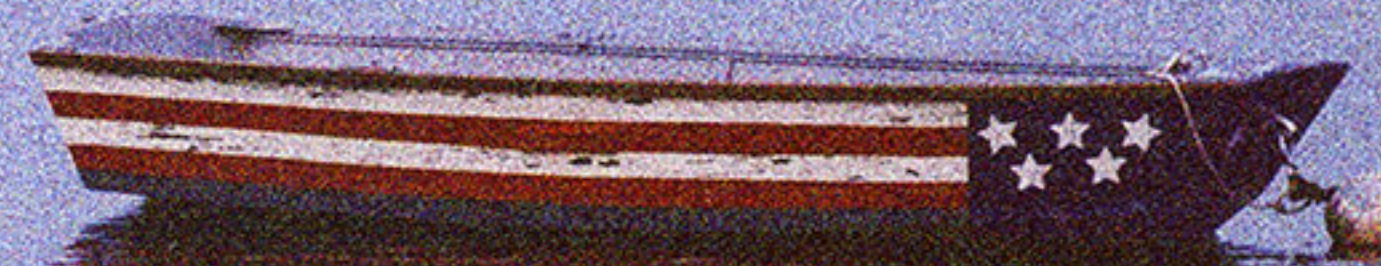


Weston

THE WESTON MAGAZINE GROUP

Where Rural Blends With Sophistication in Fairfield County, CT



OUR 50TH ISSUE:

FABULOUS FIRENZE WITH DANTE AND DAN BROWN

A.E. HOTCHNER: OJ IN THE MORNING, G&T AT NIGHT

BORN TO EXPLORE

CAN I HAVE A MILLION DOLLARS?

YOUR GUIDE TO INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

ISSUE #50
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OPPOSITE: DANTE IS DEPICTED IN THIS LAST JUDGEMENT FRESCO. IT WASN'T UNTIL 1840 THAT A RESTORER FINALLY DISCOVERED THE LONG SEARCHED FOR PORTRAIT OF DANTE KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN PAINTED BY GIOTTO AND HIS WORKSHOP 15 YEARS AFTER DANTE'S DEATH. GIOTTO AND DANTE WERE FRIENDS IN LIFE AND STAND SIDE BY SIDE IN HEAVEN FOR ETERNITY. NOW PARTIALLY RESTORED, IT ADORNS THE ST. MARY MAGDALENE CHAPEL ON THE SECOND FLOOR IN THE BARGELLO MUSEUM.

Firenze in the Footsteps of Dante... and Dan Brown

When I was 12 years old (in 1965), my parents made their first trip to Europe. Among the souvenirs they brought home was a poster from Florence. They had been there during celebrations commemorating 700 years since the birth of Dante Alighieri and the poster they gave me depicted an image of the great poet reputed to have been painted by Dante's friend, the artist Giotto. That poster has been with me all my life, and today it has a prominent place in our Weston home.

I have been to Florence a number of times in the intervening 48 years. But together with my wife Julie, and our son David, we made a special trip there this spring specifically to look at what remains of the city that Dante knew and loved, and to learn about some of the mysteries and intrigues in Florentine history in order to get prepared for the publication of Dan Brown's much-awaited new novel, *Inferno* (now on the bestseller list).

Among the high points of our spring in Florence was a visit to the Bargello museum, where we found ourselves entranced by the huge fresco that, in one corner, shows Dante as a character among the virtuous people arriving in Heaven. My childhood poster is based on that image. Experts today are divided on whether it was actually painted by Giotto or by other artists in his workshop. But the power of Dante's visage—contemplating all he has learned about the human condition on his imagined voyage to the afterlife that inspired the *Divine Comedy*—remains gripping and profound. It was a deeply emotional experience, communing not only with my own youth, but with all of the philosophy, history, politics, and art I have learned about since.

Over the last decade, together with my partner Arne de Keijzer, I have written a series of guidebooks to Dan Brown's novels, beginning with our *Secrets of the Code*, which itself became a *New York Times* bestseller by exploring the themes of Dan Brown's mega-selling *The Da Vinci Code*. Now we are embarked on a new book (*Secrets of Inferno*) to carry on the conversation about the ideas sparked by Dan Brown's latest.

