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Hist 297

Project Proposal

This semester I plan to research the Black Death in Florence, with a focus on how the plague affected art and literature in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. My working argument is that the peak years of the bubonic plague, around 1347-52, drastically shifted the depictions of life and death in the arts. Paintings, sculptures, and writing during and after the plague show a darker, more pessimistic view of Florence and the afterlife. The arts also allude to changing views of God and the church in a number of ways as people living through the plague searched for a cause. Books published in the late 1900s about Renaissance Florence seem to have a broader approach and hardly ever mention the plague as a pivotal point for art, but more recent works seem to make this connection.

Some types of primary sources I plan to use to further my argument include paintings by Florentine artists imbedded in secondary source books. I will use paintings both from before and after the plague struck Florence in order to compare themes and some stylistic aspects. Another type of primary source that will be useful is excerpts from famous literary works during the time of the Black Death, which are translated in sourcebooks. These include descriptions of the plague from people who lived through it, such as Giovanni Boccaccio, that give insight into daily life during the plague and how people perceived what was happening. Works of fiction such as stories from *The Decameron* show how authors depicted changing ideas of how life should be lived in the uncertainty and chaos of the plague. Using examples of both art and literature will be crucial in understanding how the Black Death caused a shift in these areas of life.

For this project I am looking at secondary sources that focus on Florence during the Renaissance or the Black Death in Europe. Since there are very few books focused on just the plague in Florence during the time period I am focused on, I will be using pieces of multiple different works. Some sources published earlier focus more on the stylistic aspects of Renaissance art in general and less on the role of the Black Death. Other more recent studies include the Black Death as a small part of their commentary on art. The most useful of these sources will most likely be Norman Cantor's *In the Wake of the Plague* published in 2001 and Francis Ames-Lewis's *Artistic Centers of the Italian Renaissance* published in 2012. Books that are more focused on the plague seem to include scientific and cultural points as well as maps and statistics. The challenging part of using these secondary sources will be getting a sense of which parts will be most useful for my argument. I will also have to take into account the changing focus of scholars from the 1970s to the most recent published works and how that affects their analysis of Renaissance art and literature.

Research on the Black Death is still relevant in scholarly studies today despite how long ago it occurred. My working argument that the Black Death changed the course of art and literature during the Italian Renaissance is an especially significant part of this ongoing field of study. During my meeting with Dr. Poska about this topic, she informed me that there is an active debate between Renaissance scholars and art historians on the extent to which the plague affected the Renaissance. Some scholars believe that without the plague, the Renaissance would not have become what it did in the realms of art, writing, and philosophy. Others believe that the plague was not a big factor in the outcome of this time period, and that the Renaissance would

have been just as dynamic without it. In my research, I hope to learn more about this debate and see where I fall among these scholarly opinions.

Bibliography

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