

# HOPE & HEALING

*Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague, 1500-1800*

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WORCESTER ART MUSEUM





Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, *The Plague*, ca. 1514, engraving, 40.6 x 55.9 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of W. G. Russell Allen

## Presence of the Plague in Art: Understanding the Visual Clues

*Twenty-first century viewers of the historical and religious artworks on view in this exhibition may find little connection at first between their lives and the lives of the plague-stricken in early modern Europe. This exhibition, however, presents a depth of scholarship that points to the important role that art, and consequently artists, played in providing hope and the prospect of healing to a beleaguered people. Are we also a beleaguered people? Are there 21st-century plagues? As you view the exhibition and its accompanying materials, feel free to reflect on our 21st-century world. How does art (and how might it) bring messages of hope and healing to the crises of our own time and our individual lives?*

### *A Plague of Plagues*

The bubonic plague was a constant factor in the life of early modern Europe. With busy international ports, Italy in particular suffered wave after wave of plague outbreaks from the mid-14<sup>th</sup> to the early-18<sup>th</sup> century. When Italians were not actually living through an outbreak, they were awaiting its arrival. Feeling they could do little to protect themselves, they lived in a state of anxiety and fear. How did they cope with this on a daily basis?

This exhibition explores the ways in which the visual arts responded to this consuming aspect of life. This gallery guide explains the visual clues that identify these artworks as plague images.



Since most Italians believed that plague was God's punishment for sin, they also believed that plague, as a spiritual ailment with physical manifestations, could only be conquered by spiritual means—prayers, confession, charitable works, public processions, and communal vows to God. Private patrons, civic authorities, and religious orders commissioned many works of art for these purposes. Devotional paintings provided a focus for personal reflection and prayer. Painted allegories of charitable works offered a model for action. Banners and large-scale altarpieces functioned to plead corporately for God's mercy or to collectively thank God for releasing a people from plague. Plague-related artworks were created to communicate with God and the saints, thus offering those who commissioned them, and those who viewed them, the promise of healing.

While written sources of the period provide detailed accounts of the human destruction caused by plague, early modern painters did not seek to document the gruesome effects of plague. Horrific images would have violated the nature, decorum, and purpose of "fine art" (a notion that changes drastically in later centuries). Instead, artists conveyed the presence of illness through more

subtle or indirect references to the actual symptoms and effects by using allusions and symbols. The original viewers would have immediately understood this imagery and symbolism.

### *The Consolation of History*

Terrifying and lethal diseases have been a constant throughout human history. Many things plague us even in the 21st century (SARS, HIV, tsunamis and other natural disasters, war), yet humanity and its institutions survive. People have always been comforted by stories of ancient plagues because these stories brought with them an enduring message of hope. References to ancient outbreaks were common in early modern Italian painting, promoting the idea that if great civilizations of the past have survived plague, we too shall survive.

In 1514, Marcantonio Raimondi engraved a drawing by Raphael that became one of the most influential depictions of plague in the period. In this image, Raimondi chose to illustrate an ancient occurrence of plague rather than produce a "snapshot" of contemporary times. The subject is taken from Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book III): an outbreak of plague strikes a refugee Trojan community, forcing the Trojans to leave Crete and journey to Italy.



Angelo Caroselli, *The Plague at Ashdod: Copy After Poussin*, 1630, oil on canvas, 128.9 x 204.5 cm, © National Gallery, London



Bernardino Luini, *Madonna and Child with Saints Roch and Sebastian*, ca. 1520-26, oil on panel, 173.36 x 154 cm, The John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Art, The State Art Museum of Florida, Sarasota, Bequest of John Ringling, Collection of The John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Art

Raimondi's compositional elements—languishing bodies, dying mother and child in the foreground, and architectural ruins—became standard symbols for plague paintings and were repeated by artists in many later works. Languishing bodies sick with nonspecific disease are a straightforward reference to the physical ailment of plague. A child attempting to suckle its dead mother signified, in a most poignant way, death brought on by plague. (In other contexts, however, the image of a live, healthy mother suckling her child functioned, instead, as a symbol of charity. Nourishment and care of the sick were seen as spiritually-inspired acts.) The ruins of classical architecture further emphasized the devastation caused by plague, since the ramifications of an outbreak extended beyond the human toll to an area's economy, politics, and cultural and religious institutions.

In addition to ancient stories of plague, the Bible also contains accounts of epidemics such as the one depicted in Angelo Caroselli's *Copy of Poussin's The Plague at Ashdod*. Look closely at how Caroselli's painting was influenced by Raimondi's engraving—note the dying mother with child, the crumbling architecture, and the

languishing bodies. The story depicted in this painting underscores the then common idea that God punished disobedience with pestilence. According to the First Book of Samuel, God sent plague to the Philistines for stealing the Ark of the Covenant (a sacred object for the Israelites, believed to house the Ten Commandments). Caroselli uses this story as an analogy to a contemporary plague.

