

---

## Close Encounters with Death: Changing Representations of Women in Renaissance Art and Literature

---

*Dagmar Eichberger*

DEATH IS A RECURRENT THEME in art and literature; as would be expected it is often incorporated into commemorative forms of art such as tomb sculpture, portraiture and altarpieces. During the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance one specific representation, the Dance of Death, gained immensely in popularity; images depicting the personification of Death were seen in both public and private places. In the first section of this paper, I will examine the composition and development of the Dance of Death theme between 1400 and 1530; in the second, I will investigate how this theme was developed further and adapted to other subjects, such as 'Death and the Maiden'—an image that captured the imagination of artists, writers and musicians well into the nineteenth century.

In medieval art the abstract notion of death is made more comprehensible by depicting both corporal and spiritual death as a partly decayed human body or as an animated skeleton. Death frequently holds a weapon, either an arrow or a sickle, and is draped in a sheet of linen, a further reference to the corpse. Carved wooden or ivory statuettes, such as the wooden image of Death by Hans Leinberger (Fig. 91), were popular collector's items and served the owner as a visual reminder of death.<sup>1</sup> Such skilfully crafted objects had the

---

1. Hans Leinberger, E. Scheicher, O. Gamber, K. Wegerer and A. Auer, *Die Kunstammer, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Sammlungen Schloß Ambras* (Innsbruck: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1977), cat. no. 309, 120.

power both to please the eye of the connoisseur and, at the same time, to terrify the devout beholder.

In the prolific literature on the theme of death, and the Dance of Death in particular, historians, musicologists, literary scholars and art historians have emphasized the heightened awareness of death in the late Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> The imminent threat of the loss of one's life forced people to accept death as part of everyday life. Epidemic illnesses such as pestilence and syphilis and constant dangers such as war and famine made human life precarious and unpredictable.

Christians were particularly apprehensive about being unprepared for a sudden death. Dying unexpectedly, that is without confession and Extreme Unction, was considered a great misfortune because it lessened one's chances of passing straight to heaven. In the *Breviary of Jost van Silenen*, Death takes a young couple completely by surprise (Fig. 92).<sup>3</sup> It viciously attacks the young woman who enjoys the pleasures of life by taking a stroll with her young lover. This unusual image, which is placed at the beginning of the Office of the Dead, is a reminder to the reader to prepare more carefully for death and the afterlife. In the fifteenth century, treatises such as the *Ars bene Moriendi* ('Art of Dying well') were used as aids in preparing for death and were meant to warn against submitting to worldly temptation. Medieval representations of Death are found in many different contexts—tomb sculpture, frescoes, stained glass, paintings and prints. Even a household item such as a wooden hanger for towels would sometimes be decorated with *Memento Mori* ('Remember Death') imagery, such as a double-faced portrait, with one side a beautiful queen and the other a macabre skeleton. In harmony with theological treatises, artists frequently stress the transitory nature of beauty, youth, love and happiness. Late medieval life was permeated with images of death and decay that often border on the macabre and the grotesque. This fascination with death must be considered within a broader system of belief which controlled everyday life in a predominantly Christian society. Anxiety about the Last Judgement and the possibility of eternal damnation is found in theological writings, sermons and prayer. Evidence of this concern is manifested in a predisposition towards doing charitable acts, in the purchasing of indulgences and in the establishing

- 
2. The considerable body of literature on this subject includes these major studies: W. Stammer, *Der Totentanz. Entstehung und Deutung*, (Munich, 1948); E. Koller, *Totentanz. Versuch einer Textbeschreibung* (Innsbruck, 1980); S. Cosacchi, *Makabertanz. Der Totentanz in Kunst, Poesie und Brauchtum des Mittelalters*, (Meisenheim, 1965); H. Rosenfeld, *Der Mittelalterliche Totentanz. Entstehung—Entwicklung—Bedeutung*, (Vienna, 1974); R. Hammerstein, *Tanz und Musik des Todes. Die mittelalterlichen Totentänze und ihr Nachleben* (Bern and Munich, 1980). All of the monumental cycles and frescoed images treating this subject have been listed in a recent illustrated catalogue: *Tanz der Toten—Totentanz: der monumentale Totentanz im deutschsprachigen Raum*, exh. cat., (Kassel, 1998), 71–326.
  3. Zürich, Schweizerisches Landesmuseum, LM 4624, f. 359, see: P. Jetzler, ed., *Himmel, Hölle, Fegefeuer. Das Jenseits im Mittelalter*, exh. cat., Zürich, Schweizerisches Landesmuseum (Munich, 1994), cat. no. 71, 256.

of religious foundations. Detailed illustrations of Death and the Last Judgement communicated these ideas to the general public.<sup>4</sup>

Images of the Dance of Death are best understood within this broader spiritual framework. They flourished between 1400 and 1530, but can still be found as late as the nineteenth century;<sup>5</sup> during the fifteenth century detailed fresco cycles treating the Dance of Death began to appear throughout Europe.<sup>6</sup> The term 'Dance of Death' is generally used to describe a processional sequence of images, depicting men, women and children, in which each human figure is coupled with a representation of Death, depicted as either a male or a female corpse; the dance partners usually move from right to left. These cycles appeared in churches, castles, cloisters, cemeteries, woodcuts or illuminated manuscripts.

Dance of Death cycles were also depicted on the walls of cemeteries; the most famous examples were in the large cemeteries of Paris, London, Großbasel and Bern.<sup>7</sup> For the most part these cemeteries have now disappeared, but their decoration has sometimes been documented in paintings, prints and drawings. The Dominican and Franciscan Orders played a prominent role in the development and propagation of Dance of Death iconography, which may partly account for the didactic nature of these early cycles.

