Bruegel's The Triumph of Death *Reconsidered**

by PETER THON

'In all his works more is always implied than is depicted.'
—Abraham Ortelius, 'Epitaph' for Pieter Bruegel[1]

IF, in a sense, all artists comment on their times, only a few do so deliberately. Pieter Bruegel the Elder is the first great example of the latter type, the artist as social observer and critic. His detailed scenes of everyday life, his illustrations of proverbs and moral lessons in contemporary settings are all well known. Recently, however, art historians have become increasingly aware of less obvious social and political overtones in Bruegel's work.[2] Paintings from the last ten years of his life, ranging from the tiny *Chained Monkeys* to vast scenes like *The Suicide of Saul*, *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, and *The Massacre of the Innocents*, have all been interpreted as veiled but pointed commentaries on conditions and events in the Netherlands during the mid-sixteenth century. The facts of history, it appears, may be highly pertinent to Bruegel's art.

It therefore seems curious that so little attention has been paid in this regard to one of Bruegel's greatest paintings, *The Triumph of Death*. The morbidity of the subject, the emotionality and acute, nightmare-like realism of Bruegel's scene all suggest some profound personal experience of the artist's, and one very possibly connected with the violent history of the Netherlands in the 1560's.

One issue to dispose of at the outset: the question of dates. *The Triumph of Death* is one of those problematic unsigned, undated works in the Bruegel corpus. Its creator's identity is beyond dispute, but the unknown circumstances of its origin have given scholars a free rein in trying to date it on stylistic evidence. The interpretive implications of this question are of course considerable: if either Stechow's estimate

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[1] Cited in W. Stechow, *Northern Renaissance Art 1400–1600. Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966), p. 37.

[2] See, for example, R. Delevoy, *Bruegel*, tr. S. Gilbert (Lausanne, 1959), pp. 69 ff.; I. Zupnick, 'Bruegel and the Revolt of the Netherlands,' *The Art Journal*, XXIII No. 4 (Summer 1964), 283–289; and S. Ferber, 'Peter Bruegel and the Duke of Alba,' *Renaissance News* XIX No. 3 (Autumn 1966), 205–219.

(1560) or De Tolnay's (1561–62)[3] is accurate, *The Triumph of Death* clearly cannot be considered in relation to the crucial period of Netherlandish history following the outbreak of the revolt against the Spanish Hapsburgs in 1566. The grounds for this early dating, however, are by no means conclusive, and other scholars place the work considerably later in the decade.[4] Indeed, a later date seems the more likely in view of the unconvincing stylistic arguments presented by De Tolnay; far more persuasive is Robert Delevoy's case linking *The Triumph of Death* with works done in the late 1560's.[5] The stylistic arguments thus at least cancel each other, and the dating problem remains to be resolved—if at all—on other grounds.

Bruegel's subject is certainly not distinctive. The theme of the Triumph of Death appears in many forms in medieval and Renaissance art. *The Triumph of Death*, however, expands the conventional message of human mortality into a scene of universal scope and overwhelming power. In the immediate foreground skeletons seize, mock, or attack both secular and religious personages of all social stations: emperor, cardinal, peasant woman, pilgrim, fool, nobleman, and two courtly lovers are all equal before death. Behind them a skinny nag draws a death cart towards the battle waged between death's legions and the living who, black and white man alike, are symbolically caught in nets —the toils of death—or driven into a great trap-like vault by the grim reaper while his minions assist in the carnage or wait in endless numbers behind sarcophagus covers. Dominating the center of the picture is a hellish bastion about which loathsome monsters crawl and fly. In the middle and far distance trumpet, bell, and drum sound the tocsin of doom as men perish by accident, execution, shipwreck, or in the struggle of the crowd trapped by the skeleton armies. Fires from burning buildings and executions illuminate the horizon. The whole scene seems almost a vision of hell and its forces loosed on earth.

[3] W. Stechow, *Bruegel* (London, 1954), p. 3; C. de Tolnay, *Pierre Bruegel L'Ancien* (Brussels, 1935), pp. 78–79. F. Grossmann, *Bruegel. The Paintings* (London, rev. ed. 1966), p. 191, suggests a date around 1562 without, however, giving any reasons.

