

AND UNTO DUST SHALT THOU RETURN. The dance of death as a warning and consolation of the universal reach of death



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The Dance of Death is an allegorical theme which first originated in the Late Middle Ages, and it symbolizes the universality of death. Death, in skeleton form, leads living people with its dance to the grave, regardless people's age, occupation or social condition. Early on, the topic is treated in religious and literary texts and then become represented by frescoes located in cemeteries, churches and Christian convents. Later, these paintings would be reproduced in engravings and numerous illustrators would make their own versions from the sixteenth century to the present day, adapting the theme to their tastes, styles and interests.

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Death is a subject that repels and fascinates us equally. At least, with a passionate extremism, depending on the tolerance of each person: for some it is a scabrous subject to be avoided, while for others it is a never-ending source of morbid pleasure. I remember watching as a child the film *Jason and the Argonauts* (the special effects were by Ray Harryhausen). With a mix of dread and curiosity I'd watch how those seven skeletons emerge from the ground, fighting the Greek heroes in hand-to-hand combat. Their cries were terrifying, their motions agile. The horror of such Dantesque scene did not stop me from looking through my fingers, fascinated. Such memory brings about a bittersweet sensation of fear and enjoyment, reluctance and curiosity. Whichever way we face it, the only certainty is that death concerns us all, since its bony hands stretch to touch all, making no exception, as its motto reads, "nemini parco": Nobody will be pardoned.

The *Danse Macabre* or *Dance of Death* is a literary, iconographic theme of allegorical roots. Its Late Middle Ages morals participate of that eschatological spirit oscillating between the severe and

the satirical. It has been represented throughout time in countless cultural manifestations, principally in a visual way. The word "macabre" means "that which participates of the ugliness of death and the repulsion it usually causes". It arrived to our language precisely from the French expression *danse macabre*, it could refer, on the one hand, to the martyrdom suffered by the Maccabees (*chorea macchabaeorum*), related in the Old Testament; on the other hand it may refer to the Arabic word *maqabir*, cemetery. Beyond its etymology, still being debated, such expression referred to a sort of sacred drama dating back to the fourteenth century. It warned on the universal reach of death and the futility of earthly powers and goods, while it exhorted the believers to lead a pious life. In the context of the terrible pandemic caused by bubonic plague or the *Black Death*, which reached its peak in the middle of the fourteenth century, decimating Europe, the representation of the *danse macabre* as a symbol of the complete dominance of death became very popular. Death thus became the only egalitarian element, which scourge made no distinction between social hierarchies and was imagined as a grotesque skeleton guiding mortals to their grave, while dancing to its ill-fated music. This bizarre image quickly spread through texts, and probably through its theatrical representations, in France, Italy, England, the Germanic area of Central Europe and Spain.¹

One of its first pictorial representations, which was the model for later compositions, can be found in the Holy Innocents' Cemetery of Paris. In it, a long frieze composed by fifteen male figures, and their respective skeletons, represented all social strata: pope, emperor, child, bourgeois, knight, monk, doctor, farmer... All dance under a series of arches, while there is a moralising dialogue transcribed under each scene. The fresco dates back to 1424, it was an anonymous work which was destroyed in 1669 and it has only survived up to now in Guy Marchant's engravings of 1485, and their

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continuous reprints and translations that were widely circulated between the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century, and which had a great influence all across Europe. Another pictorial representation of the *danse macabre* dated some time later, and which was also destroyed, this time during World War II, was in Saint Mary's Church of Lübeck, Germany. Its distinctive feature was the urban setting in which the characters appeared, thus making the subject even more familiar. Aside from these and other lost paintings, the older representations that are still kept date back to the middle of the fifteenth century. They can be found in the Kermaria Chapel, in Bretagne, France, where they inspired composer Camille de Saint-Saëns for his famous symphonic poem *Danse Macabre*, Op. 40 which iconography is very close to the piece in Paris. However, it will be in the Swiss city of Basel, where there are two *danse macabre* which would be of vital importance for the later graphic development of the theme. One is more modest, it dates circa 1450, and it is located in the Augustinian nuns convent. The other one is monumental, dates back to 1480, and it is in the Dominican Cemetery, which copies the former and enlarges it, with a 60-meter long fresco, of which only some fragments are kept. It is twice important. On the one hand, it introduced a landscape, as in the mentioned example of Lübeck, thus abandoning the medioeval neutral backgrounds, and continuing a progression towards a consolidation of Renaissance's aesthetic. On the other hand, they also became the main influence of for the series of engravings on the *dance of Death* by Hans Holbein the Younger. Beyond the fine of previous engravings as those by Michael Wolgemut, published in the *Nuremberg Chronicle* by Hartman Schedel (1493), it was Holbein's that would enjoy wide popularity and which would mean a true renewal of the medioeval theme, bringing it to-date with the new humanistic spirit.

