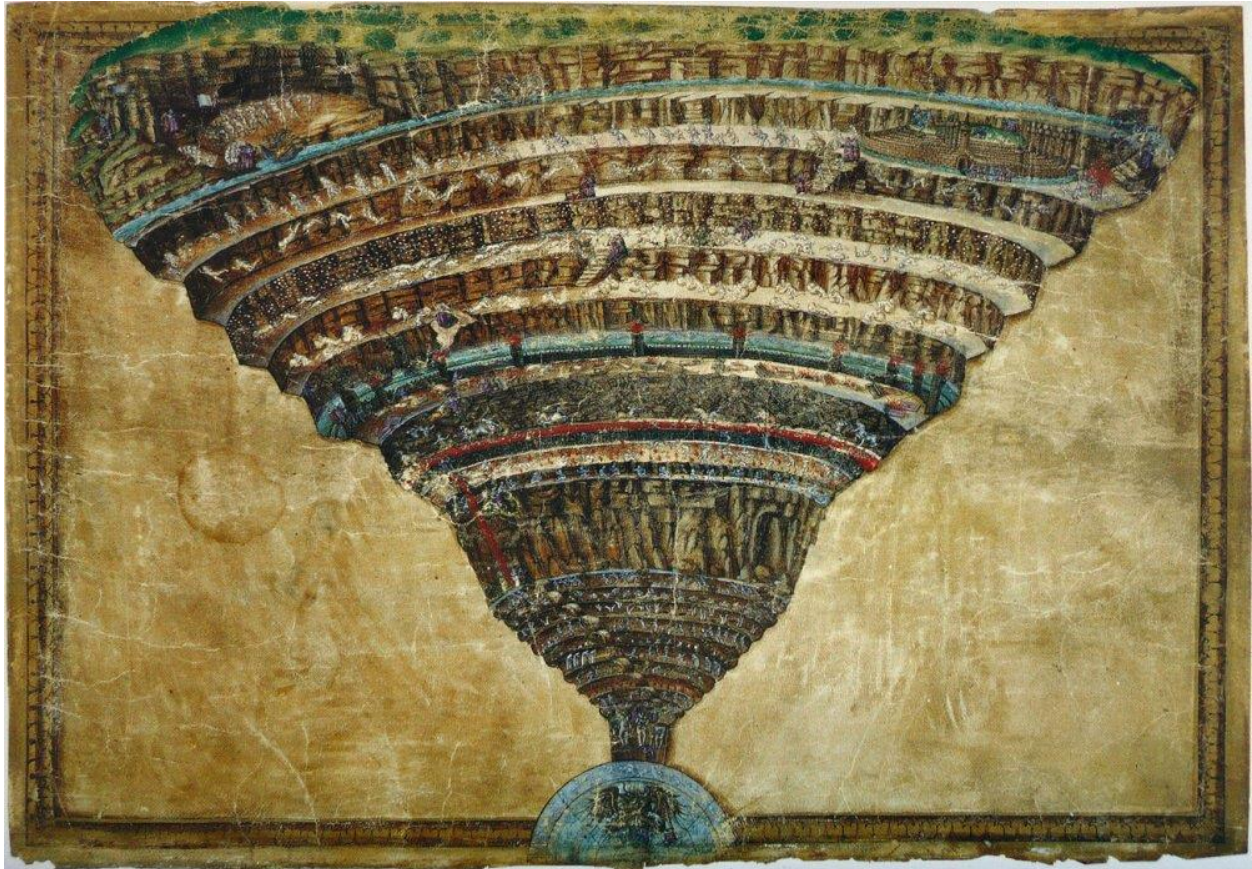


Sandro Botticelli's Unsung Hero: La Mappa dell'Inferno  
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In modern society there is a rather perplexing intrigue in the suffering of individuals, and an addictive nature to focus on tragedy. Almost every day on news outlets there are seemingly constant notifications of bombings, shootings, violent protests, and the list could go on forever. These news blasts heavily grasp the attention of all, and in return has in a way desensitized the public from these horrid events. However, one must think has the human mind always been consumed so greatly by tragedy like that of the modern public today? Are news outlets such as print media or visual media (e.g. televised news coverage) only modern applications for the widespread diffusion of such tragedy? If one were to travel six-hundred and ninety-six years in the past, one would notice the beginning of the modern human's fascination with grit and calamities. Those novel interests came primarily with the publication of an epic poem composed by Dante Alighieri. Dante published a text, *La Divina Comedia*, which was composed of three separate epic poems which described in great detail for the first time in human history a physical description of Hell.

