Art and Design

The Regression the Black Death Brought to Art

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For six horrifying years from 1346 until 1351, an illness called the Black Death pushed Renaissance Art into a recession. The progress that Giotto di Bondone and other artists of the time had made in their frescos and paintings all vanished as painters turned to the more traditional Byzantine and Gothic styles. Many believe that since so many people were dying from the plague, painters turned to the old styles and content to point toward heaven and to give their viewers hope for the life to come after death (Meiss, 6).

Before the Black Death, painters such as Giotto di Bondone were revolutionizing painting by adding the illusion of space, true proportions, narrative, portraying Jesus as an actual baby, placing figures in this world with a blue sky instead of a heavenly, gold atmosphere, and not adding Gothic ornaments. These advances can be seen in the paintings at Giotto’s Arena Chapel, especially in the Presentation in the Temple (1310). This fresco shows a background not of a heavenly scene but rather an earthly one identified by the blue sky. Giotto’s figures are turned at an angle (Meiss, 6). The figures all have emotions expressed in their body language and in their facial expressions. Jesus’ expression is that of a real baby reaching for his mother in the midst of strangers. The figures also have weight and have bodies defined by their drapery (Borenius, 277). All of the figures work together to depict the Bible story of Jesus’ presentation at the temple with Anna and Simon’s finally seeing the Savior of the world, as the Lord had promised. Giotto’s advances and those of other modern artists, however, were about to regress in the cultural crisis of the Black Death (Meiss, 8).

The Black Death spread all across Asia and into Europe by trade routes. Rats carrying infected fleas were aboard Chinese trading ships and were taken into western sea ports, such as Messina and Sicily (Cunningham and Reich, 237). When the fleas jumped off the rats and onto humans, they injected the bacteria of the Black Death, Yersinia Pestis, into their system and subsequently infecting their human host. The most common form of the Black Death was the bubonic plague. This malady involves painful boils and growths in the armpits, groin and neck, infection of the blood, and attacks on the respiratory system (Bjork, 1313). Because the cities were overcrowded from refugees of famine,
the disease spread quickly.

Physicians had never seen an illness like the Black Death before and did not know how to treat or prevent this mysterious illness. As a result, the Black Death killed two-thirds of the population in Europe (Cunningham and Reich, 238). Corpses arrived at the door steps of churches every morning. When the graves were full, grave diggers dug trenches in which to place the bodies (Beck, 417). Henry Knight observed that “people died as if the whole strength of the city were seized by sudden death” (Beck, 417). Giovanni Boccaccio recalled that corpses were being dumped in the trenches by the hundreds (Beck, 417). Because of the unknown illness that was wiping out most of the population, people began to respond in different ways.

Many people turned to the church and religion to seek answers and divine help. Monks and other Christians thought that they had done something wrong to anger God, who punished them by sending the Black Death. Church priests begged their congregations to repent their sins (Holmes, 327). The Black Death caused religious revival, as reflected in the artwork of the time.

During this time of religious desperation, the wealthy commissioned more religious paintings for churches, often to atone for their sins. Artists responded by turning to the older styles of painting, emphasizing heaven in order to give their viewers hope for the life to come after death (Meiss, 27). The style changed from a more contemporary style to a more conservative one: the Byzantine style.

Byzantine artists produced works that emphasized the power and spirituality of the Christian Church. For example, many artists used gold backgrounds to symbolize a heavenly realm in their paintings (Jones, 818). The images were usually two-dimensional on a flat surface. The figures in the paintings were also depicted floating or suspended. The frontal figures often symbolized a divine presence; divine figures were depicted wearing rich colors, such as red, blue, and gold (Jones, 819). This type of art that had been dominant in the thirteenth century was now being brought back.

For example, if one compares Andrea da Cione’s Strozzi Altarpiece (1354–57) to Giotto’s Enthroned Madonna of 1310, the return to a more conservative, hierarchical composition is evident. The background is made of gold, so the viewer knows that this scene takes place in Heaven. In addition, the viewer sees Christ in a frontal view, symbolizing His divinity (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 63). Jesus seems to be floating on his throne as angels hold him up; his face looks serious as if to remind the viewer of the judgment to come. Jesus as well as the other figures are flat and appear to inhabit a two-dimensional space. The figures are also wearing traditional Byzantine colors of red, blue, and gold (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 63).

Kneeling before Christ is one of the most important of all medieval Dominicans, St. Thomas Aquinas. This is fitting because Dominicans were focused on leading souls to heaven, and many people were turning to religion during the time of the plague (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 63). At the
left, Saint Michael stands over the slayed dragon, representing defeat of the devil. This image of Saint Michael gave hope to the viewer that during this time of trial, the devil would not win and would be defeated. Beside Jesus are frontal depictions of John the Baptist and Mary, who gesture to the viewer that He is the way to salvation.

This regression is seen more clearly when compared to one of the more advanced pieces of art work done before the Black Death. In 1310, Giotto painted a heavenly scene titled Enthroned Madonna. This piece displays modern characteristics rather than Byzantine, even though it was portraying a heavenly scene. Mary did not have a tilted head like the typical Byzantine Mary, but rather she is now depicted upright and has mass to her body. The viewer can even see the outline of her body beneath the drapery. The throne is solid and not floating, nor is it being held up in any way; therefore, it is subject to gravity. Also, the throne shows three-dimensional elements by revealing saints behind the openings (Strayer, 531). The steps leading up to the throne are three-dimensional. This comparison shows the regression of the Black Death and the effect it had in art. Turning away from the more modern styles, artists turned back to Byzantine ways in hopes of encouraging their audience to look to heaven in the midst of disease and famine.

Finally in 1351, the Black Death vanished when the population finally acquired immunity to the Yersinia Pestis bacterium (Strayer, 267). Unfortunately, by the end of the Black Death, two-thirds of the known world’s population had died of the bubonic plague. Because of its effect on the population, religious art regressed back to the Byzantine style. In the end, however, countries and their citizens recovered and overcame the destruction of the Black Death.
Bibliography

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