

Article

Nicolas Poussin's Realm of Flora: The Botanical Renaissance and the Mysteries of the Flower, Sign, Circle and Ellipse

Frederick A. De Armas 

Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637, USA;
fdearmas@uchicago.edu

Abstract

In spite of the preeminence of Nicolas Poussin as one of the great classicist painters in seventeenth century France, some of his earlier work has not received the attention it deserves. This article turns to his *Realm of Flora* (c. 1631) in order to study some salient aspects that have been neglected. First, Poussin followed what I call the “Botanical Renaissance.” This study foregrounds which elements he followed and which he transformed. In conjunction with this movement, this article highlights Poussin’s uses of Platonic philosophy through the works of Marsilio Ficino. The importance of Sol in his works is replicated here in the power of the solar rays to nourish nature. Thirdly, we consider the many metamorphoses in the work and their significance. Finally, we turn to the circle in the heavens with the planets, stars and twelve constellations and contrast it with the more elongated circle of the metamorphic figures on Earth in order to highlight the relation between zodiacal signs/stars and the flowers depicted. The circular constellations contrast with an elongated, even elliptical shape of the figures on Earth, perhaps to suggest the conflict, prevalent at the time, between the Copernican heliocentric and circular system with Kepler’s elliptical view of the path of the heavenly planets.

Keywords: Botanical Renaissance; Nicolas Poussin; Marsilio Ficino; Plato; gardens; Flora; Apollo/Sol; metamorphoses; flowers; signs of the zodiac; Johannes Kepler; Nicolaus Copernicus; circle; ellipsis

1. Introduction

Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) was one of the preeminent painters of seventeenth-century France, whose landscapes were prized by many. Such admiration continued in the 19th and 20th centuries, with artists such as Paul Cézanne and Georges Seurat praising him. Although considered one of the great French painters, he spent much of his life in Rome. On the other hand, he did commissions for Cardinal Richelieu and many of his works can be viewed at the Louvre Museum. In spite of his great renown, some of his early works have not received the attention they deserve. This article studies one of these works. When Poussin painted his *Realm of Flora* in Rome circa 1631, he sought to depict the constant change and transformation of humans into other forms in nature much like Ovid had presented in the *Metamorphoses*, construction a universe where change was at its basis.¹ The painting also follows new humanistic approaches to botany, which arose in Florence around the work of Sandro Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci. The latter espoused a minutely accurate depiction of plants and flowers. At the same time, Leonardo’s work flourished next to the philosopher who revived Plato for the Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino. Thus, while the *Realm of Flora* became the apogee of what we refer to as the Botanical



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Renaissance, it also suggests a novel view of the heavens, thus breaking with the past and subtly incorporating Johannes Kepler's theory that planets moved in elliptical orbits, not circular ones, as previously believed. This essay, then, will begin with the Botanical Renaissance, thus showing the importance of Flora, flowers and gardens—a necessary overview of a neglected field, now that the environment is becoming a key focus of attention. The second part of the essay will describe how Poussin was indebted to this movement and how its flowering coincides with Ficino's solar power that nourishes the fields and all floras, while separating the Celestial from the Terrestrial forms of love. It will show that the mysteries contained in the painting are associated with the type and placement of flowers and the importance of the self in relation to virtue and ascent. The third and final section, a brief coda, suggests that Poussin presents a harmonious relation between the heavenly constellations and the flowers and figures of the work. At the same time, it also suggests that the circular versus quasi-elliptical forms in the canvas may point to the clash between the old and the new astronomy.

2. The Botanical Renaissance

In the late 15th century, Leonardo sought to write a treatise on painting. However, the idea was set aside since he soon sought to decipher the complexities of the human body.² Over the years, the treatise on paintings seemed ever more feasible since so many of his notebooks dealt with this topic. Although the volume never came to fruition, after Leonardo's death, Francesco Melzi, who was his friend and assistant, compiled the *Codex Urbinas*, which would later serve as a basis for such a treatise. Nevertheless, even this was lost among the many manuscripts that surfaced and disappeared over time. Finally, an abridged version was published in France in 1651, translated into Italian and French.³ Illustrations from other artists, particularly those derived from Nicolas Poussin and his studio, replaced Leonardo's (Steinitz 1953; Sparti 2003). Indeed, Poussin carefully imitated and transformed Leonardo's ideas on art. While art historians have paid attention to a number of parallels and contrasts between Leonardo and Poussin,⁴ the uses of botany by these two artists need further study. The first part of this essay will then point to Leonardo as one of the initiators of the Botanical Renaissance. His work and those of Botticelli and others influence Poussin's *The Realm of Flora*, also called *The Kingdoms of Flora*.