*La Divina Comedia* is composed of three works; *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. In these three texts, Dante and his guide Virgil, travel through Hell and Purgatory in order to achieve Paradise or Heaven. Dante's work completely riveted society, and left a long lasting hold on minds of the religious as to their views on the after life.<sup>1</sup> Another one hundred and eighty years post the publication of *La Divina Comedia*, another Italian artist emerged to elaborate on Dante's work. This artist, by the name of Sandro Botticelli, was greatly influenced by Dante and had the intentions of creating a visual representation of this poem. Even though Botticelli and Dante lived in different fragments of time in human history, Botticelli, was enamored by his preceding artistic giant. Botticelli forged a rather unlikely and unique relationship to not only the ideals of Dante but also to his defining work, *La Divina Comedia*. In a way of paying homage to another Florentine artist, the lesser known Botticelli devoted twenty years to complete over ninety drawings and one painting to represent Dante's *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. However, it is argued that Botticelli's representation of Dante's *Inferno* by the completion of *La Mappa dell'Inferno* is Botticelli's unsung hero in his artistic portfolio. As shown in *La Mappa dell'Inferno*, Botticelli branched from his niche of the ornamental charm seen in his earlier works, and shifted towards a more simplistic approach in composition which was regarded as more crude and dark in creating humanities' modern visual of hell. Although the public of renaissance Florence rejected Botticelli's work as a true renaissance project, art historians have made the exact opposite argument. In Botticelli's *Mappa dell'Inferno* he uses several key themes of the renaissance such as; heavy use of iconography, humanism, enhanced emotion, and a religious subject matter to in fact create a true renaissance masterpiece. Sandro Botticelli's *Mappa dell'Inferno* is an unsung hero of art produced in the later 15<sup>th</sup> century, and is actually a representative work of the renaissance.

Sandro Botticelli was born in 1445 in the Italian city-state of Florence.<sup>2</sup> At birth he was named Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, however, was given the nickname of Botticelli from his older brother.<sup>3</sup> 'Botticelli' translates from Italian to 'small wine cask', and his brother called him that due to his small frame and his full enjoyment of life and its pleasures.<sup>4</sup> Botticelli was born into a lower class family, and his family suffered from financial issues for a lot of his upbringing. Due to the financial burden of painter apprenticeships, Botticelli was originally trained as a goldsmith. His times working as a goldsmith greatly influenced the ornamental design of his later works when he was able to work as a painter. As a painter, Botticelli, was able to receive an apprenticeship from an established Florentine artist by the name of Fra Filippo Lippi.<sup>5</sup> From this apprenticeship, Botticelli was introduced to the Medici family, and they were

the primary patrons of his critically acclaimed paintings. Under the Medici's, Sandro Botticelli worked for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de Medici, and this artist to patron relationship lasted till Botticelli's death in 1510.<sup>6</sup> The height of Botticelli's career was eclipsed by the ninja turtles of the renaissance; Leonardo da'Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Donnatello. Because of this Botticelli's fame was really underappreciated until his works were rediscovered for its value in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> Botticelli was principally known for his paintings of Madonna and Child which were commissioned by the Medici's, and he created many up until the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. At that point in the life of Botticelli, he was reported to have undergone a crisis in his artistic style and expression. In these last fifteen years of his life he became greatly devoted to the works of Dante Alighieri, and with this newfound devotion came the dark period of works that he produced.<sup>8</sup> In his recreation of Dante's works into a visual form he integrated enigmatic neo-platonic allegories, which is a theme of the renaissance.<sup>9</sup> During this time the devotion was noted as an obsession, and gives into the unique relationship the Botticelli built with the works of Dante.<sup>10</sup>