[4] Estimates range down to E. Michel's of 1566–69. *Bruegel* (Paris, 1931), p. 59.

[5] De Tolnay's attempt (p. 31) to relate *The Triumph of Death* to *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562) on the basis of similar color schemes is tenuous at best; and his argument for the spatial and compositional affinities of these works (apparently accepted by Zupnick, pp. 286, 289 n.12) ignores the sharp difference between the crowded Boschian disarray of the 1562 work and the spatial and organizational clarity in *The Triumph of Death*. Delevoy (p. 89) thinks this mastery of large-scale pictorial space is the keynote identifying the latter painting with such works as *The Conversion of Saint Paul* (1567).

This extraordinary picture nevertheless has certain traditional affinities. The major one is of course to the theme of the Triumph of Death itself. Details throughout the picture repeat the warnings of medieval Christianity: death is an ever-present threat in this world, even where least expected (witness the music-making lovers) and ultimately seizes all men and women, high and low, rich and poor alike; to trust in material things (the emperor's gold, the pilgrim's relics and charms) or to struggle against this universal fate (as the courtiers do) is foolish and futile. A similar attitude is expressed in a popular proverb Bruegel may have had in mind, *Theghens de doot en is gheen verweeren*, *i.e.*, 'Weapons count for nought when death assails.'[6] Such associations were the ones naturally brought to *The Triumph of Death* by Bruegel's contemporaries.[7]

Bruegel's representation of the Triumph of Death may also owe something to earlier art. According to De Tolnay, *The Triumph of Death* is based on a fusion of two iconographic traditions: the Italian Triumph of Death and the Northern Dance of Death.[8] The former type is exemplified in the great fourteenth-century frescoes by Traini and Orcagna and the fifteenth-century Palermo Triumph of Death.[9] If Bruegel's version of this theme is similar in overall conception and emotional tenor to these works (the latter in particular), the details of *The Triumph of Death* are clearly related to the Northern tradition. Major antecedents of Bruegel's Dance of Death figures in the foreground are Marchant's *Danse Macabre* of 1485, the Basel Dances of Death, and the famous series done by Holbein around 1525 and published as 'images and storied aspects of Death.'[10]

Bruegel may have seen or heard about the Italian frescoes during his sojourn in Italy (1552–53), and he was certainly familiar with the Dance of Death in Holbein's popular version. Despite obvious resemblances, however, *The Triumph of Death* is radically different from all previous versions of its subject. Bruegel's picture seems almost an apocalyptic vision encompassing all the living and dead in a panorama of convulsive

[6] Cited in Delevoy, p. 93.

[7] Carel van Mander, the sixteenth-century critic and biographer, notes it simply as 'a picture . . . in which expedients of every kind are tried out against death' (Stechow, *Northern Renaissance Art*, p. 40).

[8] De Tolnay, p. 31.

[9] See M. Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* (paperback ed., New York, 1964), pp. 74 ff. and L. de Libero, *Il Trionfo della Morte* (Palermo, n.d.).

[10] See J. M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Glasgow, 1950), pp. 24 f., 60 ff. and *Holbein's Dance of Death* (London, 1947).

struggle. His interpretation of the Triumph of Death emphasizes, to a unique degree, the conflict between man and the forces of death—a conflict so violent it even threatens to obscure the conventional Christian message of this theme.

What are the innovations in Bruegel's treatment? Most obviously, the whole visual conception and setting distinguish it: even the Italian frescoes cannot match the scope, variety, and detail of Bruegel's scene. Most of the details reveal an even more significant deviation from conventional representations of Death. The most striking and peculiar feature of *The Triumph of Death* is the actual assault on the living by the skeleton forces. Their violent and armed attack has little precedent in the traditional iconography of either the Triumph or Dance of Death.[11] Least of all is there anything comparable in previous works to the shocking and unrelieved savagery of this attack throughout the picture. Bruegel transforms even his Dance of Death motifs into images of grisly terror—Death does not pluck the Pilgrim's sleeve or whisper a summons but slits his throat.

