

THE DIVINE DANTE

MORE THAN 700 YEARS after its creation, *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) remains widely read and relevant to modern society. Known as the *Commedia* in Italian, this literary masterpiece describes one man's harrowing and transformational journey through the afterlife. Its enduring popularity and influence have made it a touchstone for artists across different eras and cultures.

Dante was born in Florence, in the region of Tuscany, Italy, to a family of the merchant class. He was educated in Latin grammar and read the classics of ancient Roman authors such as Virgil, Aristotle, and Cicero. Equally versed in the works of the French troubadours, early on Dante wrote lyric poetry, including a collection of verse known as *The New Life* (*La Vita Nuova*)—a tribute to his real-life muse, Beatrice, who also appears in *The Divine Comedy*.

Best known as a poet, Dante also had political ambitions. Accused of corruption and financial wrongdoing, he was exiled from Florence twice: first, for two years in 1302 after refusing to pay a fine, and later threatened with execution if he returned—banned for life. For the next 20 years or so, he lived a roving existence, traveling from place to place at the invitation of friends or fulfilling diplomatic missions at the behest of others. It is thought that he composed *The Divine Comedy* during this time. Dante died of malaria in the city of Ravenna on the Adriatic Coast.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art. All works are from the National Gallery's collection.

LA DIVINA COMMEDIA (THE DIVINE COMEDY)

DANTE ALIGHIERI'S epic narrative poem *The Divine Comedy* takes readers on a three-part journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, told in 100 sections (or cantos). Dante, as narrator, is first guided through Hell and Purgatory by the ancient Roman poet Virgil; later, his beloved Beatrice ushers him to Heaven. He travels through domains of the dead where he witnesses sin and punishment, atonement and redemption, and finally

union with God. *Commedia*, or comedy, is a term that once described something that begins in sadness but ends well.

In a radical move, Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy* in the vernacular, everyday language of 14th-century Tuscany rather than the Latin typically chosen for literary works. Using the common language, the poem attracted readers from diverse backgrounds.

Since its completion, *The Divine Comedy* has been translated into more than 50 languages. The enduring themes of love, faith, and justice have contributed to the work's profound impact and continued relevance.

The Dante quotations that appear throughout the exhibition are excerpted from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy (Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso)*, translated from Italian into English by Charles S. Singleton, Princeton University Press, 1970.

