Playful Skeletons: The Use of Skeletal Imagery as Seen in Michele Melcher's and other Contemporary Artists' Work

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Abstract

In the artistic lexicon, skeleton imagery is symbolic of death and dying. Moreover, this representation is a phenomenon observed in cultures far and wide. Yet here in the United States, taboo, anxiety and dread accompany dialogues surrounding death and dying, influencing the meaning of artworks with skeletal imagery. Analysis of contemporary artists such as Michele Melcher and Bradley Theodore reveal how current day artists are referencing the historical precedents of playful and upbeat skeletal imagery. This paper examines how these contemporary artists adhere to and depart from these precedents in their artwork, especially the medieval allegory of the *danse macabre*. This allegorical tradition depicted animated skeletons as positive representations of death as a natural consequence and ending point in life. The work of Melcher and other artists examined in this paper exemplify a shift in perceptions of skeletons as sinister symbols of death to those that act as playful surrogates for types of people and gentle reminders of our collective mortality.

1. Introduction

In the artistic visual lexicon, skeleton imagery is symbolic of death and dying. This emblematic use of the skeleton is a widespread phenomenon observed in cultures far and wide. Specifically, in the United States taboo, anxiety, and dread accompany dialogues surrounding death and the dying, influencing the artworks featuring skeletal imagery. Analysis of contemporary American artists such as Michele Melcher and Bradley Theodore, however, reveal how they are referencing historical precedents of playful and positive skeletal imagery. This paper examines how these contemporary artists adhere to and depart from these precedents in their artwork, especially the medieval allegorical use of the *danse macabre*. Consequently, this inquiry also considers historical artists Janez Iz Kastva and Paolo Vincenzo Bonomini who created works that use the skeleton in its symbolic form to influence visual affirmations of the acceptance of death as a natural phenomenon of life. The work of the artists examined exemplify how skeletons have come to be a symbol for more than just the act of dying, but also as a gentle and playful reminder of our collective mortality.

Skeleton symbolism is not limited to just death, but that is the most prevalent connection between the skeleton and its meaning. Being what remains after a living creature has died, skeletons have mostly been tied to death and negative connotations. Humans for most of history have not been capable of living for their entire possible life span due to illness, war, famine and lack of technology or community-based safety nets. Skeletons rightfully embodied the fear and discontent associated with the untimely nature of death and unless reinterpreted by religious or cultural practices, death was seen mostly as a consequence for existing. Reinterpretation of the skeleton and its meaning came about mostly due to society's shifting interactions with death and rituals surrounding burial and storage of bodies after a family member or important individuals died.[1] Later the skeleton would come to represent science and taboo due to the illegal nature of early exploration of the human body and the church deeming dissections as heretical. In addition, scientific inquiry concerning the body required fresh cadavers that often materialized as the result of grave robbing.

The history of the skeleton and its function as an object is as complex and advanced as the cultures that have developed to either accept and use skeletal imagery in everyday life and visuals, or those who shun and hide it away due to superstition and taboo. Just as cultures have advanced and changed, the interpretation and use of the skeleton as a symbol for death and the passing of individuals has also shifted over time and in artwork. In their depictions of skeletons, artists reflect their own culture's outlook on death as well as their personal struggle to accept and no longer fear death.

Medieval artists addressed death in their works often using the skeleton as a symbolic representation of death, this may be due impart to the illnesses, such as the plague, that were ravaging medieval Europe.[2] Artists used their artworks to grapple with their new reality and inability to evade death due to the lack of scientific and medical knowledge of how illnesses spread and effect the human body. This is exemplified in prayer books like that of *Bonne of Luxembourg, Duchess of Normandy*, were skeletons are used in the scenes standing in for death and notions of the afterlife like that seen on page 321v322r.[3] Depictions of deathbed scenes can be found in a multitude of prayer books from the time, the deathbed scene being of particular note due to the influence of fear around having last rights read in time before the individual passes so that their soul may make it to the afterlife with their sins absolved. This may have caused a great deal of anxiety for the early artists and monks creating these manuscripts.[4] This fear and anxiety surrounding the nature of these deaths tainted the skeleton as a symbol and cemented its negative connotation in relation to the plague and the untimely deaths.

