

ALLEGORY AND SYMBOLISM

IN ITALIAN RENAISSANCE PAINTING

Art-historians of our time have concerned themselves mainly with research into the literary and philosophic sources of Renaissance works; this leads to a detailed philological commentary on its broader themes. However, it may be noted that neither iconology nor semiotics have yet observed the existence of various *types of figuration* in the plastic arts of that period.

In fact, it is generally considered that the great triumph of the Renaissance was the *adequate reproduction* of the environment by artistic means. This became possible through the application of the techniques of perspective, of chiaroscuro, and of open air. In his representation of the Baptistry of Florence, Brunelleschi gave a very full survey of the potentials of the new art. These innovations are markedly in evidence in the Italian portrait. When Alberti put forward the idea of fixing the visual impression on the surface by the aid of a grid (*velum*), he gave artists an objective way of correcting the picture.

But art held yet another ambition: which was to reach the

Translated by Sally Bradshaw.

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general by reproducing the particular, to offer a view of the whole world by representing an element, to interpret the invisible and mental through the visible and material. The actual idea of faithfulness to the model was evolving.¹ And the answer may be solicited from *allegory* and *symbolism*.²

Most works of art-history make no distinction between allegory and symbolism. The authors speak of allegory instead of symbol, and vice-versa. In short, the two concepts are made equal, or almost so.³

But one has only to read Goethe's maxim to find a very pertinent definition of what distinguishes the one from the other. He says: "Allegory transforms the phenomenon into a concept and the concept into an image, but in such a way that the concept is always delineated with precision, entirely embraced by the image whence it may be extrapolated. The symbol, on the other hand, transforms the phenomenon into an idea and the idea into an image, and does this in such a way that the idea contained in the image is always infinitely active and ineffable, and remains inexpressible even if it is formulated in all languages."⁴

The property of allegory is to be a univalent signifier. There is usually a preconceived idea at its root. The artist's task is to make what was conceived by his source of inspiration and by himself a concrete thing before he takes up his brush. So in order to understand an allegorical image, it is necessary to decipher the concept from which its foundations are taken. Allegory therefore shows a certain resemblance to hieroglyphics, which strongly attracted the Renaissance. And yet another representative type appeared at the same time: the *emblem* (*impresa*), usually accompanied by a short motto.⁵

In the figurative arts, allegory often takes on the form of a being personifying a virtue, a vice, or any other moral force

¹ J. Bialostocki, "The Renaissance Concept of Nature and Antiquity," *Studies in Western Art*, 1963, II, p. 19-30.

² G. Gadamer, "Symbol und Allegorie," *Umanesimo e Simbolismo*, Rome-Milan, 1960.

³ F. Th. Vischer, "Das Symbol," *Ausgewählte Werke*, Leipzig, s.a. VIII, 2, p. 314.

⁴ C. R. Müller, "Die geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen des Symbolbegriffs," in *Goethe's Kunstanschauung*, Leipzig, 1937.

⁵ R. Klein, "The Figurative Thought of the Renaissance," *Diogenes*, 1960, Nr. 32 p. 134.

accompanied by explanatory attributes. An allegoric picture might include several of these characters.

Let us now consider what relates allegory to artistic creation. Benedetto Croce was vehement in his denial of any allegorical significance in poetry, notably where the *Divine Comedy* was concerned. A statue of a woman or a man may be labelled by an inscription explaining its allegorical significance, he said. But that definition bears no relation to artistic value, and, according to him, is dependent only on plastic qualities. Now, there are Renaissance works of art on canvas and in sculpture whose allegorical message is inseparable from their plastic merits. We remember particularly the four small pictures by Giovanni Bellini which are conserved in the Venice Academy.⁶

The substantial difference between symbolism and allegory is that although the idea incorporated into the former is unknowable, (even when expressed in all languages, as Goethe says) it retains its efficacy. From this comes the *polyvalence* of the symbol, recognised in the Orient since remotest antiquity. In the first half of the XIIIth century, Durandus, and later Dante, spoke of the four meanings of the Holy Scriptures.⁷ Marsilio Ficino also speaks of that interpretation,⁸ which modern writers have used in the same way as an approach to ancient art.⁹

In allegory, the concept precedes the creative moment. The latter comes after logical reflection. As for the symbol, it is born at the very heart of the creative process, and crowns the effort by which the artist tries to come at the essence of things beneath their appearance. Perhaps one may find something here of the magic in which the Renaissance took so much delight. For us, the essential thing is that the symbol freed the ground for personal, essentially lyrical creativity, with all that art could gain from it.

⁶ B. Croce, "Sulla natura dell'Allegoria," *Nuovi saggi su estetica*, Bari, 1926, p. 26.

⁷ J. Sauer, "Symbolik des Kirchengebäudes und seiner Ausstattung," in *Die Auffassung des Mittelalters*, Freiburg i. Br, 1927 p. 12. J. Schlasser, *Kunstliteratur*, Vienna, 1924, p. 69.

⁸ A. Chastel, *Marcel Ficin et l'Art*, Geneva, 1957. E. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, Stockholm, II p. 191.

⁹ H. Seldmayr, *P. Bruegel. Der Sturz der Blinden, Epochen und Werke*, Vienna - Munich, 1959, I, p. 333.

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This difference between allegory and symbolism is equally influential on the character of the perception of a work of art. Allegory, after the manner of a charade, is subject to the spectator's shrewdness. Symbolism, on the other hand, invites him to sink himself in contemplation. Symbolism assumes active participation from the spectator in the construction of the artistic impression. It places him on the same footing as the creator; in this respect it is close to certain trends in modern art. A symbol reveals the polyvalence of relationships between things; it introduces an element of dialectic, and of dialogue. Allegory, on the contrary, includes elements of rhetoric and didacticism. Its mission is to show and render evident and conclusive that which has taken the form of a concept thanks to logical reflection. Allegory tends towards precision, towards a definite, unambiguous image. Symbolism prefers the equivocal language of metaphor, of indirect rapprochements, of analogies, of associations which are capable of commenting on the entire universe by means of a single phenomenon.¹⁰ In art, it has a particular force of impact every time it is successful in preserving the matter which makes up the basis of the work.

