



# DALÍ

***THE DIVINE COMEDY***

**Eames Fine Art Print Room**  
24 June to 25 July 2021  
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# SALVADOR DALÍ | THE DIVINE COMEDY

## AN INTRODUCTION

*The Divine Comedy* is the vivid account of an imagined journey that the author – Dante Alighieri – took on Good Friday 1300. Lost in a dark wood he is attacked by three beasts: a panther, a lion and a she-wolf. Dante's platonic love, Beatrice sends the classical poet Virgil to his aid and he guides him through the wood and beyond to Hell (Inferno), Purgatory (Purgatorio) and Heaven (Paradiso). Dante imagined Hell as a configuration of nine descending circles where the damned are tormented for all eternity by terrible monsters and fiendish tortures. Dante and Virgil make their escape via a secret pathway to Purgatory which is portrayed as a vast mountain surrounded by seven circles where souls are purged of their sins before making the journey on to Heaven. To complete the journey and arrive in Paradise, Virgil makes way for Beatrice who guides Dante in the company of angels to the presence of God.

This epic verse is widely held to be Dante's masterpiece and given the exalted position that the author occupies in the Italian literary pantheon, its reputation has been lovingly burnished and jealously guarded over the centuries. That a lavish illustration of *The Divine Comedy* was commissioned by the Italian government to celebrate the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dante's birth in 1950 was entirely appropriate. The award of the project to Spanish surrealist Salvador Dalí was met with outrage however and the controversy led to questions in the Italian Parliament where the project was denounced as a crime against the Italian State. In the face of such fierce opposition, the government decided to terminate the project and Dalí's contract was cancelled.

Dalí was already deeply immersed in the project however and had already completed a number of watercolours to illustrate Dante's verses. He decided to find another publisher for the project and Joseph Forêt, Director of Parisian fine art publisher Éditions d'Art Les Heures Claires, agreed to purchase the complete set of watercolours and secured the rights to publish Dalí's *Divine Comedy* as a limited edition book.

Between 1951 and 1960, in one of the most sustained creative achievements of his career, Dalí completed 100 illustrations in watercolour, each a response to a verse or *canto* from Dante's original text. There are 34 illustrations for the realms of Inferno, and 33 each for Purgatorio and Paradiso. To render the watercolours for publication, each image was painstakingly reinterpreted as a wood engraving under Dalí's strict supervision, a process that required 56 months of patient,

continuous work. The end result, when finally published in 1964, was an astonishing publication that succeeded in bringing the artform of the *Livre d'Artiste* (Artist's Book) to as wide a collectorship as possible at an affordable price. The publication comprised two editions: a French edition of 4,765 and an Italian edition of 2,900 for a total of 7,665. A 'German edition' of 1,000 was also compiled in 1974 by taking complete sets of the French edition and adding English and German translations along with block signatures to the engravings with the approval and direct control of Dalí. The complete edition information alongside a comprehensive register of Dalí block signatures used in the publication of *The Divine Comedy* can be found in Eduard Fornés' raisonné, *Dalí – Illustrator* which serves as the definitive reference for these works.

## FROM WATERCOLOUR TO WOOD BLOCK

Translating Dalí's 100 watercolours for *The Divine Comedy* into wood engravings for printing was a daunting undertaking. Master engraver Raymond Jacquet and his assistants Jean Taricco and Paul Bassin were commissioned by Jean Estrade, the Artistic Director of Les Heures Claires, to work with Dalí to create the engraved interpretations of his watercolours. This involved deconstructing each image into separate colours and the carving of a single block for each colour. Each of these colour proofs is known as a 'decomposition' and each watercolour would require more than 30 of these decompositions to create the completed engraved translation.



Sequence of nine decompositions (there are 34 in total) and one stage proof showing development of the engraving for 'Imposter' (*Inferno: Canto 18*). Images courtesy of Lockport Street Gallery.

The process of engraving the blocks would start with the drawing of a perfect negative of the original watercolour on to the block with carbon or lithographic pencil. The design would then be incised into the block using a burin (engraving tool). Painstaking care was needed to ensure that the thickness of the incised line would translate the colour of the watercolour correctly and so Dalí's constant attention and supervision was required throughout the four years it took to produce the engraved proofs.