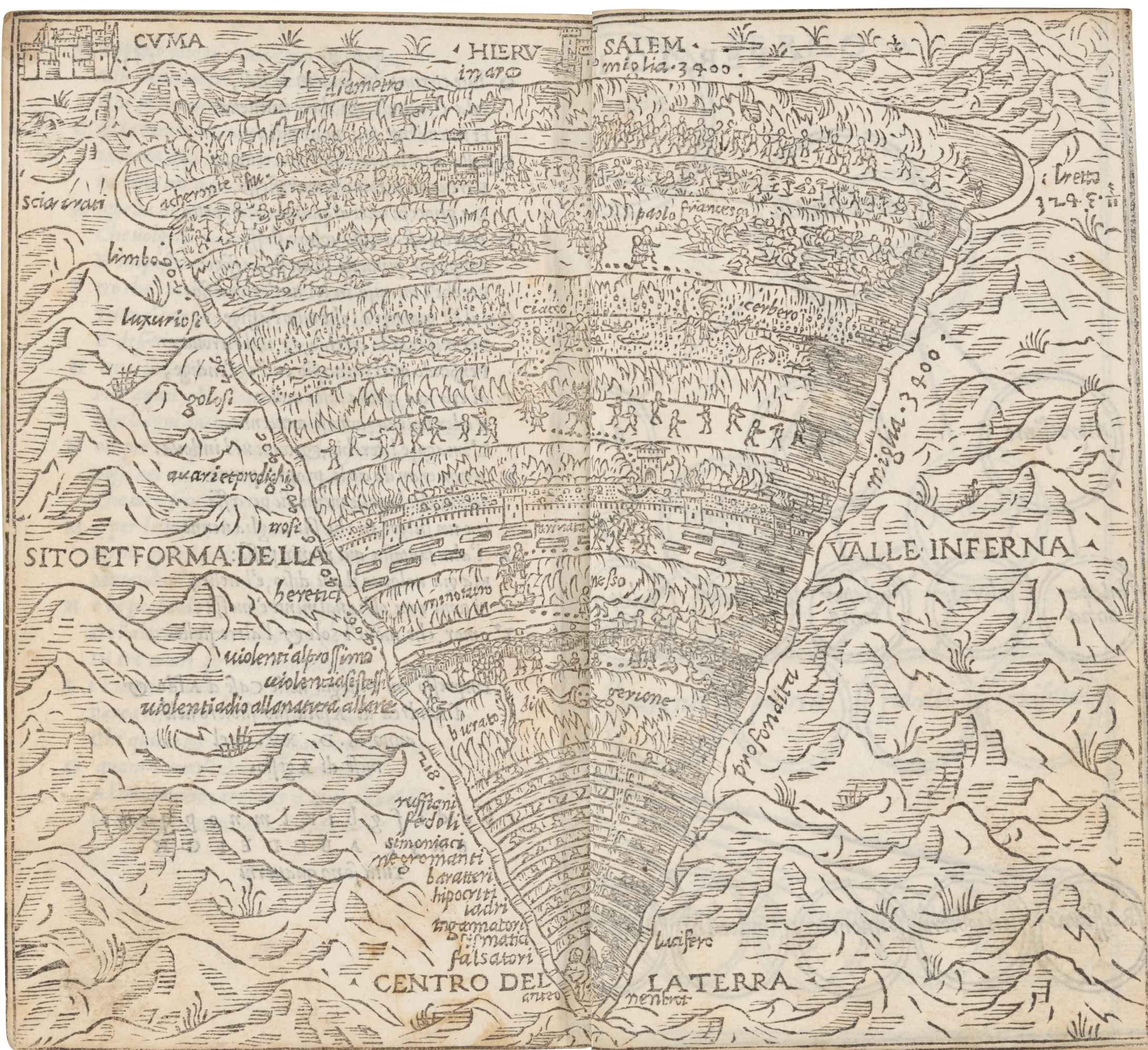


Illustration of the Valley of Hell from 1515 edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, printed by Aldo Manuzio, National Gallery of Art Library, David K. E. Bruce Fund

GOING THROUGH HELL

MANY ARTISTS over the centuries have depicted Dante's *Inferno* to explore questions of morality and spirituality, create metaphors for social and political issues, and reflect the human condition.

Inferno, the first of three books of *The Divine Comedy*, is a journey through Hell, filled with vivid descriptions of punishment and suffering. Dante's evocative language continues to inspire artists to illustrate or reimagine his nightmarish scenes.

In this room you will find works by renowned artists from different centuries, such as William Blake and Robert Rauschenberg, as well as lesser-known artists like Bartolomeo Pinelli and Ronald Kowalke. They share a common focus: visualizing Dante's *Inferno*.

BAD ROMANCE

THE TWO WORKS in this corner, Auguste Rodin's *The Kiss* and William Blake's *The Circle of the Lustful*, depict the characters Paolo and Francesca, an adulterous couple who appear in canto V of *Inferno*.

Dante recounts the story of Paolo and Francesca, who were married to other people but fell in love while reading a book together. Upon discovering this betrayal, Francesca's husband murdered them in a crime of passion. In death, the lovers are condemned to the Second Circle of Hell, reserved for the lustful. Blake's engraving shows the couple swept away by an apparent whirlwind of irresistible desire. In Rodin's bronze sculpture the lovers are locked in an eternal embrace.