### *That Horrible Stench and Bad Air*

Unpleasant smell is one of the most commonly recorded aspects of plague. As seen in Caroselli's painting, plague scenes invariably show one or more of the figures holding their noses as protection against the bad air or *miasma* and the horrible stench of the pus-filled bodies of the dead and the dying. Avoiding contact with the infected and eliminating the stench of the dead bodies through burial were of the utmost importance for survival: in Caroselli's painting, two men on the right side of the canvas carry off a plague victim to be buried.

Caroselli's painting illustrates two common beliefs of the day: that plague was brought about by God's wrath and, as early modern science maintained, that this disease had its biological origins in "corrupt air." First proposed by Hippocrates (460-377 BCE), the "miasma theory of disease" identifies corrupt air as the cause and carrier of plague. This theory further identifies excessive humidity, decomposition of organic materials, and the escape of underground gases as the specific sources of disease-bearing air.

### *What About the Rats?*

Why are rats included in this painting? Did Caroselli and his contemporaries understand the connection between rodents and plague? It is unlikely. Even though Caroselli's rodents look more like big city rats, the Biblical text (I Samuel 6) refers to mice, "the mice that ravage your land" and the "golden mice" that were offered in penance for the taking of the Ark. So even though zoologically inaccurate, Caroselli's rodents would have been understood as the biblical mice.



## *The Physical Symptoms of the Body*

The most characteristic bodily manifestations of bubonic plague were the buboes, swollen lymph glands located in the groin, neck, or armpits of victims. Social and artistic decorum, however, dictated that artists present more subtle references to actual plague symptoms. A bubo sometimes appears simply as a small red wound. Groin buboes are shown on the upper thigh instead of in their actual locations. The plague victim pointing to the upper thigh or raising an arm to symbolically display unseen buboes to onlookers also suggests the presence of plague.

In Bernardino Luini's *Virgin and Child with Saints Roch and Sebastian*, the artist identifies Saint Roch by his pilgrim's scallop shell, staff, and companion dog, as well as by the subtle suggestion of plague buboes. Saint Roch, a plague survivor, is shown with his stocking rolled down and his finger pointing to his thigh. Roch traveled from France to Rome in the late 14th-century on a pilgrimage and is believed to have contracted and survived plague while in Italy. Because he survived, Roch quickly became a popular saint during plague outbreaks. Victims would call upon Roch to intercede on their behalf, asking God to show mercy and release them (or their city) from the scourge, just as Roch had been released.

As plague progresses in the body, the skin appears to darken, a condition caused by widespread subcutaneous hemorrhaging brought on by the infection. Baroque artists chose a subtle reference to this physical effect of the plague. Instead of depicting a gruesomely blackened body, artists simply gave the skin of plague victims a less shocking gray tone.

*The Pestilence of 1656 in Naples* by Carlo Coppola is a rare painting that illustrates an actual plague outbreak, the worst outbreak suffered by Naples. In this journalistic image, Coppola portrays two bodies with this characteristic gray coloring and includes an infant attempting to suckle at the breast of its dead mother (lower left), a heart-rending reminder of the human tragedy inflicted by plague. This painting also documents how



Carlo Coppola, *The Pestilence of 1656 in Naples*, after 1656, oil on canvas, 193 x 251.5 cm, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, Caroline G. Mather Fund

society dealt with removing dead bodies. Victims are shown wrapped in cloth and carried to carts and wagons to be transported for burial.

Other medical manifestations of infection included exceedingly high fever, skin rash, delirium, great thirst, headache, vomiting, and utter prostration. This utter prostration, or extreme exhaustion, brought upon by the disease is the only one of these symptoms rendered explicitly in art. Many paintings in this exhibition, including Pierre Mignard's *St. Charles Borromeo Among the Plague-Stricken of Milan*, depict this physical symptom. In Mignard's image, Borromeo provides spiritual nourishment in a lazaretto, or plague hospital, by administering the Eucharist (a sacrament much emphasized in early modern Catholicism). Languishing bodies of victims fall toward Borromeo as he tends to the sick. Here, Mignard uses this physical symptom compositionally to draw our eyes to Charles Borromeo. Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, gained a reputation as a living saint due to his selflessness in both the material and spiritual care of plague victims. The body postures of these victims can be seen in many other paintings in this exhibition.



