



## School of History Assignment Cover Sheet

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<b>ITS Username</b>	CB21106		
<b>Module Code:</b>	HST5123	<b>Module Title</b>	The Black Death: A Global History Catastrophe and Transformation
<b>Seminar Teacher</b>	Edward Caddy		
<b>Assignment name (e.g. 'Research Essay')</b>	Essay	<b>Word Count:</b>	2647
<b>Title:</b>	Evaluating Causality between the Black Death and Artwork during the Late Medieval Period: A Review of the Criticisms of Millard Meiss's Work		

### What aspect of this submission would you most like feedback on?

This could be something you are trying particularly to improve or want to develop for other assignments on this or other modules in the future.

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## Evaluating Causality between the Black Death and Artwork during the Late Medieval Period: A Review of the Criticisms of Millard Meiss's Work

Within Western culture, the Black Death is by all accounts regarded as the most epoch-making event of the fourteen century, and indeed perhaps of the Middle Ages. Lasting from roughly 1346 to 1352, The Black Death killed some twenty-million people— at the time between one-half to one-third of the European population, and around seventy to eighty percent of those whom it infected.<sup>1</sup> This widespread death had numerous impacts on these communities, ranging from agricultural to psychological to economic: the loss inflicted by this pandemic was felt far and wide, and society in many ways had to rebuild itself and recover from these losses, and to make matters worse, Europe suffered a second, albeit marginally less devastating outbreak of the Black Death again in 1356.<sup>2</sup> An oft-debated topic in academic circles is the extent to which the Black Death impacted European art and artistic culture, which is the topic of this essay. This is an enormous topic, and far too broad to provide an absolute answer to within the constraints of this essay. Thus this short essay will attempt to review various opinions within the extant secondary literature, specifically with regard to Millard Meiss's 1951 book, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion and society in the Mid-Fourteenth century*. This review is with the intention of illuminating current tendencies and leanings within contemporary research, and with the hope of stimulating new research by putting these different opinions into dialogue with one another and assessing how far the Black Death is represented as causal to changes in medieval art, as evidenced by this contemporary research.

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<sup>1</sup> Colin McEvedy, "The Bubonic Plague," in *Scientific American*, vol. 258, no. 2, 1988, p. 118, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24988987>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 128.

One of the most-referenced works on the relationship between the Black Death and art is Meiss's *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, first published in 1951. The work covers a variety of topics, ultimately taking a position on the importance of the Black Death in altering and determining artistic tendencies reflective of the plague's various social impacts in Florence, and the neighbouring city, Sienna. His work provides an analysis of some 169 artworks from the fourteenth-century, with an emphasis on the relationship between religion and the consequences of the Black Death, specifically in depictions of the Madonna.<sup>3</sup> In his chapter, "The Two Cities at Mid-Century", Meiss cites Giovanni del Biondo's *St. John the Evangelist trampling on Avarice, Pride, and Vainglory* [Figure 1] as having struck a positive chord within the masses who "undoubtedly took a special pleasure in the sight of a defeated Avarice sprawled on the ground and ignominiously trodden underfoot."<sup>4</sup> He attributes this especially positive reception of the painting to the emergence of a *nouveau-riche* demographic created as a consequence of Black Death<sup>5</sup> which had not yet been "accepted by a considerable part of society"; thus it made sense why the crowds gravitated towards art that criticised the materialism emblematic of early capitalism. To be sure, Meiss remained skeptical about how much the Black Death had to do with the creation of the work itself, exploring possible explanations and settling on coping mechanisms adopted in response to threats or suspicions of improperly acquired wealth. Because the authority and position of the "wealthy families of Florence" were "seriously threatened, they felt sustained by the assertion in art of the authority of the Church and the representation of a stable, enduring hierarchy. Their taste would have tended to converge then, with that of the *gente nuova*,<sup>6</sup> who emerged from circles that still

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<sup>3</sup> Millard Meiss, "The Madonna of Humility" in *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 132-145.

<sup>4</sup> Millard Meiss, "The Two Cities at Mid-Century" in *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> Meiss attributes the emergence of such *nouveaux riches* individuals to "irregular inheritance and other exceptional circumstances" as a consequence of the population decimation that resulted in a great amount of resources and economic opportunity shared amongst a much smaller number of people than was the norm.