The musicologist Reinhold Hammerstein argues that the Dance of Death should be understood as a processional dance of the dead across the cemetery towards the ossuary or charnel house.<sup>8</sup> His reading of this iconography applies in particular to examples such as Metnitz in Carinthia, or the cemeteries in Paris and Basle. In the case of Metnitz, the frescoes have been painted directly onto the walls of the charnel house, where they are unmistakably as a reminder of things to come.<sup>9</sup>

The ominous message of these frescoes is illustrated further by a set of rhymes arranged in dialogue format in many later cycles.<sup>10</sup> These moralizing texts were generally situated beneath the pictorial frieze and were written in the vernacular so that everyone could understand the grave significance of the images. In most cases Death addresses its victims directly and invites them to join in the dance. In the first stanza Death comments in a satirical mode on the temptations inherent in each profession, specifying the shortcomings of the

---

4. *Ibid.*, especially: P. Jetzler, 'Jenseitsmodelle und Jenseitsworsorge—eine Einführung' (Jetzler, 1994), 13–26.

5. There are even some examples dating from the twentieth century, see *Tanz der Toten* (1998), 275–325.

6. Hammerstein (1980), 66–98.

7. *Ibid.*, 70, 77, cat. no. 15 (Paris), 167–70, no. 16 (London), 170–71, no. 34 (Großbasel), 183–88, no. 49 (Bern), 215–18; see also: *Tanz der Toten—Totentanz* (Basle, 1990).

8. Hammerstein (1980), 60–71.

9. *Ibid.*, cat. no. 37 (Metnitz), 191–92; see also *Tanz der Toten* (1998), cat. no. 11 (Metnitz), 105–8.

10. Rosenfeld (1954), 81–102.

individual office holder. In the second the addressees respond, defending themselves against Death's charges.

The figures participating in the dance do not represent specific individuals, but are generic images pertaining to certain offices, professions or social groups. The participants in the dance are arranged hierarchically, starting with the most powerful individual and finishing with the person of lowest social standing. The social status, age, gender or profession of each person can be identified easily from the titles used in the text, as well as by their clothing and attributes.

While many fresco cycles are in ruin, the printed Dance of Death by the Parisian publisher V  rard provides a complete set of images, with the accompanying text in the shape of an illustrated broadsheet.<sup>11</sup> The printed frieze is 190 x 50 cm (Fig. 93).<sup>12</sup> While this cycle and the contemporary print series by Guyot Marchant (1485 and 1486) are rather late examples, we have reason to believe that these images were based on earlier formulations of the Dance of Death, such as the well-known frescoes from the Cemetery of Les Innocents in Paris.<sup>13</sup>

Dance of Death friezes often begin with a depiction of a preacher or a learned doctor in his study explaining the significance of death, heaven and hell to the viewer. Image and text together contrive to direct viewers towards salvation, encouraging them to lead a more Christian life and pointing out common vices and capital sins. The second last image in V  rard's broadsheet depicts the author with the naked corpse of a dead king, affirming that even kings must die and return to dust. The ubiquitous nature of death is encapsulated in the final image depicting the popular story of The Three Living and The Three Dead. This anecdote predates the Dance of Death, being found in illuminated manuscripts and frescoes, such as the *Psalter of Bonne de Luxembourg*, or on the walls of the Campo Santo in Pisa.<sup>14</sup>

A fascinating aspect of the Dance of Death iconography is the selection and distribution of individual figures across the complete narrative frieze.<sup>15</sup> There exist cycles with up to forty different individuals representing all levels of the social ladder, arranged to reflect the hierarchical structure of medieval society.

Dance of Death cycles generally begin with images of the higher clergy and the leading secular authorities—pope, king, cardinal, archbishop and duke, and so on. These are followed by the lower clergy and aristocracy—abbot,

11. Hammerstein (1980), cat. no. 19 ( V  rard-Druck, c.1485), 173–74 and no. 20 (V  rard-Bilderbogen, c.1490), 174–75.

12. Paris, BN, Cabinet des Estampes, Te. 8r  s. C 21297; see Hammerstein (1980), Figs 49–53, 70–71 ; A. Harrison, ed., *The Danse Macabre of Women, MS. fr. 995 of the Biblioth  que Nationale* (Kent, 1994).

13. Hammerstein (1980), 70–71, cat. no. 17 (Marchant-Druck I), 171–72, and no. 18 (Marchant-Druck II), 172–73.

14. *Tanz der T  ten* (1998), 79–82.

15. The diagram published in *Tanz der T  ten* lists the participants in seven cycles (1998, 125).

monk, knight and count. Next in line comes the civic hierarchy—merchant, mayor, councillor and scribe—followed by the lower ranks of society—peasant, cook, messenger and serf. There are also quite frequently depictions of fringe dwellers in late medieval society, such as the fool, usurer, heathen, Jew, cripple, robber, and gambler. While it is often said that death is the great leveller, these traditional Dance of Death cycles reaffirm class-distinction rather than neutralize social difference.

