

## **FACETS OF LOVE IN RENAISSANCE CULTURE<sup>1</sup>**

## **FACETAS DO AMOR NA CULTURA RENASCENTISTA**

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### **Resumo**

Partindo de uma metodologia qualitativa de base documental e semiótica, analisaram-se fontes primárias de diversos tipos: textos de Teoria da Arte e de Filosofia e desenhos e pinturas, comparando e revisitando dentro de um recorte que pretende evidenciar o valor simbólico e o significado eidético de amor como especialmente relevante e aglutinador no Renascimento. Este artigo pretende contribuir para sistematizar um conceito que ao longo do renascimento perpassa o que se pode chamar uma cultura de época em sentido lato, estando disperso em muitas diferentes áreas e sob múltiplas formas: da revisitação da sua representação na mitologia clássica, plasmado na Poesia de Dante, Petrarca, Colonna, nas Artes Visuais com Botticelli, Ticiano entre outros, pressentindo-se na própria narrativa da Teoria da Arte que

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adopta o estilo do diálogo em homenagem a Platão, autor do venerado *Symposium*, e atingindo um esplendor filosófico do qual os *Diálogos do Amor* de Leão Hebreu dão cabal testemunho. Trata-se de um tema que se encontrava na própria cultura tangível de corte renascentista, patente nas aspirações de um *perfecto cortesano* de Castiglione, atingindo expressões cada vez mais eruditas e místicas com as visões filosóficas de Ficino, Leão Hebreu, onde a Cosmogonia é vista como um gesto de amor divino. Assim, através de um conceito chave do Renascimento e guiados por uma perspectiva aglutinadora, este artigo visa contribuir para uma maior consciência do lugar central deste conceito na agenda cultural renascentista.

**Palavras-chave:** Amor, Renascimento, Arte, Poesia, Filosofia neoplatônica.

### **Abstract**

Using a qualitative, documentary and semiotics-based methodology, primary sources of various types were analysed: texts of Art Theory and Philosophy and drawings and paintings, comparing and revisiting them within a cut-out that intends to highlight the symbolic value and the eidetic meaning of love as especially relevant and agglutinating in the Renaissance. This article intends to contribute to systematize a concept that throughout the Renaissance permeates what can be called a culture of the time in a broad sense, being dispersed in many different areas and under multiple forms: From the revisitation of its representation in classical mythology, embodied in the Poetry of Dante, Petrarch, Colonna, in the Visual Arts with Botticelli, Titian among others, sensing itself in the very narrative of Art Theory that adopts the style of dialogue in *Homage to Plato*, author of the venerated *Symposium*, and reaching a philosophical splendour of which the Love Dialogues of Leão Hebreu bear full witness. It is a theme that was found in the very tangible Renaissance court culture, evident in Castiglione's aspirations of a *perfecto cortesano*, reaching increasingly erudite and mystical expressions with the philosophical views of Ficino, Leão Hebreu, where the Cosmogony is seen as a gesture of divine love. Thus, through a key Renaissance concept and guided by an agglutinative perspective, this article aims to contribute to a greater awareness of the central place of this concept in the Renaissance cultural agenda.

**Keywords:** Love, Renaissance, Art, Poetry, Neoplatonic Philosophy.

## **1. Introduction**

The theme of love in antiquity is a central concept, present above all in mythology, poetry, and philosophy. The desire to rediscover the classical sources during the Renaissance inevitably leads to a revival of this theme. In the course of this article, we will examine some of the representations of love in Renaissance culture. If, in classical antiquity, the myth of the birth of drawing is described by Pliny the Elder as a love story, Renaissance artists

and theorists expand on this episode. The great poets of the Renaissance celebrate the different dimensions of love. The Humanists write about love using the literary device of dialogue in homage to Plato. Neoplatonic philosophy describes the divine creation of the world, and human ingenuity and creativity, as manifestations of love. Numerous Renaissance artists, for example Botticelli, Michelangelo and Titian, make exemplary representations of the different genres of love: from the sacred to the profane.

## 2. The origin of love as an art

Pliny the Elder, in his *Historia Naturalis* (book 35) describes the legend of the daughter of potter Butades of Sicyon who, “when her beloved was leaving for foreign lands, traced a line around the shadow of his face projected onto a wall by the light of a lantern, associating this act of the origin of painting to love”.<sup>2</sup> This episode was taken up countless times from the Renaissance onwards, for example by Alberti, Leonardo, Borghini, Francisco de Holanda, Vasari, and practically all the art theorists of the time.

