

Moth of Venus, caterpillar of Christ: Piero di Cosimo's insects and their possible meanings

Alcimar do Lago Carvalho¹

Inácio Schiller Bittencourt Rebetez²

Submetido em: 05/04/2019

Aceito em: 15/04/2019

Publicado em: 03/05/2019

Abstract

This paper identifies and contextualizes all the insects depicted by the Florentine master Piero di Cosimo (1462-1522). These are present in six of his paintings: *Madonna and Child with Saints Lazarus and Sebastian*, Chiesa dei Santi Michele Arcangelo e Lorenzo Martire, Montevettolini (Flesh fly); *Vulcan and Aeolus*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (Migratory locust and Scarce swallowtail butterfly); *Adoration of the Child*, Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH (Water scorpion); *Venus, Mars and Cupid*, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin (Jersey tiger moth and Housefly); *The discovery of honey*, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA (Swarm of wasps); *Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist and an Angel*, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, São Paulo (Death's head hawkmoth caterpillar). In an attempt to interpret the presence of each insect depicted within its specific iconographic context, we propose that Piero used them for different purposes: as references to events described in the New Testament (Toledo and São Paulo), as reminders of plagues that attacked the Tuscany of his time (Montevettolini and Berlin), as realized abstractions of natural elements (Ottawa), and even as a joke in a joyous bacchanalian scene (Worcester).

¹ Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).
Research grant from FAPERJ (proc. 200.107/2019).

² Programa de Pós-graduação em História, Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP).

Introduction

It can be said that in the year of 2015 Piero di Cosimo (1462-1522) experienced a revival. For a long time, he was considered extravagant and less successful than his Florentine contemporaries, but after the first major exhibition dedicated to him, in the National Gallery of Art and later in the Galleria degli Uffizi, we can now say that Piero finally has found his place among the most important European masters.

This renewed interest in the artist has drawn commentators to discuss his representation of wildlife like never before³. Piero sought in plants and animals much more than mere subjects for his paintings. According to Giorgio Vasari, he investigated subtleties of nature that are able to deeply touch the human soul⁴. Even though Vasari's biography of the artist is nowadays more contested than ever, no one has yet denied his assertion that Piero had a quite unique interest in natural phenomena, even for a period like the Renaissance in which many painters were again drawn to naturalistic observation. In the context of the so-called Book of Nature doctrine⁵, or the Bible of natural theology, insects became an important source of contemplation for that age: "[...] The idea of microcosm, the very

³ Besides the article by Alison Luchs in the Washington catalogue of the above-mentioned exhibition, in the most recent book on the artist there are four essays dedicated to this topic: BELOZERSKAYA, Marina. "Real or imagined? Exotic Animals in Piero di Cosimo's Mythologies"; MCHAM, S. B. "The 'Fantasia' of the Cricket in Piero di Cosimo's *Vulcan and Aeolus*"; OLSON, Roberta J. M. "Rara Avis – Piero di Cosimo and the Birds He Painted"; GERONIMUS, Dennis. "Beautiful Monsters – The Language of Empathy and Grief in Piero di Cosimo's Representation of Animals and Human-Animal Hybrids"; HEDREEN, Guy. "The Question of Centaurs – Lucretius, Ovid, and Empedokles in Piero di Cosimo". In: GERONIMUS, Dennis; KWAKKELSTEIN, Michael W. (Eds.). **Piero di Cosimo: Painter of Faith and Fable** (NIKI Studies in Netherlandish – Italian Art History, 12). Leiden: Brill, 2018.

⁴ One of the most interesting passages of both editions of Piero's biography is when it is said that he had "certa sottilità nello investigare certe sottigliezze della natura che penetrano". This has been translated as "a certain subtlety in the investigation of some of the deepest and most subtle secrets of Nature". While correct, we could complement that the Italian original can also mean that the subtleties of nature that the artist investigated are able to touch those who are open to appreciate them. By reproducing them in his paintings, Piero tried to communicate an understanding that the microscopic details of fauna and flora were a reflection of a macrocosmic order.

⁵ RAYBOULD, Robin. **An Introduction to the Symbolic Literature of the Renaissance**. Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 2006, pp. 21, 55, 315.

small, as a key to the working of the universe, a miraculous reduction of the mystery and magic of the grand divine design, made these often tiny creatures of special appeal”⁶.

If Piero was indeed moved by nature’s creatures, so are the viewers of his art by the way he carefully reproduced them. While not all of his beasts show anatomical precision, it is impressive that he depicted eight distinct species of insects in six paintings with such accuracy that five hundred years later it is perfectly possible to identify precisely the model species of at least three of them. Notwithstanding, the identification in the others is quite plausible in genus level.

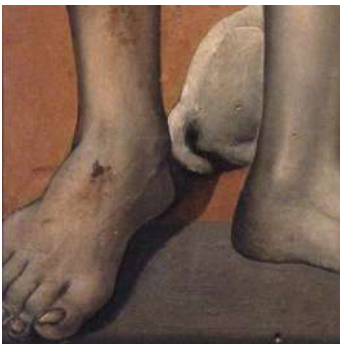
In this article, we firstly try to identify scientifically each of the insects present in the artist’s oeuvre in chronological order, and afterwards offer possible iconological meanings to them according to their biology, and the pagan and Christian sources judged pertinent. This way, considering insect representations as decisive signals for iconographical analyses in a Christian context in the Early Modern Age painting, our final goal was tentatively to reinterpret each painting based on their presence.

Figures 1-6 are composed of a complete view of the pictorial area of each discussed painting, amplified detail(s) and a photograph of the real life insect for comparison.

⁶ EISLER, Colin. **Dürer’s animals**. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, p. 119.

Flesh fly

Figure 1
Piero di Cosimo
Madonna and Child with Saints
Lazarus and Sebastian, 1481-1484
Oil and tempera on panel
165 x 123 cm.
Chiesa dei Santi Michele Arcangelo e
Lorenzo Martire, Montevettolini



Wohlfahrtia magnifica [Image credit: Alamy]

This is one of Piero's first works, painted when he was between nineteen and twenty-two years old⁷. It was Federico Zeri who first attributed it to the Florentine painter: "the impasto is his and the brushstroke is his, and typically his are certain chords of yellow, of dark red and of blue, that already in such an early work deliver that luminous and velvety density which shines in the product of his maturity"⁸.

In the panel the Virgin sits on a humble throne with Christ on her knee. Saints Lazarus and Sebastian stand by them, in a *sacra conversazione*⁹. The scene contains a series of interesting details including the boatman behind Lazarus, the three quadrupeds being fed by a person with a bowl outside the building on the right, as seen through the windows, and most important for this article, a fly (order Diptera: family Sarcophagidae) resting on the saint's right foot. Until now, the insect was only mentioned in scholarly literature by Nicoletta Pons, who considered it an example of Piero's fascination of the great skill with which the Flemish painters could depict details¹⁰. Obviously, the minute size of the representation does not provide details that allow for any possibility of accurate identification. If Piero thought about portraying a specific fly, the consideration of the Flesh fly *Wohlfahrtia magnifica* (Schiner, 1862) (Diptera: Sarcophagidae) is one

⁷ PONS, Nicoletta. "Adorazione del Bambino". In: CAPRETTI, Elena; FORLANI TEMPESTI, Anna; PADOVANI, Serena; PARENTI, Daniela (Eds.). **Piero di Cosimo 1462-1522: Pittore eccentrico fra Rinascimento e Maniera**. Florence: Giunti Editore, 2015, pp. 204-206. As the painting is mentioned in the church's documents in 1484 but not in 1480, it is supposed that the panel was made between these dates. Even though it was moved to another chapel, it is one of the rare examples of a work by Piero that remains in its original site. The fact that the altar where it was originally was dedicated to Lazarus explains why he was represented here instead of saint Roch, who usually accompanies Sebastian. Lazarus, even though much less popular, was too considered a saint who could protect and liberate the faithful from diseases (HIRSCHAUER, Gretchen A. "Madonna and Child with Saints Lazarus and Sebastian". In HIRSCHAUER, Gretchen A.; GERONIMUS, Dennis (Eds.). **Piero di Cosimo: The Poetry of Painting in Renaissance Florence**. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2015, p. 94). While Sebastian carries the arrows with which the Romans tortured him, Lazarus holds a clapper, "used to warn of the arrival of someone stricken with the plague or leprosy" (GERONIMUS, Dennis. **Piero di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange**. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006, pp. 92, 186).

