ONE

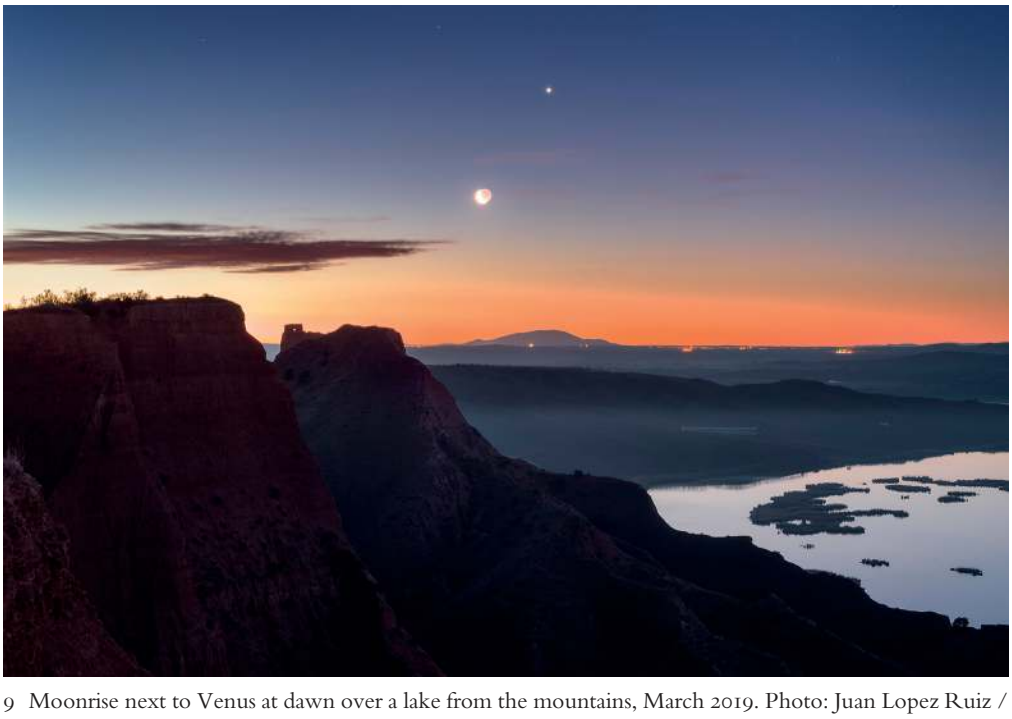
GOLDEN SPLENDOR

Visions of Venus

Oh beautiful Venus, oh sacred light,
oh beneficial splendor, oh blessed star
beautiful above every beauty,
that spreads love from the sublime heaven.[1]
—Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444)

The planet Venus shines in the twilight sky as the evening or the morning star (see Fig. 9). After the Sun and the Moon, she is the brightest light in the heavens. She casts reflections as well as shadows upon the Earth, a radiance that encouraged Renaissance philosophers and poets to describe this planet as the celestial source of love.[2] On several objects from the early fifteenth century, Venus attracts and enflames lovers through her resplendent light. Apparitions of her materialize on a betrothal box, a birth tray, and several wedding chests. Created for the intimate space of the bedchamber, these objects are among the first to represent the goddess outside of encyclopedic, serial depictions of the seven planets or narrative scenes of the Judgment of Paris. Unnoticed by previous scholars, each object presents a vision of Venus, either arrayed in resplendent garments or nude, surrounded by a mandorla of glowing light. These scintillating apparitions enthrall the human figures depicted in the artworks, and it was hoped that they would do the same for their recipients.

Epiphanies of Venus illuminate the verses of Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio, and other Tuscan poets, such as the Florentine Chancellor Leonardo Bruni, whose hymn to the goddess opens this chapter. For these



9 Moonrise next to Venus at dawn over a lake from the mountains, March 2019. Photo: Juan Lopez Ruiz / Alamy Stock Photo

fourteenth- and fifteenth-century writers, the bright light of Venus' star is the source and motive force of amorous and procreative desire, which descends to Earth via her shining splendor. Medieval cosmology explains that the planets transmit celestial virtues to Earth in the form of light rays, a composite theory derived from Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* (90–168 CE) and the writings of Persian philosophers, such as Abu Ma'shar (Albumasar) (787–886 CE) and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980–1036 CE). In Tuscan literature, this concept of Venus' active cosmological splendor merges with optical theories that describe light as the causal agent of sight and the transmitter of images from the eye to the heart.[3] Light's ability to transverse space and then to strike, illuminate, and burn made it a fitting metaphor – like the arrow – for love's power to wound, enflame, and enlighten.[4]

