

Section II

Art and the Plague

REPRESENTING THE BUBONIC PLAGUE IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

In art history, the era spanning from approximately the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries in Europe is typically classified as the Renaissance, an artistic period associated with the re-birth of classical ideas and the rise of **Humanism**. The era was accompanied by a greater interest in naturalism and the development of [linear perspective](#). Economic prosperity and the rise of global trade helped foster the arts and spread aesthetic philosophies. But the Renaissance was also a tumultuous time for Europe, characterized by repeated outbreaks of pestilence, dating back to 1347 when the Black Death (likely the Bubonic Plague) was brought to Sicily on a Genoese ship.

The Plague's spread was rapid and devastating. By 1351, when the first wave of the disease began to subside, anywhere from twenty-five to sixty percent of the population of Europe had perished, with thirty-three percent being the most common estimate.¹ Scholarly accounts vary, but contemporary estimates suggest anywhere from 75 to 200 million people died in Europe and Asia.² Cities in particular, where people lived in close proximity and lacked modern sanitation protocols, became the focal points of the **pandemic**.³ Outbreaks of plague continued to recur into the early eighteenth century, and it took two centuries for the world population to recover to its pre-1347 level.

During this period, little was known about how disease was spread. One popularly held belief was that bad air or bad smells were to blame. This is now known as the miasma theory. Medical advice at the time instructed people to carry pleasant fragrances



Nicolas Poussin, The Plague at Ashdod, 1630, Louvre, Paris.

with them to combat the contaminated air and avoid illness. Wealthy Florentine citizens tucked sachets of fragrance into their clothing or tied perfume bottles to their belts.⁴ Nicolas Poussin's 1631 painting [The Plague at Ashdod](#) shows a man holding his nose as he crosses a street laden with the bodies of plague victims. Such efforts were fruitless in the face of the epidemic. In fact, it was rats carrying infected fleas that spread the disease through trading vessels. The fleas would jump from rats to human carriers.

It is thought that the outbreak began in Central Asia and was brought westward through the trade routes of the **Silk Road**. Because the initial impact was so destructive and subsequent outbreaks were a regular occurrence for much of the Renaissance, Europeans were constantly either coping with the affliction, recovering from it, or anticipating its return. It should come as no surprise that the Black Death informed the cultural production of the time, whether as a means of coming to terms with death or as an **apotropaic** symbol to ward off infection.