

My senior honors thesis began with a question about seeing. How do four artists across two centuries look at the same poem and find something entirely different in it? To answer that question, I needed not just books but objects: the kind of primary materials that ask you to slow down, that resist the speed of digital research, that insist on being read with attention. I needed a library with the depth and range to support an argument that moved between medieval Italy, Romantic London, nineteenth-century Paris, fin-de-siècle Venice, and postwar Surrealist Spain. The Hesburgh Libraries provided that, repeatedly and generously, in ways I could not have anticipated when I began.

The foundation of my research was the Zahm Dante Collection in Rare Books and Special Collections, one of the foremost Dante collections in North America. Purchased largely by John A. Zahm, C.S.C., in 1902 from the Italian Dantophile Giulio Acquaticci, the collection totals over 3,500 volumes and includes eight incunabula alongside nearly every edition of the *Commedia* published in the sixteenth century. Hesburgh holds a nearly complete sequence of the earliest printed editions of the *Divine Comedy*, including the editions of 1477, 1481, 1484, 1487, 1491, 1493, and 1497. Encountering this sequence gave my argument something no database could supply: a material understanding of how Dante's text was first made visible, how illustration and typography shaped the reader's encounter with Hell long before Blake or Doré ever picked up a brush or an engraving tool. The woodcuts of the earliest printed editions are not decorative. They are arguments about how Hell should look, and reading them alongside the nineteenth- and twentieth-century illustrated editions that my thesis examines made the visual transformation I was tracing feel concrete and tangible in a way that purely textual research could not have achieved.

The presence of a dedicated curator for the collection, Ruben Celani, who serves as curator of the Zahm-Devers Dante collection and subject librarian for Italian Studies, meant that navigating 3,500 volumes was not a matter of searching in the dark. The curatorial expertise housed within Special Collections is itself one of Hesburgh's most underappreciated resources, and it gave my initial archival research a clarity and direction it would otherwise have lacked.

The Zahm Collection's holdings in sixteenth-century editions also proved essential to my historical overview chapter. Special Collections holds rich holdings in Renaissance editions of Dante, Petrarch, and

Boccaccio, as well as a broad range of early Italian printed books. For a thesis arguing that each era remakes Dante's visual world in its own image, having access to the physical evidence of that process across five centuries was irreplaceable. The Zahm Collection's nineteenth- and twentieth-century holdings extended this further, giving me access to period commentaries, illustrated critical editions, and ephemeral materials that documented Dante's cultural reach across the century in which my four artists were working.

Special Collections also holds an extensive collection of medieval manuscript facsimiles, covering most aspects of written culture in the Middle Ages, including works by Virgil, Chaucer, Dante, and Boccaccio, in formats ranging from papyrus and scrolls to charters and codices. These facsimiles were significant for my introductory chapter on the medieval visual tradition from which Dante emerged. Examining facsimiles of manuscript illuminations gave me a firsthand sense of the iconographic conventions, spatial organization, and relationship between text and image that defined the pre-print tradition: the same tradition that Dante's poem both inherited and transformed.

For Alberto Martini, whose fin-de-siècle Symbolist illustrations are among the least studied of the four bodies of work my thesis examines, the general Hesburgh stacks proved indispensable. Through the ND Catalog I located *La Divina commedia illustrata da Alberto Martini*, published by Mondadori Arte in 2009 and curated by the Pinacoteca Alberto Martini in Oderzo, with a critical essay by Vittorio Sgarbi (PQ 4302 .G04 2009). The volume is an oversize edition, and its scale matters: Martini's nervous, erratic linework, his use of compressed space and suspended figures, his refusal of any stable pictorial ground are qualities that only become fully legible when seen at something approaching the dimensions of the originals. Finding this volume in the Hesburgh stacks was itself a small discovery, a reminder that the library's depth in Italian literature extends well beyond its celebrated rare holdings.

The library's digital resources were equally central throughout, and in ways that directly shaped the digital humanities component of my thesis. My project includes an interactive [website](#) that juxtaposes Dante's text with selected visual interpretations from the four artists, and the visual infrastructure for that work depended heavily on Hesburgh's image resources. JSTOR Image Search, which integrates the former

Artstor collection, provided access to a searchable database of over two million rights-cleared images covering architecture, painting, sculpture, and photography across all time periods and cultures. For a thesis built around visual analysis, the ability to locate, compare, and download high-resolution images of the artworks I was discussing was not supplementary: it was fundamental. Working with reproductions of Blake's watercolors, Doré's engravings, Martini's ink drawings, and Dalí's watercolors at sufficient quality to support close formal analysis required a resource of exactly this kind, and JSTOR Image Search provided it.

The Marble platform, a collaboration between the Hesburgh Libraries and the Raclin Murphy Museum of Art, further extended this capacity. Marble facilitates cross-institutional browsing of materials from the Museum of Art, Rare Books and Special Collections, and the University Archives in a single interface, linking physical collections to digital representations in ways that directly supported my comparative method. Being able to move between a digitized Special Collections item and a museum work within the same platform reinforced the kind of visual thinking that my thesis required. It also inspired the organizational logic of my own digital project, which similarly aims to make Dante's text and its visual interpretations available in juxtaposition rather than in isolation.

The MLA International Bibliography served as my primary tool for locating scholarly literature across four national traditions and two centuries, and its cross-disciplinary reach allowed me to move fluidly between art history, medieval studies, literary criticism, and reception history. JSTOR provided access to journal articles essential for the comparative chapters of my thesis. OneSearch served as the connective tissue of the entire research process, tracing a source first encountered in a footnote through to a physical book on a Hesburgh shelf or a digital article delivered within seconds. Where the library's own holdings fell short, the Interlibrary Loan service extended my reach without interruption. Several sources central to my bibliography, including Philippe Kaenel's study of Doré's professional context and Alexander Gilchrist's nineteenth-century life of Blake, arrived through ILL within days.

What I learned through this process is that library resources do not merely support an argument: at their best, they change one. The Zahm Collection's early printed editions revised my understanding of Dante's

visual tradition from its origins. The medieval facsimiles grounded my historical chapter in material reality. The Martini oversize volume sharpened my analysis of a neglected artist. JSTOR Image Search and Marble provided the visual infrastructure for both the written thesis and its digital counterpart. The Hesburgh Libraries did not provide a backdrop for this thesis. They were the condition that made it possible.