Not all skeletons when used as a symbol for death are intended to inspire fear in the hearts of the viewer, there is historical evidence of this not being the case for skeletal imagery as far back as the medieval ages. Visual allegories such as the *danse macabre* illustrate the different approaches medieval artists took to representing ideas around death. This visual allegory was deeply religious and examples of works made to espouse this motif are found in a variety of churches throughout Europe. Starting originally as an actual physical performance by practitioners, the *danse macabre* became a visual allegory around the middle of the fourteenth century in frescos illustrating the dramatic and excited dances of the worshipers dressed up as death and skeletons.[5]

The performances that later became *danse macabre* featured death as a messenger of God summoning mortals to the afterlife as described in the Bible and by ancient poets. There was elements of dance and movement, with death and the other characters having distinct gaits to translate their disposition. Death's role and movement in these performances shifted with the changing evolution of dance and the music enjoyed by the lower classes. This all cumulated in the dance of death that was translated into a visual allegory that continues to influence representations of skeletons to symbolize death today.[6]

2. Skeletal Precedents

The fresco *Death accompanying a merchant and a wealthy banker, detail from the Dance of Death* painted in Trinity Church, Hrastovlje, Slovenia (Fig. 1) by artist Janez Iz Kastva[7] in 1490 exemplifies how late fifteenth-century Catholics saw death and accepted their own mortality. The title of this fresco is revealing, spelling out the intent of the church that commissioned it. The procession of skeletal figures standing in as the personification of death are accompanying a merchant, a wealthy banker and others from all walks of life to death in a dancing procession, with their toothy ivory grins alluding to the joy and peace of death greeting all humans equally.

Figure 1. *Death accompanying a merchant and a wealthy banker, detail from the Dance of Death*
Janez Iz Kastva, 1420, Trinity Church, Hrastovlje, Slovenia.
http://www.lyondemere.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/halloween_medieval_skeletons-2048x1554.jpg

This fresco features jewel tones, a jovial procession, material goods, and expensive fabrics adorning shriveled and wrinkly bodies in motion striding alongside skeletal figures who are arguably more animated than their counterparts. These dead guides walk hand in hand with the lavishly clad living humans, bones intertwined with twiggy fingers. Each are frail and thin with little definition in the rendering, leaving out the fatty portions of the digits after the knuckles, blending them in with the skeletal hands that hold them. The ribcage on these animated corpses is elongated with extra ribs floating, far more than the normal three that every human possesses. The spinal cord is shown behind the ribcages in a cavity more akin to the hole in an old oak tree than the actual body cavity of a cadaver. The cavity is shaded with a brownish red making these skeletons seem fresh from the grave, their blood having yet to fully dry. The pelvic bone also seems to be missing with the leg joints attached to thin triangular shapes of what could be bone, or potentially mummified skin. The skulls all seem to have perfectly circular eye sockets; a template may have been used to achieve this effect. Their circular shape does make the expressions on the skulls softer, as rounder shapes are interpreted by the human brain as cute and less aggressive.

The actions and visual depiction of skeletons in the *danse macabre* contrast in tone to a more conventional portrayal of a fearsome and monstrous skeleton in Austrian artist Ivo Saliger's color etching *The Doctor, The Girl and Death* (1920) (Fig. 2). He presents us with a dramatic struggle between a doctor and the grimy skeleton clawing away at a young naked woman who is draped nearly lifeless in the doctor's arms. The work references how doctors symbolically battle death for the sake of their patients; the woman serves as all patients and the doctor as the medical field. The skeleton represents uncompromising and sudden death. Here the skeleton is devoid of playfulness despite it being anatomically human. It is rendered in a dark brown with very deep fast lines in a sketchy style and seems almost in motion, more so than the doctor who is shown with directional line work and fluctuating line weight to create three dimensionality and drama in his pose. The skeleton is meant to strike fear; the audience is not meant to want the young woman to fall from the arms of the handsome doctor into the decrepit cold grip of the skeleton. Death is an unwanted and feared outcome, not a natural part of the life cycle as exemplified in the *danse macabre* allegory in Kastva's fresco.

