

VISUAL ART

# To Hell and back: the best European exhibitions to see

Dante's epic poem The Divine Comedy

Saturday Review

Rome, says Rachel Campbell-Johnston,  
who also picks the most enticing art  
shows to travel to this autumn





An anonymous demon from the Rome show  
THE MENIL COLLECTION, HOUSTON

---

Rachel Campbell-Johnston  
Saturday September 18 2021, 12.01am BST, The Times

---

Share



Save



**T**his month marks the 700th anniversary of the death of Dante Alighieri. Italy has been celebrating in as much style as can be mustered during a time of pandemic, with commemorative readings, bell-rings and digital shows. Plans have even been made to launch his poems — micro-inscribed on to sheets of a titanium and gold alloy — into space. And now, finally, with the easing of travel restrictions comes our opportunity to join the celebrations. Dust off your copy of *The Divine Comedy* and book a trip to Italy. “Dante and Shakespeare divide the

world between them,” TS Eliot declared. “There is no third.”

A highlight of this year of festivities will be the exhibition that opens next month at the Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome. The show, titled *Inferno* and bringing together more than 200 artworks (some incredibly famous, others rarely shown) from public and private collections across Europe, plunges its visitors into the cavernous vortex of that afterlife that Dante conjured in his 14th-century epic, but which has been illustrated, adapted and interpreted by visual artists ever since.

Go to Hell. Stare into the abyss with Sandro Botticelli as he maps the great spiralling cavern that sucks sinners down into its depthless maw. Plunge into the bowels of despair with Rodin, whose landmark *Gates of Hell* — a swarm of damned figures — trap an orgy of terror. (The Musée Rodin in Paris will be lending its scale plaster model of Rodin’s masterpiece for the first month of the show.) Abandon all hope with Hieronymus Bosch.



Pieter Huys' *The Inferno*, 1570  
MUSEO NACIONAL DEL PRADO. MADRID

Few writers have proved so fecund a source of artistic inspiration as Dante. Even those with only the most cursory acquaintance with the text can understand the allure. Dip into the poem and you will emerge with a mind that is squirming with pictures. Remember the punishment of those guilty of simony? Planted upside down to the waist in a hole, burning feet thrashing wildly in the air. And traitors to kindred and country? Trapped face downwards in a frozen lake, useless tears of regret icing their eyelids.

Even paradisaal bliss — the fiery spheres of the

angelic orders, the Mother of God in a descending circle of flames — can rouse the visual imagination. But, as John Milton made plain in *Paradise Lost* — its most vivid character, by far, is Satan — and as curators of the forthcoming Quirinale show clearly recognise, nothing is original except sin, and hellish torment (rather than paradisaical perfection) comes packed with unparalleled imaginative potential.

Little wonder that *The Divine Comedy* — and most particularly *Inferno* (the first of its three canticles) — was to prove so inspirational. Artists of the 14th and 15th centuries produced miniatures and illuminated manuscripts by the dozen. In Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* fresco, that part of the image in which an oar-wielding Charon batters the damned away from his barque is drawn directly from Dante's

descriptions.

Botticelli was the first to produce a cycle of images that, unspooling like some Renaissance comic strip, take viewers off on a spiritual mystery tour. But where he led, others followed, and the extremely fragile and so very rarely shown illustrations of the 16th-century mannerist Federico Zuccari were the focus of a digital exhibition staged online by the Uffizi this year.

Dante found comparatively few artistic followers during the 17th century. And for all that *The Divine Comedy's* popularity picked up in the 1800s, it was rather too unworldly for an era of scientific revolution and Enlightenment rationalism. But with the Romantics and the realisation that the world does not, after all, run like clockwork, a new fascination flourished and produced flamboyant blooms. Henry Fuseli, William Blake, the Nazarenes and the pre-Raphaelites found inspiration. Ingres and Delacroix produced Dante-themed works. The French illustrator Gustav Doré etched his signature illustrations.

Twentieth-century artists adapted *The Divine Comedy's* medieval world to their modernist vision. An entire section of the Quirinale show will be devoted to the various transliterations

of the experience of Hell of Earth: madness, alienation, war, extermination. Salvador Dalí saw the inferno not as a blazing furnace, but as a barren vastness in which the surrealistic psychologies of the mind were played out. Robert Rauschenberg riffed on it in drawings in which he offered his scathing interpretation of American culture. The politician and painter Renato Guttuso gave it a Marxist twist.