The motivation behind the switch of artistic styles in Botticelli's work was Dante Alighieri. Like Sandro Botticelli, Dante Alighieri was born in Florence, Italy in 1265.<sup>11</sup> During Dante's lifetime he was privy to many crises that took place not only in Europe but especially in Italy. One of these calamities is the poor harvests of crops in Europe. This crisis which took place from 1305 to 1322, greatly devastated the European people.<sup>12</sup> This famine lead to the mass starvation of people in Italy, and Dante greatly documented the torture and suffering that took place in his city. This famine took place a few years before the development of the Black Death, and since individuals were starved their bodies were not able to ward of such illnesses. From all the death that seemed to follow Dante, he gained great inspiration for his work *La Divina Comedia* which has been considered as a cornerstone in Western Literature.<sup>13</sup> Another thing that provided great inspiration for his trilogy of epic poems was his love for a woman named Beatrice Portinari. In *La Divina Comedia* as well as traveling through the pits of human sin and punishment, Dante is fighting his way through the darkness in order to reach his love: Beatrice. Dante Alighieri first met Beatrice when he was only nine years old, and had been in love with her since. *La Divina Comedia* was structured around the Dante's real life fight to find his way back to his true love after his banishment from Florence. Dante Alighieri had to move around to several Italian city-states, and during this time he took in sights of each place and became learned in ancient thought.<sup>14</sup> However, during Dante's banishment his beloved Beatrice died, and gives his motivation for *Paradiso*. Dante published the finished work in 1307 in the vernacular, and effectively communicated the eternal destiny of human life with transcendence rather than the accepted thought of the fulfillment of human understanding.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of the 1400's Botticelli was commissioned by the Medici's to illustrate one hundred cantos of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and to illustrate a map of Dante's Inferno.<sup>16</sup> At this point in Botticelli's life he was extremely religiously fervent, and the religious aspect of Dante's text greatly compelled him. The theme of the afterlife led Botticelli to stray from his sublimely radiant images, and in his rendition of the Dante's work he draws from the dark side of his imagination while still incorporating key characteristics of the Florentine Renaissance.<sup>17</sup> The opportunity that Dante's work gave to Botticelli was anything but underappreciated. Botticelli believed that this commission was a chance for him to not only show his mastery in renaissance art, but also for him to create a rediscovery of the intelligence of Dante Alighieri. This obsessive nature in his task of illustrating *La Divina Comedy* lead Botticelli to end his work with a authoritative portrait of Dante. This portrait has Dante in a crown made of laurel wreaths which are meant to symbolize his eminence in literature. However, Botticelli antagonizes this with



Dante displaying a grimly downturned frown to further portray the seriousness of the subject matter he spent twenty years illustrating. This trend of portraiture is a main motif of the renaissance, and again goes to further show how Botticelli was as much of a renaissance artist even with his finishing of the illustrated *Divina Comedia*.

Botticelli's *Mappa dell'Inferno* depicts the nine circles of Hell as described in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Botticelli constructed Hell in a shape that is similar to a funnel. This shape starts off rather large, and gets narrower and narrower as it extends vertically. Within this funnel shape, the nine layers of Hell are depicted, and in these layers are the sinners paying for their earthly sins. Botticelli fit so much detail into each layer which in the end leads to a finished visual of Hell that is looks rather crowded and unorganized when it is actually the exact opposite. Botticelli's advanced focus on composition and structural order is another example in showing how Botticelli reflected the ideals of the renaissance in his works. During the renaissance the artists really focused on the importance of overall layout, and its role in the communication of the art. A clear layout, with the combination of different perspectives are helpful for the viewer when attempting to piece together the story within the work in front of them. Botticelli's layout created an effective organizational design as it clearly reads like the text going from layer to layer. The first circle or layer in this work is limbo which is the place for individuals who never underwent a baptism. This is by far the thickest circle depicted, and the circles not only get narrower as the viewer gets closer and closer to Lucifer's layer, but the space also gets shortened due to the overall funnel shape of inferno. Following limbo are the circles associated with a particular sin such as; Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Wrath and Sloth, Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery.<sup>18</sup> Following the sixth circle, circles seven through nine all have additional rings and ditches within to further identify the degree of sin for the dead. For example, in the seventh circle which is for the sin of violence, there are three rings (outer, middle, and inner) which establish the degrees of violence. The types of violence marked as sin the Bible which are depicted in Botticelli's work is violence against people and property, suicides and profligates, and blasphemers.<sup>19</sup> The execution of a complex organizational layout of Dante's Inferno while still being able to effectively keep this work readable for the viewer is a key reason in which Botticelli's *Mappa* is a true renaissance feat. Botticelli's attention to the structure of hell with the knowledge of dimension and topography reflects the ideals of the 15<sup>th</sup> century humanism within works of art.<sup>20</sup>