<sup>6</sup> *nouveux riches*

clung to a pre-Giottesque art in which very similar qualities inhered."<sup>7</sup> Additionally, one of his most salient and indisputably points on the Black Death's contribution to the art world is that by halving the populations of Florence and Siena (and thus killing many artists) the pestilence "gave to the surviving masters, especially the younger ones, a sudden, exceptional independence and a special freedom for the development of new styles"<sup>8</sup>

However, Meiss's ideas have also sparked animated debate and criticism, the most mainstream of which points to Meiss's analysis of "guilt culture" in Andrea Orcagna's *The Triumph of Death* (fragment) [Figure 2]. Samuel Cohn contends that "[s]everal have questioned Meiss's dating of individual paintings, most importantly, the *Triumph of Death* in the Camposanto in Pisa, claiming that its execution predated the Black Death."<sup>9</sup> Naturally, this would prove a serious flaw in Meiss's argument. But Cohn also supports some of Meiss's arguments regarding the economic impact of the Black Death on the art world, stating that "[a]rt operated in fact as any other commodity might, given similar market and organizational realities... these paintings cheapened and the value that their commissions fetched stands as direct quantitative testimony to what art historians have judged qualitatively."<sup>10</sup> He uses this logic to help reconcile contradictions between art historians' perspectives, notably Miklós Boskovits's revision of Meiss's theorisations: applying this economic lens to artwork following the black death allows Cohn to connect Meiss's description of "strict uniformity and regimentation of the figures"<sup>11</sup> to Boskovits's characterisation of post-plague paintings as "mechanical in form and rigid in expression."<sup>11</sup> In this manner, Cohn helps evidence his claim that the observations of Meiss and Boskovits are far less "diametrically opposed" than

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 66

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Kline Cohn Jr., "Paintings," in *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy*, (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 273.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 277.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

they may at first seem.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Judith Steinhoff opens her paper by acknowledging, "[a]fter 1350, Sienese painting shows evidence of a significant, widespread change in both artistic working arrangements and attitudes."<sup>13</sup> Yet she remains equally critical of Meiss's work, and instead of an analysis that follows Meiss's emphasis on "plague-inspired penitence and mystical fervour" in his analyses of the Madonna and religious artwork, she would prefer to propound "that the crucial influences on Sienese painting of the 1350s and 1360s were the economic and demographic upheavals the plague engendered."<sup>14</sup> She notes numerous examples of collaboration between artists who in her opinion comprise a "*compagnia*" or type of group. One of her many examples is Niccolò di Ser Sozzo's *Madonna and Child* [Figure 3] which "largely consists of techniques, decorative details, or visual motifs which have been imported rather mechanically."<sup>15</sup> This description largely supports Cohn's (and Meiss's) ideas on the uniformity and almost 'mass-produced' quality of Sienese and Florentine artwork following the Black Death of which the destruction "inevitably affected art patronage,"<sup>16</sup> and supports her claim that "new market conditions not only prompted changes in artists' working arrangements, but may also have contributed to the break with previous norms of stylistic unity evident in the more eclectic works of the period."<sup>17</sup> She does not deny Hendrik van Os<sup>18</sup>, Meiss, or Cohn of their claims on the new economic situation and art production but seeks to contribute that the new social class which drove the high demand for artwork (which in turn led to these new working relationships) was "more preoccupied with the status conferred by being an art patron than with stylistic purity."<sup>19</sup> Thus she offers a contribution that corroborates Cohn's claims.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 276.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Steinhoff, "Artistic Working Relationships after the Black Death: A Sienese 'Compagnia', c. 1350–1363(?)", in *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2000): p. 1 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24412749>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 7

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Another notable art critic who revised Meiss's theorisations

