

## *Dominicans, Dante, and the Representation of Hell*

### ABSTRACT

In 1355 Nardo di Cione painted his depiction of Hell (*Inferno*) on the north wall of the Strozzi Chapel in the church of Santa Maria Novella. There were two major events in Florentine history, prior to the creation of Cione's fresco, which ultimately shaped this representation. The first was the writing of the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the cantica entitled *Inferno* which inspired Cione's overall composition of Hell. The second was the Black Death, a strain of the plague which swept across Europe in 1348 killing half the population of Florence. When the plague hit Dante had provided the Florentine people with the first truly detailed image of the journey which the soul takes after death, but it was the fear and uncertainty the Black Death fostered which gave them a greater purpose to depict the subject within the visual arts.

The work of Cione attempts a faithful illustration of the 34 cantos which comprise *Inferno*, with each small section of painting illuminating the corresponding literary text. Although badly damaged in the flood of 1967, the iconography of the piece still reflects Cione's deep understanding of the complex tone Dante utilizes throughout *The Divine Comedy*. The text of Dante's *Inferno* is particularly important when looking at the context in which the fresco was commissioned. The Church of Santa Maria Novella belonged to the Dominicans, a mendicant order who were famed for their strong intellectual and literary traditions. The Strozzi Chapel was commissioned by a Florentine family that had accumulated wealth and influence through both trade and banking. The Dominicans stressed confession and repentance, and Cione's work exemplifies this concern shared by those members of the Strozzi family who had committed the sin of usury. A sin that according to Dante, will place you in the inner circle of the seventh circle of hell. Cione's work expresses the fear which the *Inferno* imparted on its readers and the role which art played to help quell those fears. A work that ultimately allowed the Dominicans to assert their presence within the church and reinforce the ideology behind their faith.

In the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, before the outbreak of the Black Death in 1348, Florence was a city of unrivaled economic, political and social prosperity. Their position on the Arno River enabled them to exploit the abundant natural resources of the Italian landscape, which led to Florence becoming a major center for manufacturing. With the end of Europe's external invasions in the eleventh century, the new safety of roads encouraged travel and contributed to the rapid and extensive commercial growth of cities<sup>1</sup>. As a result, Florentine nobility entered the professions of both trade and banking, making Florence a center for finance as well. Although prosperous for the relatively small merchant class, this introduction of a market economy contributed greatly to the influx of immigrants and steady rise of the urban poor. In response,

---

<sup>1</sup> Barbarah H. Rosenwein. "Social Meaning in the Mendicant and Monastic Spiritualities" in *Past & Present*. 63 (1974) pp. 16-20

new forms of religion focusing on poverty in conjunction with preaching had begun to emerge as early as the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In Florence this new focus on helping the urban poor manifested itself within the Mendicant churches and (more specifically) the Dominican order. Religion played a significant role in the lives of Florentines, who felt that the series of misfortunes experienced in the years leading up to the Black Death were directly tied to God's will. In 1348 the Black Death spread throughout Italy, and God's wrath was truly felt by the Florentine people. In the face of impending judgment they turned to piety and religious imagery to cope with death, imagery which was shaped (in part) by the detailed account of the soul's journey after death by Dante Alighieri in the *Divine Comedy* in 1314. His representation of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise became an inspiration for church frescoes throughout Italy. Shaping the way people thought about death, and instilling within them fear of the punishment and torment suffered by those who sin.

The work of Dante Alighieri was highly influential in shaping Florentine conceptions of Purgatory and Paradise, although within the visual arts Dante's description of Hell is often the most utilized in terms of its imagery. The most accurate visual representation of Dante's hell is part of a larger fresco cycle in the mendicant church of Santa Maria Novella done by Nardo di Cione and his brother Orcagna shortly after the outbreak of the plague (Figure 1). When compared with contemporaneous depictions of Hell, this strict adherence to Dante's text is unparalleled. The composition, if read from left to right and from top to bottom, reflects all 34 cantos of Dante's *Inferno*.<sup>2</sup> The nine different circles of hell (ten if you include Satan) are

---

<sup>2</sup> Nassar, Eugene. The Iconography of Hell: From the Baptistery Mosaic to the Michelangelo Fresco in [Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society](#). 111 (1993) pp. 70-76

delineated by rocky divisions, which create clearly defined areas corresponding with each subdivision of the *Inferno* characterized by Dante. The fiery tombs belonging to the heretics found in Canto X, physically separate the composition, and also help distinguish between Upper and Lower hell. There is a relatively low, yet central focus to the composition because of how Nardo has chosen to structure the Malbolge and the ten pouches which comprise it. This forces the viewer to confront the circle of hell reserved for only the most extreme cases of sin, and the graphic and (albeit) befitting punishments issued specifically for those sinners. Underneath each division are labels which help the viewer easily identify what part of the story the painted scene is referring to. These scenes are ultimately an artistic interpretation and consolidated version of Dante's *Inferno*. Although when comparing the fresco to other contemporaneous works (like the *Camposanto Frescoes* or the Hell portion from Giotto's *Last Judgment*), it becomes apparent that no other representation of Hell follows Dante so accurately. There is no doubt of Nardo's technical ability and overall vision in the painting of this fresco, but when looking at the physical context, a much larger force emerges which ultimately could have dictated this strict adherence to Dante's conception of hell.

