



6. DEATH

Introduction

“I will die.” So each person proclaims to the camera in a video entitled *I Will Die* (2001) by Chinese artist Yang Zhenzhong (b. 1968). The multi-screen projection was featured at the Venice Biennale in 2007. Yang videotaped individuals on the street from China, Germany, France, the United States, and other countries, all saying the same simple sentence. Death is a universal fact of life. The people in the video smile as they acknowledge their own mortality. However, the impact on viewers challenged to ponder the inevitable and incomprehensible is unsettling.

Every society has developed elaborate rituals to visualize, mourn, and confront death. In ancient Egypt and China, people attempted to prolong life through elaborate tombs furnished for the afterlife. Many European and Mexican cultures have traditions that represent death as a skeletal figure, in images meant to either frighten or entertain the living. Many societies have created images and objects intended to provide comfort to those in mourning. The extensive collection of artworks that serve commemorative purposes includes paintings, photographs, mementos, ritual clothing, masks, statues, monuments, and the creation of sacred spaces and enclosures.

Representing Death

Artists in different cultures and eras have portrayed death in both personified and symbolic form. A motif used in European art of the Middle Ages is the *danse macabre*, or “Dance of Death,” in which skeletal figures interact with the living. Images often showed the skeletal figures leading people of different classes and occupations to their graves, as the individuals danced along or tried to flee. The theme appeared in mural paintings, stained glass windows, wooden carvings, metal work, woodcuts, engravings, and printed books, as well as literary tracts. Visual representations of the Dance of Death served to remind the illiterate to be virtuous at all times, since death could strike at any moment.



Figure 1. Unknown artist (French); *Death leading a doctor holding a vial of urine (La Danse Macabre)*; tempera on parchment; late 15th century; Bibliothèque de la Sorbonne, Paris, France. Photograph courtesy of Snark/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 1 (pg.164) is an early *danse macabre* image--a 15th-century French manuscript illumination of *Death leading a doctor holding a vial of urine*. Portrayed as a skeleton, Death is attempting to lead a doctor off into the great unknown. The doctor holds aloft a bottle of urine; at the time it was common medical practice to examine the color and clarity for indications of disease. Dance of Death imagery reflected that death was a very real presence in everyday life; the Bubonic Plague devastated the population in the 14th century. In this particular image, not even the doctor's medical expertise can save him from the inevitability of death.

At a time when sudden death was always a possibility, the *Ars Moriendi* (*The Art of Dying Well*) offered some hope that salvation was available to anyone who embraced the sacred rites of Christianity.¹ Figure 2 (pg.166) is a page from this instruction manual, created by an unknown German artist in 1466 by printing each page with a single carved woodblock.

This particular page is titled *Inspiration against Despair*. A dying man is surrounded by individuals who received God's mercy after living in sin—Mary Magdalene, St. Peter, Dismas the good thief, St. Paul. As two demons below the man unsuccessfully try to lead him into temptation, an angel about him consoles him, saying, "You should not despair, by any means."

A harrowing image of death's horrors appears in Figure 3 (pg.167), *The Triumph of Death* (ca.1562) by the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca.1525-1569). In this work, Bruegel depicts the end of all life on earth. Death, in the form of a skeleton, rides a pale horse through the middle-ground, leading an army of executioners. In the foreground, individuals representing different stations in life—including a king, a cardinal, chess players, a loving couple, and a knight—are slaughtered. As in the *danse macabre*, all fall prey to Death, who does not discriminate. At the time, the residents of Antwerp were embroiled in religious wars with the Spanish, so atrocities like those depicted in the painting were all too familiar.²

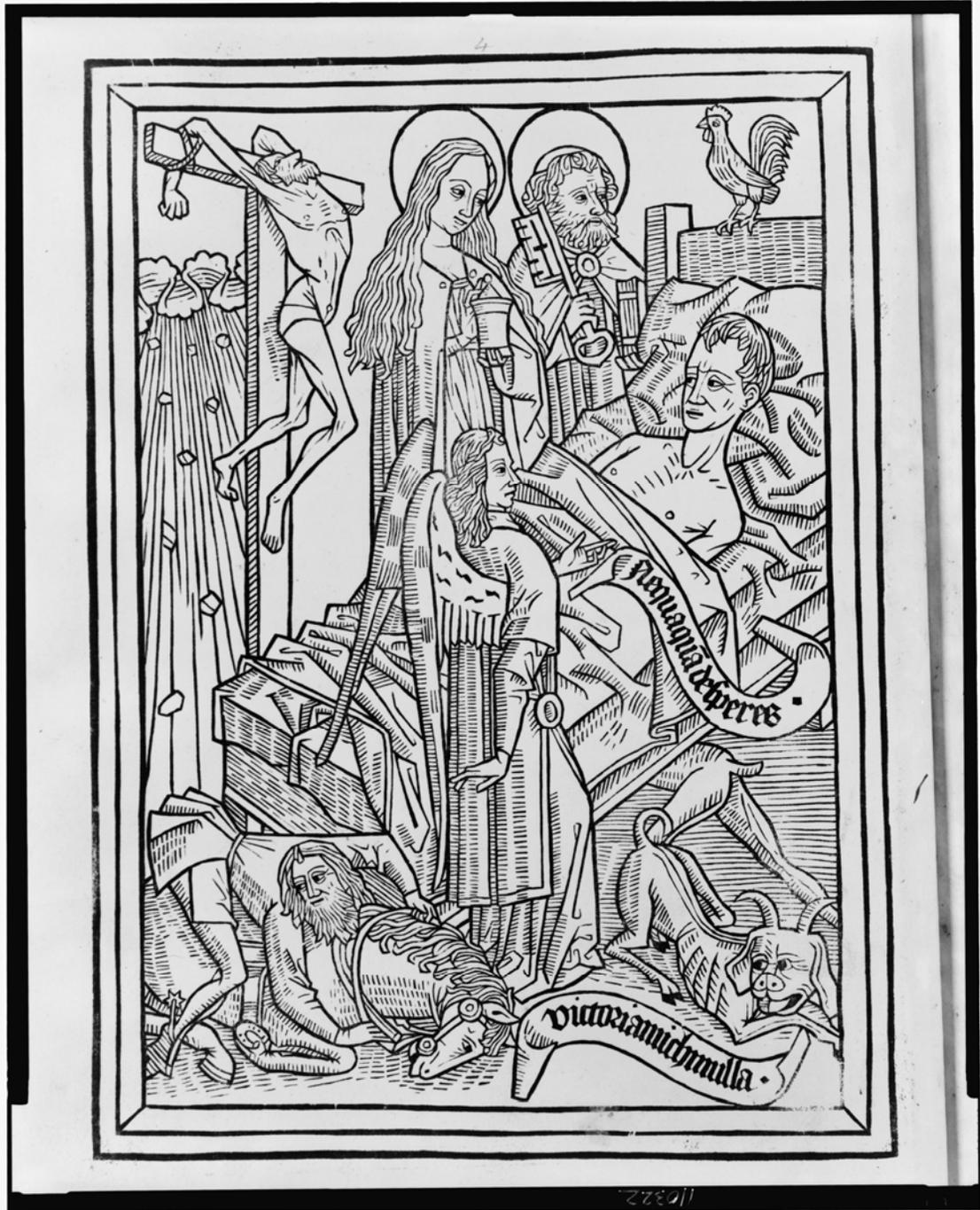


Figure 2. Unknown artist (German); A page from the *Ars Moriendi*; woodcut; ca.1466; H: approx.11 in. (28.7 cm.); Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Figure 3. Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Flemish ca.1525-1569); *Triumph of Death*; oil on panel; ca.1562; H: 46 in. (117 cm.), W: 63.8 in. (162 cm.); Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. Photograph courtesy of Art Resource/Photo by Erich Lessing.