The action of Dan Brown's *Inferno* (which appropriates its name from Dante's *Inferno*, the first book of the *Divine Comedy*—or, as the Italians call it, the *Commedia*), takes place in Florence, Venice, and Istanbul, as well as New York and a few other locales. But the first two-thirds of the book are rooted in Florence, especially in venues that were known to Dante before he went into exile in 1302, never to return again to his native Florence.

Florence is, of course, one of Europe's most beloved tourist destinations. There is so much history and art to see and learn it can be truly overwhelming. Indeed, the French writer Stendhal was so overcome with the city's dazzling beauty that he started having heart palpitations. "Stendhal Syndrome" is a known medical problem, based on tourists becoming over stimulated by the artistic bounty of this fabled city.

For us, it was a new approach to Florence to zero in on Dante and

by Dan Burstein
Photos by Julie O'Connor



CITY MAP OF FLORENCE. "THE PIANTA DELLA CATENA" IS THE FIRST KNOWN EXAMPLE IN THE HISTORY OF CARTOGRAPHY OF A COMPLETE REPRESENTATION OF A CITY—IN THIS CASE OF FLORENCE c.1490 BY THE FLORENTINE MINIATURE PAINTER AND ENGRAVER FRANCESCO ROSSELLI. FRANCESCO'S HALF-BROTHER COSIMO WAS ALSO AN ARTIST WHO TOOK PART IN THE FIRST DECORATION OF THE SISTINE CHAPEL IN THE 1480S.

to contemplate what aspects Dan Brown would find most interesting for his new novel. Here is a small sampling of the highlights from our explorations earlier this year.

Dante's "Neighborhood"

We are standing in front of the Badia, a 10th century abbey that was one of the city's most prominent landmarks in Dante's time. Dante himself grew up and lived just a few blocks from here. The tall spire of the Badia appears in the Prologue to Dan Brown's *Inferno*. A shadowy character who has phrases from Dante running through his mind ascends the spire and prepares to jump to his death to keep those chasing him from finding out his secret. Back in reality, it was in the Badia that the great 14th century writer, Boccaccio (author of the *Decameron*), read Dante's *Commedia* out loud, as



LEFT TO RIGHT: THE GROTTA IN THE BOBOLI GARDENS FIGURES IN THE PLOT OF "INFERNO" AS THE MAIN CHARACTERS ARE BEING CHASED; IN THE PIAZZA OUTSIDE THE "CASA DE DANTE," THE ACTOR ALESSIO CINOTTI (STAGE NAME FARFARELLO), COMES FREQUENTLY TO PERFORM ALL 14,233 LINES OF THE "THE DIVINE COMEDY" FROM MEMORY.

part of his efforts to rehabilitate Dante 50 years after his death, and to claim him as the great poet-philosopher-citizen of Florence that he was. It was Boccaccio who dubbed Dante's *Commedia* "Divine," a sobriquet that has stayed in the book's title for the last seven centuries. Dante, once exiled by Florence, accused of trumped up crimes, and threatened with being burnt at the stake if he ever returned, is now the most cherished figure in its history.

It is believed that Dante lived a few blocks away from the Badia. We are walking these millennium-old streets in the company of Alexandra Lawrence, an American living in Florence. She is the editor-at-large of *The Florentine*, the go-to source for local English language information. (*The Florentine* is referenced specifically in Dan Brown's *Inferno*). Alexandra gives walking tours relevant to the city's art, history, and culture. She loves to do Dante tours and has been doing them for years. Undoubtedly, she will be doing many more of them as the "Dan Brown tourists" begin to flock to Florence to see the locales of *Inferno*, just as they did to Rome for *Angels & Demons* and to Paris in the wake of *The Da Vinci Code*.

Alexandra leads us to what is called the Casa di Dante ("Dante's House"), which is a museum about Dante and medieval Florence. As we approach, a Dante impersonator in 13th century regalia is reciting passages from *The Divine Comedy*.

"Bear in mind that almost everything we think we know about Dante's life is basically speculation," Alexandra warns. This spot may not be the location of Dante's actual house. Researchers in the early 20th century took their best guess at where Dante's house would have been located, and this tall tower-style house was established here as a center to teach about Dante.

Inside, the exhibits and artifacts remind me that, deeply humanistic as Dante's literary work is, he lived a century before the Renaissance. His life experience is in the Middle Ages—a generally dark time of Crusades, as well as bloody wars among the Italian city states, and frequent violent power struggles between those pledged to the Pope and those to the Holy Roman Emperor. The brilliance of Dante's work was a factor that helped spark the Renaissance, but he himself had to endure the pain and disappointments that went with being a Renaissance humanist in a medieval world.

