

## Botticelli's gorgeous, grotesque, surreal trip through Heaven and Hell

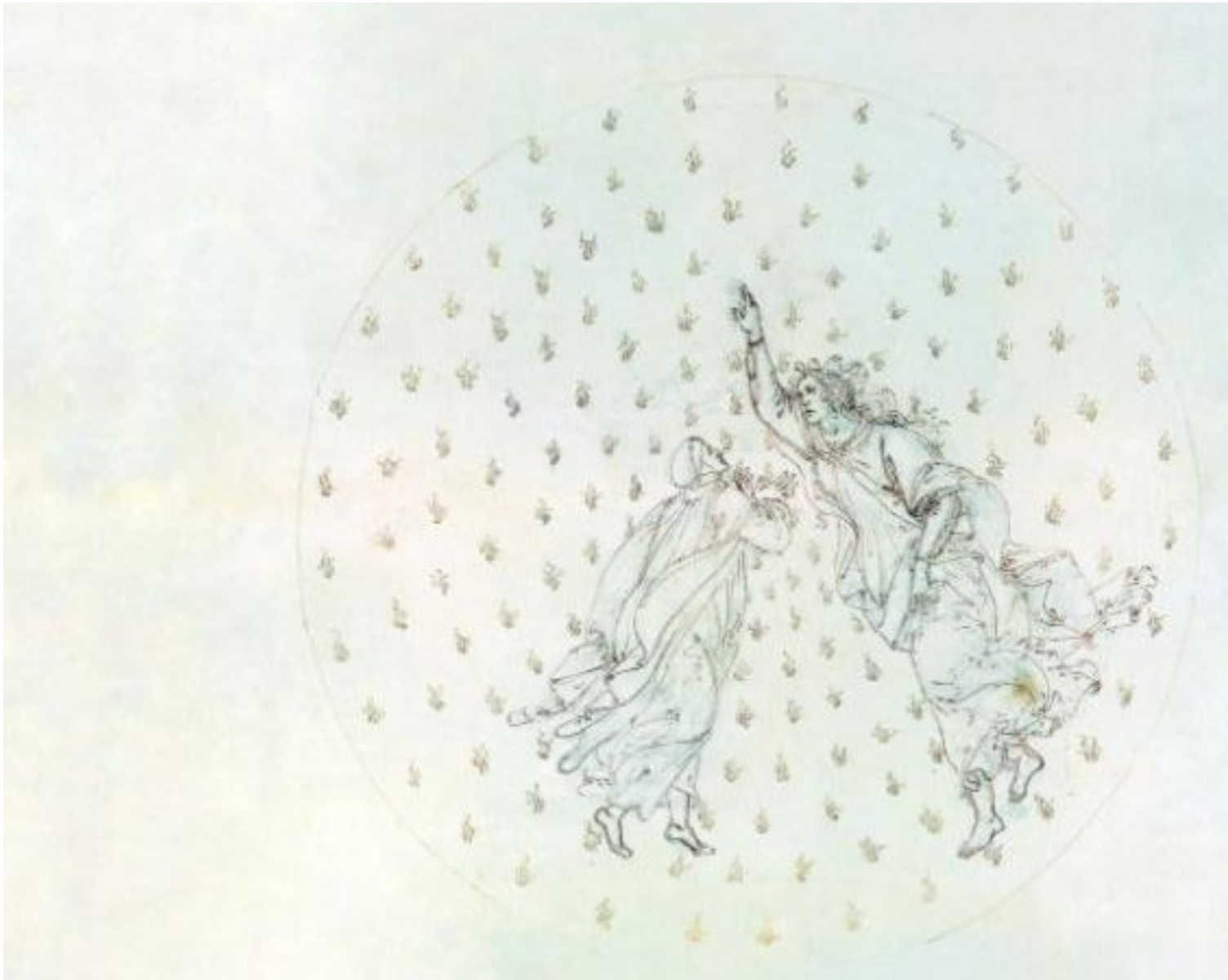
'Genesis' from the Hamilton Bible, illuminated by Botticelli's contemporary, Cristoforo Orimina (detail)



London is having a Botticelli moment, with two sizeable exhibitions devoted to the great Renaissance painter opening within a fortnight of each other. This show, focusing on the Florentine master's illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy, opens ahead of the V&A's Botticelli Reimagined, which looks at his influence on artists from William Morris to Lady Gaga. If this looks on paper like a worthy, bookish forerunner to the main event, it is in fact a revelation.

Botticelli is best known for lyrical and enduringly popular mythological scenes such as the Birth of Venus. But his visualisations of Dante's visionary journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven with their scenes of gruesome damnation and mystical exaltation, show us a very different side to this enigmatic artist. They take us into a completely imagined visionary world that is by turns grotesque, startlingly beautiful, surreal, dreamily ecstatic and often surprisingly funny.

Botticelli's Dante and Beatrice in Paradise (Divine Comedy, Paradiso VI), c.1481-1495



Commissioned by a member of the Medici family around 1480, the 92 panels in the unfinished series became the focus of a national scandal in Britain in 1882, when their then owner the Duke of Hamilton sold them to Berlin's Museum of Prints and Drawings. The 30 images now making a rare return to Britain, presented alongside a fine collection of illustrated manuscripts from the period, provide an opportunity to gauge the extent of what was lost to Britain in that sale, but far more importantly to marvel at one of the great under-sung masterpieces of the Renaissance.

Rather than illustrating selected scenes in the generally accepted way, Botticelli tried to visualise every incident in the 14,233 line epic poem. The large drawings, all in brown ink on creamy vellum, reveal a mass of bizarre events flowing into each other in what feels at times like a medieval illuminated manuscript gone wildly out of control, though the quality of the drawing is exquisitely refined. Dante,

immediately recognisable with his hook nose and floppy hat, often appears several times in the same image, alongside the Roman poet Virgil, his guide through the netherworld. Gazing one moment at fields of ice with the naked damned trapped beneath, the pair are then seen a few inches away looking on as a corrupt civil servant is tormented by repulsive demons with spears.

Botticelli's Lucifer: *Divine Comedy, Inferno XXXIV,2*, c.1481-1495 (detail)



If there's a temptation to laugh at the sheer absurdity of some of these images, you can't help sensing that Botticelli himself was also chuckling away, particularly when you realise that many of the sinners portrayed were real people, identifiable to contemporary viewers. It's as though we're being invited to cheer as the Jimmy Savilles and Robert Maxwells of the time receive their just desserts.

With their simplified notions of good and evil, these images take us far further into the mind of the average 15th-century person than rarefied, classically inspired "renaissance" works such as Botticelli's own Birth of Venus. Yet the later, more abstract images showing Dante's ascent into heaven often seem peculiarly modern. Here Dante is guided by the great – unrequited – love of his life, Beatrice, and images of the pair floating towards the source of all being through rivers of light and fields of flowers feel positively psychedelic.

Alexander the Great visits the bottom of the sea in a diving-bell in *The Romance of Alexander*, c.1290–1300

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The fact that these images were never coloured as originally intended gives them an extraordinary feeling of immediacy. The mostly frantically detailed drawings take quite a lot of peering at, even with the aid of the magnifying glasses provided. But the effort is more than rewarded by an intimate sense of watching Botticelli's pen moving over the paper and seeing into the mind of a truly extraordinary artist.

**Botticelli and Treasures from the Hamilton Collection is at The Courtauld, London, until May 15. Details: 020 7848 2526; courtauld.ac.uk**

Mark Hudson - The Telegraph