A message about mortality is central to *The Ambassadors* (1533), by German painter Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543), shown in Figure 4 on page 168. The portrait depicts Jean de Dinteville (1504-55), the ambassador to England from the French court of King François I, and Georges de Selve (1508-1541), a French bishop and diplomat. Between them is a two-tiered shelf holding an array of worldly goods—including books, musical instruments, and astronomical devices. Wearing luxurious clothes, they appear to be wealthy, highly sophisticated, and knowledgeable.

Hidden within the composition are *memento mori* elements, which serve as a “reminder of death.” An odd shape in the foreground of the painting morphs into a large skull when viewed at precisely the right angle. Holbein is asserting that material possessions are ephemeral, human achievement is transient, and that death is inevitable.³



Figure 4. Hans Holbein the Younger (German, 1497-1543); *Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve (The Ambassadors)*; oil on oak; 1533; H: 81 ½ in. (207 cm.), W: 82 ½ in. (209.5 cm.); National Gallery, London, UK. Photograph courtesy of National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY.

A famous death scene painted in the 19th century is the *Death of Marat* (1793) by French Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), who was renowned for his history painting. David's startlingly naturalistic painting depicts Jean-Paul Marat, a close friend of the painter's and a leader of the French Revolution. His murderer, a Royalist named Charlotte Corday, stabbed him to death for his role in the Reign of Terror (1793-1794), which was meant to purge revolutionary France of its enemies. Instead of a realistic depiction of Marat's deteriorating corpse, the painting presents an idealized image of a healthy, muscular body, a heroic portrayal that recalls Greek warriors depicted in battle scenes on ancient pottery. The expression on the subject's face, bathed in light, shows peaceful acceptance of suffering, further glorifying Marat as a martyr of the Revolution. The painter's signature appears as if

carved on the vertical surface of Marat's writing desk, below the simple inscription *à Marat* ("to Marat"), turning the desk into the image of a tombstone. The picture was displayed as part of a ceremony for Marat at the Louvre and remains an icon of the French Revolution.⁴

In the late 19th century, European artists revived the Gothic and Renaissance imagery of the *danse macabre*. In the Symbolist period of the 1880s and 1890s, European artists like Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), Max Klinger (1857-1920), Odilon Redon (1840-1916), Edvard Munch (1863-1944), and Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) added a new dimension of personal invention that turned traditional themes into personal expressive motifs about cycles of life and death.

Edvard Munch's childhood in Oslo, Norway, was marked by tragedy. As a child, he lost his mother and an older sister to tuberculosis, and he suffered from illness himself throughout his life. The deadly epidemics in his day influenced the macabre imagery of his art. Munch's lithograph *Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm* (1895) depicts his own face looming in the darkness, as if on a tombstone, with a strange skeletal arm on the lower edge of the print.⁵ Here the traditional skeletal image of death is fused with the self-portrait in a chilling *memento mori*.⁶

Paul Gauguin—a French painter whom Munch admired greatly—represented the life cycle in his mural-sized painting *What Are We? Where Do We Come From? Where Are We Going?* (1897).⁷ Gauguin showed Tahitian people passing from birth to death, with spiritual figures watching over them. Gauguin sought a closer connection to nature and spirituality in his trips to Tahiti, and this painting represented his personal mythology and beliefs about life and death.⁸ As symbolists, Gauguin and Munch rejected realism, but explored themes of medieval and Renaissance art through images that reflected personal fantasy and imagination.

In the early 20th century, Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada (1851-1913) created an image of death that still reappears annually in celebrations of the *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), also known as *Todos Santos* (All Saints). The holiday is celebrated each year on November 2, when people commemorate their lost loved ones. What is striking about this holiday is its festive nature, reflected in the humorous representations of death in the form of skull masks or skeletal imagery, often with a variety of costumes, playful poses, and smiling faces. Such imagery does not appear in sacred spaces like family shrines or cemeteries, but it pervades public celebrations of the Day of the Dead in locations from outdoor festivals to bakery and candy store shelves. There is nothing somber about this event, as spirits are believed to be returning from another world.⁹

José Guadalupe Posada's *La Cavavera de la Catrina* (1913), shown in Figure 5) on page 171, is a satirical image of an upper-class woman as a skeleton, illustrating that even the rich and powerful are vulnerable to death. Posada's image became a popular icon of the Day of the Dead not only because of the charm and humor of the image itself, but also because, as a print, it could be reproduced in the popular media and distributed on posters all over Mexico. His costumed skeletons, or *calaveras*, were his most famous images, characters Posada used to convey a variety of messages. His *Calavera of the Cyclists* (ca. 1900), for example, which featured skeletons riding bicycles, criticized what he viewed as an obsession with technological progress.¹⁰

At the end of the Day of the Dead celebration, *caretas* (masks) in the shape of skulls are worn to scare away the dead from the altars. These masks recall the ancient decorated skulls of the Aztec civilization, such as the mosaic mask of Tezcatlipoca made by the Mixtec people.¹¹ The mask is made of turquoise, lignite, and other valuable materials collected from around the Aztec empire, all attached to part of a human skull. The skull mask is believed to represent the god Tezcatlipoca, or "Smoking Mirror," a creator deity. A high-ranking priest would have fastened the skull mask with long deerskin straps and worn it during ceremonies, as depicted in Mixtec codices.

Decorated skulls like this one inspired the contemporary British artists John LeKay (b.1961) and Damien Hirst (b.1965) to make rhinestone- and diamond-encrusted skull sculptures. In 2007, Hirst produced the most expensive work of art in human history, a skull cast in platinum and encrusted with diamonds entitled *For the Love of God*. The work's platinum body is cast from the real human skull of an English man in his thirties, who lived between 1720 and 1810, which Hirst bought at auction. Hirst had actual teeth fastened to the cast to give it a ghoulish smile. He then covered the cast with 8,601 diamonds, the largest of which weighs 52.40 carats and sits on the skull's forehead. Made for a cost of around \$23.6 million, the work sold for roughly \$100 million to an investment group that included Hirst.¹²



Figure 5. José Guadalupe Posada (Mexican, 1852-1913); *La Calavera de la Catrina*; zinc etching; 1913; H:12 in. (30.5 cm.), W:16 in. (40.7 cm.); private collection. Photograph courtesy of Giraudon/ the Bridgeman Art Library.