Whereas many painted Dance of Death cycles include at least a few women, such as queens, abbesses or countesses, the French broadsheets by the printers Marchant and Vêrard portray men only; these are known as the *Danse Macabre des Hommes* ('Macabre Dance of Men'). In 1486, Vêrard produced an exclusively female cycle of woodcuts, known as the *Danse Macabre des Femmes*, to complement his *Danse Macabre des Hommes*.<sup>16</sup>

Reinhold Hammerstein argues that the important annual civic dance may have influenced the basic structure of the Dance of Death.<sup>17</sup> He considers the *Basse Danse*, a popular late medieval dance form, to be the principal model for the Dance of Death.<sup>18</sup> The dance as metaphor for merry-making and feasting was thus used to attract the attention of medieval viewers, but when transposed into the Dance of Death it became an image of horror and dismay. These cycles often include a morbid orchestra, consisting of wildly gesticulating corpses playing a variety of instruments, a further reference to public dances. These macabre musicians seem to be summoning the dead from their tombs to participate in the event, as in, for example, the case in a German woodcut series known as *Knoblochtzter-Druck* (1485; Fig. 94).<sup>19</sup>

As mentioned above, some of the most famous cycles were commissioned by the mendicant Orders for the walls of cemeteries or ossuaries. One of the earliest and most influential cycles was found on the southern wall of the cemetery in Paris, and is replicated in a mid-sixteenth-century painting (Fig. 95);<sup>20</sup> the cemetery originally formed part of a large Franciscan monastery, in which the fresco was executed on the walls behind the arcades which supported the storage space for exhumed bones. Though the original frescoes were lost when the cemetery was destroyed towards the end of the eighteenth century, it is thought that the texts and structure of the decoration informed the print series by Verard and Marchant.

16. Harrison (1994), 1–7; see also: Hammerstein (1980), cat. no. 25 (*Frauentotentanz*), 177–78.

17. Hammerstein (1980), 75–77.

18. There is a second type of dance, the so-called 'Branle'-type, a kind of round dance, which Hammerstein sees as an alternative strand to the dance in pairs (1980, 66–74).

19. *Ibid.*, 83–87, cat. no. 46 (*Knoblochtzter-Druck*), 206–8; this printed Dance of Death cycle has also been published under the name *The Heidelberg Dance of Death*, see *Der Heidelberger Totentanz von 1485*, with comments by M. Lammer, (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1991).

20. 'Church and cemetery of the Franciscan monastery SS Innocents', anonymous Flemish painter, mid-sixteenth century, Paris, Musée Carnavalet.

The central panel of Simon Marmion's 'St Bertin Altarpiece' depicts a painted cycle and accompanying text on the walls of an enclosed cloister (Fig. 96).<sup>21</sup> While the Dance of Death fresco acts only as a backdrop for a scene from the life of St Bertin, this image nevertheless conveys a good impression of how such frescoes may have been experienced by a medieval audience—the fresco cycle extends across all three walls of the cloister and could be studied at close range. The immense popularity of such cycles is witnessed by the fact that illustrations of this kind were soon adopted for the decoration of the naves and aisles of churches; an example can still be seen in the church of Kermaria in Brittany; the frescoes date from the 1430s and reflect the influence of the Paris cycle.<sup>22</sup> Further examples of Dance of Death illustrations inside a church are found in Kernaskleden, La Ferté-Loupière, Lübeck and La Chaise-Dieu.<sup>23</sup>

The Dance of Death from the church of La Chaise-Dieu is one of the very few cycles which still exists *in situ*, though it is quite damaged.<sup>24</sup> The frieze was originally 26 m long and extended the length of the northern aisle; it originally comprised thirty couples. In the frescoes from La Chaise-Dieu Death takes away the distinguishing attributes of individuals and throws them to the ground, indicating the futility of human occupations; the peasant has been robbed of his sickle, the knight of his sword, and the musician has lost his hurdy-gurdy. There is one noblewoman among the twenty-nine males in this Dance of Death.

Since the middle of the fifteenth century, the predominance of the frescoed Dance of Death cycle was challenged by the printed Dance of Death, first in the shape of block books and later in books printed with movable types. Printed cycles such as the Heidelberg block book (1465) helped to disseminate the cycle to a wider audience, and allowed people to study these images both at home or when travelling.<sup>25</sup> The hand-coloured block book from Heidelberg is a principal witness for the German Dance of Death tradition (Plate 16). It originates near Basle and comprises twenty-five couples in its cycle. In comparison with the Verard cycle, the images are coarser and simpler in nature, though their message is just as clear. Confronted by Death, the victims drop their attributes—a doctor lets go of his vessel, the knight his sword, the merchant his bulging purse.

---

21. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, no. 1645; see also R. Grosshans, 'Simon Marmion and the Saint-Bertin Altarpiece. Notes on the genesis of the painting', in: T. Kren, ed., *Margaret of York, Simon Marmion and 'The Vision of Tondal'* (Malibu, 1992), 233–42.

22. Hammerstein (1980), 69, cat. no. 12 (Kermaria), 164–65.

23. *Ibid.*, 67–70, cat. no. 6 (Lübeck-Reval), 154–56, no. 11 (La Chaise-Dieu), 162–64, no. 13 (Kernaskleden), 165–66, no. 23 (La-Ferté-Loupière), 176–77.

24. Today only the underdrawings remain and approximately one-third of the painted cycle has been lost, including the text beneath the images.

25. Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, MS pal. 438, ff. 129–42, see: Hammerstein (1980), cat. no. 36 (Heidelberger Blockbuch), 189–91.

During the fifteenth century, the number of scenes continues to expand to include a wider variety of people who dwell in both the city and the surrounding countryside; in the Heidelberg block book there is a cripple, a cook, a peasant, and a child and its mother. Similar figures appear in the Dance of Death from the Dominican monastery in Bern,<sup>26</sup> which was commissioned in the early sixteenth century by leading patricians from Bern; they are designated by their individual coats of arms. A set of frescoes by Manuel Deutsch were destroyed with the cemetery in the seventeenth century to make room for the expanding city. His images were faithfully recorded, however, shortly before this (in 1660) by Albrecht Kauw; his text has come down to us in a transcript made in 1576 by Hans Kiener.<sup>27</sup> In comparison with the Heidelberg block book, Deutsch's rendition of the cook and the peasant are much more colourful and dramatic.

