

Images of Consolation at a Time of Plague

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On October 27th 1918 Egon Schiele sketched a small portrait of his pregnant wife, only one day before she passed away. Schiele himself died three days later on October 31st, at the age of 28. Like many others worldwide, they had contracted the Spanish flu. The intimate drawing captures Edith's loving gaze and intense expression in the last moments of her life, and it is a moving token of the love Schiele had for his young wife and unborn child. It is also an emotional testimony of the tragedy that destroyed their lives, along with those of an estimated 50 million people across the globe. It is easy to imagine the artist, facing the death of his beloved Edith as well as his own, seeking the familiar comfort of his tools to defy, with a few powerful strokes, the oblivion of death.

As Leon Battista Alberti reminded his readers in the fifteenth century, a portrait defeats death making the absent present again. With its power to blur the line between reality and fiction, natural and supernatural, art has always provided an escape from pain and despair. It has offered consolation against death, be it the death of a family member or the ravages of an infectious disease. Or both, as in the case of Schiele's drawing. During the darkest months of the Covid-19 pandemic we looked at science for reassurance and consolation, not art. But in the past, a medical science still in its infancy could not provide much reassurance when a pandemic struck without pity. Comfort and solace were to be found elsewhere, in the creative and practical responses elaborated to cope with the devastation of a seemingly unstoppable disease.

In response to the catastrophic event of the mid-1300s epidemic of plague (the so-called Black Death, with an estimated death toll of 30% to 60% of the European population), for instance, new measures of quarantine and isolation were put in place; new architectural and urban designs were developed to separate the sick from the healthy and avoid overcrowding; chronicles and novels were written to record the tragic events; and new images were made to negotiate the trauma of the disease and the fear of its inevitable return. Soon enough, in fact, Europeans learned that the plague was to come back periodically, haunting every single generation well into the 18th century. Images were necessary tools to provide reassurance, and to help articulate an otherwise incomprehensible disaster that had left people helpless and terrified. Some images, for instance the Dance of Death where skeletons and corpses dance with the living, appear to have functioned as macabre but also bizarrely entertaining reminders that death is never too far.

Of the many plague-related images, one in particular offered perhaps the greatest consolation, the Madonna of Mercy. Though existing since the 13th century, it became very popular especially in Italy in the immediate aftermath of the Black Death. The Virgin Mary is depicted standing at the center of the composition, towering over a group of kneeling people sheltered by her outstretched mantle. A serene expression on her face, she gazes outwards at the viewers inviting them to join the circle of protection offered by her mantle. She is the Mother of Christ, but also the Mother of all humanity, offering refuge and consolation to those in despair. In some instances, the iconography of the Madonna of Mercy features angels armed with swords or either Christ or God the Father with the arrows of the plague in their hands, ready to strike – again – a terrified humanity. But this time, the merciful protection offered by Mary will neutralize the divine wrath and keep everyone under her mantle safe from the contagion. In the Madonna of Mercy the Virgin Mary is presented as the most powerful advocate of humanity, ready to stand against the punitive will of Christ, her Son. It is an image that raised extreme expectations in the viewers, and reveals the depth of the trauma provoked by the Black Death against which the world of men had been left utterly vulnerable and helpless. Faced with death on an unimaginable scale, societal structures were pushed to collapse and even the most sacred human values were tested to the limits. Friends and family abandoned their loved ones, while fathers and mothers refused to assist their children for fear of the contagion, as Boccaccio grimly narrates. Schiele and his wife faced together their most tragic hour, but for the terrified souls who witnessed the disaster of the Black Plague all human bonds had failed and their only comfort could come from the divine embrace of the Madonna.