

CELEBRATING DANTE'S VISION AT ROME'S SCUDERIE

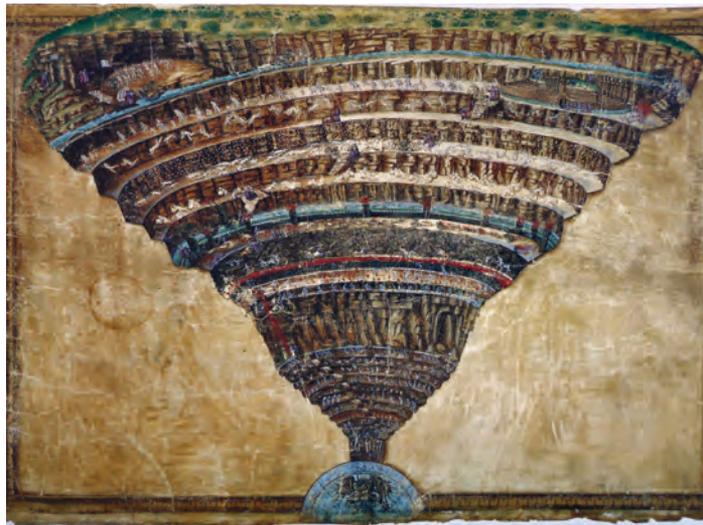
■ BY LUCY GORDAN

On until January 9 at the Quirinal's *Scuderie* to celebrate the 7th centenary of **Dante Alighieri's** death is the blockbuster exhibition *Inferno (Hell)*. Devised by French art historian **Jean Clair**, and curated by him with his Italian wife and fellow art historian **Laura Bossi**, it's the first art exhibit ever dedicated to the first canticle of Dante's *Divina Commedia* (1320). An odd coincidence, since over the centuries *Inferno* has inspired artists and writers far more than the *somma poeta's* subsequent canticles.

Through its 232 works of art on loan from over 80 major museums and prestigious public and private collections in Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the Vatican, "it aims to highlight the definitive allegorical meaning of Dante's great theological fresco," said Clair. That is to say: to show humanity a path of liberation from the miseries and horrors of "the little threshing floor that so incites our savagery" (*Paradise XII, 151*), towards a condition of happiness and salvation as Dante states in *Inferno's* last verse: "*E quindi uscimmo a rivedere le stelle.*" ("So we leave to see the stars once more.")

A large number of loans come from Florence's Uffizi Galleries, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, London's Royal Academy, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Valladolid's Museo Nacional de Escultura, and Lisbon's Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga. The most famous artists represented are Beato Angelico, Botticelli, Bosch, Brueghel the Elder, Goya, Manet,

Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), *The Abyss of Hell*



Delacroix, Rodin, Cezanne, von Stuck, Balla, Dix, Tasslitsky, and Kiefer.

Except for the introductory excerpt from *Inferno*, the 1911 silent movie, and the first room, the works of art are all displayed in chronological order. All recount the persistence of Hell's iconography, the world of the damned, although in different media and styles, from the Middle Ages to the present day.

On display in the first room is the exhibition's

most spectacular work: a 7-meter tall colossal plaster cast of Auguste Rodin's monumental *Gates of Hell* (1:1 scale fusion model). On loan from the Musée Rodin in Paris, the press release reports that this cast was "made in 1989 through the fusion of one of the last bronze specimens of Rodin's work." Inspired by Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* at the Baptistery in Florence, Michelangelo's fresco *The Last Judgment*, Delacroix's *The Barque of Dante*, Balzac's collection *La Comédie humaine* and Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, it was commissioned in 1880.

Rodin's *Gates of Hell*



Rodin worked on and off on this project for 37 years on the ground floor of the Hôtel Biron (today the Musée Rodin), leaving it unfinished at his death in 1917. That year a model was used to make the three bronze casts, now in Paris, Philadelphia and Tokyo. Subsequently the Musée Rodin donated some of the *Gates of Paradise* bronzes to a number of places which include: The Kunsthaus in Zürich, the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, The Plateau in Seoul in South Korea, and the Museum Soumaya in Mexico City.

It should be noted that most of the *Gates of Paradise* individual figures

didn't originate in Dante. "Rodin's sculptures," reports *Wikipedia*, "aren't illustrations of scenes from *Inferno*. Rather Rodin 'reinvented' Dante's hell to include figures who personified his own conception. Dante's Adam and Eve, for example, are in Paradise, thought to have been rescued from eternal damnation by Christ on Holy Saturday in the 'Harrowing of Hell.'"

The rest of *Inferno* is divided into three sections. The first, on the *Scuderie's* first floor, are works of art directly inspired by Dante's text. The second and third sections are on the second floor. On display in the second section are works of art depicting the Hell created by man. Hidden by a wall from section two, so it comes as a surprise, is "Redemption": a room entitled *Riveder le stelle*, from the last verse of Dante's *Inferno*.

