Saint Sebastian and the Black Death

Summary

The martyrdom of Saint Sebastian is one of the most enduring themes in Western religious art. The execution scene so often portrayed - with the Saint transfixed with arrows - is based on the legend about his life and death during the reign of the Roman emperor, Diocletian. However, it is the symbolic association of arrows with the Black Death - during the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance - which identifies Sebastian as the patron saint of plague victims. After more than four centuries of recurrent epidemics, the plague died out in Europe; but the image of St Sebastian continued to inspire artists until the end of the 19th century.

Résumé

Le martyre de Saint Sébastien est un des thèmes les plus dominants et persistants de l'art religieux de la civilisation occidentale. Cette scène si souvent reproduite, montrant Saint Sébastien percé de flèches, est basée sur la légende de sa vie et de sa mort pendant le règne de l'empereur romain Diocletien. C'est l'association symbolique des flèches avec la grande peste du Moyen Age et de la Renaissance qui identifie Saint Sébastien comme patron des victimes de la peste. Après quatre siècles d'épidémies cycliques, la peste disparut du continent Européen, mais l'image de Saint Sebastien continua à inspirer les artistes jusqu'à la fin du XIX siècle.

Almost every major art gallery, world-wide, has at least one painting of St Sebastian. He is usually depicted as a martyr, bound to a stake, column, or tree - and pierced with arrows (note 1). Sometimes, the picture is less dramatic, and Sebastian appears in death-like repose with one or two arrows in or next to him (fig. 1). This saint had an appeal to Renaissance and Baroque artists which was unsurpassed within the hierarchy of Christian martyrs. Although it is acknowledged that Sts Adrian, Angelo, Christina, Panaleon, and Ursula were executed by archers (De Bles, 1925 144), and that recollections of St Peter hanging upside down on the cross and of St Lawrence being roasted have stirred the imagination of numerous artists, it is St Sebastian who is peerless in respect to the variety of artistic compositions portraying his demise.

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Sebastian: Iconography

The earliest representation of Sebastian is thought to be a bas relief in the crypt of the Basilica of St Sebastian, near Rome; and here the Saint appears in armor, as a Roman soldier (Kraehling, 1938 9). The church was built *over* that part of the catacombs called the Cemetery of Calixtus , along the Appian way, two miles from the city. The original church is gone, but a new one was built in 1611; and a large recumbent statue of Sebastian by Bernini lies beneath the high altar (Jameson, 1885 21).

Some of the great Renaissance names associated with paintings of St Sebastian include Titian, Tintoretto, del Sarto, Mantegna, and del Castagno (Targat, 1979 5-25). It is significant that the figure of Sebastian was one of the few semi-nude forms permitted in early Christian art. And among the many Renaissance images of

the Saint, the paintings of Perugino, Sodoma, and Francia are considered to be the finest in terms of physical beauty and anatomical accuracy (Crawfurd, 1914 100). The Spanish painter, Ribera, is credited with no less than nine paintings of Sebastian - eight of which are still on public display (Sanchez, 1978 94-139; Trapier, 1952 121).

The urge to immortalize the Saint on canvas and in marble extended beyond the Romantic period in art, with representations by Corot (note 2), Moreau, and Daumier. How did the cult of St Sebastian begin, and what ignited the fervor of artists to paint and sculpt so many images of this martyr ?

St Sebastian : History and Legend

What we know about the life of this saint is mostly legendary (Butler, 1956 vol. 1:128-130) but the conventional biographical sketch includes a comment that Sebastian was an important member of the Praetorian Guard during the reign of Emperor Diocletian. In 288 A.D., during the persecution of the Christians, Sebastian professed both his sympathy for those persecuted and his acceptance of Christianity - which provoked the emperor to order his execution. The Saint was riddled with arrows, leftfordead.butmiraculously rescued and nursed back to health by a saintly woman, Irene. This relationship was artistically most often exploited in the reflective compositions of 19th century painters such as Corot and Moreau. Following his convalescence, Sebastian reproached Diocletian for his barbarous treatment of Christians; and once again, he was handed over to the executioners. This time he was beaten to death. Notsurprisingly, Sebastian was ultimately adopted as the patron saint of archers and pin makers (De Bles, 1925109) - and incidentally, of Perugia and Portugal.