This capacity for refashioning traditional themes and materials is of course a hallmark of the creative artist. The vitality brought to the Dance of Death motifs by Bruegel's variety of poses, expressions, and telling details all testify to his sharp eye and fertile imagination. Yet the difference between *The Triumph of Death* and more traditional treatments is not just due to talent or inventiveness. (Holbein, after all, is a part of the tradition.) It lies rather in Bruegel's whole representation of the Triumph of Death as almost a war of extermination waged by the dead against the living. Now this warfare imagery may be taken simply as a vivid symbolization of death's omnipotence and man's folly in struggling against the inevitable. Such an interpretation is in line with the clear traditional religious significance of Bruegel's scene and is certainly not incorrect. It seems inadequate, however, to account for the savagery and almost conscious malevolence of the skeleton forces in *The Triumph of Death*. Bruegel's subject is not so much death as *violent* death. This peculiar emphasis hints at some more clandestine meaning

[11] See, however, De Tolnay, p. 79 and ill. 153. Death is represented in the Italian frescoes as the Grim Horseman with a scythe who cuts down the living with his sword or arrows, but this is very symbolic violence in comparison to Bruegel's gruesome realism. Among the Dances of Death only Holbein's depicts armed and violent skeletons (and this only in the two natural cases of the Knight and Soldier), whereas Bruegel has generalized and intensified this conflict.

in *The Triumph of Death* beyond the obvious and traditional implications of the title.

What little we know of Bruegel's life offers few clues. His adult career seems to have been placid enough: returning to the Netherlands from his Italian trip late in 1553, he settled in Antwerp, where he became friendly with various intellectuals and remained for a decade until moving to Brussels, where he married and lived until his death in 1569.[12] One reason this existence seems uneventful, however, is its contrast with the extreme unrest of Bruegel's times. The historical key—if such there is—to the peculiar morbidity and violence of *The Triumph of Death* may well lie in the economic, religious, and political conditions which Bruegel observed in the Netherlands during the 1550's and '60's.

Most of the sixteenth century was a deeply unsettled period for Europe as a whole, and the mid-century decades were a time of special crisis for the Netherlands. The apocalyptic mood of *The Triumph of Death* may reflect the strains and upheavals of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and in particular the impression left by such millenarian groups as the fanatical Anabaptists who brought widespread agitation to the northern Netherlands in the mid-1530's while their brethren were slaughtering and being slaughtered across the German border.[13] Equally disturbing were the severe agrarian and economic difficulties experienced by the Netherlands in the 1550's and '60's. Bruegel, living in Antwerp, saw at close range the miseries caused when bad weather ruined two successive Brabant harvests and created a major subsistence crisis in 1556–57: despite emergency measures in the towns, food riots broke out repeatedly and the population was seriously reduced, especially in the country. A similar chain of events, though not so severe, broke out with the bad harvest of 1565–66.[14] Such famine experiences may well have kept the idea of death and man's precarious existence in Bruegel's mind.

The major calamities in the sixteenth-century Netherlands, however, were caused not by climatic but religious and political conditions. Hapsburg attempts to extirpate Protestant heresy in the Netherlands reached a climax in the 'edict of blood' of 1550, which sent a mounting number

[12] Delevoy, pp. 19 ff.

[13] P. Geyl, *The Revolt of the Netherlands 1555–1609* (London, 1932, 1958), p. 57.

[14] These agrarian and demographic events were paralleled by serious commercial and financial recessions. H. van der Wee, *The Growth of the Antwerp Market and the European Economy* (The Hague, 1963), II, 213 ff., 229 ff.

of religious martyrs to the stake. This repression was dwarfed, however, by events following the Calvinist iconoclasm and the armed rebellion against Philip II's rule which broke out in 1566. The next year the Spanish Duke of Alva arrived in Brussels with his troops and the Inquisition: several of the great nobles leading the opposition were arrested and ultimately executed; a special court, nicknamed the 'Blood Council,' was created; and a massive reign of terror, fueled by the Inquisition's large-scale arrests, torture, and collective executions, operated from late in 1567 throughout the following year to punish all rebels, intimidate the populace, and extract money for the Hapsburg treasury through punitive taxes. The isolated though often fierce resistance to the new regime was crushed.[15]