For Pliny, the motivation of this first artist, Butade’s daughter, to preserve the memory of her beloved, is clear: “[...] when he left to go abroad [...]”.<sup>3</sup> She draws to capture him, or at least his shadow, because to represent is, as the word suggests, to make present. This approach, doubtlessly influenced by Plato’s Symposium, recalls the erotic sense of love, which, put simply, argues that love is born from lack, from the desire to possess that which one does not have. Thus, paradoxically, drawing, at the very moment when it reveals itself as the “origin”, as the generating force, echoes the longing, loss, and lack. This aspect in particular is analysed by Derrida, who sees in this myth-founder Pliny, a conception of painting as a kind of blindness, that is, a relation between the visible, the invisible and the making visible: “She draws, then she loves, already in nostalgia”.<sup>4</sup> The potter’s daughter, when she sees the shadow of her beloved, no longer sees him: “As if seeing was forbidden by the act of drawing, as if we only draw on the condition of not seeing”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>“Butades estava apaixonada por um jovem; quando este partiu para o estrangeiro, ela traçou uma linha ao redor da sombra do seu rosto projetada numa parede pela luz de uma lanterna” (Plínio 2011: 124).

<sup>3</sup>Plínio 2011: 124.

<sup>4</sup>“Ela desenha, logo ama, já na nostalgia” (Derrida 2010: 56).

<sup>5</sup>“Como se ver fosse interdito para desenhar, como se não desenhassemos senão na condição de não ver” (Derrida 2010: 54).

Also, Jean Jacques Rousseau, in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, alludes to this story, stating:

Love, it is said, was the inventor of the drawing. It was able to invent speech as well, but less accomplished. Not content with its disdains, it has more vivid ways of expressing itself. The one that traced with pleasure the shadow of her Lover said a lot of things!<sup>6</sup>



Figure 1: Joseph-Benoît Suvée (1743–1807). *The Invention of the Art of Drawing (study)*. Painting. Oil on board (between 1776 and 1791). 49 x 34 cm. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

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<sup>6</sup>L’amour, dit-on, fut l’inventeur du dessein. Il put inventer aussi la parole, mais moins heureusement. Peu content d’elle il la dédaigne, il a des manieres plus vives de s’exprimer. Que celle qui traçoit avec de plaisir l’ombre de son Amant lui disoit de choses! (Rousseau 2012: 4) our translation.

### 3. Love in the Renaissance Poetry

The first poets of the Renaissance bring with them a hybrid heritage, on the one hand the sources from antiquity and on the other the strong medieval presence that is still felt and is shaped, for example, by the chivalric romances. The Renaissance in its eclectic approach manages to unite several worlds: Christianity, antiquity and medieval archaisms. Robert Stam<sup>7</sup> observes that modernity, especially following the Enlightenment, rejected the chivalric novel, considering it an archaic and magical form that is not in alignment with the spirit of secular and scientific European modernity.

Dante is a poet who anticipates the aesthetic and cultural qualities of the Renaissance, and similarly, we might say that Giotto announces the new artistic and humanised vocabularies that will come to dominate painting during the *Quattrocento*. In *Vita Nuova*, Dante represents the love relationship as a feeling that is gradually transfigured until love in the human dimension is transformed into divine love.

Dante describes three phases of the love relationship: greeting, praising and contemplation. The first phase, the most human of the three, very much reflected in the medieval style of courtly love, is a relationship that places the object of love outside themselves: all their attention and energy is translated into the desire to obtain a reciprocal response. It is a relationship in which Dante describes a series of physical effects that the presence of the beloved produces in the subject: blurred vision, numbness, trembling, etc. The second phase of his understanding of love points to an intellectualisation that emphasises the experience of love as an edifying experience for the one who loves and praises the beloved, one in which moral virtues gain relevance. Beatrice's death precipitates Dante into the third phase of the experience of love. It is because Dante has passed from the sensual phase to the praising phase that he is able to evolve into a spiritual phase. Deceased, Beatrice shall be a presence in the lover's memory that sustains a love relationship, despite being separated transcendently. Thus, a metaphysical dimension is constructed, one that throws the subject back out of themselves, but now on a divine plane, for the Beatrice he loves is a celestial being who exists only in God. Dante expresses this idea in the last sonnet of *The New Life*:

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<sup>7</sup> Stam 2008: 25.

Beyond the sphere which spreads to widest space  
 Now soars the sigh that my heart sends above:  
 A new perception born of grieving Love  
 Guideth it upward the untrodden ways.<sup>8</sup>

It is after this sonnet that Dante concludes his work with the hope that his Beatrice “who now gazeth continually on His countenance *qui est per omnia secula benedictus*”,<sup>9</sup> may be contemplated by his growing soul.

In the lineage of Italian troubadours, singing of love is a process inspired by the feeling towards the lady, which paved the way for Dante, but he goes further and takes it as a literary pretext for a philosophical reflection on love. Love for Beatrice is thus exalted, the beloved has a symbolic meaning that pervades all dimensions, from the physical to the spiritual plane.