The rediscovery of Greco-Roman antiquity was one of the key aspects of the Renaissance. These discoveries led among many others to the Botanical Renaissance. In ancient Greece, Theophrastus initiated the field of botanical studies with his *History of Plants*, where he classifies and analyzes over five hundred plants. Alexander the Great even sent him some plants from the Indus River to improve his collection and classification. Many of these plants were again discussed in Pliny's *Natural History* where, in book 21, he describes a series of flowers, beginning with the rose, the lily and the narcissus. He brings them to our view, as when the bud turns to flower. He describes, for example, the many types of roses as well as their uses in unguents and in garlands—locating such chaplets in writers as old as Homer (Pliny the Elder 1855; 21.10). When these and other works were translated in the Renaissance, they led to a new enthusiasm concerning floras. Indeed, Renaissance botanists sought to compare ancient plants with the ones that flourished so many centuries later. It could well be stated that the Medici family in Florence, beginning with Cosimo I the Elder (1389–1464), propelled what we are calling the Botanical Renaissance. As Lusia Tongiorgi Tomasi has shown, this movement in Florence included the study of natural history, the depiction of plants and flowers in treatises on plants, and the practice of horticulture. These scientific developments were related to the Platonic philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, to the poetry of Angelo Poliziano and Lorenzo the Magnificent, and the new conception of gardens associated with the ancient goddess Flora.

The idea of the garden as a space of leisure as well as philosophical conversations spread from ancient Rome, with its famous villas and gardens, as those created by Hadrian at Tivoli, to a Renaissance Florence impelled by the Medici. Indeed, the 36 villas with gardens created by the Medici in Tuscany, “marked the demise of the feudal occupation of the land and the fortified building type in favor of a conception of the territory as a pacified place where architecture was in a renewed dialectical and open relationship with the innate natural features and the surrounding landscape.”⁵ Indeed, “the third grand duke Ferdinando I, commissioned a Flemish artist, Giusto Utens, to depict the Medici villas in a series of fourteen large lunettes for a room in the Villa di Artimino. This unique collection of paintings, executed between 1598 and 1599, provides us with a good idea of what these villas, with their surrounding gardens, must have looked like during the sixteenth century” (Tongiorgi Tomasi 2002, p. 33). The notion of gardens spread all over Italy and beyond, expanding its scope. Figures such as Ulisse Aldrovandi taught natural sciences at the University of Bologna. He organized expeditions to create an herbarium and even started a public garden with a wealth of plants and herbs at Bologna in 1568, which is now part of the University. Indeed, “plant professors” were now appointed at different universities, and they were in charge of such gardens—mainly for the purpose of study, often medicinal.⁶

Nevertheless, we remember the Botanical Renaissance in Florence most of all through the art it produced, including four painters associated with the Medici, Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Francesco Bacchiacca and Jacopo Ligozzi. This movement can see its first sprouting in Botticelli’s *Primavera* (1481–1482). In this mythological painting, the figure of Flora spreads the flowers of spring, accompanied by Venus and the three Graces. Guido Moggi—former director of the Botanical Garden in Florence, has identified around 190 flowering plants in the painting, and “about 138 real individual plants” which bloom around Florence in the months of March, April and May (Moggi 1986, p. 106). Just as astounding “Some sixty individual flowering plants decorate Flora’s robe” (Moggi 1986, p. 108). In literature, Angelo Poliziano’s *Stanze per la giostra* (1475), a source-text for the *Primavera* sings of the many-colored flowers in the garden of Venus, but also describes a series of flowers that derive from a human metamorphosis, where their body or blood becomes a flower—thus following Ovid and anticipating Poussin:

Hyacinth has written his sorrow upon his breast; as usual, Narcissus mirrors himself in the stream; in a white gown hemmed with purple, pallid Clytia turns with the sun; and Adonis renews his weeping to Venus, Crocus shows three tongues, and Acanthus laughs. (Poliziano 1979, stanza 79)⁷

