



DANTE IN THE VATICAN MUSEUMS

DANTE ITINERARY

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PRESENTATION & INTRODUCTION



SEVENTH CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF DANTE ALIGHIERI
1321-2021



Presentation

Dante in the Vatican Museums

On the occasion of the seven-hundredth anniversary of the death of Dante Alighieri (Florence 1265 - Ravenna 1321), the Vatican Museums wish to pay tribute to the great poet, celebrating him not only as the author of literary works and as the founder of the Italian language, but also as a scholar of philosophy, theology, astronomy and a courageous man of his time. Above all, we wish to highlight his complexity and integrity, and the civic and moral commitment that always distinguished his conduct. Here we see him, a young man of 24, participating in the Battle of Campaldino in 1289 and later taking an active part in the social and political life of his home town. He was a member of the Council of One Hundred and in 1300 became Prior; involved in the struggle between the Guelph factions of the Blacks and the Whites, in 1301 he was sent on a mission to Rome and the following year he was condemned to exile. The eminent poet was thus prevented from ever seeing his beloved Florence again, and sadly died in Ravenna on 14 September 1321.

Author of various works, which enable us to perceive the richness of his culture, Dante is remembered for his autobiographical writings – *Le Rime* and the *Vita Nova* -, for his philosophical works - such as the *Convivio* -, for the lively debate on the formation of the vernacular language with the *De vulgari eloquentia*, elaborated however in refined Latin, for the political treatise *De Monarchia*, and his supreme masterpiece, the *Commedia*, which Boccaccio appropriately defined as *Divina*.

The poem is divided into three *cantiche* that narrate Dante's journey in the afterlife through the realms of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. In these verses, composed during the years of his exile from 1304 until his death, the poet expresses his bitterness at the wrongs he suffered and the abuse of power that burdened humanity, but also his deep desire for redemption and justice.

*“When half way through the journey of our life
I found that I was in a gloomy wood,
Because the path which led aright was lost.*

*And ah, how hard it is to say just what
this wild and rough and stubborn woodland was
the very thought of which renews my fear!”*

Inferno, I, 1-6

Lost at the age of thirty-five in a “gloomy wood”, an impassable and desolate forest, symbolising the painful and unhappy condition of the sinner's spirit, Dante, through a long journey and a path of purification, reaches the top of the mountain illuminated by the sun, that is, spiritual redemption. The sinner's condition and the path of redemption travelled by the Poet serve as a symbol and model for all humanity.

These aspects are celebrated in the Room of the Segnatura of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, where the Divine Raphael depicts Dante twice. He sees him as the Supreme Poet in the *Parnassus* and in the other he portrays him extolling his heroic virtues in the so-called *Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament*, welcoming him among the blessed.

In addition to this original artistic tribute, which promotes the image of Dante and creates an undisputed iconographic precedent, taken as a model to this day, the Vatican Museums offer along the tour itinerary some of the works mentioned in the Divine Comedy (such as the large antique pine cone in gilded bronze, repurposed as the fountain of *Paradise* in the ancient Vatican Basilica, now indeed in the Courtyard of the Pinecone), along with other testimonies that belong to the figurative and literary world that Dante knew and from which he drew inspiration for the Poem. We recall, for example, the Etruscan demon Charon in the Gregorian Etruscan Museum and, in the Vatican Pinacoteca, a view of Hell in the *Last Judgement* altarpiece by Niccolò and Giovanni, as well as the very ancient “portrait” of Saint Francis of Assisi by Margaritone d'Arezzo.

Finally, there are also references in twentieth-century art, with the colourful visions of Dante's universe in the *Divine Comedy* illustrated by Salvador Dalì and the paintings made for Hell by Robert Rauschenberg, on display in the Collection of Contemporary Art.

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Introduction

*“Worldly repute is but a breath of wind
which cometh now from here, and now from there
and shifts its name, because its quarter shifts”*

Purgatorio, XI, 100-102

With reference to the vice of Pride, Dante states that fame is nothing more than a breath of wind that changes name depending on the direction in which it blows.

The celebrations of the seven-hundredth anniversary of the death of the “Divine Poet” show us that his thought is not always valid, since his fame ensures to this day.

The tribute of the Vatican Museums highlights a double aspect of Dante, in the wake of Raphael, in the Room of the Segnatura, where we find him portrayed twice: the rigorous hero and the Supreme Poet. As will be seen below, these portraits are not included in the *School of Athens*, but Dante's face is recognised among the saints in the *Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament*, and thus we find him among the most famous poets of antiquity in *Parnassus*.

Once again beside Virgil, as in the journeys of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante is presented in the presence of Apollo, surrounded by the Muses and the greatest poets of all time, in the choral celebration of the Beautiful and the Good.

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