Figure 2. *The Doctor, The Girl and Death*
Ivo Saliger 1920, Print.
https://media.mutualart.com/Images/2020_02/11/17/171919071/62bdb054-2ea2-47f6-908f-41c53df1409f_570.Jpeg

A different approach to the representation of animated skeletons can be found in the eighteenth-century paintings of Paolo Vincenzo Bonomini. He depicts skeletons as a symbol for both death and the person who has died, with a less stylized and more naturalistic rendering, allowing more detail paid to the rendering of the bones adorned with elaborate garments. Looking closely at *The Painter, from the Cycle of Scenes of Living Skeletons* 1757-1839, (Fig. 3) a tempera painting on canvas, the skeletons are rendered with the same soft care of romantic garden scenes of the era with fleshy figures in soft pastel dresses, like that seen in a Fragonard painting. The dewy flesh with soft blush has been exchanged for warmly lit bones and smiling skulls like the grins of the boney figures in Katsva's fresco.

Figure 3. *The Painter*
Paolo Vincenzo Bonomini, 1802-1810
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/8/84/Bonomini_pittore.JPG/440px-Bonomini_pittore.JPG

Equal attention to detail is paid to the clothing the skeletons wear and the items that they interact with as well as the warm lighting that pulls the entire image together. This effect integrates the bones with the rest of the composition and upon first glance this piece can be read like any other portrait of an artist at work. The bats floating in the background allude to bad omens and the underworld. The background is the same color as the bats and this allows them to blend in so a viewer might only notice them when investigating past the skeletal figures at the canvas or perhaps the bust on the right. Soft flowing fabrics also create the illusion of fullness to the limbs helping conceal the bony nature of the figures. Upon quick glance the viewer discovers that these figures are indeed departed from the mortal realm, but originally the viewer is inclined to see these figures as flesh and bone.

Bonomini was commissioned to create six of these works for the parish of Santa Grata Inter Vites Borgo Canale for the celebration of the Triduum, the Christian holiday leading up to Easter Sunday, marking the resurrection of the Christ. [8] This holiday celebrates the mortality of believers and promise of renewed spiritual life. The holiday is not meant to be a somber reality. This message is reflected in the way that skeletons are used in the work to represent the ephemeral nature of life and its finite quality. Similar to the skeletons in the *danse macabre*, Bonomini uses the skeletons as a gentle reminder of death for practitioners who would view and worship near these paintings. Death is integrated with life and here personified as an artist in a moment of creation. Like the allegory of the *danse macabre*, Bonomini's work guides viewers calmly into the discussion about death and dying as a natural consequence for experiencing life, in a similar fashion to the way Kastva's frescos did for the worshipers in Trinity Church in 1420.

3. Michele Melcher and Contemporaries

Contemporary artist Michele Melcher develops skeleton imagery in her work in a strikingly similar fashion to Bonomini. With what could be an homage to the Rococo era Melcher dresses her skeletons in fashionable dresses and over coats with ribbons and shiny buttons that reflect the fashion of the times. Furthermore, her skeletons are posed as if they were the subjects of portraits or royals in a family portrait.[9] *The Artist (After Alexander Roslin b. 1718-d. 1793 A Portrait of the Artist Anne Vallayer-Coster)* 2018, (Fig. 4) is a portrait of a wealthy artist, posing with her palette in one boney hand and the brush with a dash of red paint on the tip in the other. Her lively pose is complimented by the silky green bow on her robin egg blue gown. Translucent lace falls upon her pale-dry scapula and atop of her humerus with hints of blue reflecting off the delicately rendered lace. The skeleton has a soft smile on her face, and her bones are rendered in soft creams and browns with no harsh shading. As a result, her portrayed features allow the skeleton to appear to breath and have a soft and energetic quality to her rendering. This is a very well-balanced painting, with no chiaroscuro. The white glow of her bones stands out against the dark background. While there is no extravagant movement in the work, the *danse macabre* theme fits with this work as well. The skeleton is enjoying a

moment. No signs of dread or fear, nor pain or suffering are evident in this work. The intent is to point out the finality of life and the very tenuous nature that the human body exists in, as delicate and complicated as the lace that drapes over the artist's shoulder. Like this ephemeral material, the human body will someday decay and turn back into the dirt of the earth. Melcher's works evoke a quiet yet humorous acceptance of the finality of existence in her parodies of historical portraiture.