It seems certain that the repressions of Hapsburg rule, culminating in Alva's reign of terror after 1566, had a profound psychological effect on Bruegel. The artist who so devotedly scrutinized his fellow Netherlanders in the *naer het leven* sketches or celebrated their ordinary existence in works like *The Corn Harvest* and *The Wedding Dance* could not have been unaffected by such conditions. Bruegel's concern is also suggested by the character of his closest friends, who included such scholars and humanists as Hans Franckert, Christophe Plantin, and Abraham Ortelius. These men, members of various clandestine organizations, are known to have been anti-Spanish and sympathetic to the Reformation, and Bruegel most probably shared their views.[16]

Bruegel's deep distress over the bloodshed and violence of events in the late 1560's may thus account for his preoccupation with the traditional theme of the Triumph of Death. The unusual violence and pessimism of his conception very likely reflect Bruegel's acute reaction to the Spanish terror—indeed, the realism of many details in *The Triumph of Death* suggests he may have witnessed similar incidents. Certainly the entire picture contains an emotional intensity unique in Bruegel's work and one most probably linked to the society-wide crisis which erupted towards the end of his life.

These considerations would indicate that *The Triumph of Death* was probably painted in the late 1560's, perhaps around 1568, as Delevoy suggests. Such a date also fits the chronology of Bruegel's fluctuating artistic interests, which shifted from the landscapes and other neutral subjects of 1564–65 to more socially and politically influenced works in

[15] Geyl, pp. 56–57, 79 ff., 99 ff.

[16] Delevoy, pp. 23–24; Ferber, pp. 216 f. Bruegel—need it be said again?—was hardly just the talented rustic 'Pieter the Droll' portrayed by van Mander.

the following years.[17] Certain of these latter works (notably *The Conversion of Saint Paul* and *The Massacre of the Innocents*) in fact make oblique references to Alva's regime. A close examination of *The Triumph of Death* suggests a similar, though even more disguised, intent.

Viewed in relation to the historical events of 1567–68, *The Triumph of Death* reveals a covert social and political dimension beneath its ostensible subject. Bruegel's refashioning of the Triumph of Death represents not just an emotional reaction to but a calculated—and very dangerous—comment on Alva's rule in the Netherlands. The Dance of Death figures in the foreground and the grim reaper on his pale horse in the middle of the picture establish the traditional connotations for the scene; but the bulk of details in the distance discloses Bruegel's undisguised vision of his land under Spanish tyranny, where men are hunted down like animals for their beliefs, hung, hoisted on the wheel, burned together at the stake, or decapitated singly, blindfolded and clutching the crucifix. The active participation of the skeletons in these bloody actions, and their massive attack on the helpless living throughout the picture reveal their true significance: the skeleton armies of death represent the Spanish soldiers and executioners. Their regime in the Netherlands *is* the Triumph of Death.[18]

A number of details support and elaborate this meaning. In the foreground, for instance, a skeleton—the only one wearing soldier's armor in the picture—seizes some barrels of gold; this seems a veiled reference to the reputed mercenary and plundering character of Spanish troops and, perhaps more generally, to Alva's emphasis on a policy of terror as a means of financial extortion.[19] Especially significant is the large num-

[17] Zupnick, p. 288.

[18] In this connection it is interesting to note the striking similarity between the skeletons in *The Triumph of Death* and the following contemporary description of Spanish soldiers in the Netherlands, which in fact seems almost to conceive of them as impersonal agents of death: 'They neither spared age, nor sex: time nor place: person nor country: professions nor religion: young nor old: rich nor poor: strong nor feeble: but without any mercy did tyrannously triumph, when there was neither man nor mean to resist them. They slew great numbers of young children. The rich was spoil because he had, and the poor were hanged because they had nothing: neither strength could prevail to make resistance, nor weakness more pity to refrain their horrible cruelty.' G. Gascoigne, *The Spoyle of Antwerp*, in *Complete Works*, ed. Cunliffe, II, 590 f., quoted in C. R. N. Routh, *They Saw It Happen In Europe 1450–1600* (Oxford, 1965), p. 370.

