# SIGNORELLI'S *PUNISHMENT OF THE DAMNED*

by Simon Abrahams

Supplement to a November 2007 advertisement in *The Art Newspaper*

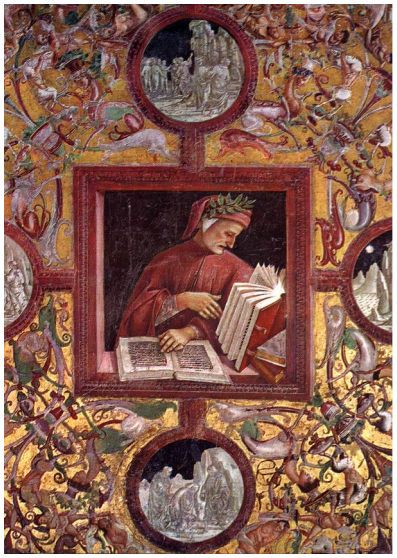
This short paper supplements a recent ad in the October 2007 issue of *The Art Newspaper* revealing a metamorphic portrait of Dante in Luca Signorelli's *Punishment of the Damned* in Orvieto Cathedral (see below). The "portrait" is important, not only in its own right, but because it inspired Michelangelo to base his own *Last Judgment* on an even larger metamorphic portrait of Dante. That portrait was also revealed in *The Art Newspaper* in a similar ad in May 2007. See the accompanying files titled: "Michelangelo's Art Through Michelangelo's Eyes."

Fig. 1 Detail of Signorelli's *Punishment of the Damned* next to a diagram indicating how to see Dante's portrait in it. Raphael's *Portrait of Dante* is included at right as a guide.

- **All images are by Signorelli unless otherwise stated**

Past writers on Signorelli's frescoes in Orvieto, unaware of how great masters paint an easily-perceived subject over a far more difficult esoteric one underneath, have generally assumed that the meaning of Signorelli's scenes are "self-evident."[1] They read them like a book, following Bernard Berenson's description of Signorelli as a great modern illustrator.[2] The theatricality of the scenes, supposedly foreseeing the end of the world, are said to be based on an apocalyptic faith.[3] Given a general tendency in art scholarship to equate the meaning of a picture with the stated beliefs of the patron, the murals are thought to extol ecclesiastical authority, visually proclaiming that there "is no salvation outside the Church."[4] This approach makes no distinction between the clergy who believed in the literal truth of the Bible, like fundamentalists today, and artists and other intellectuals who had a more spiritual understanding of the texts.

As I have argued in papers on this website and in published ads, Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* and his scenes on the Sistine ceiling depict the inside of his own creative mind. During the Renaissance a spiritual (or artistic ) mind was thought of as a replica in miniature of the divine mind, just as the human body was a microcosm of the universe. Since the body also became, with arms extended, the basic architectural plan of churches, Michelangelo's decoration of the Sistine Chapel with scenes inside the mind and body makes total sense. This also explains his habit of dissecting corpses which has always been poorly explained as an aid to drawing exterior anatomy. Believing in the Inner Tradition, as the belief's various manifestations are now collectively known, he needed to know what the inside of the body looked like in order to use its forms and shapes in his art. Though such beliefs may sound heretical, and they were certainly contrary to ecclesiastical doctrine, they have always been central to those most spiritually inclined, including many of the most venerated names in the Christian tradition. There is strong evidence that it was this teaching that Jesus passed on in secret to his apostles, an esoteric tradition later practiced by many of the early fathers of the Church as well, including Origen. All mystics, a group that includes many poets and artists, have practiced and believed in this tradition in one form or another.