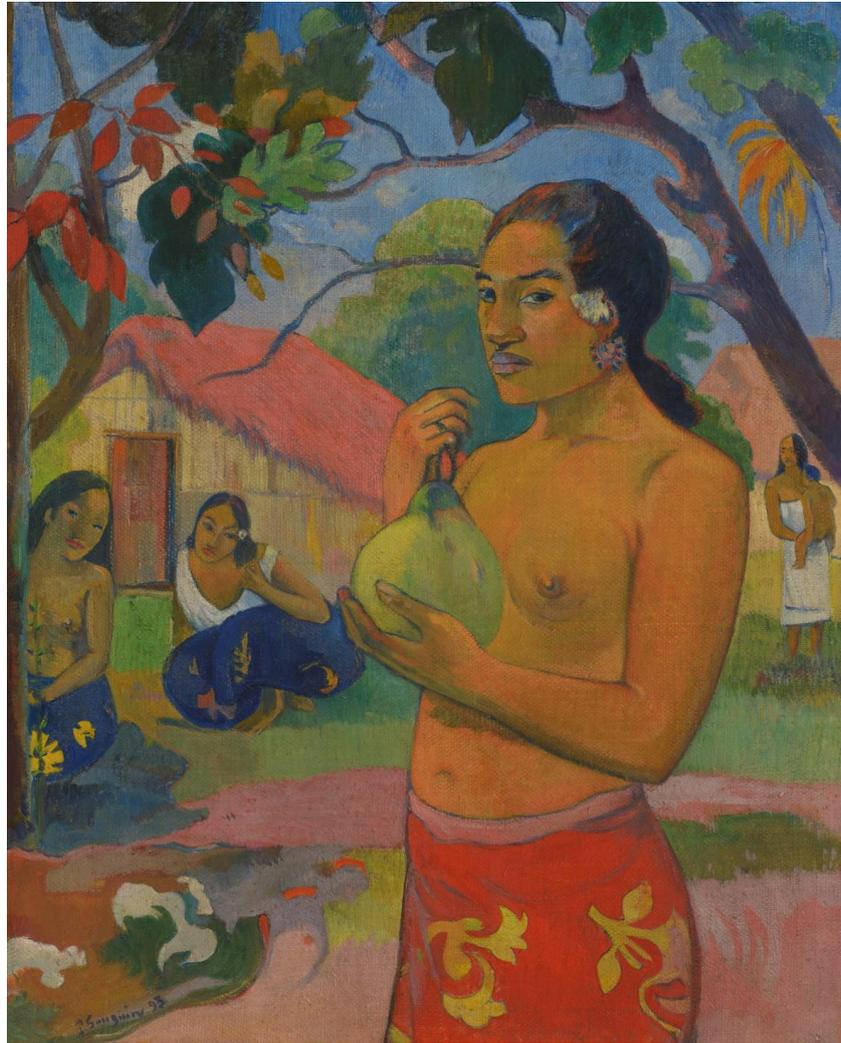
It is not just the graphic power of its images that lent this epic such a universal appeal. The world Dante presented was far more complex, intellectually sophisticated and morally coherent than that of his medieval peers. It has a philosophical subtlety matched only by a profound understanding of humanity. Dante, for instance, reserves a special suffering-free space in his *Inferno* for such people as Old Testament patriarchs and classical sages who knew nothing of Christianity's redemption for the simple reason that they predated Christ. They seem quite happy there. He describes the dead souls that are blown about by the winds that bluster just within Hell's gates. They

belong, he says, to the people who were neither good nor bad but who, having shunned responsibilities in their lifetime, having refused to shoulder their duties, are now refused passage to the underworld.

Dante does not need devils with pitchforks to prod us towards the furnace. Poetry, he discovers, will do just as well. Astray in the dark wood, he comes to the realisation that with death comes an end to our capacity for self-deception. To find our path we have to face our demons, to enter the darkest places. Only by doing this may we reach redemptive hope.

The Rome exhibition will come to its conclusion with visions of that salvation that was entrusted by Dante to his canticle's final verse: "Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars."

***Inferno* is at the Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, October 15 to January 9, 2022;**  
**[scuderiequirinale.it](https://www.scuderiequirinale.it)**



Gauguin's *Woman Holding a Fruit*  
MUSEE D'ETAT DE L'ERMITAGE

## The best exhibitions to see in Europe this autumn

From modernist masterpieces in Paris to Munch in Oslo and Magritte in Madrid, Rachel Campbell-Johnston picks the top shows to visit