Hans Holbein the Younger produced his series during his stay in Basel between 1523 and 1526. It was that year, when he left from London, that his drawings for the series would stay in the Swiss city, where local artist Hans Lützelburger would engrave them in wood, thus employing xylographic techniques, until his death interrupted his work, when he had only produced 41 of the 48 pieces foreseen. More than ten years would go by until brothers Melchior and Caspar Treschel, from Lyon, creditors of the deceased Lützelburger, received in compensation the 41 wooden blocks engraved with the *dance of Death* by Holbein. They decided to publish it in 1538² under the title *Images and Illustrated facets of Death, as elegantly depicted as they are artfully conceived*.³ This pub-

lication, inexplicably omits Holbein's authorship. Several, successful reprints later, the editions of 1554 and 1562 included eight more Holbein images, thus closing the cycle with a final count of 49 engravings at 65x50 mm. Holbein's cycle meant a great compositional and conceptual renewal of the theme. It will be a great influence on many later authors. From the point of view of composition, Holbein breaks away from the disposition of aligned figures forming a large frieze, which was the usual, in order to compose autonomous scenes that function independently. On the other hand, his great conceptual innovation was to relegate to the middle ground the *danse macabre* iconography as strictly understood, since just a few scenes represent death dancing. Instead he elaborated scenes displaying its social impact and participation. Death, represented by Holbein, breaks into the different scenes and interacts with men and women as they work in their daily chores or indulge in their depraved habits. Also, Holbein includes two images as a prologue: the Creation and Adam and Eve being tempted by the snake to commit the original sin. Then, Death does not appear until the third scene, which corresponds to the expulsion from Paradise, punishment that is linked to work, "God expelled man from pleasure / to live off the work of his hands: / then Death came to get him, / and consequently to take all humans."⁴ In the fourth scene, Adam and Death plough together, while Eve breastfeeds one of their children. Next to Adam, on the ground, an hourglass appears for the first time: a recurring element that would feature throughout the entire cycle, as a warning that Death may arrive any time. The following scene, the fifth one, presents a cemetery completely taken by skeletons. They play wind and percussion instruments, and it constitutes the perfect transition between the mythical-biblical to Holbein's contemporary world that would be shown from scene six. From there on, all sorts of representations of the diverse characters of society and their trades succeed each other in the social theme of the universal reach of death beyond hierarchies. At the same time, there is a denounce of some reproachable habits like gambling or drinking. In Holbein's *danse macabre* the bony Death surprises all characters and pulls their clothes to drag them to the grave. Even, only exceptionally, it appears as the executor. In other scenes, it is disguised and pretends to help the living. Holbein would go through an array of human reactions, from indifference to despair, from lack of understanding to incredulity, from sheer terror to face Death, from bargaining to resignation. Finally, in a macabre pun, the cycle closes on scene forty-nine, in which the beggar, the lowest rung of society seems to wait outside the city, for a consol-

ing death that would put an end to his suffering: a death which, ironically, never comes.

After three centuries in which Holbein's cycle was widely imitated,⁵ new revisions of the original theme of the dance of Death may be highlighted such as Baroque authors like Rudolf and Conrad Meyer's. It was published under the title *Sterbenspiegel* in 1650. They depart from Holbein's model to elaborate sixty scenes boasting detail and *chiaroscuro* effects. Elegant, pompous they seem perhaps more directed to show off its virtuoso technics than displaying a didactic, moral side. In them, death is represented not as a skeleton, but as a muscular characters, with flesh and skin on its bones, with a ghastly cranium. Another baroque version even more ostentatious if possible Geistliche *Todts-Gedancken* produced by Michael Rentz in 1753. Even being based upon Holbein's engraving, manages to produce scenes that are much more dramatic, full of energy and profusely detailed.

