

Art and the Black Death

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The Black Death was a devastating natural catastrophe that swept through Europe in the fourteenth century that wiped out about half its population in less than a century. Also known formally as the bubonic plague, its origins were in Asia, spread throughout by Mongolian tribes. The plague first ravaged China and the Middle East, and was soon after carried into Europe by flea-bearing black rats that infested commercial means of transport. (Fiero, 2011) During this period of devastation, many people turned to the church and the Christian religion to seek answers and divine help. Congregations and monks thought they had done something wrong and had now angered God, who sent the Black Death as punishment. Church priests begged worshippers to atone and repent their sins. The wealthy was able to commission more religious paintings for churches, to make up for their sins. The artists decided to turn to older styles of paintings that emphasized heaven, in order to give their patrons hope of life after death. (Seiler, 2003)

One of the constantly recurring symbols that is found within works of art influenced by the Black Death is the arrow. The arrow is an ancient symbol of divine punishment, and this is evident in multiple Bible verses. For example, in the Old Testament, Job remarks (about God's punishment): "The arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me" (Job 6:4). In Deuteronomy 32:41-42, God states "I will spend my arrows upon them". As is evident, the symbolization of the arrow was a somber one indeed. (DesOrmeaux, 2007)

One such theme inspiring artwork during and after the plague depicting the imagery of arrows is the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. The conventionally accepted biography of St Sebastian, although mostly steeped in legend, is that he was an important member of the Praetorian Guard during the reign of Emperor Diocletian. During the persecution of the Christians in 288 A.D., after professing his sympathy for the persecution as well as proclaiming his acceptance of Christianity, he was ordered to be executed by the emperor. He was shot and riddled with arrows and his body left for dead. He was miraculously

rescued and nursed back to health by a holy woman. This scene was depicted in the painting, 'St Sebastian Attended by the Holy Woman' by Nicolas Regnier (France c. 1590-1667). St Sebastian came to be associated with the plague, taking on the role of a patron saint, interceding for potential or actual victims of the plague like his death was. One such painting depicting such is Josse Lieferinxe's painting *St Sebastian Intercedes during the Plague in Pavia* (1497-1499), whereby a victims of the plague lies on the ground with anguished face. St Sebastian is depicted as pleading with God to reduce and lessen the people's suffering. In addition to that painting, St Sebastian was incorporated into complex paintings where he was in the company of several saints, often with the Virgin Mary herself. (Gelpi, 1998)

The Dance of Death (*danse macabre*) is one of the most iconic works of art from the fourteenth to the fifteenth century. The Dance of Death is set both in visual art (painting) and through poetry. It depicts death as a grinning skeleton, or cadaver, shepherding a procession of victims to his grave. (Fiero, 2011). The *danse macabre* symbolizes the inevitability and universality of death, that no matter which social class one hails from, whether rich or poor, men or women, people from all walks of life, they will all one day be the victims of Death. This, in a way, objectified Death itself as "The Great Equalizer" that happens to every individual regardless of status. The painting of the *danse macabre* was heavily influenced by the recurring cycles of the bubonic plague that swept through Europe from the late medieval period all the way into the Renaissance, and this fatalistic style of painting quickly became known as 'death art'. (Carrade, 2016).

It can be argued that the *danse macabre* was also an early form of social satire. (Mackenbach, 2012). It is hard to miss the message the paradox of people of wealth and social inequality are, in the moments just preceding death, equal to each other. This invites spectators and viewers of the *danse macabre* to ponder the legitimacy of a largely hierarchical society. If everyone is equal right before and into death, why bother at all?

As evident from above, the fourteenth-century Europeans developed an unprecedented preoccupation with differences in class, gender and personality. This close, objective attention can be described as “Social Realism”. Social realism was present both in literature and art, where there emerged a new fidelity to nature and personal experience in the everyday world. (Fiero, 2011) This manifests itself in the way people from different social classes are depicted in the aforementioned *danse macabre*. Social realism is also prevalent in the tales that make up Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, specifically, the “Tale of Filippa”. Boccaccio’s characters were a breath of fresh air in that they were realistically conceived, high-spirited, and prized cleverness, humor and the world of the flesh over the classic medieval values of chivalry, piety and humility. (Fiero, 2011) The tale of Filippa recounts how Filippa, a woman from Prato, Italy, manages to escape legal punishment for committing adultery. Filippa, after confessing that she has a lover, bitterly protests the city ordinance serving a double standard of justice, which has one law for men and another for women. After being caught cheating on her lover, her proposal was that women should not “waste” the passions laying unclaimed by their husbands. They should instead be allowed to enjoy the “surplus” with others. Boccaccio’s Filippa is contrastingly different from the heroines of medieval romances that passionately cling onto a lover. Instead, she boldly declares and defends her right to sexual independence. Just a few decades after, the world’s first feminist writer, Christine de Pisan, attacked the anti-female tradition that demeaned women, denying them the right to a university education. She also criticized the negative stereotypes that slandered and demeaned females. Her work was especially important because it occurred in a heavily patriarchal era. (Fiero, 2011)

As can be seen above, the Black Death certainly had a monumental impact of art during the fourteenth and fifteenth century. While the strongest effect of the bubonic plague on art is a reduction in the art produced because of the death of many great artists, what art that was produced after carried with it somber themes of death and its inevitability. For example, the *danse macabre* reflected on the inevitability of death, and how it does not discriminate between the rich, poor, young or old. Rather, everyone is equal in death regardless of status. The plague also sparked an uptick in religious paintings.

People thought that the plague was sent by God as a punishment for their sins, and as a result there were a lot of commissions for religious artwork by the wealthy in an attempt to atone for their sins. Lastly, the bubonic plague led to the developing of an unprecedented obsession over class, gender and personality differences that was termed social realism. As a result works like Boccaccio's *Decameron* sprung up that challenged the status quo of the time, as it was feminist in nature in a male dominated society. The stories were also designed as distractions from the horrors of the Black Death and provided insight into the social concerns and values of both the narrators and Boccaccio's audience. Thus, we can see, though the Black Death was extremely devastating and wiped out millions, it also led to a new era of art and the humanities.

Works Cited

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