[19] 'The towns must be punished for their rebelliousness,' recommended Alva, 'with the loss of their privileges; a goodly sum must be squeezed out of private persons; a permanent tax obtained from the States of the country. . . . Everyone must be made to live in constant fear of the roof breaking down over his head.' Cited in Geyl, p. 102.

ber of crosses in *The Triumph of Death*. Their meaning is not readily apparent, particularly since they are all ordinary types with no distinguishing features. The one exception to this is a highly ornate cross standing on the far hill beneath the funeral procession. Was this the sort of cross favored by the Catholic Spaniards and broken by the Calvinist iconoclasts—the very symbol which precipitated the struggle in the Netherlands? Its oddly isolated position and careful detail, giving this cross a prominence despite its semi-concealment in the distance, suggest such a special meaning.[20]

What is typical nevertheless about this cross is its placement near an open grave and a corpse. This seemingly natural juxtaposition of the cross and the dead is repeated throughout *The Triumph of Death*. The crosses take on ironic and sinister overtones, however, where the dead meet their end violently, as in the scene around the bridge at the extreme left. Here men are stabbed, drowned, and tortured to death just underneath crosses (carefully placed over these events even where Bruegel could not avoid a certain artificiality, as on the little building's roof). Interestingly enough, two of these details depict torture on the rack and by weights—the latter in an assembly which, with its cross, resembles nothing so much as a ghostly procession of priests. Crosses are even more prominently displayed in the attack of the skeletons in the foreground. The door of the great deathtrap is marked by a cross. The similar crosses on the sarcophagus covers seem to transform them into bizarre crusaders' shields. But the crusade in *The Triumph of Death* is one of terror operating behind a perverted symbol: everywhere murder, torture, and brutalities are committed and justified under the cross of true religion.[21] This, represented in details throughout the picture, is Bruegel's bitter indictment of the Spanish Inquisition in the Netherlands.

[20] It would not be unlike Bruegel to include such a revealing clue in the background, just as he hid Alva among his horsemen in *The Massacre of the Innocents*. See Ferber.

[21] It seems significant, in the light of S. Ferber's recent proof of Alva's presence in *The Massacre of the Innocents*, that the emblem on the standard over Alva is a cross quite similar to the type on the deathtrap in *The Triumph of Death*. Ferber (p. 208) considers the emblem too undetailed to allow 'positive identification,' yet the emblem in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum version is clear enough to associate it—if not with a historical cross—at least with *The Triumph of Death*'s cross. Any historical or iconographic information would of course be very helpful, but it seems unlikely that Bruegel would include any obvious or distinctive symbol related to the Spanish. This does not preclude, however, his using a seemingly innocuous cross as a secret identifying emblem within his works.

The Triumph of Death thus contains a concealed meaning distinct from and yet related to its apparent subject. That Bruegel is using the traditional theme and motifs of the Triumph of Death as a vehicle for surreptitious political criticism should not be surprising. Other paintings of his show a similar technique, and Ortelius's remark that his work always implies more than it depicts suggests this allusiveness may be typical of Bruegel's approach to art, particularly when dealing with dangerous ideas.[22] It is a tribute to his skill that such ideas in *The Triumph of Death* have largely gone unrecognized. All the suggestive details (atrocities, crosses, the skeleton-soldier and his gold) are either hidden in the background or subtly integrated within the 'traditional' framework, thereby contributing simultaneously to *The Triumph of Death*'s significance as both traditional religious expression and a deeply felt comment on contemporary events.

This latter meaning cannot of course be proven conclusively. What the interpretation given above does do, however, is account for certain distinctive and otherwise puzzling features of *The Triumph of Death* in terms of what is known or surmised about Bruegel's historical circumstances and personal beliefs. Hopefully it may serve to emphasize again the relevance of a historical approach towards an understanding of Bruegel's art.