⁸ ZERI, Federico. "Rivedendo Piero di Cosimo". **Paragone**. Florence, 10, 115, Jul. 1959, pp. 47-48.

⁹ HIRSCHAUER, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹⁰ PONS, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

of the most plausible hypotheses.

Since 1987 it is said that in such an early painting Piero was already “perfectly versed in [the oil] technique”, and the execution of the Montevettolini altarpiece is “typically Flemish”¹¹. The inclusion of a façade of stair gables (*trapgevel*) in the mentioned edifice on the right, the first of a total of seven of his paintings with such a detail, can be considered a tribute to the great art that was being produced in Flanders¹². Along with the buildings reflected on the river surface, the light touching Sebastian’s arrows and the lines in Jesus’ scrotum to denote rugosity, the fly indeed shows a painter looking beyond Italy’s borders for inspiration. However, we believe it also has a theological and historical significance.

According to Luke (16, 19-31), Jesus told a parable about Lazarus, a beggar who was full of sores, which were licked by certain dogs¹³. Accordingly, the artist depicted several wounds on the saint’s legs and feet. While his left foot is being licked by a white dog, as written in the Bible, Piero added a fly on Lazarus’ right foot out of his own imagination. The insect was commonly represented in paintings during the Renaissance¹⁴, and, as per Mirella Levi d’Ancona, it could acquire a multitude of meanings in the period¹⁵. In Piero’s altarpiece, however, the fly seems to acquire the

¹¹ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 188, referring to BUZZEGOLI, Ezio. “Michelangelo as Colourist revealed in the conservation of the Doni tondo”. *Apollo*. London, CXXVI, n. 319, Dec. 1987, pp. 405-408.

¹² This architecture can also be found in the *Madonna and Child* in Stockholm, the *Pala Pugliese* in Saint Louis, the *Visitation* in Washington, DC, the *Innocenti altarpiece* in Florence, the *Adoration* in Toledo and the *Madonna* in São Paulo.

¹³ THOMPSON, Frank C. (compiled and edited). **The New Chain-reference Bible** (Third improved edition). Indianapolis: B. B. Kirkbride Bible Co., 1934, pp. 83-84 (New Testament).

¹⁴ ARASSE, Daniel. **Le détail: pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture**. Paris: Flammarion, 2008, p. 120; MONESTIER, Martin. **Las moscas. El peor enemigo del hombre** (Colección: Sección de Obras de Ciencia e Tecnología). Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004, p. 244.

¹⁵ LEVI D’ANCONA, Mirella. **Lo Zoo del Rinascimento: il significato degli animali nella pittura italiana dal XIV al XVI secolo**. Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi Editore, 2001, pp. 162-164. According to her, in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries, the presence of flies could have the following meanings: the Greek deity Myiodes, the fourth plague of Egypt, the devil, the Pharaoh, captive spirits, luxury, the restless soul, sin and earthly desires, disease, temptation, torture, Christ’s Passion and plagues in general. Moreover, the making of a fly could only show an artist’s virtuosity,

specific function of reminding the faithful not only of a general idea of the corruption of the flesh, but also of death's proximity.

While the region of the Val di Nievole (where Montevettolini lies) was spared in previous plagues, it was severely stricken at the end of the fourteenth century. Documents claiming Montevettolini adopted preemptive measures against it made Pons suggest that the city itself was not contaminated, or at least not damaged as much as the rest of the region. That, in turn, would have led the Cecchi family to commission the altarpiece to Piero di Cosimo to thank the Virgin and Saints Lazarus and Sebastian for their supposed intervention¹⁶. Even assuming that Montevettolini was spared, its inhabitants knew that the surroundings were full of dead bodies – and, consequently, many kinds of flies, which are, in general, the first and most abundant decomposing agents¹⁷. Open wounds on living people and vertebrate animals also attract them¹⁸, and can produce myiases¹⁹. More than alluding to an abstract idea of death, the artist may have wanted to make a reference to a harsh experience that was still quite prevalent in the minds of the viewers: the plague attacked between 1479 and 1480, and Piero may have had already finished the panel in 1481, just months after the epidemic. As the painting is recorded in the church documents in 1484, six years is the maximum amount of time that separates the arrival of the disease and the edification of the altarpiece. Therefore, Piero's fly did not only complement the clapper and the dog as part of the Lazarus disease-related iconography²⁰, nor was it a vague reference to death, but could also be a potent reminder of a recent and tragic event.

if intended to be mistaken by the viewer for a "real" one.

¹⁶ PONS, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

¹⁷ MONESTIER, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

¹⁹ BONACCI, Teresa [et al.]. "First data on myiasis caused by *Wohlfahrtia magnifica* (Schiner, 1862) (Insecta: Diptera: Sarcophagidae) in Calabria, southern Italy". **Life: The Excitement of Biology**, vol. 1, n. 4, Apr. 2013, p. 197.

²⁰ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 186.

Migratory locust and Scarce swallowtail butterfly

Figure 2
Piero di Cosimo
Vulcan and Aeolus
c. 1487-1490
Oil and tempera on canvas
155.5 x 166.5 cm.
National Gallery of Canada,
Ottawa



Locusta migratoria [Image credit: Alamy]



Iphiclydes podalirius [Image credit: Alamy]

Piero's only painting in Canada is unanimously considered the pair to the painting by the same artist in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (Hartford, CT). They have similar measurements and are the artist's only works on canvas, being also stylistically and thematically connected. The one in Hartford, the *Finding of Vulcan on Lemnos*, shows the god right after his second fall²¹, being taken care of by the local nymphs.

In *Vulcan and Aeolus*, a complex scene with a multitude of human personages and animals, the god of fire is seen at a mature age, fashioning a horseshoe with a hammer and an anvil with the help of Aeolus, the god of the winds, controlling a pair of leather bellows. The pair of mythical gods occupies the left inferior quadrangle of the pictorial area. According to Panofsky, the full title of the work should be *Vulcan, assisted by Aeolus, as Teacher of Mankind*. In his view these ancient gods represented universal forces of nature that are "indispensable for 'mankind's progress'"²², working in an integrated way. What the author calls the progress of civilization is the domestication of animals, the manufacturing of the first metal tools, the building of the first permanent houses and the development of a social order, as shown by the two families, one in the foreground and the other behind Aeolus. If nowadays not all scholars agree entirely with his interpretation, the catalogues of Piero's exhibition in Washington and Florence named the canvas after the gods as identified by the German art historian²³.

²¹ The first happened because his mother Juno wanted to get rid of him because of his physical deficiency: it is on purpose that Piero represented Vulcan as an awkward adolescent with his left leg rigid and bowed. The second fall happened because he was defending his mother from Jupiter's ire after her intervention in the Trojan War.

²² PANOFSKY, Erwin. "A história primitiva do homem nos dois ciclos de pinturas de Piero di Cosimo". In: **Estudos de iconologia: Temas humanísticos na Arte do Renascimento**. Lisbon: Editorial Estampa, 1986, p. 58.