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

In her essay on medieval images created in the context of plague and disease, Louise Marshall offers an additional point in the critique of Meiss's ideations on the Black Death, stating that while his work is "frequently cited as a cogent demonstration of the profound pessimism induced by the plague" his argument "links up with those of many writers who pointed to the plague to explain the prevalence macabre imagery, most notably the Dance of Death, in fourteenth and fifteenth-century art"<sup>20</sup> citing French art historian Emile Mâle's 1908 work, *L'Art religieux de la fin du Moyen Âge en France*. While this is by no means the basis, or even a significant part of her argument, herein lies yet another important criticism of Meiss and his predecessors: the Danse Macabre. The criticism in this instance is that at least contemporarily the Black Death in isolation is not viewed as sufficiently explanatory of the culture of the macabre (which naturally includes the Danse Macabre). Paul Binski's work details this culture of the macabre, offering views on the Danse Macabre and Meiss alike. He describes the Dance of Death as a "theatrical piece of vaudeville" that is powerful in its ability to aesthetically acknowledge and subvert extant social norms.<sup>21</sup> Although the Danse Macabre does not predate the Black Death, it is the third component of the macabre following the Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead and the transi tomb, which are "all thematically related yet functionally separate, and offering different visions of the human dilemma of choice, all point up this new means of allegorical understanding of the self and of society... Death was itself personified."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, these all behave and conform to the class of *memento mori*, which thematically "existed centuries before the arrival of the Plague" fulfilling "key spiritual and emotional needs," thus any attributions to the Black Death or "evidence of the pessimism, decline

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<sup>20</sup> Louise Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy," in *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 3 (1994): pp. 488-489. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2863019>.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Binski, "Chapter Three: The Macabre," in *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), p.156.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

and insecurity" necessarily will fall short.<sup>23</sup> Yet that is not to say that no connections exist—Binski notes that the macabre and related genres are "intimately linked to the psychology of anxiety" and represented "a moment of instability between two temporal realms."<sup>24</sup> According to David Herlihy, anxieties around the sick and the dying were exacerbated by the Black Death, remarking that "[i]n the thirteenth century, Francis of Assisi had addressed death as a sister. In plague-stricken Europe, death was no longer the kind caretaker of souls awaiting the resurrection."<sup>25</sup> He also provides an interpretation of the epitaph of the tomb at Avignon of Cardinal La Grange [Figure 4], "[o]ne of the great masterpieces of macabre art," noting that "Death, as represented in this epitaph, vilified the body; it had become untamed." Thus while the Black Death, or more broadly times of disease and plague, had the power to influence the macabre genre, it did not cause it—the anxiety of death in the context of the Black Death was very real, but to a society "with high rates of infant mortality, disease, famine, the constant presence of war, and the inability of medicine to deal with common injuries, death was a brutal part of most people's everyday experience,"<sup>26</sup> and the development of the macabre was already underway.

To be sure, Binski offers similar information within his work: "it has been pointed out that, as with the macabre, the ethos of crisis of the fourteenth century was established before, and not as a result of, the plague."<sup>27</sup> It is thus somewhat unclear the exact boundary between Binski's and Herlihy's criticisms of Meiss's theories. Nevertheless, the 'untamed' nature of death is further evidenced in its

<sup>23</sup> Michael Carter, "Memento Mori: Let's Talk about Death," English Heritage, 2018, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/inspire-me/blog-posts/momento-mori-lets-talk-about-death/>.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Binski, "Chapter Three: The Macabre," in *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), p.138.

<sup>25</sup> David Herlihy, "Modes of Thought and Feeling," in *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*, edited by Samuel K. Cohn, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjghwgp.6>.

<sup>26</sup> Alix Bovey, "Death and the Afterlife: How Death Affected the Living in the Middle Ages," Brewminate, 2016, <https://brewminate.com/death-and-the-afterlife-how-death-affected-the-living-in-the-middle-ages/>.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Binski, "Chapter Three: The Macabre," in *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), p.128.

personification alone: that death ceases to be a result, or activity such as 'birth' but is instead imbued with human-like characteristics seems to imply a certain degree of autonomy, power, and unpredictability. He also contributes a notable interpretation of Meiss's work by citing Hendrik van Os's observation that Meiss's experience as a Jewish scholar in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust likely impacted his experience as "the analogy between the mid-fourteenth and mid-twentieth century situations was not lost on him... for Meiss the plague was a pretext for history itself."<sup>28</sup> This information is crucial to understanding Meiss's work and its potential shortcomings.

