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Plague, Art, and Crisis

### **Death, Spirituality, and Belief in 14<sup>th</sup> Century Italy**

*The Triumph of Death* fresco located in Pisa, in simplest terms, describes the passage from life to death and beyond. It is part of a series found in the Camposanto that consists of five other frescos including, the *Thebaid*, *Crucifixion*, *Resurrection*, *Last Judgment*, and *Inferno*. There has been much scholarly debate over the artist of this series, which is unknown for certain but has been narrowed down to either Francesco Traini or Buonamico Buffalmacco<sup>4</sup>. It is agreed upon that the frescos date to the 1330's, disproving the theory popularized by Millard Meiss that *The Triumph of Death* was in reaction to the Black Death.<sup>2</sup> The fresco, regardless of its relation to the plague, still portrays how Pisans viewed death and its significance during the period. The need to connect the fresco with a specific event is unnecessary as it conveys a theme so broad that it can be applied to the entire period of the trecento. *The Triumph of Death's* representation of mortality offers insight into beliefs on death and spirituality during the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Pisa and Italy.

The most well known scene from the Triumph of Death is found in the bottom left, and depicts three corpses in coffins, each in a different stage of decomposition.

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<sup>2</sup> Boeckl, Christine. "The Pisan 'Triumph of Death' and the Papal Constitution 'Benedictus Deus.'" *Artibus et Historiae*. Vol 18, No 36. IRSA 1997. JSTOR. Web.

<sup>4</sup>Meiss, Millard. *Francesco Traini*, (Washington D.C.: Decatur House Press, 1983), Print.

Above the tombs is a scroll reading, “What you are, we once were; what we are, you too will be.”<sup>2</sup> Approaching the dead bodies in evident horror are ten noblemen and women on horseback and two on foot. To the right, at the center of the fresco a winged Devil hovers in front of a large cliff tossing souls from a pile of corpses into Hell. Death itself is personified as an elderly white haired figure carrying a scythe and flying towards a group of ten unaware noblemen and women on the far right. Angels and demons fighting over the souls of the deceased occupy the upper half of the fresco, with the exception of the hermits in the top left. The composition is divided with the earthly realm occupying the lower half of the fresco, and the spiritual realm holding the upper half<sup>3</sup>. The stage of life, death, and afterlife are all illustrated here creating a powerful narrative about mortality.

*The Triumph of Death* works as a narration of death itself, not the moment of death, but the transition from life to afterlife. In the bottom right are the ten noblemen and women surrounded by trees and enjoying the pleasures of earthly existence, seemingly negligent of all the repercussions surrounding them in the fresco.<sup>3</sup> The horsemen in the bottom left also represent the physical realm, but they are confronted with death in the form of the three decaying corpses. This scene, along with the pile of corpses, depict the finite survival of the physical body, that eventually everyone will be reduced to a skeleton. The inclusion of the soul being dragged away by either a demon or angel depicts the aftermath of death, the eternal existence of the soul in the afterlife. As a whole *The Triumph of Death* is able to narrate the before and after, the passing from this life to

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<sup>3</sup> Carletti, Lorenzo and Francesca Polacci. “Transition Between Life and Afterlife: Analyzing The Triumph of Death in the Composanto of Pisa.” *Signs and Society*. Vol. 2, No 1. The University of Chicago Press 2013. JSTOR. Web.

the next through its depiction of each stage the human body and soul inhabit.<sup>3</sup> An important aspect to note is the order and description of each of these stages, the fleeting nature of human existence on earth contrasted with the eternal existence of the soul in the afterlife. This theme demonstrates the belief in the afterlife people had during the 1300's in Italy, that the human existence is ultimately embodied in the soul rather than the body.

