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TOTENTANZ

DANCE OF DEATH

DANSE MACABRE

The Black Death ravaged Europe in the last half of the fourteenth century. It left a psychological and religious impact in its wake which generated a motif used in art and literature throughout the centuries. Death is inescapable. It comes to all, regardless of rank or sex.

Meditations in paintings and in literature used this theme. One of the most famous, the legend of "The Three Dead and the Three Living," was painted at Pisa Camposanto in 1355 by Francesco Traini. It depicts a dialogue between Death and the Kings of the Earth who represent Power, Beauty and Wisdom. Death says, "Whatever you are, we were; whatever we are, you will be." This fresco is considered one of the direct influences on the later Dance of Death series.

The earliest recorded references to the Dance of Death are found in late fourteenth century sources. Jean le Fevre mentions the phrase "macabre la dance" in a poem in 1376, and various church records from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries indicate that a mystery play known as the "danse macabre" was often performed. The play is associated with periods of repentance and fasting.

The first known pictorial representation was painted in 1424 at the cemetery of the Church of the Holy Innocents in Paris; the artist was Jehann d'Orleans and the poet was Jean Gerson, Chancellor of Paris. This fresco influenced many of the illustrated editions of the Dance of Death. The "Ars Moriendi" (art of dying) tradition and illuminated books of hours also added to the theme during the fifteenth century. The most famous illustrator by far of the Dance of Death was the sixteenth century artist Hans Holbein.

Various editions of Holbein's works, as well as those of his imitators and other artists depict the Dance of Death genre between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries. The following bibliography for Special Collections and Art Collection material is in chronological order.

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April, 1987; 2008

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L Graphic Arts Dance of death D725

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Plutarch. Vitae Graecorum Romanorumque illustrium. Basileae, Io. Beb, 1531.  
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sixth edition, Basiliae, 1554. Graphic Arts Dance of death H723d

Wolsschaten, Geeraerd van. De doodt vermaskert met des weerelts ydelheyt. . .van den  
vermaerden Schilder Hans Holbeen. Antwerpen, Petrus Bellervs, 1654.  
Graphic Arts Dance of Death H723t 1654

Totentanz. . .Lyon: Trechsel fratres, 1583; Munchen: G. Hirth, 1884.  
Graphic Arts Dance of Death H723t

Le Danse de morts. . . Todten Tanz. Illustrated with copper plates engraved by M. Merian. Basle, 1756. 755 D173m

Musa us, Johann Karl August, 1735-1787. Freund Heins Erscheinungen in Holbeins Manier / von J.R. Schellenberg. Winterthur : Bey Heinrich Steiner und Comp., 1785. Graphic Arts Dance of Death M985f

The dance of death. Engraved by W. Hollar. [London, 1794]  
Graphic Arts Dance of Death H723t 1794

H. (Hieronymus) Hess (1799-1850). La Danse des morts. . . Copied from the Matthaeus Merian's designs. Basle, A. Sattler [186-?] L Graphic Arts Dance of death H586d

The dances of death, through the various stages of human life. . . etched by D. Deuchar. London: W. Smith for J. Scott, 1803. 755 D173h 1803

The dance of death, painted by Hans Holbein, engraved by Wenceslaus Hollar (1607-1677). London: J. Harding, 1804. Graphic Arts Dance of Death H723t 1804  
Emblems of mortality: representing, in upwards of fifty cuts. . . Dominican Church at Basil. . . The death of Adam, and the bird of paradise. . . from the Latin edition of 1562. New Haven: Sidney's Press, 1810. Graphic Arts Dance of Death H723t 1810

Dance of death through the various stages of human life. London, W. Baynes, 1811.  
755 D173h.3

The dance of death. . . engraved by W. Hollar. London: J. Coxhead, 1816.  
Graphic Arts Dance of Death H723t 1816

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L Graphic Arts Dance of death H723t 1947

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