



# Ezio Anichini

## Creative Knight Errant of the Ideal

John A. Shaffer

In the years before World War I, a young Italian artist undertook an audacious illustration project, bringing a highly original vision to one of the most revered prayers of Christendom.

Illustrator Ezio Anichini (1886-1948) is widely recognized for his colorful art nouveau-styled covers for *Scena Illustrata*, the popular Italian journal of arts and culture. Less known and understood is his series of 46 images based on the honorific titles of the Virgin Mary in the traditional Catholic prayer form, The Litany of Loreto<sup>1</sup>.

As the son of a working artist, Anichini doubtless benefitted from the reputation and commercial contacts of his father. After studies in figurative drawing and sculpture, he quickly emerged as an illustrator for several Florence-based periodicals of the early twentieth century.

Many early efforts— such as an armor-clad knight for *Scena* in 1906— seem to spring from youthful romanticism. Indeed, his storybook knight figure would develop and re-appear many times over the course of Anichini's career— from slaying a dragon on the cover of Giuseppe Lombardo Radice's educational treatise, *La Milizia dell' Ideale*, to enlivening the pages of Elena





Primicerio's *L'Invincibile Cavaliere*, a re-telling of the legend of El Cid for Italian children.

Exactly how Anichini became involved with the Litany project is unknown. But whether the subject matter reflected his own Roman Catholic piety or was suggested by others, its first publication was the result of the young artist's inroads at *Scena Illustrata*. In 1912, the magazine issued the entire set of devotional illustrations as a twelve-page premium for its subscribers, accompanied by a letter from the publisher.

While the artist is credited on the title page of the portfolio, "*Le Litanie Lauretane, Illustrate da Ezio Anichini*," the publisher's personal note speaks mainly of the special effort involved in its production, down to the quality of the paper. And he adds an explicit hope that readers will respond to this gift by their "benevolence and trust" toward *Scena Illustrata* in the future.

A footnote explained that the images could be obtained as postcards "collected in an elegant case", by subscribers in good standing. (At two lire, they were "much less expensive than the usual ones, which are often insulting or vulgar compositions.")

Regardless of its inspiration, tackling the complete Marian themes of the Litany of Loreto was an audacious undertaking for an artist still in his twenties. It followed the precedent of renowned Augsburg engraver Joseph Sebastian Klauber in the 18th century. But where Klauber's classic illustrations are filled with complex symbolism and scriptural allusions, Ezio Anichini's treatments are emotionally engaging, and invite the viewer to imagine story lines that extend from picture to picture.

Each image contains, within its composition, one of 46 titles of Mary drawn from the Latin version of the popular communal prayer. Like his other works from this time, Anichini's scenes have a romantic flavor— frequently set in royal courtyards, chapels filled with rising incense, or mysterious forests. Even Ezio's familiar knight makes a cameo appearance! In the image for "Mater Divinae Gratiae" (Mother of Divine Grace), he embraces his lady before an altar. In the later illustration for "Consolatrix



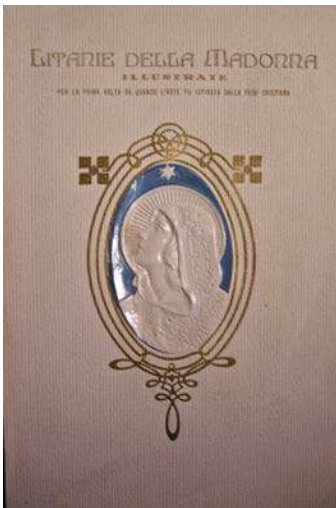
Anichini's 46 images to accompany the Litany of Loreto first appeared as a magazine supplement in 1912.





Afflictorum” (Consolation of the Afflicted), he rides off to battle, leaving her to seek spiritual solace. Re-imagined as Saint George, fresh from slaying his *own* particular dragon, he joins an ethereal tableau for “Regina Sanctorum Omnium” (Queen of All Saints).

Anichini’s images are strongest when conveying tangible emotions— maternal affection, child-like wonder, deep remorse or grief. His pictures vividly draw the empathetic figure of Mary into the range of human experience. Understandably, the young artist struggles to bring immediacy to some of the more abstract ascriptions contained in the prayer, like “Tower of David,” “House of Gold” or “Spiritual Vessel”. But the overall effect of his compositions is compelling.



Apparently, the set was well-received by the public. Following the magazine release of 1912, they appeared in two book-format editions— each hinging postcard-sized reproductions onto heavy colored paperstock. The last, issued in 1930, contains a preface summarizing responses to Anichini’s project by leaders across the Italian church and polity.

Since its launch as part of a marketing campaign for magazine sales, Anichini’s *Litanie Lauretane* (now titled *Litanie della Madonna*) had gained the endorsement of Pisa’s Cardinal Maffi as a significant aid to personal devotion<sup>2</sup>. And unlike the relative anonymity of its first release, Anichini’s role in the project was openly heralded. The later edition sites him as “the famous artist, Prof. Ezio Anichini” and speaks of many expressions of appreciation “to this young genius for this exquisitely artistic gift to the Virgo Virginum, Mater Dei.”

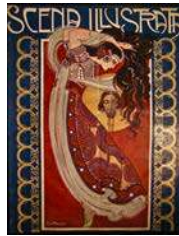


Paradiso, XXXI , 1919

While Ezio Anichini’s most enduring legacy would be his extravagantly drawn and colored covers— fashionably exotic women (and occasional *femmes fatales*)— his early Marian images led to one more project of grand scale— his 1919 illustrations for Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*. Perhaps no work of literature could better employ the young artist’s unjaundiced passion for the ideal, for opening imaginative windows into the shining architecture of heaven.

<sup>1</sup>[The Litany of Loreto](#) is associated with the Shrine of Our Lady of Loreto, where it was in use as early as 1558. It received the formal approval of Pope Sixtus V in 1587. The 46 titles of Mary illustrated by Ezio Anichini reflect the form which was current at the turn of the twentieth century. A growing and developing prayer form, the Litany has been expanded by five additional titles over the intervening years— e.g., “Queen of Peace,” added by Benedict XV during World War I.

<sup>2</sup>Cardinal Maffi expressed a desire to see Anichini’s images of Mary reproduced “for example, on the colored glass of our churches.” It would be “a very good contribution to bring her beyond the book and into the room!” At least one known adaptation of these designs by church artisans is the collection of twelve exquisite embroidered panels created at Mayfield Convent, Surrey and now in the collection of the [Royal School of Needlework](#) at Hampton Court Palace.



JOHN A. SHAFFER retired in 2017 as Director of Arts Programming at the State University of New York, Oswego, and is an avocational collector of Ezio Anichini’s published illustrations. (Contact: [john.shaffer@oswego.edu](mailto:john.shaffer@oswego.edu))