

## **More than a Pretty Picture: The Function of Art in the Plague Years**

Shellie Clark  
State University of New York, The College at Brockport  
350 New Campus Drive  
Brockport, NY 14420

Faculty Advisor: Katherine Clark

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to determine the multiple functions of works of art created during outbreaks of plague in Europe, and whether those functions were intended by artists during creation, or if the people adapted the pieces to their own uses. Beyond decoration, plague-era art utilized new and established symbols that carried messages for the people, including religious themes of comfort, hope, wrath, and appeasement, diagnosis and treatment of plague, and possible sources of infection, including miasma theory and scape-goating of the Jews. Cultural analysis shows how, in their frame of reference, medieval and renaissance people could believe in the power of driving out negative thoughts which could lead to plague. Research shows that works of art served multiple purposes for societies that experienced plague, and supports the thesis that many of those functions were intended by artists creating the pieces.

**Keywords:** Plague, Art, Black Death

### **1. Introduction**

The people who experienced waves of plague in Western Europe throughout the medieval and renaissance eras created an artistic legacy which has endured for centuries. Frequently utilizing classic themes and symbols, artists often adapted them to address the needs of a population traumatized by massive death tolls and beset with spiritual questions, and incorporated new subjects developed for a primarily Christian audience. By analyzing the evolution of these themes and symbols, and examining the messages incorporated into the products of medieval and renaissance artists, this paper will show that the art of the plague years became a critical means of expression, communication, warning, and hope to those looking for courage, comfort, and assurance. By observing primary documents and historical analysis, along with numerous examples of plague- era art, this paper will also show that, from financing to production, procession, and display, every aspect of artistic works became an opportunity to appease an angry God during times of plague, a chance to offer protection to their audience, and to prove one's contrition by illustrating the glory of God, in addition to providing artists the opportunity to earn a living and reputation.

### **2. Plague Saints and the Virgin Mary**

Whether borrowing ancient Greco- Roman themes or inventing entirely new ones, religious art spoke to the Christian world in terms they understood and accepted, and may have offered some hope and comfort. Overwhelmingly religious in nature, art that was developed in times of plague reflects the convictions of the age: that plague was the retribution of God for the sins of mankind, that the apocalypse may be near, that saints and the Virgin Mary could help intercede for the righteous and repentant. The evolution of the plague saints is a primary

example of this phenomena. Since ancient times, the arrow has been used to symbolize pestilence. When Sebastian, an early Christian, was martyred with arrows,<sup>1</sup> the stage was set for a future plague saint. The symbolism of arrows as an, "...instrument of sudden, divinely inflicted misfortune, disease, and death,"<sup>2</sup> may offer insight into the causal thinking of Medieval and Renaissance Europe. If arrows represent the punishment of an angry God, and Sebastian was martyred by arrows while protecting Christians, it would not be difficult to make the leap to St. Sebastian interceding by absorbing the arrows of the plague, and protecting the Christian people. Sebastian was credited with protective powers when an outbreak of illness reportedly ceased after a statue of him was erected in a Roman town.<sup>3</sup> Since the terms plague and pestilence were often used interchangeably, it is unknown if that illness was actually bubonic, septicemic, or pneumonic plague, but Sebastian's reputation for defense against illness and connection to arrows made him easy to associate as a plague saint.

It was not commonly permissible for religious representations to depict the saints without being fully clothed, but Sebastian's arrow-pierced body was an exception (figure 1).<sup>4</sup> As Medieval and Renaissance artists began focusing more on realistic depictions of human anatomy, the nearly nude, youthful figure of St. Sebastian became a favorite subject.



Figure 1 St. Sebastian and the Arrows, Il Sodoma, 1525 Processional banner

Another prominent plague saint was St. Roch. Generally represented as an older man in pilgrim's clothing, Roch was not a model for physical beauty, and the fact that he is almost always depicted lifting his robes to show a lesion, ulcer, or bubo of some sort on his thigh did not lend itself to aesthetically pleasing renderings, but he did have his own contributions to offer. A more contemporary saint, Roch was born in 1295. He was said to have wandered the countryside helping the sick,<sup>5</sup> and was rumored to have miraculously cured many before coming down with an illness himself. Since Roch died over twenty years before the 1348 outbreak of plague, it is not possible to know what illness he suffered from, but it was described commonly as pestilence or plague, and whatever the actual cause of the wound on his leg, it was generally accepted to be a plague bubo after the coming of the black death.<sup>6</sup> According to legend, he was exiled from a city when he became ill, and lay suffering and starving in a forest when a dog saved his life by bringing him bread from the city each day until he recovered. Roch accordingly did double duty as a plague saint and the patron saint of dogs, and is most often portrayed with a dog by his side (figure 2). In contrast to Sebastian's symbolism of protection and courage, Roch's image as a scarred survivor of the plague would have given hope and inspiration to populations experiencing plague themselves (figure 3).<sup>7</sup>