Figure 4. *The Artist*
(After Alexander Roslin b. 1718-d. 1793 A Portrait of the Artist Anne Vallayer-Coster) Michele Melcher
2018, Oil on Canvas
https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/533382a6e4b07ce0259f2152/1578962509025-
F540YZCT0SE7WY5IV1Q8/ke17ZwdGBToddI8pDm48kCaosPw-
HvRIcxOWsotBCq97gQa3H78H3Y0txjaiv_0fDoOvxcdMmMKkDsyUqMSsMWxHk725yiiHCCLfrh8O1z5QPOoh
DIaIeljMHgDF5CVlOqpeNLcJ80NK65_fV7S1Ucz6SU0sMiqc9ZaxJYij74taF2iHxk883TRi5ZHy3MFETCgV58C
QKqkVi4LppNMUzA/TheArtistWEB.jpg?format=2500w

In comparison to the original oil painting that Melcher adapted in her work, *A Portrait of the Artist Anne Vallayer-Coster* (Fig. 5) by Alexander Roslin (1783) shows a much softer figure. She exhibits blushing porcelain skin, wears a fluffy gray wig and displays an intense chiaroscuro that dips her back shoulder into the background. This effect illuminates and directs attention to the artist's bosom that is the lightest part of the work. Vallayer-Coster has a very soft smile that feels more like a polite gesture than a genuine tweak of the corner of her mouth. Her hands are rendered in reds and oranges with dabs of pink and crimson on the joints of her plump digits. The fabric that constricts her chest and drapes across her illuminated shoulder is rendered with a glossy blending technique, with no harsh lines defining any of the folds of fabric. In comparison, Melcher's version renders the fabric with much harsher brush strokes and far less blending, perhaps to integrate the harsh lines of the skeletonized figure into the composition. She accentuates the fluffy soft and smoothly blended fabric lying atop the rough and bumpy bones with multiple harsh flat facets in its surface. The shape of *The Artist's* skull in Melcher's work has been altered in appearance for the sake of emotion as well, with larger eye sockets much higher up from the bridge of the nose creating a softer expression on the skeleton. The jaw has been elongated and squared out, coming down a bit further than the jaw in Roslin's work. Changing the chin distracts from the exposed teeth of the skeleton's smile, which can be off-putting due to the connections between bared teeth and aggression. The fabrics in Melcher's work are more saturated with the greens and blues much brighter where in Rosin's portrait they appear to have a glaze of brown atop them allowing the skin on the face of the figure to be the most concentrated area of saturated color besides the palette in the artist's hand. The rendering of the

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background in Melcher's portrait is also less blended to match the brushwork on the skeleton and the dress allowing the work to be very cohesive and to present a strong composition.

Figure 5. *Portrait of the Artist Anne Vallayer-Coster*
Alexander Roslin, Oil on Canvas, 1783
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fb/The_artist_Anne_Vallayer-Coster.jpg/1200px-The_artist_Anne_Vallayer-Coster.jpg

The focus being placed on the identity of the skeleton depicted is an element that both Melcher and Bonomini's works share in common. In the two examples presented both artists have chosen to skeletonize other artists in their paintings. The woman in Melcher's *The Artist* is a painter much like the painter in Bonomini's *The Painter*. In a tongue and cheek sort of way both Melcher and Bonomini are playing with the idea of their own deaths. In these works, what remains of the identities of both these artists are elements of their trade and the way that they expressed their roles in society. With the glowing saturated pigments dashed on the palette of *The Artist* to the expensive fabrics that make up her Rococo-styled frock and flowing powdered mane, what has remains after the artist's flesh decayed were identifiers of her wealth and trade. *The Painter* is much the same, with the tailored to fit coat, fancy pants, polished shoes and a massive canvas and easel; this artist is also left with only signifiers of his wealth and tools of his trade. Both Bonomini and Melcher may be suggesting that when the artist dies, what remains of the individual is the marks on canvas that they have left behind, and the freedom that they had to do so based on their financial success. The notion of artists gaining immortality through the exoneration of their works is one that is discussed at length in the media as well as in art history. Their artwork is part of their remains. This message is also hinted at in both *The Painter* and *The Artist*.