*Portrait of Dante*

*Portrait of Ancient writer*

*Signorelli with Fra Angelico*

If we now consider Signorelli's scenes depicting the end-of-days in this light, many of their oddities are clarified. For instance, the prominence given to portraits of Dante and five pagan writers from antiquity are seemingly extraneous to any doctrinal meaning that the scenes in the Chapel may have though past writers have explained them as references to literary precedents of the scenes of Hell. It has been claimed, for instance, with twisted logic that Dante's fictional trip to the Underworld helps provide "first-hand evidence" of Hell's existence.[5] Fortunato Bellonzi, another writer, ignored such conclusions but was still left wondering what possible connection there could be between Dante, the pagan writers and Christian tradition.[6] Positioned at eye-level beneath the main panels, the portraits (two illustrated above) are accompanied by monochromatic illustrations from the *Commedia* and other works of fiction. Above them, in the main scenes, Dante appears again in the crowd listening to the anti-Christ and his features have been recognized yet again (though not convincingly) in other figures in the same scene.[7] Signorelli also placed the portraits of Dante and his guide, Virgil, across the chapel from one another, thereby emphasizing that the *Commedia* is important to the cycle's meaning. He then depicted himself next to his predecessor Fra Angelico in the opening scene (see above right.) Standing like Dante next to Fra Angelico's Virgil, he indicates to those with the right kind of

visual intelligence that the scenes are illustrations of a spiritual journey, a journey that our own minds must take to reach self-knowledge or, in his case, divine creation. Just as the underlying allegorical meaning of Dante's *Commedia* is a guide to the spiritual journey that each individual should undertake in this life, if he can, so Signorelli's wall-paintings provide an illustration of that journey through his own poetic mind.

A common feature of all spiritual journeys, in almost every tradition, is that they must begin with a descent into the Underworld where the individual encounters the state of his own mind. Hell is not a destination post-life; it is the present state of your mind and, unless you confront it and acknowledge it, you will never gain access to self-knowledge or the inner spirit. It can be no coincidence then that all the scenes that Signorelli illustrated here from the *Commedia* as well as those illustrated from the *Aeniad* and the work of Claudian, another ancient writer depicted, have been described as "all about the underworld, but can also be more narrowly defined as accounts of journeys made thither by a living person who then returns to earth."[8]

Creighton Gilbert has proposed that Alessandro Farnese, the future Pope, was the one who first recommended Signorelli to paint the chapel and that he was familiar with esotericism. He further believes that the identity of the unnamed portrait next to Dante's may be Coluccio Salutati who wrote about descents into the Underworld, recounting the journeys taken by Hercules, Orpheus, Theseus and Aeneas.[9]

Top: Dürer, *Christ's Descent into Limbo* with diagram indicating the underlying face

Bottom: Detail of diagram above; Dürer's *Portrait of Artist's Mother*, inverted and rotated

In a recent ad in *The Art Newspaper* I showed how Dürer composed his engraving of *Christ's Descent into Limbo* on a metamorphic face with a cross in the center of its mind (see prior page). I suggested that this face belonged to an unidentified man but have subsequently discovered that it is , instead, that of Dürer's own mother, a prominent symbol in his oeuvre of his own fertile mind. Note how the mother's cleft chin becomes the baby's bottom; the eyebrow matches exactly. Regardless of identity the metamorphic face indicates that Dürer's understanding of Hell is similar to Signorelli's: Hell is not some Biblical fantasy in a far-away place but in our heads. The veiled message of their art is that each of us, if we are to gain self-knowledge and higher consciousness, must face the torments of our own mind first .

Self-portrait of Signorelli as a demon

This understanding of Hell, and of the whole cycle in the *Capella Nuovo* in Orvieto, helps explain why one of the demons in the center of *The Punishment* is a portrait of Signorelli himself (at left). The demonic self-portrait is inside his own mind. Antonio Paolucci has argued that the self-portrait's presence in Hell is a clear indication that the scene is more than just an illustration of a Biblical event.[10] Furthermore, since our perception of other people can only be a composite of what we know about ourselves, so everyone we know is a reflection of us too. Thus all the characters in these imagined Hells, whether in Orvieto and the Sistine Chapel or in Dante's *Inferno*, whether demon or damned, represent varying aspects of the author himself, his mental features personified. One scholar has claimed that these demons in Hell are the first in Western art to be given human bodies rather than the torsos of monsters and insects.[11] Even if not strictly the first, the unusual