A revered art historian by the name of Yukio Yashiro once stated that Botticelli's representation of *La Mappa dell'Inferno* is "Art in its purest essence... Exempt from any exertion outside his natural inclination, he had the rare opportunity of being completely himself."<sup>21</sup> This quote is essential in the argument that Botticelli's work is a defining work of the renaissance, as Yashiro states the pureness of the work. Botticelli really exerted his mastery skills in renaissance art in *La Mappa dell'Inferno*, and especially with the great detail and reality of body images. Botticelli greatly availed his appreciation for the true human form in the miniatures in the work. Not only are the human figures depicted representative of the true human form, but their facial reactions depict a height of dramatic feeling.<sup>22</sup> In *La Mappa* Botticelli accurately depicts the gloomy and fearful atmosphere of Inferno in the landscape and the faces of the figures. This increased attention to detail is another prime characteristic of renaissance art. Asides from the figures displaying the torment of the afterlife, the detail put into each individual's figure is another renaissance feat. For one these figures are all nude. This was common in artworks of the renaissance as artists were looking back at classical art for inspiration. A trend in classical art were nude figures that appeared almost lifelike.<sup>23</sup> Botticelli's dedication to capture this key

theme of the renaissance in his work is another example of why *La Mappa dell'Inferno* should have been considered as a true representation of renaissance art ideals. However, the complexity and darkness of this work overplayed the several motifs of the renaissance that Botticelli employed in the construction of *Mappa dell'Inferno*.

Another reason in which Botticelli's *Mappa dell'Inferno* should not have been an unsung hero of renaissance art, and rather should have been appreciated in that moment as a renaissance triumph is due to Botticelli's use of heavy iconography. Iconography and allusions were instrumental in renaissance art, and a pivotal characteristic of the advancement of renaissance art.<sup>24</sup> One example in *La Mappa* is how Botticelli alludes to the seven liberal arts from the seven towers that he added in the realm of Limbo.<sup>25</sup> During Dante's banishment from Florence he became very educated in humanist thought, and in this example Botticelli is paying respect to that. Another example of the heavy iconography in *La Mappa* is the sin for those who inhabit the second circle of Hell. These sinners, lusters, are punished by having strong winds violently tumble them through this circle. The strong winds symbolize the restlessness of that individual who was led by the desire of fleshly pleasures.<sup>26</sup> Botticelli visualizes this symbol in his representation of *La Mappa* and even involves some infamous adulterers in human history such as Cleopatra. Each circle is further engulfed with some obvious and some hidden symbology pertinent to the sin at hand. This heavy iconography is a defining characteristic of renaissance art, and is a tool that Botticelli uses in his *Mappa dell'Inferno*. This is another reason in which *La Mappa dell'Inferno* should be considered as a true renaissance work.

In conclusion Botticelli's representation of Dante's *Inferno* is an extreme triumph of renaissance art. Botticelli employs several defining characteristics of the renaissance in his *Mappa dell'Inferno*. The characteristics of the characteristics that Botticelli uses include an enhanced focus of human body forms, heightened emotions, organized layout to make it easier for the viewer to read, and heavy iconography. In *Mappa dell'Inferno* Botticelli made a complete artistic switch from his romantic styles to a dark and atypical style for Botticelli. However, this switch in renaissance Florence sort of ended up invalidating his work for being a true representative of the renaissance. Furthermore, this work was completely neglected for its artistic merit until its reemergence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The inspiration and motivation for Botticelli's *Mappa* was the *Divine Comedy* which was written by Dante Alighieri. The forged unique relationship that Botticelli created with the ideals of Dante greatly influenced the pure mastery of this work, as Botticelli attempted to pay great homage to another Florentine artist.

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## Endnotes

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