation expressed by the palm of the hand directed outward, the offering or acceptance indicated by an extended arm, the signalling of a pointed finger, the teaching indicated

by three fingers of the right hand. One can observe how frequently the eloquent gesture, assigned to the right hand, can confer different degrees of dynamism and meaning to the same posture. In plate 39, the clearest example is once again, by virtue of the movement of her right arm, the progressive animation of the standing female figure, the naked Venus, who at her birth in fig. 3 holds her right arm folded across her breast (signifying seduction, in imitation of the famous statue of the so-called Venus Pudica, the Medici Venus). In fig. 6, whilst maintaining the same posture with the left arm (which comes to have a postural function), the Lady of the Garden moves her right arm and hand with a gesture indicating invitation-instruction.

In fig. 13, transformed into Pallas-Lorenzo, she uses the same gestural posture: her right arm extended further still in a gesture which tames the Centaur. The same gesture is maintained sliding into personifications of Peace and Abundance (figs. 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19), in which the right arm flourishes weapons or cornucopia, a gesture which semantises the figure by means of its attribute.

* * *

Plates 38 and 40 confirm several guiding themes of plate 39, re-presenting them in new images as variations of the same implicit significance. The leading role of the Medici family is once again reinforced and evidenced by the portrait of Lorenzo il Magnifico prominently placed at top of plate 38 (top centre). If plate 39 in the way it is mounted concentrates the most significant and dramatic moments of Giuliano's life, the images of Lorenzo signal, even in plate 38, the period between Lorenzo's youth and death. Two busts are in evidence in the table, a portrait of the young Lorenzo, executed in Verrocchio's workshop (38.3), and another portrait, executed by Pollaiuolo (38.4), presumably based on his funeral mask. In the left section of the montage we can still see the products of the Medici family's courtly life: their coat-of-arms becomes a source of amusement in the engraving for the lid of a spice-box (38.14), whilst in another engraving (38.15) from the same series as fig. 39.9 a young couple dance for love. Eros is, therefore, also present in this plate at the centre of a combination of figures, but before being celebrated in an illustration for the Baldini calendar (38.23) in which the Nymph of fig. 39.5 is also featured, the daemon is forcibly disarmed and punished (38.8, 38.9, 38.12). Love also triumphs in the opening image of the following plate, plate 40, in the tondo of Palazzo-Riccardi (40.1). However, the climate of gratified seduction in which the children of

Venus were dancing is upset by the turbulent presence of Dionysus (40.16, 40.17), as though the pathos heralded by the abductions in the right section of plate 39 were progressing into the next plate. Around the central figure in Baldassare Peruzzi's fresco of *Daphne and Apollo* (40.6), we can witness scenes of violent aggression unfolding. The bestiality of the centaur, an image that appears in a tondo in Palazzo Medici-Riccardi (40.2), tamed by Pallas-Lorenzo in plate 39, in this case has no restraint. The gesture of an arm extended outward whilst gripping an object in the hand is no longer the gesture associated with peace and the goddess of wisdom but the ferocious act of the soldiers in the massacre of the innocents (40.19, 40.21, 40.8).



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