Santa Maria Novella is a mendicant church, but belongs to the Dominican order (opposed to another mendicant order, the Franciscans). Generally, mendicants took a vow of poverty in order to focus their time and energy into practicing and preaching their religion, as well as helping the steadily growing population of urban poor. A population within Florence which had become increasingly marginalized by the parish churches at the time. Although both orders had common missions, the Dominicans were more concerned with a rational and philosophical interpretation of Christian theology, and were famed for their strong intellectual

and literary traditions. Dominicans believed that effective preaching could only be derived from a careful studying of the doctrine, and championed the idea of *indiarsi* (to become God) through knowledge.<sup>3</sup> As a result of their theological beliefs, early teachings and prominent place within Florentine society, the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Dominican Order had a large influence on Dante and the ideas he presented throughout the *Divine Comedy*. Not only did he incorporate historically well-known Dominican figures, such as St. Thomas Aquinas who recounts the story of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Bonaventure who does the same with St. Dominic in *Paradiso*, but his actual construction of Hell is reflective of a Dominican theology which focuses on God as truth. This truth is reflected in both the text of *Inferno* and Cione's fresco by having the individual obtain punishment for the specific sin which they commit.

The Strozzi Chapel (Figure 2), where the fresco cycle is located within the church of Santa Maria Novella, is also instrumental in understanding the motivation behind this accurate portrayal of Dante's Hell. The Strozzi Chapel belonged to a wealthy banking family within Florence at the time. Much like the Arena Chapel in Padua, this fresco cycle was commissioned in the hopes that beautification of a religious space would lessen the patrons time spent in Purgatory. Although a system of indulgences had been in place since the early 13<sup>th</sup> century with the conception of the "Treasury of Merit"<sup>4</sup>, this practice of religious artistic patronage became more wide spread after Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy* and included those committing the sin of usury within the seventh circle of hell. Commissioning works for religious spaces was seen as a form of repentance, an act which was ultimately facilitated by the Dominican friars. In his

---

<sup>3</sup> Tugwell, Simon, trans. Early Dominicans: Selected Writings. (1982 Mahwah: Paulist Press) pp. 10-25

<sup>4</sup> Rosenwein. "Social Meaning" pp.24

commentary on Lombard's *Sentences*, St. Thomas Aquinas stresses that "the efficacy of penance comes from the priest's absolution", and only through the priest's absolution can the confessor become worthy of justification.<sup>5</sup> By commissioning this fresco the Strozzi family were essentially confessing their sins publicly, an act that was fundamental in cultivating the self-acknowledgement of sin necessary for repentance.<sup>6</sup> Although the Strozzi family ultimately commissioned this fresco, the subject matter would have been determined by the Dominican friars who oversaw the church of Santa Maria Novella. Because of Dante's connections with Dominican theology in structuring his Hell, it would have made sense for the Dominican friars to instruct Nardo di Cione to create an image of hell grounded in the description given by Dante in *Inferno*. The intertextuality of the piece would reinforce Dominican theology and, most importantly, the idea that one's torment received in hell is ultimately determined by the sins which they commit when alive. It would also pay homage to one of the most widely known Florentines at the time, and connect them to the much greater Italian literary tradition.

*Inferno* ("Hell") by Nardo di Cione exemplifies the art which was produced after the Black Death spread to Italy in 1348. It drew upon the imagery presented by Dante in *Inferno*, providing Florentines with a way to conceptualize the afterlife. It also promoted the advantages of a pious life in which you abstain from sin and instead satisfy the Christian demand for *caritas*<sup>7</sup> in order to avoid the torments one could suffer in Hell or time spent in Purgatory. This accurate depiction of Dante's *Inferno* solidified the bond between his text and the greater Dominican ideology