The Dance of Death as a symbol of the universal-ity of death, is certainly a warning, particularly the rich and powerful, of the inescapable arrival of death and the futility of earthly possessions. Moreover, it is the consoling reality, mainly for the weakest in the social scale, that death is the only true egalitarian thing, affecting the entire humanity, including the rich and powerful. After the mentioned solemn versions of the Baroque, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will mean a return of the satirical spirit that underlies in Holbein's work. This time it will be a lot more critical and jocund with regards to power.

The first fully modern *danse macabre* will be found in the work of Swiss Johann Rudolf Schellenberg *Freund Heins Erscheinungen en Holbeins Manier*, dated 1785, with texts by the satirical writer Johann Karl August Musäus. The title of the book tries to link the piece with Holbein's "manner" dating two centuries back. However, its treatment of the theme is so novel that such reference to Holbein does not seem to be more than modestly acknowledgement of such figure of authority. Schellenberg's book speaks directly to his contemporaries, representing historic events, different deaths, suicides, accidents... It is also a satire on current events. From Holbein it will certainly take the idea of Death in disguise to deceive the living, for instance, the skeleton dressed as a fashionable lady, tempting a gentleman. Another adaptation of the *danse macabre* to his time, already in the nineteenth century would be *Death's Doing* by English illustrator (1827). It boasts satirical texts by several authors. In it, following Holbein's tradition, diverse trades and characters of all social classes are represented as they meet Death. The style is simpler than Schellenberg's, and it is closer to that of illustrated magazines of the time. There are characters that had not been seen previously,

such as the artist, the criquet player, the hypochondriac; along with funny situations, as Death in the bathroom, in the life insurance offices, or in a boxing ring. However, the most famous and hilarious of the nineteenth century interpretations of the *danse macabre* would be the titled *The English Dance of Death* (1814-16). It boasts full-colour illustrations by English artist Thomas Rowlandson and the scathing poems of William Combe. Here death appears in daily scenes well known to the English public of the time: taverns, hunting, horse races, again the insurance company, which will all be satirised with no mercy/*descarnada* by Rowlandson. Practically none of the characters, grotesque caricatures, move to compasion. As a consequence, and fully aware of its triumph, Death seems to enjoy each scene with a sinister smile. It appears harassing the living: tampering with the chemist's medicines, the drinks at the tavern, or spooking those damsels playing cards.

However, not all versions of the theme elaborated during the nineteenth century display the same satirical style. Some of them recover the grave tone of the Baroque dances, with a romantic expressivity, such as the *totentanz* by German Alfred Rethel (1848), which displays a triumphant death in urban spaces reminising of previous times. Such is also the case of the modernist illustrator Joseph Sattler and his *Modern Dance of Death* (1893). In it, skeletons, skulls and phantasmagories, move forward, this time causing what this time would be death en-mass, or the destruction of cities of medioeval inspiration.

The theme of the *danse macabre* would continue throughout the twentieth century. It would progressively leave behind Holbein's work and its medieval iconography, with the result of numerous re-significations, nearly as many as authors. However, the presence of the skeleton as a symbol of the universal reach of death would be kept, sometimes accompanied by all sorts of monsters and demons.

First World War would mark the beginning of a century which, at least when it comes to warfare, would prove itself deeply destructive and disheartening. Many would be the artists adapting the *danse macabre* to the sad reality of the Great War. Their illustrations would reflect, on the one hand, the author's personality, on the other hand, their worry and concern. One of the first series to tackle the theme from this new perspective would be the work by Italian Alberto Martini, produced between 1914 and 1916. This is a cycle of fifty-four postcard size lithographies with illustrations and slogans in French and Italian, denouncing the disasters and the brutality of war. These postcards would be strongly critical of kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany, and emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria-Hungary. They were distributed in several war fronts, reaching wide popularity, while being uplifting for one

01

Where the anonymous manuscript of the *Dança general de la Muerte*, circa 1440 is kept, at El Escorial Library, Madrid.