Leonardo da Vinci, who sought to study plants in a more scientific manner, advanced the Botanical Renaissance in many ways. We possess, for example, a *Study of Flowers* in pencil prepared at the same time as Botticelli’s *Primavera*. He also provides a detailed list of flowers in the *Codex Atlanticus* (f. 324r). Such was his interest in the exact description of flowers and plants, that some art historians, while accepting the Louvre version of his *Virgin of the Rocks* (circa 1483–1486), doubt that the version at the National Gallery in London was done by him. While the Louvre painting shows very accurate flowers such as an Iris and a Jacob’s Ladder, the plants in the London canvas are invented (Alberge 2014). Ann Pizzorusso, for example, complains of the inaccuracy of the London painting: “The flora is also diverse through-out the picture. The plants in the foreground resemble cultivated annuals needing considerably more light than would be available in the grotto” (Pizzorusso 1996, p. 198). Other paintings and sketches by Leonardo such as *Leda and the Swan* also foregrounds the accuracy of the flora, with its wood anemone and marsh marigold (Meyer and Glover 1989, p. 75).⁸ Indeed, his *Treatise on Painting*, published posthumously in 1651, contains important sections where botany is applied to painting such as “The branching of

trees with their leaves” (Da Vinci 1989, p. 181), and “On the luster of the leaves on trees” (Da Vinci 1989, p. 184). It is no wonder that for the Sforza Duke of Milan, he frescoed a room called *Sala delle Asse* (Room of Knots) (1498) formed by eighteen painted trees that ascend to the vaulted ceiling. Charles Nicholl describes it as a “rhapsody in green. A dense tracery of intertwined branches that covers the walls and ceiling, creating a lush interior” (Nicholl 2004, p. 317).

Leonardo da Vinci also impelled a series of portraits of the goddess Flora, which hid the presence of individual women of the period. Indeed, he may have hinted at Flora as goddess, mistress or courtesan.⁹ His portrait, if it did indeed exist, has been lost, but a painting by Glan Pedrini at Basildon Park seems closest: “Shown in half-length and on a scale corresponding to the outside world, the figure is capable of a direct and intimate rapport with the beholder. With her glance and her alluring smile, she, indeed, establishes this contact and thereby is transformed from a remote personification to a present and real attraction. Unmistakably, Leonardo stressed Flora’s nature as carnal seducer. . .” (Held 1961, p. 211). Not long afterwards, Titian painted a portrait of *Flora* (1515) where a beautiful young woman in simple white clothing holds a bouquet of spring flowers including violets, rosebud and jasmine.¹⁰ Almost contemporaneous is Palma Vecchio’s *Flora* (c. 1520) who portrays a young woman wearing a chemise that falls from her shoulders as she holds in her right hand a bunch of flowers including forget-me-nots, buttercups and primroses. Many other such paintings existed, from Paris Bordone’s *Flora, Roman Goddess of Spring* (16th century, undated) to Rembrandt’s *Flora* (c. 1654). The playfulness and erotic atmosphere found in many of these paintings, go back to their antique source, Ovid’s *Floralia*. In book 5 the roman poet describes the feast which celebrates spring. Compared to others, it is “marked by greater wantonness and broader jests” (5.330-31). Bacchus loves her floral crowns and “a rakish stage fits Flora well” (5. 347).

Flora, goddess of flowers and deity of spring was not just celebrated in painting but also in sculpture. The discovery of a colossal marble statue in the ruins of the baths of Caracalla, based on a lost smaller Greek original, the *Flora Farnese*, was restored by Guglielmo della Porta. It led to a series of copies starting in the sixteenth century. An actual copy of the statue, with some changes, appears in Peter Paul Rubens’ *Garden*. As a copy of the lost statue by Praxiteles, it now holds flowers in her right hand (Muller 1989, p. 34). As goddess of the flowers, she thus appears in numerous Renaissance gardens.

3. Poussin, Heir to the Botanical Renaissance and the Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino

The Realm of Flora is a mysterious painting, in its composition, ownership, and its many hidden mysteries and correspondences. Art historians have noted how curious it is that Poussin prepared the drawing for the *Realm of Flora* three years before the painting and how much it departs from the drawing. Indeed, the painting “represents an abrupt stylistic shift” as he creates a series of works that transform the “crowded sensual appearance” into “serenity and restraint” (Beeny 2021, p. 9). Curiously, Fabrizio Valguarnera commissioned it—and he turned out to be an art merchant who became known as a jewel thief. Indeed, he was caught, tried and sent to the most frightful prison in Rome, the Tor di Nona (Costello 1950).¹¹ During the Renaissance and early modern period this jail held such famous figures as Beatrice Cenci, Benvenuto Cellini and Giordano Bruno. The subject matter of Poussin’s painting may turn away from Flora and be as eerie as the fate of its purchaser. At first, the paintings seems haphazard, as we view Flora frantically dancing surrounded by several groups that are identified by specific flowers. However, as Thomas Worthen explains, “Flora is no longer an honored goddess. She is now an unseen spirit wreaking her will on a choice group of poor mortals. They are acting out their deaths and transformation” (Worthen 1979, p. 581). For

Walter Friedlander, the motivation is clear: “there is a certain melancholy for these figures, the victims of their own passion” (Friedlaender 1966, p. 126). Troy Thomas assures us that “the figures in the painting do not achieve a higher state of being, but become flowers, symbolizing death through a *vanitas* iconography” (Troy 1986, p. 226).