Florentine
16th century

Allegorical Portrait of Dante, late 16th century
oil on panel

Samuel H. Kress Collection

The *Allegorical Portrait of Dante* depicts the poet sitting on a rocky outcrop. Although no certain portrait from life exists, his distinctive profile and cap were common attributes used to identify him in works of art. Turning to look across the water at small figures walking along the rocky, elevated circles of Purgatory, he holds a large manuscript copy of *The Divine Comedy*. It is open to canto XXV of *Paradiso*, where he writes of his unfulfilled desire to return to the Florence of his birth after a long exile. In this canto Dante speaks bitterly of the Florentines who have banished him, calling them “wolves” (*lupi*) and imagining a time when he—a “lamb” (*agnello*)—can finally return home.

Auguste Rodin
(French, 1840–1917)

The Thinker, model 1880, cast 1901
bronze

Gift of Mrs. John W. Simpson

Rodin's *The Thinker* is one of the most iconic sculptures in European art. The brooding, seated nude man was one of the first figures Rodin envisioned for his monumental *Gates of Hell*, two bronze doors inspired by Dante's *Inferno*, the first book of *The Divine Comedy*. Originally intended for a museum in Paris, the



doors were never installed during the sculptor's lifetime — but some of the figures Rodin made for the *Gates* are considered among his greatest works. Early on, the imposing bronze was associated with both Dante and Rodin himself, considered a possible self-portrait. Eventually, it took on the name *The Thinker*, losing its association with the *Inferno* to become a relatable “everyman.”

Auguste Rodin, *The Gates of Hell*, modeled 1880–1917, cast 1926–1928, bronze, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Bequest of Jules E. Mastbaum, 1929, F1929-7-128

After Domenico di Michelino
(Italian, 1417–1491)

Dante as the Poet of “The Divine Comedy,” 19th century
heliogravure

National Gallery of Art Library, Department of Image Collections

This heliogravure is based on a fresco located in the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence. It is one of the most famous depictions of Dante and the three realms of the afterlife: Inferno (Hell), Purgatorio (Purgatory), and Paradiso (Paradise).

Wearing a crown of laurels—an ancient symbol of triumph and wisdom—Dante holds an open copy of *The Divine Comedy* with his left hand; with his right, he points to Hell. Behind him is Mount Purgatory, the region between Hell and Paradise where the penitent toil for forgiveness of their sins. The city of Florence, Dante’s

birthplace, is shown at right. Above him is the realm of Paradise, with its cosmic depiction of different stars and heavenly spheres.



Domenico di Michelino, *La Commedia Divina di Dante*, 1465, fresco in the Duomo Cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore Church, Florence, Italy.

Photo: Wiliam Perry/Alamy Stock Photo

Italian
15th century

“The **Inferno**,” after a fresco in the Campo Santo of Pisa,
c. 1480/1500
engraving

Rosenwald Collection



Buonamico Buffalmacco, *Last Judgment* (part of *Triumph of Death*), 1336–1341, renovated fresco inside the Campo Santo cemetery, Pisa, Italy, Camposanto monumentale. Photo: MindestensM/Adobe Stock

Auguste Rodin
(French, 1840–1917)

The Kiss, model 1880–1887, cast c. 1898/1902
bronze

Gift of Mrs. John W. Simpson

Jean-Jacques Feuchère
(French, 1807–1852)

Dante Meditating on “The Divine Comedy,” 1843
pen and brown ink with brown wash and watercolor over
graphite, heightened with white gouache

Gift of the Christian Humann Foundation

Robert Rauschenberg
(American, 1925–2008)

Drawings for Dante's 700 Birthday II.B, 1965
graphite, watercolor, and gouache
with screenprint on two panels

Gift of the Woodward Foundation, Washington, DC

IN THIS WORK, created to mark Dante's 700th birthday, Rauschenberg uses the idea of Inferno (Hell) as a powerful allegory for the tumultuous social and political climate of the 1960s. "If one is illustrating hell," the artist said, "one uses the properties that make hell."

A series of dramatic images lifted from *Life* and other magazines includes a mass grave, a starving child holding a spoon, a roaring baboon, and members of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club. The artist added vibrant paint to contrast with the graphic black printing ink and hand-drawn geometric shapes. Together, these elements create a sense of visual overload and disorientation befitting the subject matter.

