

# Uprisings, epidemics and spontaneous deaths

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Terrifying encounters with uprisings and epidemics across Europe were one result of my recent examination of the prints of the German painter and printmaker Alfred Rethel (1816–1859). All the prints I considered have one symbol in common: the allegorical figure of Death. As a means of representing dangerous historical events, formidable and mysterious, this diabolical being would frequently deliver spontaneous death to his chosen. Rethel's *Ein Todtentanz aus dem Jahre 1848* (A dance of death for the year 1848) was purchased in 2010 for the Baillieu Library Print Collection and serves as the gateway for my adventure through some new purchases which further develop this theme in the collection.

Depictions of death have a long tradition in the visual arts, many stemming from the medieval idea of the dance of death—a series of individuals, whose social positions range from peasant to king, in a procession with a skeleton who represents death.<sup>1</sup> Many scholars believe the dance of death originated with the appearance of the plague, which took the lives of both rich and poor indiscriminately.<sup>2</sup> So depictions of death of this kind present the viewer with two ideas: that of an individual's constant vulnerability to death, and also that in death there is equality.

An influential depiction of the dance of death in the print medium is Hans Holbein the Younger's (1497/8–1543) *Dance of death*, a series of woodcuts which first appeared in book format in 1538. The Baillieu Library Print Collection has a set of the *Dance of death* (1680) by the Prague-born artist Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–1677) after Holbein. A 1913 privately printed version of Holbein's work is held in the Baillieu Library's Rare Book Collection.<sup>3</sup> As well as dance of death prints, also found in the collection originally donated by Dr J. Orde Poynton are *memento mori* prints, which depict a single individual and his or her encounter with death.<sup>4</sup> These prints from the Renaissance provide insights into our continuing enthrallment with, and often fear of, death. Macabre prints, including those depicting the figure of Death, emerge as one of the distinct themes in the collecting tastes of the Doctors Poynton. (Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1906–2001, collected prints and books with his father Dr F. John Poynton, 1869–1943.)<sup>5</sup>

This thread in the Poynton prints has been noticed by Dr Catherine Kovesi, Associate Professor Robyn Sloggett, Dr Jenny Spinks and Professor Charles Zika, who have selected prints based around these

ideas for a project funded by the University Library's inaugural Scholarly Information and Innovation Grants. Their ambitious project, which uses a range of pre-1700 prints and rare books held in the Baillieu Library, aims to create a network for early European research, establish a new website, support conservation, and provide hands-on experience for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. This project contributes substantially to an exhibition planned for the National Gallery of Victoria in the latter half of 2012, provisionally titled *The four horsemen: Apocalypse, death and disaster*.<sup>6</sup> My intention here is to examine recently acquired prints—in particular those by Alfred Rethel—to demonstrate how strongly these later prints were influenced by representations of death in Renaissance prints.

From the tradition of the dance of death emerge several features of the representation of death. Firstly, nobody knew what death looked like, but it was assumed that it took tangible form as a male supernatural being. Secondly, the living people in depictions of the figure of Death are unable to see him; only the viewer can. Thirdly, Death frequently uses attributes or

Alfred Rethel, Plate 1 from *Ein Todtentanz aus dem Jahre 1848* (A dance of death for the year 1848), 1849, woodcut, block: 25.6 x 31.1 cm. Reg. no. 2010.0004.001, purchased 2010, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

props, such as a musical instrument, hourglass or skull, to help make his presence known to his chosen. This figure of Death is like a magician, who uses props, tricks and illusions to seduce his victims.

Rethel's *Ein Todtentanz aus dem Jahre 1848* is a series of six woodcuts, published as a broadsheet in 1849. The cycle includes poems written by Robert Reinick (1805–1850) in collaboration with Rethel, in letterpress which explains the action in the images above. A staggering 15,000 copies were sold that year, demonstrating the set's influence.<sup>7</sup> The prints were distributed throughout Germany and France and some copies were printed in magazines or specifically to use as propaganda, especially in schools, as they promulgated a strongly counter-revolutionary attitude.<sup>8</sup> This series of short revolutions, whose aims included national unification of the loose collection of German-speaking states, also involved demands from the people for freedom of the press, assembly and arms. Uprisings saw the formation of barricades in the streets and violent fighting between insurgents and police. The tricolours of the event—black, red and gold—were to form what we now know as the German flag.

