



Triumph of Death, c.1446, fresco, Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo.

and in this painting two skeletons can be seen ringing a bell above the ruins of a church or catacomb, while another pair buries a coffin nearby.

The painting includes several symbols denoting the transience of life. The skeleton supporting the king's body holds an hourglass in his hand while the woman in red lying in the path of the death wagon has a spindle. Both are traditional emblems of life's passage. Games of chance—cards and backgammon—lie knocked down to the ground. A young couple is about to be interrupted by yet another skeleton, as if to suggest that even love cannot win over death. Material objects, including the king's gold and the pilgrim's religious **relics**, are scattered about on the ground. Neither wealth nor religion has any purchase here.⁷

Bruegel's painting is part of a tradition of death-oriented subjects produced in the wake of the Black Death. The most direct antecedents for the painting were Triumph of Death **frescoes** produced in southern Italy, which also feature death riding a skinny horse and attacking people of all social classes. In the 1446 fresco from the Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo (which Bruegel likely saw during his trip to Italy), death shoots arrows at its victims, which can be understood as a metaphor for the random and brutal nature of the Black Death. One can also see the influence of [Heironymous Bosch](#), who died ten years before Bruegel was born, and whose work Bruegel copied and engraved in the early part of his career when he worked for the printer Heironymous Cock. Like Bosch, who was known for his eccentric, crowded compositions of tiny figures, Bruegel fills his canvas with so many figures that the eye does not know where to rest. The piles of dead are reminiscent of Boccaccio's descriptions of the overwhelming abundance of plague victims in Florence. He recounted how that city's citizens "dug for each graveyard a huge trench, in which they laid the corpses as they arrived by hundreds at a time, piling them up tier upon tier as merchandise is stowed on a ship."⁸ Such imagery finds its visual analogy in Bruegel's nightmarish painting.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The religious and social context for this work is integral to understanding its concerns. Bruegel's career took place in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, and the post-Reformation sensibility informs his depiction of human suffering. As mentioned, one can see references to Italian Triumph of Death frescoes in his work, but the image also partakes of the Northern European dance of death, or **Danse Macabre**, tradition. The visual representation of the Danse Macabre dates back to a now-lost French mural from the Holy Innocents Cemetery in Paris, painted in 1424, that depicted figures from all walks of life, from pauper to prince, parading their way to the grave. The movements of the skeletons' dance may have been symbolic of the involuntary movements of plague sufferers as cell necrosis advanced prior to death.⁹ Throughout the fifteenth century, the motif was a popular subject for church and cemetery murals. Hans Holbein the Younger revived the late medieval allegory in a series of engravings called *Dance of Death* published in 1538. The popularity of this subject speaks to