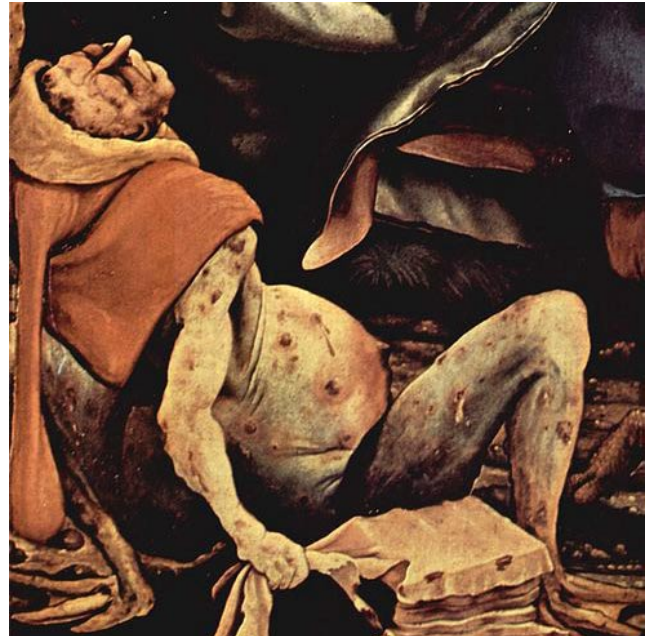


## The Art of Infection

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Pablo Picasso once wrote, “Painting is just another way of keeping a diary”. Artists often find their inspiration in everyday life, and since infectious diseases have been faithful and dedicated companions of the human race, it’s probably safe to assume that most artists encountered – and were influenced by - infection. But given the deep and mysterious ways of artists, it’s often difficult to “find” that influence in their works; it’s a job best left to the endless debates of art historians. There are diseases, however, that have taken hold of society, clearly affecting all facets of human life. Including expression through art.

They’re almost as different as two diseases can be, and between the epidemics lay more than a century. Yet the Black Death (plague) and tuberculosis both left particularly deep impressions on generations of Europeans and had enormous influence on art of their respective eras.



In his Isenheim Altarpiece painted for the chapel of a French hospital and monastery, Matthias Grünewald incorporated several figures – including Christ – with skin disease, most likely manifestations of the dreaded St. Anthony’s Fire (ergotism). (Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar, France)

### Dancing with Death

*O death! cruel, bitter, impious death! which thus breaks the bonds of affection and divides father and mother, brother and sister, son and wife. Lamenting our misery, we feared to fly, yet we dared not remain.*  
Report about the Black Death, Gabriele de’ Mussi, 1347

After a pretty tough time in the Early Middle Ages (Dark Ages), things had been looking up for Europeans. A mild climate supported the spread of agriculture, food supplies were plentiful, the population expanded dramatically and started moving into cities. In a little Renaissance that started in

#### The Black Death

*Symptoms:* buboes (swelling of the lymph nodes in armpits, neck groin), high fever, rapid death; can be accompanied/ followed by spots on the skin, heavy breathing, vomiting of blood, aching limbs, coughing, decaying of skin and terrible pain

*Causative agent:* usually attributed to *Yersinia pestis*, the causative agent of bubonic plague; some researchers believe it was a viral hemorrhagic fever or a combination of pandemics (for more see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Causes\\_of\\_the\\_Black\\_Death](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Causes_of_the_Black_Death))

the late 11th century, universities were founded and science, philosophy and literature returned to Europe, supported by an extremely powerful Catholic Church. Christianity was celebrated in art, and death was visualized as a passage between life on earth and salvation.

The euphoria didn't last. The 14th century started out badly: the climate cooled, rains destroyed crops and famines killed millions. And then came the Black Death. A ship full of Genoese traders brought it to Sicily in October of 1347, and over the next four years it ravaged Europe, killing an estimated 50% of the population. It was indiscriminating, taking people from all walks of life. It wiped out entire families and emptied villages. Then it subsided. But waves of the plague continued to haunt the continent until well into the 17th century.

The Black Death took many a gifted artist to the grave. Those that survived were understandably tormented by what they had seen and experienced, and their work conveys this. The painting of religious works continued; despite a general loss in faith, many wealthy people were eager to sponsor religious works in the hope they would be spared a future plague infection. But religion was no longer celebrated; the devastation caused by the Black Death cost the "all-powerful" Church much of its credibility, and gloom, fear or even sarcasm pervaded the works of many writers and painters in the years to come.

It's not surprising that death became a major focus of artistic work during the 14th century: deathbed, encounter with death, death triumphant, *Dance of Death*. The latter – also known as the *Danse Macabre* (French) or *Totentanz* (German) – was probably first performed, then poetized and finally painted. By the 15th century it could be found on the walls of churches throughout Europe. In its dance, Death (in the form of a skeleton or corpse) leads people from all social classes and ages – pope, king, hermit, child – to the grave. The Black Death had sent a clear message: Death knows no prejudice. And the terror that had accompanied the plague during its devastation of the population seems to have been replaced by a cool acceptance of death's inevitability. Although the bubonic plague eventually loosened its hold on Europe, the Dance of Death is a theme that has been revisited by every generation; epidemics (cholera, influenza), war and other crises continue to remind us that death is the great equalizer.



