

## The Chur Images of Death

The cycle of death images from 1543 consists of 25 painted picture fields on a half-timbered wall with three registers. The depictions show encounters of people with death. They are executed as grisailles, i.e. the painter used mainly grey, black and white tones. In the base zone there are animals behind barred arches.

The Chur images of death are in the tradition of medieval death dances. They go back to the woodcut series with the Images of Death by Hans Holbein the Younger and are the first large-format copies of those small prints from the time before 1526. A single depiction without Holbein reference reproduces the

copper engraving Knight, Death and Devil from 1513 by Albrecht Dürer.

The painted half-timbered wall was originally located in the 1st floor. The first floor of the Episcopal Palace and separated a narrow corridor from a hall. The year 1543 indicates Bishop Luzius Iter as the patron. Since the half-timbered wall had to be removed for reconstruction, the cabinetmaker Benedikt Hartmann sawed it apart in 1882 and transferred the individual picture fields to the Raetian Museum. They remained there for almost a hundred years. The images of death were restored in 1943 and placed under federal protection.

After a second restoration, which lasted from 1976 to 1981, the images were transported to a cultural her-

itage protection area. They are now open to the public again for the first time after the latest restoration.

The Chur images of death are an independent work of high artistic quality. Apart from the two depictions of death from around 1520 to 1530 in the charnel house in Leuk, this is the oldest surviving cycle in the tradition of death dances in Switzerland. It is completely preserved with the exception of the scene of the abbess. The motifs have neither been painted over nor whitewashed.

Mass: Length 15 metres, height: 3.40 metres



### UPPER REGISTER

- 1 Creation and the Fall
- 2 Expulsion from paradise, work of the first parents and ossuary
- 3 Pope and Emperor
- 4 Empress and Queen
- 5 Bishop and Elector [Kurfürst]
- 6 King
- 7 Earl and Canon
- 8 Judge and Advocate

### MIDDLE REGISTER

- 9 Lawyer and Preacher
- 10 Priest and Mendicant Friar
- 11 Virgin and Old Lady
- 12 Miser, Merchant and Sailor
- 13 Chivalry and knights, death and devil
- 14 Bride, old man and married couple
- 15 Duchess and grocer
- 16 Farmer and child
- 17 Abbot

### LOWER REGISTER

- 18 1. Base field: Inscription from 1943
- 19 2. Base field: Unidentifiable pale animal
- 20 3. Base field: Unidentifiable pale animal
- 21 4. Base field: Unidentifiable pale animal
- 22 5. Base field: Back part of a lion
- 23 6. Base field: Front part of a lion and hellhound
- 24 7. Base field: Reconstructed rear part of a dragon
- 25 8. Base field: Front part of a kite

Images of death, 1543. Chur Cathedral Treasure Museum.  
Title: Scene of the Bishop (detail).  
Photos Ralph Feiner.



The Pope.



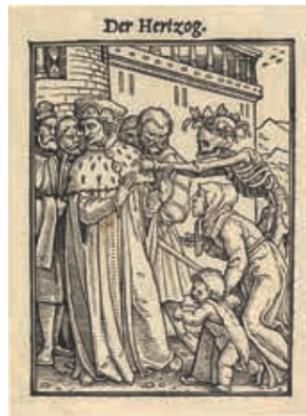
The Emperor.



Pope and Emperor.



The Bishop.



The Elector.



Bishop and Elector [Kurfürst].



The Earl.



The Canon.



Earl and Canon.

## GLOSSARY

TRUSS WALL. Bolt wall.

GRISAILLEN. Work of art whose colouration is mainly limited to grey, black and white tones.

REGISTRY. Series of pictures.

REPRESENTATIVE OF THE ESTATES. The term 'representative of the estates' refers to the medieval estates (clergy, nobility and farmers), but also includes age and professions.

DANCES OF DEATH. Since the Middle Ages, dances of death in poetry, art and music have illustrated the power of death over human life. In the picture cycles death, shown as a skeleton, dances with people of all ranks. He admonishes them in view of the Last Judgement to lead a life pleasing in the sight of God. Painted dances of the dead have spread throughout Europe since the 15th century. Famous works were also found in Switzerland, for example in Basel and Bern.

IMAGES OF DEATH. Encounters of people with death, whereby the dance motif is missing.

# Todesbilder Immagini di morte Maletgs da la mort Peintures de la mort Images of death

Woodcut series with the Images of Death by Hans Holbein the Younger.  
Kunstmuseum Basel, Museum of Prints and Drawings, inventory no. X.2186.6,  
X.2186.7, X.2186.12, X.2186.13, X.2186.16 und X.2186.17.  
Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin P. Bühler.

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