

THE DANCE OF DEATH



AN EXHIBITION AT
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THIS EXHIBITION is concerned with that great reminder of mortality, the Dance of Death. It attempts to demonstrate the spread of the concept from the first known example, a series of paintings on the walls of the cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris, throughout Europe and eventually, by the medium of printing, to America.

It should be remembered that the Dance of Death is not found before 1424 when the first one was commissioned to be painted in Paris, that it is, therefore, not a mediaeval thing, but a creation of the transitional period between mediaeval and renaissance. The mediaeval concern with death seems not to have been with death itself, but with dying well for Christ. This is clearly demonstrated in the concern with saints' lives and deaths, with the art of dying well, with the great attention paid to the aftermath of death, the afterlife in Heaven or Hell; concepts in which no sense of the horror of death has any part. Death was considered a door through which all men must pass, each at his allotted time, not a raging horror rampant in the streets. The great plagues which swept from the East throughout Europe, killing thousands of persons in city after city (80,000 persons in one year in Danzig, for instance), throughout the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, made the horror of death all-encompassing. No longer could one expect, barring war or accident, a fair span of life. One reaction to this, which Boccaccio has recorded for us, is the frenzied use of that life which may remain. Another, perhaps deliberately induced to counteract the first, is the Dance of Death, the terrible reminder of the common fate, with its implied command to prepare one's soul. The great leveling movements of the time, the forerunners of the later revolutions of the 'common man,' are reflected in the Dance's gleeful insistence on Death coming first to the great, making it a political reminder as well as a mortal one, although this is a subordinate and probably incidental concept.

Hans Holbein, in 1538, made the Dance of Death into an aesthetic toy, but a powerfully attractive one. The copies of his work are almost innumerable, and perhaps we are indebted to him for keeping the concept alive up till the eighteenth century when wars, rather than plague, made it again relevant. It is not likely to die out completely. As its latest user, Ingmar Bergman, has made one of his characters say, "A skull is more fascinating than a naked woman," and the aspects of death are always with us.

I. SOME REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DANCE OF DEATH IN MURAL
PAINTING AND STAINED GLASS.

1. Death and the Abbot as seen by Matthaeus Merian in the Dominican cemetery at Basel. From the Basel, 1744, edition of Merian's *Todten-Tanz*, with cuts by Chovin after Merian.
2. Death, the Knight and the Lady, from Massmann's *Die Baseler Todtentänze in getreuen Abbildungen*, Stuttgart, 1847. Lent by the University of Michigan Library.
3. Eighteenth century German manuscript representation, in water-colour, of the Basel *Todten-Tanz*. Copied from Merian's *Todten-Tanz*, first published in 1649. Lent by the Spencer Collection of the New York Public Library. Page turned daily.
4. *La Danse des Morts à Basle*. Souvenir tourist folder showing entire Dance of Death in colour, measuring about nine feet when unfolded. Basle, ca.1840. Displayed unfolded.
5. Self-portrait of the Artist with Death. Between 1626 and 1636 Caspar Meglinger painted, in the covered Mill Bridge at Lucerne, a Dance of Death whose dancers were identifiable local persons, including himself, as shown in this plate from *Der Todtentanz gemälde auf der Mühlenbrücke in Luzern*, Luzern, 1889.
6. Death and the Bishop. This example in 15th century stained glass from St. Andrew's, Norwich is shown in J. M. Clark's *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Glasgow, 1950.

II. PRINTED EXAMPLES FROM THE 16TH TO THE 20TH CENTURY.

7. Death, the Lawyer, the Minstrel, the Parish Priest, and the Labourer, from the *Grand Danse Macabre*, Paris, 1486 (facsimile: Paris, 1862), the 2d edition of Guy Marchant's portrayal of the original *Danse Macabre* in Paris.
8. The Deathly Orchestra as shown by Heinrich Knoblochzter in his blockbook printed at Heidelberg in 1488. (Plate from *Treasures of the Pierpont Morgan Library*, a catalogue of the library's fiftieth anniversary exhibition in 1957.)
9. Death and the Knight from *Des Dodes Dantz*, Lübeck, 1489. Facsimile (Berlin, 1910) lent by the University of Michigan Library.

