

The Macabre in the Work of Hans Baldung Grien

Mariela Bargeño



Fig. 1
Detail of Grien's
monogram at lower left
in *The Fall of Man*, 1511
Engraving, 311 × 251 mm
Rijksprentenkabinet,
Amsterdam

Hans Baldung Grien was born in the town of Schwäbisch Gmünd, southwest Germany, in late 1484 or early 1485. Although little is known about his origins, it is certain that he did not come from a family of craftsmen. Regarding the surname Baldung, records from the time mention two: one a lawyer at the Episcopal Court in Strasbourg and the other – Hieronymus Baldung¹ – a doctor of medicine and honorary physician to the Emperor Maximilian I. Hans's brother Caspar is also known to have taught at the University of Freiburg and to have later become a judge at the Imperial courts.

Baldung embarked on his career around 1500, probably in Strasbourg and apprenticed to a follower of the great painter and engraver from Colmar (Alsace) Martin Schongauer (c. 1430-91). He thus received his initial training in the Upper Rhine region. Three years later, he was apprenticed to Albrecht Dürer at the artist's Nuremberg workshop.

Various theories exist as to when and why he adopted the nickname "Grien". Some state that he received it in the early years at the Strasbourg workshop or when he was with Dürer, but other explanations may be that in his youth his favourite colour was green, or that he preferred clothes of that colour, or that the leaf which usually appears in his monograms² [fig. 1] is green, or even that he used it to distinguish himself from other apprentices of Dürer's called Hans. Whatever the case, in 1510 his monogram became "HBG".³

The fact that Dürer left Baldung in charge of the workshop when he embarked on his second journey to Italy in 1505 is proof of the close friendship between master and apprentice. Indeed, the relationship was to last a further two decades.

In 1507 Baldung was summoned to the town of Halle, where he painted the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* altarpiece (now in the Germanisches Museum, Nuremberg). Two years later he returned to Strasbourg, where he obtained citizenship. In 1510 he married Margarethe Herlin, the daughter of a middle-class merchant, and established his own workshop.

Between 1509 and 1512 Baldung was obsessed with sorcery, witchcraft and death. Dating from around this period are the drawing *Three Witches* (1514, Musée du Louvre, Paris) and *The Three Ages of Woman and Death* (c. 1510-11, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). These themes were recurrent throughout his career.

Between 1512 and 1517 he painted the extremely ambitious altarpiece for the high altar of Freiburg cathedral. One of the eleven paintings, *The Coronation of the Virgin* [fig. 2], has been described as expressive mannerism and somewhat eccentric. "The Virgin is too self-conscious, God the Father lacks the proper degree of godliness, Christ is weak and effeminate..." Furthermore, the painting lacks the monumentality typical of Dürer.⁴



Fig. 2
Hans Baldung Grien
The Coronation of the Virgin, 1512-16
Oil on panel, 280 × 239 cm
Freiburg cathedral



Fig. 3
Lucas Cranach the Elder
Venus and Cupid, 1509
Oil on canvas, 213 × 102 cm
The State Hermitage Museum,
St Petersburg



Fig. 4
Hans Baldung Grien
Eve, 1525
Oil on panel, 208 × 83.5 cm
Szépművészeti Múzeum,
Budapest

When Albrecht Dürer died in 1528, Baldung was sent a lock of his hair, again proving just how close their friendship was. There is no doubt that Dürer's most gifted pupil inherited his skill and knowledge from his master, although it is also true that he developed a unique style of his own characterised as impetuous and energetic and on occasion informal and light-hearted.⁵ He was also strongly influenced by the styles of Matthias Grünewald (1475/80-1528), Jan Mabuse (1478-1532) and Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553).⁶ He died in 1545.

Brief notes on the theme of death and its representation

Hans Baldung Grien's art reflects a lifelong obsession with the concepts of sin, witchcraft and death. This is why so many of his works were inspired by the Dances of Death.