Hirst's work explores issues connected to life, death, commerce, and art itself. *For the Love of God* presents the paradox of using diamonds—luxury items commonly advertised as symbols of eternity—in a representation of death and the ephemeral nature of human existence. These luxury objects also point to the commercialization of death imagery—the art object itself being a luxury commodity—as well as the fleeting and superficial nature of contemporary popular culture.

Depicting the Sorrowful Mother

In the Gothic period in Europe, an iconography of mourning developed for both male and female figures in depictions of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The image of Christ on the cross, the basis of Western and Byzantine art, religion, and culture for centuries, is perhaps the most well-known image of death worldwide, and perhaps the most famous scene of mourning in Western art is the lamentation of the Christ. In this scene the Virgin, sometimes accompanied by Mary Magdalene and other figures, is shown grieving at the foot of the cross or over the body of the dead Christ, as in the *Lamentation for Christ* (1500-1503) by German Renaissance painter Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528).¹³ In the *Mater Dolorosa*, or “sorrowful mother” tradition, which began in

the Gothic period, the Virgin is often shown separately as a devotional portrait. In a moving version produced in the Flemish workshop of painter Dieric Bouts (ca. 1410-1475), the Virgin is shown mourning, her eyes reddened with jewel-like tears falling down her face.¹⁴

During the Northern Renaissance, Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden (ca. 1399-1464) depicted Mary's grief at the death of Christ in *Descent from the Cross* (ca. 1435-1440) on an altarpiece commissioned by the Crossbowmen's guild in Louvain, Brabant (in present-day Belgium).¹⁵ In this richly colored oil on wood panel, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and a helper carefully lower Christ from the cross as Mary faints in grief at the suffering and death of her son. The pose of the Virgin's body in its vivid blue shroud directly echoes the pose of Christ's body, in a powerful and immediate visual evocation of compassion. On the left side, a holy woman bends her head, her face contorted in grief, while on the right, the younger figure of Mary Magdalene forms a parallel anchor to the composition by bending inward in a similar pose. The bodies are almost life-size and given an extraordinary degree of almost sculptural solidity, accentuating the visceral impact of the scene on viewers.

Similar images of the *Mater Dolorosa* were found in the *retablo* painting tradition of 19th-century Mexico and New Mexico. Mary is portrayed with her head covered, hands clasped, and tears streaming down her face. Sometimes her veil is topped by a crown of thorns, and there is at least one dagger piercing her heart, a symbol of the death of Christ, and a reference to Simeon's prophecy that her soul would be pierced. Made by artists with no formal training, *retablos* were religious images of important Catholic figures that were painted on flattened tin or wood. These were used mostly in home altars as an inexpensive alternative to devotional paintings on canvas, which only the wealthier classes could afford.¹⁶

Secular paintings have also depicted grieving women mourning for sons and husbands lost in modern conflicts, such as the two World Wars. Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) was a painter and printmaker in Berlin who became renowned for her emotionally stark and profoundly realist depictions of political uprisings, illnesses, and scenes of death and mourning. Her husband was a doctor in the working class neighborhood in Prenzlauerberg, where Kollwitz lived and worked for over 40 years, with regular exposure to scenes of suffering and growing political unrest. In her series of etchings called *Woman with Dead Child* from 1903, Kollwitz used her own 7-year-old son Peter as a model for an updated, emotionally realist version of the traditional *pietà* (Italian for "pity"), a devotional image in which the Virgin Mary holds the body of Christ in her lap. Here, the mother crouches in mute grief over the body of her dead child, drawing it to her as if to merge the two into one body again.¹⁷ The picture tragically foreshadowed Peter's death at age 21 in World War I, an event later memorialized by Kollwitz in a series of stark, equally dramatic lithographs from the 1930s.

Imagining the Afterlife

Art has long been a way for people to seek immortality. Egyptian tombs created permanent protective environments for the eternal life of the *ka*, the spirit believed to live on after death.

The Great Pyramids at Giza, one of which is seen in Figure 6, are perhaps the most renowned and spectacular tomb structures in human history, built by the three kings Khufu (r. ca. 2589-2566 BCE), Khafra (r. ca. 2558-2532 BCE), and Menkaura (r. ca. 2532-2503 BCE), of the Fourth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom. They were situated on the west bank of the Nile, traditionally associated with the setting sun and the realm of the dead. The oldest and largest of the three is the pyramid of Khufu, which spans 13 acres at its base and rises to a height of 450 feet in its present state. Originally it was taller, reaching 481 feet with its veneer of polished limestone, now missing. The angled sides of the pyramids may have been designed to symbolize the rays of the sun, as later tomb inscriptions describe deceased kings climbing the sun's rays to join the sun god Ra in the afterlife.¹⁸



Figure 6. *Mastaba Entrance Against the Pyramid of Cheops in Giza*; ca. 2525 B.C.; Giza, Egypt. Photograph © Gian Berto Vanni/Corbis.

In the Old Kingdom period (ca.2686-2181 BCE), it was especially important to provide a comfortable home for the *ka* of the departed king in order to ensure the continued prosperity of the Egyptian state.¹⁹ The valley temple, the

area of public reception for the tomb, contained the king's *ka* statue, a life-sized stone statue of the king with or without his queen. This statue symbolically enabled the departed king's spirit to continue receiving visitors and watching over his realm from the afterlife.²⁰

The pyramids provided elaborate burial chambers for the mummy in its sarcophagus, and the walls of the burial chamber were covered with paintings, inscriptions, and relief sculptures. The chambers were sealed after the burial ceremonies and false entrances and burial chambers were included to help ward off thieves. Such attempts were often unsuccessful, as evident by the presence in collections around the world of sculptures, paintings, and objects from Egyptian tombs. The immortality the kings believed they would achieve through the careful placement of these objects and images in their burial chambers has been replaced by another form of immortality, their preservation in the modern museum.

Egyptians brought their beliefs about death vividly to life through the genre of handwritten papyrus manuscripts known as the Books of the Dead (or Books of Going Forth by Day). These manuscripts included scrolls designed for particular tombs, each a sort of individualized guidebook, complete with elaborate diagrams or illustrations, describing what the deceased would confront in the afterlife and explaining how to surmount the many obstacles that threatened to prevent a person from entering the underworld. Each person buried with such a book would be armed to face the journey ahead, which was thought to be accomplished in a single night, ending at dawn.

Such scrolls were especially popular in the New Kingdom period (ca. 1550-1069 CE) among the non-royal classes. Family members commissioned papyrus scrolls to be written and often beautifully illustrated by trained scribes, who used rush pens and water-based inks on papyrus rolls. The embalmers placed the finished scrolls of the Book of the Dead among the wrappings of the departed loved one's mummified body.²¹ Each book was conceived with scenes specific to the lives of those who commissioned it, such as the scene in Figure 7 (pg.175) of *Kha and His Wife Meryt Before Osiris*, in which a man and woman face judgment before Osiris, god of the Afterlife. Such symbolic preparations sought to ensure the continuation in the afterlife of the prosperity they enjoyed in life.

