

# Impact of the black death on art in europe



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**How significant was the Black Death for painting in Siena, Florence and Padua in the second half of the fourteenth century?**

From 1280 until the advent of the Black Death, Florence, Siena and Padua had been growing in wealth and size, but the outbreak of disease in 1348 and the years following led to the deaths of between a half and two thirds of their populations (Norman, 1995, II, 8). This ‘catastrophic fall’ led to the culmination of many building projects, notably the construction of the Duomo Nuovo in Siena (Norman, 1995, II, 135), but the significance of the Black Death with respect to painting is disputed.

Since the publication of Meiss’s work, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* (1951), the connection between the Black Death and a change in art during the second half of the fourteenth century has been the subject of discussion among art historians. Henk Van Os, for example, argues that Meiss was not the first to identify this trend, but that he was the first to attribute it to the social and religious upheaval which accompanied the Black Death (Van Os, 1981, 238).

There has been much discussion as to whether the Black Death could be seen as quite the decisive event that Meiss alleged. The debate focuses on three crucial areas of thought: firstly, whether the works that Meiss cites are correctly dated (i. e. whether they can with certainty be placed before or after 1348); secondly, whether the Black Death was actually a causative factor in the perceived change in style; and, thirdly, whether there was one shift or several in the artistic course of the fourteenth century. In view of these disputes, we must beware of taking too simplistic an approach.

For an example of the first element of this debate, we can look to the *Triumph of Death* in the Camposanto at Pisa and Barna da Sierra's frescoes in the Collegiata of San Gimignano, both cited by Meiss as being typical of artistic production after the Black Death. Subsequent scholarship has cast doubt on Meiss's theory because the former work is now believed to have been produced in the 1330s (Smart, 1978) and the latter is now dated before 1348 (Van Os, 1981, 240). We must also consider that "some of the qualities most characteristic of late Trecento painting are already present, as Meiss himself was the first to recognise, in the frescoes by Taddeo Gaddi in the Baroncelli Chapel" (Smart, 1978, 108). As this chapel was painted during the years 1328-34, it demonstrates an early change in style which also undermines Meiss's thesis.

The second element of the debate concerns the change in religious thought that occurred as a result of the devastation of the Black Death. Norman comments on the popularity of altarpieces depicting Saint Sebastian and the overt association of his sufferings with those of the victims of plague (Norman, 1995, I, 187-195), but there is also a subtler change in style represented by the *Strozzi Altarpiece* (1357). Meiss argued that painting typical of the early fourteenth century dwelt on 'familiar and universal human experience' (Meiss, 1951, 28) and that it had been succeeded by a greater emphasis upon the hierarchical and dogmatic expressions of religious life, an elevation of the church and a mystification of the deity. Giotto had pioneered an artistic style that was marked by its realistic depiction of three-dimensional space, harmonious use of colour and the creation of a sympathetic response in the viewer. These features came to be

characteristic of early fourteenth painting, yet the *Strozzi Altarpiece* rejects the depiction of concrete space, the figures 'hover' and show a 'lack of exact spatial placement', the colours are 'disjointed and uneasy' and the painting creates a distancing sense of awe and mystery, which Cole describes as 'strange', 'eerie', 'stern and unforgiving' and 'aloof' (Cole, 1976, 134-6). Meiss argued that this style was a conscious return to the Byzantine influenced art of the previous century (Meiss, 1951, 10) and that it is a reflection of the religious emphasis upon guilt and atonement that was a reaction to the Black Death. We may also notice an interest in the symbolic rather than realistic representation of figures in the *St John the Baptist Altarpiece* (1370/80) by Giovanni del Biondo, where John tramples his enemy, Herod, underfoot. John has the same austere look and there is the same sense of psychological withdrawal that has been observed in the face of Christ in the *Strozzi Altarpiece*.

However, in Padua it is difficult to discover much evidence for the rejection of 'realism' in artistic style during the second part of the century. Altichiero's decoration of Lupi's funerary chapel in the Santo, far from attempting to distance the viewer, uses space and form to draw the spectator in. His use of landscape reminds us of Lorenzetti and his figures are clearly inspired by Giotto, especially the women who gather near the foot of the cross and embrace in a manner reminiscent of Joachim and Anna and the angels who have the substance and expression of those we see in the Arena Chapel. The scale, proportion and design of this fresco suggest that this scene is being played out just beyond the walls of the church and that we are viewing it as though through the arches of a loggia. The colours are harmonious and

subdued and there is an impression of nearness and reality. Altichiero's style is more developed and detailed than earlier works, but its underlying intent and spirit owes much to his legacy from the earlier fourteenth century.

In Siena we also find more contradictory interpretations of the changes that occurred in the mid-century. Henk Van Os has described the way in which social upheavals following the Black Death led to profound changes in patronage: the wealthy elite lost much of their political power and a class of *nouveau riche* sprang up who had less interest in artistic commissioning. Much of the art became imitative and conservative and was more often commissioned in the provinces surrounding Siena. In the city itself, only the wealthy body of the Ospedale of Santa Maria della Scala, which had received many bequests from victims of the Black Death, continued commissioning new altarpieces, one of which, by Bartolommeo Bulgarini, included the *Assumption of the Virgin*, a painting which Van Os believes to exhibit "very full, monumental figures, entirely in the tradition of Pietro Lorenzetti" (Van Os, 1981, 245). He argues that this painting does not show signs of the flat, hierarchical, mystical design which Meiss attributed to it, but that it takes the form of a "plastically realistic version" of the Assumption and so stands within the earlier traditions of Sienese painting (Van Os, 1981, 245). Certainly, the treatment of the Virgin and the use of elaborate gold effects reflect the Sienese craftsmanship established by Duccio and Simone Martini. Van Os concludes that changes in artistic production after the Black Death were principally due to different sites of patronage rather than changes in religious thought.

The third aspect of the debate concerns the question of whether Meiss was right to propose that there was a single significant shift around 1348. Smart and Norman, for example, argue that the *Strozzi Altarpiece* was not such a significant departure as Meiss had argued because the precedent for such a depiction of Christ had been set in the *Stefaneschi Altarpiece*, painted by one of Giotto's associates and dated late 1320s – early 1330s (Smart, 1978, 122 and Norman, 1995, I, 184). Although many critics agree that the “middle years of the fourteenth century can be described as a period of reassessment in the history of Tuscan painting” (Smart, 1978, 107), there are significant arguments that that the evolution of artistic style went through a number of phases, not just one sudden change linked to the Black Death. John White discusses two stylistic changes in the second half of the fourteenth century: the first more conservative and less adventurous and the second in which exploration and experiment again came to the fore (White, 1993, 542). Cole also argues that, as well as the change in the middle of the century, there was another change in style around 1375 and “a renewed interest in both the form and content of Giotto's art” (Cole, 1976, 140).

It is clear that, since Meiss's original theory was proposed, much work has been done by other art historians to challenge his ideas. Although the production of art in Florence in this period did take on different forms from earlier ones and the theory that this was due to the religious reaction provoked by the Black Death can be given some credence, there is less evidence of this trend in Padua and Siena. It is therefore my conclusion that the middle part of the century saw a brief set-back in artistic endeavour, which was due to the devastation caused by the Black Death, but that the

fourteenth century was mostly a period of successive developments building on the work of the earlier masters.

1500 words

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