

The Creative Inspiration of Liszt's Totentanz

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Abstract: As an artistic theme with a long history and diversified forms, the text origin of *Dance of Death* can be traced to the legend of *The Three Living and the Three Dead* before 1280. And the outbreak of The Black Death in Europe in the 14th century is usually considered to be the main reason for the popularity and creation of the theme of *Dance of Death*. The theme usually appears in the image of human skeleton and death. It reminds the world to keep in mind the equality of death through dialogues and dance with people of different classes and professions. Liszt's piano and band work *Totentanz* is no exception. There are two views on the creative inspiration of *Totentanz*, one is the fresco *The Triumph of Death*, and the other is the woodcut *Danse Macabre*. Both of them had an immediate impact on Liszt and his *Totentanz*.

1. The Fresco the Triumph of Death and Totentanz

In 1838, the Piazza Camposanto in Italy welcomed a special visitor-- Franz Liszt. He walked into the Holy Cemetery next to the Leaning Tower of Pisa, crossed the cloister and entered into a huge side room. There he saw the mural that he had thought about for a long time-- *The Triumph of Death*. This is a Renaissance work of art. With the unique vibrant colors and rich layers of frescoes, it encloses the patina of the years, which not only brought the most direct visual impact to Liszt, but also made the artist, who was only 27 years old at that time, accustomed to seeing the flashy scenes of aristocratic life, feels some unrealistic world influences. Taking this as inspiration, Liszt completed the first draft of *Totentanz* in the same year.

The Triumph of Death is a work that simultaneously depicts angels and demons, heaven and hell, joy and panic, hope and despair. The author is Italian painter Buonamico Buffalmacco. The work was completed before the full outbreak of the Black Death in Europe in the 14th century. In the work, three scenes are depicted in sequence from left to right: a group of hunting noblemen encounter three coffins with corpses. The process of the three dead from death to decay is reflected in the coffins; they walk up the stone steps to the monastery, it is like a paradise where there is free from worldly strife, where hermits meditate, sages think here, and even the ferocious beasts seem to become tame. To the right of the picture, two opposing scenes appear. The first scene is the hideous devil tramples a group of well-dressed men and women under their feet and appreciates their frightened expressions; the second scene is the angels fly freely in the air, watching the nobles playing in the forest. Decades after the completion of this fresco of Buonamico Buffalmacco, Europe broke out with the Black Death, a disaster that almost destroyed the entire Europe and claimed the lives of 75 million to 200 million people. It is said that after the disaster, the people who survived suddenly noticed the painting and admired it greatly, so they feasted and reveled next to *The Triumph of Death* to celebrate their aftermath. In 1944, *The Triumph of Death* was destroyed in the World War II, and then restored by the gathered fragments. Together with *The Hell* and *The Last Judgement*, these three murals constitute the three most famous frescoes in the Piazza Camposanto.

Fresco, also known as "fresh painting", can be traced back to ancient times. It flourished in Italy in the 13th century and matured in the 16th century. It has the advantages of bright colors, rich layers and durability. The frescoes have reached their heyday when the Buonamico Buffalmacco was active. They are both spectacular and exquisite. They can vividly express the various forms of

everything in the world, and the painting themes are more abundant. Mr. Chen Danqing once commented on Buonamico Buffalmacco's *The Triumph of Death*: "The maturity and growth of art in various periods, (their) roots are all in the early stage, which is actually the same as the physical growth of children and teenagers. The works are very simple in the early stage but vigorous; Childish but innocent; inevitably rough but full of energy. As the old Chinese saying, it is "vigorous and unrestricted".... The most important thing in art is not knowledge, not proficiency, or not the so-called cultural education, but intuition, instinct and the freshest sensibility. I even think this is a kind of precious ignorance."

This power of ignorance had a direct but long-term impact on Liszt at the time. "These frescoes are as life-like in his memory as when he saw them that day--or rather, the impressions left by seeing them in those few weeks, because he had returned to check them carefully." In the face of *The Triumph of Death*, this young but experienced composer sounded the ancient Catholic Mass *Dies irae* tune. With this majestic and simple melody as the theme, Liszt completed the first draft of *Totentanz* in 1838. The fear of death and the imagination of the unknown world made Liszt dissatisfied with his first draft, so he shelved it temporarily, and did not modify it until he settled in Weimar, and then revised it twice in 1853 and 1859.

The relationship between the development of the theme of *Totentanz* and *The Triumph of Death* is also very obvious. The first theme is to use the melody of *Dies irae* for variation development, and this theme is also the music material selected in Mozart's *Requiem aeternam* and Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. Liszt also compared *The Triumph of Death* with Mozart's *Requiem aeternam* in a letter to Berlioz. In the second theme, the sound of horns and hoofs seems to depict the hunting nobles in the scene on the left of *The Triumph of Death*; in the first few variations of the second theme, the melody texture of light jumping seems to depict the people playing in the forest in the scene on the right side of *The Triumph of Death*; In the subsequent variations of the second theme, the gloomy and depressive atmosphere is mixed with incongruous chords, which seems to symbolize the ferocious devil in the middle scene of *The Triumph of Death*.

In addition, the reason why *The Triumph of Death* has an impact on Liszt is not only because of the description of death in each scene, but also because of the monks in the upper left corner of the mural who are beyond the annoyance of death. Liszt is a devout Catholic. Not only did he forge an indissoluble bond with religion when he was young, he even joined the Franciscans in his old and took up the priesthood. When faced with a work like *The Triumph of Death*, he must have sympathy with the scenes depicted on the mural in his heart.