The Bern Dance of Death not only identifies the individual families who sponsored the production of this fine cycle of paintings, but also contains a self-portrait of the artist. The last scene from the Dance is followed by a depiction of the Last Judgement. In it Deutsch portrayed himself as a fashionable young man surrounded by the tools of his trade—several paint brushes and pots, a palette and a painting stick. He is putting the finishing touches to the last image in the Dance of Death cycle when Death strikes again, this time carrying off the painter himself. This play between reality and illusion reflects the new self-confidence of Renaissance artists. Deutsch had high social standing in the Bern community—in 1516 he was elected a member of the city council of Bern, and in 1523 he was appointed high bailiff of Erlach. He is well known for his social critique and erotic imagery. The image of 'Death and the Prostitute' (Fig. 97) was originally accompanied by these verses:

Death: My dear whore, your time has come  
 Now your heart will soon have peace and quiet.  
 You are about to leave your shameful life behind  
 to exercise on my bagpipe.

Whore: I have lived in sin  
 and did not raise my eyes to God  
 but provided pleasures to the body  
 now I am lost, all is in vain.<sup>28</sup>

The introduction of such imagery to the Dance of Death iconographic scheme cannot, however, be credited to Deutsch. It appears earlier in a printed French Dance of Death which focuses exclusively on women. Marchant's

26. P. Zinsli, *Der Berner totentanz des Niklaus Manuel* (Bern, 1953).

27. *Ibid.*, 7 (fn. 7) and 10; the watercolours by Kauw date from 1649 and have been preserved in the Historisches Museum in Bern.

28. This is my translation, based on the text published by Kiener.

'Dance Macabre of Women' (c.1500) contains an image of a prostitute, ambiguously referred to as an 'amorous woman'. This gender-specific cycle became very popular at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The most luxurious edition of this specifically female programme is found in an illuminated French manuscript (Paris, BN, MS fr. 995), dating from the early sixteenth century; it derives from the 1491 printed edition by Marchant, but develops its ideas further.<sup>29</sup> Up until 1480, French Dance of Death cycles had concentrated on male office-bearers to portray a hierarchical cross-section of society. In the 1480s, artists began to represent women in their professional and private social roles in the 'Macabre Dance of Women'. The male and the female cycles were often treated as a set and bound together in a single volume. It is uncertain what caused this new cycle to develop at the end of the fifteenth century. It may have been because women were now important patrons of printed books and illuminated manuscripts and thus were perceived to be potential clients for these new cycles.<sup>30</sup> They offered a fresh response to the traditional subject of the Dance of Death and personalized the confrontation with Death.

The earliest known source for the 'Macabre Dance of Women' is an unillustrated manuscript dating from 1482.<sup>31</sup> It contains descriptions of thirty women of different social roles and positions. Guyot Marchant's first printed version (1486) describes thirty-four encounters between Death and women.<sup>32</sup> The designer of the female cycle was confronted with a problem in so far as it was not always possible to find a female equivalent for a specific office in the well-established male cycle—for example, for the Pope. Thus Marchant introduced a range of women who acquired positions of influence and power through marriage—the queen, the duchess, the knight's or squire's lady and the bailiff's wife. In the case of women from towns and villages direct reference is not made to their marital status, but rather to their social context.

These secular types are complemented by a smaller number of women, who dedicated their lives to the Church—the abbess, the prioress, the female Franciscan and the nun. Next follows a small number of professional women, who are enlisted to fill the ranks—the wet nurse, the shepherdess, the saleswoman, the prostitute, the bathhouse attendant, the chambermaid, the hosteller and the female fool. This list is interesting in so far as it shows the broad range or areas in which women were professionally active at the time.

In addition to the occupational images there is another interesting group of female prototypes that represents different aspects of a woman's world—the female life cycle—the young girl, the debutante, the bride, the pregnant woman, the darling wife, the widow, the aged debutante, the wealthy old

29. S. Hindman, 'The Illustrations', in Harrison (1994), 19–25.

30. See, for example, M. Orth, 'Louise de Savoie et le pouvoir du livre', in K. Wilson-Chevalier, ed., *Royaume de Féminie. Pouvoir, contraintes, espaces de liberté des femmes, de la Renaissance à la Fronde* (Geneva, 1999), 71–90.

31. Harrison (1994), 1–2.

32. *Ibid.*, 5–6.



woman and the poor old woman on crutches. The accompanying texts reiterate the warning that death can strike anyone at any time; no one is exempt.<sup>33</sup>

What can be said, however, about the 'Female Theologian' (Fig. 98) and the witch, two types which represent neither a profession nor a social rank? The appearance of the female theologian suggests that well-educated religious women who could speak their minds were regarded as a threat in some quarters. Authors such as Juan Luis Vives encourage women to read prescribed devotional texts and study certain theological writings;<sup>34</sup> at the same time, however, he advises women to remain at home and to study privately. Participating in public debates or engaging in public speaking was considered an inappropriate activity for women, and was even described as dangerous by Vives. The text describing the nature of the female theologian expresses scorn for educated women who transgressed these boundaries:

Death:     Won't you say anything new, Madame Theologian,  
               About the Old or New Testament?  
               You see how I lead you away and you are already very old.  
               It is good to recognize this  
               and to take the trouble to die well.  
               It is a great thing to know yourself.

Female Theologian:

A woman who speaks as a member of the clergy,  
 to have a following or to be listened to,  
 is one of the codfish on the Petit Pont  
 Who have large eyes and see nothing.  
 Wise is the one who sails smoothly around,  
 and the one who wants to know too much is a noisy calf.  
 Rising high often costs dearly. We are all blind in our deeds.<sup>35</sup>

There are two more images which do not fit into the categories mentioned above—the female hypocrite and the so-called 'friendly woman'; the related text confirms that these are condescending labels for gender-specific behaviour. This dialogue accompanies the image of the female hypocrite:

Death:     God surely loves pious women  
               who have clear consciences,  
               and he hates hypocrites after all.  
               They wear hoods without veils  
               like some nuns in high collars.  
               Through hypocrisy they are depraved, in secret sins,  
               before God and his company.