Theoreticians of the Renaissance have certainly recognised the symbolic character of its architecture, which they have taken pains to give as much weight to as possible.¹¹ On the other hand they hardly refer at all to the symbolism of the figurative arts. It remains to decide under the circumstances whether it is legitimate to apply a concept to Renaissance painting and sculpture of which theoretical thought at the time was ignorant. To us it is clear that a history of art should not be based on the ideas current among the people of the time but on their *work*. And there, many Renaissance paintings and sculptures display a clearly symbolic character.¹²

Art history classifies the Renaissance according to the developments in style, and according to the Masters' individual features. Iconology does it according to the literary and philo-

¹⁰ R. Klein, *La Forme et l'intelligible*, Paris, 1970, p. 363. The notion of the visual metaphor indicated by the author has remained obscure to this day.

¹¹ R. Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, London 1949. E. Battisti, *Rinascimento e Barocco*, Turin, 1960.

¹² Evidently the notion of a symbol is not dealt with in its widest meaning

sophic sources which were the artists' inspiration. But it is just as important to clarify the ways in which these had recourse to the language of *allegory*, and when they used *symbols*. Within the frame of an article, we can only hope to discuss the masterpieces of the Italian school. I will try to underline what makes up the difference between allegory and symbol there; as it is necessary to do so in my view, particularly as the origin eventually became obscure. But we should also remember that there were a multitude of intermediate stages.

Giotto's cycle of frescoes in Padua would, properly speaking, be the first example of allegory and symbol as newly conceived by European painting. Giotto's *Virtues and Vices* followed mediaeval iconography. Each personage had his own attributes: the scales for Justice, gifts for Charity; Envy darts a serpentine tongue. Nevertheless, each personage preserves a living human character. Did not Marcel Proust think he had discovered a vague similarity between the allegory of Charity and a maid in his father's house?¹³ Hope has more than wings: her whole pose expresses trustful waiting. On the other hand, Despair, not content with putting a rope round his neck, also seems to find himself shut in his space on the painting. Giotto's allegories could have figured in his historical paintings: it is easily seen that Hope is the twin-sister of the Holy Women of the Last Judgement, while Anger rends his robes in the same way as Caiphas.

His contemporaries were very sensitive to the dramatic realism which Giotto was able to confer to the scenes in the life of Mary or Jesus. Even now visitors follow all the events described with captivated emotion. But the most remarkable thing is that eternally and universally human states, of joy, sorrow, contemplation, submission, and mystical rapture can be seen through the veil of legend. Whether the person is standing, approaching, walking in procession, kneeling, meeting another man, embracing him, whether he is sitting on the ground, or prostrate in his final hour, in each case, Giotto expresses everything which makes up the foundations of human nature. In his biblical frescoes, the painter touches on the very heart of the human condition as no

in this article, as a "movement of the soul whose spiritual foundation is connected with the sensory sign." (E. Cassire).

¹³ M. E. Chernowitz, *Proust and Painting*, New York, 1945, p. 67-69.

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artist had been able to do before him. His *Threnos* is much more than a simple episode in the gospels. Rintelen, a German writer, has likened it to the incident in the *Iliad* relating to Patroclus' funeral.¹⁴ It was probably to give more of a sense of that implacable law of human existence that Giotto arranged, in the Chapel of the Arena, that as a complement to the scenes of Christ's life on Earth, there should also be the analogous scenes of his Passion.¹⁵ This is a procedure which we do not find in the frescoes of the *Life of Saint Francis of Assisi* in the upper Church, which several authors have attributed to the master.

A certain number of Virtues also appear in the cycle of frescoes realised by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. Each one is identifiable according to its inscriptions and attributes. Notably, the beautiful figure of Peace may be recognised, with her engaging picture, and immaculate habit conveying nobility. In the others Lorenzetti was more concerned with the set pattern than with his own intuition. His allegories are much more allegorical than Giotto's!

In his pictures of life in the town and the countryside, allegory falls into the background, while loving attention to little details of everyday life and the diverse characteristics of the period comes to the fore. But the symbolic nature of the pictorial image which is so manifest in Giotto is not within the reach of the Sienese master. His world can be broken down into a multitude of particular phenomena, which are meticulously reproduced in his painted chronicle. Properly speaking, the idea of "unity of the whole" which figures explicitly in his programme, did not here receive the plastic attention which one expected.¹⁶

The *Trinity* painted by Masaccio in Santa Maria Novella bears no resemblance to the *Crucifixion of Saint Clement* in Rome, which is represented in the style of an episode in the earthly life of Christ. This *Trinity* is not an allegory whose message could be reduced to one concept, one thesis, or one dogma. It is a symbolic image in which the Master gives a point of view regarding the earthly order, the heavenly order, and Man's position in it. G.

¹⁴ F. Rintelen, *Giotto und die Giotto-Apokryphen*, Munich, 1912.

¹⁵ M. Alpatov, "The Parallelism of Giotto's Paduan Frescoes," *Art Bulletin*, September 1947, p. 149-154.

¹⁶ Cf. the text: "Questa santa virtù la dove regge induce al unità li animi

Von Simson has thrown a shrewd glance on the iconography and intellectual motifs of this work, bringing out the close correlation between the project and its execution.¹⁷

Let us note that while it shows exceptional clarity of conception and execution, this *Trinity* is inexhaustible in its meanings and infinitely complex in its formal structure, which is what makes it an authentic symbol. Innumerable strands connect it with the past: with Byzantine mosaics, gothic miniatures, the frescoes of Giotto, and Brunelleschi's architecture. Masaccio's *Trinity* has something in common with the usual depiction of the crucifixion showing witnesses, and also something in common with the Last Judgement presided over by the Almighty (in this case it is God the Father represented at the foot of the picture). And finally it has something in common with the *Sacred Conversation*, of the altar-picture of the donor piously kneeling. The whole fresco betrays a desire to invest the personages with a universal meaning. There is heaven, at which the witnesses gaze hopefully; there is Golgotha, which humanity looks at in terror. There is Man's earth, composed of sin and vice, and there is the beyond, where the dead rest.