In Petrarch, the concept of love signifies the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, established by the poems in his work *Canzoniere*. The “Petrarchian concept” signified the Renaissance understanding of love that spread throughout Italy and the world. Laura was the poetic realisation of Petrarch’s ideal of love. Yet, he was disturbed by a contradiction: loving her elevated him, but also debased him. His unconsummated love for Laura, after her death, leads him to despair. He tries to enter into a dimension of spiritual love, but in vain, he remains trapped by the memory of his sensuality.<sup>10</sup>

Petrarch’s legacy is extensive, and in Renaissance Italy it leaves deep and experiential traces on what we can call courtesan culture. Castiglione in the third part of his *Il Cortegiano* describes the Courtesan Lady.<sup>11</sup> The idealisation of women, namely the gaze that is addressed to them by the poet and the artist, as Parker et al suggests in “Old Mistresses”<sup>12</sup>, can be related to the discarded status of women, relegated to a separate and subordinate position in social and productive life. The entire significance of the woman relates to the courtship that the man offers her. In the life of the court and its social play, any act of kindness or devotion, or elegant act of chivalry, which is not inspired by love for a woman would always be highly flawed.

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<sup>8</sup> Dante 2002: 47.

<sup>9</sup> Dante 2002: 48.

<sup>10</sup> Musa et al 1999:127.

<sup>11</sup> Castiglione 1965: 213.

<sup>12</sup> Parker et al 1982:38.

Another outstanding example of poetry dedicated to love was the book *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, whose authorship has been attributed to the Dominican monk Francesco Colonna after an acrostic was discovered in the book: if we take the first letter of its thirty-eight chapters, we obtain the phrase “*Poliam frater Franciscus Columna peramavit*” (“Brother Francesco Colonna loves Polia passionately”). *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, an almost unpronounceable title could be translated as *Poliphilo’s struggle of love in a dream*. It is a chivalric love poem, shrouded in mystery and eroticism, written in Latin, Greek and Venetian Italian and richly illustrated, coming from the printing presses of Aldo Mannuzio, an Italian printer in Venice. Utopianism reaches a high point in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, which narrates a dream of a romantic couple walking through dense and obscure Woods (a clear allusion to Dante’s *Inferno* and also to Petrarch’s poetic writing) where magnificent ruins from Classical Antiquity appear, as well as pleasant and balmy gardens.<sup>13</sup>

This Italian influence on this subject naturally reaches Portugal. Authors such as Sá de Miranda, António Ferreira and Camões, explore the theme of suffering for love as it is presented in the style of Petrarch<sup>14</sup>:

[...] Love, an evil that kills and cannot be seen.  
 What days have there been in my soul  
 a something that comes from I don’t know where,  
 arrives in a way I don’t know how and hurts in a way I don’t know why.<sup>15</sup>

Camões referred to a love for the ideal Woman. A concept that most resembles the Platonic, archetypal and universalist idea, in this case the ideas of Beauty and Perfection: “[...] love is an idea of perfection derived from the perfection of its object”.<sup>16</sup> The poet describes an unconsummated love, an idealised love, which is the object of his desire, and which expresses a feeling of an absolute and superior nature. Cunha notes that idealised love is one of the basic concepts of what can be called Neoplatonist love.<sup>17</sup> This Platonic quality of love as a universal concept is very evident in the sonnet: “Love is

<sup>13</sup> Colonna 2009: 148.

<sup>14</sup> See Soares 1992.

<sup>15</sup> “[...] Amor um mal que mata e não se vê. Que dias há que na alma me tem posto um não sei quê, que nasce não sei onde, vem não sei como e dói não sei porquê.” (Camões 2008: 528).

<sup>16</sup> Luhmann 1986:48.

<sup>17</sup> Cunha 1989: 22.

fire that burns without being seen; It is a wound that hurts and isn't felt; It is discontented contentment".<sup>18</sup> Love in its amplitude cannot be conceivable, hence Camões' need to resort to various paradoxes in the attempt to define it, reinforcing the idea of love as a contradictory feeling, or of a dialectic of desire as Cunha describes it, in which Camões, like Plato, understands love as divine madness, a force opposed to reason. Also in this famous sonnet, Camões evokes, beyond the suffering, the metaphor of fire, already employed by Petrarch in *Triumph of Love* "[...] I'm on fire and I'm burning with delight...!",<sup>19</sup> and later by the mystics John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila who refer to love as a burning or a flame, like a fire that penetrates the heart.

Even though Camões (1524-1580) lived at the end of the Renaissance, almost in the transition to the Baroque, it is in him that one can sense Petrarch's greatest legacy, present in the adoption of the Platonic concept of love, to which he associates the concrete erotic desire, which in its absence, in non-consummation, increases in intensity until the point of madness, bringing a sense of love as a paradoxical force: between a spiritual and a more sensual side, although Rita Marnoto argues that, through Camões' Petrarchism, he:

[...] repels the idea of a unified and harmonious universe. If, on one hand, the circularity sustained by Ficino's cosmic harmony comes up against the dissolution of the body, on the other, the unitive path of the mystical doctrine is made impossible and delayed by the indissolubility of the link between body and soul.<sup>20</sup>

One possibility does not exclude the other and Camões proposes a complete portrait of love where this "contradiction" can be resolved, physical passion being a reflection of ideal beauty.