Furthermore in Bonomini's work, the skeletonized painter is rendering an image of a skeleton with a scythe in hand on the large stretched canvas, a possible nod to the precedent of skeletons being symbolic of death itself. Yet the painter is rendered in a very elongated and expressive pose, implying he is in mid movement, and quite animated and lively compared to his subject matter. This is where the influence of the *danse macabre* can be seen in both Bonomini's and Melcher's works. These artists are both depicted as lively and in the moment, with both skeletons participating in actions related to their identifiable roles in society. They are both individuals and yet they simultaneously still are symbolic of death. However, much like the skeletons in the frescos by Katsva, they are painting their way to the grave enjoying a loving trade that they devoted themselves to in life. This brings full circle the concept that death is cyclical and life continues. The artwork these artists made last, going from owner to owner, following their own cyclical path of existence. These two skeletal artists represent a point in the cycle of life and the individuals experiencing it. The skeletons in this work are both symbolic of death and the artist who is immortalized through their artwork.

Melcher's body of work contains a multitude of portraits of distinguished historical figures in identifiable roles within society that have been skeletonized in the same manner. Her painting *The Monarch (After Vladimir Borovikovsky b.1757-d.1825 Portrait of Paul 1 Emperor of Russia)* (2020) (Fig 6) shows the rendering of the skeleton in a different light, where the theme and mood of the painting reflects the idealized and propagandistic nature of the

original portrait. The skull is rendered in a piercing white unlike the cream tones in *The Artist*. Clothing is highly detailed with less expressive brushwork and more tight and seamless blending in the folds and embellishments. Brassy medallions reflect light in the same detailed way that the golden embroidery along the trim of the hat rim does. The identity of the figure is portrayed through all the elements that remain from the original portrait. Melcher's skeletonizing of the figure further highlights the importance of the identity of the Emperor and his position in society as all that remains of him is his medals and militaristic gear.

Figure 6. *The Monarch (After Vladimir Borovikovsky b.1757-d.1825 Portrait of Paul 1 Emperor of Russia)* Michele Melcher, Oil on Wood, 2020
https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/533382a6e4b07ce0259f2152/1578962518982-JZW5ZXSRZNANHD7U1L67/ke17ZwdGBToddI8pDm48kLBdAmOFzNO2GZ4j3eESwnl7gQa3H78H3Y0txjaiv_0fDoOvxcdMmMKkDsyUqMSsMWxHk725yiiHCCLfrh8O1z5QPOohDIaIeljMHgDF5CVlOqpeNLcJ80NK65_fV7S1UQI_Xt1y3k5gWu4ft2hckrMBmqBOBFU608ICS0P1OY9vuqWRKOCd3Esfzua9QhbWww/TheMonarchWEB.jpg

   A myriad of contemporary artists use skeletons in a similar fashion in their works. Artist Bradley Theodore depicts monumental figures from history as skeletons with lush bold brushstrokes and eye-popping saturated colors. The concept behind his work is strikingly similar to Melcher's. Like her work, Theodore hints at the immortality of the megalithic figures in history, left behind as skeletons, but commemorated through art and identified by markers of their roles in society. In Theodore's painting *Louis & Marie* (Fig. 7) infamous French royalty are depicted in their flowing exaggerated gowns and dress coats with over the top wigs matching the larger than life gossip and stories of their lives that have been recounted numerous times, surviving to modern day.[10] Here the rendering of the skeletons is blocky and impressionistic in style, with broad brush strokes and unnatural colors used to shape the shadows and highlights that define the angulations in the skulls and vertebra exposed above the ruffled necklines. The skull on the table is not rendered in the same fashion; it is monochrome with only a few visible strokes and no overlapping layers to create depth. This purposeful shift in rendering between the skeletal figures and the skull on the table highlights how the skull representing death is simply symbolic, while the skeletons are surrogates for actual individuals each with unique identities and connections to the world.