Egyptians considered the body a part of the eternal soul, and thus believed it crucial to preserve the deceased's body as much as possible through the mummification process. In Egyptian mummification, the organs of the body were removed, and the body and major organs were preserved in natron, a mineral salt. After the body cavity was filled with clean linen soaked in herbs and ointments, the organs wrapped, and the trunk and limbs wound



Figure 7. Unknown artist (Egyptian); *Kha and His Wife Meryt Before Osiris* (detail) from the Book of the Dead; pigment on papyrus; New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty, ca.1567 BCE - 1320 BCE; Egyptian Museum, Turin, Italy. Photograph © Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis, The Picture Desk Limited.

separately in cloth strips, the entire body was bound together with hundreds of yards of linen to protect the mummy.²² Amulets, Books of the Dead, and other protective objects were placed in the wrapping, and sometimes the wrapped mummy was adorned with jewelry or masks. The body was then placed in one or more coffins. In the early periods, the Old and Middle Kingdoms (ca.2686-1650 BCE), the coffins were rectangular. In the New Kingdom (ca.1550-1069 BCE), the coffins began to conform more to the shape of the body.

Initially, only members of the royal family were mummified, but by the New Kingdom, the practice became more widespread. The Coffin Set of Henettawy from circa 1000 BCE (Figure 8) on page 176 was designed for a woman who was a ritual chanter for the god Amun-Re. By this period of the late New Kingdom, family tombs were mostly undecorated, but coffins were elaborately painted with symbolic and religious scenes, as shown here. Henettawy was buried with a mummy lid and two coffins, one nestled inside the other. Scenes in gold-colored paint on the outer coffin show Henettawy, in her black wig and

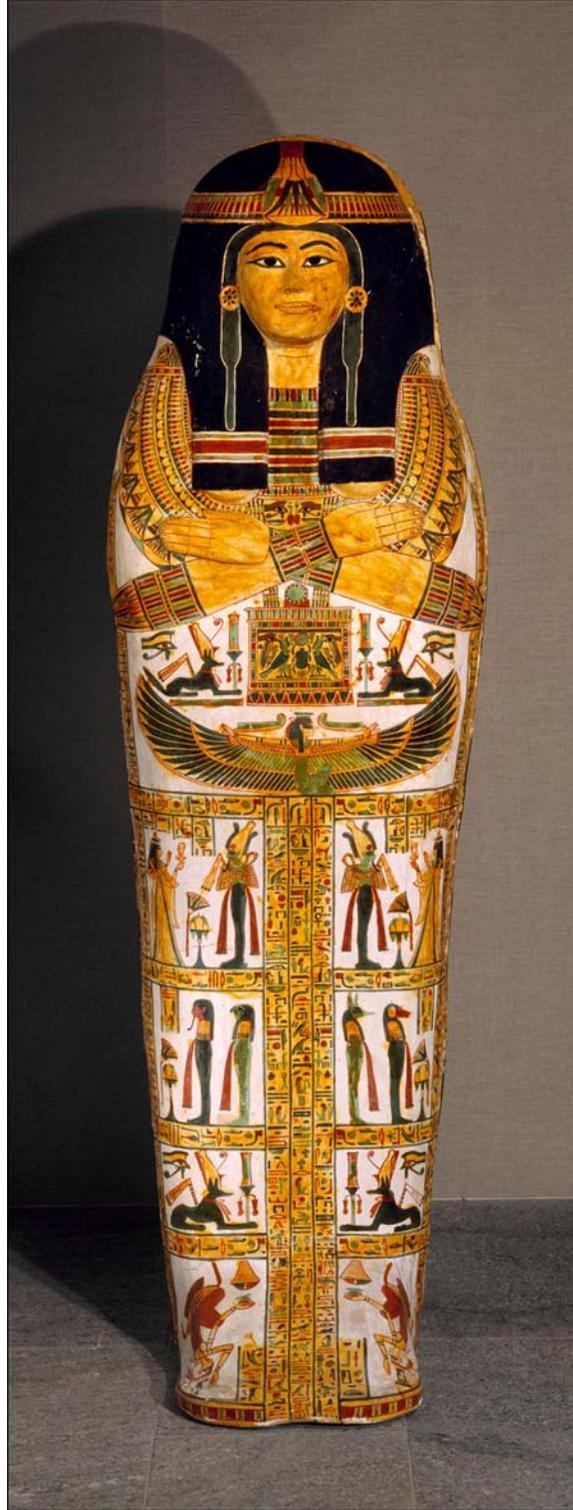


Figure 8. Unknown Artist (Deir el-Bahri, western Thebes, Egypt); *Coffin of Henettawy*; gessoed and painted wood; Third Intermediate Period, 21st Dynasty, ca.1040 BCE - 992 BCE; H: 79 7/8 in.(203 cm.); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund.

funerary jewelry, praying to Osiris, while the four sons of the god Horus make offerings.²³ The inner coffin is painted an overall yellow color, in imitation of earlier royal coffins made entirely of gold or painted in gold leaf and inlaid with precious stones.



Figure 9. Unknown artist(s) (Chinese); *Terracotta Army* (detail) from the Tomb Complex of Qin Shi Huangdi; terracotta; Qin Dynasty, ca. 210 BCE; H: approx. 72 in. (182.8 cm.) (each); Museum of Terracotta Warriors and Horses of Qin Shi Huangdi, Xi'an, China. Photograph courtesy of the Bowers Museum, Santa Ana, California.

In ancient China of the Zhou (1045-256 BCE), Qin (221-207 BCE) and Han (202 BCE-220 CE) Dynasties, wooden or ceramic models of architecture, livestock, implements, and even family members would be placed along with the deceased in tombs. These objects, which often formed detailed documents of the daily life of the deceased, were known as *mingqi* or “spirit vessels.” The first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huangdi, who established the Qin Empire in 221 BCE and reigned until 210 BCE, left the most spectacular collection of full-scale spirit vessels ever discovered. His elaborate mausoleum and nearby collection of several thousand life-sized clay warriors was discovered in 1974 in modern Shaanxi province in northern China.

Qin Shi Huangdi was the first emperor to unify China, but he began building the tomb when he was king of the state of Qin, before unifying China into a single empire. The underground complex represented an idealized microcosm of his realm, over which he intended to continue ruling after his death. The warrior figures guarding his tomb included infantry men, middle-ranking officers, charioteers, and generals—all roughly life-size and standing in formation, some holding real bronze or iron weapons (Figure 9) on page 177. Bearing naturalistic, life-like features, the figures were molded and partially hand-shaped out of clay, and painted after firing, though much of the original paint has not survived.²⁴ Excavation of the tomb also revealed likenesses of chariots, horses, and charioteers.

Unprecedented in size, the terracotta army may have been inspired by earlier straw figures, which Confucius had recommended as a humane alternative to immolation.²⁵ Like the ancient Egyptians, the ancient Chinese believed that the spirit of the departed should be provided in the afterlife with all that he or she possessed—or would have liked to possess—in life. The terracotta soldiers may have served as a substitute for the emperor's living army, buried with him in order to protect him after his death.