The Black Death and Social Change

The Black Death - bubonic and pneumonic plague - arrived in Europe with a vengeance in 1347 A.D., after an absence of 600 years. First appearing in Genoa, it quickly spread into Tuscany and enveloped the cities of Sienna and Florence. It was here that the florescence of humanism, and the art it inspired, was wilted by the devastation of the plague. In its spread throughout Europe - and measured on a Richter scale of catastrophes - the plague would rank with World War II as the greatest disaster in recorded history (Lemer, 1982 77-105). An estimated one-fourth to one-third of Europe's population perished. In Florence, the population was reduced from 90,000 to 45,000, and in Sienna, from 42,000 to 15,000 during the first plague epidemic (Langer, 1964 114-122). The epidemic waned by 1350, only to flare again in 1361 - with repeated epidemics occurring throughout Europe over the next three hundred years (Gottfried, 1983 43-46, 53, 156).

Although Boccaccio's account of the plague in Florence is perhaps the most familiar, the description of the disease in Avignon by Guy de Chauliac is more to the point - and clinically authoritative. Guy was personal physician to a succession of popes, and one of the very few physicians to remain in Avignon to care for plague victims during the first year of the epidemic (Walsh, 1911 294; Power & Thompson, 1923 294; Seeling, 1925 74). He has been honored with the title, The Father of Surgery ; and his master-work, *Chirurgia Magna*, contains a vivid - but no less accurate - description of both bubonic and pneumonic plague:

> *"It was of two kinds: The first lasted two months (in the local population, that is), with continuous fever and blood spitting. And they died of it in three days. The second kind lasted all the rest of the time with continued fever and boils and carbuncles on the exterior, particularly in the axilla and groin; and they died in five days. And it was of such*

St Sebastian Attended by the Holy Woman. ***Nicolas Regnier (France c. 1590-1667). Stanford Art Museum, Stanford, California, USA The artist was usually known by the name Niccolo Renieri, and he specialized in portraits and historical themes. His reputation is a matter of conjecture, but he was certainly not a 17th century luminary. The Stanford painting was first associated with Regnier by Pierre Rosenberg of the Louvre, who noted the close relationship of the figure of St. Sebastian here to that in Regnier's picture of the same subject in the Fine Arts Museum at Rouen. Although the authenticity of the fomer painting has not been established, Louvre experts believe that it is a genuine Regnier (Registrar's file, Stanford Art Museum, Stanford, California, USA; Benezit £., 1976 Dictionaire Critique et Documentaire des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinaterus et Graveurs. Librairie Grund, Paris 8:655)***

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great contagion, especially that with the blood spitting, that not only in dwelling but in looking one had it from another. So that they died without servants and were buried without priests. The father did not visit the son, nor the son the father; charity was dead and hope crushed (Nicaise, 1890 170)."

The demographic consequences of the plague have come down to us from on-going, voluminous municipal records in various parts of Europe; and both its political and economic effects have remained subjects of intense scrutiny. But the immediate social consequences were dramatic and divisive. In Tuscany the rich left the city in droves. Class suspicions were aroused, old prejudices revived, and there were the usual claims that one social element or another was responsible forthe calamity. Survival might be interpreted to mean either divine intervention or protection afforded by a compact with the devil.

There was an avalanche of bequests for churches and a surge of religious processions. Pilgrimages increased and swarms of penitents materialized, of whom the flagellants were the most conspicuous and the most infamous. Although there seemed to be no limits to imaginative opinions on the causes of the Black Death, the prevailing view was that the disease represented divine retribution for immorality. In Sienna, the Blessed Bernardino, looking narrowly at his congregation and at the extent of dissolute behavior around the city, concluded that the plague was punishment for sodomy. Even some physicians were convinced of the divine retribution theory. Exhortation replaced the usual

sermons, with themes extolling self-denial, poverty, chastity, and Christian militancy (Meiss, 1951 75, 78-85; Trexler, 1980 361-364, 380).