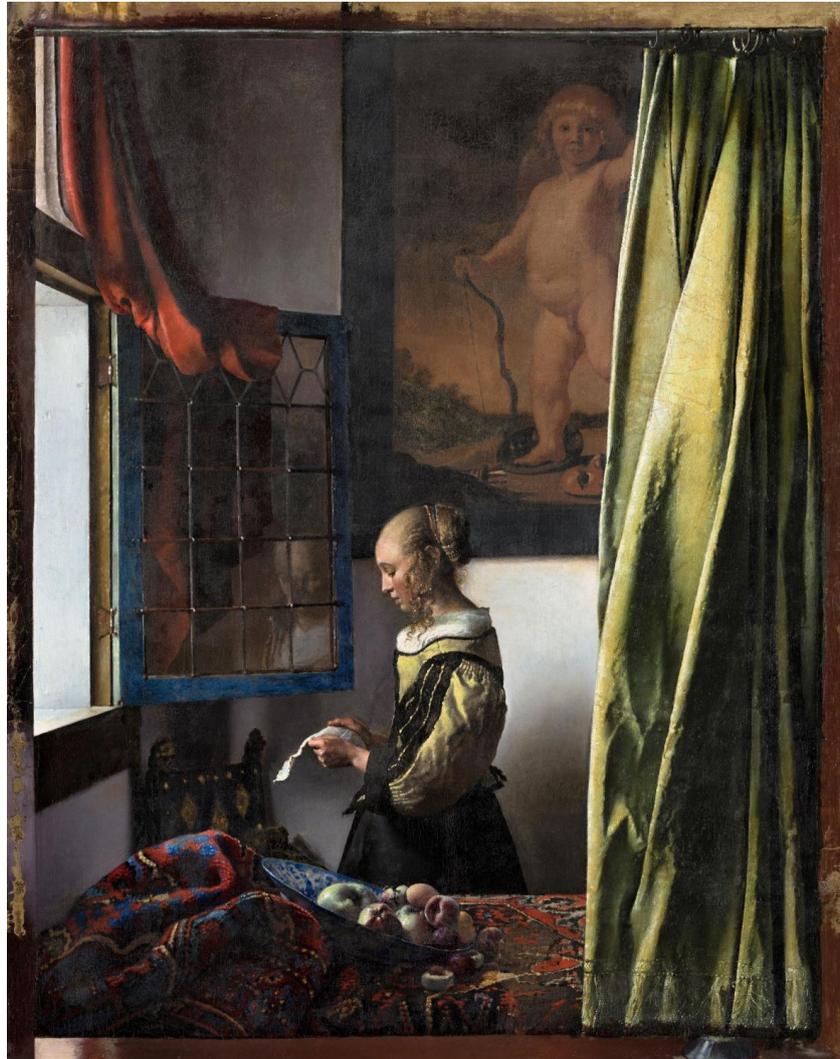
### France

#### **The Morozov Collection: Icons of Modern Art at the Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris**

In the late 19th century, two Muscovite brothers, heirs to a massive textile fortune,

began collecting. They started with Russian contemporary art, but, after a trip to the Paris Exposition in 1900, their interests expanded and before long they had built up a spectacular modernist collection incorporating masterworks by, among others, Manet, Monet, Rodin, Cézanne, Picasso and Van Gogh. The Morozovs' collection, disbanded in the wake of the Russian Revolution, has been reassembled for the first time in a century in a landmark show.

*Sept 22-Feb 22, 2022 ([fondationlouisvuitton.fr](http://fondationlouisvuitton.fr))*



