

ORIGIN OF OUR DANCES OF DEATH.

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THE so-called Dances of Death, the *trionfi della morte* of Italy, came into being during the fifteenth century and reached their culmination in the sixteenth when Hans Holbein the Younger created his famous pictures in 1530. Various explanations have been given to account for the origin of this motive of art in Europe. The great epidemic plagues of the fourteenth century have been made responsible for its rise,¹ an argument which has little convincing force, as such natural phenomena may sufficiently explain a certain propensity of the time for reflections on death, but not the material foundation of an artistic conception of a motive of very peculiar and individual character. Deserving of more consideration is the suggestion that it presents the reproduction of a real dance of Death,² such as was performed in 1424 in the Cemetery of the Innocent at Paris, and in 1499 at the Castle of Bruges, and as it is represented in the shape of really dancing skeletons in Hartmann Schedel's *Weltchronik* of 1493. But the idea of Kraus³ that we must descend into classical antiquity where we find Greek and Latin inscriptions repeatedly referring to death as the one who seizes all mankind, in order to explain the origin of our Dances of Death, is altogether too far-fetched, and such general reflections on the power of death as may occur at all times and almost any-

¹ F. Xaver Kraus, *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, Vol. II, 1. Freiburg, 1897, pp. 448-451, where also the entire former literature on the subject is quoted.

² "Ein ins Bild übersetztes Spiel des Totentanzes," as Kraus expresses it.

³ *Loc. cit.*, p. 450. There is, altogether, no greater contrast imaginable than that existing between the idea of Death as a dancing skeleton and the Greek representation of Death as a beautiful serious youth. If Didron (*Christian Iconography*, Vol. II, London, 1891, p. 156) refers to the antique larva as the early Christian model for Death in the form of a skeleton, this may be right; but this representation has no direct connection with the Dances of Death in which the essential point is that the skeletons are represented *dancing*, and not merely skeletons.

where are too vague and general to be admitted as arguments in the present question. Certain it is that classical art did not possess this motive, that it was likewise unknown to early Christian art and sprang up in Europe at a late date, not before the fifteenth century. As regards all motives of art, we are justified in searching for their historical foundation and for their occurrence in other spheres of art, from which they may have eventually been derived.

Such a province of art, in which the motive under consideration is widely made use of, indeed exists, and it is found in Buddhism, more particularly in the Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism. As is well known, in Tibet and the other countries where Lamaism prevails, certain kinds of mystery plays are performed, in which masks of very elaborate make are used. Up to the present time but little has become known of the plots of these masquerade moralities, though in Tibetan literature a special class of books is devoted to the subject of their performance and rites. Some represent the advent of Buddhist monks from India into Tibet, and their struggle with, and final triumph over the native adherents to shamanism; and others give scenes from the life of Buddha, while still others relate the so-called birth-stories or Jatakas, the deeds and miracles of remarkable saints, or the horrors and torments of the Inferno. The subjects of other pantomimes are taken from Tibetan history, like the assassination of King Glang-dar-ma by a Lama, because of his hostility to Buddhism. Others are emblematic, one for instance being symbolical of the departure of the old year and the ushering-in of good luck with the new. Many of these lamaistic dances suggest the exorcism of devils or survivals of ancient shamanistic rites. The principal deities and demons represented by the masks of these plays in a series which I obtained from the great Lama Temple Yung-huo-kung at Peking, are the four Great Kings of Heaven (*maharaja*), distinguished, according to their colors, as the Yellow, Red, Blue, and Black King, each a guardian on one of the four sides of the world-mountain Sumeru, where they command hosts of demons; further two men-devouring ogres or Rākshasa, painted yellow and red, with protruding tusks and brute-like ears and snout; and two aerial demons or Yaksha,—one red, the other blue,—with elephant's trunk, tusks, and ears, and with a wreath of five skulls around the forehead. Four masks represented ghosts of small-pox, others animals—the stag, spotted black and white, the monkey, the blue and the red ox, these being helpers to the god of Death, Mahākāla, whose masks are made in four different colors. Contrasting with these fierce-looking demoniacal faces are the masks

of the jovial and humorous monks. The largest one signifies the great or chief Huo-shang, who in some plays is intended to represent an historical Chinese monk who appeared in Tibet at the end of the eighth century, while in others he symbolizes Maitreya, the Buddha of the future. He is bald-headed, has a big wart on his forehead, an almost scythe-like mouth, and his face is convulsed with laughter. A peach of colossal size, expressive of longevity, is his attribute. Six other heads belong to young monks, his disciples, who play the parts of buffoons with him. They have youthful red lips, and their skulls are painted with a small tuft of hair with a short cue attached.