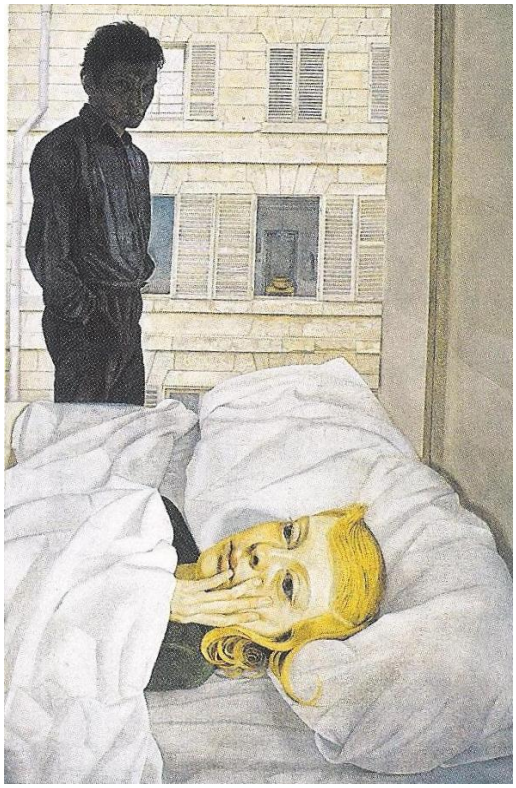
humanity of these demons may have been intended to suggest to contemporaries that they were indeed looking at demons on the inside, not out.

This brings us back to Dante. Dante was Signorelli's poetic muse, *alter ego* and guide, just as he was for Michelangelo in Florence. Signorelli was steeped in the *Commedia*. It is surely natural then that Dante should appear in Signorelli's mind and that four of the figures outside the mouth of Hell, two demons and two of the damned, should form his metamorphic portrait, as described in *The Art Newspaper*. This image of Dante, like other mental images, comes and goes as our perception changes, difficult to pin down but there nonetheless. If Hell, though, seems an odd location for a great poet, consider this. The dark side of the mind with all its torments is chaotically fertile: it is the source of artistic creativity. [12] Michelangelo, Signorelli and the other great Renaissance artists needed no philosopher nor humanist to tell them this because the subject had long been explained in art, for those that could see, and was probably common knowledge among artists.

In the twelfth century, for instance, the sculptors of Romanesque churches in Aquitaine carved images of themselves on the exterior walls among dice-players, fools and monsters, some heads with severe, tortured and distorted expressions. As Nurith Kenaan-Kedar has observed, this iconography deviated from the official art of the Church and placed the artists themselves squarely among images of mortal sinners.[13]

Artists' identification with chaos and evil, as well as the chaos *of* evil, continued. Pisanello, Lucas Cranach and Lorenzo Lotto all used serpents in their personal emblems and at least one scholar has concluded that Lotto's snake signifies evil.[14] Joseph Leo Koerner believes that Hans Baldung Grien's nickname "has a playfully diabolical aspect."[15] Heironymous Bosch's hellish paintings, whatever their superficial meaning, represent the inside of his own mind while Caravaggio's self-portrait as the dead Goliath clearly identifies the artist with evil. Even in our own age a scholar has written that Francis Bacon's contorted figures of popes with their "screams of pain, anger and terror" are "clearly also, somehow, the artist's own."[16] More subtly, Lucien Freud's self-portrait in shadow represents the dark

side of his mind too (see below). As Nietzche said of creative minds, “You must be a chaos to give birth to a dancing star.”