Figure 2 St. Roch, Bila Hora, 1751



Figure 3 St Roch Among the Plague Victims and the Madonna in Glory, Jacopo Bassano 1575

Like Sebastian, the Virgin Mary is often associated with thorns and lances, piercing objects symbolically akin to arrows, suggesting plague, pestilence, or suffering in general.<sup>8</sup> The connection felt to Mary by those suffering the effects of plague was expressed in rich artistic form in Venice, when a 1630 outbreak led to the commission and construction of Santa Maria della Salute, or the Basilica of Saint Mary of Health. An entire church built to honor Mary and encourage her intercession, the Basilica is home to numerous works of plague related art. The central altar depicts “The Queen of Heaven Expelling the Plague,” a powerful image promoting Mary’s ability to vanquish disease (figure 4.)



Figure 4 The Queen of Heaven Expelling the Plague, Santa Maria della Salute ca 1630

### 3. Causes

Artists frequently represented their understandings of the cause and spread of plague within their works. Anti-Semitic works of art were sometimes used to portray the Jews as a cause of plague, whether poisoning wells or desecrating the host, or as a pollution among Christian communities which may have incited God's wrath. These pieces may have served as a misguided warning to others about the cause of plague, or to justify the torture and murder of thousands of Jews during times of plague. The concept of blood-libel and the fear of pollution, literal and figurative, was difficult to banish, even when Pope Clement the VI issued a papal bull on September 26, 1348 stating that Jews were not responsible for the plague.<sup>9</sup> Medieval Strasbourg historian Jacob von Konigschofen wrote, "In the matter of this plague the Jews throughout the world were reviled and accused in all lands of having caused it through the poison which they are said to have put into the water and the wells- that is what they were accused of- and for this reason the Jews were burnt all the way from the Mediterranean into Germany, but not in Avignon, for the pope protected them there."<sup>10</sup> Images of Jews poisoning wells, ritually sacrificing Christian children, and being burned at the stake were all too common in plague era art (figure 5).



Figure 5 Burning of the Jews, the Nuremberg Chronicle, Hartman Schedel, 1440-1514



Poussin's "The Plague at Ashdod" (figure 6,) is a good example of art portraying other numerous suspected methods of transmission. Poussin depicts the sulfurous fumes of miasma, a plague-source theory which was widely adhered to in Western Europe, yet he also shows figures holding their noses, a representation of contagion theory mingled with avoidance of miasma, as well as examples of human contact throughout the painting.<sup>11</sup> Sheila Barker explains, "...the composition itself reads as a visual metaphor for contagion. Extending from one end to the other is a great concatenation of human bodies linked by their reaching, touching, grasping and leaning, each creating a great possibility of human-to-human contagion."<sup>12</sup> Poussin also portrayed an actual source of plague, rats. It is difficult to determine whether the artist included rats because he knew or suspected there was a connection, or if he simply painted them because they were present, but the rich symbolism of plague-era paintings, where almost every detail had meaning, makes it hard to believe the rats were simply a reproduction of the common sight. In fact, Baker contends, "Europeans had suspected that rats spread the plague from quarantined merchant ships to the port cities," and the philosophy that rats were born of miasma would have also made them suspect.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 6 The Plague at Ashdod, Nicolas Poussin, 1631

#### 4. Apocalypse

Many examples of plague-era art portray the events as the coming of the apocalypse. Symbols of biblical apocalypse included the four horsemen, signifying famine, war, plague, and death. Prior to the arrival of the Black Death in 1348, Europe had experienced famine during the "Little Ice Age,"<sup>14</sup> so the arrival of plague accompanied by massive death tolls could easily have been seen by many as the approach of the apocalypse promised in Revelations (figure 7).



Figure 7 Albrecht Durer, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, 1498

Because death made no distinction between social classes, and social order was difficult to enforce when outbreaks of plague led to a breakdown of authority, other apocalyptic images featured portrayals of the “natural order” turned upside down, as shown in Pieter Brueghel’s “Mad Meg”(figure 8.)