Thus the first section covers the origins of Hell as the kingdom of Lucifer, the Final Judgment that condemns the damned to dwell eternally in Hell after their death on earth, the landscape of the infernal cone, the multiform nature of the Devil and the temptations with which he tries to attract us. Its itinerary begins with illuminations of Hell in medieval manuscripts, followed by 15th-century canvases of the damned being tortured by fire and brimstone, conical maps of Hell, 16th-century prints of *Inferno* episodes by Federico Zaccari and Giovanni Stradano, then several portraits of Dante, and large 19th-century canvases depicting Paolo and Francesca Da Rimini and Dante with Virgil.

The star of the exhibition is *The Abyss of Hell* (1481-88), a painting on parchment by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510). It was on loan from the Vatican Apostolic Library only for the exhibition's first two weeks, because of its fragility; it was then substituted by a modern facsimile.

The Abyss of Hell is a chart of Hell as described by Dante. Dante pictured Hell as an abyss, a giant cave leading to the center of the earth. The cave was created when God threw Lucifer out of Heaven. Lucifer is stuck in the center, caught in ice. In *Inferno*, Dante describes his journey in Hell in the company of his friend and fel-



Taslitsky's *The Little Camp at Buchenwald*

low poet Virgil. Descending, they pass through nine rings of Hell, each ring representing a different category of sins. The first five rings are for people who couldn't control their desires: lust, gluttony, greed, anger, and revenge. Also the unbaptized dwell here. Rings 6 and 7 are for heretics and the violent: murderers, suicides, blasphemers, and sodomites. Witches, thieves, astrologers, seducers, alchemists and corrupt politicians dwell in Rings 8 and 9.

The other masterpieces in the first section include: *The Last Judgment* by Fra Angelico, *The Temptations of Saint Anthony Abbot* by Brueghel the Elder, and the majestic 3-meter canvas *Virgil and Dante in the Ninth Circle of Hell* by Gustave Doré, the famous illustrator of the Bible.

I was surprised to discover that the Bible has no description of Hell other than the "furnace of fire" in the Gospel of St. Matthew. Dante's Hell is a product of his imagination combined with ancient Greek and Roman myths. Another interesting discovery was that Dante describes meeting Muhammad in Hell's ninth ring (Dante and many of his contemporaries regarded Islam as an offshoot of Christianity).

The second section is dedicated to the 20th century. "This makes *Inferno* timely because the century we're living in has become Hell," explained Clair in an interview with *The Art Newspaper*.

It nevertheless opens with a link to Dante: a Neapolitan puppet theater (1920) with wooden *pupi* from Palermo and Catania on loan from the Antonio Pasqualino International Puppet Museum in Palermo.

The *pupi* represent characters from Dante's *Inferno*: several skeletons, devils, *malagigi* (epic heroes), a snake, dragon, killer whale and the sorceress Alcina.

Most of the rest of the section illustrates man-made secular versions of Hell: the devastation of war, totalitarianism, the anguish of imprisonment, alienating and deleterious work on assembly lines or in pollution-causing factories, never-ending cities which transform farmland and forests into cement, leading to the extinc-



Doré's *Virgil and Dante in the Ninth Ring of Hell*

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tion of flora and fauna, the darkness of madness in insane asylums with no hope of cure, the nightmare of extermination in particular by the Nazis, and Islamic terrorism.

Only one of its paintings has a direct religious connection: Franz von Stuck's *Lucifer*, the exhibition's logo, is almost entirely black except for the devil's fiercely-penetrating glazed eyes and a tiny streak of light. It's unclear whether the streak will close leaving the observer permanently in Hell's total darkness and desperation with Lucifer, or whether it will widen, offering the observer redemption. Although the section's other artworks don't have visibly religious subjects, they illustrate the several aspects of contemporary Hell.

Pope Francis has spoken relatively little on this subject. He reportedly did say in an 2018 interview with Eugenio Scalfari, the declaredly agnostic founder of the important Italian daily newspaper *La Repubblica*, that "we must not abandon the idea of Hell," and he then added (always according to Scalfari; the Vatican Press Office later said the Pope's words "were not



The ominous painting by German artist Franz Stuck (1863-1928 — his name became Franz von Stuck in 1905 when he was knighted), entitled *Lucifer* (1890, oil on canvas)

recorded " and were not to be regarded as entirely reliable quotations): "The Church still believes in evil, but the phantasmagoria of Hell and its devils... seems childish and outdated," then adding: "You aren't sent to Hell; you go there because you choose to be there. Hell means lacking faith and wanting to be distant from God... God did not create Hell; we did."

Like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the *Scuderie*'s final section is dedicated to redemption: "to raise our gaze upwards" towards "the infinite, the absolute, God." This final section includes paintings of the starry sky by Anselm Kiefer and ends with photographs taken by NASA's telescope "Ultra Deep Field."

The splendid catalogue, published by Electa in Italian and English editions (50 euros), contains many essays, splendid photographs, a checklist of every artwork, and an anthology of excerpts about hell from writings by Goethe, Leopardi, Victor Hugo, Baudelaire, Verne, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Malaparte, Thomas Mann, Solzhenitsyn, and Calvino, among others. ○