Artists in many cultures have created works that offer guidance for the afterlife and a vision of larger cycles of life, death, and rebirth. An 18th-century Mongolian painting entitled *The Wheel of Life* is a depiction of the cycle of life and death according to Buddhist cosmology. This hanging scroll, made of ground mineral pigments and gold on cotton, depicts a frightening large red figure of Samsara (the cycle of life) personified. Symbolizing the impermanence of existence, he stands poised to devour a disc covered with images representing the life cycle in a complex, strictly delineated series of concentric circles. An inner circle depicting three symbolic animals—a rooster (desire), black pig (ignorance), and green snake (anger)—is surrounded by a circle of people moving upwards or downwards based on the good or bad karma resulting from their actions. A third circle depicts the six realms of the gods, anti-gods, humans, animals, ghosts, and hell, while the outermost circle shows 12 scenes representing a progression from ignorance, symbolized by three blind figures, to a final stage of old age and death, depicted by figures carrying bundled corpses to a funeral pyre. In this painting, Yama Dharmaraja, the Lord of the Dead, King of Judgment, is depicted as a blue figure in the realm of hell, holding a stick and a mirror.²⁶

The painting includes images of human role models on the path to enlightenment as well as supernatural figures of inspiration and warning, serving as a visualization tool to guide the meditator to a higher state of consciousness.²⁷ The symmetry and order of the panels represent the strictly ordered cosmology of the tradition, based on stories recorded in the ancient Indian *sutra* and *tantra* writings and imagery codified in the Tibetan painting

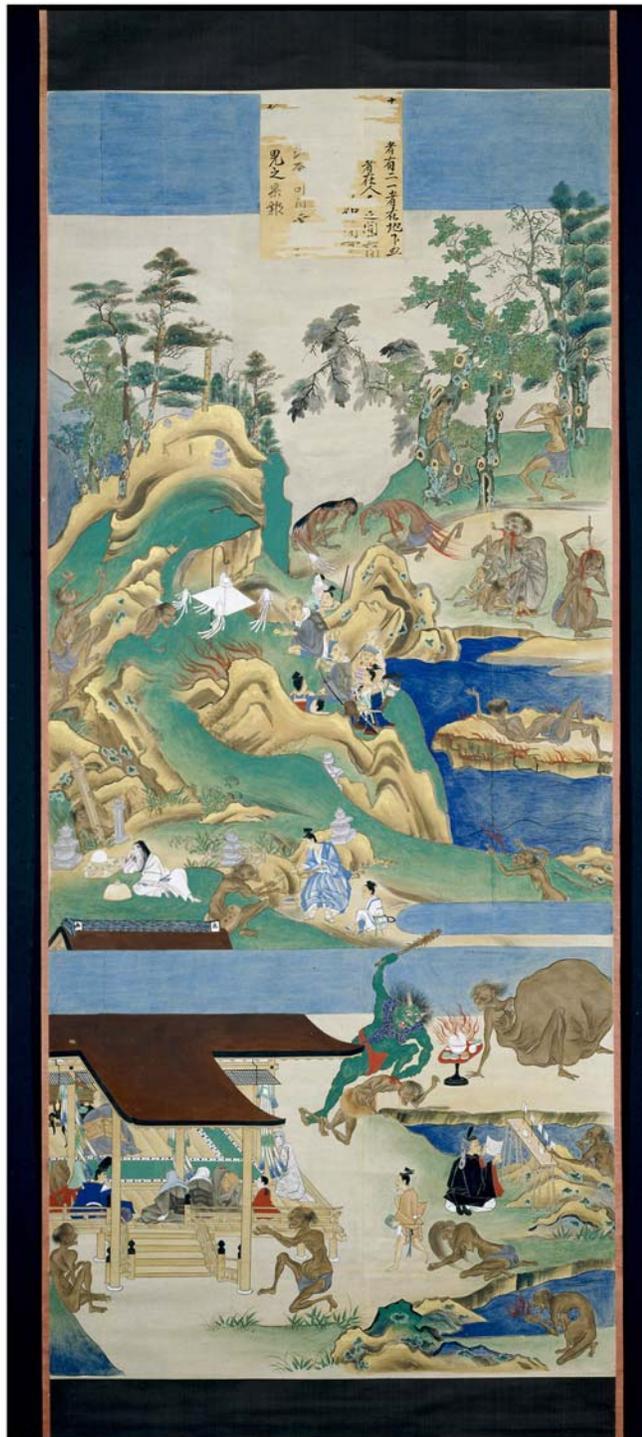


Figure 10. School of/Style of Hirotaka (Japanese); *Realm of Hungry Ghosts* (from *The Six Realms of Rebirth*); ink and color on paper; Edo period, 19th century copy of 13th century original; H: 60 in. (152.6 cm.), 26 3/8 in. (67 cm.); British Museum, London, UK. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum/Art Resource, NY.

tradition. Such hanging scrolls continue to be used today as objects to facilitate meditation.

A dramatic vision of the afterlife is found in the Japanese scroll depicting the *Realm of Hungry Ghosts* (Figure 10, pg.179), one of a series entitled the *Six Realms of Birth*. The Japanese monk Genshin (942-1017) wrote of these realms of birth (or *rokudō*), describing the various states encountered in each in his seminal work, *Ojōyōshū* (“The Teachings Essential for Pure Land Rebirth,” 984-985 CE). The six realms include those of hell, hungry ghosts, warrior demons, beasts, human beings, and heavenly beings. In Japanese Buddhist belief, humans are forced to reincarnate continually through these realms until enlightenment releases them from the cycle of life and death. The greedy and jealous are reborn into the *Realm of Hungry Ghosts* as ugly, tormented, doomed beings who are ravenous and insatiable, reflecting the excessive attachment to worldly desires in their former lives. This is the fourth of ten scrolls, copied in the 19th century from an original set of 15, believed to date from the late 13th century. Such paintings were powerful images of contemplation, inspiring Buddhist practitioners to stay on the path toward Enlightenment, in order to avoid the carefully delineated horrors of endless rebirth.²⁸

Commemorating the Dead

In addition to the coffin that protects the deceased, objects of remembrance include personal or family tombs, public commemorative monuments, and personal memorial objects.