Pierre Mignard, *Saint Charles Borromeo Among the Plague-Stricken of Milan*, ca. 1647, oil on canvas, 125 x 91.5 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen

### *Non-Medical Cues and Heavenly Assistance*

Many paintings that are considered plague paintings do not include any plague victims or references to the physical or medical condition of the dying. Just as today we might look at red, yellow, and pink ribbons as symbols representing 21st-century “plagues,” artists in early modern Italy created visual symbols to alert the viewer to plague. These cues include arrows, swords, and lances; stormy weather or dark clouds; astronomical or astrological signs and symbols (stars, planets, and comets were considered either causes of the plague or omens of its imminent arrival); and an angel holding a sword or scourge. Arrows, swords, and lances in plague paintings symbolize divine wrath.

The plague saint Sebastian is shown bearing the instruments of his martyrdom—arrows. In Strozzi’s *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene and Her Maid*, the saint stands with hands extended toward heaven in thanks for surviving an attack of arrows, as Irene

tends to his wounds. In the Sebastian story, arrows were not intended to symbolize God’s wrath. However, since arrows were firmly associated with plague in the popular imagination, Sebastian’s help was invoked in times of epidemic. His adoption as a plague saint made sense—he was a survivor, and if he could survive an arrow attack, he could also effectively intercede on behalf of those hoping to survive plague. He became one of the most popular plague saints.



Bernardo Strozzi, *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene and her Maid*, ca. 1636, oil on canvas, 167 x 118 cm and 75 x 121.5 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Charles Potter Kling Fund and Francis Welch Fund, *Three Angels*, oil on canvas, 75 x 121.5 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry H. and Zoe Oliver Sherman Fund





Luca Carlevarij, *The Feast of S. Maria della Salute*, 1720, oil on canvas, 111 x 139 cm, The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund

One of the strongest images of hope in time of plague was that of St. Michael the Archangel either defeating Satan or sheathing his sword. In Giovanni Sirani's *St. Michael the Archangel Overcoming Satan*, we see Michael clothed in armor, wielding a sword in defeat of Satan. This victory over Satan became a metaphor for victory over plague. An apocryphal story tells of the appearance of Michael sheathing his sword during a plague procession in Rome. According to common belief, the plague left the city at this moment. From that time on, Michael became popular as a protector against disease, and the sheathing of his sword became a universal symbol of plague's end.

The inclusion of dark clouds offers a universal reference to storm, danger, or doom. In plague paintings, this reference takes on a further meaning of contagion and death. The dark clouds also refer to the miasma theory, which identified corrupt air as cause of the plague. Luca Carlevarij's *The Feast of S. Maria della Salute* records an annual festival procession commemorating Venice's survival of plague outbreak in 1630. This celebratory procession moves across a specially-erected pontoon bridge toward the church of S. Maria della Salute. Dark ominous clouds roll in from the left, symbolizing the death and destruction brought upon Venice by plague. Although the city celebrates conquering the plague, another outbreak could strike at any moment. Do we also live with the anxiety that a plague could appear at any time?



Anthony van Dyck, *Saint Rosalie Interceding for the Plague-Stricken of Palermo*, oil on canvas, 99.7 x 73.66 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, 1871

## Hope and Healing

Finally, the presence of plague saints is a visual cue that connects a specific painting with the plague. As seen in images of Roch and Sebastian, saints played an important role in offering viewers the promise of hope. These saints functioned as intermediaries between human pleas for survival and God. Images of these saints offered hope to the suffering, the weary, and the despairing.

Anthony van Dyck's *Saint Rosalie Interceding for the Plague-Stricken of Palermo* illustrates the role of saints in assisting plague victims. Rosalie, a favored intercessor against pestilence in Sicily, is seen in glory—on a cloud supported by angels and surrounded by a golden light. She looks up toward heaven asking God to bestow mercy on Palermo, Sicily (seen in the bottom right) and to release the city from plague. Heavenly assistance was considered essential for liberating a city from the plague.

Do we look to special figures in our world to uplift us when confronted by our “plagues”? Do images of them encourage us to move from discouragement to hope?

The images in this exhibition convey the psychological and spiritual concerns of early modern Italians. Physical documentation of plague symptoms, references to non-medical cues, and religious symbols and figures allow today's viewers to better understand Italy in a time of plague. We welcome the viewer of *Hope and Healing: Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague*, to reflect on art, crises, and the ways we find hope in our own time.

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On cover: Giovanni Andrea Sirani, *Michael the Archangel Overcoming Satan*, late 1630s, oil on canvas, 279.4 x 188 cm, Bob Jones University Museum and Gallery, Greenville, From the Bob Jones University Collection

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