²³ One author argued that the painting should be called *The return of New Life to Lemnos* and that the pair on the left would not be Vulcan and Aeolus but could "be more convincingly interpreted as personifications of industry" (GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 159). It has also been suggested that it is an Old Testament scene, showing *The family of Tubalcain* (CALVESI, Maurizio. "Piero di Cosimo: sbrogliando la matassa". **Storia dell'Arte**. Rome, vol. 43, n. 134, n.s. 34, Apr. 2013, p. 17). In the entry of this work in the Washington catalogue, it was said that the character working on the anvil "has been plausibly identified as Vulcan", while identifying his companion as Aeolus would be "less certain" (FRANKLIN, David. "Piero and the painting of his time". In: HIRSCHAUER & GERONIMUS (Eds.), *op.*

Panofsky may have successfully used classical sources to explain most of the painting's elements, but the two insects positioned on the right inferior angle of the composition were not discussed in his writings. He probably viewed them in the same way he saw the giraffe, camel and birds: "charming [accessories] expressive of the halcyon spirit of the scene [...], and not as hieroglyph[s] invested with a uniquely determined iconographic significance"²⁴. Some argued that the locust would be a reference to Tithonus, the aristocratic Trojan with whom goddess Eos (Aurora) fell in love with and who ended up being transformed into a cricket²⁵. The locust and the butterfly have also been considered "evidence of Piero's love of nature's creatures"²⁶, once insects "merited [his] attention"²⁷. However, on other occasions when the canvas in Ottawa was discussed they were not even mentioned²⁸.

Recently, Sarah B. McHam made an interesting analysis of the locust presence in that painting²⁹. The author reminds us that Pliny the Elder recorded that the Latin word *gryllus* may not just mean "cricket" (the Italian *grillo*) but also "could refer to painters who specialized in small-scale paintings of secular subject matters interpreted in a humorous, whimsical, and imaginative way". Even though the Roman author considered that these artists belonged to a lower category, as opposed to the higher one of those

cit., pp. 118-119). In spite of this questioning, the publication retained the traditional title. In the Uffizi catalogue of the same show, two authors expressed their agreement with Panofsky's original hypothesis concerning the main characters of the scene (FARINELLA, Vincenzo. "Il dolce miele delle muse: Piero di Cosimo e la tradizione lucreziana a Firenze"; CAPRETTI, Elena. "Il ritrovamento di Vulcano". In: CAPRETTI, FORLANI TEMPESTI, PADOVANI, & PARENTI (Eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 118-119, 224). In this article, we also believe that the canvas in Ottawa shows Vulcan and Aeolus as natural forces that enable mankind to succeed in technical and social evolution.

²⁴ PANOFSKY, Erwin. "Letters to the editor". *The Art Bulletin*. New York, vol. 28, n. 4, Dec. 1946, p. 288.

²⁵ This past interpretation is mentioned in GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 149.

²⁶ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 159.

²⁷ LUCHS, Alison. "Creatures great, small and hybrid: The natural and unnatural wonders in Piero's art". In: HIRSCHAUER & GERONIMUS (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 64.

²⁸ FRANKLIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-122; FARINELLA, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-119; CAPRETTI, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

²⁹ We thank Professor McHam (Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick) for sending us her article before it had been published.

who dedicated themselves to history painting, Pliny regarded them to be amongst the best Greek painters for the quality of their inventions. In McHam's opinion, the insect should be read "as a sort of emblematic signature that proclaimed he was one of the artists who should be linked to the great Greek secular painters of *fantasia* – and that he was proud of it and wanted to be recognized"³⁰. She does not mention its related neighbor, the butterfly.

Before venturing ourselves into an interpretation, however, we should be clear about what is actually painted. The insect lying on the rock has all morphological characteristics of a locust, compatible with the Migratory locust, scientifically the *Locusta migratoria* Linnaeus, 1758 (order Orthoptera: family Acrididae), a species that occur in Northern Italy. While both belong to the same order, crickets have long antennae, which are usually longer than their dorso-ventrally depressed bodies, and their saltatory legs are commonly directed laterally. Locusts, for their part, have small antennae, like those seen in the Ottawa painting, and their bodies are laterally compressed, with the saltatory legs directed dorsally. It is unlikely that an artist so interested in natural phenomena would paint a locust intending to represent a cricket.

Locusts are predominantly mentioned throughout the Old Testament as agents of plague and as symbols of the successive invaders of the Holy Land³¹. In the book of *Revelation* (9, 1-3) however, to the sounding of the fifth angel's trumpet, they acquire a meaning that might be useful for our

³⁰ Even though Piero di Cosimo is nowadays considered more sophisticated than he was in the past, it should be pointed out that no one claims he actually read Pliny. As McHam notes, the *Natural History* was translated from Latin to the vernacular for the first time by the Florentine humanist Cristoforo Landino in Venice, 1476, when Piero was fourteen years old. The humanists with whom Piero lived might have introduced him to the contents of Pliny's magnum opus. It is a consensus among art historians that the artist's panels *The Hunt* and *The return of the hunt* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art show he was aware of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, a text that had been recently rediscovered and that was generating heated discussions. If the secular elites were fascinated with Lucretius' account of the wonders of the universe, the church felt threatened by his assertion that no divine creature could interfere in human affairs. This means that Piero had access to the most relevant intellectual debates happening in Florence at his time. As we shall see, it also seems that the artist was familiar with Pliny's *Natural History* because of the presence of tadpoles in the Toledo tondo.

³¹ As in the books of Joel (1, 2-20), Amos (7, 1-4), Naum (3, 15).

analysis. When the unspecified fallen angel opens the bottomless pit, it exhales “smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit. And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: as the scorpions of the earth have power”³². In Saint John the Evangelist’s account, locusts inhabit the underworld, just like Vulcan. While the ancient Greeks regarded the underworld as a cold place, in the *Revelation* they come out of the fire, which recalls the fire that Vulcan is using in Piero’s painting to forge the horseshoe. Locusts had already been associated with fire in the Old Testament, as we find in Nahum (3, 15): “There shall the fire devour thee; the sword shall cut thee off, it shall eat thee up like the cankerworm: make thyself many as the cankerworm, make thyself many as the locusts”³³. In Lorenzo Lotto’s painting depicting Saint Jerome, on exhibition at the Muzeul Național de Artă al României in Bucharest, a locust is placed centrally in the foreground, below the figure of the saint in self-flagellation, as an evident demonic sign³⁴. Even today, the observation of the phenomena of locust swarms lead authors to associate them with fire and reinterpret the passages of the Bible which cite them³⁵.

Regarding the Scarce swallowtail, named *Iphiclides podalirius* (Linnaeus, 1758) (order Lepidoptera: family Papilionidae), a butterfly frequently represented in Italian Renaissance painting, the most common reading in Christian tradition would be to consider it a symbol of resurrection or the soul freed from the body³⁶. Bartolomeo Montagna seems to have chosen the very same species for this purpose in his *Pietà* (Santuario della Madonna di Monte Berico, Vicenza), as so as Gentile da Fabriano in the

³² THOMPSON, *op. cit.*, p. 260 (New Testament).

³³ THOMPSON, *op. cit.*, p. 857.

³⁴ HUMPREY, Peter. **Lorenzo Lotto**. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1997, p. 55.

³⁵ MIRANDA, Evaristo Eduardo de. **Animais interiores: os voadores**. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 2003, p. 367.

³⁶ By the same time, distinct species of butterflies were acquiring their own meanings in Flemish painting. See CARVALHO, Alcimar L. “Butterflies at the Mouth of Hell: traces of biology of two species of Nymphalidae (Lepidoptera) in European paintings of the fifteenth century”. **Filosofia e História da Biologia**, vol. 5, n. 2, 2010, pp. 177-193.

Madonna della farfalla (Pinacoteca Vaticana), and maybe Pisanello in his *Portrait d'une princesse d'Este* (Musée du Louvre)³⁷. Curiously, Agnolo Bronzino used the image of this butterfly in the *Doppio ritratto del Nano Morgante* (Galleria degli Uffizi) as a kind of sex cover. In Piero's canvas, there is no suggestion of death: to the contrary, it's main subject is mankind's awakening to the new possibilities that arose from the use of fire³⁸. We propose in this case that the meaning of the Greek word *psyche* (ψυχή), which covers in its origin the concepts of human soul and butterfly, can also be connected to the verb "to blow" (ψύχω)³⁹. This possibility guided us to interpret this diaphanous and cryptic butterfly image as a metaphor for the almost immaterial conception of the wind, personified in the painting as the god Aeolus.