In his sonnets, odes, songs and round songs, the beloved woman appears illuminated by a supernatural light that transforms her carnal features: her golden hair is luminous, and her radiant gaze has the power to calm the wind; her presence makes the flowers bloom and even softens the tree trunks. Her entire appearance is the embodiment of an ideal: it

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<sup>18</sup> "Amor é fogo que arde sem se ver; É ferida que dói e não se sente; É um contentamento descontente" (Camões 2008: 528).

<sup>19</sup> "[...] arder me fazem de contentamento." (Petrarca 2004: 63).

<sup>20</sup> "[...] repele a ideia de um universo uno e harmónico. Se, por um lado, a circularidade sustida pela harmonia cósmica de Ficino esbarra com a dissolução do corpo, por outro, a via unitiva da doutrina mística é impossibilitada e adiada pela indissolubilidade da ligação entre corpo e alma. (Marnoto 2015: 604).

exudes calm, serenity, stature. In the portrait of the Beloved, Camões did no more than follow Laura's example.<sup>21</sup>

His Platonism is clearly evident in the following sonnet, which refers to the primitive human condition, understood as being one and complete, where we can hear not only echoes of Plato's *Symposium*, but of Aristotelian *Metaphysics*, since, according to Saraiva,<sup>22</sup> Camões is seeking a synthesis between eternity and the tangible, idea often present in the dialectic of Renaissance, as referred by Luhmann: "The attitude towards sensual love varies from one author to another, but the common basis for including the physical was still the goal of finding redemption in some higher form of love. Sexual love is thus preformed through spiritual love".<sup>23</sup>

This encounter is awakened in the spirit and is fully materialised by the body and soul of the beloved.

The beloved is transformed into the thing loved,  
 By virtue of much imagining;  
 I suddenly have nothing more to desire,  
 For in me I have the desired part.  
 If in it my soul is changed,  
 What more does the body wish to attain?  
 In itself alone can it rest,  
 For with such a soul is bound.  
 But this beautiful and pure semi-idea,  
 Which, like the accident in its subject,  
 Thus, with my soul is conform'd,  
 Is in thought as an idea;  
 [And] the living and pure love of which I am made,  
 As simple matter seeks form.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "Nos seus sonetos, odes, canções e redondilhas, a mulher amada aparece iluminada por uma luz sobrenatural que lhe transfigura as feições carnis: luminosos são os cabelos de ouro, e o olhar resplandecente tem o condão de serenar o vento; a sua presença faz nascer as flores e até enternecer os troncos das árvores. Toda a sua figura é o revestimento corpóreo de um ideal: respira gravidade, serenidade, altura. No retrato da Amada, Camões não fez mais do que seguir o padrão de Laura". (Saraiva 1966: 342).

<sup>22</sup> Saraiva 1966: 345.

<sup>23</sup> Luhmann 1986:48.

<sup>24</sup> "Transforma-se o amador na cousa amada,  
 Por virtude do muito imaginar;  
 Não tenho logo mais que desejar,  
 Pois em mim tenho a parte desejada.

As can be seen in the last third of the sonnet the fulfilment of love can only be achieved through the beloved and her materialisation in carnal love as a reflection of the spiritual, thus going further than Petrarch who remained with spiritualist idealisation.

#### 4. Creation of the world as a divine love

Regarding philosophical and metaphysical content, we can highlight the theme of the Creation of the world as an act of divine Love. This approach common to several authors corresponds to a concept, which in the early Renaissance aims to describe the origin of the universe and the human in relation to it, highlighting harmonious and proportional spheres of relationship, which, starting from the idea of God creating man in his image and likeness, extends to the structuring concepts of macrocosm and microcosm.

In Hebrew, divine Creation is understood to be an act of supreme love. Love is hierarchical, from the creator to creatures and it is through love that the creature returns to God. The world is seen as an organic whole, as a living being composed of higher and lower elements, that is, soul and body. The love that gives life and harmony also possesses a redeeming force. Hebrew establishes a hierarchy of beings ranging from pure spirit - God - to vile matter. Hebrew addresses the theme of the universality of love and its role in the creation of the universe. In a manner that draws on both Plato and sacred scripture and in an approach reminiscent of Ficino's conciliatory spirit, Hebrew describes the creation of the universe as having its origins in divine copulation. He presents a comprehensive view of the intelligible organisation of the universe,

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Se nela está minha alma transformada,  
 Que mais deseja o corpo alcançar?  
 Em si somente pode descansar,  
 Pois consigo tal alma está liada.  
 Mas esta linda e pura semideia,  
 Que, como o acidente em seu sujeito,  
 Assim com a alma minha se conforma,  
 Está no pensamento como idéia;  
 [E] o vivo e puro amor de que sou feito,  
 Como a matéria simples busca a forma” (Camões 2008: 301).

arriving at a notion of love as a life-giving spirit that pervades the entire world, as a thread that unites the whole universe.