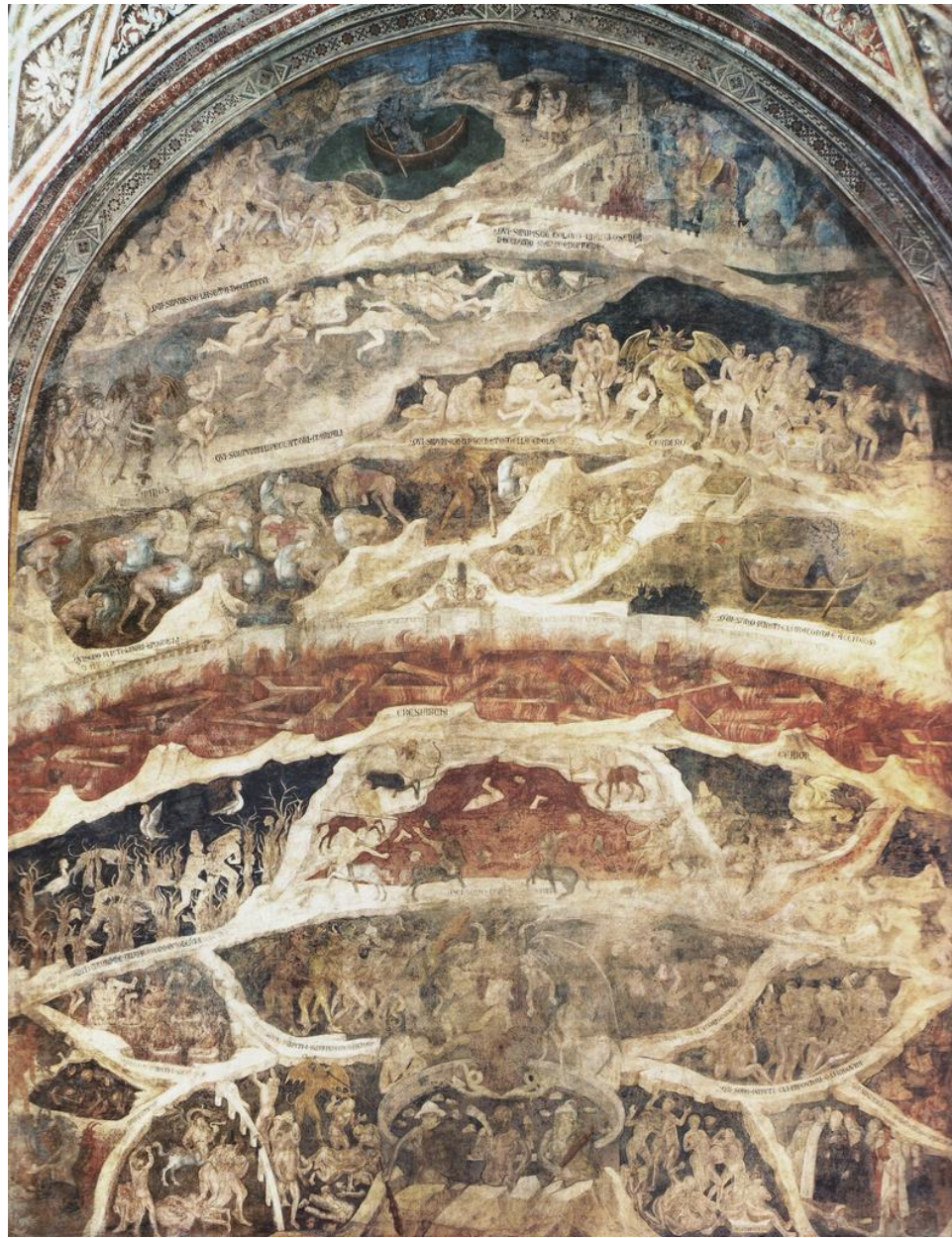
---

<sup>5</sup> Dallas Denery II. "The Devi in Human Form: Confession, Deceptions and Self-Knowledge" in *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World*. (2005 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp. 43

<sup>6</sup> Denery II. "Seeing and Being Seen" pp. 50

<sup>7</sup> R.N. Swanson. "The pilgrimage of life and death" in *Religion and Devotion in Europe c.1215-1515* (1995 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp. 206

supporting the church of Santa Maria Novella. It is an accuracy which becomes effective only through a contextual understanding of the space in which it resides, and can begin to reveal the possible motivation behind the production of this piece.



**Figure 1:** Inferno ("Hell"), Nardo di Cione, Cappella Strozzi, Santa Maria Novella, 1355 – 1357  
"Magic Transistor on Tumblr", 786 x 1024,

[http://24.media.tumblr.com/cb8de0494c8aef3355baae36b6ba96b/tumblr\\_mqd3byzLqt1rz74xjo1\\_1280.jpg](http://24.media.tumblr.com/cb8de0494c8aef3355baae36b6ba96b/tumblr_mqd3byzLqt1rz74xjo1_1280.jpg)



**Figure 2:** Capella Strozzi (Strozzi Chapel), Santa Maria Novella  
(Right) – Inferno (“Hell”) fresco, Nardo di Cione

“imagebank” 1005 x1334; <http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/ffolliott/arth340/imagebank/strozz0.jpg>



## Bibliography

Arthur, Kathleen. The Strozzi Chapel: Notes on the Building History of Sta. Maria Novella. *In The Art Bulletin* 65:3 (1983) pp. 367-386

Denery II, Dallas. "The Devil in Human Form: Confession, Deceptions and Self-Knowledge" *in Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World*. (2005 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp. 43

Meiss, Millard. Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death. (1951 Princeton: Princeton University Press)

Nassar, Eugene. The Iconography of Hell: From the Baptistery Mosaic to the Michelangelo Fresco *in Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*. 111 (1993) pp. 53-105

Paoletti, John, and Gary Radke. "Florence: Traditions and Innovations" *in Art in Renaissance Italy*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (2012 London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd)

Rosenwein, Barbarah H "Social Meaning in the Mendicant and Monastic Spiritualities" *in Past & Present*. 63 (1974) pp.4-32

Tugwell, Simon, trans. Early Dominicans: Selected Writings. (1982 Mahwah: Paulist Press)

Vettori, Alessandro. "Dominicans". *In The Dante Encyclopedia* edited by Richard Lansing (2011 Routledge) pp. 313-315