10. Death Emerging. Illustration to the Czech Bible of Martin of Tisnowa, Kutná Hora, 1489 (plate shown in A. S. Barten, *De Doodendans in de Drukḱunst*, Utrecht, 1942).
11. The Mortal Orchestra, Death, the Pope, and the Emperor, from the *Chorea ab Eximio Macabro*, Paris, 1490. Facsimile (Washington, 1945) lent by the Free Library of Philadelphia.
12. Death, the Astrologer, the Burgess, the Canon, and the Merchant, from the *Chorea ab Eximio Macabro*, Paris, 1490. Facsimile (Washington, 1945). See title-page illustration.
13. Imago Mortis, from Schedel's *Liber Chronicarum* (the Nuremberg Chronicle), Nuremberg, 1493.
14. Sixteenth century Italian Dance of Death; broadsheet.
15. Russian Dance of Death, sixteenth century. Illustration from the sale catalogue of the Dance of Death collection of Susan Minns, New York, 1922.
16. Death, the Child, and the Hobby-Horse, from Johannes Geiler's *Sermones*, Strassburg, 1515. Lent by Yale University Library.
17. Dance of Death Borders from Simon Vostre's Book of Hours (Use of Cluny), Paris, 1502-20. From the Office for the Dead; the first words within these borders are "Circumdedederunt me dolores mortis."
18. Death the Archer, a woodcut from Miguel Carbonell's *Chronica de Espanya*, Barcelona, 1547. Photograph from the copy in the library of the Hispanic Society of America, New York.
19. Death and the Physician, two illustrations (16th century) from *The Physician of the Dance of Death*, by Dr. Aldred Scott Warthin, New York, 1931. Materials in this display borrowed from the University of Michigan are from Dr. Warthin's notable collection of the Dance of Death.
20. Death and the Astronomer, by Michael Rentz, from *Geistliche Todts-Gedanken*, Passau, 1753.
21. *La Grande Danse Macabre des Hommes et des Femmes*, Troyes, 1728. Lent by the University of Michigan Library.
22. Death as the School Inspector, from J. R. Schellenberg's *Freund Heins Erscheinungen in Holbeins Manier*, Winterthur, 1785.

23. The Daunce of Machabree, Wenzel Hollar's version of the headpiece to John Lydgate's poem (a translation of the verses accompanying the Holy Innocents' Danse Macabre), first published by Tottell in 1554. Shown in *Holbein's Dance of Death* as edited by Francis Douce, London, 1790.
24. Death and the Nobleman, by Daniel Chodowiecki (original about 1791), here reproduced in a 20th century work, Walther Nithack-Stahn's *Totentanz*, published in Berlin.
25. Death and the Children, from *Det Menneskelige Livs Flugt, eller Dode-Dands*, Kjobenhavn, 1814, 3d edition.
26. Death and the Family of Children, by Thomas Rowlandson. From Combe's *The English Dance of Death* (first edition published by Ackermann, 1815), London, 1903.
27. Death and the Female Student, from *The British Dance of Death*, illustrated by Robert Cruikshank, London, 1823. Lent by Princeton University Library.
28. Death Drives a Pretty Hack, from *Voyage pour l'Éternité*, by I. Grandville, Paris, ca.1830. Lent by Yale University Library.
29. Death and the Revolution, from Alfred Rethel's *Ein Todtentanz aus dem Jahre 1848*, Leipzig, 1849. Lent by Yale University Library.
30. Death and the Child, from Franz Pocchi's *Todtentanz in Bildern und Spruchen*, Munich, 1863. Lent by the University of Michigan Library.
31. Death the Gravedigger, from Carl Wiegand's *Todtentanz 1914-1918*, Zurich, 1919. Lent by the University of Michigan Library.
32. Death as the Diplomat, from *Une Danse Macabre*, by Edmond Bille, Lausanne, 1919. Lent by Yale University Library.
33. Death and the Anatomist, from *Ein Totentanz nach Scherenschnitten*, by Walter Draesner, Berlin, 1922. Lent by the University of Michigan Library.
34. Death and the Dancers, from *La Danse Macabre*, text by Pierre MacOrlan, illustrations by Yan B. Dyl, Paris, 1927. Lent by Yale University Library.
35. La Mort et La Danseuse; La Mort et L'Enfant, from *La Danse des Morts*, by Jean Marembert, Paris, 1960.