Virgil wrote that Vulcan's workshop is next to the island of Lipari, where Aeolus reigned. That is why later mythographers like Servius believed there was "a close association between Vulcan and Aeolus, who were finally thought of as something like partners in business", since fire and wind "are both suitable for blacksmith's work"⁴⁰. Piero painted the locust and the butterfly next to each other just as he depicted both gods sitting close to each other working in association: note that Vulcan is seen below Aeolus just as the locust is below the butterfly. The pair of insects here might be understood as a microcosm of the universal forces incarnate in Vulcan and Aeolus. Therefore, what we can see here are two different visual allegorical translations of the association of fire with wind, personified in the case of the representation of the gods of mythology, or in the form of realized abstractions⁴¹ in the case of the insects.

³⁷ CORDELIER, Dominique. **La princesse au brin de genévrier** (Collection Solo, n.3). Paris: Musée du Louvre, 1996, p. 13.

³⁸ In the mentioned *Hunting Scenes* in New York, Piero showed humanity before that, when there were no families, no metal tools, no permanent habitations nor fabrics.

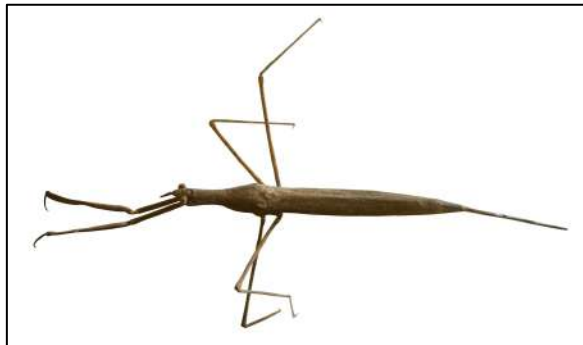
³⁹ Similarly, the Hebrew word רוח (*ruach*), which means "wind", also appears in the Torah as "spirit" (see, for example, Genesis 1, 2).

⁴⁰ PANOFSKY, *op. cit.*, [1986], p. 48.

⁴¹ As defined by ALPERS, Svetlana. **A arte de descrever: A arte holandesa no século XVII** (Texto & Arte, 16, trad. A. P. Danesi). São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1999, p. 412.

Water scorpion

Figure 3
Piero di Cosimo
Adoration of the Child
c. 1490-1495
Oil on panel
Diameter 160 cm.
Toledo Museum of Art,
Toledo



Ranatra linearis [Image credit: Alamy]

It was mentioned that the subject of Piero's tondo in Toledo derives from Saint Bridget of Sweden's *Revelations*. On a religious journey to Bethlehem between 1371 and 1372, the saint saw "the Virgin Mary kneeling on the ground and giving painless birth to the Christ child, then worshiping her son while Joseph slept nearby"⁴². Her vision of the Holy Family was later painted by Florentine artists such as Fra Filippo Lippi, who made several versions of this narrative. The one by Piero di Cosimo is made of precious materials such as ultramarine and is still nowadays in excellent condition⁴³. It may be considered one of the painter's finest works and one of the few of his masterpieces that Vasari did not mention in either edition of the *Lives*.

As Roberta Olson noted, the artist "created a visual sermon on the life of Christ and his gift to mankind"⁴⁴. It is one of Piero's paintings more full of life, with plants growing in every corner and with different kinds of animals: quadrupeds, birds, amphibians and a single insect. It has been argued that the tondi were meant to be bridges to link "the terrestrial and theophanic realms"⁴⁵, and one who has seen this immense circular painting may realize why it was considered a doorway to another dimension.

This tondo contains "the most unexpected and unprecedented detail"⁴⁶: twelve tadpoles in the pristine pond below the fragile body of the baby Jesus. If the amphibians have been noted before and associated with the idea of new life, it was Giancarlo Fiorenza who first developed a theory relating them to classical and Christian literature⁴⁷. According to him, the tadpoles would be both a signature (Piero showing himself as an artist with

⁴² BRILLIANT, Virginia. "The Adoration of the Child". In: HIRSCHAUER & GERONIMUS, (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁴³ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], pp. 167, 325.

⁴⁴ OLSON, Roberta J. M. **The Florentine Tondo**. Oxford University Press: New York, 2000, p. 205.

⁴⁵ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 165.

⁴⁶ FIORENZA, Giancarlo. "Tadpoles, Caterpillars, and Mermaids: Piero di Cosimo's Poetic Nature". In: SCHLITT, Melinda (Ed.). **Gifts in Return: Essays in Honour of Charles Dempsey**. Toronto: Melinda Schlitt ed., 2012, p. 154.

⁴⁷ FIORENZA, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-177.

incomparable creativity) and would also invite the spectator to reflect upon the secrets of nature and how they are related to the incomprehensible doctrines of Christianity. The author states that they establish an “analogy for the miracle of Christ’s human formation through sexless conception”: as we have seen, by the end of the fifteenth century there was a renewed interest in Pliny, who thought that “after a life of six month’s duration, frogs melt away into slime, though no one ever sees how it is done; after which they come to life again in the water during the spring, just as they were before”⁴⁸. It is not known that Renaissance thinkers had a more precise idea of how frogs reproduced. Therefore, Piero would be connecting the mystery of the Incarnation with the tadpoles’ perceived “miraculous” conception and their ability of mutating into frogs with Christ’s powers. And just like the pollywogs would have come to life from the slime, the divine Λόγος (Logos) had just assumed the material form of σαρξ (Flesh), because in Saint Bridget’s vision the Virgin is adoring the Child right after his birth.

While there are many written religious sources relating Jesus to plants and animals, no Christian text associating him to tadpoles has been discovered so far. In spite of that, Fiorenza’s theory is convincing. Every author that commented on the tondo’s amphibians after his article agrees that the tadpoles would be related to the events described in the New Testament⁴⁹.

We believe, however, that another animal depicted in the pond offers a clue to interpreting this subscene. Only two authors paid attention to the cryptic little creature above the tadpoles, and both identified it as a “water spider”⁵⁰. Even though it is very small and the representation is the least

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 161, 163.

⁴⁹ BRILLIANT, *op. cit.*, p. 127-128; GERONIMUS, Dennis. “Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist and Angel”. In: HIRSCHAUER & GERONIMUS (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 173; PONS, *op. cit.*, p. 242; GERONIMUS, Dennis. “Caterpillars in the grass, castles in the air: Piero di Cosimo, painter of faith and fantasy”. In: BARBOSA, Karen (Ed.). **Piero di Cosimo: restauração = Piero di Cosimo: restoration**. São Paulo: MASP, 2017, p. 74.

⁵⁰ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 167; BRILLIANT, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-128; GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2017], p. 74. Two publications claim that there are winged insects in the scene (FERMOR, Sharon. **Piero di Cosimo: Fiction, Invention and Fantasia**. London: Reaktion Books, 1993, p. 150;

precise of all of the insects painted by Piero di Cosimo, its morphology is definitely not of a water spider, being more compatible to that of a water scorpion or water stick, a peculiar insect of the genus *Ranatra*⁵¹ (order Hemiptera: family Nepidae). The representatives of this genus are stick-like, very thin and have long legs. The first pair of legs are designed to grip their prey. They also possess a needlelike, elongated appendages at the tip of the abdomen composed of a pair of half-tubes that, when held together, become a sort of snorkel. There are many records of the occurrence of *Ranatra linearis* (Linnaeus, 1758) in Tuscany, and we can assume that this is the probable species that the artist could have had in mind to represent.

The *Ranatra* species feed on a range of aquatic animals, including tadpoles. If the absence of textual references comparing Jesus with tadpoles could cast doubt upon the proposed association, the fact that these aquatic larvae are being “watched” by one of their natural predator reinforces the hypothesis that has been recently advanced. It is not hard to find Renaissance pictures in which Christ’s infancy is full of references to the Crucifixion⁵²: one of the foundations of Catholic theology is that Jesus came to this world destined not only to die like any other man, but to die under great suffering in order to redeem humanity. When a pollywog is captured by a water scorpion’s strong, pincer-like front pair of legs, it is immediately pricked by its rostrum, through which the vital fluids of the prey

FORLANI TEMPESTI, Anna; CAPRETTI, Elena. **Piero di Cosimo: l’ouvre peint**. Paris: Éditions du Félin, 1996, p. 109). It is true that the *Ranatra linearis* has wings, although it rarely uses them and the one depicted by Piero is not showing them.

