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Catalog Essay  
The Triumph of Death in Palermo

*The Triumph of Death* is a grand fresco that was commissioned for the Sclafani Piazza in 1446. There is little information on the artist and the patron. *The Triumph of Death* in Palermo was painted in the late Gothic style, a century after the Black Death. It became a popular artistic theme across Europe during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century and was a successful tool in terrifying people about the plague. *The Triumph of Death* was commonly recognized in that no description or text were necessary.<sup>1</sup> Unlike previous medieval paintings, the “Triumph” paintings did not inspire faith, however, the graphic images were instead used with intent to redirect panic from the plague and subtly scare people into paying attention to religion.<sup>2</sup> The paintings were commissioned for hospitals and cemeteries and served as a warning that the alive were being judged by the dead; people should be careful not to sin for they would suffer as a result of the plague. The belief of the cause of the plague impacted what artists depicted in their paintings and gradually affected future iconography.

The scene depicted in *The Triumph of Death* in Palermo, which can be analyzed in 6 parts, is located in a garden surrounded by a hedge, with groups of people cluttering the edges of the painting. In the center, a skeleton, personifying “Death” and riding an emaciated horse, interrupts the scene, carrying a scythe and shooting arrows from a bow. At the top left a man walks two dogs on taut leashes, one of the dogs appearing disturbed and growling and the other sniffing the hedge. Below the dogs in the lower left corner is a group of people that interpreters have suggested are survivors of the plague, having not endured any arrows or injuries from the

riding skeleton. In this group, two figures look out at the viewer, one holding a paintbrush. After the plague, as art was being commissioned by more classes of people, people began demanding to have themselves be painted among their favored sacred figures.<sup>3</sup> This tradition carries on into the next century as the unknown artist discretely appears on the left hand side with his apprentice. Below the horse in the center are the victims of the plague, all of whom are virtues of the world and represent different classes of wealth; the bishops, a pope, an emperor, a sultan, and a man of law. Some have expressions of acceptance while others show fear of their fate.<sup>4</sup> The crowns and mitres that top their heads demonstrate that with all their power on Earth, they still have not been able to protect themselves from the plague. Their death is evident by the unanimous grey skin and their rigid and stiff clothes, describing rigor mortis.

However, at the bottom right next to the unfortunate dead, are a group of well-dressed nobles, shown with the color of healthy flesh.<sup>5</sup> They present themselves with prose and calmness, despite a recently targeted young couple kneeling on the ground together, agony in their faces.<sup>6</sup> Others have just begun to notice the arrows flying towards them. A man holding a lute has a look of trepidation as Death is coming near. At the top right, above the nobles, another group of people surround a gothic style fountain, which symbolizes life and grace. A harpist plays music and all seems idyllic as courtiers talk among themselves, appearing unaware of Death's presence. Poets, musicians, and women stand around the fountain, wearing elegant clothing. Some faces show uncertainty that Death may be lurking while the skeleton's arrows do not seem to register to others. This ghastly scene troubles the viewer as each group of people is about to meet their fate, whether they are aware or not.

The theme of death, particularly Danse Macabre, or the Dance of Death became a favorable motif in art and literature following the tragedy of the Black Death of the 1340s.<sup>7</sup> The Dance of Death is characterized by skeletons in different forms, such as rising from graveyards, riding some kind of animal, or dueling God. The skeleton horse is most likely one of the first iconographic examples of Death riding a horse.<sup>8</sup> Death was sudden and unexpected; images would show a skeleton choosing its victim's fate, either damnation or salvation. The painting features strong themes of macabre and misery, aspects of which were commonly confronted in Italy during the Black Death as people attempted to articulate the masses of death by creating images and art based on their experiences.

Painters used this theme of death to make points about social class<sup>9</sup>; all classes were on equal levels in terms of death, regardless of background, in that anyone could suffer from the plague. In *The Triumph of Death*, the skeleton riding the horse represents evil as he mows down the living with his deadly arrows<sup>10</sup>, the powerful rulers losing their lives first. The crowds of peasants and lower classes beg Death to spare their lives and instead take the privileged classes although their<sup>1</sup> deaths would not be seen as tragic as the noble. Death in itself is portrayed as a privilege as the poor beg for deliverance but are ignored and left to suffer on Earth. The group of people on the left bottom corner in *The Triumph of Death* are shown alive as monks and hermits who were able to live in isolation and dodge the disease.

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph P. Byrne, "Encyclopedia of the Black Death" (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 102

<sup>11</sup> Allen, Michael J.B., Rabil, Albert Jr.; Rona Goffen, Bridget Gellert Lyons, Colin Eisler, Gene A. Brucker; "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy." *Renaissance Quarterly*. no. 3 (1994): 493

In this specific *Triumph of Death* scene, Death launches arrows to all of the social classes. It is an instrument of sudden death, a weapon of God's armory in the Old Testament in which it states that "God promises judgment upon the wicked". The arrow symbolizes the plague being thrown upon humanity by an angry God.<sup>11</sup> Another common motif along with the Danse Macabre is the location of the stricken arrow in Death's victims. Throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> century the placement of the arrows became more precise as Death is shown throwing down arrows at anyone in its path including youth and the carefree. In *The Triumph of Death* nobles and lower class alike are struck in the neck, reiterating that the disease was ubiquitous. The specific location of the neck represents the lymphatic system in the human body that would be the first to respond to the symptoms of the bubonic plague. The arrow remains the most consistent metaphor for the result of the Black Death simultaneously reducing God's responsibility for the mass tragedy. Past, present, and future victims are shown with arrows puncturing their bodies.

*The Triumph of Death*, in the Palazzo Sclafani, Palermo, represents a theme that had been concurrent throughout Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup> century after the bubonic plague. After the Black Death, plague continued to methodically attack Europe. Art had begun being commissioned by all classes, not just for religious purposes but to decorate their burial places, churches, and homes. *The Triumph of Death* itself is curious as a subject matter because the content, exhibiting a horse with a skeleton riding its back, reflects the devastation of the Black Death in 1348, despite being produced a century later. As a result, the fresco displays evolved forms of iconography that have been concurrent in Italian art since the plague of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.



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