Turning away from pessimistic interpretations, other studies, whether focusing only on this painting or linking it to the whole of his work, propose more uplifting views. Anthony Blunt (1966) encourages viewers to consider Poussin’s paintings not just as aesthetic objects, but also as vehicles for philosophical and poetic ideas. Turning to Ovid, he emphasizes the painting’s concern with the cyclical nature of life, with resurrection and reincarnation. While some art historians view Poussin as a cerebral or *peintre-philosophe*, who hides much wisdom in this and other works, others prefer to see love as a force that carries Poussin from one work to another: “envisage l’amour comme un aiguillon tout au long de la carrière de Poussin, jusqu’à ses derniers jours” (Hammache 2023). If love is at the center, so is nature. The directors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit held in 2007 affirm: “in his landscapes we encounter nature reconfigured and ennobled. . . Dense with literary associations and profoundly poetic. . . Embellished with subjects derived from Classical and Renaissance literary sources” (de Montebello and Viar 2008, vii). The painter’s change of style towards nature’s vast poetic world could well have started with the *Realm of Flora*. Indeed, for Emily Beeny, its beauty and dynamism cannot be denied: “Just as Flora’s dance transforms mortals into flowers, the painting transforms suffering into a cosmic order; mortality itself into beauty (Beeny 2021, p. 11).

Poussin’s *Realm of Flora*, I would argue, looks back at the Botanical Renaissance, including many of its features, already found in Leonardo and thus exalting and summarizing a whole era. The painting also embodies a particular vision of today’s ecocriticism. In it, as in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* we witness the delicate equilibrium of natural forces and we confirm how nature is in a constant process of transformation. In one of the early studies on the subject, William Rueckert coined the term “ecocriticism,” as a trend that seeks “to find the grounds upon which the two communities—the human, the natural—can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere” (Rueckert 1996, p. 107). In Ovid and Poussin, these two communities are seen as one. While in today’s ecocriticism apocalyptic events are blamed on human interference, in Ovid (and by extension in Poussin) all natural forces are forever changing and from a human perspective, some of these transformations are seen as apocalyptic. Thus, humanity and nature should not be separate entities, but part of one sphere where only constant is change. The one difference is that the human being, in the manner of Ficino, can ascend and go beyond the material. The brightness of the sun in the springtime may lead to the flourishing of plants, but the spiritual sun can take humans beyond.

Poussin’s canvas is an ode to flowers and to the painter’s ability to re-create nature and its flowers in its most colorful and dramatic manner. It is both an astounding creation where color and movement come together, inviting the viewer to seek an understanding of what the circular or elliptical shapes and movements, on Earth and in the heavens, signify—the carefully choreographed dance of which Emily Beeny speaks. Let us be more specific. The Botanical Renaissance borrowed from the ancients the love of gardens and the tending of flowers. A goddess, either Flora or Venus presided over the space. In Poussin, Flora is not presented as a sculpture, but as a living being dancing triumphantly. The one sculpture present in the painting is a herm, a pillar with a male torso, also exposing his genitalia and thus referring to Priapus, god of fertility. This ancient deity was commonly found in gardens, boosting fertility and suggesting wantonness. A common presence in Renaissance literature and art, we thus find him in an engraving of *Bacchus Surrounded by Putti* by the Master of the Die and published by Antonio Salamanca. Here we find a plump Baccus, drinking wine, surrounded by playful putty who enhance the notion of

playful eroticism. A statue of Priapus, much like the one in Poussin, towers over the scene further emphasizing the generative and the erotic.¹² Poussin utilized the herm as Priapus in several of his paintings, including *A Bacchanalian Revel before a Term* (c. 1632–1633) and *The Triumph of Pan* (1636), where the frenzied erotic impulse is much more evident. Painted in the Realm of Flora with more decorum, it allows for Flora to take center-stage indicating the passionate impulse and consequent generation.

As opposed to Botticelli, who points to the origins of Flora, Poussin only shows her metamorphosed self. The transformation is carefully described in the *Fasti*: “Chloris I was, a nymph of the happy fields. . . Twas Spring, and I was roaming; Zephyr caught sight of me; I retired; he pursued and I fled, but he was the stronger. . . . He made amends for his violence by giving me the name of bride” (5.197–206). Poussin elects not to tell Flora’s backstory, as opposed to Botticelli, and dresses her in green, associating her to vegetation and the greenery of springtime. We are reminded once again of the Botanical Renaissance since some of her features, such as the detail that “he girded her gown below the waist” is “an explicit reference to the Farnese Flora, a colossal first-century statue that was among the antiquities most revered by Poussin and his friends” (Beeny 2021, p. 10). If she is a statue come to life, Priapus is a god in the form of a statue. Both preside over the garden. His masculine power seems to be the passive one, while her feminine presence energizes the garden. She has come to life within the painting to represent the superhuman power of change, but in a very specific manner, in the creation of springtime flowers. Although these may be based on human agony, she exults in her ability to bring change, to resurrect the dead into a living flower.