33. For the original text with English translation, see Harrison (1994), 46–132.

34. Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman in a Sixteenth-century Manual*, C. Fantazzi, ed. and trans. (Chicago and London), Ch. V, 73–79.

35. Harrison (1994), 78.

## Female Hypocrite:

I wore the look of someone blessed,  
 often better than I was.  
 Without any effort I ate heartily pretending to fast,  
 with a trembling mouth not saying or reading a word  
 I pray to God that it may please him,  
 to send my soul on the right path.<sup>36</sup>

The verses in the 'Macabre Dance of Women' are didactic texts composed to point out to women their specific weaknesses so that they might have the opportunity while alive to prepare their souls for death. Most of the female characters depicted behave in an exemplary fashion and demonstrate remorse.

Male and female Dance of Death cycles exerted considerable influence on everyday life—they became a source and inspiration for artists and writers alike. By presenting viewers with the ageing female body artists such as Hans Baldung and Gregor Erhard provide powerful visual commentary on the transitoriness of beauty. Hans Baldung painted several panels in which he juxtaposed a group of women of different ages with the figure of Death.<sup>37</sup> He also produced a series of paintings in treating the confrontation between Death and a single woman. The theme of 'Death and the Young Maiden' is found both in a drawing on coloured paper and in several panel paintings in Basle.<sup>38</sup> The beautiful young woman in the Berlin drawing is absorbed utterly in combing her long hair and looking at herself in a mirror.<sup>39</sup> Here Death does not lead his victim off to participate in his morbid dance, but is portrayed in a more static pose. He presents the naked female to viewers in a way similar to that in which Adam presents Eve in Baldung's famous chiaroscuro woodcut of 1511 (Fig. 99).<sup>40</sup> Baldung consciously teases the viewer here, offering seduction and reproach at the same time, just as he does in his panel paintings of the same subject. In one of his Basle paintings (Fig. 100), Death brutally grabs the woman's long blond hair and points with his bony fingers towards an open grave: 'This is where you will go.'<sup>41</sup> Death is unmoved by the young woman's

36. *Ibid.*, 120.

37. C. Talbot, 'Eve, the serpent and death', in *FMR* 31 (1988), 83–120; see also J. Koerner, 'The mortification of the image: Death as a hermeneutic in Hans Baldung Grien', in: *Representations* 10 (1985), 52–101.

38. P.H. Boerlin, T. Falk, R.W. Gasen, D. Koepplin, *Hans Baldung Grien im Kunstmuseum Basel* (Basel, 1978).

39. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett der staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, KdZ. 4578, see *Dürer Holbein Grünewald. Meisterzeichnungen der deutschen Renaissance aus Berlin und Basel*, exh. cat. (Basel and Berlin, 1997), no. 12.11, 214–16.

40. R.W. Scribner, 'Ways of seeing in the age of Dürer', in: D. Eichberger and C. Zika, eds, *Dürer and his Culture* (Cambridge, 1998), 109–13.

41. Boerlin et al. (1978), cat. no. 5, 23–30; this painting is dated 1517; there is a second panel of small dimensions in the Kunstmuseum Basel which depicts 'Death with an older-woman', *ibid.*, cat. no. 6, 23.

plea for mercy, her hands raised in supplication, or her streaming tears. Though Baldung treats the same subject as the 'Macabre Dance of Women', he introduces a stronger psychological element into his imagery, which makes his works more confronting. He seizes the viewer's attention by depicting human emotions which range from fear and despair to sheer horror in the face of death. The text accompanying the image of the bride in the Paris manuscript explores the relationship between death and human sexuality:

Death: To show you your folly and to show,  
that people ought to watch out for death  
take my hand young pretty Bride.  
Let's go, take off your clothes:  
there will be no more work for you,  
you will come to bed in another place.  
You shouldn't get too excited.  
God's acts are marvellous.

Bride: On the very day I desired to have a special joy in my life,  
I only get grief, unhappiness, and I must die so suddenly.  
Death, why do you lust for me, why take me so quickly?  
I haven't deserved such a blow.  
But we must praise God for everything.<sup>42</sup>

In Baldung's woodcut (Fig. 99) the connection between death and sexuality is made even more explicit by linking love and sensuousness with the Fall of Man: 'LAPSUM HUMANI GENERIS'. Eve, a young and beautiful sister of the women in Baldung's Basle paintings, presents an apple from the tree of knowledge to the amorous Adam, thus precipitating the loss of human immortality. In 1518, the theologian Agrippa of Nettesheim published a treatise entitled *On the original sin*, in which he argues that it was human sexuality that caused the fall of man and introduced death into the world.<sup>43</sup> He suggests that the snake, an agent of the Devil, took advantage of Eve's sexuality in order to seduce Adam. This argument was found earlier in the French Macabre Dance of Death, but it is developed by Baldung, who focuses on the 'Death and the Maiden' theme in order to investigate the nexus between female beauty and sexuality. In another painting, now in Ottawa, he goes a step further by merging the themes the 'Fall of Man' and 'Death and the Maiden'.<sup>44</sup> Eve is depicted as a

42. Harrison (1994), 112.

43. A.K. Hiart, 'Eve as Reason in a tradition of allegorical interpretations of the Fall', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 43 (1980), 221–26.

44. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada; see W. Hartmann, 'Hans Baldungs "Eva, Schlange und Tod"', *Jahrbuch der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen in Baden-Württemberg* 15 (1978), 7–20; see also Talbot (1988), 98–102. M. Laskin and M. Pantazzi, *Catalogue of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. European and American Painting, Sculpture and Decorative Arts, Vol. 1, 1300–1800*, 7–9; a colour reproduction of this painting is on the internet at: <http://cybermuseum.gallery.ca/ng/>.

seductive young woman who holds the fatal apple in her right hand; with her left she grasps the tail of the snake, which curls around a barren tree. A horrifying, partly decomposed figure with an apple in its right hand steps forward from behind the tree. As he reaches out to grab Eve's forearm, he is bitten by the snake and dies, so that here in Baldung's most complex painting of this series, the figure of Adam and Death merge into one. The artist could not have found a more symbolic image for visualizing the link between female beauty, human sexuality, and the Fall.

Baldung seems to have been preoccupied by this topic. At about the same time he developed a second, closely related theme—'Death and the Three Ages of Women'. In two of his paintings on this subject, childhood, youth and old age are represented by three unclothed women, who are either approached or led off by Death.<sup>45</sup> The idea of using images of female beauty to express *Vanitas* was not limited to the painter Baldung, for it appealed to the intellectual elite across southern Germany, who were interested in collecting innovative secular art for their cabinets.

Barthel Beham (1502–40), a painter active in the cities of Nuremberg and Frankfurt, produced a small panel painting dealing with the transitoriness of life (Fig. 101).<sup>46</sup> A young female nude stands frontally on a stone pedestal and faces the viewer. She is accompanied by a small boy who clings to the red piece of cloth with which she covers the lower part of her body. The skeleton of Death behind her and the corpse of the young woman lying on the floor recall the 'Mother and Child' scene from the Dance of Death cycle. But the painting is not to be taken as a simple illustration of this scene; in adding symbolic attributes and attaching an inscription with biblical references to the front of the pedestal, the Dance of Death motif has been transposed into a *Memento Mori* image.

This analysis of Dance of Death cycles and related representations demonstrates that the confrontation between Death and men and women underwent considerable change during the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The early monumental cycles which had been designed for cemetery and church walls depicted a cross-section of society and were concerned with hierarchical rather than gender issues. In these cycles the representative of specific offices and professions were exclusively male. Towards the end of the fifteenth century the Parisian printed and illuminated Dance of Death cycles focus for the first time exclusively on women in order to counterbalance the emphasis on male prototypes in earlier examples. In these newly emerging cycles women are portrayed variously as office-bearers, professional women and as a group which experiences a gender-specific life cycle. The didactic texts accompanying these images emphasize the dangers which women specifically are faced with and reflect tensions raised by the changing roles of

---

45. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, c.1510 and Madrid, Museo del Prado, c.1541–44; see Talbot (1988), 110–16.

46. Hamburg, Kunsthalle, 1540, 58.5 x 42 cm.

women in society. In accordance with the general discourse in contemporary theology, matters concerning the female body and female sexuality were now explored in the Dance of Death. The Swiss artist Hans Baldung uses the earlier Dance of Death cycles as a rich source for his innovative work. In his arresting images the intensive encounter between Death and a beautiful naked woman achieves a life of its own, having been excised from its original context. In his Basle paintings he avoids all references to specific offices or professions, instead stressing female beauty and the body, as in his images of the female life cycle. In this way Baldung develops an innovative iconographic programme from traditional images in female Dance of Death cycles.



Figure 91. Hans Leinberger. Death (c.1520). Innsbruck, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Schloß Ambras. Boxwood.