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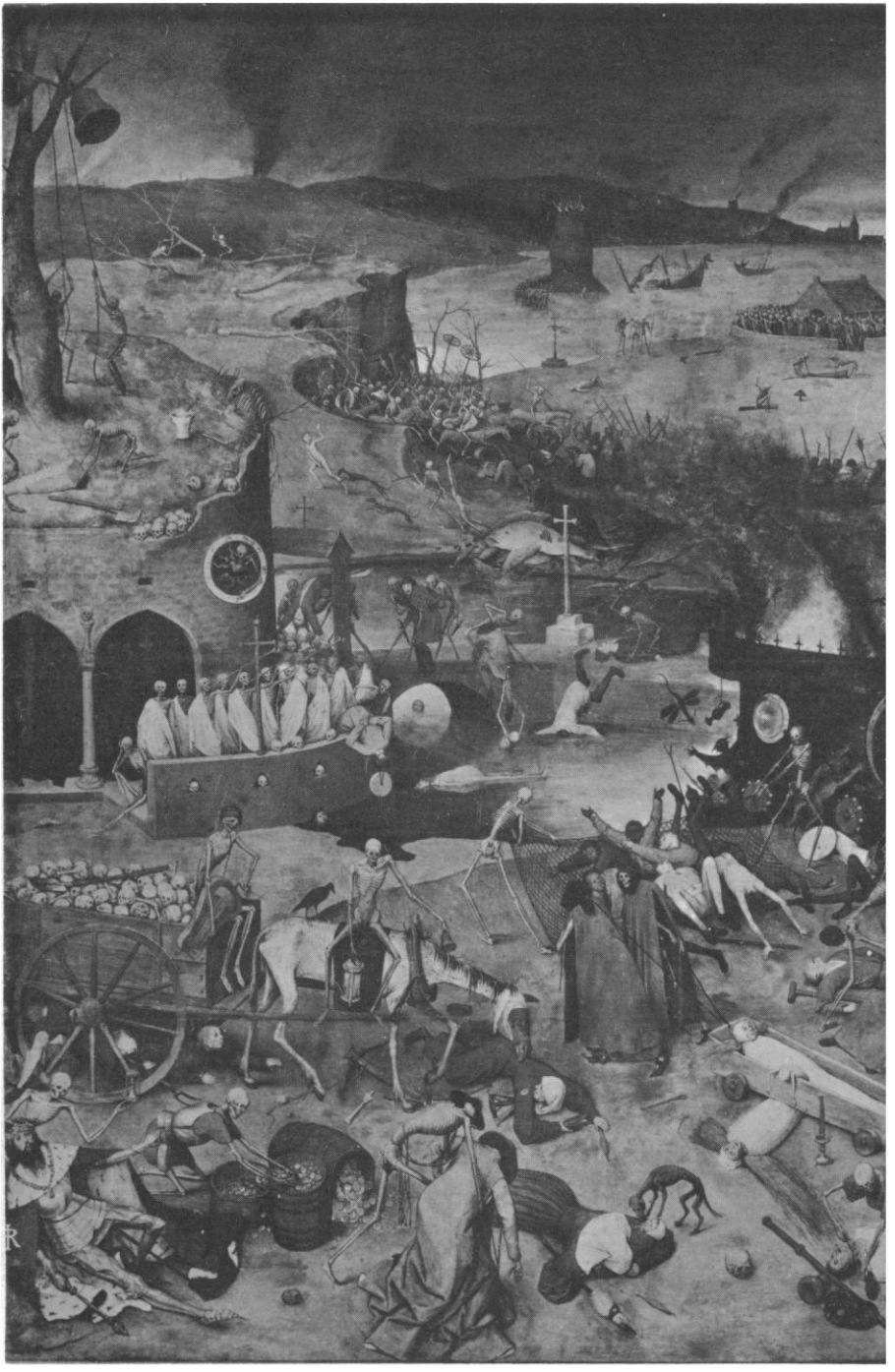
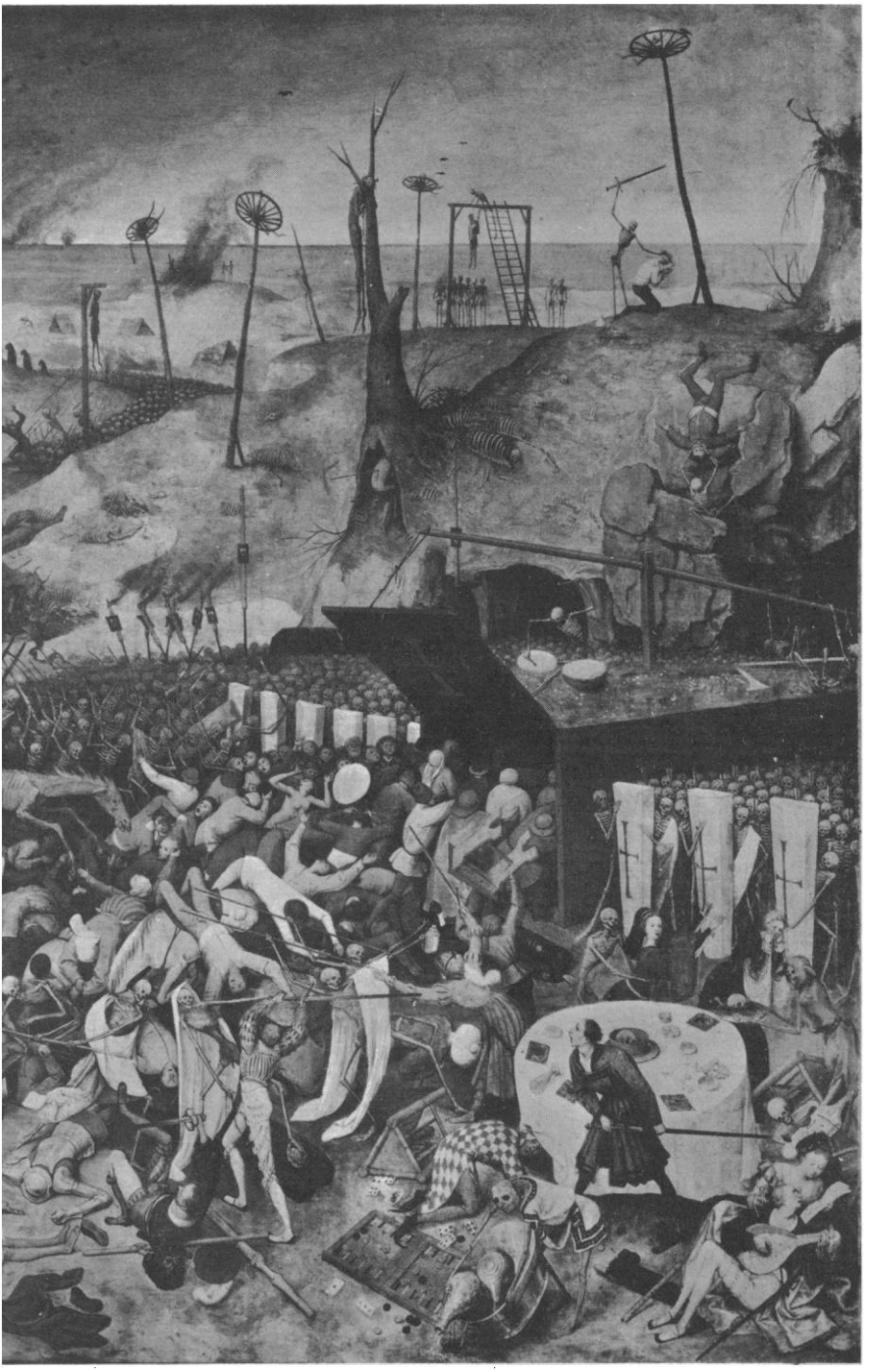
[22] Van Mander records that, where his meanings became too explicit, Bruegel had the potentially offensive works destroyed (Stechow, *Northern Renaissance Art*, p. 40).





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