Figure 8 Mad Meg, Pieter Brueghel the Elder, 1559

## 5. Comfort and Prevention

It may be challenging to think of horrific depictions of plague in art as a possible source of comfort to the people suffering from it, but some pieces could be viewed in this light. Biblical plague representations, by virtue of their having occurred long ago, showed that plague was not the end of the world, it had happened before, but many people survived, and the world had gone on. Works such as Poussin’s “The Plague at Ashdod” (figure 6,) created in the midst of the 1630 plague that ravaged Italy, could be seen as evidence that mankind had previously assuaged the wrath of God. By creating a piece that depicted the grim details and terrible suffering of a previous plague, Poussin’s presentation of plague flew in the face of conventional medical and religious belief which connected even thinking of sickness, death, and suffering with an increased risk of contracting the plague.<sup>15</sup> Sheila Barker writes, “Beginning in the Renaissance, physicians, surgeons, philosophers, literati, and priests throughout Europe formulated theories

that linked imagination and disease...”<sup>16</sup> Religious figures such as Jesuit priest Etienne Binet wrote, “The imagination has the power to alter the blood completely, (and) when the imagination takes fright at some scare, there is a danger that it will transfer this impression to the blood, which often results in the plague itself.”<sup>17</sup> Medical observer Robert Burton wrote, “The mind most effectively works upon the body, producing by its passions and perturbations miraculous effects, cruel diseases, and sometimes death itself.”<sup>18</sup> So why did Poussin not paint idyllic, happy images to uplift the spirits of his audience instead of representing the Plague of Ashdod in 1630? In *Poetica d'Aristotele volgarizzata e sposta*, (1570), Lodovico Castelvetro discussed the use of catharsis in tragic plays, based on Aristotelian theory. He says, “...tragedy...which allows for us to see and hear (piteous and terrifying events) far more frequently than we otherwise might see and hear them is the means by which our compassion and fear is diminished, and thus it is to our benefit that we experience these passions in so many diverse situations (as theater makes possible).”<sup>19</sup> Poussin made direct reference to Castelvetro in his notes,<sup>20</sup> confirming his familiarity with Aristotle’s tragic catharsis theory. It is entirely feasible, therefore, to theorize that Poussin’s intent was partly to help his audience develop a resistance to the overwhelming emotional toll of plague by exposing them to images of other’s suffering, in total contradiction of contemporary discouragement of dark and tragic thoughts. Poussin also painted more positive imagery, such as the expulsion of plague by Saint Frances of Rome, during an outbreak in 1656, portraying the Virgin Mary holding “a number of broken or blunted arrows,”<sup>21</sup> symbolizing the end of plague, while Saint Frances kneels before her (figure 9.)



Figure 9 St. Frances of Rome Announcing the End of Plague, Nicolas Poussin, 1657

Plague era art, even when not addressing plague directly, may have been produced in part to help the people ward off disease by occupying their attention with positive images. With precedent set by Plato for an understanding of the link between positive, calming words and manner to resistance to illness and ability to recover,<sup>22</sup> or “verbal therapy,” Barker parallels Boccaccio’s *Decameron*<sup>23</sup> as the literary version of verbal therapy, and points out that whether or not his intent was actually to provide a remedy against plague, “The reader has in fact already been instructed on the relation between health and such healthful diversions of the imagination.”<sup>24</sup> It is easy, in light of this common understanding, to view renderings of the Virgin Mary as what Barker terms, “gentle visual medicine.”<sup>25</sup> Mary embodied compassion, love, and mercy, and her proximity to God made her a likely intercessor for the faithful. Her image was capable of reinforcing positive emotions and driving out dark thoughts which could make one vulnerable to plague, a powerful psychic defense. The emerging importance of the Virgin Mary was magnified during the plague years, and her standing in the church evolved dramatically as people feared the arrival of the end of the world. Artists frequently placed Mary prominently in plague-era works, interceding with God to show mercy on the suffering of mankind.

The art created in times of plague may have helped a traumatized populace process the overwhelming emotions associated with the loss of neighbors and loved ones. The trauma of seeing the streets filled with bodies, and the



guilt and horror of sometimes having to abandon sick friends, relatives, and even one's own children to avoid becoming sick themselves, is reflected in numerous examples of plague art. Poussin, in *The Plague at Ashdod* (figure 6,) portrays the tragic image of a young mother whose milk-filled breasts can offer her nursing child nothing but death,<sup>26</sup> and echoes the descriptions of infant mortality connected to the infection and deaths of mothers and wet nurses offered by Daniel DeFoe in *Journal of the Plague Year*.<sup>27</sup>

Processions were believed to be an important method of displaying faith and penitence, and were frequently represented in plague art. While participating in processions, the faithful would carry banners, usually painted with a formulaic composition which included recognized plague saints, often in the company of local patron saints, praying to the Virgin Mary and Jesus to intercede with God for them.<sup>28</sup> Notable among these banners are Reni's *Pallione del Voto* (figure 10,) and Sodoma's 1528 banner depicting St. Sebastian (figure 1), carried in Siennese processions during times of plague. Regional in nature, Catherine Puglis is describes procession banners as, "...a telling indicator of a community's self-identity," and describes how the painter, "...addressed an audience of compatriots who shared common fears during the crisis..."<sup>29</sup>



Figure 10 *Pallione del Voto*, Guido Reni, 1630

The rise of the flagellant movement was another attempt by some to appease an angry God with acts of mortification of the flesh. Eventually ruled heretical by the Church,<sup>30</sup> flagellants nonetheless left their mark on the people suffering the plague, and were often depicted by artists in paintings, woodcuts, and illuminations (figure 11.).



