



The Dance of Death

Hans Holbein

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Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543), remembered today for his insightful portraits, was better known in his own time for his varied and extensive graphic works, the most celebrated of which was The Dance of Death. This work, from the woodblocks of collaborator Hans Lützelburger, was first published in book form in 1538.

The theme of the dance of death was a popular one of the sixteenth century. Holbein captured the feeling of death, the leveler, in its attack on all classes, both sexes, and all ages. A stylized skeleton seizes the child from his mother's breast. The skeleton snatches, plays, tugs, and cavorts throughout the rest of the book. The king, emperor, pope, and cardinal must cease from their functions. The skull is thrust into the face of the astrologer. The hourglass runs out onto the floor. Countess, nun, sailor, peddler, senator are all stopped by the common force. Forty-one finely cut, highly detailed woodcuts capture the single motif, *Memento mori*: "Remember, you will die." Although the theme is common, the variety of expressions, social groups, backgrounds, styles of dress and architecture, and calls to death are so varied that each one is unique in its power.

This edition, reprinting the unabridged 1538 edition, is the first in a series reprinting great rare books from the Rosenwald Collection. Besides the woodcuts, the book contains a prefatory letter by Jean de Vauz  le and various quotations, depictions, and meditations on death, deaths of men, and the necessity of death. A repeated series of the 41 woodblocks follows the reprinted work and contains English translations of the quotations and verses. Art historians and social historians will find this to be one of the best depictions of class life caught at its fateful moment. The collector will find this to be the finest reproduction of one of Holbein's major works.

The Dance of Death Details

Date : Published June 1st 1971 by Dover Publications (first published 1538)

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Author : Hans Holbein

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From Reader Review The Dance of Death for online ebook

Richard Smith says

This is a fine book. It's mainly Holbein's drawings given a page of each, but there's also clear text that provides the context and describes the drawings.

I've written a blog about it, arguing that it will be the perfect Christmas present:

<https://richardswsmith.wordpress.com/...>

David Schaafsma says

I read this because of Jan Maat's very helpful and enthusiastic review. One reason I read it is that I am interested in comics, in sequential art, which Scott McCloud told/reminded me has been around for centuries. Holbein is known more for his paintings today, but in his time he was especially known for The Dance of Death, accomplished between 1523 and 1525, which I am tempted to call a comic book, though it is most certainly a sequential visual narrative, beginning with Adam and proceeding through history, where Death visits a range of people, one per black and white woodcut. The Swiss version of the Reformation was happening all around him so it gets reflected in his drawings. Yes, even the rich and powerful are visited by Death. The Great Equalizer.

Each image itself tells its own story, sometimes with wit, sometimes with horror. Of course as Ingmar Bergman's The Seventh Seal, focused on The Great Plague--The Black Death, peaking in Europe from 1347 to 1351--reminds us, the sixteenth century wasn't the only time people thought of the mythological/allegorical/literal character of Death. Holbein picked up on that theme and made it his own, for his time. An amazing work of art, which I got from the library, but now will buy, for sure.

But read Jan Maat's review for a more thorough and entertaining treatment.

The whole sequence/narrative of The Dance of Death can be viewed here for free:

<https://publicdomainreview.org/collec...>

But also included in my Penguin edition is Holbein's "Alphabet of Death" which can be found here:

<http://www.dodedans.com/Eholbeinalf.htm>

which I had not recalled seeing before, but it is clear where Edward Gorey got his similar idea for his own Alphabet of Death. As Jan Maat reminds me, there's a comic strain that runs from Holbein through 7th Seal, which is very much also in Gorey. Maybe this is the origin of the concept of "Black humor," that it originates in stories of the Black Death:

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2011/01...>

The Knight meets Death in The Seventh Seal by Ingmar Bergman and plays chess with him:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4yXB...>

The Dove, a 1968 film that parodies Bergman's *Seventh Seal*, has its own appearance of Death, though not as a chess player, but a badminton player (!), and again, extends this idea of making fun of Death:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dov...

Matt Kelly says

A really great way to learn about a particular artist. The first 100 pages or so are dedicated to the woodcuts from Holbein, followed by a contemporary commentary on the woodcuts, plus a short biography of Holbein, which sets the scene for the period under which they were crafted.

Jan-Maat says

Wow, absolutely incredible, a lucky find.

