Picturing Death 1200-1600 (Edited Volume)

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Proposals sought for chapters in a peer-reviewed edited volume

The glut of pictures of and for death has long been associated with the Middle Ages in the popular imagination. In reality, however, these images thrived in Europe in a much more concentrated period of time that straddles the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as conventionally defined. Macabre artifacts ranging from monumental transi tombs to memento mori baubles, gory depictions of the death and torment of sacred figure as well as of the souls of the lay, gruesome medical and pharmacological illustrations, all proliferate in tandem with less unsettling (and far more widespread) works such as supplicant donor portraits and lavishly endowed chantry chapels, with the shared purpose of mitigating the horrors of death and the post-mortem state. The period in question, 1200-1600, is bracketed by two major moments in European cultural history. At its end is the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, which altered Europeans' approach to their own mortality and subsequently also aspects of the visual culture facilitating their practices. The beginning, 1200, is marked by the culmination of a conceptual shift that in a 1981 book Jacques le Goff termed the spatialization, or more famously, birth of Purgatory.

Le Goff observed that in the second half of the twelfth century a hitherto somewhat vague and changing idea about a third place for the dead—neither heaven nor hell—coalesced into a notion of a concrete locale for posthumous penance and spiritual cleansing. Crucially, this fixed "third place"—Purgatory—was subject to the influence of the living. The ability to alleviate purgatorial sentences and torments by prayer, Le Goff observed, profoundly altered the relationship between the living and the dead in Europe, spawning a complex economy of Salvation, which, as most social systems, greatly favored the rich and powerful. While some of his evidence has been called into question, Le Goff undoubtedly traced an accurate trend. First embraced in a 1254 letter by Pope Innocent IV, belief in the efficacy of prayer in addressing the plight of the souls in Purgatory became official Church doctrine at the Council of Lyons in 1274, and was subsequently affirmed, repeatedly, through the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The influence of the Salvation economy on image making is unmistakable. It has been discussed in numerous studies dedicated to various aspects of this phenomenon that have appeared since Erwin Panofsky's 1964 field-defining work on tomb sculpture, especially in recent decades, as part of a broader surge in visual culture studies.

The purpose of the present volume is to further probe the many open questions still surrounding the logic and purpose of Salvation-industry imagery, and especially to explore connections hitherto obscured by artificial modern divides of periodization, national school, and perceived aesthetic

merit. Those include parallels between picturing death north and south of the Alps, continuities between such seemingly disparate objects as the Royaumont Abbey tombs and Early Modern anatomy treatises, and, crucially, the oft-underemphasized connection between macabre and mainstream pictures of and for death. In bringing together essays on death-related artifacts from a broad temporal and geographic scope and purposefully cogitating the macabre and non-macabre novelty imagery, we seek to ultimately raise an ambitious question: Was the new sense of agency in the face of death a major driving force behind the phenomenon now known as the Renaissance?

A great number of images—and image types—from the period 1200-1600 are directly related to this newfound economy of Salvation, likely accounting for a substantial portion of the era's dramatic quantitative expansion in artistic production across Europe. The qualitative change that followed, from heighted interest in realism to an obsession with affective engagement, likewise seems curiously entwined with that economy. Furthermore, recent studies problematize the popular notion that macabre imagery emerged in response to the plague that ravaged Europe in the mid-fourteenth century; in reality, pictures of decomposing human corpses appear much earlier in the context of medical illustrations, and thus form part of a broader, essentially rational inquiry into human transience. Along with the settling recognition that so many famous Renaissance artifacts were created primarily to mitigate mortality it greatly complicates the (already rather fraught) grand narrative of the disenchantment of the image.

This greater framework begets a host of other questions. Potential topics may include, but are not limited to:
-The inherent tension in luxury artifacts evoking the "memento mori" theme
-Parallels and disjuncture between literary and pictorial works on death
-Novelty funerary practices, from the embalming of the body to increasingly lavish ceremonies
-The messages, intended or inadvertent, that viewers received from images of the afterlife
-The effects of the religious turmoil of the sixteenth century on earlier imagery and customs

Please send a 500-word abstract and a short CV by September 1, 2016 to the editors:
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