Figure 7. *Louis & Marie*
Bradley Theodore, oil on canvas, 2018
https://artlogic-
res.cloudinary.com/w_800,c_limit,f_auto,fl_lossy,q_auto:low/artlogicstorage/maddoxgallery/images/view/5f9f1239
6eb650a789db2a9e25fb1aeej.jpg

Artists like Michael Reedy[11] and Laurie Lipton[12] also depict the skeleton as a dual symbol, both to reference an actual individual and as a more generalized notion of death. Reedy uses the skeleton as a symbol for science and medical knowledge as well in a variety of his works. However, he also creates partially skeletonized figures where the skin of the figures is rendered as transparent revealing a matrix of nerves, bone, and muscle. (Fig. 8) These works reference multiple and ambivalent messages pertaining to partial deaths, spiritual deaths, death of the mind and spirit, and dreams. Lipton similarly represents natural and allegorical death with skeleton imagery. (Fig. 9) Her skeletons represent a range of feelings from apathy to cynicism as they comment on the lack of disregard for fellow humans in deeply political works inspired by current political events in the world. The skeletons simultaneously represent individuals and concepts. This trend in skeleton imagery is evident in a multitude of works on paper and canvas by emerging contemporary artists in the United States.
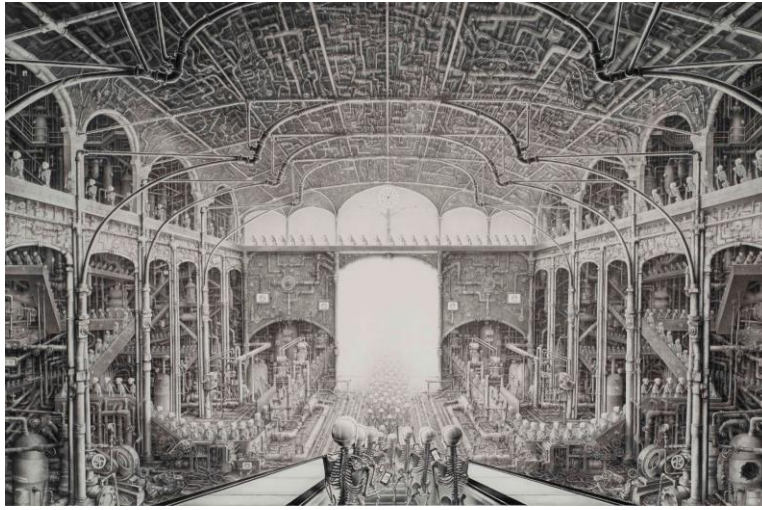

Figure 8. *The Fall (man),* Michael Reedy

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Mixed Media on Paper
https://americangallery21st.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/the-fall-man.jpg?w=529

Figure 9. *HAPPY 2015*
Laurie Lipton, Graphite and Charcoal on Paper, 2015
https://d32dm0rphc51dk.cloudfront.net/KYgxPQ0qSjmJRzgCFGiqGg/large.jpg

4. Conclusion

Through analysis of Michele Melchers works alongside her contemporaries in reference to the historical precedents it is evident that the way skeletons are used a symbol for death has shifted to hold a dual meaning for these artists. The skeleton embodies the notion of death as a natural phenomenon, part of the cycle of life, while simultaneously functioning as a representation for the human being that has died. The skeleton is not only an object used to broach the difficult and intricate topic of death, but also an individual with a past and an impact that they imparted upon the world during their time spent walking upon the right side of the soil. Death is a very personal and emotional topic for humans to tackle, the skeleton as a symbol in contemporary artwork is a unique vessel that is perfectly fitting to hold and express the ever-changing attitudes towards death in American society.

5. Endnotes

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http://www.michaelreedy.gallery/.

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