Girl Reading a Letter at the Open Window by Johannes Vermeer, c1657-59

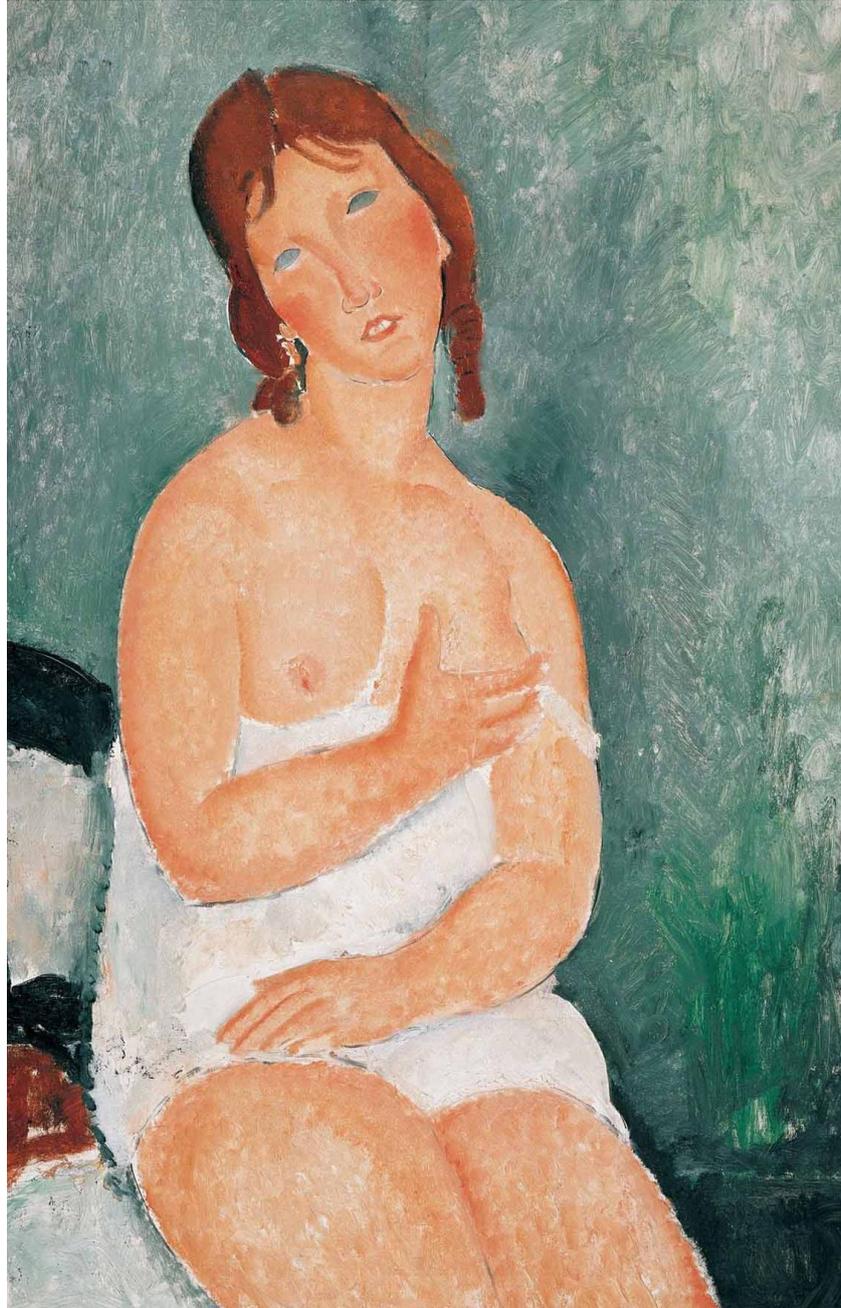
## Germany

### **Johannes Vermeer: On Reflection at Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden**

The Gemäldegalerie in Dresden possesses two Vermeer paintings. One is his *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* in which, after a recent cleaning, conservators discovered an image of cupid on the back wall and a wineglass. Now the museum pulls off another bit of revelatory magic. Prising a further eight

Vermeers from the clutches of other museums, it puts on a blockbuster where these serene images may be admired in the context of the works of other Dutch Golden Age masters.

To Jan 2, 2022 ([gmaeldegalerie.skd.museum](http://gmaeldegalerie.skd.museum))



Female Semi Nude by Amedeo Modigliani, 1918  
THE ALBERTINA MUSEUM, VIENNA

## Austria

## **Modigliani: The Primitivist Revolution at the Albertina, Vienna**

To commemorate last year's centenary of Amedeo Modigliani's death, the Albertina brings us a harem of his languorous, sloe-eyed seductresses. However, bringing together more than 130 works, this show will amount to more than just a parade of erotic beauties lounging around in elegant curvilinear poses. Hanging [Modigliani's](#) paintings alongside those of his Parisian peers (Pablo Picasso, Constantin Brancusi and André Derain among them) as well as objects from prehistoric and non-European world cultures, it looks at the ways in which this outsider bohemian borrowed, adapted and innovated to create his unique style.

*To Jan 9, 2022 ([albertina.at](http://albertina.at))*



The Munch Museum, Oslo  
© MUNCHMUSEET

## Norway

### **The Munch Museum, Oslo**

The icon of angst finds a new home this autumn as, after many delays, the new Munch Museum prepares to throw open its doors. We all know [Edvard Munch](#)'s *The Scream*. It is about the most celebrated image to have crossed over from the world of high art into popular culture. Yet there is far more to the famously neurotic Norwegian, who analysed his unhappiness with such unsparing persistence, as the visitor will discover perusing works that range from massive 50 sq m paintings to tiny autobiographical prints.

