

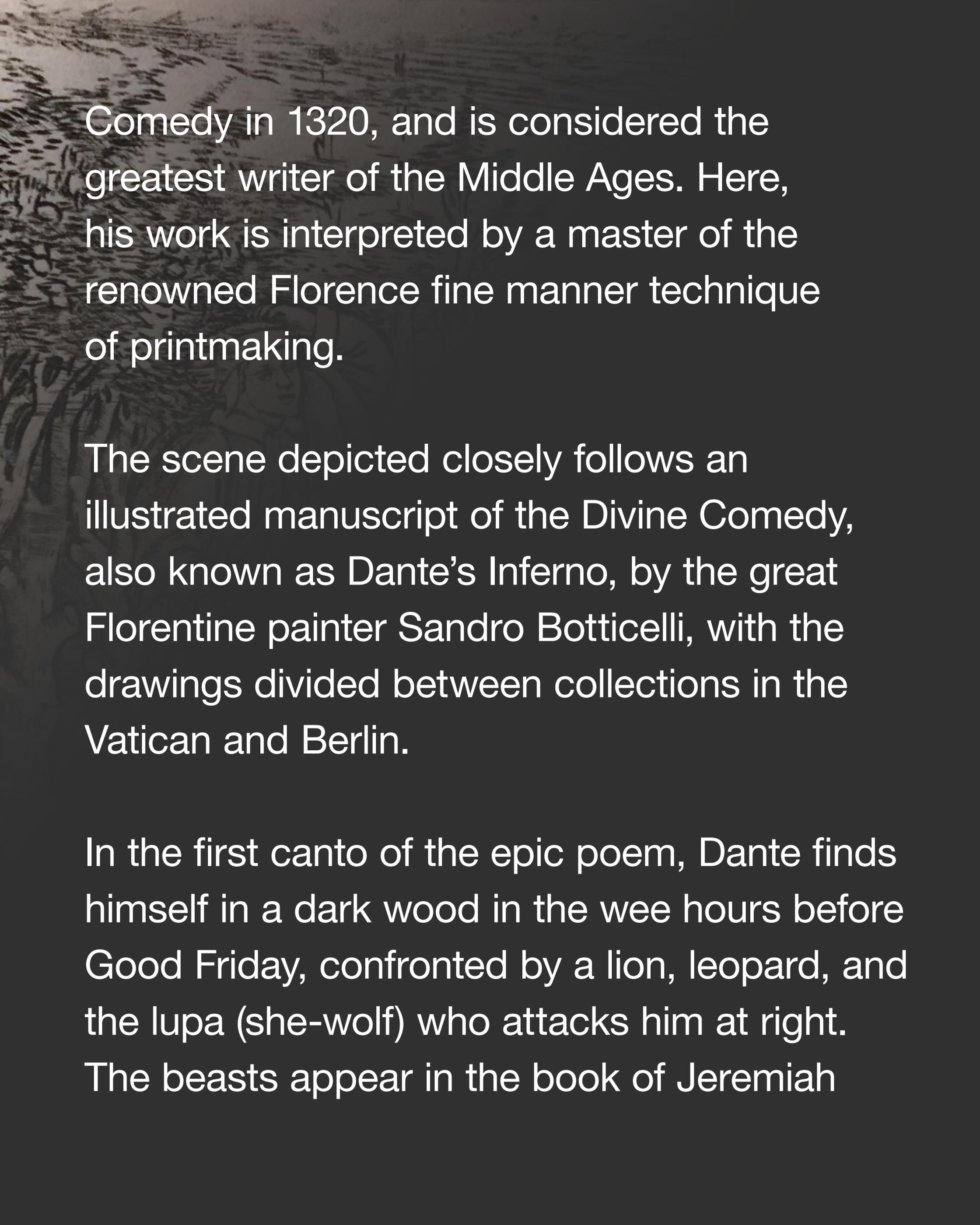
MASTERPIECE  
MINUTE



Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute with Doc Brown on Virtual SDMA. I'm your host, Michael Brown, Curator of European Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in every other Friday at 10am to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

Today's masterpiece is an enigmatic tour-de-force of Florentine Renaissance printmaking and a very timely subject as the world celebrates the life and work of Dante Alighieri in 2021 on the 800th anniversary of his death in 1321.

