

## DANTE ICONOGRAPHY: AN INTRODUCTION

In his recent drawings for the Iliad, his contemplated drawings for a complete Shakespeare, and his most recent series of illustration to *The Divine Comedy*, Leonard Baskin demonstrates a very capable intention of re-dressing the major literary classics in an admittedly harsh but relevant and powerful graphic statement of our own times. It has been over a century since Gustave Doré's illustrated Dante, that somber monument of the Romantic period in France, first appeared. In the slow, well-marked pace of typography and the printed book this kind of once-in-a-century stylistic change is not unusual; it is particularly evident in the successive illustrated editions of classic works. Dante's sublime poem, from its conception in the thirteenth century to our own time, gives us the perfect example of successive landmark editions to prompt a brief outline history of the illustrated *Divine Comedy*. ☞ The importance of Dante's text as a pivotal transition between the medieval and Renaissance worlds gives early Dante iconography exceptional interest. Pictures, as a legitimate and illuminating companion to literary text rather than a mere decorative embellishment, quickly emerge in the first century of *The Divine Comedy*. The text of the great poem, which Carlyle called the voice of ten silent centuries, seems at first almost to overawe and even intimidate the earliest illuminators of Dante manuscripts. Much more fitting to the monumental scale of the poem are the great frescos of the fourteenth and fifteenth century depicting the Dantesque Hell and Paradise. Orcagna's awesome fresco of Hell in the Santa Maria Novella in Florence dramatically combined Medieval Damnation with an almost narrative panorama of Dante's nine circles of hell. Italian art of the fourteenth and fifteenth century includes considerable additional significant Dante iconography. Giotto and Raphael's well-known portraits of the poet, Signorelli's series of chiaroscuro paintings of Purgatory at Orvieto, and Michelangelo's scene of Hell in the Last Judgment of the Sistine Chapel should all be mentioned, but the most important and extensive series of illustration for the poem was created by Botticelli between 1485 and 1495. In this series, one of the Botticelli's greatest achievements as a draftsman, the intricate imagery of *The Divine Comedy* appears in the neo-Platonic terms current in the high Renaissance. In addition to this new reflection of a late fifteenth-century philosophical attitude, the Botticelli drawings in their delicate linearity project a quiet poetry of their own quite independent of Dante's epic work. Nevertheless, these drawings, now in Berlin and the Vatican, have become one of the most famous sets of illustrations for *The Divine Comedy*. The first printed edition of Dante with the Landino commentary, (1481), was planned to include these designs. The great difficulty of combining engraved illustrations with printing thwarted the intention, and this edition usually appears with only the first three of the Botticelli designs, engraved by Baccio Baldini. ☞ Almost observing the centenary of the Botticelli drawings is the series of drawings for *The Divine Comedy* created by the Italian artist Federico Zuccaro in 1587. Just as the earlier drawings evoke prevailing stylistic attitudes of the *quattrocento*, this too little known suite of eight-seven drawings by Zuccaro is eloquent of the stylistic mannerism of the sixteenth century. The drawings are imbued with the feverish elegance characteristic of this period, and Dante, Virgil, and all the sinner ad saints of Hell and Paradise appear in the attenuated forms that frequent manneristic art. A beautifully mannered graphic nuance may also be seen in Zuccaro's