Spotting the spine on a bookshop shelf I thought 'what is this? Did masterpainter Hans Holbein write books too?'

Well no, he didn't, but this is a book and he is not it's writer. What the book is, is a reproduction of his woodcut series *The Dance of Death* with the *the Alphabet of Death*, and in this edition an accompanying essay by Ulinka Rublack.

In the 1520s Holbein was based in the Swiss city of Basel, there he was a struggling artist and in an effort to become a wealthy and successful artist he set upon a scheme to collaborate with a woodcut carving expert to make a series of prints, a cycle on the theme of the dance of death to be sold as separate individual sheets, in order to demonstrate the skills of the artist each print was 65 by 48 mm or 2³/₇th by 1⁸/₉ths of an inch on a full sized sheet of blank paper. In this edition the publishers kindly increased the reproductions to 127 by 97mm and they still seem absurdly detailed, the fingers twitch for a magnifying glass. Well Hans Holbein proposes, while God disposes, Death was so charmed that he danced off with the carver and a few of the printers involved and the project fell through first in Basel, and then in Lyons where the wood cuts ended up, however eventually still in Lyons - one of the great centres of printing at the time - Holbein's pictures were bound into a set and published with some text - this edition then pirated and printed in various European centres, Holbein naturally never saw a groat, a penny, or another coin in any currency of the profits - but that's the publishing world of Early Modern Europe for you, by the time of the eventual publishing success Holbein was in England painting *The Ambassadors*, and in time he specialised in painting the good and the great of Tudor England and got to be able to buy himself a big house in Basel.

Of course you may be thinking that you have seen *The Seventh Seal* and found Death leading a variety of people through a jolly dance far less fun than you might have expected, and indeed not only are these woodcuts also in Black and white, but the general idea is similar, the series starts with the Creation, illustrates the story of Adam and Eve before plunging into portraits of representatives of the social classes from the Pope, via the emperor, a King, Duke, Duchess, Cardinal, Bishop and so on, down to a Ploughman, a child, the Last Judgement and the Arms (as in heraldry) of Death. Amazingly detailed and witty, in the

commentary (view spoiler) the images are placed in the context of the Reformation, and the artist's desire for guilders and ecus to appeal to as large an audience as possible, but also to ideas of social justice, Death takes the rich and powerful by the hand while they have their gazes fixed on other wealthy people, or their worldly goods while they ignore the poor. Death at the same time labours with Adam and the Ploughman, perhaps not the constant companion you most desire, but at least someone who is with you when you need them. Often Death holds an hourglass - their time is up, or maybe, if they paid by the hour, then they paid too much.

Tremendous. An amazing thing to own, find your own copy (view spoiler)

Jaclyn says

Bought the Dover Fine Arts edition, may look into the Penguin one because the woodcuts are reproduced in this book at about 1 inch wide by 2 inches tall and the bulk of the French text is not translated, only the Bible passages and rhymes accompanying the woodcuts are and you can't just plug French from the 1500's into Google Translate.

Pat says

Hans Holbein the Younger (Artist & Printmaker, German, circa 1498-1543)

41 very small woodcuts by Holbein. When will I learn? I expected to see full size artwork - as on the cover - throughout the book. Instead, 2x3" illos more like big postage stamps. And, of course, the text is in medieval French so you know I bought this solely for the artwork. The rating reflects my disappointment in the illo size: miniscule. Holbein's a master but break out your magnifying glass for this one. Bummer.

Erwin says

Fascinating leather bound limited edition with beautiful woodcut illustrations of one of Holbeins key works.

James says

Wonderful edition of Holbein's woodcuts. The pictures themselves show death approaching both high and low, and are highly critical of the lives of those who live in pomp but ignore the poor. An excellent short biography of the artist and contextualization of the work in terms of Reformation politics is included.

Dan Vine says

Commentary is good but it is hard to pair up images with commentary, especially as there are no page numbers on the images.

Marie-pierre Stien says

A lovely book of Holbein's woodcut.