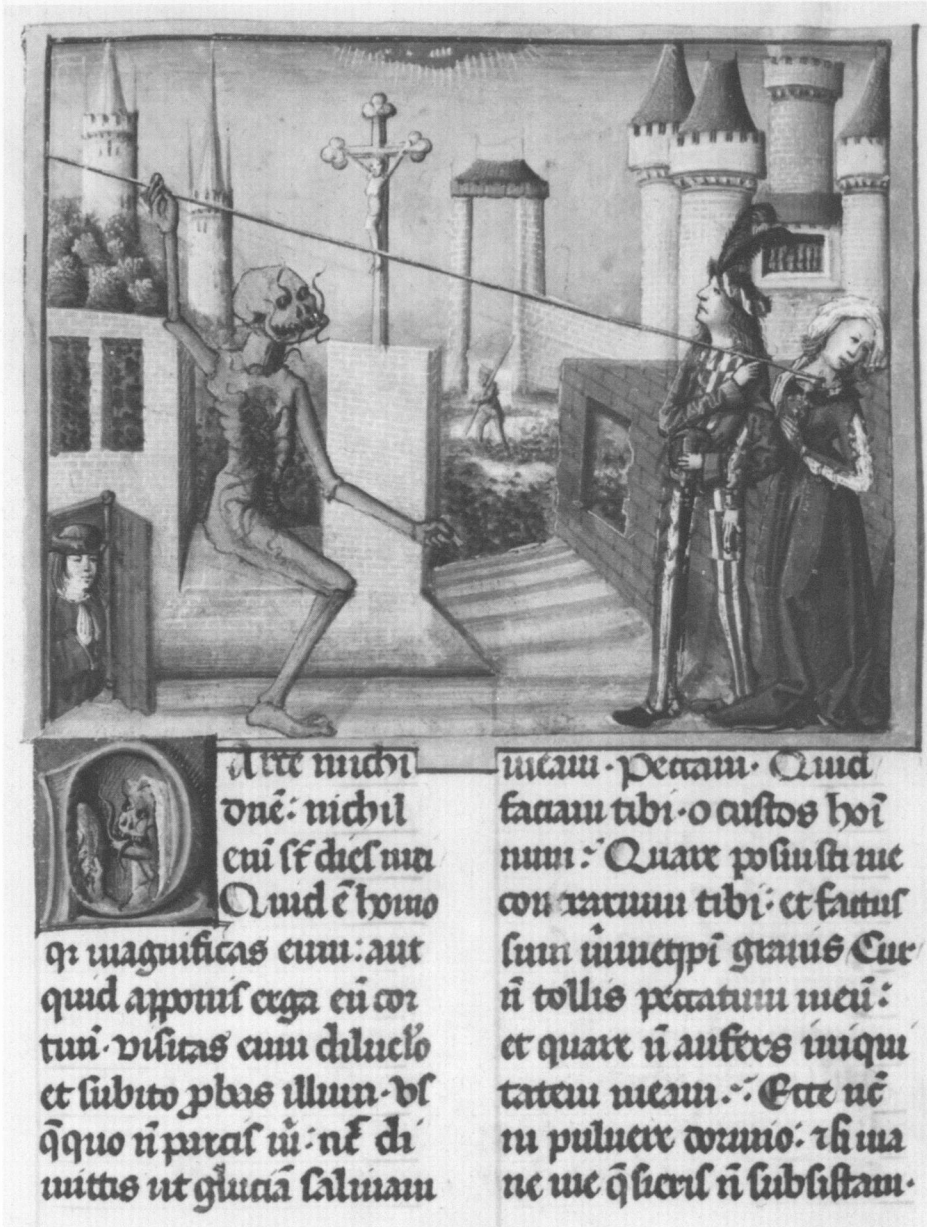


Figure 92. Death and a Young Couple (1493). Office of the Dead, *Breviary of Jost van Silenen*. Zürich, Schweizerisches Landesmuseum, LM-4624, f. 359.



Figure 93. Dance of Death with Author Image (1493). Printed by Antoine Verard, broadsheet, woodcut. Paris, BN, Cabinet des Estampes, Te. 8rés. C 21297.



**A**lle menschen trucken an mich Vnd hütten vor  
 der welt sych Ich hatte viel gütes vnd was mir  
 cren Golt vnd sylber hatte ich zu verzeren Nü  
 syn ich inn der wüme gewalt Solich testament  
 ist myr bestalt Der wt hat mich her zu bracht  
 Da ich yf aller mynst bedacht Vorware wer das  
 mercket eben Der mag wollt bessern syn leben  
 Wand hie geet lachen vnd schymph üß Wand  
 wir negben zu diesem danzhüße Weckene nū  
 vnd sehent an disze figure War zu komme des menschen nature Lache  
 von sünde das ist myn tade So mogent ye bi got synden gnade.



Figure 94. Anonymous. Dance of Death: Musicians (c.1485). South German woodcut. Printed by Heinrich Knoblochzer. Heidelberg, University Library, C 7074 Folio Inc., f. 2.



Figure 95. Anonymous. Church and Cemetery of the Franciscan Monastery of SS Innocents (c.1550). Flemish panel painting. Paris, Musée Carnavalet.



Figure 96. Simon Marmion. *St Bertin Altarpiece* (right-hand panel, background scene with *Dance of Death* fresco; 1459). Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Oil on wood.