In total 3,500 engraved blocks were needed to complete *The Divine Comedy* and importantly, Jacquet decided to print different colours from the same block, meaning that each block was permanently altered during the printing process. This not only meant that there was simply no margin for error in the printing of the edition but also ensured that the integrity of the edition was preserved as subsequent unauthorised printings or forgeries made from the blocks would not be possible. Another feature of the publication that demonstrated Jacquet's commitment to the highest of standards was his decision to use resin blocks. Traditionally, wood engraving was executed on sections of box wood, however Jacquet's preference for harder, more durable resin blocks allowed for finer detail to be achieved in the engraving of the blocks and richer quality in the final printing. This was crucial in ensuring that all impressions across both the French and Italian editions were printed to a consistent, high standard.

# THE DIVINE COMEDY OF DALÍ

Few artists can rival Salvador Dalí in the spheres of self-promotion and myth-making. So successful was he in these realms, that his art is almost obscured by them. There is a tendency in the collective consciousness to reduce him down to his moustache and a few melting clocks. So, we can be forgiven for forgetting that Dalí was, in fact, extremely gifted as both draughtsman and painter. Nowhere in his body of work are these abilities more apparent than in the 100 prints he produced to illustrate Dante's monumental poem. In his depictions of Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso we are confronted with images of tortured souls and sublime visions, executed in simple yet refined pen and watercolour that stand in marked contrast to the slickness of his paintings and seem to possess an uncharacteristic immediacy that belies their lengthy and, of course, controversial creation.

Dante Alighieri's epic poem, in which his narrator, guided by the poet Virgil, first descends into the depths of Hell, before ascending Mount Purgatory to finally arrive in Paradise, stands as one of the undisputed masterpieces of world literature. Few works can be said to have influenced the imagination of an entire civilisation on such a scale as has The Divine Comedy. It is daring, visceral and continually shocking in its portrayal of the afterlife, and since its completion in 1320, it has not ceased to furnish other artists with inspiration.

Botticelli, Blake, Doré – Dalí, at first, may seem a strange name to add to the list. After all, the religious aspect of his life is yet another facet obscured by the artist's own image-making. It may therefore come as a surprise to some that, in 1950, Dalí was granted an audience with the pope. More surprising still, the pontiff consented to the enfant terrible painting Christianity's most sacred of scenes, the Immaculate Conception. That same year, encouraged by, and perhaps not a little jealous of, this papal approval and to commemorate the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their nation's greatest poet, no lesser body than the Italian government commissioned Dalí to produce a series of illustrations for the Divine Comedy. Such was the furore created by this commission that some in the Parlamento accused the government of perpetrating a crime against the state, and in order to spare itself a lawsuit, the commission was rescinded.

One might expect that to a provocateur such as Dalí this censure would only serve to fire his resolve. However, the enormity of this task, the artistic labour it required, clearly demonstrates that to Dalí there was something more serious at stake. To turn 100 watercolours into woodcuts is no small undertaking. Indeed, to complete the series, no fewer than 3,500 woodblocks were required. It took master engraver Raymond Jacquet five years to accomplish this feat, with Dalí at hand to approve

each and every step. It is hard to not draw a parallel between Dante the wandering poet and Dalí the rejected illustrator, two spurned exiles too committed to their artistic projects to give way.

It has been commented that Dalí's artistic vision succeeds most when applied to smaller works, that his self-described paranoiac imagination is charged and heightened when somewhat confined. That is more than evident in his *Divine Comedy*. Yet there is something else at play, too. Hitchcock, Disney, Coco Chanel: collaboration was an integral part of Dalí's career. Meeting another's imagination halfway allowed Dalí to slip his own claustrophobic concerns. And who can claim to have had as profound an imagination as Dante? Motifs we recognise as Dalí's, his featureless faces, distorted limbs supported by crutches, windowed torsos, shattered, ethereal beings here transcend Dalí's own Freudian obsessions to make us see afresh the horrors of Dante's hell, the overawing visions of his heaven.

The *Divine Comedy* is celebrated for what has come to be known as *contrapasso*, the audacious ingenuity with which Dante fitted a crime to its punishment. More than any of the poem's many illustrators, Dalí fits Dante's vision. The inferno is to some extent already an absurd, surreal nightmare; in the act of translation from word to image, it is oftentimes difficult to pinpoint where the early Renaissance Poet ends and the Surrealist artist begins. That the two possess a shared sensibility in their conception of hell and purgatory as intellectual torture, body-horror and farce, we might expect. Dalí's Paradise, however, offers up something we are much less likely to anticipate. The delicacy of line and colour on display here is unique in his oeuvre. All in all, it is something of a revelation.

Luke Wallis, June 2021

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