CHAPTER 2

Death Personified: The Skeleton and the Printed Image

As emphasised in the previous chapter, the circulation of printed imagery was vital to the emergence of a Central European age of contemplation and commemoration in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Benefitting from the availability of graphic prototypes, regional artists were now equipped to explore the physical reality of death more directly than ever before, which coincided with an increased desire for such subject-matter among local patrons. In Poland-Lithuania, this marrying of purposes was particularly evident in one particular form of the personification of Death: its depiction as a human skeleton. These representations of death, rendered with increasing sophistication over the period discussed, began to dominate certain prominent commissions.

This chapter will explore a selection of the most important such artworks, ranging from stucco sculptures and elaborate metalwork to paintings and ornate liturgical vestments, which not only used the skeletal form as a commentary on life's brevity, encouraging the faithful to prepare for their inevitable demise and Judgement, but could acknowledge the elevated status of their patrons by alluding to humility and intellectual prowess. This chapter also considers the gendered dimension of Death in Polish-Lithuanian art, given that its representation in Western Europe during the medieval and early modern periods fluctuated between female and male. Art historian Jan Bialostocki traced the influence of linguistic factors upon Death's personification, identifying correlations between the gender of the noun 'death' and its cultural representation in different European states.1 While Italian and French depictions of a female Death can be contrasted with a male Death from northern Europe, however, it is striking that such a reflection of indigenous grammar was rarely present in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It will be shown here that, although 'death' is grammatically feminine in Polish (śmierć), the main language of Poland-Lithuania that concerns us for the purposes of this study, the widespread reliance of its portrayal in visual culture upon sources from outside

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the Commonwealth created a dissonance between its artistic manifestations and vernacular folklore.²

With no native iconographic traditions to draw upon, Polish-Lithuanian painters and sculptors attempting to personify Death in the early modern period were particularly influenced by imagery found in foreign woodcuts and engravings circulating in the early modern Commonwealth. In particular, the availability of illustrated anatomical treatises gave artists access to ever more accurate renderings of the human skeleton; while the earliest printed medical images of this type were crude woodcuts produced in the early 1490s, developments in printmaking techniques and the popularity of such depictions resulted in more sophisticated and accurate graphic models appearing during the sixteenth century.³ Illustrated publications such as these were also produced later in the Commonwealth, the most influential of which was that by the Gdańsk-based physician Johann Adam Kulmus (1689–1745), first published in 1722.⁴ As this chapter and the next will demonstrate, with a growing body of printed material providing abundant prototypes for macabre artworks, the image of Death in Central as well as Western Europe became ever more standardised.

This chapter seeks to identify a variety of modes for the representation of Death in the role of protagonist, which formed the focal point for individual artworks. It will look first at the Melancholy Death, in which a skeletal figure in the traditional pose of a melancholic suggests the emotional turmoil associated with human demise, before moving onto the more established allegory of the Triumph of Death, in which a victorious skeleton tramples upon signifiers of worldly power. Although rooted in European artistic traditions of the Middle Ages, Triumphs of Death appeared in Polish-Lithuanian artworks as well as indigenous printed illustrations only in the early modern period, a form of

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² For references to a female Death in Polish medieval literature, see Chapter 3. For Death personified as a woman in Lithuanian folklore, see Jonas Balys, *Mirtis ir laidotuvės: lietuvių liaudies tradicijos*, Silver Spring 1981.