Nowhere has the mood of the times been better reflected than in the letters and poetry of the prototypical humanist, Petrarch, who remained preoccupied with the plague and its social consequences until the end of his days (Watkins, 1972 19:196-223). In a moving verse, he measures his personal loss against the devastating effects of plague on society, as a whole:

"Alas what lies before me? Whither now
Am I to be whirled away by the force of fate?
Time rushes onward for the perishing world
And round about I see the hosts of the dying,
The young and the old; nor is there anywhere
In all the world a refuge, or a harbor
Where there is hope of safety. Funerals
Where'er I turn my frightened eyes, appall;
The temples groan with coffins, and the proud
And humble lie alike in lack of honor
The end of life presses upon my mind,
And I recall the dear ones I have lost,
Their cherished words, their faces, vanished now,
The consecrated ground is all too small
To hold the instant multitude of graves.
(Wilkins, 1961 79-80)

Plague Art

The cultural transformation wrought by the plague in Western Europe was perhaps most apparent in changes of artistic expression. Pervasive gloom and preoccupation with death invested painting and sculpture (Brossollet, 1972 11-24).

A recurrent theme, the dance of death, appeared in wood cuts, paintings, and murals. It pictured a procession of mortals being led by skeletons to the charnel house, which both figuratively and explicitly reminded the viewer that death was just around the corner (Burgess, 1980 26:250-37; Mollaret & Brossollet, 1965 59-76). Literal plague paintings were less common. However, there was a profusion of symbolic portrayals, with victims of the plague shown as wounded and dying under a shower of arrows from a heavenly executioner (Burgess, 1976 70:422-428; Crawfurd, 1914 135-150; Polzer, 1982 111).

The use of arrows to represent pestilence goes back to classical mythology, along with the belief in a divine archer meting out punishment forvarious transgressions or sins. Forthe Greeks, it was Apollo, God of the Silver Bowl (Chamberlain, 1968 3). That St Sebastian came to be identified with the plague - in the role of a patron interceding for potential or actual victims - has been a matter of continuing interest and validation among European historians. But it is clear that Sebastian became associated with the plague as early as the 7th century A.D. A mosaic in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli (Rome) shows the Saint again as a Roman soldier, but with the following inscription: 'To Saint Sebastian, martyr, dispeller of the pestilence. In the year of salvation 680, a pernicious and severe pestilence invaded the city of Rome... Such was the multitude of dead, that on the same bier, parents and children, husbands and wives, with brothers and sisters, were borne out to burial places, which, everywhere filled with bodies, hardly sufficed... The disease spread for a length of time, until it was announced to a holy man that there would be an end to the calamity, if, in the church of St Peter ad Vincula an altar should be consecrated to Sebastian the martyr; which this being done, immediately the pestilence, as if driven back by hand, was commanded to cease" (Jameson, 1885 21-22).

In any case, by the time that the disease was reintroduced into Europe in 1347, the cult of Sebastian was widespread in Italy and elsewhere on the continent (Mollaret & Brossolet, 1965 76-79). At the end of the fourteenth century there were innumerable representations of the Saint

on wood and fresco, not to mention those images on crude posters in village after village. There were churches and chapels dedicated to Sebastian, and many of these were festooned with effigies of the Saint. A typical example is the chapel which still stands in Lansvillard, France, constructed by a Sebastian Turbil, who miraculously survived the plague. This chapel has seventeen frescoes tracing the life of the Saint, two of which are directly concerned with Sebastian's role during the plague (Mollaret & Brossolet, 1965 78).

During the Renaissance, the figure of the Saint became incorporated into complex paintings showing Sebastian in the company of several saints - and often with the Virgin Mary. From this heavenly entourage emerged a new contender for the role of patron saint to protect potential plague victims: Saint Roch was born in Montpellier at the end of the 13th century. As a mendicant, he traveled extensively in Italy during the mid-century plague epidemic; and while caring for the sick he was credited, on one occasion, with miraculous cures of plague victims. He attracted the attention of artists, who sometimes portrayed him alone (note 3), but more often in the company of Sebastian. He can be instantly recognized by the bubo on his upper thigh - a literal characterization as constant in art as St Sebastian's arrows (Mollaret & Brossolet, 1965 80-90).

