

Jenna Grossman

Plague, Art & Crisis

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Draft 2

The Trionfo della Morte Fresco in Clusone, Bergamo

The late fifteenth century fresco *Trionfo della Morte e Danza Macabra* can be found on the outer wall of the Oratorio dei Disciplini in Cluson, a small town in Bergamo in the Italian region of Lombardy. The artist of this piece is unknown although some speculate that it may have been the work of Giacomo Borlone de Buschis. Although little research has been done specifically on this fresco, it stands as an excellent example of both confraternity art as well as art made during the plague.

Confraternities gained popularity in Italy between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries¹. These religious organizations were run by lay members and varied in type. Some confraternities were exclusively male or female, but oftentimes these organizations welcomed both male and female members. The goal of confraternities was to ensure salvation to its members through acts of public charity and organized devotion.

¹ Schifel, Ellen. *Corporate Identity and Equality: Confraternity Members in Italian Paintings, C. 1340-1510*. Source: *Notes in the History of Art* 8:2 (1989) pp. 12-18

The largest confraternity in Bergamo was the Misericordia Maggiore², dedicated to the mercy of the Virgin. This confraternity worked closely with the changing government and political climate of Bergamo and surrounding towns. During the late thirteenth century, civil war broke out in Lombardy between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. The members of the Misericordia acted as negotiators, trying to protect civic peace. Eventually in 1332 the Visconti family of Milan gained power and Lombardy transformed from a civic commune to an imperial dukedom. Because of the Misericordia's constant presence and activity, as well as its willingness to abide with the changing governments, they were able to maintain an important and influential standing. The Misericordia even acted as an umbrella organization for other smaller confraternities in surrounding parishes, including Clusone.

The Disciplini was the leading confraternity in Clusone. This particular confraternity practiced self flagellation and wore white robes. Like other organizations, they performed charitable acts in their town and were made up of both male and female lay members. The Disciplini constructed the Oratorio dei Disciplini in the early 1300s as a meeting place and place of worship. However the exterior fresco, the *Trionfo della Morte* or the *Triumph of Death*, was not created until the late fifteenth century³. Despite the discrepancy in time, the *Triumph of Death* fresco still offers examples of the plague mentality that existed in earlier centuries. Many confraternity buildings were decorated with some sort of image aimed towards the public, be it a reminder of the confraternity's charitable importance in the town or some religious ideal the confraternity

² Cossar, Roisin. *The Quality of Mercy: Confraternities and Public Power in Medieval Bergamo*. Journal of Medieval History. (27:2) (2001) pp. 141

³ Cossar, Roisin. *The Quality of Mercy: Confraternities and Public Power in Medieval Bergamo*. Journal of Medieval History. (27:2) (2001) pp. 150

wished to convey. The Disciplini clearly set out to display a very harsh and morbid message to the public of Clusone with this fresco.

The eleventh century British monk and philosopher, Saint Anselm of Canterbury wrote that men can no longer compensate with riches, but only with suffering. This idea was reborn with fervor in the wake of the Black Plague and representations of suffering became extremely widespread in both literature and art⁴. For example, Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, a collection of short stories narrated by a group of Florentines gave detailed accounts of the Plague's devastation in the city and throughout the rest of Italy. Many religious and lay people began to hold beliefs that God's mercy could only be evoked by suffering, with this idea religious images became more dramatic and horrific⁵, for example scenes of the last judgment used more imagery from Dante's *Inferno* such as the Arena Chapel. Images of death and decomposition also became more mainstream such as in the *Triumph of Death* in Pisa. Saint Sebastian became a symbol of the suffering inflicted upon society by the Plague. Although many scholars debate the reasoning behind Saint Sebastian's connection to the Plague, many argue the symbolism behind the arrows that pierced his flesh, as an allegory of the Plague piercing its victims quickly and mercilessly⁶.

The theme of suffering is continued in the Clusone fresco, both in the *Triumph of Death* and the lower *danse macabra*. In the *Triumph of Death* scene, mostly men but a few women circle around three deathly figures begging for mercy and offering up riches in exchange for life. However, their actions seem to be in vain as the two outer skeletons shoot at the surrounding

⁴ Boeckl, Christine Maria. *Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology*. pp. 75

⁵ Boeckl, Christine Maria. *Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology*. pp. 76

⁶ Boeckl, Christine Maria. *Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology*. pp. 76

crowd with a bow and arrow and a gun. The shooters show no concern with matters of class or social status and seemingly shoot out at random, mimicking the nature of the Plague which showed no discrepancies with its victims. The use of arrows reflects back to images of Saint Sebastian, while the presence of the gun offers the idea that even as time moves forward with new innovations, crisis may strike unexpectedly. The unexpected nature of the Plague and its affects on all despite social standing was a major factor that religious art played off of. The Disciplini clearly wanted to remind the public, regardless of social standing, that death is inevitable and may come at any moment, thus plan accordingly and maintain devotion because wealth and riches will no longer matter in the face of death.