By its composition, this fresco contains elements of the "enclosed space" conceived by Giotto, but it also reminds one of the rotunda, of the basilica, a section of the sanctuary and its crypt. The work is endowed with a fine spatial depth, the distances are well graded, the surface reinforced while the personages of the donors seem to pierce it and walk straight out into the real space in which the spectator is standing. The composition structures itself around the pyramid of personages who are as it were brought out by repeated vertical lines, like the square placed on a circle in gothic quadrifolds. Masaccio's pyramid was afterwards to triumph in classical painting. The divisions of the patches of colour balance out in an analogous way.

This *Trinity* has in no way the aim of making its allegorical message felt; it does not claim to illustrate the dogma, nor to

multi." N. Rubinstein "Political Ideas in Sieneese Art: the frescoes of A. Lorenzetti and Taddeo di Bartolo in the Palazzo Pubblico," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1958, XXI, 3-4, p. 17.

¹⁷ C. V. Simson, "Ueber die Bedeutung von Masaccios Trinitäts-Fresco in S. Maria Novella," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, 1966, VIII.

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suggest a pictorial narration from which the message would have to be deciphered. Masaccio invites us to pure artistic contemplation. And it is by giving ourselves up to it, by penetrating the successive strata of meaning, by grasping the endless interplay of relationships that we arrive at that fundamental matter. Mary's gesture and look are not those of the "indicator" spoken of by Alberti. The symbol is essentially polyvalent: Mary is addressing St. John, Jesus, the spectator and no-one, all at once. But something in her satisfies our hunger. The measured gravity of the people heightens the scene's meaningfulness. It is as if we were attending a rite whose unspeakable mystery commanded our respect.

How can one forget that Masaccio's *Trinity* is contemporary with Rublev's *Trinity*? But if the Italian master was trying to endow his symbol with as concrete a character as possible, if he meant to "test his intuition by the rule," Rublev pursues his ideal of classical harmony in a vision full of luminous spirituality.¹⁸

Of all the Quattrocento painters, Piero della Francesca was probably the most accomplished master and colourist. His works are to be considered more eminently symbolic than those of any other contemporary. It is true that in his *Triumphs of Federigo Montefeltre and Battista Sforza* he, also, sacrifices something to contemporary taste (see those Cupids, Virtues, Unicorns, etc.) but that knowledgeable use of sign-language which modern iconology is so pleased to find in Renaissance art is lacking in his allegories. Here, we are above all aware of the noble morality of the human character, the clarity of distance, the silvery light of a timeless sky.

Piero della Francesca gives his *Mary Magdalene* of the cathedral of Arezzo the appearance of an indefinable Virtue, and the oil jar which she holds in her hand clearly plays the part of an emblem. The closeness to allegory comes from an intention to convey meaning beyond that of the simple legendary character. But unlike pure allegory, the painting studies the feminine temperament with the greatest attention. This is conveyed by the generous drapery, the noble posture of the silhouette which is clearly outlined in the opening of the arch. Here the ideal takes shape by means of the

¹⁸ M. Alpatov, "La signification de la Trinité de Roublev," *Studi vari di umanità in onore di F. Flora*, Milan, 1963, p. 825.

pictorial form itself, and we grasp it through contemplative reflection, without ever being able to exhaust it.

In this way, the cycle of frescoes at Arezzo seem to be one of the most remarkable manifestations of Renaissance symbolic art. This symbolism arises above all from the polyvalence of the images. Literally, these frescoes tell the story of the Holy Cross, from the Old Adam to Constantine. In the context of this literal meaning, the painter has kept very closely to the text of the *Légende Dorée* by Jacques de Voragine, as well as to other more ancient iconographic types. But the semantics of his work does not stop there. Behind the literal meaning we can very clearly see an underlying one. This second meaning is already manifest in the arrangement of the pictures, which are placed in pairs instead of following chronological order. The story of the Cross changes into a study of various states of human existence: the patriarchal past, (*the Death of Adam*) communal life (*the Invention of the Cross*) life at Court (*Adoration of the Cross and the Meeting of Solomon*), and, finally, scenes of war (*the Victories of Constantine and Hercules*). Some of these frescoes give rise to a multiplicity of meanings which spring to the eye: the masculine personage who is carrying a heavy tree-trunk with difficulty is at once an evocation of the story of the Cross, a scene of everyday life, an *a posteriori* premonition of Jesus' Calvary, and a composition which joins together with incredible skill the diagonal of the trunk against the silhouette of the mountains, surmounted, as with a precious piece of material, by a streak of the sky traversed with long clouds.

The evangelical scenes are enriched by contemporary characters, (the emperor Palaeologus, the artist, the patron of the arts) and the metaphor confers a polyvalent meaning to each element of the fresco at the same time. Its limits widen so far as to convey the presentiment of an indistinct aspiration. The auxiliary details are balanced by others which have universal value. Behind the sacred scenes the antique myths and the characters of epic are transparently drawn.

In Piero della Francesca the artistic form becomes singularly active, everything contributes: the space, the perspective, silhouette, corporal harmony, the arabesque quality of the lines, the limpidity of the colours. In *The Queen of Sheba adoring the*

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Cross, the falling lines of the two ladies' robes seem to cover the piety of the crowned one with an awning, rather like a musical cadence or a poetic alliteration. It is difficult for us to decide which the master placed first, the ideal or the pictorial form, the meaningful message or the colour. In any case they are inseparable in this work. It was the reign of what the English critic Clive Bell has so felicitously called *the significant form*.¹⁹

In the second half of the XVth century in Florence, at the time when the court of the Medici was infatuated by Platonism, by the world of ideas, of beautiful aspirations, and the inner meaning of things (*ragione*), art continued to display its refusal to restrict itself to the simple reproduction of the visible world. But this situation cannot be explained simply as the effect of the propaganda of Platonic views, to which Marsilio Ficino gives way. It must not be forgotten that art was posing itself new objectives independently of this infatuation with humanism. Certainly the painters of the time must have been greatly in agreement with the view that contemporary thinkers took of an art and poetry which were capable of helping Man to reach the Divine, the Beautiful, the Music of things.