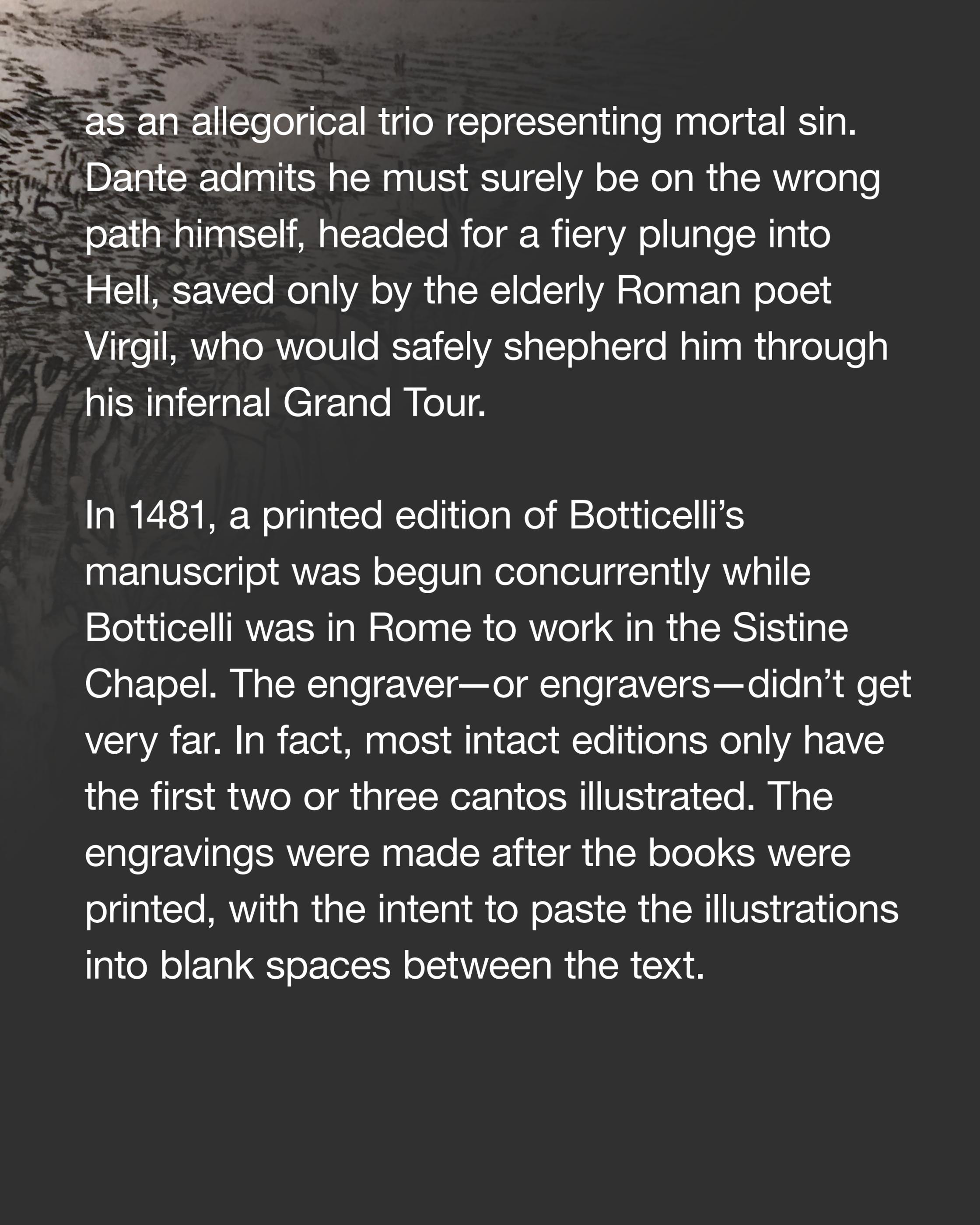
Il Sommo Poeta (or Poet Supreme) as Dante is known in Italy, who completed the Divine



Comedy in 1320, and is considered the greatest writer of the Middle Ages. Here, his work is interpreted by a master of the renowned Florence fine manner technique of printmaking.