First waves of macabre art appeared in Avignon, France, the seat of the Pope as well as one of the first regional areas affected by the Plague. Historians believe the Plague first entered Europe from the Middle East via sea ports in Marseilles, a city very close to Avignon. Although depictions of death or funerary practices had been created as far back as Greek and Roman times, it was not until the Plague outbreak of 1347 when this genre reappeared with popularity. The outbreak resulted in twenty-five million deaths between the years 1347 and 1388. Because of the sheer mass of death experienced, Europeans adopted a morbid humor and ironic view towards death as a coping mechanism⁷. The French poet Jean le Fevre was the first to incorporate the word “macabre” into his work in 1376. Italian writers and poets such as Machiavelli and Francesco Berni wrote about the extreme casualties of the Plague and used sarcastic comic tones

⁷ Taylor, Francis Henry. *The Triumph of Decomposition*. Parnassus. (4:4) (1932) pp. 25

to express their bewilderment. By the end of the fourteenth century images of decomposition were also seen in macabre pieces⁸.

The Danse Macabre has a certain ironic lightheartedness to it. The danse macabre image in Clusone depicts both men and women being lead off one by one by skeletons. The facial expressions vary from fear to indifference and the clothing shows class variation⁹. Disciplini members covered completely in white robes are also seen being lead off to death. The placement of the danse macabre beneath the Triumph of Death might act as a further reminder of the inevitability of death. The facial expressions remind the viewer that one's pious actions during life will affect the afterlife. Those looking content and facing forward have had a satisfying religious life, while those looking scared and leaning away must fear the afterlife due to lack of religious observance during life. The grim ironic humor of macabre images began to shift gears after the Plague and clergy and religious members started using this art form as a tool for religious propaganda.

In addition to the imagery of the danse macabre and the Triumph of Death, the legend of the three dead and three living is portrayed in the Clusone fresco. The triumph of death and the legend are fused together into one image. Ashby Kinch discussed the variations in the legend and concentrates on its role in Medieval literature. The legend goes that three aristocratic men are on a hunting trip and come across a forgotten burial ground. Suddenly three skeletal figures appear and remind the men of their inevitable death, they tell the men that soon they shall be as they ap-

⁸ Taylor, Francis Henry. *The Triumph of Decomposition*. Parnassus. (4:4) (1932) pp. 13

⁹ Clark, James M. *The Dance of Death in Medieval Literature: Some Recent Theories of its Origin*. The Modern Language Review. 45:3 (1950) pp. 338

pear. The writing on the Clusone fresco is similar to the legendary words of the death figures. In most cases, as Kinch states, the skeletal figures were once kings, but in other versions they were once ecclesiastical sinners¹⁰. Clusone depicts the latter. The three skeletons stand over the corpses of religious figures, easily identified by their robes and headdresses. Their sin is represented by the vermin crawling over their bodies. Snakes, the symbol of ultimate sin dating back to the story of Adam and Even, slither over the dead clergy while toads and a scorpion line the tomb. Scorpions and toads were symbols of heresy during this time¹¹. This powerful image acts as a reminder that no matter ones social class, the sins committed will affect the afterlife. The skeletons, now acting as Kings of Death appear to hunt down those who have sinned.

Speculation about life after death became an obsession during the time of the Plague due to the massive amounts of death. Pope Benedict XII's *Benedictus Deus* and Dante's *Inferno* added to the anxiety created by the question of the afterlife¹². The Clusone fresco is just another example of Plague art directed towards a massive public audience to remind them to maintain a pious life because death is mysterious and can come without warning and by doing this one will enter the afterlife contently.

¹⁰ Kinch, Ashby. *Image, Ideology, and Form: the Middle English "Three Dead Kings" in its Iconographic Context*. *The Chaucer Review* 43:1 (2008) pp. 60

¹¹ Ferguson, George Wells. *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*. pp. 19

¹² Boeckl, Christine Maria. *The Pisan "Triumph of Death" and the Papal Constitution "Benedictus Deus."* *Artibus et Historiae* 18:36 (1997) pp. 60

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