The confrontation between the three decomposing corpses and the twelve horsemen alludes to the shock and fear of human death as if there were no existence after the physical body is gone. The message above the coffins places emphasis on the fragility of life, and that the transition from life to death can happen at any time. It also forces the viewer to keep in mind that death is inevitable, and everyone, including the prestigious nobility, will face it. This is evident through the post mortem judgment of the soul depicted throughout the fresco. Angels and demons are shown fighting over the souls of the deceased, with the majority being dragged into the inferno. These scenes demonstrate the belief that there is something more to live for than life itself, that there are consequences for one's behavior in the afterlife. Just as everyone will inevitably face death they will also face judgment. This serves as a warning to live righteously according to religion, and was a reason for people, regardless of their status, to live piously. *The Triumph of Death* shows how spirituality was becoming more prevalent in how people viewed their existence. The church's Benedictus Deus doctrine had recently pronounced that the soul would be judged directly after death rather than during the Last Judgment at the end of time.<sup>2</sup> This belief stresses the immediacy of judgment, the soul would not hang in limbo waiting for its fate, but rather be dealt with at the moment of death. The new

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<sup>2</sup> Boeckl, Christine. "The Pisan *Triumph of Death*."

outlook was very pessimistic in that few were believed to make it to heaven while many would be condemned to the fires of Hell.<sup>2</sup> The overwhelming amount of space occupied by the demons and Inferno compared to the angels communicates this negative perspective. *The Triumph of Death* conveys the message that one should fear the judgment of the soul rather than death itself.

The idea of spiritual immortality and consequence is possibly a result from the shortness of life at the time. It could give people something to look forward to after death, and as a way to rationalize it. Disaster and famine were responsible for many deaths during this period. When the Arno River flooded in 1333 thousands of lives were lost mainly in Florence and Pisa, a famine in 1328 also decimated the population for Florence, Siena and several other cities.<sup>6</sup> Such abrupt vanquishing of life make the rationalization of death even more applicable to the time. This concept becomes ironic with the title, Triumph of Death. The phrase insinuates that death will always conquer life, and that death is permanent. This however, is not the true theme of *The Triumph of Death*. The focus is rather on the continuation of life after death, that although death triumphs the earthly existence the spiritual existence lives on.<sup>3</sup> This was a prominent belief of the church at the time and speaks to how people used spirituality as a way to cope with catastrophe in Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

*The Triumph of Death* was an accessible and direct piece of art to anyone who viewed it because of its subject matter. It presents itself to a very heterogeneous

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<sup>2</sup> Boeckl, Christine. "The Pisan *Triumph of Death*."

<sup>6</sup> "Nuova Cronica." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuova\\_Cronica](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuova_Cronica) (accessed April 7, 2014).

audience.<sup>5</sup> There is no clear depiction of any saint or martyr, rather there are representations of everyday contemporary people. The corpses in the middle of the fresco can even be identified by gender and even profession as it is possible to pick out a doctor, merchant, bishop, and monk.<sup>3</sup> This visual “evidence” of familiar figures being taken to Heaven and Hell demonstrates how people were taking the concept of the afterlife very personally. Rather than envisioning biblical figures in these places they could imagine themselves there. This aspect of the fresco gives it a power that otherwise would not exist.

14<sup>th</sup> century Italy was a time filled with death and destruction. It was a part of life that no one could get away from, and many used religion to make sense of what would happen when one dies. The belief that the body exists both spiritually in the soul and physically was an extremely prevalent and important concept that is conveyed in *The Triumph of Death*.<sup>2</sup> It gave purpose and reason to live according to the church. It also reiterated the ultimate power held by the spiritual realm that everyone would eventually be judged by. The immortal soul would pay for the mortal sins was a rule people followed and lived under. At the other spectrum *The Triumph of Death* could also be viewed as a ray of hope and salvation from the crisis’ occurring all around. It could give people faith that the next world will not be as cruel as this one. Regardless of what this piece was a response to, if anything at all, it gives a powerful representation of the spiritual beliefs people lived by in Italy at the time.

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<sup>5</sup> Meiss, Millard. *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), Print.

<sup>3</sup> Carletti, Lorenzo and Francesca Polacci. “Transition Between Life and Afterlife.”

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