Rethel's own political stance in relation to his *Dance of death* is somewhat ambiguous. Opinions are divided about his personal views and those presented by his work. He was associated with the conservative centre-right faction of the Frankfurt Assembly, but potentially his political attitude was modified after the final and failed May uprising which was quashed in 1849.<sup>9</sup> Rethel does not seem to have been opposed to this Dresden uprising; he was certainly a supporter of the unification of Germany and in

a letter he wrote: 'A few hours ago the dreadful catastrophe that had befallen this town was decided in favour of the military—that is, of the king. A great, magnificent effort for the glory of Germany has fallen to coldly calculating military force, to the sword!'<sup>10</sup> Rethel's greatest interest within his art appears to be the portrayal of history and his obsession with the figure of Death.

Individual prints from the series have been given various descriptive titles by commentators over the





years, some of which are imprecise, indicating that like many narrative print series, a detailed explanation is required, otherwise their allusions are lost. The first plate from the set (illustrated opposite) appears to have strong associations with the French Revolution, which took place nearly 60 years before Dresden's. The whole of Europe was looking to France, which was experiencing another revolution in 1848, as its example during this time of civil unrest.<sup>11</sup> Some have interpreted the women

in the image as representing Liberty, Equality and Fraternity (and this is indeed the first cry of the poem beneath the image). Although Rethel may have intentionally drawn this parallel, closer investigation reveals that the five women have clawed feet and that really, they are the allegorical harpies, also known as furies or vices. In other words, in this image, regardless of his personal beliefs expressed elsewhere, Rethel has equated revolutionary ideals with violence and destruction.

The figure of Death is just breaking out of his grave at the left of the image, and the harpies are handing him the attributes he will require for his mission, which is to seduce people to join the revolution. The central woman, Cunning, is handing Death the sword of Justice, while Vanity is about to place a Friedrich Hecker hat upon his head. (Friedrich Hecker was the leader of the Baden uprising in April 1848; he famously wore a broad-brimmed hat with a cock's feather.) Vanity also holds a mirror which reflects the ghastly reflection of Death; the masked Dishonesty holds the scales of Justice and points to the latter's allegorical figure who, robbed of these attributes, is held bound and captive in the background. Bloodthirst holds a scythe ready for Death, as Madness leads her horse toward him. This horse will accompany Death through the series. Madness bears the 18th-century style coat and riding boots that Death will wear, a reference to the French Revolution of 1789.<sup>12</sup> The second plate (illustrated above) shows Death, with his attributes, riding the horse of Madness towards a town, presumably Dresden. Two girls are fleeing before him—the first clue that unlike the Renaissance figure, Rethel's Death is visible to mortal humans. Also

Right: Alfred Rethel, Plate 4 from *Ein Todtentanz aus dem Jahre 1848*, woodcut, block: 25.1 x 31.6 cm. Reg. no. 2010.0004.004, purchased 2010, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

Below: Alfred Rethel, Plate 3 from *Ein Todtentanz aus dem Jahre 1848*, woodcut, block: 25.6 x 31.1 cm. Reg. no. 2010.0004.003, purchased 2010, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.



in variance, Rethel's Death requires magical props in order to seduce his victims, whereas in Renaissance depictions Death was powerful enough to merely place a hand upon his selected. Death's first act of illusion is his costume, with which he deceives people into believing he is a leader or agitator for the Dresden revolution.

The third plate (below) depicts Death's most obvious performance of an illusion in this cycle. He is holding

the scales of Justice before a totally captivated audience. Rather than holding the scales by the handle, he has them by the tongue and is thus able to convince his fans that a common pipe, that is the people, weighs as much as a royal crown.<sup>13</sup> Delighted by his caper, the tradespeople in his audience are his first converts to the revolutionary cause. Only the woman at the right, who is blind, and pushing away a small child (perhaps a symbol of

innocence), is able to save herself by evading Death's hypnotism. Behind Madness's horse, which bears a demented expression, a poster on the wall of the inn reads 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. As if the ideals of revolution, referred to here by the motto of the French Revolution and as learnt through the history of that event, require violence and atrocities to achieve, Rethel implies that the bringer of death offers these very same morals, and that revolution itself is an illusion.