To represent Venus' energetic light on Earth, fifteenth-century artists appropriated the materials and techniques traditionally reserved for sacred epiphanies. They manipulated gold leaf, liquid gold, yellow ocher, and lead-tin yellow to materialize celestial brilliance. They worked with circles, concentric arcs, *vesica piscis*, and rays to symbolize the interaction of heavenly and earthly spheres. Iconographically, this imagery was sacred, and its appropriation for amorous portrayals of Venus may appear transgressive at first; however, writers since the time of Fabius Planciades Fulgentius (fifth–sixth century CE) and Isidore of

Seville (ca. 560–636) had defended astrology with passages from Isaiah 11:2–3 and the apocalyptic writings of the Book of Revelation. Dante, for instance, describes Venus' light as one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.[5] In the visual arts, the merging of sacred and profane imagery may reference this literary syncretism or justify astrological content; however, it also likely stimulated discussion of love's liminal position between the sacred and the profane.

Art historians have argued that the female recipients of these amorous gifts, painted with visions of Venus, may have identified with the goddess as a dominant female or as the "woman-on-top."[6] These interpretations tend to characterize Venus and thereby the receiver of the gift in an assertive, even aggressive light, as a *femme fatale*. In this chapter, I avoid eliding Venus' identity with that of the viewer and argue instead that she should be understood as a cosmological influence on the gifts' recipients. It is important to remember that betrothal boxes, wedding chests, and birth trays were presented to women and/or couples during adolescence, the period of life that the planet Venus governed.[7] In his *Liber Astronomiae* of 1277, Guido Bonatti writes that with regard to human age, "Venus has to signify adolescence," and according to Isidore of Seville, adolescence spans from 14 to 28.[8] Taking this period of young love into consideration, this chapter hopes to shed light on the values and aspirations of Venus' understudies, and through them, the larger society they hoped to join and sustain as lovers, spouses, parents, and leaders.

A GOLDEN MIRAGE

In 1421, a man from the Florentine Bechi family presented a gilt box (Fig. 10) as a betrothal present to his future bride. On the box's lid, Venus materializes in a golden circle of light and encourages a young maiden to open her heart and find happiness in love. The dimensions of this cylindrical box (29 cm diameter and 14 cm tall) are those of a small chest or *forzerino*, typically given by a suitor to his future bride during their engagement.[9] The box's origin has been a subject of debate since the early twentieth century. Millard Meiss argued that it was Sienese; Frank J. Mather declared it to be Umbrian; and John Pope-Hennessy described it as Lombardian.[10] My own research into the box's heraldry, however, suggests that it was commissioned by a Florentine family. The single coat of arms emblazoned twice on the lid's edge is that of the Bechi family, who lived in the quarter of the Black Lion in Santa Croce. The *stemma* is a gold *banda doppiomerlata*, a crenellated band that descends diagonally from the viewer's left to right, against a blue background.[11] Associated with the military and the Guelph party, the *banda doppiomerlata* belongs to a number of Tuscan families; however, different colors and/or subsidiary symbols distinguish each family's coat of arms. For example, the Aldobrandini di Madonna family boasts a diagonal, crenellated band in gold,

10 Marriage casket decorated with the *Triumph of Venus*, 1421, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource

but it is flanked on either side by three stars.[12] The Marzi family of Siena, to whom the box was linked before the advent of color printing, claims a silver *banda doppiomerlata* on a red background, rather than the Bechi's gold band on blue.[13]