Although less well known, Saint Anthony the hermit became associated with the plague, centuries after his death. His disciples began a system of hospices in Alpine France; and when subsequently, Anthony's hospitalers tended plague victims, the Saint took his place with Sts Sebastian and Roch in Gothic and Renaissance paintings. Much later, there were a few short-lived patrons who surfaced during the Counter-Reformation: Sts Rosalie and Francis Xavier in Italy, St Adrien in Flanders, and Sts Genevieve and Louis in France (Kraehling, 1938 14-15).

There is a curious parallel to the St Sebastian martyrdom scenes - considered by some to be a further extension of the symbolism portrayed in scenes of execution with arrows. In a number of Medieval and Renaissance surgical texts there appear anatomical illustrations which superficially resemble some of the St Sebastian iconography. However, this wound man is bristling with swords and daggers as well as with arrows, and was probably intended as a teaching aid for budding trauma surgeons of the Middle Ages (Jones, 1984 113-115).

Plague Reverberations and the Decline of Sebastian

After a final epidemic in Marseilles in 1720 the plague began to die out in Europe, and so did the reminders of St Sebastian - including new churches and chapels in his name. Sebastian was less often selected as a given name (Kraehling, 193816). But the cult of St Sebastian somehow survived into the 20th century. The great voluptuary - at times, poet and playwright - Gabriele D'Annunzio, claimed that he was inspired by the Sebastian paintings of Mantegna and Gozzoli to write his play, which was supposed to be about the Saint. Unkind critics have suggested that the paintings instead, inspired him to use the Sebastian theme as a dramatic vehicle for the eccentric ballerina, Ida Rubinstein, who was his mistress at the time. This production, which included spoken lines as well as ballet, was a mixture of myth and allegory with little resemblance to the sombre legend about the Saint (Jullian, 1972 222-237). The play, in five acts - which opened in Paris on May 22, 1911 - must have overwhelmed audiences with its assault on all the senses as well as with its duration. There were stunning sets by the designer/illustrator, Leon Bakst, and there was an elaborate musical score by Claude Debussy (Spencer, 1973 136-144). This extravaganza eventually reached the Royal Opera in London, and has been revived from time to time. There was a 30-year hiatus between its staging at l'Opera, in Paris in 1969, and its premier at the

Saint Roch of Montpellier.
Oak polychrome of XVII Century.
Collection of the Brussels Medical Museum

Metropolitan Opera in 1987 as a production of the Paris Opera Ballet. The original production inspired this hyperbole from a respected drama critic:

"...she (Rubinstein) suggests some saint from a stained-glass window who, suddenly called to life, and still trammeled by the thought of his translucent immobility, has not yet grown accustomed to the newly-bestowed gifts of speech and gesture. She gives this impression throughout... when she says with childlike gentleness to Diocletian that he has been a generous master... when in her intoxication of faith, she counts the glowing keys of her deliverance, and when she hangs, pierced by the arrows, against the tree, like the wreck of some gallant ship entangled in its rigging...(Arsene & Cocteau, 1971 37-38)."

Buried in the vast repertoire of the composer, Villa Lobos, is his *Mass of St Sebastian* for chorus and orchestra, which was completed in 1937. And still, this is not the last of Sebastian: The memorabilia of this saint - from various parts of Europe - was assembled for an extraordinary exhibition at the French National Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions (Paris), in 1983. The collection included sculpture, graphics, tapestries, and assorted documents representing songs and invocations. And once again St Sebastian's association with the Black Death was high-lighted (Cuiseier, 1983 65-69).

The Black Death: Its Final Legacy

The plague of the Middle Ages conclusively shaped Western history and thought in ways that have not since been duplicated, introducing a number of philosophical contradictions and psychological conflicts. On the one hand, the Black Death led to the debauchery described by Bocaccio, on the other, to born-again religious zeal. Such a paradox may have been possible only against the backdrop of the 14th century, with its continuous war, peasant revolts, famines, persecutions, and a dislocated, discredited papacy. In this setting, despair was replaced by growing cynicism, and in the words of historian, Barbara Tuchman:

"Survivors of the plague, finding themselves neither destroyed nor improved, could discover no Divine Purpose in the pain they had suffered. God's purposes were usually mysterious, but this scourge had been too terrible to be accepted without questioning. If a disaster of such a magnitude, the most lethal ever known, was a mere wanton act of

God, or perhaps not God's work at all, then the absolutes of a fixed order were loosed from their moorings. Minds that opened to admit these questions could never again be shut. Once people envisioned the possibility of a change in a fixed order, the end of an age of submission came in sight; the turn to individual conscience lay ahead. To that extent the Black Death may have been the unrecognized beginning of modern man" (Tuchman, 1978 123).