Despite its various issues, when used cautiously and when the relevant shortcomings are acknowledged, Meiss's ideas can be applied with some success. In his essay, "The Black Death and English Art: A Debate and Some Assumptions," Phillip Lindley expands Meiss's ideas to help inform the understanding of the impact of the Black Death in English art. After acknowledging the many issues that have been previously discussed within this essay, he admits that the situation in England may be inherently more straightforward than that of Italy, but that there exist similar economic consequences to the extent that "[w]hen the leadership of artistic innovation is concentrated in relatively few hands, high mortality amongst this group will clearly have a disproportionate effect on the arts," citing "the end of the rich tradition of manuscript painting in Norwich" and "Flemish brasses start[ing] to penetrate the English market" as likely owing to the widespread death of artistic innovators, among several other examples.<sup>29</sup> But in accordance with Binski's ideas, Lindley mentions that "images of '[t]he Three Living and the Three Dead' d[id] not gain increased currency."<sup>30</sup> He concludes that although different arts were impacted to different

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Phillip Lindley, "The Black Death and English Art: A Debate and Some Assumptions," in *The Black Death in England* (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 2003), pp. 125-147.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 144.

degrees in post-plague England, "the Black Death did have a dramatic effect on cultural production."<sup>31</sup> The nuanced and subtle argument that Lindley is able to achieve suggests that to say Meiss's findings lack current application would clearly be false: though not without issue, in many ways Meiss's work acts as a foundation upon which new theories can be built—a survey of the effects of the Black Death as ambitious and comprehensive as Meiss's is sure to contain shortcomings. While contemporary art criticism does not classify this pestilence as the sole cause of any artistic movements, it is generally agreed that Black Death acted as a catalyst that reinforced and shaped extant ideas—in a society that was in many respects already so obsessed with death, the Black Death was certainly not going to provide any reason to change course.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 147

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## Appendix

Figure 1. Giovanni del Biondo, *St. John the Evangelist trampling on Avarice, Pride, and Vainglory*, tempera on wood, 1380-1385, (Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze, Italy)

Figure 2. Andrea Orcagna, *The Triumph of Death* (fragment), fresco, circa 1348, (Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce, Florence, Italy)

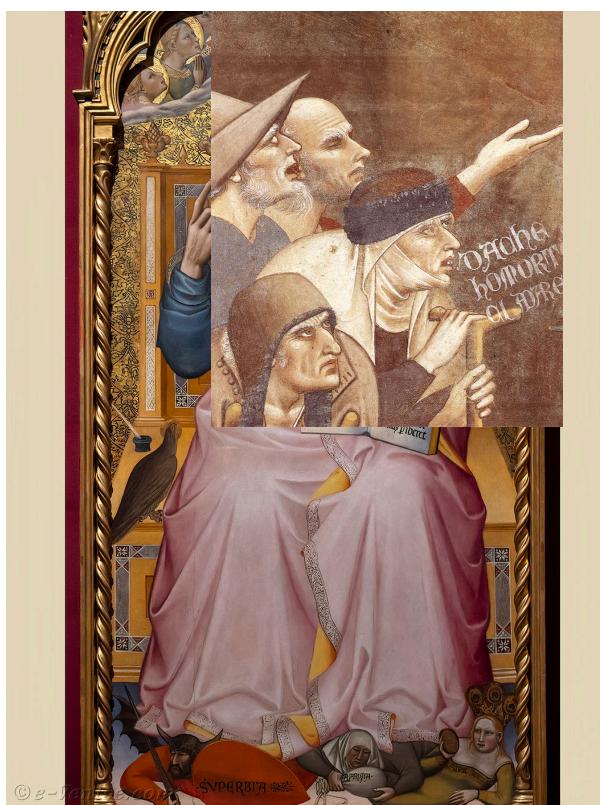


Figure 3. Niccolò di ser Sozzo, *Madonna and Child*, tempera on wood, circa 1363, (Uffizi, Florence, Italy)

Figure 4. Unknown, *Transi du tombeau du cardinal Jean de Lagrange*, alabaster, 1389 -1402, (Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon, France)