Mariana Orantes says

Yo sé que estas ediciones baratas dan desconfianza, pero debo decir a su favor que es una buena edición. Es bilingüe y es edición facsimilar con los grabados de 1538. Además, la traducción es de José M. Tola, que originalmente salió en 1977 en una edición de Premiá y en su momento esa y una edición de Madrid (Erisa 1980), eran las únicas dos ediciones. Aunque la de Madrid su introducción no venía firmada y reproducía no la versión de 1538 sino la de 1758. Así que ésta es una edición confiable que rescata Ediciones Coyoacán y es muy barata (de 60 a 70 pesos según donde se compre). Ayer que fui a tomar café con mi querido amigo Iván Viñas, decidí comprarla aunque para mi fortuna, Iván me la regaló.

A mi me viene de perlas para mi proyecto, pues resuelve muchas de mis dudas sobre la concepción de la muerte por aquellos años. Y une las tres partes esenciales: el discurso, la intención y una representación. Además reelabora versos de la biblia para unirlos con la figura de la muerte y la salvación. Los grabados van más allá de lo que dicen los versos de Holbein. Es decir, primero un verso de la biblia ("Médico, cúrate a ti mismo" Lucas 4,23) después una re-elaboración del verso en una cuarteta que una el concepto de lo que dice la biblia con lo que es (o será) la muerte: "Tú conoces bien la enfermedad / para asistir al paciente / Y sin embargo no podrás decir / del mal que tú deberás morir." Y después viene una representación gráfica del concepto que va más allá de la cuarteta, así como la cuarteta fue más allá del verso de la biblia. Además es interesante la cantidad de voces, pues mientras el verso de la biblia le habla a alguien, los de Holbein pueden hablarle a alguien o pueden estar en una primera persona. Podría seguir escribiendo cosas sobre este libro, pero creo que cada quien debe leerlo y disfrutarlo a su manera.

Joe says

[Holbein's wood engravings begin with Death in the background as Adam and Eve fall. From this moment onwards, Death is forever present. Either you are led to your grave as he plays his drums, or you ascend during the Last Judgment.

Sometimes Death is seen as justice, denouncing greed and bribery, but it is important to remember that he is not selective. Death affects all classes, ages, and sexes. He also likes to play musical instruments whilst doing his job.

Some of my favourites:

The fool, as he plays music with Death

Death, playing on a dulcimer, leads an old man into his grave

Death steals the youngest child.

Carl says

an excellent edition of Holbein's woodcuts focused on death and its effect on all aspects and levels of society in renaissance Europe. Here each woodcut is enlarged to full page size to better see the exquisite details. The original woodcuts were roughly 3 inches by 2 inches!

almost worth the price of admission itself is Ursula Reblack's 100 pages biographical essay which cover's Holbein's life and the creation of the woodcuts and how the social political and religious turbulence of reformation Europe affected their creation.

Marinovski says

Maravillosísimo <3

Graychin says

Hans Holbein the Younger is perhaps my favorite portraitist. His painting of the merchant Georg Giese holds a special fascination, though I've never seen it in person (it's in Berlin). On a recent east coast vacation, my family and I were able to see Holbein's portraits of Sir Brian Tuke and the infant Edward VI in Washington DC, and of Margaret Roper (daughter of Thomas More) and the so-called Man in the Red Cap in New York City. I wish we'd seen the portrait of Margaret's father at the Frick, but by that time we were so overgorged on museums we preferred sweating like pigs under the angry sun in Central Park.

It was in New York, too, at the Strand Booksore, that I bought a copy of Holbein's *Dance of Death*. As a wordless woodcut novel (of sorts), you might compare it to Frans Masereel's *Passionate Journey* or Lynd Ward's *God's Man*. But the differences are telling, I think. As moderns, Ward and Masereel (who was far the better of the two) each describe the story of an everyman hero struggling against various oppressive forces and lures of society toward a pinnacle of achievement or self-realization. In Masereel's story, the tale ends with the protagonist's enlightened spirit straddling the ball of Earth in the form of a cosmic skeletal flaneur.

The hero, or antihero, of Holbein's story is Death. He makes his first appearance as an interloper, a jaunty skeleton playing the lute alongside Adam and Eve at their tearful expulsion from Paradise. He goes on to consort with bishops and feast with kings. He fraternizes with judges and merchants and soldiers. He drives the plow, bribes the official, takes the child away from her parents. He keeps house with all, is the bosom companion in every endeavor, the noseless horror lurking behind every joy. Man's achievement are nothing to him, man's self-realization mere farce. But Death is conspicuously absent from two panels that bookend Holbein's story, The Creation and The Last Judgment.

