CHAPTER 3

The Dance of Death in Central Europe: Indigenous Variations on a Familiar Theme

Benefiting from our undoing, Death will rip off the golden crown of the king as it does the bishop's costly mitre; it will discard the rich man's gold guzy and crimson delia as it does the meagre attire of the beggar; it will remove the hood of the monk and the soldier's armour; it will treat the silk robes of the courtier in the same manner as the peasant's mop of hair.¹

This emotively-worded extract, taken from the funeral sermon for Konstancja Czarnkowska (born Princess Konstancja Lubomirsk, d. 1646), constitutes a highly-developed encounter with Death. It emphasises the didactic memento mori message more vividly than the personifications discussed in the previous chapter, focusing greater attention on Death's victims, who represent the whole social spectrum. Delivered by the Reverend Dydak Stanisław Meler (d. 1651), an Observant Franciscan, the enticing narrative would have made the congregation consider each individual – the king, the bishop, the rich man, the beggar, the monk, the soldier, the courtier and the peasant – in turn, although their distinguishing features are noted only to be dismissed as inconsequential in the face of an uncompromising Death, who treats all alike irrespective of social status. The sermon invokes an established theme known as the Dance of Death, in which cadavers or skeletons dance or enter into dialogue with people of varying ecclesiastical and secular rank in order to demonstrate that no-one can escape their mortal fate. Popular in Western European literature and art since the fifteenth century, the Dance of Death, similarly to other macabre motifs, did not appear within the territories of the Commonwealth until the seventeenth century, for reasons discussed in

Chapter 1. The later Polish-Lithuanian variations on this theme achieved their moralising impact by contextualising the Dance of Death and making it relevant to local audiences. So Dydak Stanislaw Meler, for example, chose to reference within his sermon elements of indigenous dress, such as the ornamental buttons known as *guzy*, in order to personalise it for a Polish congregation.

Meler’s sermon is just one example of how the revived religious orders of Poland-Lithuania harnessed the medieval Dance of Death motif for the purposes of public proselytisation in the seventeenth century, employing it as a moralising combination of text and image and disseminating it to locations as far-removed from its Western European roots as Grodno, now Hrodna in western Belarus. The new wave of Dance of Death artwork that followed constitutes the most significant and coherent body of macabre imagery to survive from early modern Central Europe, notable for its similarities to as well as differences from its Western European antecedents. Given the repeated scholarly focus upon medieval and Renaissance examples of the Dance of Death, both in classic studies such as those of James Clark and Hellmut Rosenfeld as well as more recent ones, notably that by Elina Gertsman, the later Polish-Lithuanian interpretations of this motif have been largely overlooked, as has the crucial role of printed imagery in the transmission of this iconography belatedly to this region of Central Europe. While the Dance of Death’s enduring pan-European popularity has previously been linked to its viability for mass dissemination in printed form, in books or as single-leaf prints, it will be shown here that this correlation becomes especially apparent when considering Polish-Lithuanian Baroque visual culture.

This chapter will begin by establishing the medieval roots of the Dance of Death and the related theme of the Three Living and the Three Dead, and to what extent these permeated beyond Western Europe in the Middle Ages. It will then focus upon the religious patronage that enabled the delayed adoption of the Dance of Death in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Poland-Lithuania, considering the contribution of the religious orders, in particular the Observant Franciscans. The initial role of foreign graphic prototypes in introducing the theme to Poland-Lithuania will be assessed, as will its indigenous development and adaptation by local painters, which eventually led to the self-perpetuation of the motif and the redundancy of printed visual aids.

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