Flora dances in a way that can be described as either frantic or gracefully energetic. The point here is that she is both a positive and a negative force. As a positive force she creates a beautiful garden where many colorful flowers are exhibited. As a more negative force, she transforms humans into a “lower” realm in what was then viewed as the great chain of being, starting with the celestial and going downwards. Her flowers, although beautiful, are the remnants of humans who have been engaged in excesses of passion. Although their punishment is a beautiful metamorphosis, it is also a step down the ladder of existence. And yet, as will be discussed later, the flowers created are inextricably connected to the signs of the zodiac, the celestial. In many ways, what happens in this painting recalls the platonic vision of Botticelli’s *Primavera* where the union of Zephyr and a nymph brings forth the creation of Flora, who represents the flowers of spring. But this coming down from above, is balanced, at the other end of the painting with a moving again to the heavens as seen in the figure of Mercury. Edgar Wind explains that from an initial *emanatio* at one end of the painting, we perceive that “the lower beings were drawn back to heaven and rejoined the gods (*remeatio*)” (Wind 1968, p. 37). The beautiful flowers in Poussin, although flourishing in a downward turn, aspire to a *remeatio*, a return to the heavens. Flora both brings humans down and yet offers the possibility of future ascent.

Heirs of the Botanical Renaissance will not only appreciate the perfectly delineated flowers, their beauty and their scientifically accurate representation, but also the many mysteries that the attentive viewer may discover in this natural environment, figures that through their excessive passions have called upon Flora. While lacking in some virtues, their almost heroic excesses are worthy of the goddess. Although lacking some virtues, their almost heroic excesses are worthy of a goddess once called “wanton.” These range from Ajax’s excessive desire for Achilles’ shield to Narcissus’ passion for his own image. Let us look at each figure. Closest to the viewer and to the viewer’s left is an imposing warrior. Ajax, a Greek hero of the Trojan War, competes for Achilles’ shield after his death, but loses it to Odysseus. In despair, Ajax plunges his sword into his chest and kills himself, and thus Poussin depicts him. While Ovid transforms him into a purple hyacinth, Poussin shows a

white carnation, symbol of faithfulness, leaving the viewer to ponder the significance of this change. This “mystery” is attuned to that of Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino who saw flowers as images for spiritual ascent, their full bloom signifying the fulfillment of the human being’s spiritual potential. This leaves us with a greater mystery—how can Ajax ascend while committing suicide? The second image further foregrounds the Ficino’s Neoplatonic philosophy. As the viewers follow the images to their right, they come upon the tale of Echo and Narcissus. Poussin, who had composed an Echo and Narcissus shortly before, completely transforms his representation of the myth. In the earlier painting, the Earth colors emphasize Narcissus’ dream of himself, with eyes closed, and the beauty of his body taking up the full horizontal foreground.¹³ Daffodils are already springing by his head and we may imagine a pool in front of him once he wakes from the dream of himself. In the back, Echo seems to be fading. The scene in the *Realm of Flora* could not be more different. True, Narcissus preserves a reddish tunic and Echo is in a white-blue of evanescence. However, he is not daydreaming of himself but is avidly looking into a container filled with water, which reflects his own image. She holds the container listlessly, knowing he can never see her or love her. The narcissus flower is by his knee. Marsilio Ficino picked Narcissus as image for his philosophy of ascent starting from the beauty of the human body and reaching to the higher virtues. Charles H. Carman reminds us that Ficino points to Narcissus as a figure that “most dramatically functions to remind the reader that one is easily misled by material reality—a mistake that is not merely an example of moral misdirection, but a condition of mankind akin we might assume to original sin” (Carman 2012; 23). Even in his letters, Ficino turns to Narcissus. Seeking to console Giamondo della Stufa, he asserts: “Whatever wretch is so deluded as to think that the shadow of man is man, like Narcissus is dissolved in tears” (Ficino 1975, p. 54, Letter 15). He is not to look for Albiera’s shadowed beauty, but to follow “her own clear light” (Ficino 1975, p. 54, Letter 15). In other words, ascend to find the light of her virtues.