02

On the same year, 1538, Holbein would publish his famous *Alphabet of Death*: a design of 24 initial letters devised to be used by printers. They represent morbid scenes at 25x25 mm.

03

This first edition was followed by another one in 1542, with the corresponding quote from the Bible attached to each image and a commentary in verse, a quatrain in French. This is the way they would be represented in the following reprints.

04

Quatrain corresponding to the third scene that first appeared in the edition *Los simulacros e historiados rostros de la muerte, tan elegantemente retratados como artificiosamente imaginados* (Images and Illustrated facets of Death, as elegantly depicted as they are artfully conceived), of 1542. Translation from

French by Juan Barja and Juan Calatrava in BARJA, J. and CALATRAVA, J.: Hans Holbein. La danza de la Muerte, Madrid, Abada Editores, 2008, p. 40.

side and humiliating the other. His extremely dramatic, crude illustrations, displayed grotesque caricatures of important characters involved in the conflict/contienda, and their emblems and national symbols, with the constant presence of phantasmagoric beings and blood-thirsty beasts as a symbol of the triumph of death.⁶ Equally expressive is *Ein totentanz* by the Austrian Alfred Kubin, published in 1918, although it was produced between 1915 and 1916. It was comprised by pen illustrations and engravings that evoke the miseries that the refugees in France and Belgium suffered during the conflict. Twenty years later, in 1938, Kubin would elaborate a new version, published as *Ein neuer totentanz*. It contained new drawings, with much more loose strokes, and it was still the answer to the strong impressions of the horror of war. 1915 was also the date of publication of *Vom Totentanz. Anno 1915*, by German Otto Wirsching. He was a great connoisseur of the old German engravings, and his xilographies achieved great expressivity and a certain comicity. The war was also the terrible inspiration of *Une danse macabre* (1919) by Swiss Edmond Bille, who was very critical of the posture of an “armed neutrality” of Switzerland at the time. Bille produced a series of 20 full colour engravings displaying satirically several characters and situations as “rumours”, “lies” appearing in the press on the development of war, diplomatics, high finance or workers enslaved by a giant skeleton. Similar was the dance of French René Georges Hermann-Paul (1919) which relates death with alegoric figures of reason, eloquence, money or conquest.

If there was ever an artist moved by armed conflict and for whom *danse macabre* became a recurring theme, this was certainly Belgium artist Frans Masereel, illustrator, engraver and prominent pacifist. Masereel from the onset positions himself against war, and he would use his work as tools for denounce and raising awareness. In 1917 he produces a series of xilographies under the title *Debout les morts* (The dead, standing), comprised by ten engravings with their typical contrast of large ink mass areas and white areas representing scenes of dead or dismembered soldiers, corpse-like soldiers abusing women, even two beheaded soldiers carrying a two heads on a stretcher. The following year he would publish seven new xilographies under the title *Les morts parlent* (The dead speak) of similar themes and in which ghastly faces will continue to feature. Masereel would always live haunted by the horrors of war. Years later, with the outbreak of World War II in 1939, he will return to the *danse macabre* theme, unavoidably linked to the disasters of war. This time, his new work would be titled *Danse macabre*. It is comprised by twenty-five drawings with no text published in 1941. This

series was drawn with expressive strokes full of dynamic force to represent raining skeletons with parachutes, shell-firing and spitting fire over cities, a line of people being carried to death, or Death, leading the battle tank of a macabre army.