In 17th-century Ghana, the Akan people honored their deceased ancestors by making three-dimensional likenesses of them out of terracotta. These portrait heads, known as *mma*, were typically made by women artists. The artist would be summoned to the house of the individual after his or her death to see what the person looked like. In the memorial head, the artist would convey specific features, such as hair style and scarification marks, which served to distinguish an individual in Ghanaian culture. Once they were molded, fired, and decorated, the heads were paraded through the village. They were then placed in memorial sites such as family shrines, where they became focal points for devotion to the deceased.²⁹

The terracotta head in Figure 11 (pg.181) is a memorial portrait of an Akan ruler. It demonstrates how the general shape and expression of the face was idealized, given a smooth roundness, perfect symmetry of the basic features, and a serene expression. Such royal memorial images were accompanied by likenesses of courtiers and servants, possibly meant to accompany the deceased in the afterlife. Portraits of past rulers would reside in a section of the cemetery known as *mmasoo*, where prayers and offerings to the ancestors would help ensure their protection.³⁰

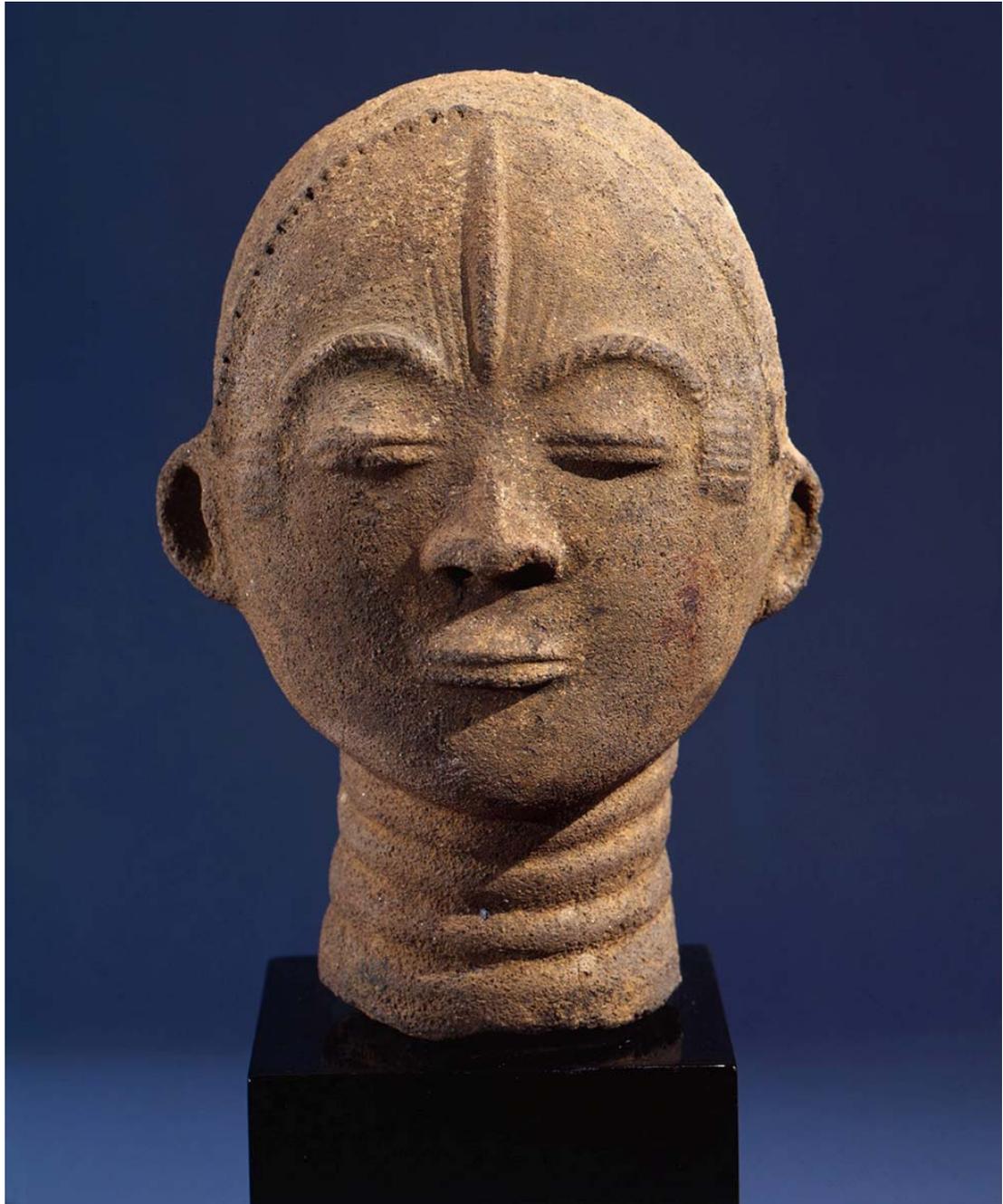


Figure 11. *Memorial Head (Mma)*; terracotta, roots, quartz fragments; Akan, Hemang city, Twifo region, Ghana; 17th century; H: 8 in. (20.3 cm.), W: 5 5/8 in. (14.3 cm.), D: 5 in. (12.7 cm); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

Some images commemorating the dead are designed to aid the grieving process. They may take the form of hanging portrait paintings or photographs, small images set in frames on a mantelpiece, altar, or grave, or even smaller, portable images that are worn or carried by the mourner.

The American tradition of miniature memorials became widespread around the turn of the 19th century. To commemorate the one-year anniversary of George Washington's death in 1799, his wife Martha commissioned British artist Robert Field (ca.1769-1819) to paint a series of eight miniature memorial paintings. Completed in 1801, the portraits were painted meticulously on ivory, along with an accompanying portrait of Martha in mourning garb. Details such as the eyelids and irises were created through *sgraffito*, or scraping into the ivory. The back of Washington's memorial portrait consists of a woven design featuring a lock of his hair beneath the monogram "GW."³¹



Figure 12. Unknown artist (American); *Memorial for Solomon and Joseph Hays*; watercolor, pearls, gold wire, beads, and locks of blond and brown hair (natural, chopped and dissolved) on ivory; 1801; H: 1 7/8 in. (4.8 cm.), W: 1 13/16 in. (4.6 cm.); Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT. Photograph courtesy of the Yale University Art Gallery, promised bequest of Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch and Alvin Deutsch, in honor of Kathleen Luhrs.

The use of hair in a woven design is also a feature of the *Memorial for Solomon and Joseph Hays* created in the same year (Figure 12). This miniature work, commissioned by a Jewish family in New York, was a memorial for twins who died in infancy. The front of the miniature features locks of each boy's hair curving over images of tablets bearing the boys' names and dates of death. More of the boys' hair is braided and set on the back of the work under their initials. Locketts containing mementos of the deceased continued to be popular throughout the 19th century. After the invention of photography in 1839, however, it became standard to use photographic portrait images of the departed in memorial tokens.



Figure 13. Yoruba artist (Nigerian);Twin Figures (Ère Ìbeji); wood; early 20th century; H: approx. 10 in. (25.4 cm.) (each); National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria. Photograph courtesy of Marilyn Houlberg.

The Yoruba people who live in Nigeria and the Republics of Benin and Togo have a unique tradition of memorials specifically for deceased twins. The Yoruba, long known for their unusually high twin birth rate, developed a cult of sacred twins (*ère ibeji*) in the 19th century. The Yoruba believe that each person has a spirit counterpart that is left behind in heaven when he or she is born, but twins—who are considered divine—are believed to serve as each other’s spirit doubles, sharing a bond so strong that the two cannot be separated. Thus, when a twin dies, an *ère ibeji* figure is created to both honor the deceased child and prevent the living twin from following his or her sibling into death. Today, twins are still considered *òrisàs*, or spiritual guardians. The 20th-century *ère ibeji* sculptures in Figure 13 (pg.183) were carved to create a symbolic likeness of the deceased twin or twins. Caring for the sculptures as if they were alive, the family ensures their continued spiritual protection.³² Like most Yoruba sculptures, masks, and domestic objects, these figures were carved from local wood and decorated with wooden beads.

