

20th century death portrayal in art



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The 20th century was a time period lasting from January 1, 1901 all the way through December 31, 2000. Commonly known as the modern era, this century was nothing less than contemporary in every aspect throughout the world. Art in itself has always been a widely known and incorporated feature around the world since the beginning of time. As centuries came and went, eras within art and certain portrayals were heavily integrated and became best known as being used within certain centuries.

From visual arts, to music, theatre, literature, and architecture, there has never been a dull moment. As modern as the 20th century was though, a very evident theme seemed to stand out among others within many forms of art. This was the portrayal of death. The theme of death was deeply displayed in many forms of art within the 20th century to specifically include paintings, fictive comic strips, and theatre; all commonly based and stimulated from events within the era itself.

Once a deeper look is taken into what went on within the 20th century, a clear explanation can come forth of why the theme of death was portrayed to the extent it was. One of the easiest ways to approach an enlightenment of why death was such an overly used theme in 20th century art is to look back at events that provoked the thought of death within the 20th century. For starters, World War I; lasting from 1914-1918 and World War II; lasting from 1939-1945 were two of the most widely known wars for all of the deaths that took place.

With one war being based on opposing alliances of triple entente and central powers, and the other being based on global military conflicts, the end result

of both was the death of over 9 million combatants in each war (Oz, 2010). The Vietnam War lasting from 1945-1975 was based on communist and anti-communist nations. This war led to millions of deaths as well due to starvation, those trying to flee and avoid the war, and combating forces. The Nazi Regime lasting from 1933 -1945 led to many deaths of opposing communist, socialist, and liberals (Rosenberg, 2011).

Other events taking place within the 20th century that led to the production of the theme of death within so much art in this century included The Great Depression, thousands of protest taking place at coal and steel mines and factories, the stock market crash, and even personal events within the lives of many artists. Subsequent to a blast from the past, one can now actually look into different forms of art developed by different artist with portrayal of death and gain clarification of why this portrayal is so.

Within the 20th century, paintings and photography were widely used forms of art. Pablo Picasso is one of the most well known artist of this century for his versatile views and styles of art. In 1937, Picasso developed his art piece “Guernica”. This piece depicted the bombing of Guernica, Basque Country, by German and Italian warplanes at the behest of the Spanish Nationalist forces, on April 26, 1937, during the Spanish Civil War (Arnason, 2010). Guernica displays an incredible theme of death as one can easily notice the grieving look of destruction throughout the canvas.

Picasso’s attempt was to protest against the actions of General Franco and his fascist allies while at the same time to develop an anti-war piece that indicated the suffering to all living creatures caused by war. Besides that, he

also wanted to mimic other universal symbols of horror and destruction caused by war. Dorothea Lang was an influential American documentary photographer and photojournalist. She was best known for her work done in the midst of the Great Depression. The Great Depression lasted from 1929-1940 and was a severe economic depression following World War I and the stock market crash.

Unemployment was on the rise while income was on a decline with the economy. People were homeless, starving, and without many of life's daily necessities. Lang was sent by the FSA to photograph the humanized and tragic consequences of the Great Depression (Carry, 2008). One of her greatest works was *Migrant Mother* taken in 1936. The woman portrayed is Florence Owens Thompson and her children. She and her children were hungry and desperate at the time while they were in this state of destruction.

She had sold everything and had nothing and Lang's attempt when she took the photograph was to demonstrate a photograph's capability to display emotional powers. The look of death on the mother's face was meant to make emotional connections with the viewer as a cry for help. Last, when it comes to paintings, Frida Kahlo was a legend in her own time. On a constant basis, her art demonstrated how expressionism can be based on life scenarios (Wood, 1998). Kahlo was well known for her self-portraits displaying her uni-brow and an imperious expression.

Her art was personal and every piece was an attempt to let the viewer know that art is not always based on world events, but sometimes personal event

too. In 1943, Frida Kahlo painted *Thinking About Death*. With a vegetation background and another domineering facial expression, Kahlo painted a skull and cross bones across her forehead. Her attempt was to portray her mental state based on her preoccupation with morality and events that were going on in her life. These events included her diagnosis of polio, her near fatal bus accident leaving her unable to conceive a child, and her miserable relationship with artist Diego Rivera.

Before this piece though, another death portrayal was set forth in Kahlo's piece "A Few Small Snips"; created in 1935. Broken-hearted over her husband's affair with her younger sister Cristina, Frida recreated her sorrow and anger in this painting. Her own pain being too great to depict, she projected it onto another woman's misfortune. The violent deed makes symbolic reference to Frida's own mental state and her own emotional injuries (Wood, 1998). Paintings and photography were not the only portrayals of the theme of death within this century though as other forms of art were just as much used.

Comic strips and cartoons became a major art form within the 20th century. With all that was going on in the 20th century, a quick draw and a little shading was far from being unused. In 1960, Robert Minor drew "Pittsburgh". This was a political cartoon in his attempt to display what was going on in the world at the time. The 60's called for many strikes by steel and coal mine workers who were against their unsafe working conditions (Mayne, 2009). Pittsburgh displayed an authority figure striking a steel miner with a shotgun through his body in attempt to kill him.