The Dance of Death was a form of Christian reflection on death that originated and developed between the 14th and 16th centuries in response to the Black Death and other pandemics, famines, wars and droughts of the age. The first references are found in a number of poems written in Latin in the 13th century, known as *Vado Mori*, and in the theme known as *the three living men and the three dead men* (possibly of Eastern origin and widely found in late 13th-century Europe), in which three men returning from a hunt meet three corpses or skeletons who remind them of the fleetingness of existence.⁷

Other references also exist in Latin texts from the early to mid-15th century containing advice on procedures for a "good death" or how to "die well", according to Christian precepts. These are known as the *Ars Moriendi*.

In the 15th century, Dances of Death were performed all over Europe. The participants probably numbered twenty-four and represented different social stations (kings, bishops, peasants, etc.), and each was invited to dance by another figure representing death. Although little is known about the development of the dances, their purpose is known to have been to exalt life while serving as a reminder of its fleetingness, as all too soon Death will come to claim it. In this respect, death was seen as a levelling force between all social classes.

Outstanding examples of depictions of this kind can be found in books illustrated with wood prints and among the engravings by the Nuremberg painter and engraver Michael Wolgemut (1434-1519)⁸ [fig. 5], as well as in Hans Holbein the Younger's (1497-1543)⁹ [fig. 6] Dance of Death (*Totentanz*) series. Specific dating is not possible but experts generally agree that the theme first appeared in Baldung Grien's production in the period between 1509 and 1520.



Fig. 5
Michael Wolgemut
The Dance of Death, from
Liber chronicarum, 1493
Woodcut, 470 × 324 mm
National Gallery of Art,
Washington



Fig. 6
Hans Holbein the Younger
The Noble Lady, from
*Les simulacres et historiées
faces de la mort*, *La
Dance Macabre*, 1538
Woodcut
British Museum, London



Fig. 7
Hans Baldung Grien
The Fall of Man, 1511
Woodcut, 371 × 251 mm
Rijksprentenkabinet,
Amsterdam



Fig. 8
Hans Baldung Grien
Death and the Maiden, 1515
Drawing
Kupferstichkabinett,
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
SPK, Berlin

The macabre in Hans Baldung Grien's work

Executed in the expressionist style prevalent in early 16th-century Germany, Baldung's works have a strong psychological impact and are forceful in style and on some occasions intentionally informal and unabashed.

Despite the importance of diabolical fantasies in Baldung's work, the existence of evil and sin combined with a distinct sensuality are often the *leitmotif*. In *The Fall of Man* of 1511 [fig. 7], a seductive Eve gazes out at the spectator while Adam stands behind her fondling her breast as he glances at the apple in her left hand. Here it could be said that the artist drew an analogy between the forbidden fruit and Eve's breast.¹⁰ The scene is strongly influenced by a work of Albrecht Dürer's which, although similar, does not possess the same degree of sensuality.

The figure of Eve is again found in the oil on panel painting *Eve, the Serpent and Death* [fig. 9] of around 1515. Here the artist left Adam out of the scene, substituting him – even replacing him¹¹ – with Death in a clear allusion to the driving forces of life and death as represented through Eros and Thanatos. It is interesting how Death grasps Eve's arm while the serpent bites his wrist.¹²

This painting is highly charged with symbolism: Death is the representation of Adam as a corpse¹³ reproaching Eve for the act she has just committed. It could thus be seen as an interpretation of the Christian myth regarding the origin of death. The extremely interesting relationship between Adam and Death established by Baldung is not an isolated case in his oeuvre. He painted Adam and Eve again in 1531 in a canvas now belonging to the Museo Thyssen [fig. 10].¹⁴

Here Adam stands behind Eve in a distinctly provocative pose with his left hand resting gently on her hips as he fondles her breast with his right hand. Both gaze out at the spectator, interacting with him and making him Adam's accomplice¹⁵ – even causing a certain rivalry between Adam and the spectator – while Adam flaunts Eve's beauty. Eve is dressed in a very thin garment which, rather than concealing her body, accentuates her genital area. Flimsy garments of this kind are common in pictures of female nudes of the time and were featured as erotic elements (as for example in Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Venus* of 1532).

In conclusion, Hans Baldung Grien the artist was deeply preoccupied with sin, death and sensuality, which he depicted with skill similar to that of his master, Albrecht Dürer, and approached the majority of his works with a markedly moralistic and spiritual viewpoint.