In the background, almost protruding between Narcissus and Echo, Clitie gazes at the sun in spite of his overpowering brilliance. She uses her hand to shade her eyes. Forever in love with Apollo-Sun, she will become the heliotrope or sunflower, turning to him even when metamorphosed. Continuing with the mystery of Narcissus, we may believe that Clitie is looking at the light, at the highest, and is neither misdirected nor deceived. In reality, she is looking merely at the outward beauty of the Sun and ignoring the inner mysteries. Delving into several treatises by Ficino, Martin Zemla highlights: “his conception of the Sun which, as the symbol of the invisible God and as a bearer of the divine light, overlaps into the realm of the super-natural” (Zemla 2023, p. 40). Clitie must shade her eyes since she is looking at a planetary body. Rather than gyrating eternally, Ficino would have advised a path of ascent. As Ficino admonishes: “Therefore seek yourself beyond the world” (Ficino 1975, p. 165, Letter 110). Clitie would indeed allow us contemplate the passage of the soul through the spheres as explained in chapter twenty-five of the Hermetic “Poimandres.” Ficino translated the work for Cosimo the Elder in 1463, then published at Treviso in 1471. It describes the passage of the purified soul *ad astra* through the spheres of the planets and the gradual severing of the vicious planetary concretions contracted during the previous descent into its bodily cage (Copenhaver 1992, pp. 1–7).

In the *Realm of Flora*, a space opens between the pair, Echo and Narcissus, and the next myth so that the viewer can gaze at an elongated Flora, dressed in green, in the midst of the many transformations of humans into flowers. We have already viewed her in terms of erotic and generative powers. But we should recall that at the center of Renaissance gardens we have statues of either Flora or Venus. The emphasis on Flora and her generative dance point to one of the two Venuses that are present in Plato’s *Symposium*. While Venus Urania represents celestial love, Venus Pandemos refers to terrestrial desire. Achilleas A.

Stamatiadis emphasizes that with Ficino, the separation between these two types grew in amplitude: “Once we appreciate that Heavenly love is a non-bodily love while Terrestrial love is related to body, form and matter, we can better understand Ficino’s fascination with Heavenly love as described by Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*. It is clear from a letter Ficino sent to Bernardo del Nero and Antonio Manetti that people had been ‘led astray’ in his time by bodily or terrestrial conceptions of love. Therefore, Ficino proposes that non-bodily love as envisioned by Diotima ought to be revived through close study of his *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis*” (Stamatiadis 2022, n.p.). This would lead to beautiful actions. The painting shows amazing beauty, be it in Flora or her floral companions, but the actions performed, although yielding beautiful flowers are not in themselves representatives of the kind of virtues that should stem from the contemplation of celestial beauty. It is as if the canvas serves as a warning that the contemplation of beautiful bodies will not lead to platonic perfections.

After pausing to contemplate her verdant powers, we then move to a lesser-known myth. Here although seemingly entwined, Crocus, in the back was in love with the nymph Smilax, but she spurned him. He holds saffron crocus in his hand, his floral transformation, while she will become mere bindweed, found by Crocus’ left foot. It is a clingy vine with thorns representing the neo-Platonic image of a fallen world, that of bodies seeking to clutch other bodies, remaining forever in the horizontal, and never ascending.

As if turning in a curved manner, we view the two last metamorphoses in the background. Adonis appears diagonally across Ajax, each with a spear. While Ajax uses it to commit suicide, Adonis blandishes it in a vertical manner, showing his intention to go hunting even though Venus pleaded that he stay with her. She worries that the jealous Mars will kill him. He wears a blue tunic, thus creating a second diagonal, this time with Echo. We realize then, that like Narcissus, he is so trapped in his desire that he cannot look at the redemptive power of women. Adonis sees Venus as a mere distraction, not realizing that she might lead him to a higher, albeit not celestial love. Anemone flowers stem from his thigh. Beyond him, we reach the last human form, Hyacinth. Beloved of Apollo, he dies from his beloved’s own disk, as they were engaging in competition. In Poussin, he catches flowers that spring from his injured head. He is a most appropriate human to stand at the end of this row of transformations. After all, he is closest to the god represented above, Apollo himself.