Ronald Leroy Kowalke
(American, 1936–2021)

top:

Canto IV: The Bard Began from Dante's "Inferno," 1970
one from a portfolio of 10 etchings on paper

Print Purchase Fund (Rosenwald Collection)

bottom:

Canto XIII: Harpies from Dante's "Inferno," 1970
one from a portfolio of 10 etchings on paper

Print Purchase Fund (Rosenwald Collection)

Robert Rauschenberg
(American, 1925–2008)

Drawings for Dante's 700 Birthday II.B, 1965
graphite, watercolor, and gouache
with screenprint on two panels

Gift of the Woodward Foundation, Washington, DC

Rico Lebrun

(American, born Italy, 1900–1964)

**Figure and Serpent from
“Drawings for Dante’s Inferno,”** 1963
one from a supplementary suite of seven lithographs

Rosenwald Collection

In 1963 — a year before Rico (Federico) Lebrun’s death — the artist produced a series of 36 works illustrating various scenes from *The Divine Comedy*. Focused specifically on the Hell realm (Inferno), these shadowy renderings depict grisly subjects: beheadings, immolation, cannibalism. This lithograph shows an unfortunate man tormented by a serpent, one of the many brutal punishments Dante witnesses as Virgil escorts him through Hell.

Joseph Anton Koch
(Austrian, 1768–1839)

Dante and Virgil Riding on the Back of Geryon, c. 1821
pen and black ink over graphite on paper

Wolfgang Ratjen Collection, Patrons' Permanent Fund

This drawing by Koch depicts an episode from *Inferno* where Dante and his guide Virgil descend to the Eighth Circle of Hell, known as Malebolge, a place with “new torments” and “horned demons” (*male bolge* in Italian translates loosely to “evil pits”). They are carried by the monster Geryon, an imaginary creature that possesses the face of a man and the body of a beast.

Gy Szabo Bela
(Romanian, 1905 – 1985)

**Dante: L'enfer, Chant XXI, Ongles sales
(Dante's Inferno, Canto XXI, Nasty Claws), 1963**
hand-printed wood engraving on Japanese paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Le Bovit

“LET US DESCEND NOW into the blind world here below,”
the poet began, all pale. “I will be first, and you second.”

DEX 12

INFERNO, CANTO IV, LINES 11–13

HERE THE FOUL HARPIES make their nests

DEX 13

INFERNO, CANTO XIII, LINES 9–10

THEY HAD THEIR HANDS BOUND behind with serpents: these thrust
through their loins the head and tail, which were knotted in front.

DEX 10

INFERNO, CANTO XXIV, LINES 92–95

DEX 18

“BEHOLD THE BEAST with the pointed tail, that passes mountains and breaks walls and weapons! Behold him that infects all the world!”

INFERNO, CANTO XVII, LINES 1 – 4

DEX 11

THE SINNER SANK UNDER and rose again, rump up;
but the devils, who were under cover of the bridge, cried....

INFERNO, CANTO XXI, LINES 45 – 48

THE SOULS APPEAR
to return to the stars...

PARADISO, CANTO IV, LINES 21–23

John Flaxman
(British, 1755–1826)

Album of Drawings for Dante’s “Divine Comedy”

c. 1793

bound volume with 78 drawings in pen and ink and graphite

Rosenwald Collection

A sculptor and draftsman, Flaxman created spare and simple line drawings to be engraved for a popular illustrated edition of *The Divine Comedy* published in 1807. This unique volume holds the original drawings on which all the engravings were based.