In Papua New Guinea, objects called *bis* poles are created to celebrate the dead, send them off into the spirit world, and signify that the mourners will avenge the death. The island of New Guinea, now divided into the two countries of Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya, was one of the last indigenous areas to be explored by Westerners. New Guinean culture incorporates a complex range of ceremonies rooted in ancient traditions and a belief that the world is controlled by mythic and ancestral spirits that must be appeased to ensure prosperity. A large number of art objects have been produced for these ceremonies.³³

The *bis* pole shown in Figure 14 (pg.185) was created in the 1950s by the Asmat people in southwestern New Guinea. Standing up to 20 feet tall, *bis* poles are made from mangrove trees upended, their roots carved into elaborate patterns. The poles, which are ceremonially set up facing a river, symbolize the transition of the deceased into the realm of the ancestors across the sea. Traditional Asmat belief maintains that all deaths are caused directly by another person, either through violence or through malevolent magic, so commemoration ceremonies typically involve vows to avenge the death and correct the spiritual imbalance.³⁴ In the past, *bis* feasts were staged by the male elders after several men had died and served as preparation for headhunting raids. Today, although the Asmat people continue the tradition of honoring the dead through *bis* feasts, they no longer engage in headhunting.³⁵ After the ceremonies, the *bis* poles are brought back to the swamp and left to decay, nourishing the soil and maintaining balance with the natural world.



Figure 14. Asmat artist(s) (Omadsep village, New Guinea, Papua (Irian Jaya) Province, Indonesia); *Bis Pole*; wood, paint, and fiber; late 1950s; H:18 ft. (5.48 m.); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection.



Figure 15. Workshop of Kane Quaye (Teshé, Ghana); *Eagle Coffin*; painted wood; 1991; H: 51 in. (129.5 cm.), W: 52 ½ in. (133.3 cm.), L: 106 in. (269.2 cm.); Newark Museum, Newark, NJ. Photograph courtesy of Newark Museum.

In southern Ghana, the Ga people have developed a local tradition of “fantasy coffins” (Figure 15), which began about seventy-five years ago. Made out of wood, these coffins are carved and vividly painted into elaborate forms symbolizing the social status, occupation, or interests the deceased had in life. A fisherman may prefer a fish or a lobster, a hunter a lion or a leopard, a businessman a plane or a Mercedes Benz. Although many Ga people belong to the Christian church, the fantasy coffins have become a widespread popular tradition. Many people have one burial ceremony in the church and a second with a specialized coffin in which the body is ultimately buried. The “fantasy coffins” allow the Ga people to create a festive public commemoration of the deceased, celebrating their entry into another life and, according to traditional Ga belief, ensuring the continuation of earthly activities in the afterlife.

Personal experience with death shaped both the life and work of Italian artist Angelo Filomeno (b.1963). He lost his mother when he was 12 years old and his father at age 19. His parents serve as inspiration for his exquisitely embroidered artworks, such as *When the Flower is Near (The Philosopher and the Woman)* from 2007, shown in Figure 16 on page 187. Filomeno learned to love sewing and embroidery during childhood. His parents apprenticed him at age 7 to a tailor in southern Italy, and he developed his artistic skills studying art in Lecce, Italy, and then working in the fashion industry in Milan and New York.³⁶

Filomeno’s embroidered skeletons, here representing his parents, draw on the traditions of the *danse macabre*, depicting frolicking skeletons, along with witches’ sabbath imagery dating back to medieval times. Filomeno sets the

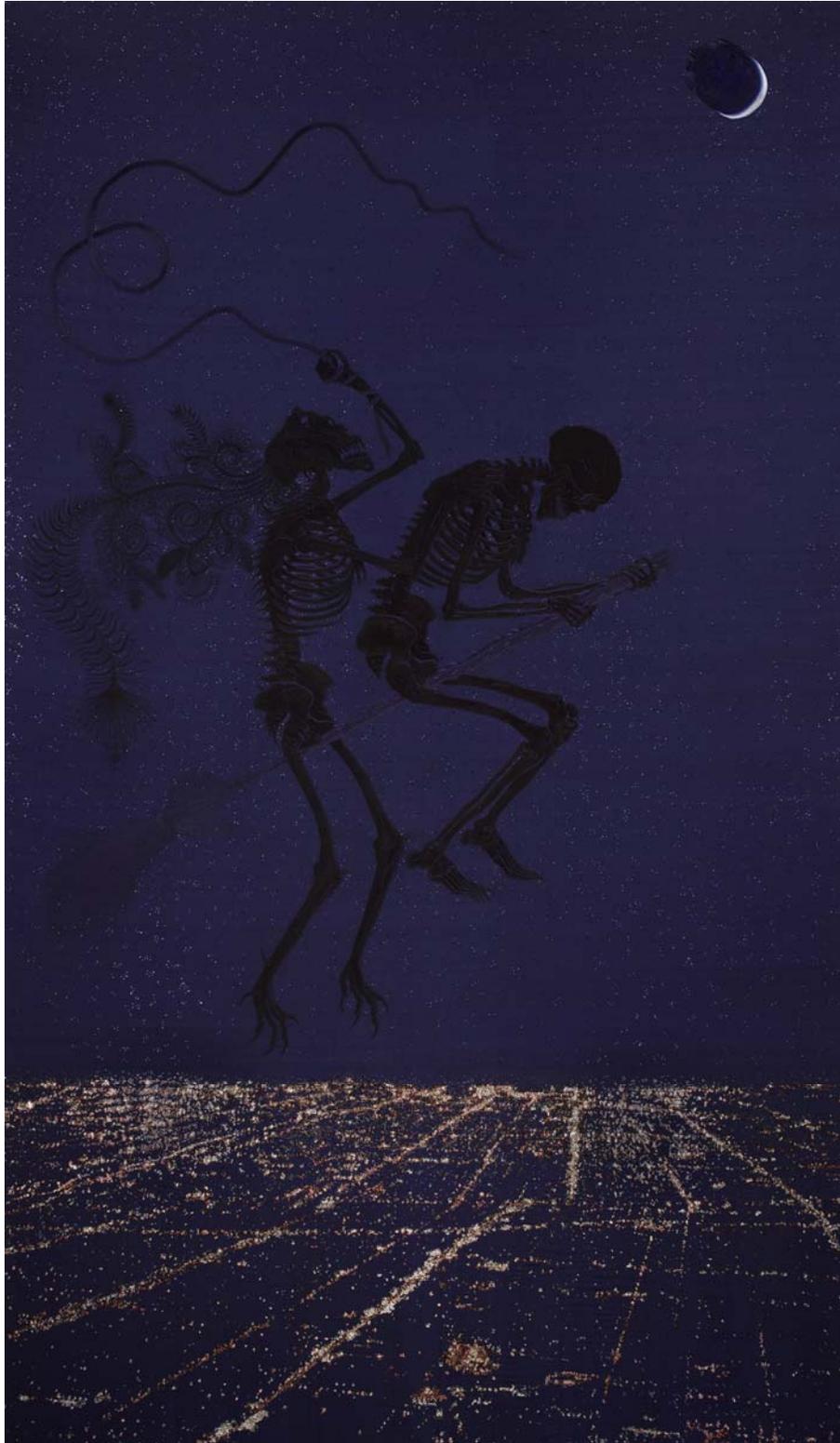


Figure 16. Angelo Filomeno (Italian, b.1963); *My Love Sings When the Flower is Near (The Philosopher and the Woman)*; embroidery on silk shantung stretched over linen with crystals; 2007; H:155 in. (393.7 cm.), W: 90.2 in. (229.1 cm.); Galerie Lelong, New York, NY. Photograph © Galerie Lelong and the artist.