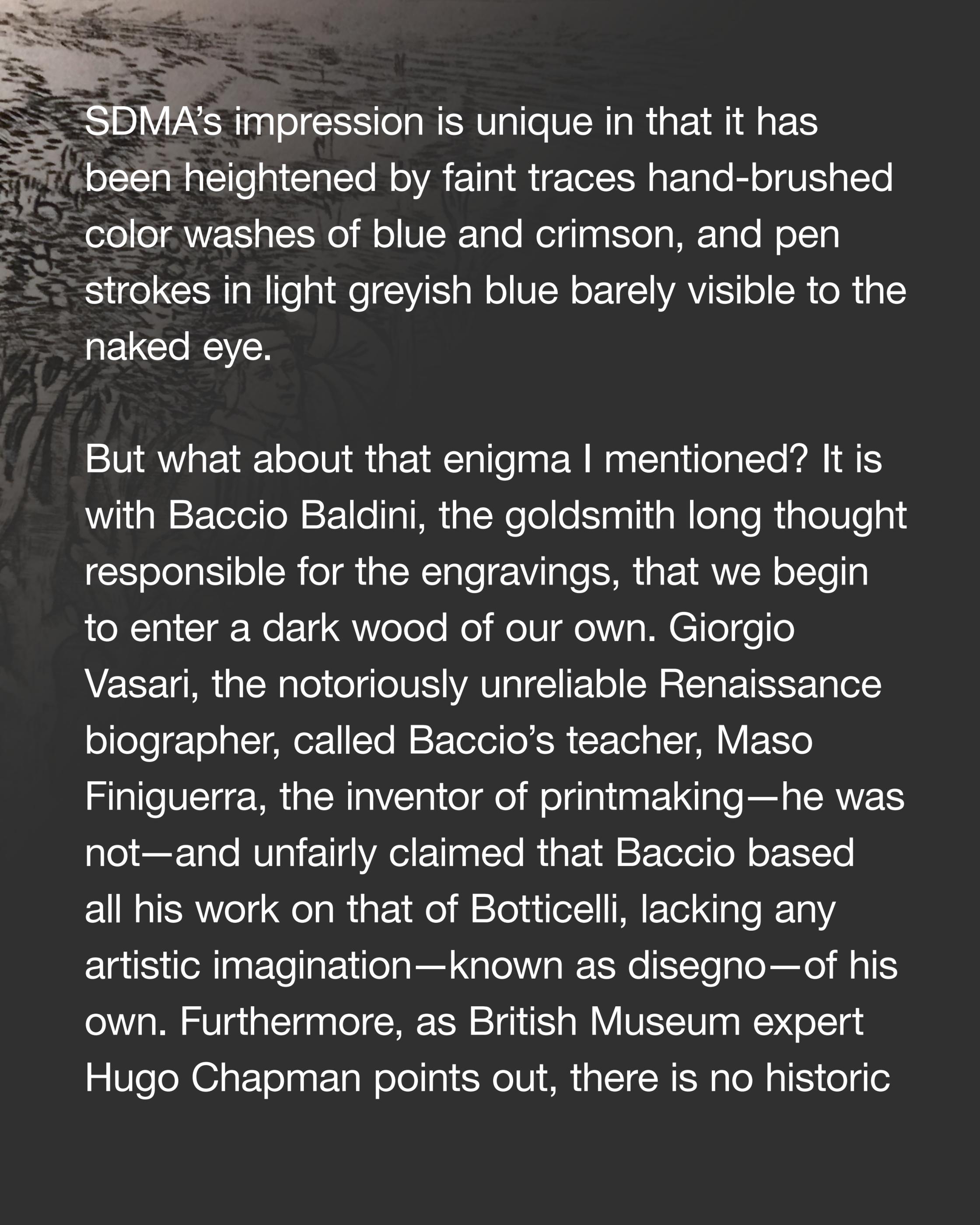
The scene depicted closely follows an illustrated manuscript of the Divine Comedy, also known as Dante's Inferno, by the great Florentine painter Sandro Botticelli, with the drawings divided between collections in the Vatican and Berlin.

In the first canto of the epic poem, Dante finds himself in a dark wood in the wee hours before Good Friday, confronted by a lion, leopard, and the lupa (she-wolf) who attacks him at right. The beasts appear in the book of Jeremiah



as an allegorical trio representing mortal sin. Dante admits he must surely be on the wrong path himself, headed for a fiery plunge into Hell, saved only by the elderly Roman poet Virgil, who would safely shepherd him through his infernal Grand Tour.

In 1481, a printed edition of Botticelli's manuscript was begun concurrently while Botticelli was in Rome to work in the Sistine Chapel. The engraver—or engravers—didn't get very far. In fact, most intact editions only have the first two or three cantos illustrated. The engravings were made after the books were printed, with the intent to paste the illustrations into blank spaces between the text.



SDMA's impression is unique in that it has been heightened by faint traces hand-brushed color washes of blue and crimson, and pen strokes in light greyish blue barely visible to the naked eye.

But what about that enigma I mentioned? It is with Baccio Baldini, the goldsmith long thought responsible for the engravings, that we begin to enter a dark wood of our own. Giorgio Vasari, the notoriously unreliable Renaissance biographer, called Baccio's teacher, Maso Finiguerra, the inventor of printmaking—he was not—and unfairly claimed that Baccio based all his work on that of Botticelli, lacking any artistic imagination—known as *disegno*—of his own. Furthermore, as British Museum expert Hugo Chapman points out, there is no historic

document that suggests Baccio ever made prints himself.

Whatever Baccio's involvement, the work showcases the genius of both Botticelli and Dante, bringing together two stars of the Renaissance literary and artistic worlds.

This has been Doc Brown with Masterpiece Minute. Thanks for joining us here on Virtual SDMA!

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