Dante Alighieri
(Italian, 1265–1321)

Aldo Manuzio
(Italian, c. 1450–1515)

**Dante col sito, et forma dell'inferno tratta dalla
istessa descrizione del poeta (Dante, with the
Site Map and Form of the Valley of Hell), 1515**

National Gallery of Art Library, David K. E. Bruce Fund

Dante Alighieri
(Italian, 1265–1321)

**Opere del diuino poeta Danthe con suoi
comenti (Works of the Divine Poet Dante
with His Comments), 1520**

National Gallery of Art Library, David K. E. Bruce Fund

This version of *The Divine Comedy* was meant for demanding, educated readers who desired their Dante with commentary. The woodblock prints depict important moments, including Dante and Virgil at the entrance of Hell (left), the Garden of Eden (bottom right), and Christ Pantocrator surrounded by angels (top right).

Paolo Giovio
(Italian, 1483–1552)

Tobias Stimmer
(Swiss, 1539–1584)

**Pauli Iouii Nouocomensis Episcopi Nucerini
Elogia virorum bellica virtute illustrium
(Paolo Giovio, Bishop of Nuocomensis,
Praise of Illustrious Men of Military Valor), 1575**

National Gallery of Art Library, A. W. Mellon New Century Fund

Dante Alighieri
(Italian, 1265–1321)

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (illustration)
(British, 1828–1882)

Evelyn Paul (illustration)
(British 1883–1963)

The New Life (La Vita Nuova), 1899

National Gallery of Art Library, Gift of Russell Sale

A collection of lyric poems, *The New Life* introduces Beatrice, a character Dante based on a real acquaintance who also appears as his guide through Paradise in *The Divine Comedy*. After meeting as children, Beatrice and Dante grew up to marry other people—but she remained his creative muse.

Dante Alighieri
(Italian, 1265–1321)

Henry Francis Cary (translation)
(British, 1772–1844)

Gustave Doré (illustration)
(French, 1832–1883)

Dante's "**Inferno**," 1880

National Gallery of Art Library, Gift of Huntington Cairns

FROM THE MOUTH of each [hole]
projected the feet of a sinner and his legs
as far as the calf... their soles on fire, because
of which their joints were twitching so hard
that they would have snapped ropes....

INFERNO, CANTO XIX, LINES 22–27

ALL AT ONCE
three hellish blood-stained Furies
had instantly risen up.

INFERNO, CANTO IX, LINES 37–38

William Etty
(British, 1787–1849)

Scene from the “Inferno” (canto IX), undated
pen and black ink with gray wash

Julius S. Held Collection

YOU ARE MY MASTER and my author.
You alone are he from whom I took the
fair style that has done me honor.

INFERNO, CANTO I, LINES 85–87

Bartolomeo Pinelli
(Italian, 1781–1835)

Dante Flees the Wild Beasts and Meets Virgil, 1824
graphite on paper, mounted on 19th-century album sheet

Gift of Alexandra Baer

Born in Rome, Pinelli illustrated literary works by various authors from antiquity through the Renaissance. This drawing depicts an episode early in *The Divine Comedy* where the narrator meets the ancient Roman poet Virgil, his guide through Hell and Purgatory. The real Virgil served as a literary inspiration to Dante.

Florentine
15th century

Dante Alighieri, Florentine Poet, 1265–1321 [obverse],
late 15th century
bronze medal

Samuel H. Kress Collection

**HOW MANY SWEET THOUGHTS,
what great desire,
brought them to the woeful pass!**

INFERNO, CANTO V, LINES 112–114

William Blake
(British, 1757–1827)

The Circle of the Lustful: Paolo and Francesca, 1827
engraving

Rosenwald Collection

ON HIS SHOULDERS behind the nape
lay a dragon with outstretched wings that
sets on fire whomever it encounters.

INFERNO, CANTO XXV, LINES 21–23

William Blake
(British, 1757–1827)

**The Circle of the Thieves; Agnolo Brunelleschi
Attacked by a Six-Footed Serpent, 1827**
engraving

Rosenwald Collection

On Dante's imaginary journey through Hell, he witnesses torments of the damned. Here a thief, Agnolo Brunelleschi, is attacked by a six-legged serpent. Dante, dressed in a long, dark robe, appears at left with his guide, the Roman poet Virgil. Blake's image of Dante differs from the usual depiction of the poet in his distinctive cap.