⁵¹ The fact that this representation is not precise does not make it any less impressive. As recently as the decade of 1980, scientists avoided studying water scorpions in nature, preferring to carry out experiments with it in laboratories: “The foraging behavior of *Ranatra* is difficult to observe under field conditions because of poor visibility (for the observer) and the structural heterogeneity of the environment” (BLOIS, Catherine; CLOAREC, Ann. “Density-Dependent Prey Selection in the Water Stick Insect, *Ranatra linearis* (Heteroptera)”. **Journal of Animal Ecology**. London, vol. 52, n. 3, Oct. 1983, p. 850). The fact that Piero was able to understand the behavior of that insect and reproduce its shape five hundred years ago shows how his observation powers were truly outstanding.

⁵² STEINBERG, Leo. **The sexuality of Christ in Renaissance art and in modern oblivion**. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 274.

are sucked until its death; it is afterwards discarded⁵³.

By placing an animal in its “infant” state that, as it was believed, had a “miraculous”, sexless conception right below the Christ Child and next to its natural predator, it is plausible to assume that Piero intended to make an analogy between the tadpoles’ capturing by the water scorpion with Jesus’ inevitable future in the hands of the Romans⁵⁴. Such bizarre, amphibian version of the *Agnus dei* could only have been made by this artist who found delight in the unexpected. In turn, not far removed from these, a depiction of the passerine bird Great tit, *Parus major* Linnaeus, 1758, was put on alert, as if it were looking for the insects from which it feeds. Here the cycle seems to close, where we can meditate on a vision of redemption, where divine forces maintain control over earthly events. A dandelion, plant generally associated with the Passion, is hanging in the first plan over the composition. It may refer to the spreading of the Gospel given that it is depicted at the moment where it is about to disperse its seeds following the death of the flower head.

⁵³ Very few of the pollywogs actually become frogs, because predators like the water scorpion menace every stage of their development.

⁵⁴ The pricking of the tadpole’s body might be a reference to the thorns of the crown Jesus received, to the nails with which he was attached to the cross and to the spear of the Roman soldier who wounded him in the abdomen.

Jersey tiger moth and Housefly



Figure 4
Piero di Cosimo
Venus, Mars and Cupid, c. 1495-1505
Oil on panel, 72 x 182 cm.
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



Euplagia quadripunctaria [Image credit: Alamy]



Musca domestica [Image credit: Alamy]

This painting is unanimously believed to be the one that Vasari described as being in his possession in the second edition of the *Lives*⁵⁵. The subject of the *putti* that play with Mars' weapons comes from a description by Lucian of Samosata from a work by the Greek painter Echion, who represented frenetic loves playing with Alexander's armor while the emperor was getting closer to his wife Roxana, who was in the nuptial bed⁵⁶. But the idea to represent Venus and Mars in a meadow probably derives from Reposianus' erotic poem *De concubitu Martis et Veneris*⁵⁷. The contradictions that the Ancient poets saw between Love and War were expressed by Piero in different ways, such as the sinuous road behind Venus that contrasts with the rocks behind Mars, a black bird that flies next to the blue mountain obliquely opposed to a white bird resting in the background, and the fact that the goddess is laid down in a light-green grass, in contrast to the dark-green grass where the god lies. The white and black doves in the foreground kissing each other may be an allusion both to the goddess and to the Neoplatonic concept of *concordia discors*, the conciliation of the opposites that generates universal harmony⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ "He painted, also, a picture containing a nude Venus, with a Mars, likewise nude, who is sleeping in a meadow full of flowers, and all around are various Loves, who are carrying away, some here, some there, the helmet, armllets, and other pieces of armour of Mars; there is a grove of myrtle, with a Cupid that is afraid of a rabbit, and there are also the Doves of Venus and the other emblems of Love. This picture is at Florence, in the house of Giorgio Vasari, who keeps it on memory of that master, whose caprices have always pleased him". VASARI, Giorgio. "Piero di Cosimo (c. 1462 - c. 1521) Painter of Florence".

Available on < <http://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariPierodiCosimo.html> >. Accessed on May 2, 2018. Because the painting is not mentioned in the first edition of the *Lives*, it is believed that Vasari acquired it between 1550 and 1568.

⁵⁶ CAPRETTI, Elena. "Fece in Fiorenza molti quadri a più cittadini, sparsi per le loro case': *Venere, Marte e Cupido* e altri dipinti da camera con 'storie di favole". In: CAPRETTI, FORLANI TEMPESTI, PADOVANI & PARENTI (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 93. Lucian's ekphrasis is also the textual source for Sodoma's *Wedding of Alexander and Roxane* fresco in the Villa Farnesina.

⁵⁷ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 92. In this poem of the second century of the Common Era, the roman author tells us that the gods met in a place where "flowers are the bed, flowers the frame of the couch, flowers the support beneath". And while they are resting after the sexual activity, "Cupid is handling Mars' weapons: and after scanning them one by one, breastplate, shield, sword, plumes of the threatening helmet, he binds them each with flowers" (DUFF, J. Wight & DUFF, Arnold M. **Minor Latin Poets** (Loeb Classical Library). London: Heinemann, 1934, vol. 2, pp. 529, 535).

⁵⁸ CAPRETTI, *op. cit.*, pp. 91, 95.

Made around ten years after Sandro Botticelli's version of the same subject (National Gallery, London), Piero's painting has few similitudes with it⁵⁹. Insects are surprisingly represented in both. The wasps on the side of Mars in Botticelli's version can allude to the warrior temperament of this god and at the same time be a reference to the Vespucci, the family that probably commissioned this work⁶⁰. While discussed previously in many of its aspects, the two insects represented in Piero's version still might deserve more debate.

Previously identified as a garden tiger moth, *Arctia caja* (Linnaeus, 1758), the insect representation landed in Venus' right leg would primarily not possess a symbolic meaning, being rather a "charming detail confirming the perfect tranquility of the goddess's repose"⁶¹. In the Washington catalogue, it was called a "springtime orange moth" and would be there only because "reptiles, amphibians and insects also merited [Piero's] attention"⁶². It has also been naively considered a "very beautiful butterfly" (*bellissima farfalla*) that could represent the "soul's elevation from sin", a symbol of Good being opposed to Evil, which in turn could be incarnated in the fly that sits on Mars' red pillow⁶³. Matthew Gandy was the first to correctly identify it as a Jersey tiger moth (it. *Falena dell'edera*), scientifically named *Euplagia quadripunctaria* (Poda, 1761) (order Lepidoptera: family Erebidae)⁶⁴, a species that can be readily distinguished

⁵⁹ The only affinities are that in both panels the gods are laid down in the grass and surrounded by bushes of myrtle, and shown in a mirroring way instead of resting together (GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 93; CAPRETTI, *op. cit.*, p. 93). Among the most important differences are that Piero painted the characters in an open and fertile landscape instead of the closed environment of Sandro, and if in the older version we see Venus dressed and with an air of superiority over the sleeping, vulnerable Mars, Piero's goddess is almost naked and seems to ignore Cupid's gesture as she is still in ecstasy, with her right hand open as a sign of relaxation and her eyes looking far away. The different manner with which they treated the same myth is an example of why Piero was considered the antipode of Botticelli (PANOFSKY, *op. cit.*, p. 41).

⁶⁰ LEVI D'ANCONA, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

⁶¹ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 94.

⁶² LUCHS, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁶³ CAPRETTI, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁶⁴ GANDY, Matthew. **Moth** (Animal Series). London: Reaktion Books, 2016, p. 107.

from *Arctia caja* by its thorax which has a pair of yellow longitudinal dorsal stripes, amongst several characteristics. That insect was supposed to represent the “fragility of life, or it may even be a gaudy portent of death [...] or perhaps di Cosimo simply borrowed the symbolic motif of a moth as the pretext to explore his fascination with the natural world”⁶⁵. Although we are in total agreement with the proposed identification, we think that his interpretation showed little daring.