Beyond the war context, *danse macabre* would be an often re-visited theme in print and new versions will appear during the entire twentieth century. Fascinated by the macabre, many an artist would elaborate their particular vision of the theme, from different perspectives: some times close to its original meanings, others, as a playful evasion centred on graphic research, and on the many graphic possibilities. Interesting versions aiming for new aesthetic turns, are the black silhouettes of Walter Draesner (1922), in which death gives chase to different characters, as in a shadow theatre. Another noted examples in the 1920s are a set of magnifique art déco illustrations by French illustrator Yann Bernard Dyl. They were published with a text by Mac Orlan in *La Danse Macabre*, of 1927. They review a series of contemporary attitudes and vices in which death is present, such as gambling, speed, prostitution or cocaine. Given their originality and the expressive use of stroke and colour, the xilographic series of 1966 *Totentanz* von Basilea by HAP Grieshaber should also be mentioned. This is a series that keeps an eye on the mural paintings of the macabre dance of Basel, which already inspired Holbein. They reproduce in a very personal way the medieval composition of pairs of characters of different professions and social classes, accompanied by their respective skeletons. With a style following the steps of Paul Klee and the primitive art, Grieshaber represents in a fully contemporary way the doctor, the lady and the gentleman, but also, the office worker, the soldier and even a jew with the Star of David on his chest. We shall also mention the naïf style of Swiss Véronique Filozof's, published in 1976, a year before the death of the author, who will write for its introduction, “*Death is as powerful as life. As for myself, I am convinced that death is life, another life, an other life.*” In 1980, German-American Fritz Eichenberg elaborated his own *The Dance of Death*, with a set of dark, richly detailed xylogrphies in which he will analyse characters, businesses and characteristics of his surroundings as the pimp, the gunsmith's, military education, the death row, or the refugees, accompanied by a set of poems in pacifist spirit.

Artists and illustrators have continued to research the theme of the *danse macabre* up to our days, bringing it to the contemporary context with situations and features that are contemporary, with its vices and virtues, with all the poetic and prosaic that it means. Authors such as Kreg Yingst, Dutch Marcel Ruijters, French Huet Jérémy, or the Spanish pair Los Bravú in their recent publication

05

Reportedly, during the sixteenth century there were up to 100 editions and unauthorised adaptations of Holbein's engravings, imitating his style with small changes, such as those by Heinrich Aldegrevier (circa 1540), Heinrich Vogtherr (1544), Arnaud Nicolai (1557) or that of a young Peter Paul Rubens (circa 1590). Already in the seventeenth century, towards 1618, Eberhard Kieser's version of *Totentanz* is based directly upon Holbein's. Its approach is a lot more elaborate thanks to the metal engraving technique, which allows finer detail than xylographic techniques. Other versions of the time that display a great technical finished and carefully crafted decorative details of classical inspiration, as those by Wenceslaus Hollar (circa 1651), Johann Weichard von Valvasor (1682) and, already in the eighteenth century, the reinterpretation of the dance of Death by Salomon van Rusting (1707) which borrowed from Holbein's originals. Even in the nineteenth century some illustrators like Alexander Anderson (1801), Ludwig Bechstein (1831) or Carl Helmuth (1836) continued to publish new editions with their copies of copies based on Holbein's originals.

06

The theme of the *Trionfo della Morte* (Triumph of Death) constitutes the Italian variation of the *danse macabre* in which Death, as an armed skeleton or an army of skeletons kills characters of different social classes or provokes, directly, a massacre.

Toreromaus (Fulgencio Pimentel, 2014) which, as though an orgiastic carnival, it narrates the journey of an irate drunk out on a late-night revelry. Revelry. Not surprisingly, Francesc Capdevila *Max* used precisely the theme of the *danse macabre* as the farewell of the mythical [Spanish] magazine *El Víbora*. It waved goodbye in 2005 with the sentence, “*Bailemos hasta el final. Hum... ¿Habrá tebeos allá abajo?*” (Let’s dance til the end. Hmmm... Will there be comic books down there?).

As in an eternal return cycle, the terror and fascination for this theme are recurring and their graphic representation emerges graphically in what seems to be a neverending progression. From the first medieval frescoes to the engravings of the Modern Age, to contemporary illustrations, in its six centuries of existence, the theme of the *danse macabre* has kept rich and poor sleepless, it has survived popes and emperor, rites and religious orders, wars and diseases. However, it still holds a strong attraction over us. Death, unsparing and devoid of prejudices, continues to be the only egalitarian, levelling feature of all of us on this world riddle with inequalities. Thus, as we wait for the unavoidable/irremediable time to begin our dance, we find solace in new graphic representations of a subject that we fear and enjoy, we resist and are curious about. Satisfying our morbid interest with new representations, new techniques, new styles, new contexts, At least, while there are still artists that enjoy just like children, the frightening vision of a skeleton ●

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