36. The Dance of Death from Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, a transmutation of the Dance of Death into the twentieth century medium of the motion picture (shown here is the Dance of Death scene on the dustjacket of his *Four Screenplays*, New York, 1960).

III. HANS HOLBEIN'S DANCE OF DEATH.

37. Death and the Duke in the Letter I, an initial from Holbein's Alphabet of Death, used in Johannes Agricola's *Scholia Copiosa in Therapeuticam Methodum*, Augsburg, 1534. Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine.
38. Death Delves with Adam, from the first edition (Lyon, Trechsel, 1538) of Holbein's Dance of Death, as issued in facsimile by the Holbein Society in 1869, with translation and commentary by Henry Green.
39. Death, the Astrologer, and the Emperor. Facsimile published by Murdoch, New York, 1935. Made from engraver's proofs (in the possession of the German Government Printing Office) of the 1538 Lyon edition.
40. Death, the Preacher, and the Priest, from the first edition. Facsimile (Munich, 1884) lent by Yale University Library.
41. Death and the Miser, Death and the Merchant, from the Lyon 4th edition of Holbein's Dance of Death. Lent by Princeton University Library.
42. Death, the Porter, the Shipmen, the Carter, and the Plowman, in *Oeuvre de Jean Holbein*, engravings by C. de Mechel, Basle, 1780.
43. Death, the Physician, and the Astrologer, in John Bewick's version of Holbein's Dance of Death. Published as *Emblems of Mortality*, London, 1789.
44. The first American representation of the Dance of Death (*Emblems of Mortality*, Hartford, 1801), engraved by Alexander Anderson after Holbein. Lent by Yale University Library.
45. Death and the Old Man, from David Deuchar's engravings from Holbein's woodcuts, published in London in 1803 as *The Dances of Death through the Various Stages of Human Life*.

46. Death at Sea. The back cover of the New Haven, 1810, edition of the *Emblems of Mortality*, engraved by Anderson after Holbein. Lent by Princeton University Library.
47. Death and the Newly-Weds, from the London, 1816, edition of Hollar's copies of Holbein, with commentary by Francis Douce.
48. Death and the Soldier, from the much-enlarged version of Douce's commentary, published in 1833 with engravings by Bonner after the 1547 Lyon Holbein.
49. Death and the Fool, from the Charleston edition of 1846 of the *Emblems of Mortality*. Lent by Princeton University Library.
50. Death and the Monk in the letter O; Death and the Soldier in the letter P, from Holbein's Alphabet of Death. The borders are from a 16th century Book of Hours. Published in 1863 in Paris as *L'Alfabeto della Morte di Hans Holbein*.

IV. SOME RELATIVES OF THE DANCE OF DEATH.

51. The Triumph of Death, from Petrarch's *Il Trionfo della Morte*, in his *Opera*, Venice, 1515. Lent by the Cornell University Library.
52. The Triumph of Death, two reproductions of the paintings in the Campo Santo of Pisa. Attributed to Orcagna. Lent by the University of Kansas Museum of Art.
53. The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence, as an illustration of the Christian interest in dying rather than in death. From Nicolas Circignani's *Ecclesiae Militantis Triumphus*, Rome, 1585. Lent by the Harvard University Library.
54. *La Danse aux Aveugles*, a 14th century poem by Pierre Michault. Edition of Lille, 1748, lent by the Princeton University Library.
55. Death, Blindfolded and Mounted upon an Ox, calls the Dance. This image, derived from *La Danse aux Aveugles*, is here shown in a plate from A. de Laborde, *La Mort Chevauchant un Boeuf*, Paris, 1923.
56. The Three Blind Ones: Love, Luck and Death, a triptych appearing at the head of the Geneva manuscript of *La Danse aux Aveugles*. From *La Mort Chevauchant un Boeuf*.

57. Memento Mori; two 17th century Italian engravings, one of a young man, the other of a young woman. If the folded-down parts of the pictures (on which appear the handsome young faces) are lifted, death's heads are revealed.
58. *Ars Moriendi*, an illustration from La Vigne's *Sterben und Erben*, Amsterdam, 1702 (a finely illustrated edition of Abraham a Santa Clara's perennially popular work).
59. The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead, two early illustrations from Émile Malé's *L'Art Religieux de la Fin du Moyen Age en France*, Paris, 1922.