*From Oct 22 ([munchmuseet.no](http://munchmuseet.no))*



Piero di Cosimo's Portraits of Giuliano and Francesco Giamberti da Sangallo is in Amsterdam

KONINKLIJK KABINET VAN SCHILDERIJEN MAURITSHUIS

## Netherlands

### **Remember Me: Portraits from Dürer to Sofonisba at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam**

How would you like to be remembered? The Rijksmuseum's flagship autumn show gathers 100 Renaissance portraits from galleries across the world. Their subjects range from a Holy Roman Emperor to an unknown man from Africa. What they all speak of is our fundamental human hope that our existences will not pass unrecorded. As you gaze at images by, among others, Holbein, Dürer, Memling, Gossart and Veronese, you will find yourself haunted by a sense of longing and loss.

*Oct 1-Jan 16, 2022 ([rijksmuseum.nl](https://www.rijksmuseum.nl))*



The Railway Crossing (Sketch) by Fernand Léger, 1919

© 2018 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS

## Belgium

### **Europalia: Tracks to Modernity at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels**

Here's one for the trainspotter. Take an artistic journey through the history of the train as it was painted by artists from Monet to Léger, Mondrian to Magritte. For a time the steam train was seen as the ultimate symbol of modernism. It transformed society, disrupting old concepts of time and space. It even, as the surrealists will show, crept into our psyche. But no doubt the trainspotter already knows that.

*Oct 15-Feb 13, 2022 ([fine-arts-museum.be](https://www.fine-arts-museum.be))*



Magritte's Delusions of Grandeur  
MUSEO NACIONAL DE ESCULTURA

## Spain

### **The Magritte Machine at the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, Madrid**

René Magritte declared that he had painted more than 1,000 pictures but had come up with no more than 100 motifs. Yet his surreal images of apples and pipes, men in bowler hats, cloudy skies and window frames, have seeped into our cultural subconscious. Take your teenagers along. Let them see the original of that poster

on the student bedsit wall. However, don't expect explanations. "There are no answers here. Only questions," Magritte said.

To Jan 30, 2022 ([museothyssen.org](https://museothyssen.org))



Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto  
DR/SERRALVES

## Portugal

### **Serralves em Luz at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto**

The picturesque city of Porto has shot to the top of the tourist wishlist. Take a minibreak and be illuminated. The award-winning artist Nuno Maya has enveloped the extensive parklands of the Museo Serralves with a constantly shifting display of light and colour. As you loop round the 3km route of this immersive installation you will be transported into a dreamlike realm where seasons shift under circling planets, and rainbows carve

through the atmosphere.

To Oct 17 ([serralves.pt](http://serralves.pt))



Kolokotronis is heading to Nemea by Nestoras Varveris, 1908  
E. KOUTLIDIS FOUNDATION COLLECTION

## Greece

### **Revolution '21 at The National Gallery- Alexandros Soutsos Museum, Athens**

In the year that Greece celebrates the 200th anniversary of its independence, the National Gallery-Alexandros Soutsos Museum reopens after an almost decade-long expansion and renovation that has more than doubled its size with a wonderfully historic — not to mention histrionic — show. Following the course of the Greek revolution of 1821 across land and sea, it invites visitors to follow its painterly drama of extravagant costumes and moustachioed soldiers, prancing steeds and waving sabres towards national liberation.

To July 2022 ([nationalgallery.gr](http://nationalgallery.gr))

Share



Save



## Related articles



LOOKING AHEAD

### The autumn arts guide: 50 to see, from Succession to Simon Rattle, Bond to Bill Bailey

By Ed Potton and Kevin Maher **The Many Saints of Newark**

Fourteen years after *The Sopranos* was whacked comes the prequel movie...

August 26 2021, 5.00pm BST

## Comments (1)

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

**fernando vaz**



Add to the conversation...

Sort by **Recommended** ▾



**SARAH** • 3 HOURS AGO

## Hmmm...someone in the Johnson family loves Europe

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend](#)

 OpenWeb

[Feedback](#)

[^ BACK TO TOP](#)



### GET IN TOUCH

[About us](#)

[Help](#)

[The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints](#)

[Classified advertising](#)

[The Times corrections](#)

[Careers](#)

[Contact us](#)

[The Times Editorial](#)

[Place an announcer](#)

[Display advertising](#)

[The Sunday Times](#)

### MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

[The Times e-paper](#)

[Times Currency Services](#)

[Times Print Gallery](#)

[Times Crossword Club](#)

[Times+](#)

[Times Expert Traveller](#)

[Schools Guide](#)

[Best Places to Live](#)

[Sportswomen of the Year Awards](#)

[Podcasts](#)

---

© Times Newspapers Limited 2021.

Registered in England No. 894646.

Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

[Privacy & cookie policy](#)

[Licensing](#)

[Cookie settings](#)

[Site map](#)

[Topics](#)

[Commissioning terms](#)

[Terms and conditions](#)