One of the best displays in the museum is a detailed presentation of the Battle of Campaldino in which Dante fought on the side of the faction known as the Guelphs against the Ghibellines. These civil wars were the dominant battles wreaking havoc throughout northern Italy in the 13th century. But they are very hard to understand from the distance of the 21st century. The museum displays help give me meaningful context to this internecine fight-

WHEN IT WAS DEDICATED IN 1412, THE BASILICA OF OUR LADY OF THE FLOWER OR SANTA MARIA DEL FIORE—BETTER KNOWN AS THE DUOMO—BECAME, AND STILL REMAINS TODAY, THE MAIN CHURCH OF FLORENCE. MUCH OF THE ORNATE WORK ON THE FAÇADE IS FROM THE 19TH CENTURY AND IS COMPLETELY COVERED WITH WHITE, GREEN AND PINK TUSCAN MARBLE. THE BANDS OF POLYCHROME STAND IN FOR THE COLOR CODED THEMES IN DANTE'S "DIVINE COMEDY" FROM CARRARA (WHITE) FOR FAITH, FROM PRATO (GREEN) REPRESENTING HOPE, AND FROM SIENA (RED) FOR LOVE.

powerful Folco Portinari, becomes the great—and unconsummated—love of Dante's life. According to Dante's notes, poems, and other historical sources, Dante and Beatrice actually met just two and possibly three times in life (the first time as eight- and nine-year-old children).

Although Dante was obsessed with Beatrice, she married a prominent banker in 1287, and then died at only 24 in 1290. Beatrice (properly pronounced by Italians as "Bay-A-Tree-Chay," usually while letting her name roll off their tongues slowly with a loving and lofty look in their eyes) was immortalized by Dante as his spiritual guide in the *Divine Comedy*. It is the great Roman poet Virgil who is Dante's guide to the Inferno, but it is Beatrice, the paragon of beauty and grace, who takes him through Paradiso.

We stop in for a brief visit at the Chiesa di Santa Margherita dei Cerchi, more popularly known as the "Church of Dante," where it is presumed that Dante and Beatrice saw each other, first as children, and later as young adults. Some say Beatrice is buried here, and the Church is treated as a kind of shrine to her. Historians dispute the myth that Beatrice is buried in this church. But that does not stop dozens of people from leaving letters every day to Beatrice in a basket near her "tomb." Dan Brown visited the church while writing *Inferno* and left a letter beseeching Beatrice for inspiration in writing his book. He also sets a scene here.



Palazzo Vecchio

"I pass behind the palazzo with its crenellated tower and one-handed clock... snaking through the early morning vendors in Piazza di San Firenze with their hoarse voices smelling of lampredotto and roasted olives..."

Dan Brown, *Inferno*

The "palazzo with its crenellated tower and one-handed clock" in the above quote is the Palazzo Vecchio, which is Florence's town hall. The building's construction began during Dante's youth. He would not have recognized the current edifice, most of which was constructed long after his death. But when Duke Cosimo I de' Medici moved his operations here in 1540, it became the seat of power from which the Medici family—bankers to Europe, political wizards of Florence, patrons of Renaissance artists including Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci—would invent modern capitalism and control Florence for the next century. Today, in addition to housing the Town Hall, the Palazzo Vecchio is open to the public as a museum.

Michelangelo's famous 17-foot tall statue of David stood outside the Palazzo for almost 400 years, from the time he sculpted it to 1873, when it was moved indoors to the Accademia Gallery in another part of town. But there is a replica of David today, standing guard at the front of the Palazzo, along with several other giant marble statues of Renaissance origins.

A good portion of the action in Brown's *Inferno* is set in the labyrinthine spaces of the Palazzo Vecchio. For example, Dante's death mask is on display here, and it becomes one of two McGuffins central to Dan Brown's plot. For 65 pages, Brown's characters, Robert Langdon and Sienna Brooks, are hunting for clues or being pursued by their adversaries in various rooms, secret passageways, and attics of the Palazzo.