This nocturnal moth presents typical deimatic behavior as a predictor of toxicity. When disturbed during the day, it abruptly opens its disruptive fore wings exhibiting the aposematic colored hind wings as a sign to alert to potential predators, most of them birds. The fore wings, black with yellow stripes, conceal the deep red with black spots of the hind wings. Its polyphagous caterpillar eats plants that produce heterocyclic compounds of pyrazine, which are accumulated in their tissues and subsequently transmitted to the adults, making them unpalatable⁶⁶. After some attempts, when a bird sees the color pattern of the Jersey tiger’s wings, it immediately realizes that that insect will cause great pain if eaten. By placing this moth with its wings opened on the triumphant Venus, Piero seems to be warning the viewer to the dangers of being enchanted by the goddess. In book VIII of the *Odyssey*, Homer tells how Venus and Mars were caught by her husband Vulcan and publicly humiliated in front of the other Olympians, who said Mars should be punished for adultery⁶⁷.

But beyond the Christian morality regarding sex outside marriage, there is a possibility that the artist was alerting Florentines to menacing venereal diseases that were starting to appear in Europe. Dennis Geronimus dates

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁶⁶ MOORE, Barry P.; BROWN, W. Vance; ROTHSCHILD, Miriam. “Methylalkylpyrazines in aposematic insects, their hostplants and mimics”. **Chemoecology**, vol. 1, n. 2, Aug. 1990, p. 43.

⁶⁷ HOMER, **Odyssey**, Book VIII, 343-348: “At this, laughter rose from the group of immortal gods. But Poseidon was unsmiling, and kept begging Hephaestus, the master craftsman, to set Ares free, speaking with winged words: ‘Set him free, and I promise what you ask, that he’ll pay what’s owed in the presence of the deathless gods’.” Available on < <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Odyssey8.php> >. Accessed on Feb. 18, 2019.

the panel now being discussed as made “c. 1495-1505”⁶⁸. Syphilis was first recorded in 1495 in Naples, just five hundred kilometers south of Florence⁶⁹. Its outbreak occurred when Charles VIII of France invaded the southern Italian city, and the epidemic disseminated while his mercenary soldiers were returning home⁷⁰. Before spreading to the rest of Europe (and eventually reaching India and China by 1504), Italy was where syphilis initially struck. Switzerland, one of the countries struck right afterwards, could only be reached from Naples by land, and Florence was not spared. The Florentine physician Giovanni Giacomo Penni reported that the cases of “French disease” decreased only by 1513⁷¹. Even though they became less severe by the middle of the sixteenth century, the symptoms of syphilis were horrendous by the time Piero was painting *Venus, Cupid and Mars*, and included pustules “as shocking as the pain itself⁷²”. Genitals, usually the first infected part, could suffer severe ulceration. It is no coincidence that the Jersey tiger was represented as a kind of alert signal in a scene that happens right after the gods’ extramarital intercourse. The image of naked Venus with Cupid also seems to have been appropriated by Lucas Cranach for the composition of a series of paintings that today can be

⁶⁸ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 92; GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2017], p. 44. The same dating is offered by the Washington catalogue (p. 49). In the Florence catalogue, *Venus, Cupid, and Mars* is also reproduced and commented on, although its writers offered no indication of when they believe it was made.

⁶⁹ The disease only acquired its modern name some decades later, in Girolamo Fracastoro’s poem *Syphilis, sive morbus gallicus*. As the poem’s title suggests, it was first called “French disease”, but also “Disease of Naples”, “venereal lues” and “Great Pox”, as compared to smallpox. TOGNOTTI, Eugenia. “The Rise and Fall of Syphilis in Renaissance Europe”. **The Journal of Medical Humanities**. Denver, vol. 30, n. 2, Jun. 2009, pp. 99-113.

⁷⁰ FARHI, David; DUPIN, Nicolas. “Origins of syphilis and management in the immunocompetent patient: facts and controversies”. **Clinics in Dermatology**, vol. 28, n. 5, Sept.-Oct. 2010, pp. 533-538.

⁷¹ TOGNOTTI, *op. cit.*, p. 106. Penni was actually lamenting that the election of Giovanni di Lorenzo di Medici as Pope Leo X apparently made Italians healthier, thus reducing doctors’ profits.

⁷² KNELL, Robert J. “Syphilis in Renaissance Europe: rapid evolution of an introduced sexually transmitted disease?”. **Biology Letters – Royal Society Publishing**. London, vol. 271 (Suppl. 4), May 2004, p. 174.

interpreted as allegories of syphilis⁷³.

The fly landed next to Mars' head, on his red pillow, assumed here as a possible Housefly *Musca domestica* Linnaeus, 1758 (order Diptera: family Muscidae), then, could have some iconographic connection with the one depicted by the artist in the Montevettolini altarpiece. Although it is hard to estimate the number of deaths, there is a consensus among scientists that the infection caused devastating human loss in Europe⁷⁴. As in the case with the panel in Montevettolini, the fly here seems to be referring to the real flies that were attracted by the huge number of dead bodies in Italy at the beginning of the syphilis epidemic. Due to his sexual relations with Venus, Mars is experiencing what the French call *petite mort* (small death), and unarmed by the *putti*, he became completely vulnerable. By then, the only way of preventing sexually transmitted infections would be abstinence or a stable marriage. In keeping with the mores of his time, Piero might be suggesting that those who were falling into temptations, in spite of the known dangers represented by the Jersey tiger moth, could soon start attracting flies.

The artist seems to give the fly a long tradition as a bearer of diseases, but also of lust. According to Saint Melito of Sardis in his *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae*, the fly could be a symbol of the devil. Centuries later, the Venerable Bede considered it a symbol of luxury in his *Quaestiones super Exodum*. And again, in the eleventh century, for Saint Peter Damian, the fly could be a symbol of sin and terrestrial desire⁷⁵. These traditional meanings corroborate with the message we believe is implicit in the choice of the pair of gods and insects for the painting, representing the misfortunes of Love and War.

⁷³ EBERLE, Mark W. "Lucas Cranach's Cupid as Honey Thief Paintings: Allegories of Syphilis?" **Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**. Los Angeles, vol. 10, n. 1, 1979, pp. 21-30.

⁷⁴ HARPER, Kristin N. [et. al.]. "On the Origin of the Treponematoses: A Phylogenetic Approach". **PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases**. San Francisco, vol. 2, n. 1, Jan. 2008, pp. 1-13.

⁷⁵ LEVI D'ANCONA, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-164.

Swarm of wasps



Figure 5

Piero di Cosimo

The discovery of honey, c. 1500-1505

Oil and tempera on panel, 79.2 x 128.4 cm.

Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA



Vespula vulgaris [Image credit: Alamy]

Vasari also mentioned another painting by Piero containing insects, the famous *The discovery of honey*: “For Giovanni Vespucci, who lived in a house now belonging to Piero Salviati, opposite to S. Michele, in the Via de’ Servi, he executed some bacchanalian scenes, which are round an apartment”. The biographer goes on to mention all the strange creatures contained in it, concluding that “throughout the whole is a feeling of the joy of life, produced by the great genius of Piero”⁷⁶. Since the nineteenth century the painting and its companion, *The Misfortunes of Silenus* (Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge), have been associated with Vasari’s passage⁷⁷. Noting their “warm and crystalline light”, Elena Capretti relates the panels with other paintings the artist made after Leonardo’s return to Florence, such as the *Cini Madonna* in Venice, in which a joyful atmosphere is also present⁷⁸.

Panofsky was the first to realize why the noisy satyrs are trying to attract the “bees” to the tree⁷⁹. It would be a pictorial representation of a passage of Ovid’s *Fasti*, in which the poet states that Bacchus was the one who taught how to unify bees to obtain honey⁸⁰. While the subject is no longer discussed, Panofsky’s conclusion that it would represent the god’s sweet contribution to civilization is controversial. Geronimus thinks that the discovery of honey does not represent “a meaningful advance towards a civilized way of life”⁸¹. The author goes on to reject as well the amorous interpretations of the painting, proposing that the scenes are “more

⁷⁶ VASARI, Giorgio. “Piero di Cosimo (c. 1462 – c. 1521) Painter of Florence”. Available in < <http://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariPierodiCosimo.html> >. Access in May 2, 2018.