4. Apollo’s Circle and the Floral Ellipse: A Conclusion

The connection between the gardens of Earth and the fields of heaven lead us to some final thoughts. Six main metamorphoses appear in *The Realms of Flora*, forming a rounded space, closer to an ellipse than to a circle surrounding the dancing Flora. In the skies above, Sol/Apollo, in a chariot led by his four horses, circles around the Earth. The painting shows a golden circle around him, the zodiacal constellations that he follows. Etched in the golden circle, six zodiacal signs (Gemini, Taurus/Bull, Aries/Ram, Pisces, Aquarius, and Capricorn/Goat) shine in silver, thus corresponding to the six flowers in Flora’s Garden. We are led to wonder if there is a mysterious correspondence between flowers and signs. More specifically, if we count Smilax lying with Crocus as one transformation, there are six major transformations in Poussin’s canvas. This would thus correspond to Gemini, a double figure, and the closest to the viewer in the golden circle of the zodiac.¹⁴ The stars above, be it planets or zodiacal signs, provide a link in the Great Chain of Being, acting as an intermediary between the Platonic world of Ideas and the human world, and below them to the animals, plants and minerals. In this sense, each flower is related to a particular star or sign of the zodiac. The humans undergoing metamorphoses are intermediates between above and below. The painting suggests that their metamorphoses into flowers

condemn them to a lower realm, since they have failed to be truly virtuous, but in their suffering, they have merited a place with the earthly beauty of the flowers.

There may be, however, one puzzle in the design. While the signs of the zodiac are shown to shine in a perfect circle, the circle below, that of the metamorphic figures surrounding Flora is more elongated, coming closer to an ellipse. Poussin's *Realm of Flora* was painted the year before the appearance of Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, a highly controversial book at the time, and one which remained in the Index of Forbidden Books until 1835. The four speakers debate the heliocentric versus the traditional geocentric cosmic view. Simplicius (the simple minded) is the most fervent defender of the traditional system that places the Earth at the center with the Sun, Moon, planets (wondering stars) and the fixed stars revolving around it. The book was but the apogee of discussions going on for decades. From 1600 to 1610, numerous celestial events and astonishing discoveries in astronomy kept many eyes fixed on the sky. For example, the invention of the telescope, as well as the appearance of the 1604 *nova* (a new star that cannot be created since the heavens is beyond generation and corruption), led to new arguments, such as the Copernican theory, which became more and more discussed at universities such as Salamanca. Tycho Brahe attempted to blend geocentric and heliocentric theories to no avail, while his former disciple, Johannes Kepler, concluded his observations on elliptical orbits, based primarily on his observations of Mars in 1605. Due to complications, he was not able to publish his *Astronomia nova* (New Astronomy) until 1609. Here, he explains that "the orbit is an ellipse with the sun as one focus" (Martens 2000, p. 16). He thus breaks with the sacredness of the circle and with the geocentric cosmos. Curiously, Galileo, the supposed iconoclast, would remain silent on this discovery, even though it would help his heliocentric argument. His silence came from a very different appreciation of art and literature: "Galileo saw in Kepler's ellipses the disturbance and confusion of Holbein's anamorphosis and Tasso's poetry. The ellipse was 'a form in which "perfect order" has been disturbed by the intrusion of rectilinearity.' It was also a form widely used in Mannerism and expressly rejected by the Renaissance" (Machado 2017, p. 240). Indeed, as Erwin Panofsky states, "Galileo could not help but feel that the ellipse is a distorted circle: a form which was, so to speak, unworthy of celestial bodies" (Panofsky 1956, p. 12).

In the midst of the debate between the circle and the ellipse, Poussin composes a work where the circle is reserved for the heavens, while on Earth, the goddess Flora dances in the midst of metamorphic figures that seem to form an elongated circle, approaching the form of an ellipse. Perhaps, like Galileo, Poussin turned away from the ellipse as unworthy of celestial configurations. He does hint of it as an earthly figure but one ruled by a goddess as a way to mirror an ongoing debate.

The *Realm of Flora* attracts by its dance, by the striking metamorphic figures that slowly turn into flowers in what may appear to be a Renaissance garden. In the middle, the goddess Flora, not drawn in the image of a human courtesan or lady, but as a goddess, spreads her flowers moving with the springtime and with the silent assistance of a statue, not of her, but of Priapus, who also impels fertility and the passions. The painting, in some ways, replicates the movement of Botticelli's *Primavera*. We have the downward movement of Zephyr and Chloris in Botticelli, which reflects that of human beings turned into flowers in Poussin. However, the beauty of these flowers and their relation to the celestial, point to their full blossoming, to a future *remeatio*. They will ascend to the celestial spheres and turn into constellations. The whirling movement is like that of the Earth around the Sun, as Apollo stands above depicting six constellations. The ancient mystery of which flower corresponds to which constellation¹⁵ stands in contraposition to the cosmos as circle or ellipse. And the Sun, coursing the heavens, hints at Platonic mysteries and the pursuit of virtue. He illumines those who would follow, although the figures seem consumed by

earthly passion and fall into the Earth as beautiful flowers. The proliferation of blossoms in these examples of the Botanical Renaissance remind us of the delight of creation, while, at the same time, warning of the violence that hides among the flowers, the ever-changing world that leads from the dance of springtime, to the dark mysteries of earthen blooms.