Like other round betrothal boxes, the *Triumph of Venus* is constructed from thin pieces of shaved wood, cut and molded into circles, then covered with gesso – gypsum mixed with animal glue.[14] After construction, raised *pastiglie* or molded gesso decorations were applied. Scrolling vines, lacertine tracery, and geometric borders adorn the surfaces of several extant betrothal chests, while others are ornamented with even more elaborate moldings, such as portrait busts or miniature animals. Cennino Cennini offers instructions for sculpting *pastiglia* decorations in his early fourteenth-century *Libro dell'arte*, a handbook of recipes for materials and directions for their technical use. Cennini explains that "with this same gesso, or with one with a stronger glue, you can cast some lions' heads or other impressions cast in earth or clay."[15] Twelve lion heads encircle the lid of the Bechi box, perhaps referring to Florence's heraldic Marzocco or the family's residence in Santa Croce's *quartiere* (quarter) of

the Black Lion. The box's other gesso moldings speak to love: triumphant flower garlands wrap its foot and lid, while two dolphins arch to form its handles. The entire surface is gilded with gold leaf, a lavish technique made possible by the object's small size.

In comparison with other extant, round betrothal chests, the lid painting on the Bechi box is one of the most elaborate and the only one to present a vision of Venus. The painting's composition resembles illustrations of the planet *Venus* (Fig. 11) found in illuminated manuscripts of Christine de Pizan's (1364–ca. 1430) *Épitre d'Othéa* or *Epistle of Othea*.[16] In an early manuscript of the text now in the British Library, Venus sits on a bank of clouds surrounded by a series of heavenly circles. Below, courtly lovers offer her bright red hearts. In the text accompanying the illustration, Othea or Prudence warns the knight Hector that he should

11 Illustrated by Master of the Cité des Dames, author Christine de Pizan, *Venus Presented with Hearts* (whole folio). Venus holds in her lap the hearts of her devotees who, standing below, raise their hearts to her; text beginning with decorated initial "D," from *L'Épitre d'Othéa*, 1410–11. Photo: © British Library Board / Robana / Art Resource, NY

not make Venus his goddess because she lures men to love, idleness, lechery, and vanity.[17] This cautionary advice, expressed by a female poet of the French court, contrasts with the emphatically virile, amorous rhetoric found in Andreas Capellanus' *Art of Courtly Love* and Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *The Romance of the Rose*.[18] Though it is uncertain when or if a copy of the *Epistle of Othea* reached Florence, over 40 manuscripts of the text exist from the fifteenth century. According to Millard Meiss, humanists of the French court were in contact with Florentine citizens, such as Coluccio Salutati between 1390 and 1415, and it is through these connections, Meiss argues, that "the box bears witness to the diffusion of French pictorial forms in Italy."[19]

On the Bechi box, Venus sits on a cosmological rainbow of clouds, which also suggests the celestial spheres. Rather than receiving hearts, she bestows the weapons of love – a Turkish bow and a long arrow – to a pair of nude blindfolded cupids. Three flaxen-haired maidens kneel in the flowering meadow below. The female on the viewer's left strums a lute, while the one on the right beats a tambourine, two instruments dedicated to the planet Venus.[20] Both ladies are clad in vermillion gowns. Their companion, in the center, wears a slightly more ornate, crimson dress painted with red lake. Rather than playing an instrument, this damsel folds both of her arms across her chest, tucking her hands beneath her elbows. Her gesture, which contrasts with those of the ardent lovers in the *Epistle of Othea* illustration, seems to suggest refusal rather than obeisance.[21] Looking to her companion rather than to Venus, this female has yet to be touched by the goddess's resplendent power. The inscription encircling the lid is intended for her as well as for Bechi's fiancé: "Whoever wishes to live happily should look on her to whom are subject Love and the other gods 1421" (CHI VOLE VIVERE FELICE GHUARDI CHOSTEI CHEGLIE SUGIETO AMORE EGLIATLTRI IDEI MCCCCXXI).

The lid's inscription correlates with Venus' persuasive speeches to vacillating lovers in several of Giovanni Boccaccio's romantic tales. In *Fiammetta*, the goddess appears in a brilliant aura of light and encourages the young female protagonist – who has fallen for the Florentine merchant Panfilo – to follow her heart, declaring that all are subject to the will and power of love.[22] In another aureate apparition in the *Nymph of Fiesole*, Venus materializes before a lad named Africo in a burst of golden light and proclaims that he should not resist love because no one, not even the gods, has ever defended himself against her.[23] While not directly illustrating either tale, the vision of Venus on the betrothal box asserts a similar message, prompting the central maiden and Bechi's fiancé to surrender to love and to look to Venus for a happy marital union.