In Holanda's work, in contrast, the role of divine Creation is absolutely central: In the chapter "*Como Deos foi Pintor*" ("How God was a Painter") of *Da Pintura Antiga* (Of Ancient Paintings), Holanda paraphrases Genesis, supported by an aesthetic foundation. The origin of Painting is simultaneously the reason and the genesis of the creation of the world. The metaphysics of the creation of the world is understood to be an artistic creation, insofar as the origin of Painting has a divine genesis. God is the first reason for existence, but also the source and inspiration for man's artistic and creative capabilities. For Holanda, God is a painter God, and the world is a painted altarpiece. Human painting is thus inanimate in the image of divine painting, which is life-giving.

Similar to Hebreu where divine creation is a defining expression of love over chaos, for Holanda, creation is the defining action of light over darkness, over shapeless chaos. To justify this position, Holanda refers to the creation of the world described in Genesis: "And God said: Let there be light".<sup>25</sup> We can thus relate love in Hebreu's work, which seeks to demonstrate that it is an ontological foundation of reality, envisioned as feeling and intellect, with the divine demiurgical action that Holanda expounds. As a consequence of this idea, both reflect on the protagonism of a *Deus Artifex*: "This creation which does not depend on time, is made in the image of artistic creation which has in its spirit the template of what it will produce".<sup>26</sup> He whom Hebreu calls the Supreme Artificer or Architect of the world, the Painter God, in Holanda's words, sees Him mirrored in the creative force of the artist, also through the expression of divine love.

We can also consider that both Hebreu and Holanda had the same source in common: Marsilio Ficino, who through the concept of creation links two central metaphysical ideas: the microcosm and the macrocosm. In individual conception, creation is procreation, but also artistic creation that draws on the cosmic force of nature uses quite a similar process. Ficino establishes the correlation between the act of divine creation and human creation by making the human a universal artist, or in his words, a *Deus in terris* (God on Earth).

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<sup>25</sup> "Assi que disse Deos: Faça-se luz" (Holanda 1984: 23).

<sup>26</sup> "Esta criação que não se faz depender do tempo, é feita à imagem da criação artística que possui no espírito o modelo do que irá produzir" (Hebreu 1983: 292).

It is in this argument that, as explored here, the painter acquires an elevated status, especially since he is connected through ideas to the divine plan of creation. This is perhaps the most significant “discovery” of Platonic philosophy in the Renaissance. The artist becomes a kind of superman, he asserts himself through the creative act itself, the act of participating in Creation is his supreme self-affirmation that, according to Holanda, reaches its maximum personification in Michelangelo.

## 5. The influence of Ficino and the Symposium

On this theme of Love, Ficino is undoubtedly the greatest philosophical influence of Hebreu and Holanda. As Medeiros states: “The author of *De Amore* was in fact responsible for sedimenting the concept of Platonic love that shaped Renaissance love speculation, the effects of which took on the dimension of a true historical phenomenon”.<sup>27</sup> The concept of love, according to Pina Martins,<sup>28</sup> as it is expressed in Portuguese poetry and literature of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, is influenced by Petrarch and Ficino.

In addition to *Opera Omnia*, in which Plato’s dialogues reached the Italian intelligentsia through Ficino, *De Amore* also had a considerable impact, being received by the elite inner circle, as evidenced by its impact on the poetry of Lorenzo di Medici himself.

Leo Hebreu is undoubtedly the Portuguese author most impressed by this movement, but whether he actually participated in or became acquainted with members of the Platonic Academy of Florence, we cannot say, hence the most likely hypothesis is contact with Ficino’s texts, even though the same is not cited among his sources. The members of Careggi “[...] considered themselves disciples of Plato and attentive readers of his dialogues, more than 1800 years after they were composed”.<sup>29</sup> Hebreu paints a universal vision of love, in which he describes the main strands of his thinking in terms of cosmology, theology, metaphysics, anthropology and aesthetics.

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<sup>27</sup> “O autor do *De Amore* foi, de facto, responsável pela sedimentação do conceito de amor platónico que marcou a especulação amorosa do Renascimento, cujos efeitos ganharam a dimensão de um verdadeiro fenómeno histórico” (Medeiros 2012: 133).

<sup>28</sup> Martins 1969: 121.

<sup>29</sup> “[...] consideravam-se discípulos de Platão e leitores atentos de seus diálogos, mais de 1800 anos depois de terem sido compostos” (Medeiros 2012: 78).

Ficino will say in a letter to Nicolau, in 1474: “No one without love speaks well of love”.<sup>30</sup> Only the lover seems to have the legitimacy to speak about love. There is undoubtedly an experiential atmosphere that pervades the Renaissance in this regard. Ficino’s *De Amore* was a legitimate source for Hebreu, although he did not cite it, just as he does not cite any of his contemporaries. The fact that Hebreu quotes and discusses Plato’s Symposium with fluency may suggest that he had access to this work through Ficino’s interpretation and translation.