For the rest, let us bet that Ficino took great pains to influence the artists by his example or his advice. It is well known that he claimed verbal art took precedence over the plastic arts, and that this was a grave misunderstanding of the brilliant artistic promotion of a period to which posterity has done ample justice.²⁰ As for the pictures he appreciated, such as *Heraclitus weeping*, and *Democritus laughing*, they were more a matter of didactic allegories than of the symbolic art with which we are concerned here.²¹

The difficulties which the Renaissance painters soon came up against when they aimed to restore the prestige of symbols came partly from their previously accomplished ability to reproduce reality. It must be said that the Renaissance was at once enriched and weighed down by what the ancient aesthetics called *mimesis*. It took pains to raise itself to the heights from which one may observe pure beauty, the secret music of the universe. This was

¹⁹ C. Bell, *Kunst*, Dresden, 1922.

²⁰ E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, 1967, p. 127.

²¹ E. Wind, *op. cit.* p. 48.

an exercise within the scope of only some geniuses, and which caused them unspeakable creative torment.

Since A. Warburg,²² modern iconology has done much towards elucidating the metaphorical message of many of Botticelli's works. The analysis always started from texts which were either antique or contemporaneous with the painter, from which he might have been able to draw inspiration. Yet this analysis was wrong in not establishing a starting point for a textual illustration, which is allegory, on the one hand, and on the other, from what made the painter free to rise to mythology, to the figurative symbol, without leaving the realm of art.

Many of Botticelli's works which possess all the seductive qualities which he is acknowledged to hold, may be considered as simple allegories conforming to the spirit of the time. This is the case with *la Fortezza*, which, with some analogous painting by the brothers Pollaiuolo, was destined to decorate the premises of the Tribunale di Mercanzia in Florence. Of course Botticelli's work far surpassed that of his fellows. What they show us is reminiscent of puppets whose allegorical meaning is conveyed without any slyness, by their attributes. As for Botticelli's *Fortezza*, it presents us with a living and typical character, whose distinction yet suggests a premonition of the Sybils that Michelangelo was to paint later on in the Sistine Chapel. The robust woman seems to have forgotten all about the martial emblem she holds in her hand: she leans her dreaming head in the same way as most of Botticelli's madonnas.

The four feminine personages in the former collection of the Earl of Rosebery, in London—one embracing an enormous bouquet of flowers, another carrying a sheaf on her head—appear also to be typical seasonal allegories. The sheaf qualifies Summer, an evocation of the capitals of ancient caryatids²³; it is an excellent find. The *Minerva and the Centaur* of the Uffizi Gallery also has all the appearance of an allegory, in praise of the wisdom of Lorenzo and the prudent government of the new Athens; on the

²² A. Warburg, *S. Botticelli's Geburt der Venus und Frühling*; 1893; E. Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1945, VIII, p. 7-61; E. Panofsky, op. cit., p. 191; P. Francastel, *La réalité figurative*, Paris, 1965, p. 272.

²³ L. Venturi, *Botticelli*, Vienna 1937, p. 13-14.

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other hand one notes an expression of suffering on the face of the centaur which is similar to that of a Saint John the Baptist and a product of the painter's rich imagination.²⁴ The same comments are relevant to the *Calumny of Appelles*, where the young woman, deprived of her finery, represents Truth, and the old Shrew rigged out in her cape, Calumny. Here, the creative element is to be sought out in the way the painter incarnates abstract ideas in a pictorial form: naked Truth shines with whiteness, Calumny is nothing but a black stain which offends the eye.

Apparently Vasari saw an allegorical picture in Botticelli's *Primavera*, although as the actual personage of Spring is absent, it has been replaced by antique divinities and personages from mythology who are relevant to the awakening of nature in spring: the "earthly Venus" pursued by Zephyr, and the nymph Chloris herself transformed into Flora, the three Graces and Mercury. Today we know the literary sources from which this composition draws its inspiration (Politian, Homer, Horace and Ovid). Everything points to the idea that the painter had worked out a veritable plan of action before he picked up his brush. Basically, virtually nothing happens in this painting. If Zephyr is teasing the Nymph, and if Cupid is getting ready to let fly an arrow at one of the three Graces, one must remember that these two personages are no more than the attributes of Chloris and Venus. Similarly, the dancing Graces are no more than a simple element of the line made by these fine full length figures.

A critic has sounded the alarm against any inclination to turn Botticelli into the docile executant of such a programme.²⁵ And yet, is it not true that scholarly elaborations are here coming before artistic intuition? The matter is particularly delicate in the famous group of the three Graces. We do not consider that the illustration of the philosophic subject of misunderstanding and harmony, the basis of the universal order, need be seen there. It is much more probable that the painter was thinking then of antique models, and also of the three young girls in Ghiberti's relief of *Jacob and Esau*. And anyway if one does not cling to this generalisation, and tries to confront Botticelli's three Graces scru-

²⁴ A. Chastel, *Arte e umanesimo al tempo di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, Turin, 1964, p. 267.

²⁵ L. Becherucci, *La Primavera di Botticelli*, Florence, Forma e Colore, s.a.

pulously with their supposed prototype, it is soon established that they are most attractive in the ways in which they differ. The distinction of the personages, the exquisite elegance of the middle figure with her head framed by the entwined arms of her companions, the ineffable richness of the eurhythmic relationships, the quality of the Arabesque, all this is pure creation. One may look for it in vain in the medals of Fiorentino, in Cossa's work, or in the ancient reliefs. Let the learned say which of the three Graces is Chastity, which is Pleasure. What we have there is the symbol of a whole slice of history, as we have the famous verses of the song of Lorenzo dei Medici. Unlike the preceding group, the metamorphosis of Chloris has not been allowed final plastic expression. We have to complete it by turning to literary commentary. The flower which is sketched in the mouth of the lovely creature is an emblem and nothing more. It does not lead us into the poetic world of plants which the painter delighted in itemising in his meadows sown with corolla or on Flora's gown decorated with the same motif.

The painter had to unify into a coherent group all these personages drawn from texts. It is like a carnival procession, what is described in the second part of *Faust* as Italian *Mummenschanz*. In order to invest his painting with a little of the "music of the spheres," Botticelli has sought out a rhythmic composition and rounded contours, made to coordinate well together. In the course of execution, an unexpected motif seems to have asserted itself out of line: in her attempt to escape Zephyr, Chloris, a gracelike form swathed in a transparent robe, is so strongly evocative of the three dancers that one is convinced that she is hastening to join their roundel, which is sufficient to balance the two groups on both sides of Venus, who is as timid and reserved as a Quattrocento Virgin of the Annunciation.