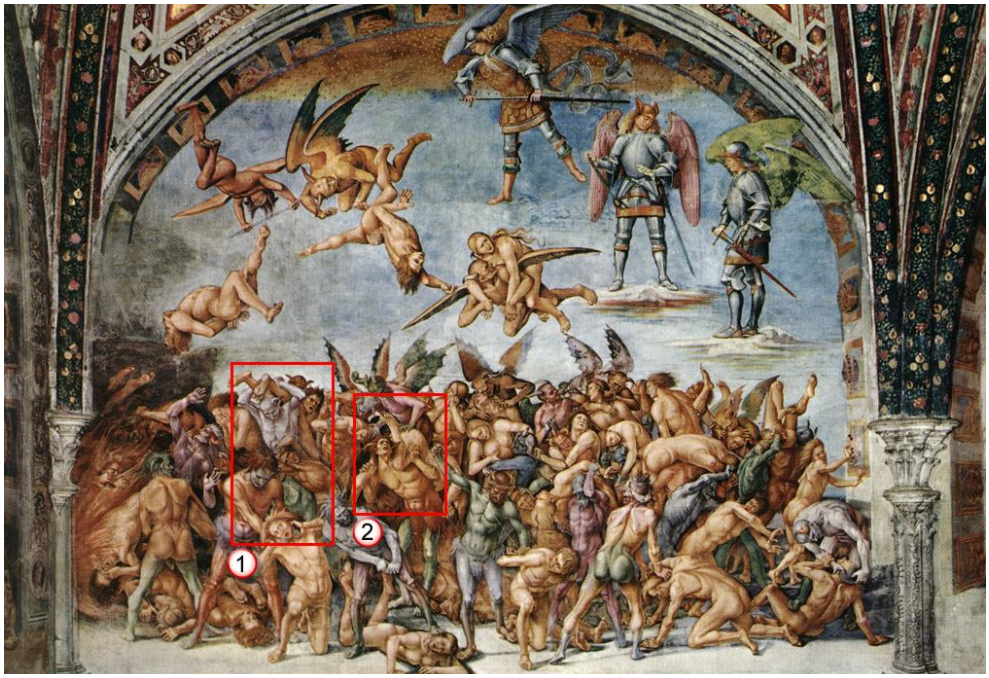
Lucien Freud, *Hotel Bedroom*
(1954)

Once *The Punishment* is recognized as a scene of creative struggle, other odd features make more sense. The demon with the self-portrait carries away a girl with long, blond hair like the artist’s own (see detail on p. 7). Paolucci, who explains the presence of the self-portrait as possibly some unknown reference to a romantic affair, has observed that the same woman’s features appear time and again throughout the scene.[17] This repetition would be natural in someone’s mind, less so if the scene merely illustrates a Biblical text. Furthermore, all the figures in *The Punishment* are one half of a pair, one demon and one damned in combat. This repetitive pattern reinforces the idea that the artist (and us, too) is a combination of opposites and that, unless both sides unite, they will continually

fight each other. As for the artist's pairing with the woman who resembles him, she is his feminine side, a sign of androgyny, a spiritual characteristic of Michelangelo's as well that he emphasized all over the Sistine Chapel.[18] While, for us, the successful conclusion to this struggle will be inner harmony and access to higher consciousness, for an artist creative struggle is always the prelude to divine creation.

Other choices that Signorelli made elsewhere in the Chapel begin to make more sense too. One of the tondos in grisaille illustrates Canto 11 of *Purgatorio*, starting at line 73. It can now be seen as a reference to Signorelli's own artistic tradition and future renown. It is the line in which the soul makes the famous comment about Giotto's fame.[19]

Lastly, there is another metamorphic portrait in *The Punishment* that I have long wondered whether to reveal. Like the portraits of Dante by both Michelangelo and Signorelli and the many metamorphic self-portraits of Michelangelo that I have shown online, it is difficult to perceive and to prove. It is a self-portrait of Signorelli (located in the rectangle numbered "2" ) and faces Dante (in the rectangle numbered "1").




*The Punishment of the Damned* indicating the location of Dante's portrait (1) and Signorelli's (2)

This “portrait” of Signorelli, illustrated with diagrams on the next page, is not complete. There is only one eye with the nose, mouth and chin though the hair is perhaps suggested in the furry leg of a demon. The most convincing feature is the nose which matches an upside-down leg in the image perfectly; the bend in the leg looks like a nostril. An impossible double curve on the demon’s torso also suggests the artist’s full lips while making no anatomical sense on his own body. The demon’s stomach, where it changes color, nicely echoes the cleft chin of the artist. As a mental image this self-portrait is difficult to perceive, can be seen only in part, but is there.

