

The Dance of Death of La Chaise-Dieu

La Danse Macabre

This fresco extends over three panels, the figures being about a metre high. **It is composed of the living of our world, accompanied by Death in the form of stylised skeletons, sometimes wearing a shroud.** It is a dance because the skeletons **dance their invitation to death to the 23 living people representing most of medieval society, inviting them in their turn to join the dance ...**

The dance is macabre because it concerns the death of people who do not wish to die but who must join the dance ... This grotesque dance leads from right to left ...

This artistic form arose from the great calamities of the 14th and 15th centuries (the Black Death in 1348, recurrent plagues, wars, famine etc.).

It began as religious theatre, acted by the Franciscans in particular, then was depicted on walls, and finally in published form from 1484. The one in La Chaise-Dieu can be dated around 1470. (*Other danse macabres exist, in particular that of Le Meslay-Grenet near Chartres.*) Below each figure used to be a text of what they were saying, but they are missing here, although we can construct such dialogues as a way of interpreting the images.

It is called a fresco because the artist worked “**a fresc**”, when the lime plaster was still wet or fresh, so that the colours went into the plaster itself and the painting would last a long time. We do not know why it is not finished or who painted it; it has not been restored but has been cleansed of harmful micro-organisms.

Le prédicateur (commentator)

On the first pillar, half-erased, we can make out the

commentator in his chair;

he begins:

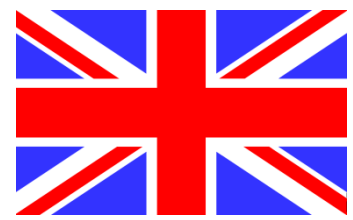
*“Oh reasonable being
Who wishes for eternal life
You have here the remarkable
doctrine*

*Of how to end your mortal
life well*

*The Death Dance reminds us
That each of us has to learn
to dance*

*Both men and women
naturally*

*Death spares neither great
nor small.”*



The lesson is clear: listen to the teaching and you will surely go to Paradise when you die. The text continues: « *Tu vois le plus grand commencer* »...

“You can see it begins with the most important ...”

The Pope

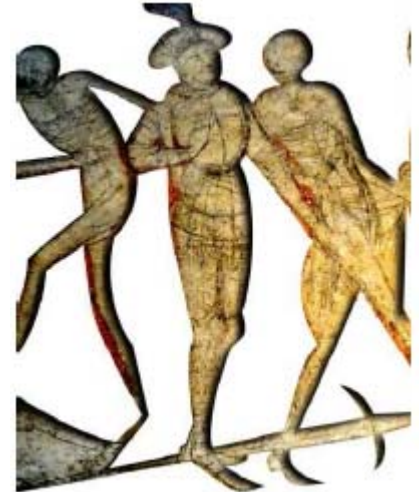
(the first panel)

The Pope is first. Death is rather respectful to him; he is going in the right direction and death only needs to nudge him gently from behind.

The Emperor is next; with a hint towards **the cardinal (beautiful red robe)**, Death mocks the Emperor, his neighbour.



Death takes a firm hold of the **connétable (in the beautiful armour)**, commander-in-chief of the king's armies, whilst the military man replies that he would like to assault once more “the castles in order to gain honour and riches”, but alas “all prowess, Death brings low”.



The Merchant (2nd panel)

In the second panel, **in the middle**, we see a person with a well-trimmed beard wearing a beautiful hat, rich clothes, taking a firm stance; **a merchant, without a doubt skilful in business**, as indicated by the full money bag at his belt; he seems to be looking down on

Death, no doubt certain of obtaining, thanks to his skill, **a reprieve**; Death does not negotiate but **with a large smile**, extends his arm to let him know the imperative of taking “the right path”...



Le sergent royal

On the right a royal justice officer **with his wide-brimmed hat, his truncheon and the fleur de lys on his uniform**. He has a military bearing and certainly knows how to get people to obey him; at first glance, everything should fall into place for him. But he is overwhelmed; on one side he is disarmed by mockery, and on the other he is being led away, powerful officer that he is, he is forced to obey, as shown by his already bent knee ...



(Below is the enormous stone a little hollowed out, used to wash the bodies of deceased monks, and the vigil held around the deceased monk).

Le damoiseau (third panel)

In the third panel, the first person : **an elegant squire with curly hair, a beautiful topcoat with long sleeves and his pony-skin shoes, immobilised** because Death has dropped a posy of flowers for his belle ... He thinks only about seducing female hearts ...



Le docteur

Then the **doctor from the Sorbonne**, blinded by his bonnet, having no clear view of reality or truth, moreover Death points an accusing finger at the parchments hanging from his belt, no doubt full of errors, not to say heresies; perhaps his teaching is like the rattle which Death is shaking in his ear ...



Le troubadour

Further along the **troubadour** in beautiful clothes has lost his sense of humour and in his chagrin has smashed his hurdy-gurdy when faced with death ...



Le paysan

Death catches **the peasant** going in the wrong direction, the full sack of grain on his shoulder; very sad at having to leave his fields and his harvest, to which he was too attached, in chagrin, he lets his scythe fall ...



Le petit enfant

Finally, seeming shameful, Death hides its face with a veil while coming for **a little child (wrapped in swaddling clothes as they were at the time)**. Which is understandable ...



According to classical texts, **Death has compassion for this infant** who is afraid and tells it “in the world, you would find little pleasure”; more deeply, it does not wish to frighten it at the moment of good news, that the child is going to avoid a life of suffering as Death is leading it to Paradise. In fact, for this little, baptised infant, it will be Heaven, immediate eternal happiness, as the Christian faith affirms.

“Death” more alive than the living?

Perhaps this is the way we should interpret this particular presentation of Death at La Chaise-Dieu. As Death here is not a hideous skeleton, is not holding a scythe, pike-staff, or lance, as elsewhere; it is not represented as harsh or violent, even if it is incorruptible, as the reality is inevitable. It kills people certainly, but it dances, leaps and capers. It is so lively that it evokes life in Heaven; it seems to say that life does not end in death; **at La Chaise-Dieu the liveliest thing is Death, not those living in this world, perhaps the message is that life here below can be the doorway to a life full of happiness and joy in the presence of God.**

This interpretation brings us back to the introduction of la Danse macabre:

“Oh reasonable being,
You have here the remarkable doctrine
Of how to end your mortal life well”