The artist of the Bechi box captured the visionary aspects of this amorous epiphany by manipulating geometry and light. The triumphant portrayal of Venus resembles representations of Christ in glory, in particular the prominent, more than life-sized mosaic of *Christ Overseeing the Last Judgment* (Fig. 12),

12 *Christ Overseeing the Last Judgement*, central ceiling of the Florence Baptistery, ca. 1240–1300. Photo: akg-images / Pictures from History

decorating the vault of the Florentine Baptistery on axis with its altar. Upright and frontal, Jesus sits on a cosmic rainbow inside a mandorla or circle of golden light bound by a blue band. This circular mandorla emphasizes Jesus' glory through light while simultaneously symbolizing heaven. Plato, for example, wrote that "as a Circle revolving in a circle He [God] established one sole and solitary Heaven."[24] Medieval astrological texts also described the celestial realm as circular. For example, the *Ghayat al-Hakim* or *The Goal of the Sage* (an Arabic text on astrology and astral magic composed between the ninth and eleventh centuries and translated into Latin in 1256 with the title of *Picatrix*) explains that "the shape of heaven is spherical, round, and smooth in its surface area and so is everything in it with respect to their qualities and rotations."[25] The text's author declares that this concept cannot be doubted because "what is first and oldest in the world ought to have a perfect shape. The perfect shape and figure is a circle because it is the first of all the shapes and is itself made up of a single line."[26]

In the Baptistery mosaic, the circular mandorla surrounding Jesus symbolizes the highest heaven of the cosmos. The arching striations of the cosmic rainbow refer to the series of heavenly spheres that encase one another and lead from the planets, to the fixed stars, to the angelic realm, and finally up to the Empyrean Heaven. This geometry schematically represents the firmament; it also signifies Jesus' divine splendor, the glory of which could be experienced on Earth through an epiphanic vision.[27] On the Bechi betrothal box (Fig. 10), Venus sits on a similar cosmic rainbow of light-filled celestial spheres. She places her foot on the third sphere, her planetary domain. A mandorla, formed by the circular shape of the box and bound by the blue band containing the gold inscription, surrounds the goddess. The artist suggests the meeting of her heaven with that of Earth in the garden's curved horizon line.

The gold leaf (Fig. 13a) of Venus' mandorla materializes her celestial light, the same light that characterizes visionary experiences in literature. Artists often employed gold in their representations of otherworldly light because of its rarity, expense, and resistance to rust. As a shiny metal, gold also generates light.[28] On the Bechi box, the gilded ground surrounding Venus forms a reflective surface that bounces outside light back towards the viewer, creating an intimate bond between the eye and the object. The raised and depressed surfaces of the *pastiglie* or gesso moldings multiply the intersections and generate different degrees of reflection. The play between represented and reflected light produces a visual

13 Samples of (a) gold leaf, (b) yellow ocher, and (c) lead-tin yellow. Photo: Kip Bulwinkle / Karson Photography

drama that enchants the viewer, placing her, like the maidens below, under the goddess's illuminating spell of love. In both *Christ in Glory* and *The Triumph of Venus*, a deity appears in an otherworldly apparition and persuades the viewer to make a choice: to believe or not to believe; to love or not to love!

Facing the viewer and gazing outward, Venus is a celestial sovereign. She models rich garments, an iconographic attribute that also dazzles the viewer.[29] In his scientific handbook *Liber introductorius*, composed between 1220 and 1236 at the court of Frederick II, Michael Scot describes Venus as a lady clad in "beautiful garments, embroidered and bejeweled."[30] On the Bechi box, the deity wears a stylish *giornea* – an overgarment with splits down the sides – fashioned from crimson silk and lined with ermine fur, two of the most expensive textiles in fifteenth-century Florence.[31] The artist painted the silk with a glossy red lake pigment, manufactured from either lac resin or clippings of silk thread dyed with the costly kermes insect.[32] When light passes through the transparent layer of red pigment, it reflects off of the gold ground beneath, creating the illusion of a shimmering silk textile. For the mantle's lining, the artist used lead white and gray shadows to imitate the downy softness of white fur. A similar technique is employed for Venus' *balzo*, a round headdress constructed of a wire or willow branch frame, over which a luxurious textile is wrapped. The artist replicated the luster of a pearlescent silk by painting the *balzo* with shades of gray and then placing tiny dots of pure lead white across the textile's surface. In the center of the headdress sits a gold and ruby brooch, encircled by rubies and sapphires.[33]