The impact of the Platonic text is decisive, and it gave rise to countless citations, approaches and echoes. Ficino is clearly its great disseminator. In Symposium, beauty is understood to be a condition of awakening, which in turn is shaped by love. It is this which allows each being to be conscious of its origin and to reach its end in a circular movement of attraction to the beautiful. An immediate equivalence unites the world with beauty, creation and love. Thus, love as desire for beauty becomes a creative force and beauty, as stirring love, becomes a force of attraction.

Despite the sensory dimension of love, this is only its primary manifestation as the true nature of love is spiritual. The final revelation about love and development of this idea is revealed by Diotima. Lovers unite through the body, a union that identifies with and ignites the pre-existing inner love of the idea of beauty. The soul is led to love in the direction from the concrete to the abstract, from the particular to the universal, until finally the ideas are mystically revealed to the lover in a dialectical ascent.

If there is nothing in the sensory world that escapes love, for Hebreu, contemplation is fundamental to the union between the lover and the beloved. But love is also the source of ecstasy in which there is an abandonment of the body, an idea that Hebreu and Holanda inherit from Plato’s Phaedrus. Ecstasy perceived as a mystical moment of revelation is understood, as Plato would say, as a good madness that due to its beauty is superior to the wisdom of which men are authors. Holanda will place particular importance on this idea, even reviving the expression ‘Divine Furor’, also used by Ficino, as the maximum expression of revelation of the inner idea to the artist who will materialise it through drawing.

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<sup>30</sup> “Ninguém sem amor fala bem sobre o amor” (Ficino apud Tavares 2011: 58).

## 6. Dedication to art as love

The love of art is also a theme that runs through the Renaissance, and it manifests itself as a type of dedication that, while on the one hand, is voluntary and requires effort and sacrifice, on the other hand, is also an irresistible and involuntary force like that of love. Love, a feeling inspired by Eros, can be understood as a virtue of the soul, insofar as it inspires spiritual development, a growing nobility of character, in the context of a relationship between lover and something loved. The loving sensibility that permeates the Dialogues of Leo Hebreu can also be understood as a kind of gentleness of mind, a characteristic so important for the artist.

The Third Dialogue by Hebreu deals with the origin of Love and is introduced with the theme of Contemplation. This is represented with a strong Platonic overtone, represented as an interior moment, compared to sleep and to the abandonment of the body. Similarly to Plato's *Phaedrus*, Hebreu reminds us that the blessed, who include poets and creative spirits, are those who are destined for the grace of contemplation of beauty, through ecstasy and numbness of the senses, as a mystical journey: "In dreaming, the spirit is not entirely detached from the senses, but in ecstasy, bringing together all the powers of the soul, it isolates itself, concentrates on itself and becomes the object of contemplation".<sup>31</sup>

Love, like artistic inspiration, comes from the abandonment of the mind, of its rational side, this being a gateway to the divine madness of which the lover and the artist are mediators.

Furthermore, Cennino Cennini in his *Libro Dell'Arte* states that only where there is love, is there an artist. The artist must have, in addition to a gentleness of spirit, a natural love for art: "Not only due to possessing a gentle spirit do some come to this art, but above all because of a natural love".<sup>32</sup> It takes as its starting point the romantic idea that love is the master of all art, thus following once again the teachings of Plato who, in *Symposium*, states that love is the master of Apollo himself, protector of

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<sup>31</sup> "No sonho o espírito não se desliga inteiramente dos sentidos, mas no êxtase, reunindo todas as potências da alma, isola-se, concentra-se em si próprio e converte-se com o objeto da contemplação" (Hebreu 1983: 84).

<sup>32</sup> "Non sanza cagione d'animo gentile alcuni si muovono di venire a questa arte, piacendogli per amore naturale" (Cennini 2014: 55) our translation.

the arts. Similarly, in Cennini, Love is placed not only among but above all the virtues that the artist needs to succeed in art. “Therefore, you who possesses a gentle spirit and an adoring thirst for this virtue, especially through art come and adorn yourself first with this garment: love, fear, obedience and perseverance”.<sup>33</sup>

Francisco de Holanda presents the artist as a remarkable individual, who, for the love of art, makes huge sacrifices. It follows that the painter needs contemplation, they cannot give themselves to an idle life. Their love of art drives themselves to loneliness and melancholy which can so often be unfairly mistaken for misanthropy. This girlfriend that is painting, as Holanda says, makes artists “distant, but it is because their minds are occupied with exalted imaginations, which they use for embellishment”.<sup>34</sup>

## 7. Profane love and divine love

Leo Hebreu does not despise erotic love, and several times throughout his *Dialoghi*, carnal love is also exalted because this flame is the visible symptom of divine strength. As João Vila-Chã states:

The *Dialoghi* by Leo Hebreu, on the other hand, show how, implicitly or explicitly, the physical union between man and woman constitutes the clear manifestation and reflection of the highest level of spiritual union, and consequently should not be denigrated, but rather appropriately celebrated.<sup>35</sup>

This dichotomy between sensual love and spiritual love is exalted by Neoplatonic philosophy and appears in Renaissance art in various forms. Whether in opposition or in harmony, the theme truly caught the attention of

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<sup>33</sup> “Adunque, voi che con animo gentile sete amadori di questa virtù, principalmente all’ arte venite, adornatevi prima di questo vestimento: cioè amore, timore, ubbidienza e perseveranza” (Cennini 2014: 56) our translation.

<sup>34</sup> “desconversáveis, mas porque a sua mente está ocupada com altas imaginações, com as quais andam embelezados” (Holanda 1984: 230).

<sup>35</sup> “Os *Dialoghi* de Leão Hebreu, por outro lado, mostram como, implícita ou explicitamente, a união física entre homem e mulher constitui a clara manifestação e reflexo do mais alto nível de união espiritual, e conseqüentemente não deve ser denegrida, mas antes apropriadamente celebrada” (Vila-Chã 2006: 250).

several important artists who were receptive to the Neoplatonic humanism of the time. We will now look at a number of highly emblematic examples, such as Botticelli's "Primavera" (1480), a painting that represents the arrival of spring. In the midst of an orange grove, Venus, the goddess of Love appears in a meadow, over which her son Eros is shooting arrows of love with his eyes blindfolded. Zephyrus is depicted on the right-hand side in the form of a blue winged being pursuing a nymph in transparent clothes (Cloris) who watches him with horror (according to the myth, he has kidnapped and raped her). Flowers fall from her mouth. On the left, we see the Three Graces (Aglaia, Talia and Euphrosina), who represent beauty, chastity and sensuality, dancing. Next, we see Mercury, easily recognised by his winged sandals, who is oblivious to the love of the central nymph of the Three Graces who looks at him attentively, about to be struck by Cupid's arrow, but still representative of chastity. The theme of love, communicated by Ficino and Hebreu, has a clear artistic expression here: the right side of the painting would represent carnal love, through Zephyrus, and the left could be interpreted as Platonic love represented by Mercury.



Figure 2: Sandro Botticelli: Primavera. Tempera on board. 203 x 314 cm. Collection: Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Thus Primavera, portraying Venus as the spirit of Love and spring, is rooted in the stylistic conventions of a classical vocabulary, but also in its contemporary influences. Dempsey in *The Portrayal of Love: Botticelli's Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent*, identifies this genre with the conventions of vernacular love poetry that were so present in Tuscan culture, rather than just the philosophical influence of Ficino, and he highlights the importance of the Renaissance cultural agenda imagined and sponsored by Lorenzo de Medici:

Primavera addresses not a Christian concept of supernatural love, as may be expressed in the personification of Charity or the Madonna, but the worldly idea expressed by Venus and the poet's madonna. Regardless of whom Primavera was originally intended for, it is Lorenzo's madonna who is celebrated here. She is the personification of the new concept of love and kindness, the new humanist muse created from the traditions of Latin and Italian pasts, transforming them into Venus, who is in her essence and by definition the perfection of love and beauty.<sup>36</sup>

The paradox between profane and divine love has been represented countless times and is a theme that has fascinated artists. We also look at the case of Michelangelo in the drawing *Gli Arcieri* (Archers Shooting at a Herm), created c.1530, with dimensions 21.9 x 32.3 cm, on paper. In this work we can observe the archers being attracted by the fire of passion, created by the cherubs, and are prevented from reaching their true goal: the heart. The representation of the sleeping winged Cupid evokes the idea that the archers will not have a guide, because only with love can one reach their goal: the ascent of the soul through beauty to the divine sphere. The archers are frantically driven by the flames of passion and therefore their arrows are unable to hit the target. The bows are invisible in the work, symbolic of carnal love, which is an eternal illusion that obscures true feeling: divine/spiritual love. Ascanio Condivi pointed out that he sometimes heard "Michelangelo discourse on love but had never heard him speak of anything other than Platonic love".<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Dempsey apud The Free Library 1995: s.n.

<sup>37</sup> "Michelangelo discursava a respeito do amor, mas jamais o ouvi falar qualquer coisa diferente do amor platônico" Duppa 1846: 128-129.