skeletons in a contemporary context, over the glittering lights of Los Angeles, the city of angels, a favorite image in contemporary cinema. As Filomeno explains, he aims to bring a more lighthearted approach to death into his art. He produces an inspiring and expressive imagery out of the reality of death. The celebratory nature of his imagery recalls the playful treatment of death in the Mexican Day of the Dead celebrations. Like Damian Hirst's *For the Love of God*, Filomeno's art makes use of ecstatic, glittering decorative forms and media that normally signify ephemeral luxury. Like the ancient Egyptians and Chinese, who produced beautiful paintings and sculptures to ensure their enjoyment of the afterlife, he finds his own form of immortality in the realm of art.

Endnotes

¹ Robert A. Koch. "Block-book," in *Grove Art Online*. Oxford Art Online: <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T009237>.

² "Pieter Bruegel the Elder. *Triumph of Death*, ca. 1562, P01393" in *On-line gallery*. Museo del Prado Web site: <http://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery>.

³ "The Ambassadors, 1533, Hans Holbein the Younger." National Gallery, London, Web site: <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/collection/features/potm/2004/june/feature3.htm>.

⁴ "Jacques-Louis David: *The Death of Marat*." Boston College Web site: http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/his/CoreArt/art/neocl_dav_marat.html.

⁵ Edvard Munch. "Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm, a Lithograph," in *Highlights*. British Museum Web site: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pd/e/edvard_munch_h_self-portrait_wi.aspx, and Munch-museet (Munch Museum) Web site, <http://www.munch.museum.no/>.

⁶ "The Scream," in *Works from the Collection*. Munch-museet (Munch Museum) Web site: <http://www.munch.museum.no/work.aspx?id=17&wid=1#imagetops>.

⁷ "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?, 1897–98, Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903)," in *Collections*. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Web site: <http://www.mfa.org/collections>; and George T. M. Shackelford and Claire

Frèches-Thory. *Gauguin Tahiti* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Publications, 2004), 180.

⁸ Stephen F. Eisenman. *Gauguin's Skirt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

⁹ Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer. *The Skeleton at the Feast* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1991), 14.

¹⁰ "Calavera Las Bicicletas, ca. 1900, José Guadalupe Posada (Mexican, 1851–1913)," in *Works of Art*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site: http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/drawings_and_prints/calavera_las_bicicletas_jose_guadalupe_posada/objectview.aspx?collID=9&OID=90044934; and Elisa García Barragán. "Posada, José Guadalupe," in *Grove Art Online*. Oxford Art Online: <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T068920>.

¹¹ "Mosaic mask of Tezcatlipoca," in *Highlights*. British Museum Web site: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/m/mosaic_mask_of_tezcatlipoca.aspx.

¹² Alan Riding. "Alas, Poor Art Market: A Multimillion-Dollar Head Case." *New York Times*, arts section, June 13, 2007; Katya Kazakina. "Damien Hirst, of \$100 Million Diamond Skull, Sees Prices Slump." *Bloomberg.com*, December 18, 2008: <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601088&sid=abD0t5DfeY84&refer=mu>; and "Damien Hirst: Beyond Belief." *White Cube* Web site: http://www.whitecube.com/exhibitions/beyond_belief/.

¹³ "Albrech Dürer, Lamentation for Christ, 1500-03." *Web Gallery of Art* Web site: <http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/d/durer/1/03/2lament.html>.

¹⁴ "Workshop of Dieric Bouts, *Mater Dolorosa (Sorrowing Virgin)*, 1480-1500," in *Collection*. *Art Institute of Chicago* Web site: <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/110673>.

¹⁵ "Descent from the Cross, P02825," in *Visit the Museum: 15 Masterpieces*: <http://www.museodelprado.es/en/visit-the-museum/15-masterpieces/work-card/obra/descent-from-the-cross/>.

¹⁶ "New Mexico State University Retablo Collection." *New Mexico State University Art Department* Web site: <http://artdepartment.nmsu.edu/faculty/zarursite/retablo/>.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Prelinger. "Kollwitz Reconsidered," in *Käthe Kollwitz* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art/Yale University Press, 1993), 42.

¹⁸ Marilyn Stokstad, et al. *Art History*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Abrams, 2002), 102.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁰ "King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen, 11.1738," in *Collections*. *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, Web site: <http://www.mfa.org/collections>.

²¹ Stokstad, *Art History*, 125.

²² *Ibid.*, 99.

²³ "Coffin set of Henettawy [Egyptian; From Deir el-Bahri, western Thebes] (25.3.182-184)," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tipd/ho_25.3.182-184.htm (October 2006).

²⁴ Jessica Rawson, et al. "China," in *Grove Art Online*. Oxford Art Online: <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T016513pg22>.

²⁵ Michael Sullivan. *The Arts of China*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 63.

²⁶ Jeff Watt. "Wheel of Life," in *Himalayan Art*, Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation/Rubin Museum of Art Web site: <http://www.himalayanart.org/image.cfm?icode=78&CFID=22472493&CFTOKEN=21032561> (August 1998).

²⁷ David Sneath, et al. "Mongolia," in *Grove Art Online*. Oxford Art Online: <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T059096>.

²⁸ "Six Realms of Birth, 10 Hanging Scroll Paintings," in *Highlights*. British Museum Web site: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/asia/t/the_six_realms_of_birth_10_ha.aspx.

²⁹ Jean-Baptiste Bacquart. *The Tribal Arts of Africa* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 33.

³⁰ "Memorial Head [Ghana; Akan, Twifo region, Hemang city] (1978.412.563)," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/09/sfg/ho_1978.412.563.htm (October 2006).

³¹ "The Yale University Art Gallery Acquires Rare Portrait of George Washington." Yale University Art Gallery press release, November 2008: http://www.artgallery.yale.edu/pdf/1208_georgewashington.pdf.

³² Bacquart, *Tribal Arts of Africa*, 101.

³³ Richard L. Anderson. *Art in Small Scale Societies*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 46.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

³⁵ "Bis Pole [Asmat people, Omadesep village, New Guinea, Papua (Irian Jaya) Province, Indonesia] (1979.206.1611)," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/11/ocm/ho_1979.206.1611.htm (April 2008).

³⁶ Claudia Schmuckli. "Angelo Filomeno," in *Damaged Romanticism: A Mirror of Modern Emotion*, by Terrie Sultan, et al. (Houston: Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, 2008), 80.