Established art scholars will dispute this; those who can see it will be artists, art lovers with open minds and art history students new to the discipline. Skeptics, though, may want to consider this: it is surely most unlikely, virtually inconceivable, that two forms resembling Dante and Signorelli should *by chance* face one another in a painting by Signorelli known to be deeply indebted to Dante. If these partial “portraits” are figments of my imagination, why do they not resemble someone else, say William Shakespeare or Norman Mailer? If , as is often said by scholars refuting similar claims, that such “faces” are easy to see and imagine but were not intended, then Shakespeare’s face should be easy to find here too. It is not.

Diagrams indicating the metamorphic features of Signorelli in *The Punishment of the Damned* (at left)

The truth is, contrary to a widespread belief in art scholarship, artists did not surrender control over the content of their works to their patrons. They found ways to satisfy the commissions while remaining true to their goals. Metamorphic portraits, such as those just shown, are one way of doing it. Paradoxically, scholars widely acknowledge that visual inconsistencies and problems of interpretation are a fundamental characteristic of great masterpieces while also arguing that great masters, especially those involved with religious masterpieces for the Church, are told what to paint. If the great masters were told, and obeyed their instructions, then religious masterpieces would be as simple to understand as a sermon. They hardly ever are, which is surely evidence that great masters do not take advice well and have their own agenda. Besides, in this instance, the commission makes clear that Signorelli chose the subject of the paintings, *The Last Judgment*, himself.[20] This knowledge did not prevent two specialists on Signorelli's art from imagining that Signorelli had an influential artistic director. They lamented that the name of the man who "devised the marvelous and intricate programme" that Signorelli "so majestically realized in paint" is now lost while that of Signorelli, then a mere artisan, is now widely remembered as a hero of his age.[21]

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## ENDNOTES

[1] Jonathan B. Reiss, *Luca Signorelli: The San Brizio Chapel*, Orvieto (New York: George Braziller) 1995, p. 16
[2] Antonio Paolucci, *Luca Signorelli* (Florence: Scala) 1990, p. 48
[3] Reiss, p. 7
[4] Reiss, p. 13
[5] Reiss, pp. 9, 26
[6] Fortunato Bellonzi, "Il linguaggio di Luca Signorelli" in Corrado Gizzi (ed.), *Signorelli e Dante* (Milan: Electa) 1991, p. 45
[7] Pietro Scarpellini, "L'Ispirazione dantesca negli affreschi del Signorelli a Orvieto" in Gizzi, p. 93
[8] Creighton Gilbert, p. 97
[9] Ibid. p. 98
[10] Paolucci, p. 53
[11] Bellonzi, p. 43
[12] Unlike those who follow doctrine, mystics embrace all life, good and bad, chaotic and calm, and recognize that only by embracing opposites can anything worthwhile be achieved. Evil to them is an essential part of life, no better expressed than in the title of William Blake's poem, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Blake's own obsession with Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* is well-known; he understood it and used it as a source for his own artwork.
[13] Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, "Unnoticed Self-Representations of Romanesque Sculptors in Twelfth-Century France" in I. Lavin (ed.), *World Art: Themes of Unity in Diversity*, vol. 2 (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press) 1986, pp. 487-92
[14] Louisa C. Matthew, "The Painter's Presence: Signatures in Venetian Renaissance Pictures", *Art Bulletin* 80, Dec. 1998, p. 640
[15] Joesph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press) 1993, p. 329
[16] Robert Brown, "Portraits of Il Papa: Francis Bacon's Popes" in *Francis Bacon Study for Portrait II*, Supplement to Christie's Auction Catalogue for 8th Feb. 2007 (London), p. 14
[17] Paolucci, p. 53
[18] See Abrahams, "Michelangelo's Art Through Michelangelo's Eyes" at www.everypainterpaintshimself.com

essay_pdfs/SignorelliSupport1197.pdf
[19] Gilbert, p. 100
[20] Gilbert, p. xviii
[21] Tom Henry and Laurence Kanter, *Luca Signorelli: The Complete Paintings* (New York: Rizzoli) 2002, p. 63