

Francesco Scaramuzza

Italian painter, illustrator and poet
(1803-1886)

Scaramuzza was born in Sissa, Parma, on 14 July 1803 to Nicolò and Marianna Benedetta Frondoni. From a very young age he demonstrated a marked aptitude for drawing, and was enrolled at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Parma, where he was a pupil of Antonio Pasini and Giovanni Tebaldi.

After winning various prizes, in 1826 he won a competition for a specialization school in Rome, where he created his first important works: a large canvas depicting *Silvia and Aminta and Saint John the Baptist in the desert* (preserved in the National Gallery of Parma).

Back in Parma in 1830, he painted frescoes and canvases in various churches in Parma and in the province. In 1836 he took part in the national exhibition in Milan, presenting a work representing the episode of Count Ugolino from Dante's *Inferno*. The work was greatly appreciated both by the public and by the critics, so much so as to induce him to try his hand at creating paintings on the entire *Divine Comedy*.

Between 1836 and 1842 he painted frescoes in the Sala Dante and in the reading room of the Palatine Library. On the ceiling of the reading room he painted *Prometheus stealing fire, protected by Minerva*.

In 1853, as the sixth centenary of Dante's birth approached, the dictator of the Parma provinces, Luigi Carlo Farini, contacted him to commission him to create works on the great poet. Scaramuzza accepted the proposal and undertook the work, but after a short time the project was stopped due to financial problems of the client. Convinced of the validity of the enterprise, however, he continued the work on his own account. The work, not yet fully completed, was exhibited for the first time in Parma in 1870, and was immediately judged a masterpiece.

In the same period the Frenchman Gustave Doré, who had become aware of Scaramuzza's project, also created and published his own Dantesque illustrations, which had great success, so much so that they overshadowed the one obtained by Scaramuzza.

Displeased by the success of his antagonist, at first he thought not to finish the work, but then continued with the work, which he finished in 1876. The illustration of the *Divine Comedy* is considered his most important and representative work. It consists of 243 canvases on cardboard divided as follows: 73 for Hell, 120 for Purgatory and 50 for Paradise.

He also dabbled in poetry. Influenced by Ludovico Ariosto, he composed a Sacred Poem of XVII Canti in octaves. He called himself a "poet by proxy" and claimed to have mediumistic powers and to be able to write his verses thanks to his paranormal powers.

He also wrote some theatrical dramas, which he said were "dictated" to him by Carlo Goldoni.

From 1860 to 1877 he was director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Parma. Many Parmesan painters trained at his pictorial school, including Cecrope Barilli, Ignazio Affanni, Giorgio Scherer and Cletofonte Preti.

He died in Parma on 20 October 1886, at the age of 83.

Translated from:

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