Critics generally consider that the heroine of the *Primavera* is an earthly Venus, while that of the *Birth of Venus* is a heavenly one.²⁶ The main difference between the two paintings is, in our opinion, quite other, viz: in the much more markedly allegorical character of the former. It seems as if the painter had felt what Dante felt when he stopped applying himself to the versification

²⁶ E. Wind, op. cit. p. 118-121.

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of theological thought and flew up in one swoop to the heights of lyrical creation, to poetic vision. *The Birth of Venus* is not a gallery of allegorical figures, each calling forth a story. It is rather the product of plastic creation instinct with poetry. The painter was able to sense what was common to the myths of divine manifestation in ancient times, pagan times, and in mediaeval and Christian times.

The affinity, which we have already pointed out, with the traditional theme of Baptism (and also with the Coronation of the Virgin) is not the fruit of intentional imitation. On the contrary, it is the result of a deliberate desire to return to the the myths which nourish all ancient and mediaeval civilisation.²⁷ There is no need to decipher this painting is if it were a riddle or a charade. It is enough to seek a message in what the painting reveals to us. The group formed by the Zephyrs and the Grace on the right-hand side—the one presenting the goddess with a veil—seems to make a sacred ambo around her (there we have a plastic metaphor). From this point of view, Botticelli's composition may be compared to that of the *Madonna del Parto* by Piero della Francesca (also a plastic metaphor), in which the vision appears framed by two angelic beings. The dynamic elan of the pair of Zephyrs, the force of their breath, finds a marvellous echo in the graceful movement of the goddess, in the fine disorder of her golden hair. In contrast to the gigantic shell, she gives the impression of a precious ornament. The meaning of the picture is no longer dependent upon the philological commentary: it is a painting done to be contemplated, to be taken over by the play of the imagination, to arouse amazement before the wonderful and unusual phenomenon: in this nude which bursts on the sunny Mediterranean air; the principle of Beauty is clearly evident, and remains inexplicable.

Leonardo da Vinci, also, evinced rare ingenuity in his enigmas, his prophesies, and his allegories. But his allegorical drawings preserve a much more traditional character. Many were done to order, for example on the occasion of the consecration of Lodovico il Moro, or the Concordat made between Francis I and Leo X. Leonardo drawings are as beautiful as is everything

²⁷ E. Gombrich, *op. cit.* E. Panofsky, *op. cit.* The resemblance to a Coronation of the Virgin has been noted by G. Dunaev in his unedited study of Botticelli.

which came from his hand. But at no time does he raise himself above the middle level of allegory.

In the series of drawings which he devotes to the *Flood* Leonardo does, however, show an authentic genius of philosophic vision.²⁸ The language which he employs here is that of symbolic art. It is no longer the fruit of observation, as in the red chalk drawings at Windsor on the theme of the *Storm*, nor of imagination stimulated by the sight of old cracked walls. Within the limits of a modest leaf from a sketch-book, the artist manages to give the terrifying effect of a calamity of cosmic dimensions. In it there is neither high nor low, neither right nor left. Powerful billows curl round the clouds and the torrents of water in fantastic convolutions like the hair of a Gorgon, or the disturbing spirals of a titanic machine. Yet a certain order can be seen in these capricious curves: evidently the artist shows us some signs, but we cannot discover their secret, and to acknowledge this plunges us into a terrified stupor. All this was drawn in a kind of prophetic delirium. It is the hermetic language of the visions of St. John the Evangelist.

The ceiling of the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican has been decorated by Raphael with the typical allegories of Poetry, Philosophy, Law and Theology. Between the medallions biblical or mythological scenes in the same vein have been inserted. As for the famous Raphael wall frescoes, they are clearly organised according to a strict programme and relate to the same spheres of human activity. Some have thought that it was suggested by a Benedictine sage, as the chief protagonists in the scene of the *Dispute* are from that religious order.²⁹ Let us say that we have almost no information about the way those plans may have arisen³⁰ and that we are reduced to guessing at what is attributable to theologians, and what is the painter's responsibility. H. Wölffling used to inveigh against visitors to the Stanza who were only interested in the identity of Raphael's characters,

²⁸ J. Gantner, *Leonardo's Visionen*, Berne, 1958.

²⁹ H. Guntmann, "Zur Ikonologie der Fresken Raphaels in der Stanza della Segnatura," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 1958, p. 37.

³⁰ P. Hirschfeld, *Mazene. Die Rolle des Auftragegebers in der Kunst*, Munich, 1968, p. 140. Cf. the text of P. Bembo's letter of 1 January 1505 concerning the invention and fantasy of the artist. Hartlaub, *Giorgione's Geheimnis*, Munich, 1935 p. 5.

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without trying to go more deeply into his artistic merits. Nowadays, it can be said that Wölfflin's warning has remained ineffectual: modern art historians have eyes for nothing but the story, the iconography of this great fresco.

And yet the slightest awareness is enough for a grasp of where the story ends and the masterly creation begins. As to the part played by Plato and Aristotle, two of the characters in the famous *School of Athens*, the stage-manager's directions are in evidence. The theatrical gesture shows clearly that they are conceived as allegories of philosophic idealism and of natural philosophy.

But Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican tell us much more than the Pope's advisors who worked out the scenario ever envisaged.³¹ We have grown so used to the traditional, if inexact, designations of the Stanza della Segnatura that we easily lose sight of the real truth. And their aim hits one in the eye: it is to present the various forms of the *Human Condition*. In the *Dispute*, the disposition of the characters in two hemispherical arrangements gives a feeling of the celestial and the earthly hierarchies. The *School of Athens*, for its part, boldly paints a universe where liberty reigns, and where characters arranged in little groups are written into the pictorial version of the ideal city in echo to the perfect architecture. It is not only at *Parnassus* that the protagonists lit by Poetry may find a welcome asylum, in the lap of collusive nature. Visibly, the painter intended to show by this that man may still be a winsome and beautiful creature at all levels of his condition.

