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## REVIEWS

**Christine M. Boeckl, *Images of Plague and Pestilence. Iconography and Iconology, Sixteenth-Century Essays and Studies*, vol. 53 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press 2000) 210 pp., 45 b/w ills.**

To what degree the sudden outbreak of bubonic plague in Europe in 1347 changed medieval society and culture has long been debated amongst historians and art historians alike. According to Christine Boeckl's new study, we can at least be certain that the disastrous epidemic marked the beginning of a plague iconography in European art. This development is unique, since the plague is the only disease for which a specific iconography has evolved. Therein lies the impetus for this book, which is an examination of the representation of plague and pestilence (most especially bubonic plague) in paintings, prints and drawings produced in Europe between 1347 and the 1990s. In its treatment of the iconography and iconology of plague images, Boeckl's book is the first general overview of this imagery by an art historian.

Boeckl's study begins with an examination of the history of bubonic plague. She introduces both historical and medical evidence to describe such phenomena as the plague's symptoms, past theories on the causes of the disease, treatment of victims, building of hospitals, etc. Much of this information is presented in general statements without much concern for historical differentiation. Included in this chapter are several photographs of people suffering from bubonic plague, which the author compares to plague paintings. While these comparisons are intended to suggest the level of verism achieved by the artists (based on the supposition that symptoms have not changed over the years), the photographs also serve as a forceful reminder that bubonic plague is still a very real threat in many parts of the world. The following two chapters examine the textual and visual traditions relating to the plague. Here Boeckl enumerates the literary *topoi* and visual motifs which have been determinative in the development of plague iconography. Her discussion of literary sources is supplemented by a useful appendix consisting of excerpts from some of the texts which have found visual representation in plague images, such as Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, Virgil's account of the plague of Phrygia in *The Aeneid*, and eschatological references to pestilence in the New Testament. As is standard

for iconographical analyses, the relationship between literary sources and visual images is considered fundamental: the meaning of images in most cases is determined by textual references. Although Boeckl recognizes the importance of oral tradition, she is unable to suggest what role it might have played in shaping the iconography.

The following chapters (4 through 7) examine the transformations in the iconography and iconology of plague images from the Black Death through the 1990s. Since the majority of plague art produced before the nineteenth century served religious purposes, these changes are understood in terms of the interplay between religion and art. Chapter 4, “The Black Death and Its Immediate Aftermath (1347–1500),” argues that the preoccupation with death imagery in the fourteenth century predates the outbreak of plague and has less to do with the Black Death than with theological ideas concerning the final judgement. (Boeckl here engages with Millard Meiss’s famous interpretation of *The Triumph of Death* in the Camposanto at Pisa.) Following the outbreak of the plague, however, a distinctive plague iconography was established by the third quarter of the fourteenth century. Plague altars and ex-votos, often depicting such intercessory saints as Saint Sebastian, proliferated. The following chapter examines the changes that occurred during the Renaissance, most importantly the introduction of new motifs and stylistic innovations. Complex theological symbolism was now often mixed with secular subjects and ideas, yet these erudite plague images still reflected a preoccupation with eschatological themes. The heady interpretations offered by Boeckl would perhaps have been intelligible to “sophisticated Renaissance viewers” (102), although I wonder how many sixteenth-century Italians fell into that category. In chapter 6, “The Tridentine World: Plague Paintings as Implementations of Catholic Reforms (1600–1775),” Boeckl likens the post-Tridentine images of plague to “visual sermons” (135) that served an edifying purpose within the reformed Catholic church. The paintings produced during this period rarely functioned as ex-votos; instead, narrative paintings emphasized the Catholic Church’s teachings on the sacraments and the status of the clergy—both polemical subjects during this period—in a manner that would have made them far more easily understood by the majority of Catholics. Finally, chapter 7 examines the developments of the last two centuries. Throughout these chapters, Boeckl’s approach is rather conventional—she tends to offer a single

interpretation for each image's meaning, one that is unambiguous and presumably identical for all viewers.

Given that this is the first general overview of the subject, it is regrettable that Boeckl did not include a systematic discussion of earlier scholarship. The two paragraphs (one in the Preface, the other tucked away in the final chapter) devoted to previous research have collectively only one endnote, and that does not include a single citation. Boeckl would have provided a great service to scholars and students encountering this imagery for the first time if she had succinctly summarized the most important studies relating to this subject along with bibliographic references. This shortcoming is compounded by the rather vexing problem that various points made by the author throughout the book are either not annotated or underannotated.

Boeckl's monograph, while providing a useful general introduction, leaves open many avenues for further study. With the establishment of the corpus of plague images well under way due to the iconographic detection of the author and other scholars, these images could now be studied in terms of reception, devotional practice, ritual function, etc.

Such contextual studies would add to our understanding of these images.

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