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Notes

- ¹ “Nothing retains its own form; new shapes from old but Nature, the great renewer, ever makes forms from other forms” (Ovid 1916, Book 15, p. 383).
- ² “Leonardo’s early anatomical studies were rather unfocused, for he wished to explain every aspect of the human body—not just structural anatomy, but also conception and growth, the expression of the emotions, the nature of the senses, and so on.” (Clayton and Philo 2010, p. 10).
- ³ Roland Fréart Sieur de Chambray (1606–1676) was the translator.
- ⁴ For example, the French painter diverged from Leonardo’s *sfumato* technique, favoring a more structured and proportional arrangement of light and shadow to emphasize relief and clarity (Cropper 1980).
- ⁵ <https://villegiardinimediceit/en/medici-villas-and-gardens-of-tuscany/> (accessed on 1 September 2025).
- ⁶ <https://plantspeopleplanet.au/botanic-gardens/> (accessed on 1 September 2025).
- ⁷ The many flowers here are the result of amorous, tragic or vengeful events and include the hyacinth, the narcissus, the sunflower or heliotrope, the anemone, the flower with three tongues, the crocus and the acanthus.
- ⁸ Leonardo was deeply interested in the myth of Leda and the Swan: “he executed several studies and at least one cartoon. A completed painting has traditionally been attributed to him, rationalized through other studies, a variety of 16th century supposed copies, and a 17th century description” (Meyer 1990, p. 279). For his intended work, Leonardo executed studies of marsh, field and woodland wildflowers which demonstrate his deep knowledge of botany and his ability to draw and paint flowers and plants (Meyer and Glover 1989).
- ⁹ Some question Julius Held views: “Held further complicated the issue by suggesting that Titian’s and Palma Vecchio’s Floras are actually portraits of courtesans. While the representation of a Renaissance courtesan in the guise of a classical counterpart seems a reasonable conceit, this is only one of a number of possible interpretations. These could be portraits of specific women as Flora, but they could also be paintings of anonymous courtesans rendered in mythological trappings. And need they necessarily represent courtesans at all? Must we assume that women who offer sex are automatically courtesans—women of a specific class and occupation? Must we read the courtesan/Flora tradition so literally? Could these works not also represent mythological Floras offering sexual favors as would a courtesan? Or ideally beautiful women, in the guise of Flora, indicating sexual intentions? (Schuler 1991, p. 217).
- ¹⁰ Some seek to view Titian’s *Flora* as courtesan. For Julius Held, “the picture itself should be considered as an important piece of evidence for the respect and admiration paid to the leading courtesans in the Renaissance [...] The best of them were women of education, taste and talent (Held 1961, p. 213). Others prefer to see this and other related from a different perspective. They “exemplify the cultural conception of the courtesan as embodying the potential to realize a multitude of erotic fantasies” (McVeigh MacLure 2017, p. 33).
- ¹¹ Fabrizio Varguarnera was an Italian noble of Catalan and Sicilian origin who was deeply interested in art. As an art merchant he corresponded with Rubens and van Dyk. He went to the Spanish Court where he had influential relatives. However, he was involved in a diamond theft committed by Manuel Álvarez. He and Álvaro flee through France all the way to Naples where they sold part of the diamonds to the Prince of Conca. While Alvaro returns to Spain, Fabrizio, under the name of Don Antonio, goes to Rome where he exchanges his diamonds for valuable objects, and even commissions two paintings from Poussin. He is recognized at a tavern in 1631 and is arrested.
- ¹² <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/396175> (accessed on 1 September 2025).
- ¹³ https://www.wga.hu/html_m/p/poussin/1/18echo_n.htm (accessed on 1 September 2025).
- ¹⁴ Both Zuccaro and Poussin seem interested in the sign of Gemini. “In the fresco [Zuccaro’s] Flora’s chariot is drawn by the zodiacal signs of spring, and the two winged children on the far left are the Gemini, the sign of May. Poussin uses these Twins, now adorned with garlands, to pull the car of his own Flora, though he modeled his specific children on those in another painting from the Villa Giulia series, the *Triumph of Summer* (Worthen 1979, p. 577).

- ¹⁵ According to the Doctrine of Signatures, plants, animals and minerals reveal their qualities, which may well be medicinal. They also correspond to higher entities such as stars and constellations. The flowers depicted in the painting may well “cure” afflictions emerging from the passions of the former humans. Thus, the garden of Flora can emit a healing balm.

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