

Dance of Death

Portrayals of Death encountering people from all walks of life have appeared on church and cemetery wall-paintings, in the decorations of ecclesiastical architecture, and in illustrated manuscripts and books. The Libraries have collected printed works in the three main traditions of the Dance: editions of Hans Holbein's woodcuts and his engraved, etched, and lithographed prints; editions that reproduce the wall-paintings at Basel; and eighteenth- to twentieth-century variations on the theme.

Although earlier examples of the Dance of Death exist, the theme was popularized throughout Europe during the fourteenth century. During this period, plague, famine, and war killed an estimated 25 million people, or about one-third to one-fourth of the population of Europe at that time. The Dance may have been acted out in the same way as the medieval morality plays were, but it also appeared in paintings on the walls of civic buildings and churches throughout Europe. Eventually, the art form was adapted for use in both printed book illustration and the decoration of household goods. The ultimate message of the Dance of Death was macabre, but one that would have been all too familiar to Europeans in the later Middle Ages: the fact that death is inescapable and eventually claims everyone, from the richest king to the poorest beggar.

The painter and book illustrator Hans Holbein (1497-1543) created one of the best known Dance of Death cycles. Holbein's Dance of Death was first published in Lyons by the Trechsel brothers in 1538. It gained wide popularity, and printers all over Europe copied or adapted the images in subsequent publications. The earliest Holbein edition in the collection is *Icones Mortis* (1547), which contains fifty-three illustrations. The blocks for this edition of Holbein's Dance of Death were carved by the woodcutter Hans Lützelberger and were printed by Jean Frellon in Lyons. Bound with sermons and religious writings, this Dance of Death served an essentially religious purpose. It reminded the reader that the human body, social status, and wealth were all to be regarded as fleeting vanities, as they would all be lost to death.

Later religious works also drew on the Dance of Death theme. Johann Ulrich Megerle, known as Abraham à Sancta Clara (1644-1709), an Augustinian monk and preacher, was influenced by an outbreak of the plague in the late seventeenth century to create powerful treatises and sermons on the inevitability of death and the necessity of preparation for judgment. A prolific author, Abraham held a great influence over the lay piety of the time. The engravings in this book, *De Kapelle der Dooden* (1764) are by Christoph Weigel, who worked as a cartographer and book illustrator in Nuremberg. Although the book reinforces the certainty of death, the iconography of the illustrations also conveys a message about eternal life.

By the early modern period, the meaning of the Dance of Death had shifted from *memento mori* to dark comedy. One such satire, *The English Dance of Death*, was published in 1816 with images by Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) and verses by William Combe (1741-1823). Both Rowlandson and Combe were known for their satirical works that lampooned current British society. Their first collaboration, *The Tour*

of *Doctor Syntax*, was such a commercial success that their publisher commissioned a comic Dance of Death adapted for English society in 1814. Rowlandson composed the satiric images, while Combe supplied verses to go along with them. The plates were hand-colored before being sold. Although this book did not sell well at the time of its release, it is considered one of Rowlandson's greatest works.

The Dance of Death did not lose popularity as the plagues and famines of the later Middle Ages and Renaissance abated in the Western world. Modern artists and writers, still confronted by the universality of death, also explored the idea through this format. The Dance became relevant once again during World War II, when Europe again lost a large proportion of its population due to violence. The Belgian artist Frans Masereel (1889-1972) adapted the Dance for the modern world in 1940, picturing a capering Death leading millions to the grave through battlefields, concentration camps, street fighting and hunger. Unlike earlier examples of the genre, Masereel's *Danse Macabre* is starkly wordless. The viewer is forced to confront the reality of death with no recourse to religion, morality, or satire. At the end of Masereel's vision, Death sits alone in the middle of an empty battlefield; there is no one left for him to take.

Selected Resources:

Eichenberg, Fritz. *The Dance of Death: A Graphic Commentary on the Danse Macabre through the Centuries*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1983.

Scherer, William F. "A 'Living' Baroque 'Exemplum' of Dying." *Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 27/1 (March 1973): 3-9.

Available on J-STOR at <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0035-7626%28197303%2927%3A1%3C3%3AA%22B%22OD%3E2.0.CO%3B2-9>

Wark, Robert K. *Drawings for the English Dance of Death*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1966.

Willett, Perry. *The Silent Shout: Frans Masereel, Lynd Ward and the Novel in Woodcuts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Libraries, 1997.