By plate 4 (above), Death has his followers totally incited. He stands on a public speaking podium; beside him a blacksmith holds a republican flag. Death hurls his sword which is now marked 'People's justice' into the mob. The deceitfulness of transforming justice's sword into the people's sword is another of Death's acts of illusion. As Madness's horse looks on, the angry crowd prepares for conflict. In the distant background a lynching has already taken place and the police are just appearing. The poem below the image captures Death's speech: 'People, this sword is yours! Who else could judge if not you alone?', and finishes with the lines: 'The populace looks to Death as "the hero of the Revolution"', and as a column of soldiers approaches it shouts, 'Blood! Blood!'<sup>14</sup>





Left: Alfred Rethel, Plate 5 from *Ein Todtentanz aus dem Jahre 1848*, woodcut, block: 25.1 x 31.6 cm. Reg. no. 2010.0004.005, purchased 2010, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

Below: Alfred Rethel, Plate 6 from *Ein Todtentanz aus dem Jahre 1848*, woodcut, block: 25.1 x 31.6 cm. Reg. no. 2010.0004.006, purchased 2010, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

Through his acts of illusion, Death has now achieved his goal. In plate 5 (above), the police are firing a cannon into the mob, and the blast has shattered a beam on the makeshift barricade constructed from barrels, bricks and wood. As the rebels fall, other insurgents rush to take their place and face their doom.<sup>15</sup> Nonchalantly, Death stands with a bloodied flag on the mattress on top of the barricade, and reveals his frightening body to his chosen. The poem this time begins with Death's speech: 'Now I am keeping my promise to you; You all want to be equal to me', and concludes with 'The blood flows freely like the red flag; He who led them was Death.'<sup>16</sup> Plate 5 bears perhaps the strongest resemblance to a graphic novel, with its dynamic and exaggerated action. The comic-strip quality of the series may explain its accessibility and popularity in 1849.

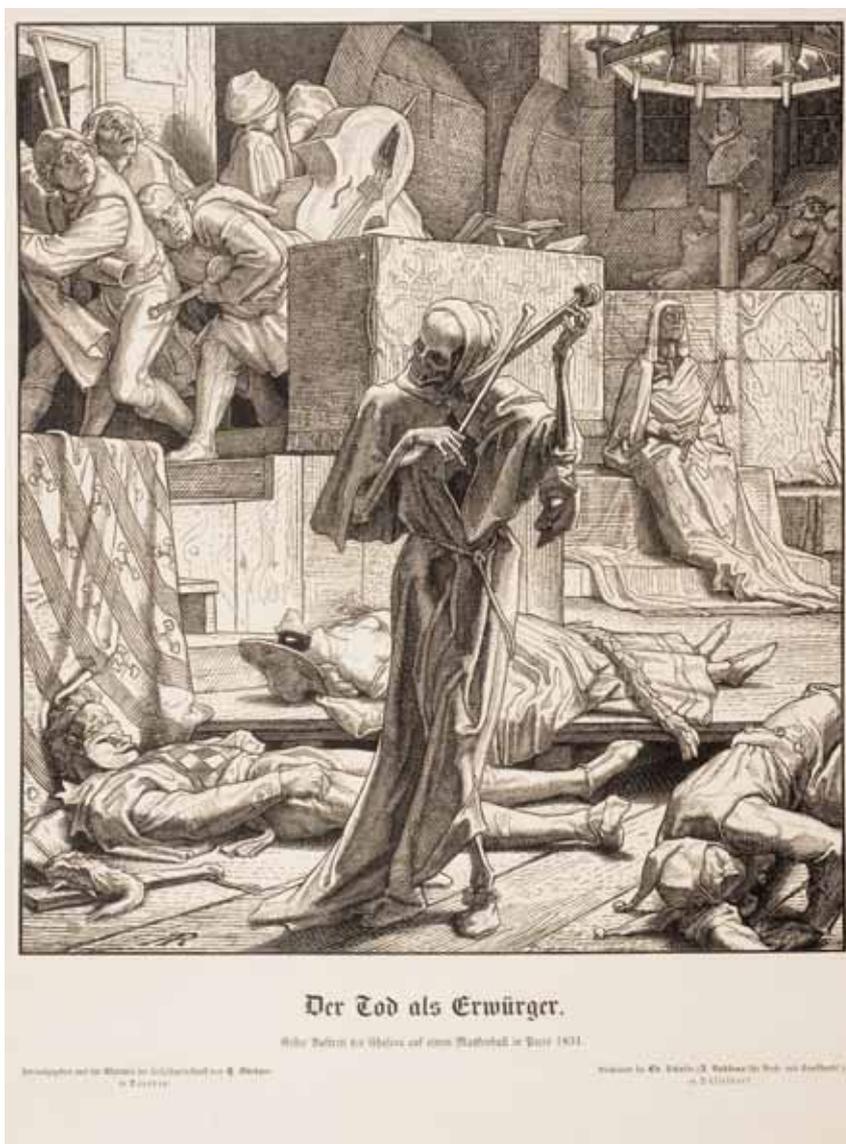
His mission complete, Death in plate 6 (right) has removed his costume and the attributes provided by the harpies; only the horse of Madness remains. Wearing a wreath of victory, he rides over the remains of the barricade strewn with the dead. A dying man on the right wears an expression of abject horror as the illusion is revealed. A mother and child on the left, weeping for a dead

husband and father, are inadvertently spared because they have their eyes covered, thus escaping Death's supernatural powers. The town is now in ruin, the sword of Justice is discarded on the barricade, and the horse of Madness has its tongue dangling, either from exhaustion or to lap up the blood of a corpse. This final plate is the most famous from the series, one scholar describing its emanating horror and rhetoric as unique in European art.<sup>17</sup>