Figure 3: Michelangelo (1475–1564). Archers Shooting at a Herma. Circa 1530. Sanguine. 219 x 323 mm. Collection: Royal Collection. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

According to Luhmann: “Love is clearly experienced as being saturated in contradiction, and is portrayed as bittersweet love (*amare amaro*) especially in sonnets of the Renaissance period”.<sup>38</sup> As Argan mentions, it is Francis of Holland in his *Dialogues of Rome*<sup>39</sup> who highlights the Neoplatonic side of Michelangelo’s thought,<sup>40</sup> a tendency especially present in Holland himself who shares with Michelangelo the same imagery, as we can see in emblematic diptych *Afrodite e Eros* (Aphrodite and Eros) and *Anjo do Senhor* (Angel of the Lord). These drawings, which can be dated between 1545 and 1547, appear at the end of *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines*. *Anjo do Senhor* and *Afrodite e Eros*, two images that oppose each other absolutely, in the way divine love opposes profane love, as do light and shadow, and day and night. The drawing *Afrodite e Eros* represents two fragile and sterile skeletons, in a sepulchral and nocturnal scene, surrounded by inscriptions quoting texts from Antiquity, and has a single function, to parody those gods that symbolise profane love.

<sup>38</sup> Luhmann 1986:48.

<sup>39</sup> Holanda 1984: 65.

<sup>40</sup> Argan 1999: 311.

Holanda represents the gods of antiquity, symbols of sensuality, with fragile and fleshless bodies demonstrating their materiality and impermanence, as a symbol of transience and sensual love as opposed to the splendour and luminous beauty of the *Anjo do Senhor*, an eternal and universal beauty.



Figure 4: Francisco de Holanda, Angel of the Lord, *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines*, p. 87v



Figure 5: Francisco de Holanda, Aphrodite and Eros, *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines*, p. 88r



Figure 6: Titian, Sacred and Profound Love (Borghese Gallery, Rome, 1514). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

It is an allegorical scene influenced by the Neoplatonic Renaissance thinking, typical of the philosophies of Marsilio Ficino and Leo Hebreu, according to whom physical beauty can be a reflection of heavenly beauty and its contemplation is an anticipation of future spiritual destiny. There are numerous interpretations of this painting by Titian, an oil on canvas commissioned by Niccolò Aurelio on the occasion of his marriage to Laura Bagaroto. We see two women sitting in a sculpted marble fountain, one naked and the other clothed. The two represent Venus, the goddess of love, according to the title (attributed later and not by the painter), we know that one of them is the heavenly figure and the other the earthly one. The naked one, wearing a crimson robe (representative of the divine) is the sacred one and the Venus dressed in a luxurious white garment with crimson sleeves is the profane one. Between the two is Cupid, absorbed by stirring the water in the fountain. The sacred Venus is the naked one because nudity in the Renaissance period, as in classical antiquity, is emblematic of purity and truth.

The background also helps convey the different concepts related to the allegories: on the left, behind the profane Love, a hilly landscape is depicted with a rising path on which a knight is headed towards the castle. This can be read as a metaphor of a path to follow in order to achieve virtue, which is attained with hardship and sacrifice or, alternatively, as an allusion to the “secular” and “civil” nature of profane Love. On the right, the landscape is flat and punctuated by grazing herds evoking bucolic utopias and in the distance a church can be seen, connecting with the religious and spiritual realm. This would become the only painting by Titian that can be interpreted entirely in Neoplatonic terms.

The title might suggest a dichotomous relationship between the two Venuses, but in fact both boast a specific beauty, one natural and the other adorned, one heavenly and the other earthly, yet both forms of love are noble and worthy of being venerated. Panofsky<sup>41</sup> refers to the concepts of Renaissance Neoplatonism relating to human love as opposed to divine love, but the historian believes that a dialogue of love is present in the work.

If, in the previous artist, Francisco de Holanda, we had a clear opposition in which profane love is even ridiculed with black humour, in Titian the cupid would be a symbol of harmony that unifies the two forms of love:

The woman to the left is dressed in wedding attire and may represent carnal love and beauty. In contrast, the nude is usually read as spiritual

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<sup>41</sup> Panofsky 2003: 114.

love, a symbol of simplicity and purity. The position of Eros, at the center of the two, therefore, may indicate the point of mediation between spiritual and carnal desires.<sup>42</sup>

## 8. Final considerations

In the Renaissance, the concept of Love finds a fertile narrative that leaves a particular impression on Leo Hebreu and Francis de Holanda. In this article we have highlighted some common points and others that we have put in a correlative relationship: the fact that both wrote in the genre of dialogue is a common theme running through the literary fashion of the time of these authors. This approach, which was mainly based on echoes of Plato, traces its lineage, above all, to the profound influence of *De Amore* translated by Marsílio Ficino. Hebreu and Holanda present us with a Cosmogony and Metaphysics of Creation that stems from the Divine Love, and similarly they share countless philosophical and literary sources. The subject of Love is present in themes of profound expression and subtlety such as the dedication to art resulting from an innate and natural love of it, as well as the major theme of sacred and profane love. In this way our authors present a comprehensive portrait of love: in all its dimensions, from the most sensory to the most spiritual, permeated by its cosmic force.

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<sup>42</sup> The Art Story Foundation 2022: s.n.

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