Between 1523 and 1526, the German artist Hans Holbein produced a famous series of woodcuts portraying the Dance of Death.



The "Dance of Death" painted by Bernt Notke in Tallinn, Estonia (St. Nikolai's church) at the end of the 15th century may have been 30 meters long. Approximately 25% remains today.

## An Ode to Death

*She dwells with Beauty--Beauty that must die; And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh, Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips*  
John Keats, "Ode on Melancholy", 1884

Melancholy. And tragic beauty. During the pre-Romantic and Romantic movements of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, European literature and visual art were defined by these qualities, and the driving force was tuberculosis. This painfully slow killer claimed the lives of more young adults than any other cause of death, and it ruined the physical and mental health of many more. Everyone had observed or experienced tuberculosis, and for generations it altered the perception of a normal life.

Many poets and writers (including Keats) were infected with the disease, and there was widespread belief that as the body wasted away, "consumption" stimulated the mind. In his memoirs, Alexandre Dumas wrote, "...it was the fashion to suffer from the lungs; everybody was consumptive, poets especially; it was good form to spit blood after each emotion that was at all sensational, and to die before reaching the age of thirty." Tuberculosis was also a widespread theme in writing – consumptive heroines that died young, pale and sensitive children that faded away from existence. Thomas Mann, inspired by his wife's stay at a sanatorium in Davos, chose a Swiss clinic as the location for his famous novel *The Magic Mountain* (*Zauberberg*), in which almost all characters have tuberculosis.

Relatively few painters suffered from tuberculosis, but the White Plague nevertheless permeates paintings of the time. Painters of the pre-Raphaelite movement such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais favored beautiful young models with pale, sad and tired faces. The ideal of languid and fragile femininity became so widespread that rouge was replaced by whitening powders and women attempted to destroy their appetite by eating sand and drinking vinegar.



Elizabeth Siddal, a model for several pre-Raphaelite artists (here in Millais' „Ophelia“, 1852) may have suffered from tuberculosis. (Tate Gallery, London)



In his portrayal of a mother and her dying child (here in "Spring", 1889), Edvard Munch drew on his own experiences. (National Gallery, Oslo)

However, the romanticism of tuberculosis was not universal; the Symbolist painter Edvard Munch lost his mother, brother and beloved older sister Sophie to the disease, and his grief is evident in his paintings, where he often explored the themes of death and depression.

Finally even writers began to notice that tuberculosis isn't really romantic at all. The disease became even more prevalent following the Industrial Revolution, and – especially among working classes – was an illness of fear and suffering. The romantic aura of tuberculosis in literature also faded as the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to a close.

## Death eternal

The epidemics of Black Death and tuberculosis left a lasting impression on generations and had a particularly obvious impact on art of the time. The connection between art and infection is, however, much deeper. Art shows how disease was treated throughout history.

It makes critical statements. It has been used to inform the public and promote preventative measures. Despite our efforts, infectious illness shows no sign of leaving mankind in peace, and art will continue to convey both human suffering and perseverance in the battle against our age-old microbial foes.



Art has been an important tool worldwide in campaigns for AIDS education and prevention. (Andrzej Pagowski - National Library of Medicine)

## References and additional reading:

More information about the Isenheim Altarpiece, “A Masterpiece Born of Saint Anthony’s Fire”

<http://www.stanleyeisler.com/smithsonian/smithsonian-1999-09-grunewald.html>

More images of the altar can viewed here:

<http://experimentalthaology.blogspot.com/2008/04/ugly-part-5-isenheim-altarpiece.html>

### Black Death:

- Byrne, Joseph Patrick. (2004) *The Black Death (Greenwood guides to historic events of the medieval world)*. Greenwood Publishing Group.  
Book preview can be viewed on <http://books.google.com>  
\* An interesting look at plague in the Middle Ages, including the ongoing controversy over the causative agent of the Black Death and the effects of plague on society and art.
- The effects of the Black Death - social, psychological and physical – are described vividly by the Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio in *The Decameron* (probably written between 1350 and 1353).  
[http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/themes/plague/morte.shtml](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/themes/plague/morte.shtml)
- Information about The Dance of Death (and other death themes) throughout Europe:  
<http://www.lamortdanslart.com/main.htm>
- The Dance of Death, with special focus on the Notke paintings in Lübeck and Tallinn as well as the woodcuts from Holbein: <http://www.dodedans.com/Eindex.htm>

### Tuberculosis:

- Dubos, Rene and Jean. (1987) *The White Plague: Tuberculosis, Man and Society*. Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.  
Book preview can be viewed on <http://books.google.com>  
\* Especially interesting: Consumption and the Romantic Age (Chapter 5, p. 44)
- Chalke, H.D. The Impact of Tuberculosis on History, Literature and Art. *Med. Hist.* (1962) 6: 301–318.  
pdf available: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1034755/>  
\* An extensive – if somewhat dry – discussion of how tuberculosis has affected art throughout history (not just in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries)
- For a list of more appearances of tuberculosis in literature and other art forms see:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuberculosis\\_in\\_popular\\_culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuberculosis_in_popular_culture)

### AIDS:

“Visual Aids” is a website dedicated to supporting the work of artists with HIV/AIDS and promoting AIDS awareness: [http://www.thebody.com/visualaids/web\\_gallery/index.html](http://www.thebody.com/visualaids/web_gallery/index.html)