



DANTE IN THE VATICAN MUSEUMS

DANTE ITINERARY

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IMAGES OF DANTE



SEVENTH CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF DANTE ALIGHIERI
1321-2021



Images of Dante

ROOM OF THE SEGNATURA, RAPHAEL ROOMS, APOSTOLIC PALACES

Raphael, Portraits of Dante in the *Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament* and in the *Parnassus*

Used as the library and private study of Pope Julius II della Rovere, pontiff from 1503 to 1513 and commissioner of the Raphael Rooms, the Room of the Segnatura houses the master's first Vatican frescoes, painted between 1508 and 1511, possibly under the supervision, in terms of architecture and perspective, of Donato Bramante.

This room illustrates some of the key concepts of humanist culture: Theology, alluded to by the so-called *Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament*; Philosophy, alluded to by the *School of Athens*; Poetry, recalled by the scene with the *Parnassus*; Justice, symbolised by the *Delivery of the Pandects to the Emperor Justinian* for civil law and by the *Delivery of the Decretals to Pope Gregory IX* for canon law.



Fig. 1
Raphael, *Portrait of Dante in the Parnassus*



Fig. 2
Raphael, *Portrait of Dante in the Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament*

Dante's portrait appears twice in the room, in both cases portrayed in profile and wearing a laurel wreath. He can be seen in both the *Parnassus* (**Fig. 1**), frescoed above the window overlooking the Belvedere Courtyard, and in the *Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament*, in the upper register of which, at the sides of the Trinity with the Virgin and St John the Baptist, is the triumphant Church with patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament and apostles and martyrs of the New, while the militant Church depicted below, at the sides of the altar dominated by a monstrance with the consecrated host, is identified principally by the Fathers of the Latin Church.

While in the *Parnassus* the portrait of Dante, in profile looking right and holding a book in his hands, appears behind the blind Homer and looking at Virgil, who is shown pointing to Apollo playing the lyre surrounded by the Muses, in the *Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament* the portrait of the Florentine poet (**Fig. 2**), in profile looking left, is less visible, located on the right side of the fresco and behind a standing pontiff with the facial features of Sixtus IV, uncle of Julius II.

Raphael's portraits of Dante respond in part to the literary portrait from the pen of Boccaccio, who in his *Trattatello in laude di Dante* described the poet as “of mediocre stature”, with a long face “and aquiline nose; and eyes large rather than small; jaws large; and with the upper lip protruding over the lower; his hair was brown; and the hair and beard thick, black and frizzy; his face was always melancholic and pensive”. It is plausible that Raphael was familiar with later portraits of Dante, such as Domenico di Michelino's in the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence (1465) or Luca Signorelli's in the Chapel of San Brizio in Orvieto Cathedral (1499-1502), rather than Boccaccio's text or Giotto's portrait of Dante in the Chapel of the *Podestà* in the Bargello in Florence.

More than in the *Parnassus*, where Dante's presence in a gathering of ancient and modern poets is almost taken for granted, his appearance seems significant and surprising in the *Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament*, in which he appears among the Fathers of the Church and the theologians, echoing the epitaph to Dante in Ravenna in which the supreme poet was defined as «Theologus» by his friend Giovanni del Virgilio.

Raphael's two portraits of Dante, although executed almost two centuries after his death, would rapidly become among the most copied models, as demonstrated a few years later in Agnolo Bronzino's *Portrait of Dante* (1532-1533) in the Uffizi.

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