Allegory and symbol were to take a special place in XVIth century Venetian painting. As with other Italian schools, one finds here quantities of allegorical paintings signed by Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, Veronese, etc. In the monumental paintings of the Doge's palace, the allegories are meant to glorify his Serene Highness' fortune and power.

And yet, in Venice too, and maybe even more than in the other cities of the peninsula, there is a desire to get beyond the cerebral,

³¹ It is paradoxical that H. Gutmann, (op. cit.) affirms that the poets are represented by Raphael on Parnassus as prophets, while the author does not take into consideration the fact that the greater painter was also a poet and a prophet, and considers him in his study as the docile illustrator of a literary programme.

allegorical style and enrich the message by introducing symbolic elements. As everywhere else, this is accompanied by a wide diffusion of Platonic ideas. And it is certain that similar phenomena were at work in other areas of culture. This is borne out by the publication of so fantastic and so symbolic a novel as Polyphilus' *Hipnerotomache*.

The division made by the Venetians between allegory and symbolism is clearly expressed in Titian's youthful work "Earthly Love and Heavenly Love" and in Giorgione's "Tempest," two equally famous works.

Titian draws inspiration from the basis of Italian neo-Platonism with its doctrine of two Venuses, one earthly, the other heavenly.³² The woman in luxurious drapery is an allegory of earthly beauty: secular, opulent, while her companion being stripped bare represents beauty of a higher kind, celestial. The Cupid drawing water from the well represents passionate love. The well like a sarcophagus represents the abode of the dead turned into a source of life. The horse in the relief may be interpreted to be bestial passion tamed by a riding-whip. The countryside also has an allegorical function: a castle in the background of Earthly Beauty, and a pastoral scene and rustic bell-tower behind Ideal Beauty.

Is it not a programme strictly weighed, rather artificial, in short unwieldy in its philosophical whimsicality, erudite over-emphasis and pedantry, that was suggested to the artist to illustrate the literary text in an intelligible, pictorial form? The younger painter has taken advantage of this handbook guide to give a brilliant display of his talent. The simple contrast between the outrageously clad woman and her denuded companion was an assurance of success, while the scenery was an opportunity to give his natural lyricism free rein, even if its role in this painting was an auxiliary one. Titian performs his task triumphantly, endowing an artificial subject with an exquisite sensual flavour; it is only because of the painting's structure, with two protagonists placed upstage like in a parade, that the painting does not get further than the illustration, the *Mummenschanz* referred to earlier.

In a recent interpretation, which seems to us highly pertinent,

³² H. Tietze, *Titian*, Vienna s.a. I, p. 91; E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, New York, 1967, p. 150; E. Wind, op. cit. p. 142.

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E. Wind no longer sees Giorgione's famous *Tempest* as a mythological scene, which many researchers have tried in vain to decipher.³³ In its present state, the painting is definitely an allegory. The mother giving the breast is Charity, the Lancer with a halberd is Power. It is true that analogous subjects abound in paintings attributed to the school of Giorgione.³⁴ But we do not go along with the author when he limits the relevance of this eminently poetic work of the Venetian master to the allegorical message he finds in it.

In comparison with Titian's painting, Giorgione's presents an infinitely more complex semantic structure. Its meanings are multiple. It only became an allegory of Charity after the painter had added the personage of the Lancer as a second thought. An X-ray examination shows that at first there was an undressed woman bathing her feet in the stream,³⁵ (and, one must add, she fit much better in the landscape). In fact, originally we had one of those paintings which the Venetians described as "*nudo nel paese*."³⁶

From another point of view, Giorgione's work has something in common with a triptych with a dominant centre panel which breaks with tradition in leaving that part empty. The empty beach, where there is nothing but the stream, separates the two protagonists irrevocably. The little wooden bridge is not enough to connect the two halves of the canvas. Adding to the effect of the broken arcade and the fragments of columns, this gap is a melancholy touch, rather like those romantic ruins which were meant to convey the destruction of the internal unity of things.³⁷

What is more, all this is counterbalanced by the importance which is given to the forces of nature, as expressed in the delineation of the rock and the ferns, and the grey mist which accumulates. Nature's unity is underlined by the warm golden

³³ G. Tschmelitsch, *Harmonia est discordia concors*, Vienna 1966.

³⁴ E. Wind, *Giorgione's Tempesta. With comments on Giorgione's poetic allegories*, Oxford, 1969.

³⁵ L. Coletti, *Giorgione*, Milan, 1955, planche 57.

³⁶ L. Venturi, *Giorgione e il Giorgionismo*, 1912, p. 85.

³⁷ In an excellent paraphrase of the *Tempest*, J. Piper neglected the structure which is reminiscent of a triptych, the landscape becomes panoramic. P. Saches, *Modern Prints and Drawings*, New York, 1954, p. 169.

quality of the greenery and the earth (which is disturbed by only one brighter patch of colour: the man's red cape).

The same forces can be felt in the uneasy succession of light and dark patches in the background. It seems a light effect caused by lightning. Finally, the most remarkable feature of the Venetian's masterpiece is that the essential message is not to be found in the subject or in the action, but in the musicality of the forms, in the eurhythmics of the coloured patches, in the living motion of the paint.

To get the most out of the sensual painting in Titian's canvas, one must first decipher the allegory. In the case of the *Tempest*, this is no help at all: this painting is to be contemplated from every angle, its pictorial texture should be penetrated to its ultimate poetic potentialities. The trees, the clouds, the mountains, the distant buildings, everything, is filled with a kind of spirituality; much is no more than hinted at, and as it thus escapes logical analysis, it irritates and punishes our imagination. The trees spring up above the bodies like the laurel growing from Daphne pursued by Apollo (a metaphor which is lacking in the Laura of Vienna). Titian calls his characters on stage, but it is the authors of the play who pull the strings. In Giorgione's work, the apparently passive actors escape reason like objects, entering into a living communication, their meaning changes with the part of the imagination we apply to it. Finally, this little picture gets big enough to symbolise nature caught at the moment when the blind forces are awakening and a titanic event is about to take place. From this point of view, Giorgione's *Tempest* has much in common with Leonardo da Vinci's tragic series of the *Flood*.