There is a daily "Secret Passageways" tour of the Palazzo. Dan Brown took it and he milks it for all it is worth in *Inferno*. The Studiolo is one of the rooms you can see on the Secret Passageways tour. It is referenced briefly by Brown, although personally, I could have spent all day there and in its even smaller sister chamber, the Tesoretto room. Here, the Medici family kept valuable, mysterious and magical objects they had collected from the four corners of the world (and secret document files as well). These rooms were designed by the great Renaissance painter and architect, Giorgio Vasari, at the direction of Francesco I, the alchemist in the Medici family. Almost every inch of the walls and ceilings of the Studiolo is covered by paintings, many of which contain alchemical symbols, codes, and clues in its imagery. Most of the paintings, in turn, are actually cabinet doors, which once concealed secret objects of magical and alchemical significance.

The Studiolo is just off Palazzo Vecchio's main hall, the Salone dei Cinquecento or "Salon of the 500." Vasari presided over the creation of this rehabbed version of one of the most magnificent—and theatrical—spaces in Italy. Since this room was used by the Medicis to convene important meetings and hold major celebrations, Vasari decorated it with massive paintings depicting victorious moments in Florentine and Medici military history. Fifty-foot high tableaux of battles rise up to meet a ceiling completely covered in additional scenes of the glories of Florence.

Hidden in the vast scale of these paintings are tiny white letters one inch high on a green flag carried by a soldier. You can barely discern it with the naked eye. But if you know what to look for, you can probably make out the words CERCA TROVA ("seek and you shall find"). This turns out to be the oft-repeated watchword of *Inferno*. And the paintings in the Salon of the 500 play a key role in the plot.

Great hijinks in *Inferno* take place in and above the Salone dei Cinquecento, and in the other secret rooms and passageways of the Palazzo Vecchio, like



PONTE SANTA TRINITA (ITALIAN FOR HOLY TRINITY BRIDGE) IS NAMED FOR THE NEARBY CHURCH. THE DESIGN FOR THIS, THE OLDEST ELLIPTIC ARCH BRIDGE IN THE WORLD, IS SAID TO BE BY MICHELANGELO. THE FIRST MENTION OF THE BRIDGE (THEN BUILT IN WOOD) DATES FROM 1218. BEYOND THIS YOU CAN SEE THE PONTE ALLA CARRAIA.

the Duke of Athens stairway. The central ceiling panel by Vasari depicting the "Apotheosis of Cosimo I" comes into play. So too does the spectacular map room on the upper floor of the palazzo. I was expecting Brown to do more with the giant globe in the center of the map room. In the 16th century, this was the world's largest globe, and Vasari had designed it to have motion and be used dramatically to show the earth's movements and the "cosmological" interests of Cosimo. But Brown needs to keep his characters constantly moving. The secret passageway concealed by a map of Armenia is used as an exit strategy and Robert Langdon and Sienna Brooks are off to the next part of their adventure.

The Duomo, the Baptistery, and the Ponte Vecchio

Many of Florence's top tourist attractions figure in *Inferno*. The Duomo, which was under construction in Dante's time, gets a cameo appearance. Immediately adjacent to the Duomo, the Baptistery, where Dante himself was baptized, is the venue for several important plot developments. Brown reminds us that Ghiberti's famous carved bronze doors for the Baptistery have been traded out for replicas, but never mind. They are still worth a good long look at Ghiberti's masterful design.

The Ponte Vecchio, a 10th century bridge over the Arno, which is today dotted with gold and jewelry stores and crammed full of tourists at all hours, comes in for some of the action in *Inferno* and a few history lessons from Brown.

IT IS OUR LAST DAWN IN FLORENCE. WE ARE GAZING OUT AT THE ARNO FROM our hotel, soaking in our last looks at the Ponte Vecchio and the Florentine "skyline"—the Duomo, the Campanile, and the clock tower of the Palazzo Vecchio. A dragon boat from a local rowing club skims the water and speeds by. After almost a week in Florence, Julie and I are experiencing a mild case of Stendhal Syndrome. So much beauty, so much art, so much we have seen... and yet so much still to be seen. *

Dan Burstein and Julie O'Connor live in Weston, CT. Dan is a venture capitalist and the author of 14 books. With his Weston-based partner, Arne de Keijzer, he wrote Secrets of the Code, the world's bestselling guidebook to The Da Vinci Code, a decade ago. The "Secrets Team" is currently at work on Secrets of Inferno, a guidebook to Dan Brown's latest novel.

Julie is an award-winning photographer. She created the first non-Western door poster with "Doors of Tibet" in 2003, which became the basis for her interest in doing her book, Doors of Weston: 300 Years of Passageways in a Connecticut Town, published in partnership with the Weston Historical Society.