



HNA's Pandemic Intermission Online Event

Picturing the Pandemic. Epidemic Outbreaks and Their Impact on Art Made in the Netherlands during the Early Modern Era

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Program

Session chair: Judith Noorman, University of Amsterdam

Pandemia and Astrology. Syphilis and Visual Epidemiology in 15th and 16th Century Northern Europe

Anja Grebe, Professor of Cultural History and Museum Studies at Danube University Krems

Among the first works ascribed to the young Albrecht Dürer is the woodcut of a "Syphilitic Man". It illustrates a large broadsheet with a Latin poem by the Dutch physician Dirk van Ulsen (Theodorus Ulsenius) dedicated to the disease and printed in Nuremberg in 1496. Van Ulsen, who acted as medical advisor to the city of Nuremberg and had close connections to the vibrant humanist circle in the Franconian metropole, composed a poem of 110 hexameters in the literary form of a dream in which the ancient God Apollon informs the author about the origins of the "Epidemica scabies" for which he blames a malevolent star constellation in 1484.

The artist has visualized the astrological incident and its disastrous effects on mankind in the woodcut, described by Colin Eisler as "one of the very earliest examples of applied graphic epidemiology" (Eisler 2009, 59). In my paper, I would like to explore the idea of "applied graphic/visual epidemiology" with a special focus on the connection of pandemics (and especially syphilis) and astrology in the Netherlands and Northern Europe during the late 15th and 16th centuries. How did artists visualize the often-complex scientific reasonings, who were their (intended) audiences, and which reactions did their iconographic inventions provoke?

The Logic of Disgust. Picturing Contagion and Pandemic Knowledge in *Warning Against Syphilis*

Tony Yanzhang Cui, PhD Student at the University of Maryland

In "Warning Against Syphilis" by Christoph Schwartz and Jan Sadeler, the Italian medical doctor Girolamo Fracastoro alerts a shepherd to the dangerous disease that he catches by drinking contaminated water. After Erwin Panofsky has identified key iconographical details, this paper reconsiders the print's appropriation of contemporary writings and relates its intellectual origin to early modern ways of thinking about infections, contagions and pandemic morality. With special attention to its allusions to Venice and liquid motifs, I analyze how the print embodies common medical knowledge of the time, constructs metaphors for infectious diseases and judges individual behaviors. As "contagion" was a new concept for deadly ailments, the print's compositional and rhetorical strategies demonstrate how early modern Europeans, such as Sadeler and Schwartz, imagined contagions in both descriptive and allegorical ways that gave scientific, moralistic,

iconographic, religious and poetic meanings to the equally new disease of syphilis. Eventually, by identifying and contextualizing what I call a “logic of disgust” in the print’s use of fluid metaphors and visual *affetti*, I argue that the early modern invention of contagions engendered associative, sympathetic and moralizing modes of pandemic thought that continue to affect how we perceive infectious diseases and visualize pandemics.

Video Tour of the Mauritshuis Exhibition: Fleeting – Scents in Colour

Lizzie Marx, PhD Candidate at the University of Cambridge and Research and Exhibition Assistant at the Mauritshuis

Disease was commonly believed to originate in stagnant or putrefying matter, and to spread through odoriferous air. But how did the medical theory about the invisible forces of malevolent odours manifest visually in works of art? *Fleeting – Scents in Colour*, an exhibition currently on display at the Mauritshuis, explores smells in the seventeenth century. In this short tour of the exhibition, select artworks will be explored through the lens of disease and odour. The exhibition includes an assortment of pomanders (scented jewellery) whose fragrances were believed to protect the wearer. Based on recipes from early modern medical treatises, the fragrances of two pomanders have been reconstructed, and visitors can sample the complex combinations of ingredients through scent diffusers. This presentation will discuss the process of developing the scents. What may seem like pleasant fragrances today were the defining scents of protection against the plague to the early modern nose.

Holland’s Last Epidemic of Plague (1663/4) and the Decline of the Art of Painting

Eric Jan Sluifjter, professor emeritus at the University of Amsterdam, with a contribution of Weixuan Li, PhD Candidate at the Huygens ING (KNAW) and the University of Amsterdam

Remarkably, historians and art historians have never pointed out that the disastrous years of plague (1635, 1655 and the worst: 1663/64) must have had a drastic impact on economic and cultural phenomena of that time – something that seems so self-evident to us right now. In this paper, I will underpin my hypothesis that the last and most horrifying epidemic of plague (c. 17% of the Amsterdam population died in 1663/1664!) caused the unstable and risky business of making and selling paintings to collapse: this human tragedy gave the final blow to the golden age of Dutch painting.

The number of active painters decreased rapidly from the mid-1660s onwards. Weixuan Li’s new and convincing calculation of the production trend of paintings shows a first slump in the mid-1650s, after which it plummets as of 1664. From the 1640s onwards a structural overproduction had increased the risk of a stagnation of demand during a crisis (Bok). The new graphs make it possible to observe that the turning points coincide precisely with the last two grave epidemics of plague (1655 and 1663/1664). I will also argue why this market – unlike the earlier dip in 1635 and in contrast to other luxury crafts – did not recover. Apart from pointing out exogenous and endogenous factors, Weixuan Li’s theory about the rapid growth and steep decline of a massive production of paintings as a “social bubble” will be adduced.

‘Pestvogel.’ Harbinger of Impending Doom

Joy Kearney, Independent Art Historian and PhD Candidate at Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen

This paper will focus on the phenomenon of the ‘Pestvogel’ or Bohemian Waxwing as a harbinger of impending doom and the advent of the plague in the Early Modern Netherlands. In many seventeenth century Dutch paintings by artists such as Melchior de Hondecoeter, this small, beautifully coloured bird became a symbol of death, pestilence and misery. Before the advent of

natural science, a combination of folklore, imagination and superstition often led to inaccurate suppositions regarding certain natural history phenomena, the transmission of diseases and the role of animals in such occurrences. Conrad Gessner was the first to write about the bird's role in the dissemination of disease in 1555 and called it "Garrulus Bohemicus", and it was immediately associated with the spread of the plague, meaning that large irruptions of the bird's population were greeted with fear and dread. In the absence of scientific knowledge, observation of birds and their migration led to misconceptions regarding the rise in cases of the Black Death and the spread of disease. The 'Pestvogel' and its history in the context of early modern illustration, the symbolism of birds in relation to death and disease, and other examples of such beliefs will be explored in this paper.