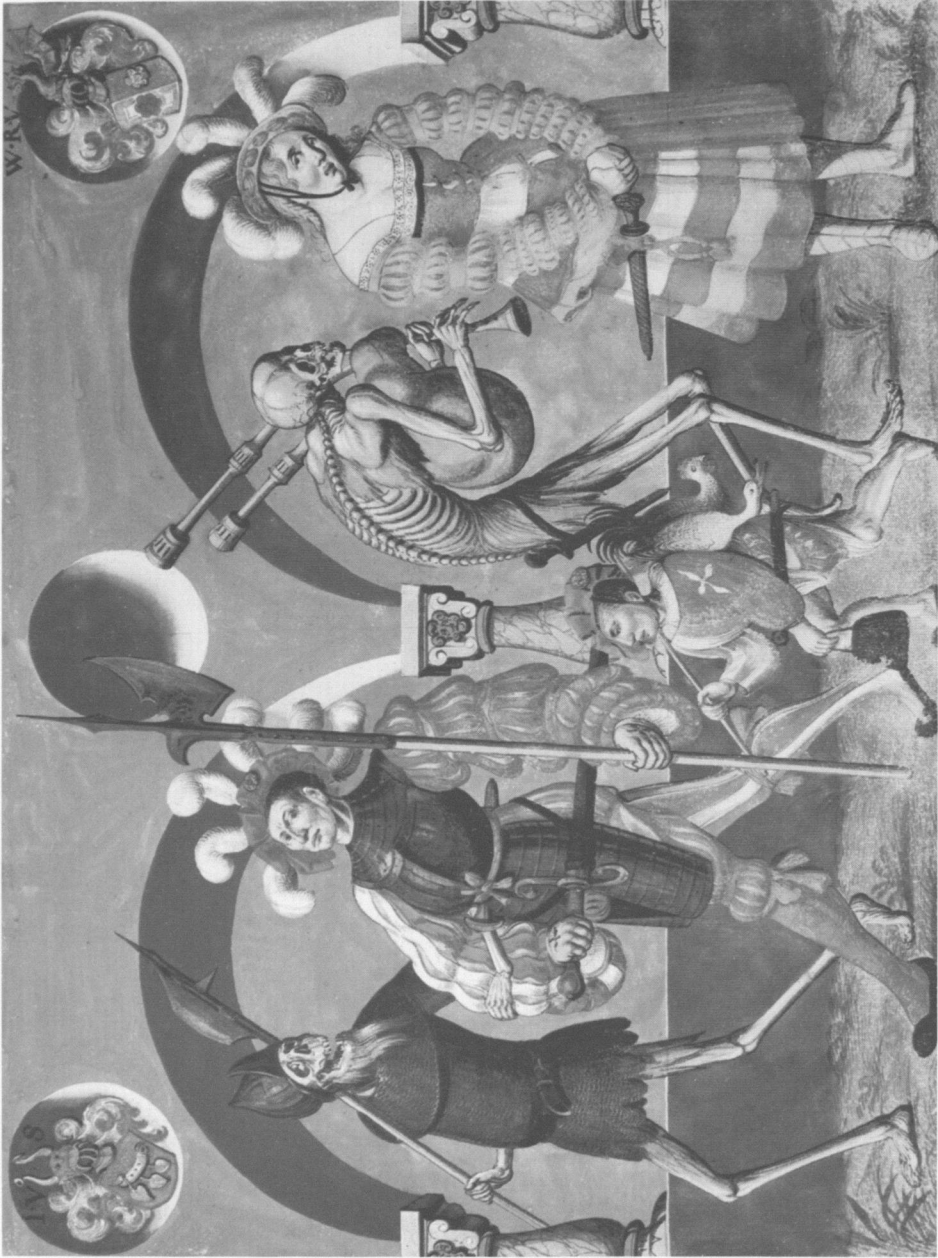


Figure 97. Albrecht Kauw. Dance of Death; Death and Warrior / Death and Prostitute (1516–19). Watercolour, based on the Bern Dance of Death Frescoes by Manuel Deutsch. Bern, Bernisches Historisches Museum.



Figure 98. Female Theologian. Danse macabre des femmes (c.1510–20).  
 French manuscript illumination. Paris, BN, MS Fr. 995, f. 31v.

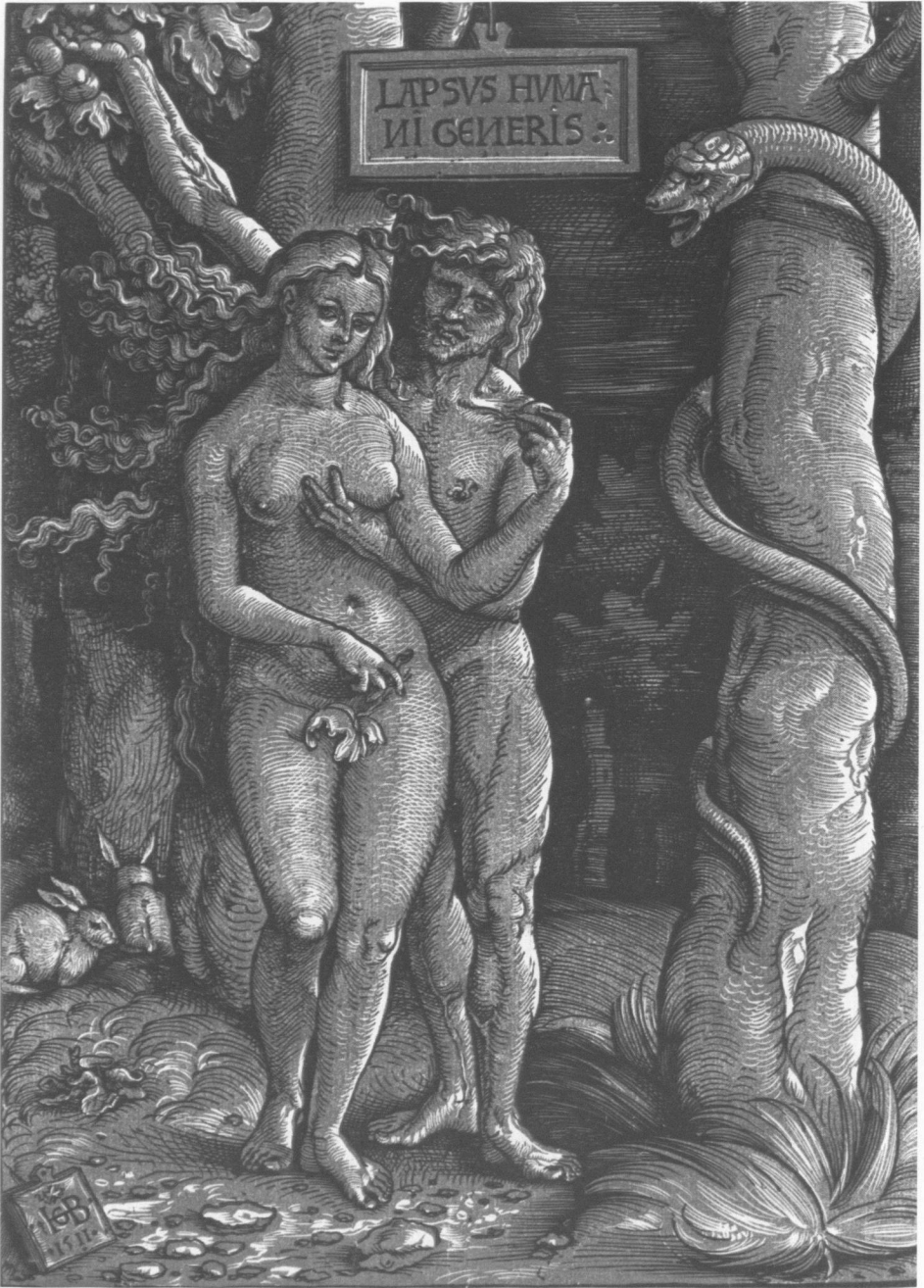


Figure 99. Hans Baldung Grein. Adam and Eve (1511). Chiaroscuro woodcut. Kupferstichkabinett, Sammlung der Zeichnungen und Druckgraphik, inv. no. 882-2. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie.



Figure 100. Hans Baldung Grien. *Death and the Maiden* (1517). Tempera on wood.  
Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel.



Figure 101. Barthel Beham. *Vanitas* (1540). Oil on wood. Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle.