

the sky. A large potted plant, extended out precariously on a stick, hovers over the spectators below, threatening at any moment to tip over. Smiling women look down, and some playful little cherubs cavort about, including a squalling one who has gotten his head caught in the balustrade and another who regards whatever is happening below with single-minded fascination. A document from 1474 indicates the room was originally a bedroom, a place where the family line might be perpetuated, hence its traditional name: Camera degli sposi, or room of the newlyweds. The joke, of course, is that the noble newlyweds occupying this bedroom would be observed in their bed by the entire ducal family (painted on the walls) as well as by smirking servants, laughing ladies, cherubs, a tipsy plant and a peacock, all peering down on them from above.

Botticelli's painting, "Venus and Mars," is one of the most charming and witty versions of a popular Renaissance theme. The artist presents the goddess of love and the god of war reclining out of

doors, surrounded by playful baby satyrs. Some scholars have emphasized classical, moral and astrological interpretations of the work, and others have suggested it symbolizes the triumph of love over war. But such explanations ignore the playful sexuality and erotic innuendo of the work. One scholar claims that Venus has triumphed by "putting Mars to sleep," vanquishing him "by the power of her beauty." Really? The nudity and exhausted slumber of Mars suggest he's been vanquished by something more than mere beauty.

Botticelli has isolated his couple by showing them lying around out in the bushes somewhere, and he has surrounded Mars with satyrs — known for their sexual appetites. Both offer none too subtle clues about what has just happened here. The utter relaxation of Mars' body evokes not only sleep but the pleasurable lassitude that follows sexual relations. Mars doesn't even hear the trumpet one of the satyrs is blowing directly into his ear! The position of Mars' right hand, with his index finger curled

across his thigh is also suggestive of sexual exhaustion, as is his useless lance the little satyrs are playing with. Furthermore, Venus is hardly demure — her wide-awake gaze is one of conquest, and her softly draped gown suggests her sensuous body beneath. In short, Botticelli has depicted the mighty god of war utterly worn out by the energetic love-making of Venus.

Michelangelo, who had a sardonic sense of humor, was capable of mocking his own serious work. While painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508-12) he sent his friend Giovanni da Pistoia a sonnet he'd composed about his discomforts and difficulties with that project. The sonnet is accompanied by a sketch of himself. He's not shown painting one of those monumental and noble figures that cover the ceiling, but a shapeless schmoo with big circles for eyes and four spiky hairs sticking out of its head. In his "Last Judgment," painted on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel around 1540, he portrayed himself as a flayed skin, implying that he was reduced to that condition by the scurrilous insinuations of Pietro Aretino, who had suggested that the

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