⁷⁷ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 310.

⁷⁸ CAPRETTI, Elena. “La scoperta del miele”. In: CAPRETTI, FORLANI TEMPESTI, PADOVANI & PARENTI, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-282.

⁷⁹ PANOFSKY, *op. cit.*, [1986], pp. 55-56. The author claims that “the use of noisy instruments to avoid that the bees go astray – a method still used by apiculturists in the whole world – was described by numerous classical poets and naturalists”.

⁸⁰ OVÍDIO NASÃO, Públio. **Fastos** (Edição bilingue: português/latim; trad. Márcio Meirelles Gouvêa Júnior). Autêntica: Belo Horizonte, 2015, p. 173.

⁸¹ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], pp. 103-105.

suggestive of lust than of the elevated virtues of love, mischievous high jinks than human evolution”⁸².

Because the paintings in general match with the cited classical source, authors have so far taken it for granted that the flying insect representations in the *Discovery of honey* are based on bees. However, a careful analysis of their registered morphology leads to another conclusion, as most of the represented individuals exhibit bright yellow spots on the head and thorax, a feature not present in honey bees. They are clearly based on wasps compatible to the genus *Vespula* (order Hymenoptera: family Vespidae) which, as other vespids, feed on other insects and do not produce honey. Therefore, even though most scholars expected the wasps to be in *The Misfortunes of Silenus*, which shows Bacchus’ partner being stung and rescued by the troupe⁸³, they surprisingly can only be seen in its companion painting *The discovery of honey*⁸⁴.

While the presence of Bacchus and his noisy friends remains a very likely reference to Ovid’s passage, the artist seems to have twisted the narrative: the depicted insects could never reward the god and the satyrs with the

⁸² The author’s opinion is reinforced by a recent technical analysis that showed that, originally, the *Misfortunes of Silenus* had a satyr that approached the donkey in the background from behind with his erect phallus. He writes: “It is no exaggeration to claim here that nothing approaching this degree of sexual explicitness had ever appeared before in Florentine Renaissance painting” (GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 101). In the Florence catalogue of Piero’s exhibition, however, the evolutionary reading of the *Discovery of honey* was maintained (CAPRETTI, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-282).

⁸³ In the *Fasti*, Ovid also writes that the insatiable Silenus went to a tree looking for a honeycomb, but found instead a nest of hornets. Then he was stung and kicked by his donkey. Piero’s painting in Cambridge shows him falling from the tree and being hurt by the animal at the center, while in the right the satyrs try to stand him up and on the left they apply mud in his face to ease the pain caused by the stings. Ovid writes, “Thousands of hornets gathered, and thrust their stings into his bald pate, and left their mark on his snub – nosed face” (GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 105). The original text in Latin says that Silenus was attacked by *crabro*: “milia crabronum coeunt, et vertice nudo spicula defigunt oraque sima notant” (OVÍDIO, *op. cit.*, p. 173).

⁸⁴ The *Misfortunes of Silenus* is in a very bad state conservation, likely because later (and more moralist) owners ordered harsh restorations in an attempt to make it more chaste: “As the technical evidence shows, the satyrs’ priapic excitement and all other sexual misbehavior have either been scraped off or painted over”. We will probably never know if the insects that stung Silenus were erased in this process, but the fact is that they cannot be seen by naked eye or through infrared reflectography (GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2006], p. 101).

discovery of honey, as Piero di Cosimo certainly knew. Given this, we can think about some possible interpretations. Firstly, the painter might have just made a joke. His intention could have been to indeed paint Bacchus teaching how to make bees produce honey, but by substituting them with wasps he was associating the Italian word for them (*vespe*) with the sonority of the commissioner's family name, Vespucci⁸⁵. Such a distortion could be very amusing for the original owners and their guests at the palace. Also, it was suggested that the panels could represent the contradictory nature of love, alternating between the joy expressed by the sweet taste of honey and the pain represented by the stings of wasps⁸⁶. Could it be, then, an inside joke Piero formulated with the patron: that marriage promises sweetness but in it one shall find only stings?

Another possibility could be to consider the two paintings mentioned as a cycle. It is quite easy to imagine that, given the great similarity of the scenes, which seem to represent the same place at two different times. The first would be the one entitled *The Misfortunes of Silenus*, where the setting is more primitive, and the narrative follows more literally the passage from Ovid's *Fasti* relating to Silenus' equivocal search for honey, which Bacchus had long ago discovered. The second, traditionally called *The Discovery of Honey*, treated in this article, maybe does not represent the corresponding passage in Ovid's *Fasti*, where Silenus was not a protagonist, and may represent a later moment. This hypothesis can be supported by the representation of roads and buildings in the background, gathered in the citadel on the left, where a steeple that may be a church points to the sky. The twisted tree from the center of the composition itself seems to have grown a little. In our new view, the scene represents a kind of *The*

⁸⁵ In the Washington catalogue it was stated that the panels were commissioned to "decorate the bedroom of Giovanni di Guidantonio Vespucci (1476-1549) and Namiciana di Benedetto Nerli after their marriage in 1500" (GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2015], p. 144). In the Florence catalogue, on the other hand, it was said that these bacchanalian scenes would not be adequate for a nuptial chamber, and that they would probably be adorning another room of the Vespucci Palace (CAPRETTI, *op. cit.*, p. 280).

⁸⁶ GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2015], p. 144; GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2017], p. 78.

Redemption of Silenus or Tanging the wasps where Bacchus and his companions learned to settle swarming wasps by making loud, clanging noises by striking metal on metal. This folkloric method of tanging the bees, used since classical antiquity⁸⁷, was also employed by Bacchus and his escorts in the discovery of honey as written in Ovid's *Fasti*⁸⁸. As bees and wasps since antiquity were considered very near relatives, maybe it could be expected that the same method could be applied to both. The siting satyr near Bacchus in the foreground, who has been identified as Pan, is staring directly at the beholder and shows what seem to be heads of garlic taken from his bag, a traditional medicine for insect stings and a food item which beekeepers should avoid in order to keep bees calm whilst near them⁸⁹.

⁸⁷ GRASSELLI, Margaret M. "Tanging the bees: A curious apiarian practice in a drawing by Claude Simpol". **Master Drawings**. New York, vol. 47, n. 4 (Articles and Notes in Honor of Karen B. Cohen), Dec. 2009, pp. 443-446.

⁸⁸ "This [method] is, however, quite a mistake; there are other and better means for the purpose" (NEIGHBOUR, Alfred. **The apiary; or Bees, Bee-hives, and Bee Culture**. London: Kent and Co., Paternoster Row; Geo: Neighbour and Sons, 1865, p.13).

⁸⁹ NEIGHBOUR, *op. cit.*, p. 111. While it was said that Pan is holding a bunch of onions, we believe they resemble more heads of garlic.

Death's head hawkmoth's caterpillar

Figure 6

Piero di Cosimo

*Virgin and Child with Saint
John the Baptist and an
Angel*, c. 1505

Oil and tempera on panel

Diameter 129 cm

Museu de Arte de São

Paulo Assis Chateaubriand

(MASP), São Paulo



Acherontia atropos [Image credit: Alamy]

New research has shown that Piero's only painting in the Southern Hemisphere, until recently considered undocumented⁹⁰, has in fact been registered since 1663, just one century and a half after its production in Florence. From the collection of Ferdinand Karl, a Habsburg archduke of the Tyrol, this tondo went to Vienna, where due to its conservation problems it was called "repugnant" in a letter written by an Austrian official. After arriving in São Paulo in 1951 in an acceptable state, an unsuccessful intervention relegated it to MASP's deposits from 1979 until 2013; then the tondo was sent to Rome to be restored. The last restoration, not without its own controversies, had the merit to make it suitable to be exhibited in the first major monographic exhibition dedicated to Piero di Cosimo, which received over one hundred thousand visitors⁹¹. And, after decades, the Brazilian public can now finally see this work that was called "a composition of an originality without precedent"⁹².