2. Woodcut Danse Macabre and Totentanz

From 1522 to 1526, German painter Hans Holbein the Younger created a set of large-scale woodcuts *Danse Macabre*. This set of prints had as many as 41 in the original version of 1538, and 10 more in 1545 and 1562. This set of prints was large in scale and had a great impact on both the time and later generations. Western art historians once called Holbein's *Danse Macabre* as *The Great Dance of Death*. Compared with other European works of art of the same theme, this set of prints is obviously in a pivotal position.

In Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries, Dance of The Death was very popular in various art forms, but most appeared in the art of painting. This theme is not only painted on the walls of the cemetery, in the bones depository, but also in the funeral homes of the chapels and even in the cathedrals. It can be found in most European countries. Dance of The Death in the Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris, painted in 1425, may be one of the oldest paintings; *The Triumph of Death* painted in the Italian Pisa Cemetery between 1450 and 1500 can be regarded as one of the most famous paintings on this theme. There is also a huge 30-meter-long work, *The God of Death of Rubik*, which shows the God of death and people of all levels, from the pope to infants, dancing the dance of death. This painting was originally painted in 1463 and is considered to be the earliest large-scale Dance of The Death work in the world, but was replaced by a new work in 1701, meanwhile, this new work was also destroyed in the Second World War.

Holbein's woodcut *Danse Macabre* is one of the outstanding works of art of the same theme. He adopts a single-frame format similar to a manuscript that seems to be independent but interconnected. In addition, each print also has a specific storyline and situation, depicting various human forms related to death. From the time when God created human beings, to the third scene where Adam and Eve were expelled from the paradise, death held a musical instrument and waited to dance with them. It shows that death is destined to be the inevitable fate of man from the beginning. Subsequently, *Danse Macabre* listed the "departure of the God of Death" one by one: the God of Death was expelled by angels and came to the world and appeared in front of people of different professions and identities. Whether they are emperors or queens, soldiers or merchants, monks or nuns, the old or children, will eventually be taken away by the God of death, showing that the end makes all equal. But Holbein seems to want to emphasize that these people have different attitudes towards death: the elderly yearn for a permanent rest and greet death with a smile, so the God of death helped him to the grave kindly; the emperor refused to abandon his crown and the businessman is nostalgic for his belongings, but the God of death sees through the greed and vanity of the world, and desperately carries out his mission, ruthlessly drags them away. The whole picture is filled with cold irony and witty humor. In his work, Holbein tries to personify death and make it human. Skeletons appear around people and lead them to death. This is not to create terror deliberately, but to let people experience the irresistibility of the power of death. It follows people just like an old friend. *Danse Macabre* warns people not to forget death, not to be afraid of death and not to try to conquer death.

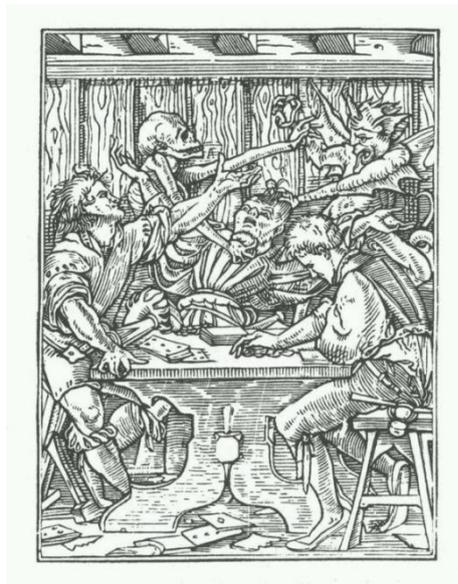


Figure 1. Holbein: The Gambler

The connection between Liszt's *Totentanz* and Holbein's *Danse Macabre* is very obvious. First of all, these two works have a common theme-- Death. In *Danse Macabre* by Holbein, the image leading this theme is the skeleton representing the God of death, while in *Totentanz* by Liszt, is the theme music of *Dies irae*. Secondly, in Holbein's *Danse Macabre*, the different situations when death comes are represented by characters and stories of different images, which is in line with the theme and variation structure adopted in Liszt's *Totentanz*. Thirdly, instead of saying that the horrible image of the God of death is rendered in *Danse Macabre*, it is better to regard the God of death as the messenger of God who brings judgment and redemption to the world. For example, in *Danse Macabre*, there is a work called *The Gambler* (picture 1), which depicts three gamblers having a dispute over the bet at the table, and the God of death on the left has strangled one of them. But the devil on the right grabbed the person's head and tried to push the God of death away. The conflict between the God of death and the devil is very confusing, but if the God of death is regarded as the messenger of God, the content of the picture will suddenly become clear. Gambling is a sinful act that makes people degenerate, but the devil takes pleasure in it and does not allow

God of death to save the gambler in the form of death so that he can obtain permanent relief. At this moment, the God of death is no longer a cruel and ruthless image, but exudes the light of Christian moral judgment. Liszt's *Totentanz* also has the same meaning. Instead of blindly expose the work to tragic death and terrifying horror, Liszt constructed a bright and splendid ending, full of freedom and gratitude to reach nirvana and rebirth in heaven after all kinds of twists and turns.

In addition, the major premise for the birth of *Danse Macabre* is the sharp decline in population caused by the rampant Black Death in Europe. The idea that everyone is equal before death is popular throughout Europe, which is the same as the birth of *Totentanz*. In Liszt's view, although Europe had made some progress in art and science in the 19th century, it was still full of "unjust or shameless parochial ignorance". Artists "have been painted by God, frustrated and imprisoned", and it is difficult to get the respect and social recognition they deserve. Liszt yearns for a society where artists can be treated equally, and he is eager to tell those who "damage and torture artists who are regarded as playthings at best": "Who is the one that God thinks is particularly suitable to testify to the highest human emotions and is taken care of by God because of his loyalty."

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