A special group of these masks is formed by that of the graveyard ghouls (*çmaçānapati* or *citiṭpati*) which are intended to represent skulls. They are pale-faced, have circular eyes with red rings around them and flames over them, a flattened nose, and compressed mouth. They wear clothes to represent skeletons. In one of the sacred dances they scare away with their sticks a raven who is about to steal the strewn offering of sacred meal.⁴

Here, accordingly, we meet with a real Dance of Death, and further, the same ghosts performing their weird dance in the mystery plays find their counterpart also in a pictorial representation. The most common one of these is a pair of skeletons dancing over a human corpse.⁵ They brandish staves made into the form of a skeleton. This is a favorite household picture of all Lamaists and easily procurable at Peking of all dealers in Lamaistic objects.

⁴ An illustration of such a performance, in which nine skeletons take part, is inserted in the book of E. F. Knight, *Where Three Empires Meet*, London, 1897, on the plate opposite p. 216. The author's description of them (p. 219) runs thus: "A small black image representing a human corpse was placed within a magic triangle designed upon the pavement of the quadrangle. Figures painted black and white to simulate skeletons, some in chains, others bearing sickles or swords, engaged in a frantic dance around the corpse. They were apparently attempting to snatch it away or inflict some injury upon it, but were deterred by the magic of the surrounding triangle, and by the chanting and censer-swinging of several holy men in mitres and purple copes, who stood beneath the temple porch." A single skeleton-dancer is figured in Waddell's *Buddhism of Tibet*, p. 525. See also Chandra Das, *Journey to Lhasa* (2d ed.), pp. 115-116 and p. 263. The same dance occurs among the Mongols and is described and figured by A. Posdnäyev in *Sketches from the Life of Buddhist Monasteries in Mongolia* (in Russian), St. Petersburg, 1887, pp. 396, 397.

⁵ Illustrations in Pander-Grünwedel, *Das Pantheon des Tschangtscha Huktuktu*, p. 98, No. 253; Grünwedel, *Mythologie des Buddhismus in Tibet und der Mongolei*, p. 170. These ghosts are called "Lords of the graveyard" or "protectors of the cemetery" (Tibetan, *zhing skyong*); they belong to the retinue of Yama, the god of the nether world, and are accordingly real personifications of Death.—As to the development of the history of art, it is interesting to note that a mask intended for a death's-head is already represented on one of the sculptures of Gandhara in the demons of Mara's army (see Grünwedel, *Buddhist Art in India*, p. 99, German edition, pp. 94, 106.).

In this and kindred representations we have doubtless to see prototypes of our Dances of Death. In Buddhism the Dance of Death has its suitable well-founded place and is connected with many other phenomena of Indian religious lore. We must here call attention to a peculiar class of spirits called Vetāla, who have become so familiar to us from the entertaining collection of stories, the Vetālapañcavimçati.

The Vetāla is a ghost who haunts graveyards and is possessed with the ability of passing into a corpse which is thus resuscitated and begins to move and to dance.⁶ Miraculous powers may be obtained from such a ghost (*vetālasiddhi*), and to conjure them, a special method is employed which plays an important part in the Yoga and Tantra schools of later Buddhism. It is especially conspicuous in the legends of Padmasambhava (eighth century), who meditates and conjures ghosts for five years in one cemetery. It seems to me probable that it was Padmasambhava himself who introduced the dance of the skeletons in Tibet while actively engaged there in the suppression of demons, for just at his time we find a description of masked pantomimes in celebration of the completion of the temples of bSam-yas built after his plans.⁷

No example of this subject in Chinese art is known to me; it seems to have had its special connection with Tantrism which penetrated into Tibet. The Japanese, however, must have had a certain tradition relating to it, for Kyosai has taken up the theme with some eagerness, and incorporated two Dances of Death in his *Mangwa*,⁸ in which the skeletons perform wonderful acrobatic feats.

The analogy between the two phenomena in the East and the West is most striking. On both sides we encounter skeleton-dancers in mystery plays and pictorial representations of the same subject. The similarity goes still further in a very peculiar point. "The spectacles or performances of the Dance of Death, so common in the Middle Ages, were often relieved of their gloom by the introduction of interludes in which the Fool took a prominent part. Such scenes when illustrated formed part of the series of subjects of engravings of the '*Danse macabre*.' The Fool is seen at strife with

⁶ See the illustration in Grünwedel's *Mythologie*, p. 192.

⁷ See my paper "Die Bru-ža Sprache und die historische Stellung des Padmasambhara," in *T'oung Pao*, 1907. Also Chandra Das (*Journey to Lhasa*, p. 155) joins in the opinion that Padmasambhara is the reputed originator of religious dances in Tibet.

