

Sacred and Profane Healers: The Visual Culture of Pandemics

Images of the 1347 Bubonic Plague, the 1918 Spanish Influenza, and the COVID-19 pandemic reveal an intriguing pattern, the depictions of the dead and dying from these periods are far outnumbered by images of people administering to the sick. Furthermore, most of these images glorify saints, doctors, and healers in scenes where the dead and dying are greatly diminished in importance. This project examines visual depictions from three distinct periods of widespread disease: the 1347 Bubonic Plague, the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, and the ongoing COVID-19 novel coronavirus. I examine the imagery representing those people who signified or engaged with disease, in paintings, prints, photographs, infographics, and comics that date from the fifteenth century until the present day. Many of these images were created to inspire hope for healing, such as Titian's *St. Mark Enthroned* (ca. 1510-1511) which depicts a cluster of plague saints -a type of votive image invoked by the people of a city to intercede on their behalf to prevent or curtail future outbreaks of the plague, similarly, images of the 1918 Spanish Flu and the COVID-19 pandemic, while are largely secular in their iconography, elicit the same hope and desperation for salvation as those of the Bubonic Plague. These modern depictions of pandemic typically elicit the desire of salvation not through God, but through the intervention of medical practitioners. Thus, the representations of the 1918 and current COVID-19 pandemics supplant the role of science over religion. Doctors and nurses in the images of modern pandemics are transformed into quasi-saints celebrated for protecting the public against the invisible threat of disease despite the risk. In the 1918 Spanish Flu imagery for American audiences, doctors and nurses were fashioned as signifiers of patriotism in their models for good behavior by demonstrating health protocols as an expression of duty to one's country.

In this paper, I argue that images of saints, priests, doctors, nurses, and other caregivers in the times of pandemics have represented these figures in acts of intervention to prevent or mitigate disease. I am supporting this argument first by analyzing how art invoking plague saints has been replaced by secular images celebrating the action of doctors and nurses during pandemics. Secondly that images produced during these periods chose to focus on the people who engaged with disease because these images focus on the ideal outcome of being healed. Lastly that art made during pandemics is used to demonstrate how to behave in accordance of community health guidelines.

Images depicting the saint like aspect of healers are not new and has not gone away during the COVID-19 pandemic. An example of this from the COVID-19 pandemic is Brigitte Dawson and Melissa Turner's mural, *COVID Tribute Mural Frontline Hero 606 Balcombe RD*, Melbourne, 2020. This image depicts a doctor bearing the wings of an angel as he poses as Atlas to support the weight of the world on his shoulders. He is depicted standing upon a particle of the COVID-19 virus keeping it away from the Earth with his body. As the art historian Sheila Barker has argued the pictorial tradition of images elevating caretakers to a sacred level begins in the early seventeenth century Rome starting with images depicting the Cure of Saint Sebastian, that differed from his earlier depictions as a martyr. These images, created in Rome starting in 1601, depicted an emphasis on earthly medicine as a healing agent in contrast to spiritual healing. Art of physicians has progressed since the Baroque period from being made by an outside observer to being made by physicians. Art produced by physicians during the COVID-19 pandemic depicts the desperation and helplessness that physicians face when intervening, as opposed to the idealized, self-sacrificing, good Samaritan images created by non-physicians. This can be seen in the physician Alex Thomas's comic, *Untitled (I Got My First COVID Vaccine Today)*, 2021, the artist-doctor depicts himself receiving his COVID-19 vaccine. He states in the text of the comic "It didn't feel

like we were winning. It felt like we were all in an airport desperately trying to flee a war-torn country, doing whatever we could to get off the front lines.” This sentiment tells us that the physicians do not see themselves as the heroic intercessor that pandemic images so often depict them as, but as another victim of the pandemic. The social distanced line shows the physicians somber and isolated but sharing in this isolation.

The art of all three time periods also shows ways in which living people intervened through health protocols. In the 1532 *Plague Victims* woodcut from Francesco Petrarca’s, *Artzney Beyde*, two people attending to a sick man with the plague cover their noses with cloth to keep themselves from the toxic miasma, which was the most common belief for how the plague spread at the time. Although the cloth would not protect the caregivers from the disease that was transmitted through flea bites, the action of covering one’s nose when around the sick could protect them from the more deadly pneumonic form of the disease. A later advancement of this protection is seen in the seventeenth century plague doctor costume. Paul Fürst’s, *Doctor Schnabel in Rome*, 1565, depicts a plague doctor. The costume features the long bird-like mask filled with herbs and flowers, a leather or waxed canvas outfit, boots, gloves, and a staff. This costume was somewhat effective in protecting physicians of the time against the plague as it completely covered the physicians’ body in a heavy material making it harder for fleas to get to the skin underneath. Also, many of the herbs and flowers the physicians used in their masks to clean the miasmatic air we now know repel fleas. The tradition of covering one’s face to protect against disease did not go away with the widespread acceptance of germ theory. During the 1918 Spanish Flu, mask orders were mandated around the country. In an image by an anonymous artist from a 1918 edition of the *Edmund Bulletin*, *How to Make Mask for Prevention of Influenza*, there is a depiction of how to create and properly wear a gauze mask in order to slow the spread of the flu. The text below the image also tells the viewer where and for how long to wear the mask. These images were spread in newspapers in order to reach as wide an audience as possible as quickly as possible. Images, like the one from the *Edmund Bulletin*, explaining how to properly follow state and nationally mandated public health protocols have been one of the most common types of art created during the COVID-19 pandemic. These images are mainly presented in the form of infographics and are distributed by health organizations like the Center for Disease Control to be posted on social media or printed for a physical space. Like mask wearing, that can be seen in newspaper publications across the country. One example of this is the CDC’s, *Stop the Spread of Germs That Can Make You and Others Sick!*, 2020. This image displays four bubbles showing what to do to follow health guidelines, washing your hands, wearing a mask, covering coughs and sneezes, and social distancing. This image is made specifically for use in schools as the people depicted in the image are school children.

Art created about intervention during times of pandemics is important because it creates an emphasis on the importance on believing that the future will be better. This is seen in the instilling of hope in artwork created about healers and their ability to protect. It is seen in the emphasis in the art on community and cooperation to slow the spread of disease. It is seen in how the art attempts to inform the viewer that they are not alone in their fear and seeks to comfort them with that fact.



Paul Fürst, *Doctor Schnabel in Rome*, copper engraving, c. 1656,
The British Museum, London, © The Trustees of the British Museum

Accession Number : 1876,0510.512



Caspar Luyken, *Plague in Naples, 1656*, etching, 1698,
published by Pieter van der Aa (I), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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