The Rethel death dance set completes the Baillieu Library's holdings of this artist's most renowned prints. The other pair of Rethel prints was purchased in 1984 and contains what I consider one of the most arresting prints in the Library's collection for its chilling and bizarre qualities. *Der Tod als Erwürger* (Death the strangler) of 1851 (see page 36) depicts a masquerade party. The dance floor is littered with dead partygoers



Alfred Rethel, *Der Tod als Erwürger*  
 (Death the strangler), 1851, woodcut, block:  
 31.0 x 27.6 cm. Reg. no. 1984.2012, purchased  
 1984, Baillieu Library Print Collection,  
 University of Melbourne.



bedecked in outlandish costumes, while a terrified orchestra forms a stampede trying to escape from the room. For at the centre of the scene looms the utterly appalling figure of Death. With a mask dangling from his arm he plays a violin made from human bones. Another gruesome figure, in the garb of an Egyptian mummy, is Cholera, sitting zombie-like in the background.<sup>18</sup>

The inscription beneath the image describes the action: *Der Tod als Erwürger. Erster Auftritt der Cholera auf einem Maskenball in Paris 1831* (Death the strangler: The first outbreak of cholera at a masked ball in Paris 1831). Although some epidemics could cause death within hours, cholera does not cause instantaneous death as the picture suggests. Rather, Cholera in the image serves as one of Death's supernatural props; this interpretation is supported by the fancy-dress costume and inanimate nature of this eerie being. Death, dressed as himself at the masquerade, has performed his greatest act; his very appearance has caused spontaneous death—a supernatural feat. The image is creepy for its wanton destruction of a fanciful event and the macabre twist of Death's hypnotic melody being played on human bones. This almighty power of Death has been

Max Klinger, *Chaussée* (The road), (c. 1882–85, printed 1899), Plate 4 from the print portfolio *Vom Tode, erster Teil, opus XI* (On death, part 1, opus XI), etching and aquatint, proof, plate: 27.5 x 17.9 cm. Reg. no. 1994.2612, purchased 1994, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

said to derive from the woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528),<sup>19</sup> whose work is well represented in the Baillieu Library Print Collection.

Although there had indeed been a cholera epidemic in Paris in 1831 (20 years before he created this work), Rethel may have conceived this image from an incident in his own life in which he was at a party and a guest collapsed and died of a heart attack.<sup>20</sup> Or, Rethel's work at this period could have been influenced by the novels of Eugène Sue. Although regarded by some as 'sensationalist trash', *Les mystères de Paris* (The mysteries of Paris), published in serial form in 1842–43, is nevertheless recognised as playing a role in motivating France's 1848 revolution.<sup>21</sup> The novel also contains powerful characters such as a criminal named the Skeleton, who would have appealed to Rethel's imagination. One relevant incident has the Skeleton leading a mob, disguised in masquerade costumes, to a public execution.<sup>22</sup> Sue's subsequent novel published in 1844, *Le Juif errant* (The wandering Jew), is set in 1831 and Sue's immortal character is known as a representation of cholera as he brings the epidemic everywhere he travels.

This idea of spontaneous death appears to have gripped the imagination of a number of German



artists. An etching by Max Klinger (1857–1920) purchased in 1994 demonstrates one artist's preoccupation with the supernatural powers of the figure of Death. *Chaussée* (The road) depicts what is at first glance an enchanting landscape (above). But as the viewer is drawn into the image by a receding avenue of trees, a person can be seen lying dead on the path. The forcefully split sapling shows the evidence of how this worker, while innocently carrying goods in a basket, was killed by a lightning strike.<sup>23</sup> The figure of Death is this time seen entwined in the border of the print with his scythe, a

device which has come to represent the Grim Reaper and his evil harvest. On a seemingly clear day, this individual has been unexpectedly taken by a freak, almost biblical event. The figure of Death has again performed the apparently magical phenomenon of a spontaneous death. Klinger's death series, of which this is plate 4, is concerned with this morbid and fascinating idea and other works show persons who have died abruptly during a mundane moment or task of the day.