Throughout the XVIth century we find many Italian painters who produce allegorical works while bent on finding the road to symbolism.³⁸

The *Victory* group executed by Michelangelo in the Palazzo Vecchio, with that marvellous young boy felling the bearded brute, is obviously a typical piece of allegory, like *Honour triumphing over Imposture* by Vincenzo Danti in the National Museum. Let us note in passing that up till now opinion is

³⁸ Creighton Gilbert, "On Subject and Not Subject in Italian Renaissance Picture," *Art Bulletin*, September 1952, p. 202, the author defines the essence of the *Tempest* as "a symbolism."

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divided as to the attitude of Michelangelo within his group to contemporary events.³⁹ On the other hand the characters he presents in the *Tomb of Julius II*, and even more, his Captives in the Boboli Gardens are obvious symbols which words are inadequate to explore or to define in a satisfactory way. The diverse ways in which people have tried to make them into allegories, through reference to the *Dying Prisoner* in the Louvre, are scarcely convincing. Even if there is a place for allegory in the Medici chapel, it is clear that the great Florentine makes an emphatic step into the world of symbols.

One and the other may be found in Bronzino's works. The tapestries executed according to his cartoons which may be seen at the Uffizi—notably *Innocence* and *Flora*—are, without doubt, to be placed in the field of allegory. Each personage has his allegorical meaning, and altogether they make up a coherent system of significations. E. Panofsky classes the London painting *Envy* in the same category.⁴⁰ Indeed, Bronzino is here following an allegorical plan, but in this case the personages break free of the stage-manager's control. The Cupid's sensual caresses, the casual profile, superbly drawn in in the square occupied by Venus, and particularly the group of the nice little scamp and the irascible old gentleman have so much unexpected energy and pure plastic expressiveness; this composition gives rise to so much internal tension that the spectator is taken over, independently of the allegorical meaning. This is a painting which may be enjoyed without knowing the subject. And it is noteworthy that a painter as cold and cerebral as Bronzino was able to draw so near to the world of symbols.

If we contemplate the work of the later Titian now, we see that here symbolism is definitely imposed. This has not, however, prevented the painter from creating, after basic reworking, a typical allegory in his *Spain following Religion*. It was sent to Philip II on these grounds.⁴¹ The woman with a spear is obviously

³⁹ E. Panofsky, *Studies*, p. 231; L. Goldschneider, *Michelangelo. The Sculptures*, New York s.a. p. 14, Ch. De Tolnay, *The Tomb of Julius II*, Princeton, 1954.

⁴⁰ E. Panofsky, *Studies*, p. 86. The allegory of London is of a very different kind from that of Budapest, where the figures are simply confronted in the painting.

⁴¹ E. Battisti, *op. cit.* p. 112; H. Tietze, *op. cit.* p. 247.

Spain, the one bowing her head, the Catholic Church. The thought may be admitted that Neptune's presence is an allusion to the battle of Lepanto. Here, the glories of the master's palette, at the height of his genius, are only one of the seductive elements. Titian's painting is also able to evoke with astonishing masterliness eternally human values of sadness and weakness in the face of strength and energy. A similar conflict can already be seen in Giotto's Paduan fresco of *Joachim's Dream*.

The *Pietà* in the Accademia in Venice, one of Titian's last paintings, does, of course, contain the allegorical personage of Faith with lion-masks, as would be expected, but it also gives rise to a touching interference in the existential levels, and this is what gives it all its tragic power. The weeping women are people of flesh and blood, the Christ—a corpse which life has deserted—Moses and Hope are like statues, and the despairing Magdalene seems to be made of marble. Everything which the old painter put on the canvas with an already faltering hand seems to be set in motion by the action of inexplicable anguish and sadness.

In the *Crowning with Thorns* at Munich, if Christ's ordeal arouses compassion, the whole scene transports us into such a noble and beautiful world that it seems to belie the tragic results from the start. Jesus' athletic body, which is in the tradition of Laocoon, triumphs in the face of his torturers; light sends darkness flying, the witnesses—and notably the Venetian who is as sumptuously clad as the centurion Loguine of Golgotha—seem to be on the point of taking sides with the martyr. The spectacle is made even more impressive by the nocturnal darkness in which it is swathed.

And now one of Titian's very last masterpieces: *The Flaying of Marsyas* (Cromar, Czechoslovakia), which has been pertinently and circumstantially analysed by J. Neumann in his study.⁴² There we are in the presence of one of the most outstanding symbols of the whole Renaissance.

In the composition on the same subject as that treated by Raphael in the Stanza della Segnatura, Apollo's laurel-crowned

⁴² J. Neumann, *Die Schindung Marsyas*, Prague, 1962. This excellent study incurs only one criticism. The author makes efforts to find all the meanings in the painting of which Dante speaks in his celebrated letter to Cangrande, while the symbolism of the XVIth century is of a new kind.

triumph is given pride of place. The ephebus performing the task of executioner presents a splendid dorsal musculature, and is the incarnation of physical strength. The satyr Marsyas relegated to the limit of the picture is no more than the pathetic victim of a cruel execution. Beauty allied to strength triumphs over ugliness: this is Raphael's verdict. In contrast to baroque painters who followed, the details of the flaying are studiously avoided.⁴³

But in Titian's picture, Marsyas becomes an important protagonist. The tortured man's body coincides with the middle axis, the navel being in the geometrical centre of the rectangle. This is enough to determine that the whole composition should have an effect far beyond the artist's original intentions.

Marsyas hangs by his feet as in the crucifixion of the apostles Andrew and Peter. The metaphor is enough to invest him with a martyr's halo. His legs become indistinguishable from the fork of a tree; this sets the forces of nature at odds. The balance of the composition gives the spectacle the character of a ritual sacrifice. The protagonists are at once actors, witnesses, and sympathisers. Even the executioners act with no apparent cruelty, as if they were performing a simple duty. King Midas (whom the painter may have endowed with his own features) is plunged in sombre musings. Apollo is neither the executioner nor the conqueror; he is content to charm the ears of the assembled company with his lute. The child and the dog seem to be aware of the gravity of the occasion. The sight of the torture, far from arousing indignation, seems to cause compassion mingled with a sort of cathartic feeling. The colours in this painting, which is more encumbered with characters than usual, have faded considerably. But it still has the integral charm of an authentic masterpiece. As if to say that "everything which vanishes is only appearance," the painter leads us to the heights where tragedy opens out in its full meaning. The very structure of the painting is changed by this: it is not a bay opening out on the world of phenomena anymore, but a picture of the Universe itself, after the fashion of a gothic rose-window.