Figure 11 Flagellant, 14c. Prayer Book, Flanders



## 6. Treatment

Art also illustrated the various methods employed by physicians to treat plague. Numerous paintings, woodcuts, pamphlet illustrations, and even biblical illuminations showed methods for treating plague patients, such as the lancing of buboes, or the dispelling of miasmatic fumes (figure 12.)



Figure 12 1411 Toggeburg Bible

## 7. Change

To be fully articulated and understood by a largely illiterate population, messages incorporated in works of art were symbolic, relying on long-established understandings of ancient meanings. Swords, thorns, and lances frequently symbolized the wrath of God, and a sheathed sword, frequently held by Saint Michael, indicated an end to plague. The familiar associations of the plague saints, such as St. Roch's dog, helped people to identify the subjects of artworks, as well. One new symbol, developed in response to the Black Death was the upraised arm of plague victims, which illustrated the presence of plague buboes often found in the underarm area, making it painful for victims to lower their arm.<sup>31</sup> Artists also began to incorporate scenes of plague victims with their heads tilted to one side, to help reduce the pain of buboes located on the neck (figure 13.)<sup>32</sup>



Figure 13 Sebastian Interceding for the Plague Stricken, Josse Lieferinxe, 1497-1499.

The plague experience changed the way people came to view life and death. Shortly after the Black Death, images of the Danse Macabre began to emerge. Although each representation has its own variations, most depictions of the Danse Macabre involve a number of seemingly playful, jaunty skeletons leading, or pulling, people to their death (figure 14.)



Figure 14 Danse Macabre at the Rittersche Palast, 16thc

The movements of the skeletons may have been symbolic of the involuntary movements of plague sufferers as cell necrosis advanced prior to death.<sup>33</sup> The skeletons, leading all types of people from every social strata, symbolized the constant presence of death, and how it came for people of all walks of life, leaving no group untouched. Danse Macabre images can be viewed as reminders to keep one's soul in a state of readiness, as death could come at any time. Indeed, many Danse Macabre images show death pulling people from life in the midst of their daily routines. Beyond the traditional Danse Macabre images depicting lines of skeletons and various people, the idea of ever-present death presented itself in various forms for centuries (figure 15.)

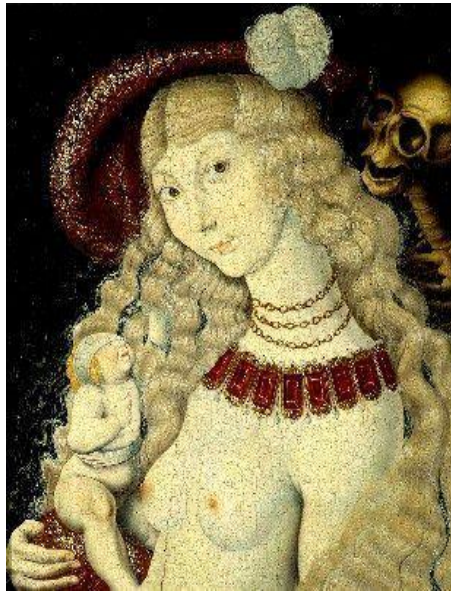


Figure 15 Young Woman and Death, Hans Baldung Grien

## 8. Conclusion

Far more than decorative pieces for the homes of the rich or houses of worship, plague art was comprised of layers of rich symbolism that held messages for the people, urging them to repent for their sins, to keep their souls in a state of readiness, to pray to the Virgin Mary and the saints for intercession, and to also have hope in times of darkness and death. In their frame of reference, medieval and renaissance people could believe in the protective powers of driving out negative thoughts which they believed could lead to plague, and for those who could afford it, the divine benefits of sponsoring art in exchange for intercession. The market for such pieces created a lucrative field for artists whose talents could attract the patronage of the wealthy. As a method of describing plague and its treatments, art offered the illiterate a guide for locating, identifying, and lancing buboes, and for dispelling miasma, however accurate or helpful such methods might be. Warning of methods of transmission, some plague art was woefully destructive in its scapegoating of the Jews, while some examples were eerily accurate in their depictions of rats and human contact spreading contagion. As a religious tool, plague art offered some divine explanation and hope for comfort to a population which often questioned God, the church, and their own faith in the face of mass devastation. As a form of expression, plague art helped give a voice to the unspeakable fear, grief, and loss, along with a sense of chaos, experienced by plague sufferers. While it is impossible to determine the specific intent of these works at the time they were created, they have left a chronicle for modern audiences of how a devastated Europe processed such a monumental human tragedy.

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