A recent acquisition is a drawing by Ruby Lindsay (1887–1919) which depicts the figure of Death seated in a cemetery, contemplating a headstone (illustrated on page 38). There are no names on the monument, only ambiguous inscriptions to 'my loving husband' and a 'devoted wife'. Ruby Lindsay was one of ten siblings from the prominent Australian family of artists which included Lionel and Norman. Ruby adopted the professional name of 'Lind' in order to separate herself from the artistic dominance of her famed older brothers. Here we can see how she is positioned in an international context. At the age of just 32, Ruby succumbed to the 1919 Spanish influenza pandemic—one of the world's most devastating events—



Ruby Lind, *Death*, 1907, pen and ink over pencil, 23.2 x 32.6 cm. Reg. no. 2010.0008, purchased 2010, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

and died suddenly on the night she was to attend a ball.<sup>24</sup> *Death* (1907) is an extremely rare example of a woman's interpretation of a traditionally masculine subject. The image is disturbing in view of her unexpected death; to us today it stands as a representation of the artist's own grave. 'Death is but Death;/ Nor can I find/ Him pale and kind/ Who set that endless silence on her/ Death is but Death!' wrote Ruby's bereaved husband, the Australian artist Will Dyson (1880–1938) in his tribute, *Poems: In memory of a wife* (1919).

The acquisition of the haunting Ruby Lindsay drawing is part of the Library's strategy of collecting the works of later generations of outstanding artists alongside those of the old master printmakers, such as Holbein and Dürer, in order to demonstrate the latter's lasting impact. Along with the acquisition of the Rethel works and the Klinger print, these images show us how the old masters' depictions of death would seize the imaginations of later artists and help them express their personal reactions to deadly contemporary events. These works also demonstrate the importance of new acquisitions in keeping the Baillieu Library Print Collection thriving and relevant.

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- 2 Marcia Collins, *The dance of death in book illustrations*, Columbia: Ellis Library, University of Missouri, 1978, p. 15.
- 3 *The dance of death by Hans Holbein. Enlarged facsimiles in platinotype by Frederick H. Evans of fifty wood engravings from Douce (1833), Lippman (1866) and a Basel edition (1796)*, privately printed in 15 copies only, 1913, no. 2 of four copies in large-paper format. Gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 4 *The dance of death*, by Hans Holbein the Younger, p. x.
- 5 Merete Smith, 'Dry light is best', *University of Melbourne Library Journal*, vol. 7, December 2001, pp. 11–13; Kathleen Kiernan, 'Lonely traveller in a transient world: The landscape prints of Jan van de Velde II donated to the Baillieu Library by Dr J. Orde Poynton', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 2, July 2008, pp. 14–20.
- 6 Website of Melbourne prints: *Renaissance and early modern print culture*, School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne, 2010, <http://melbourneprints.wordpress.com/> accessed April 2011.
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- 8 Albert Boime, 'Alfred Rethel's counterrevolutionary death dance', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 63, no. 4, 1991, p. 578.
- 9 Albert Boime, *Art in an age of civil struggle 1848–1871*, University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 515.
- 10 Peter Paret, *Art as history: Episodes in the culture and politics of nineteenth-century Germany*, Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 113.
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- 12 Christine Hartel, 'Dis/continuities in Dresden's dances of death', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2000, pp. 93–4.
- 13 Paret, 'The German revolution', p. 235.
- 14 Boime, 'Alfred Rethel's counterrevolutionary death dance', p. 581.
- 15 Paret, 'The German revolution', p. 238.
- 16 Boime, 'Alfred Rethel's counterrevolutionary death dance', p. 581.
- 17 Paret, 'The German revolution', p. 238.
- 18 Paret, 'The German revolution', p. 244.
- 19 Giulia Bartrum, *Albrecht Dürer and his legacy*, Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 307.
- 20 Paret, 'The German revolution', p. 244.
- 21 Edward R. Tannenbaum, 'The beginnings of bleeding-heart liberalism: Eugène Sue's *Les mystères de Paris*', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 23, no. 3, July 1981, p. 492.
- 22 Eugène Sue, *Les mystères de Paris*, in *The works of Eugène Sue: Illustrated with original etchings*, London: F.A. Niccolls, [1912], vol. 6, pp. 201–13.
- 23 Memory Jockisch Holloway and Irena Zdanowicz, *Max Klinger: Love, death and the beyond*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1981, p. 40.
- 24 Robert C. Littlewood, *Ruby Lindsay: 1887–1919*, Melbourne: Douglas Stewart Fine Books, 2010; Ruby Lind, *The drawings of Ruby Lind (Mrs Will Dyson)*, London: Cecil Palmer, 1920, p. 10.