Fig. 9
Hans Baldung Grien
Eve, the Serpent and Death,
c. 1515
Oil on panel, 64 × 32.5 cm
National Gallery of Canada,
Ottawa

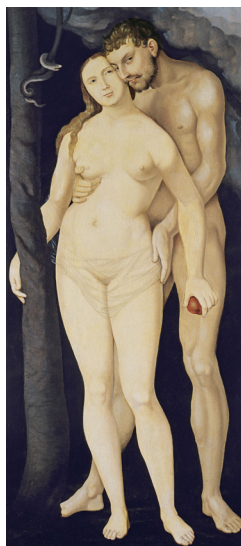


Fig. 10
Hans Baldung Grien
Adam and Eve, 1531
Oil on panel, 147.5 × 6.3 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid
[\[+ info\]](#)

Notes



Fig. 11
Hans Baldung Grien
Adam (detail), c. 1524
Oil on panel, 208 × 83.5 cm
Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest

- 1 On page 4 of the exhibition catalogue *Hans Baldung Grien, Prints and Drawings* (James H. Marrow and Alan Shestack, *Hans Baldung Grien: Prints and Drawings*. [Exh. cat. Washington, National Gallery of Art, 25 January-5 April 1981; New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, 23 April-14 June 1981]. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1981), his father is identified as Johann Baldung and Hieronymus Baldung is listed as his uncle. However, on page 19 of the catalogue *Witches' Lust and the Fall of Man* (Bodo Brinkmann, *Witches' Lust and the Fall of Man. The Strange Phantasies of Hans Baldung Grien*. [Exh. cat. Frankfurt, Städel Museum, 24 February-13 May 2007]. Petersberg, Imhof, 2007), Hans Baldung Grien's father is listed as anonymous.
- 2 See Brinkmann 2007, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
- 3 As regards his beginnings as an artist, the workshop where he was apprenticed and the origin of the nickname "Grien", there are many opinions and much controversy when it comes to dating his works. In addition to the catalogues mentioned above see Robert A. Koch, *Eve, the Serpent and Death*, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 1974, p. 10.
- 4 Marrow and Shestack 1981, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
- 5 If we compare Baldung's *chiaroscuro* print *The Fall of Man* (1511) and a work by Dürer of the same name of 1504, the master's stylistic legacy is evident in Baldung's treatment of the female form, a subject which Baldung was later to develop further.
- 6 To the untrained eye, Hans Baldung Grien's female nudes can be mistaken for Cranach's due to the similarity of styles: see figs. 3 and 4.
- 7 See Juan Barja, *La Danza de la Muerte. Seguido de un texto de John Ruskin y del Códice Del Escorial. Hans Holbein*, Madrid, Abada, 2008, p. 8; and *Del Amor y la Muerte. Dibujos y grabados de la Biblioteca Nacional*, [Exh. cat. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, July-October 2001], Barcelona, Fundació Caixa Catalunya, p. 188.
- 8 It is interesting to note that Michael Wolgemut was also Albrecht Dürer's master.
- 9 Of great interest regarding depictions of the Dance of Death are: the work of the Paris engraver Guy Marchant, who in 1485 copied the now lost murals of the Dance of Death in the Saints Innocents cemetery in Paris; the frescoes painted by the monk John Lydgate in the Gothic Basilica of St Paul's, London, which were destroyed in the great fire of 1666; and the mid-15th-century frescoes in the Marienkirche, Lübeck (also destroyed). In modern times, the Dance of Death is performed in Verges (Gerona) every year on Maundy Thursday. The event is unique for having survived across the centuries.
- 10 See Brinkmann 2007, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-63.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 176; see also Marrow and Shestack, *op. cit.*, p. 243.
- 12 Death emerges from behind the Tree of Knowledge in a reference to the Christian principle that knowledge is sin and human desire for knowledge can only bring death (Koch 1974, *op. cit.*, p. 24).
- 13 Marrow and Shestack, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
- 14 On p. 178 of *El diablo: una máscara sin rostro*, Madrid, Síntesis, 2002, L. Luther compares the figure of Adam in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza picture to the Devil, a theory supported by the curls in Adam's hair, which resemble horns. The same can be said of the 1524 oil painting *Adam* [fig. 11].
- 15 Brinkmann 2007, *op. cit.*, p. 209.