Robert Minor wanted to express his attitudes of how the workers were being treated and developed this cartoon as an attack on the government's strike-breakers of the Miners strike. Another cartoonist by the name of James N. Rosenberg was also well known for his artistic depiction of modern events that had huge effects on members of society. In 1929, he drew "October 29 Dies Irae (Days of Wrath)". His attempt was to develop an expressionist nightmare through cartooning (Carry, 2008). This piece of art was developed based on the October 28, 1929

Stock Market Crash. Rosenberg's cartoon displayed scenes of panic that overwhelmed Wall Street as on this day in history, there were so many orders to sell that the ticker quickly fell behind. By the end of close, it had lagged to 2 1/2 hours behind and people were in a panic because they couldn't get rid of their stocks fast enough. Since everyone was selling and nearly no one was buying, stock prices collapsed. Rather than the bankers rallying investors by buying more stocks, rumors circulated that they were selling.

Panic hit the country and over 16. million shares of stock were sold meaning people were going broke. The cartoon displayed storm clouds, suicidal stock brokers, teetering skyscrapers ready to fall over and kill millions, and the bone frames lying on the ground of those seemingly who were already dead. Last, Roy Lichtenstein was a comic strip artist who had a knack for displaying active forms of violence and action in his comic strips. His name was heard throughout the 20th century for his participation in the creation of pop art. In 1963, Lichtenstein created "WHAAM! ".

It was meant to be a banal and violent comic strip (Wood, 1998). It depicted a fighter aircraft firing a rocket into an enemy airplane. This was Roy's way of forming an exclusive example of pop art following the World Wars. His aim in this comic strip was to portray the cause of war being a result of death. Among cartoons, comic strips, and other forms of visual art though, theatre was known as one of the most lengthy and thought out forms especially when it came to the portrayal of death. Theatre is an art form that has been around for many centuries.

While it started out with many male actors playing both male and female roles, the expansion of theatre through time led to much more versatile roles and different themes within plays. Throughout the 20th century many epic tales and verse dramas displayed the theme of death. T. S. Eliot developed the poetic drama " Murder in the Cathedral" which was performed for the first time in 1935. The main character within the play was Edward Grim who possessed an unusual opposition to authority after he became an eyewitness to a murder.

Eliot wrote the play and had it performed around the time of the rising Fascism in Central Europe. His attempt was to protest to individuals in affected countries to oppose the Nazi regime's subversion of the ideals of the Christian Church. The play featured the deaths of many individuals who opposed the Nazi Regime and the conversion to fascist views. Another great piece of theatre work within the 20th century that featured the portrayal of death in many scenes, but was based on a different aspect of reason, was " Clash of the Titans".

This play was developed in 1981 by Beverly Cross in attempts to bring forth the theme of death once portrayed in Greek Mythology. Perseus is the main character in this play. He is the favored son of the god Zeus, but he has unwittingly ticked off the sea goddess Thetis. Just to make things worse, Perseus falls in love with the lovely Princess Andromeda, who used to be engaged to Thetis's son. Soon Perseus is off on one quest after another, with Zeus helping, Thetis hindering, and lots of innocent bystanders getting stabbed, drowned, and squished.

The theme of death is portrayed all over this play as one of the most memorable scenes was the loss of lives while Perseus fought to cut off the head of Medusa. He had soldiers who fought by his side but died to Medusa's two headed dog guardian, her arrows, being caught in the stare of Medusa which sentenced him to a still death that turned him into stone. Perseus needed the head of Medusa to defeat the Kraken who was the ancient sea monster. Many citizens of the town loss their lives to the Kraken before Perseus presented the head of Medusa to defeat it and save the princess.

The theme of death was portrayed throughout this play in so many scenes in attempts to present an epic hero to the fictional world of Greek mythology. With all of the hardship and long lists of events that took place within the 20th century, there is no wonder why the theme of death was so deeply portrayed in the many aspects of art. From paintings to photographs, cartoons to comic strips, and even theatre art, the theme of death never missed a death in art in this century when a major event was taking place that featured lost lives, murder, and war.

While the World Wars became responsible for the loss of millions of lives, artists were expressing their views through paintings and comic strips. Paintings also became a resource for artist to express feeling based on what was going on in their own lives as well. As strikes broke out and even when millions of stocks were lost in 1929, artist captured the essence of this time period through cartoons. When the Great Depression took a toll on the world, photographers were capturing every moment of emotional views of death in the eyes of the subject.

The Nazi Regime was a major event causing many to be put to death based of opposition to fascist views, yet artist developed physical portrayals of the events through portrayals in theatre plays. Last, when mythology of previous centuries needed a boost to keep from being forgotten, theatre was also used to produce fictional tales of epic heroes saving lives and keeping many from dying like those before them. The 20th century was nothing short of the push in the right direction towards modern art and will forever be remembered for how events impacted art of the era.