The tondo's five hundred years trajectory, from Florence to São Paulo passing through Innsbruck, Vienna, Amsterdam and London, is as fascinating as its quite unique iconography⁹³. It is the only Madonna that contains a caterpillar, which in turn is the last larval stage of the Death's head hawkmoth, scientifically named *Acherontia atropos* (Linnaeus, 1758) (order Lepidoptera: family Sphingidae), an insect not represented elsewhere in European Renaissance painting⁹⁴. Its species is recognizable

⁹⁰ FIORENZA, *op. cit.*, p. 164; GERONIMUS, *op. cit.*, [2015], p. 173.

⁹¹ RÖSTEL, Alexander. "The Liberation of Piero di Cosimo". **Journal of the Society for Renaissance Studies**. London, vol. 31, n. 4, Sept. 2017, p. 643.

⁹² PADOVANI, Serena. "Madonna con Gesù Bambino, san Giovannino e un angelo". In: CAPRETTI, FORLANI TEMPESTI, PADOVANI & PARENTI (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 296.

⁹³ Serena Padovani wrote a synthesis of the panel's history in her entry for the Florence catalogue (p. 296). A more detailed account can be found in REBETEZ, Inácio Schiller Bittencourt. "Considerations on Piero di Cosimo's tondo in São Paulo: formal analysis, history, and iconography". In: BARBOSA (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 98-101. For an even more detailed discussion, including a transcription of all relevant documents found so far, see REBETEZ, Inácio Schiller Bittencourt. **O tondo "Virgem com o Menino, São João Batista criança e um anjo" de Piero di Cosimo do Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP)**. Master's dissertation. Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Universidade Estadual de Campinas (advisor: Jorge Coli). Campinas, 2017.

⁹⁴ It was represented centuries later by William Holman Hunt in *The hireling shepherd* (Manchester Art

by the dark tubercles dorsally concentrated along the length of the abdomen, the black spiracles, the oblique dark, bluish-green stripes along the abdominal segments 1-7 and its yellow, verrucous caudal horn.

Concentrated in the foreground, the natural elements overcame the aridness of the land to express the life of Jesus, from his metamorphosis into flesh, his death on the cross and his Resurrection⁹⁵. Of all these natural elements, the large caterpillar being watched by the passerine Black redstart, *Phoenicurus ochruros* (Gmelin, 1774), is one of Piero's most eccentric creations, and a challenging subscene to interpret. The insect, holding onto a cut branch, was taken out of its natural environment and left like an offering on a tree stump that resembles a sacrificial altar. The black redstart, an insectivorous bird, seems to be analyzing how to better take it to its nest. The innocent Messiah, usually represented by a lamb, appears here as a vulnerable caterpillar. Christian literature compared Jesus to worms and caterpillars centuries prior to the Renaissance⁹⁶. It is likely, then, that Piero used this tradition that goes back to Saint Augustine (354-430) to relate the imminent pricking of the insect by the bird and its offspring with the flagellation the Child is destined to in its adulthood. If the tondo in Toledo may be called an amphibian *Agnus dei*, the MASP tondo shows an entomological one.

As Fiorenza noted, the caterpillar, like the tadpoles in Toledo, raise

Gallery), but in its adult form. Vincent van Gogh thought he painted a death's head hawkmoth in a canvas now in the Van Gogh Museum, although it is actually a Giant peacock moth [*Saturnia pyri* (Denis & Schiffermüller, 1775)]. The death's head also appears in the movies *Un chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1929) and *Silence of the lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), besides other references in poetry, literature and videoclips.

⁹⁵ These natural elements were identified and discussed in REBETEZ, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-103. Judging by its traditional meaning and the state it was represented, the oak where the Child is seated probably refers to his sacrifice and the Resurrection. The broom in the Baptist's left hand is a common symbol of the Incarnation. The fact that the angel is about to prick his finger on the only thorn of the white roses must be a reference to the crown of thorns and the crucifixion. The mushrooms are traditionally identified with death, but the chamomile and the betony next to them are symbols of cure and Salvation. The dandelion is a common sign of the Passion, while the ranunculus and the lady's bedstraw next to Saint John symbolize, respectively, death and affliction. The latter are a commentary on the sacrifice of the caterpillar happening above them.

⁹⁶ LEVI D'ANCONA, *op. cit.*, pp. 62, 222.

deliberations on the double nature of Christ, as it is generated without carnal intercourse and also has the ability to metamorphose. Actually, it was apparently represented on the verge of becoming a cocoon, since the death's head larva only acquires this large size, similar to the one of the bird, in the last stage before pupation⁹⁷. Besides the ancient identification of the butterfly with the human soul, the author notes that Florentine viewers could relate it to a passage of their poet Dante. He reprimands the faithful who are too attached to matter to fly as high as the angelic butterflies which Christian souls could become⁹⁸. This specific caterpillar, however, could never become a butterfly, even if it was not to be attacked by the bird, because its morphological characteristics are those of a death's head hawkmoth. Instead of the beautiful, angelical insect, it would actually become the horrifying moth that displays on its body a form similar to a human skull, said to be used in the potions of sorceresses and long considered as a sign of bad omens.

This fact adds one more layer of complexity. As we can see, Piero was a gifted observer who spent a great deal of his time in the surroundings of Florence admiring the mysteries of Creation. It is unlikely that he (or any artist of the Renaissance) would spend so much time observing and reproducing every single detail of an animal in the foreground of a religious scene if it did not have a broader meaning⁹⁹. Even though the concept of genetics would only be developed centuries later, he could identify in this creature an inexorable destiny to exhibit the skull image. Just as the insect bears the sign of death since its conception, Catholicism believes Jesus

⁹⁷ The caterpillar of *Acherontia atropos* can measure up to thirteen centimeters in its final larval stage, while the adult Black redstart, on average, does not exceed fifteen centimeters in length. Therefore, the size of the painted animals is proportional to their nature, even though many commentators are astonished by the insect's size.

⁹⁸ FIORENZA, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-165. The author is mentioning the canto 10 of Purgatory (121-129).

⁹⁹ We are not arguing that every single creature in Piero's work has iconographic significance. In the *Visitation* in the National Gallery of Art, for example, the little animal scuttling along of an exterior railing on the palace on the right is more likely a whimsy than a hieroglyph related to the sacred characters. The caterpillar in São Paulo, however, is in a privileged position that instantly attracts the eye, which prompted art historians to search for its meaning since the decade of 1990 (FORLANI TEMPESTI & CAPRETTI, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131).

incarnated in order to experience a tragic death in Golgotha, “place of a skull” according to the Gospels. But even if several of the panel’s elements refer to the tragic fate of Jesus, the artist included next to each of them others that convey the idea of healing and new life, reminding us of the Resurrection¹⁰⁰. In the subscene, one can see right behind the caterpillar and the bird a broken and cut tree trunk next to the river. The branches and leaves sprouting from it, in spite of its degraded state, suggest the renewal of life and might be right behind the animals to remember the promise of the resurrection from the dead.

Conclusion

The amount of time Piero spent investigating nature greatly benefited his art. Concerning the presence of the insects in his work, until now few mentions had been made, and in general they had not been considered for iconographic analyzes. In the case of the works exhibited in Toledo and São Paulo, his careful observation of water scorpions and caterpillars allowed him to associate them with events described in the New Testament. In those from Montevettolini and Berlin we see how he was able to use his empirical knowledge of flies and a moth to comment on the hardships of different plagues that attacked Tuscany of his time. In that from Ottawa, a butterfly and a locust show the companionship of mythological gods expressed in natural elements. And that of Worcester, wasps have been represented in place of bees in a twist that is in accordance to the joyous atmosphere of the bacchanalian scene. In an attempt to interpret the presence of each insect considering biological features within its specific iconographic context, we hope to have contributed to the discussion regarding Piero di Cosimo’s representation of wildlife, a fascinating topic that seemingly will keep sparking debates.

¹⁰⁰ REBETEZ, *op. cit.*, [2017], p. 103.