⁸ Reproduced by C. H. Stratz, *Die Körperformen in Kunst und Leben der Japaner*, Stuttgart, 1904, pp. 126, 127. On other representations of skeletons in Japanese art see A. Brockhaus, *Netsuke, Versuch einer Geschichte der japanischen Schnitzkunst*, Leipsic, 1905, p. 367.

his adversary Death, and hitting him with a bladder full of peas or pebbles. We frequently meet with allusions to Death's fool in Shakespeare."⁹ In the Tibetan moralities also, the fool or mime is of utmost importance and appears under a great variety of forms and masks;¹⁰ whether the skeleton masqueraders figure also in this rôle, I am not prepared now to assert positively, as we know too little about the plots of these plays, but it certainly seems that their actions and dances are better calculated to bring about a humorous and comical effect than a serious one, in the same way as the *Vetāla* is a rather jolly and jovial creature in the Indian stories. If the whole subject could be scrutinized more closely in Tibet, both in the mystery plays and in the line of iconography, and in the texts relative to the subject, the points of coincidences between East and West would probably increase to a considerable extent.

But the reason I am inclined to believe that we are compelled to admit an historical connection between the two phenomena, lies still deeper. That the personification of Death in the shape of a human skeleton may have arisen independently in various quarters is obvious, although the idea is by no means of frequent occurrence among mankind, and if this were all, the whole matter would not be a case of great significance. But the idea of a temporary rising of the dead conceived as skeletons, and of their ability to move freely around and commit extraordinary actions, is very specific and does not find any explanation from the thoughts of Christianity, to the whole spirit of which it seems to be entirely alien. It has certainly nothing to do with the idea of resurrection, which is eternal, while here it is the question of a merely transitory rising with a final return to the grave, so it has nothing to do in Buddhism with the doctrine of transmigration. It is the idea which we find expressed in numerous German folk-tales and songs, of the midnight dance of the dead over the graveyard, of the man rising from the grave to punish his faithless sweetheart, of the dead man climbing a steeple—the dead always appearing as moving skeletons in popular imagination. No doubt, this conception is foreign to the early periods of Christianity and probably may not be older than the times when the Dances of Death began to come into more general vogue. On the contrary, the orthodox Jewish-Christian notion is that the corpse does not continue a material existence, but that it will decay and crumble away into earth and dust. This notion is strongly contra-

⁹ Didron, *Christian Iconography*, Vol. II, p. 169.

¹⁰ The mask of one type of buffoon is figured in *Globus*, Vol. LXXIII, p. 6. As everywhere, he is armed with a large stick, as already G. Boyle (1774) emphasizes (L. R. Markham, *Narratives of the Mission etc. to Tibet*, p. 93).

dicted by the whole conception of the Dances of Death and of the dead, in which the *moving power of the skeletons is implicitly presupposed*, but not by any means accounted for. This shows that it must be a foreign, a borrowed idea in European Christianity, and we find this idea fully developed and rationally accounted for in Buddhism. In India, it seems to me, the idea must ultimately be traced back to the system of Yoga, the practice of which was considered the safest way of acquiring many kinds of supernatural, miraculous powers (*siddhi*),—among others, the ability of causing deceased persons to appear and communicating with them, of passing into another body and returning into one's own.¹¹ The notion of the Vetāla penetrating into a corpse and filling it with life is perhaps connected therewith. At all events, Indian tradition offers an interpretation for the moving power of the dead or skeletons derived from and consistent with indigenous religious beliefs.

We have heretofore considered only those lamaistic representations in which solely dancing skeletons figure. As is well known, in the European Dances of Death, the figure of the latter is usually associated with several or even a whole company of human beings whom he leads away into the realm of shadows. This was a moral point specially emphasized by the Church which availed itself of this motive for educational religious purposes. Certainly we have here a peculiar Christian development of it, and the great artists of the Renaissance treated the theme with the spirit of their individuality. On the other hand, however, it must not be passed over in silence that also in lamaistic art human life is brought into close connection with the powers of death with a utilitarian viewpoint in mind for impressing the masses. I think, in this connection, of the numerous representations of the punishments and tortures of Hell, as they particularly appear on the so-called "Wheels of Life." On many of these, the demons inflicting castigation are drawn in dancing postures, and the dance of the Preta signifies a regular Dance of Death.¹²

Quite recently, R. Pischel¹³ justly remarked that "without doubt much has migrated from Lamaism into the Catholic Church."

¹¹ See R. Garbe, *Samkhya und Yoga*, Strassburg, 1896, p. 46. Compare also the two interesting legends contributed by Sarat Chandra Das in his article "On the Translation of the Soul from One Body to Another," *Journal of the Buddhist Text Society of India*, Vol. V, Part III, 1897, pp. (1)-(7).

¹² See especially Posdnäyev, *Sketches from the Life of Buddhist Monasteries in Mongolia*, Plate opposite p. 80, where the ribs in the emaciated bodies of the dancing Preta are clearly outlined, and Plate VII, in Waddell's "Lamaism in Sikhim" (in *Risley's Gazetteer of Sikhim*, Calcutta, 1894.).

