

Life on a Half-Shell

Roger Pierson, MS, PhD, FEAS, FCAHS, Ed Hughes, MBChB, MSc, FRCSC

“Nascita di Venere,” the birth of Venus, is the second in our series of artworks that reflect the history and mystery of reproduction. Created by Sandro Botticelli between 1483 and 1485, this glorious painting provides a counterpoint to our January offering, the frontispiece from William Harvey’s treatise on the origins of life. “Ex ovo omnia,” intoned Harvey, “everything comes from the egg.” The leading ovist of his day, Harvey locked swords with the spermists, who insisted that the sperm was the seed from which all life grew, and that the uterus (and “female testes,” the ovaries) merely provided soil for its germination. We’ll refer to this sometimes acrimonious debate and its resolution in future issues.

The spermists would have appreciated the mythology of Venus’s birth. First there was Chaos, from which came Mother Earth, Gaia in Greek. She in turn, gave birth to Uranus, who went about killing Mother Earth’s other

offspring. Finally Chronos, a Titan son of Gaia, took it upon himself to avenge his mother by killing Uranus. He then cut off Uranus’s testicles with a diamond sickle and cast them into the Mediterranean Sea. The mixture of brine, blood, and semen generated foam, which blew south to the shores of Cyprus, where Aphrodite (Venus to the Romans) eventually washed ashore. Her name in Greek is derived from the words Aphros, foam, and odite, who walks.

In Botticelli’s iconic painting, now housed in the Uffizi Gallery of Florence, we see Venus being welcomed ashore by two young lovers, Zefiro and Clori, as well as Horae, goddess of the seasons. Thus Venus, the Roman goddess of beauty, love, and fertility was born.

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