But where the plague stimulated a reaffirmation of the Christian faith, there was a fresh vitality to religious art:

"All sections of the middle class were... clearly united in their desire for a more intense religious art... Masses of people, interpreting the calamities as punishment of their worldliness and their sins, were stirred by repentance and religious yearning. Some of them joined groups that cultivated mystical experiences or extreme asceticism. Many more sought salvation through traditional methods offered by the Church. For the painters of the time this religious excitement and the conflicts of values which it entailed was a crucial cultural event" (Meiss, 1980 73).

For the faithful of the Middle Ages, who viewed the plague as a manifestation of God's exasperation with mankind, it was only natural to seek a holy redeemer. Thus St Sebastian emerged from classical obscurity to intercede with a vengeful God on behalf of sinners.

But now we have a new pestilence: HIV infection, with its immunedeficiency syndrome. And we still have more than a few clerics thundering from their pulpits that this disease too, is divine punishment for dissolute behavior. We even have some of the social stratification associated with the Black Death: The new plague is more likely to affect the poor than the rich, and Third World populations rather than those in industrialized society. The cold light of scientific illumination and of demographics is of little comfort to those afflicted, or to those threatened with AIDS. For we have no Sebastian to deflect this latest shower of arrows. And in the divine quiver the supply of arrows is endless.

Notes

1. *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian.* Antonio del Pollaiuolo, 1473, The National Gallery, London (1431-1498). Pollaiuolo introduced a special vitality to early Renaissance art. Waxen repose was transformed into tension and movement. His figures were committed to an eternal struggle. These kinetic qualities are no more evident than in his *Sebastian Confronted by the Executioners.* This painting was commissioned by the prominent Puzzi family for a chapel at the church of Santissima Annunziato, and was completed in 1475. If not his greatest, it is considered to be his most ambitious work (Hart F., 1975 *History of Italian Renaissance Art.* Prentice Hall Inc., New York 274-275).
2. *Saint Sebastian Succoured by the Holy Woman.* Jean Baptiste Camille Corot (France, 1796-1875). The Walters Art Gallery Baltimore, MD, USA Corot was born in Revolutionary Paris. Destined by parental preference for the clothing Business, he turned instead to painting. Of independent means, he was able to support himself during the lean years of his artistic development, and went on to become Europe's leading landscape painter at mid-century. What is ironic about Corot's Sebastian - which was completed in 1853 - is that the Saint and the Holy Woman are almost incidental to the landscape. Only towards the end of his career did Corot take up portrait and figure painting. Although indifferent, if not actually hostile to the nascent French impressionism, he is credited with having profoundly influenced the impressionists (Roberts, K. 1965 *Corot.* Spring Books, London 34; Rabinovitz-Mott, E. 1986 Camille Corot, the Roman campagna with the Claudian aqueduct, *Journal of the American Medical Assoc.* 256:160)
3. Saint Roch. Carlo Crivelli (Italy, 1430/35-1493?). The Wallace Collection, London. In the usual painting of St Roch, the artist places the bubonic swelling - and its overlying incision - discreetly distant from the groin. Crivelli's St Roch is closer to anatomic reality - perhaps more daring than

that of other artists of his era. Crivelli was a painter of the Venetian school who attained neither the proficiency nor the reputation of his contemporaries: Mantegna and Bellini. However, in the view of one critic".. .he provided an agreeable and high-class holiday far away from great pictures and the aesthetic problems they pose... General esteem for him is not dependent on illuminating experiences, but on simple, powerful attraction of his pictures". As with other Crivelli paintings, the date of execution of the St. Roch painting in the Wallace Collection is uncertain. Crivelli also did a superior Sebastian, which hangs in the Museo Poldi Pizzoli, Milan (Bovero A., 1974 *Opera Completa del Crivelli.* Milano, Rizzoli cat. #146-147, pi. 50A, 50B; Davies M. 1972 *Carlo Crivelli.* The National Gallery, London 7, 13, 20-21)

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