When Bechi's bride-to-be opened her golden box, she would have found several gifts. It is likely that one of these was an ornate headdress or *balzo* similar to the one worn by Venus and the central maiden. Because of its large, circular shape and vertical depth, Millard Meiss argued that the object may have functioned as a cake box; however, it is more likely that the box was crafted to hold a *balzo*.[34] In fifteenth-century Florence, the *balzo* was a feminine version of the masculine *mazzocchio*; both types of headdresses were fashionable because they allowed men and women to display an additional rich textile on their heads. Such a luxurious gift was intended to charm the

recipient of this golden betrothal box and like a golden arrow, spark a tiny flame of desire within her heart.[35] The nature of that desire, however, is dictated by another inscription found on the inside of the box, which reads, "honest and beautiful lady, a pure love needs faith" (ONESTA NA BELLA DONNA UN PURO AMOR VUOLE FEDE).[36] This message, which appears on other betrothal boxes, originates in an epigram by Boccaccio. It lauds the recipient of the gift as both honest and beautiful; however, it also requires that her love be pure and faithful.[37] It makes a promise that if the virtuous bride, who may have been wary of the proposed union, trusts in the goodness of her groom and willingly submits herself to the commitment of marriage, Venus will fill her heart with love. It implies, perhaps, that the betrothed couple are not sufficiently familiar with each other for that trust to have naturally grown beforehand and that a leap of faith and an honest heart are needed for joy to blossom in marriage.

SCINTILLATING RAYS

While the Bechi betrothal box features an elegantly clothed Venus materializing before three kneeling ladies, the goddess appears in a very different fashion on a 12-sided Florentine birth tray of *Venus and Lovers* (Fig. 14) created in the first half of the fifteenth century.[38] Hovering in the night air, Venus stands completely nude before a group of kneeling knights. A yonic-shaped mandorla surrounds her winged body, from which she emits over 150 rays of light. Long gilt beams stream from her pubis and extend directly to the eyes, lips, noses, and hearts of the six men, who genuflect in the dark but fruitful garden below. Gold inscriptions identify these courtly lovers ordered from the viewer's left to right as Achilles, Tristan, Lancelot, Samson, Paris, and Troilus. Transfixed, these men have fallen to their knees as supplicants to Venus: on the right, Troilus crosses his hands over his chest in submission; in the center, Samson opens his arms in wonder; and on the left, Lancelot and Achilles touch their hearts, moved by love. The diagonal trajectories of gaze, gesture, and rays form an opposing pyramidal construction with Venus at its apex. She is the central source of light and power.

Family members customarily commissioned and presented *deschi da parto* to brides or new mothers in preparation for or in celebration of a child's birth.[39] Draped with white cloths, the salvers were used to carry boiled chicken, savory broth, almond cookies, or rose-sugar candy to postpartum women who, after giving birth, might be confined to their chambers for up to 40 days.[40] This practice of bringing gifts to new mothers can be seen in Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Birth of St. John the Baptist* (Fig. 57), painted ca. 1485. Once unveiled, birth trays revealed sparkling and colorful surfaces illustrated with mythological, historical, or nativity scenes. Within the confinement chamber,

14 *Venus and Lovers*, birth tray, fifteenth century, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. Photo: akg-images / De Agostini Picture Library

the painted salvers circulated among what Adrian W. B. Randolph has described as a "limited female audience," being "handled and passed from one set of hands to another."[41] However, after this gendered period of viewing, birth trays entered bedroom suites, where they hung alongside devotional paintings, wedding chests, mirrors, and tapestries. Here, the father, family members, and other close friends would have also seen them.[42] The 1492 inventory of the Medici palace, for example, lists "a round birth tray painted with the Triumph of Fame" as hanging in Lorenzo de' Medici's bedroom.[43] This tray, attributed to Lo Scheggia (Giovanni di Ser Giovanni