In the intervening three centuries which separate the *Lamentations on the Body of Christ* by Giotto and the *Flaying*

⁴³ E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, p. 117. The divergence between the interpretation of this subject by Mr. Wind and that given in this article may be explained by the fact that Mr. Wind based his on the literary sources

of *Marsyas* by Titian, Italian painting evolved considerably. Favourite subjects have changed, new literary sources are now cultivated, from which the painters draw their inspiration, of course; the view of life has changed, and so has the language of painting. The history of art makes a close study of these changes in mentality and style, and we need not go into them here. What must be said is that the will to endow art with symbolic value and to preserve it that way never ceased throughout this long historic development.

It is true, I reiterate, that the artists of the Renaissance aimed first of all at reproducing the world as it was, and that on this count they met with considerable success. These men allowed themselves considerable freedom from the iconographical archetypes they cultivated; this was disallowed in the Middle Ages. They followed philosophy, religion, science and the technology of their time very attentively. Finally, they took a lively interest in problems of perfection and professional enrichment.

And nevertheless, we can say that in the eyes of a number of these artists, there was also a *problem of a higher order*, which we will now attempt to define. They thought that art should proceed from the particular and fortuitous to the general and rigorous; it should reach the deep essence of things through their covering, and get as close as possible to what transcends the world, thus arriving at what their contemporaries called the Music of the Spheres.

Of course, the task was totally inaccessible to those who were resigned to limiting their painting to the simple reproduction of the real, as conceived by Alberti. So it was a matter of transforming art into a system of signs which might be capable of reaching what lies on the other side of the visible anodyne. Which signs do we speak of? Of accepted, numbered signs, holding a key, in other words, to the allegory beneath which can be divined an intention formulated by human reason. But also of the symbol, whose polyvalence increases the chances of arriving finally at the ultimate mystery of existence. And this is what explains the way the Renaissance showed itself as fertile in works aiming at simple reproduction as in works grappling with symbolism.

which might have been known to Raphael, and the author of this article based his on what the great painter's work immediately offers us.

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Nowadays we are in the habit of appreciating the function of “discovery of Man and the Universe” in this art; we are particularly appreciative of the richness and abundance of figurative motifs by which it operates. But it is just as true that any of the great Italian master’s important works of this period also contain some incomprehensible sign—an arabesque, as Delacroix would have called it—an indescribable silhouette, a shape, a motif, a structure. This is the case with the geometrical bodies of a Piero della Francesca, and also with the ingenious tracery of a Botticelli. These signs mean nothing in themselves, but they are consecrated in the art. Their singularity, and impalpable nature, strikes and enriches our eyes in a special way. These metaphors (in plastic art) are usually formed by the assimilation of one object with another (the slender body of a woman and the graceful trunk of a tree), but it is also possible for the familiar object to be likened to some unknown thing, with no common standard of comparison, similar to nothing, unheard-of. This is what Italian Renaissance art has always tried to reach, even when it produced works whose force of impact was intrinsically sufficient. Art then reached regions which no other sphere of human activity could aspire to touch, including science and technology, which were held in such respect at that time.

In ancient times, the Choragus led the chorus into the orchestra, and the drama began. The Italian painter sets loose living characters on his canvas and his work becomes history. But when art deals in symbolism, when it frees signs which reason can no longer control, the characters evade the control of their creator, and one can see the intervention of something which had not been foreseen either in the programme nor by the man who conceived the idea. Then the actors enter into unexpected connections, everything which figures in the painting begins to have a life of its own. The painter puts a line, a stroke on the canvas which call forth other lines and other strokes and it is an imperative from which he can no longer restrain himself. The picture arises from the living interaction of what the painter envisaged and wanted to paint, and of what his work, that surface which possesses its own unity, prompted by its own internal forces, that microcosm, demands of him. In that privileged moment, the creative act leads him to contact with the very foundations of art

and the effects of this incredible contact, of this direct dialogue with the material which he immortalises ineluctably affect the spectator, opening a world for him which contains unsuspected treasures.

In this way, the art of the great Renaissance geniuses took on bit by bit the importance of a revelation, while the artist became a visionary, a prophet who was capable of resting his eyes on things no-one had seen before him. Renaissance pictures were designed to please, and Leonardo da Vinci laid particular insistence on this. But masterpieces like the ceilings of the Sistine Chapel or the *Sistine Madonna*, or even the paintings of Giovanni Bellini and of the masters of Ferrara go far beyond feasting the eyes. Here art works a real miracle, and does so essentially through its recourse to the language of symbolism.

Modern iconology has devoted itself mainly to an interpretation of the art of the Renaissance. Panofsky's studies and those of his following have done much to advance our ideas on the correlation between art and culture at that time. But by the fact of concentrating almost exclusively upon the literary sources, iconology has got into a vicious circle. While the historians' purpose, by definition, should be to discover an extra source of information in art, they agree to take an interest in only that art which has been drawn from the work of poets, moralists, philosophers, theologians and theoreticians.

We have said that allegory came into Renaissance art like an ultimate echo of the waning Middle Ages. But the great majority of mediaeval allegories, particularly those which referred to the Seasons and Tasks, remained simple and universally intelligible, in no way restricting the painter's imagination. On the other hand, Renaissance allegory was a concerted innovation by humanists who were often dominated by somewhat overwhelming erudition and pedantry. Their cold intellectualism had a sedative effect upon the creative moment.

This meant that the use of the symbol did more than merely enrich the information with which the art supplied the spectator. By this initiative the artist affirmed his undeniable right to take part equally with the thinker in the genesis of the new culture. His marked preference for the symbol, at the expense of allegory, showed that the autonomy of art had finally been recognised.