¹³ In his excellent book *Leben und Lehre des Buddha*, Leipsic, 1906, p. 124.

Among these migrations, we may now count the artistic motive of the Dance of Death. Several ways of how the transmission took place may be indicated. First of all, I wish to call attention to the fact that a representation very similar to the Tibetan conception has been discovered in Turkistan. I refer to Plate XII in Grünwedel's Report.¹⁴ This illustration represents an ink-drawing derived from an Uighur inscribed roll and showing, as Grünwedel remarks,¹⁵ "the boldly painted figure of a demon, a sketch which might be called Japanese, if it should fall into our hands without knowledge of where it was found."

The most striking features about this demon are first, that he is represented in a dancing posture with crossed legs and outstretched arms, and secondly, his general skeleton-like appearance. This has been brought out by the artist by the ghastly thinness and leanness of the limbs and bones, and by clearly outlining his ribs on one side. Whether the figure must be conceived of as wholly nude or as being clad with a tightly fitting linen robe, such as the lamaistic skeleton dancers wear, with the ribs painted on, may be a debatable question. Arms, breast, abdomen, and legs at all events convey the impression of being uncovered, while a sort of breechcloth seems to be present. Arms, hands and fingers, legs and feet, have upon the whole a skeleton-like character. The head is very curious: the tremendous eye-sockets and the big skull with the large tuft of hair are intentionally made quite out of proportion with the smallness of the face. I think we need not hesitate to look upon this figure as an offshoot of the "Dances of Death" series. It would hardly be a matter of great surprise, if more and still more impressive representations of the same subject were to come to light in Turkistan, and then we might be able to establish a similar case, as R. Pischel did in regard to the penetration of the fish-symbol into Christianity.¹⁶

As the ideas concerning the Death Dances did not crystallize in Europe before the fifteenth century and may extend back as far as into the fourteenth, it may be well to suppose that it was the Mongols who brought a knowledge of the subject to Europe; to them it was familiar from Lamaism, and it may not be superfluous to recall the fact that they possessed in their Siddhi-kür a version of the

¹⁴ A. Grünwedel, "Bericht über archäologische Arbeiten in Idikutschari und Umgebung im Winter 1902-1903." Aus *Abhandlungen der Bayer. Akademie*, Munich, 1906.

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*, p. 71.

¹⁶ "Der Ursprung des christlichen Fischsymbols," *Sitzungsberichte der Berliner Akademie*, 1905, pp. 506-532.

Indian Vetālapañcaviṃṣati, many stories of which are found in European folk-lore.

It has been asserted that Dances of Death are represented also on works of art coming down from classical antiquity; this opinion, however, seems to be in general erroneous, as the skeletons found on such representations are by no means in a dancing posture, but reclining, standing, or walking. The best known subject of this kind is that occurring on the silver goblets from the Treasure of Boscoreale ascribed to the time of the reign of the Emperor Augustus.¹⁷ De Villefosse¹⁸ remarks regarding this motive: "It has been pretended that the reliefs of our goblets were to represent a dance of skeletons (*Totentanz*). The expression is far from being correct; no detail justifies us to entertain such an idea. The principal actors of these scenes are evidently not given to a dance." Besides, it is shown by the profound investigation of the same author that these reliefs are not at all connected with the idea of death; they do not recall to mind the briefness of existence; their object is to demonstrate the uselessness of philosophy and the hypocrisy of morals.¹⁹ This is sufficient to exclude any relation of these Greek subjects to the Christian and Buddhistic Dances of Death. The only known Greek example of really dancing skeletons remains one moulded in a relief on a terracotta goblet, apparently of Alexandrine art, now in the Musée du Louvre.²⁰ It does not seem improbable that this exceptional case may have received a certain impetus from traditions derived from India, for it is noteworthy that according to de Villefosse²¹ the antique lamps adorned with figures of skeletons appear to have been turned out by one special factory which, in all probability, had its seat in Alexandria. And, in the judgment of the same scholar, it was just after the epoch of Alexander the Great that ancient art has increased the representations of skeletons and *larvæ*, which, I am inclined to think, can hardly be a case of mere chance, but is possibly traceable to an incentive from Buddhist India.

¹⁷ Described and figured by Ant. Héron de Villefosse, "Le Trésor de Boscoreale (Fondation Eugène Piot, *Monument et Mémoires*, Vol. V, Paris, 1899, pp. 223-245, and plates VII and VIII).

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*, p. 240.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

²⁰ Illustrated and described by E. Pottier, *Revue archéologique*, 1903, I, pp. 12-16.

²¹ *Loc. cit.*, p. 225.