insistent use of sanguine and black chalks only in the drawings for the Inferno, bistre only for the Purgatorio, and red for the Paradiso. ☞ It is extraordinary, but indicative of the great popularity of Dante in the sixteenth century, that another series of drawings for *The Divine Comedy* was created in the same year, 1587, but the itinerant Flemish artist-engraver, Stradamus (Jan van der Straet, 1523-1605). The compositions of Stradanus suffer in the contrast to the elegant finish of Zuccaro's drawings of the same subjects; their irregular, often Baroque quality points rather to the seventeenth century. It is perhaps their heavy Flemish style that prompted John Addington Symonds, the nineteenth-century aesthetic missionary of Italianate refinement, to dismiss these drawings as "Task work of a raw and Flemish nature . . . penny-a-lining in pictorial design". ☞ The following two centuries saw a strong diminishing of the Dante cult of the sixteenth century. By the middle of the eighteenth century Horace Walpole in England and Voltaire in France actually expressed critical disdain of the great thirteenth-century poem. The poetic intensity and shadowed mysticism of the Inferno and Paradiso exercised little stimulus to the well-ordered imaginations of the artists of the age of reason, and it is difficult to conjure up a convincing Rococo vision of Hell. ☞ It remained for another great mystic and visionary poet, William Blake, to revivify adequately the sublime imagery of Dante. In 1824, commissioned by his patron John Linnell, the sixty-seven-year-old Blake began his series of drawings for *The Divine Comedy*. The project soon consumed all of the aging poet's enthusiastic interest. He learned Italian to read Dante in the original and during the next three years created 102 drawings to illustrate the cantos of the poem. The drawings, Blake's last work before his death in 1827, are among his most powerful, and although some of them were still left unfinished at the time of his death, they are unmatched for their artistic and sensitive psychological interpretation of Dante. ☞ The rediscovery of Dante in the nineteenth century brought forth more new image versions of *The Divine Comedy* than in all the previous centuries. The Neoclassical sculptor John Flaxman, in whose work Gothicism and classicism were sometimes indiscriminately mixed, published a well-received series of drawings for *The Divine Comedy* in 1803. The fragile linearity of his drawings recalls the pure line drawings by Botticelli, but they depict an anachronistic image of Dante's hell as a Greek bas-relief. The German philosopher Schlegel particularly admired the Flaxman *Dante*, and wrote an essay in its praise. German romantic painters of the period followed Flaxman's lead with a seemingly endless series of illustrated versions of Dante. These heavily Teutonic and awkward pictorial conceptions, full of sentimental realism, now occupy their own niche of obscurity. ☞ In contrast and far more equal to the titanic vision of Dante is a painting first exhibited in the Salon of 1822 by the French painter Eugene Delacroix. The large canvas of "Dante et Virgil aux Enfers" established the rising reputation of the young artist, became a land-mark example of transition between the neo-classicism of David and Ingres and the new Romantic school, and remains a rare refutation of the unsuitability of art as illustration. ☞ The "last of the Romantics", Gustave Doré, still enjoys a strange lingering popularity as an eminent illustrator of books. In its day in enlightened Victorian parlors, the Doré *Dante*, with its dark underworld scene of bat and sinner-infested grottos, might well have served along with Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* as a morality lesson. In fairness to Doré, a comparison of his original drawings for Dante with the lugubrious wood-engravings by the Pannaker brothers and others for the printing of this book reveals great loss of sensitivity, with

Doré's almost magical mood and atmosphere of the underworld rendered into the excessive contrast and theatricality of black and white, eminently Victorian engravings. ☞ This century-by-century sequence of the radically changing stylistic raiment of the illustrations of *The Divine Comedy* betrays the *sartor resartus*, the spectacle of the tailor retailored, of the unending search for style in the history of book illustration. Certainly the delicate Renaissance illustrations of Botticelli, the mannered Zuccaro's, the neo-classical Flaxman's, the melodramatic Doré's, and worst of all, the pallid Pre-Raphaelite influenced versions remembered from every school-book text, are all inappropriate to present Dante to readers of the last half of the twentieth century. It is for our own time that Leonard Baskin has created a stark new image for the seven-century-old poem. The vigorous honesty and lack of compromise characteristic of these drawings, however, does not mean a lack of historical awareness. True to Baskin form, the drawings are full of erudite nods to past tradition. His Dante frontispiece is familiar with the Giotto portrait; the "Fair and Blessed lady" of canto II of the *Inferno* recalls certain fifteenth-century drawings by Pollaiuolo, and many of the female portraits have a very gentle – for Baskin – *quattrocento* demeanor. The "Fortuna" of canto VII is a twentieth-century Tarot card, and the "shade transfixed by a serpent" of canto XXIV is adapted from Michelangelo's depiction of the same subject in the Sistine Chapel. In technique, the large pen-and-ink drawings in line and wash have the direct and unhesitating quality reminiscent of the quickly applied cartoon underpainting of early fresco. In the few drawings where erasures occur, as in "the Poet" of canto IV, the erased lines are left partially visible, like an early manuscript palimpsest, and demonstrate the overall spontaneity of the drawings. ☞ Baskin is also capable of making his own modern pictorial comments. The "Simony" of canto XI, which Dante only mentions, and Webster defines as "traffic in ecclesiastical preferment", is expanded by Baskin into a Hogarthian plate of a series of shastly and corrupt clerical profiles. Baskin's humanistic compassion for deformity is delineated in the limbless torso of "one who is shaped like a lute" of canto XXX. And the artist's private nightmare of death and the devil is fixed in the static specters of Cerberus, canto VI, and "the violent against nature" of canto XII. ☞ More indicative, however, of Baskin's response to this challenge of a twentieth-century illustration of *The Divine Comedy*, is the sustained creative energy manifest, canto by canto, through the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. In many of the earlier illustrated Dantes, a strange fatigue and unbalance of treatment of Heaven and Hell repeats itself in the monumental task of illustrating one hundred plus cantos of the poem. Only Botticelli, Blake, Dore and Baskin numerically survive the full arduous journey from the Gate of Hell to the final Empyrean glimpse of "The Love that moves the Sun and Stars" of *Paradiso*, canto XXXIII.

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