

Aleksandra Koutny-Jones. *Visual Cultures of Death in Central Europe: Contemplation and Commemoration in Early Modern Poland-Lithuania.* Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2015. 257 pp. \$145.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-30507-6.

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The history of mentality and the perception of death became popular in the 1970-80s in western Europe, especially in the third generation of the Annales school (represented by scholars such as F. Aries, J. Le Goff, J. Duby, etc.). The territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that was formed after the Lublin Union (1569) as a federation with broad autonomy, which united the Kingdom of Poland (present-day Poland) and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (modern Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine), remained outside the interest of leading historians concerned with studying European cultures of death and was seldom covered by the English-language historiography. The study under review, authored by Aleksandra Koutny-Jones, aims to fill this gap. The author's ambitious objective is to answer the question of why the visual culture of death became so common in the region in the early modern period. She attempts to prove that despite the fact that visualization (visual presentation) of the culture of death was borrowed by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from western Europe and showed the iconic features of Baroque art, at the same time, it was marked by a large number of local peculiarities. Koutny-Jones argues that the European trends were altered in the local environment under the

influence of the mentality of the indigenous population. The author aims at demonstrating that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was not the "outskirts of Europe," but rather its integral part.

The book is written at a professional academic level. The author uses a cross-disciplinary approach and new methods of research. The book is based on a wide range of sources and addressed to historians of eastern Europe. The book consists of an introduction, five chapters, and conclusion. Its undoubted advantage is the presence of a glossary explaining basic terms used in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The monograph features extensive use of illustrative materials, which helps the reader become deeply immersed in the era and its culture.

The first chapter introduces the context of the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It outlines the country's political and social structure, and links the omnipotent presence of *memento mori* themes to a combination of political, economic, and religious concerns in early modern Poland-Lithuania. The main conclusion of this chapter is as follows: the spread of death imagery in Poland-Lithuania was promoted by the *szlachta* (gentry) and the Catholic Church. It was influenced

by the cultural policy of the Counter-Reformation, which widely employed art to expand its influence against the background of constant wars and epidemics, as well as established it as a trend which came through printed literature, and was successfully borrowed by the elite from western Europe. The second and third chapters describe the three main subjects of *memento mori* art: the Wheel of Death, the Triumph of Death, and the Dance of Death. The author traces the evolution of the images of death, explaining their moralistic tones, such as the idea that "all are equal before death," the idea widely promoted by the Order of Franciscans, who accepted people from all social strata. The peculiarity of the imagery of death is shown through analysis of clothing and weapons.

Despite its strong points, we can note some controversial statements in this part of the study. A large number of analyzed illustrations to the *Danse Macabre* spread or created in the territory of Poland feature images of Turks and Jews accompanied by disparaging texts of unknown origin. These quotations lead the author to conclude that anti-Semitism and xenophobia were extremely common in the Commonwealth. The author notes that xenophobia was promoted through the Dance of Death by the monastic orders (p. 119); however, there is no reliable evidence that the country was marked by a totally negative attitude toward Jews.[1] The researcher provides no support for her claim about the spread of xenophobia in Poland-Lithuania, basing her conclusion solely on an image in a single church in Hrodna, the Church of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth. The second controversial statement is made in regard to the idea of Death as a fisherman (Death takes souls like a fisherman catches fish), which she suggests was quite widespread in Lithuania in the seventeenth century. This is not, however, supported with any evidence. Finally, according to the author the late arrival of the Dance of Death in the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was associated with personal acts by patrons who commissioned works of art (p. 117).

However, she does not clearly explain what caused such intentions among the noblemen. From our point of view, this situation arose in the aftermath of the actions of the Catholic Church in this region and the later arrival of western European cultural trends.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the funeral ceremonies and their uncanny symbolism. The author demonstrates that the coffin (burial) portraiture was not simply a reminder of the deceased. It also performed other functions. The portrait was brought to the church separately from the body in order to emphasize the distance between the physical body and the spiritual essence. The latter was alive after death. In addition, the coffin portrait played the role of the deceased's presence, and after the funeral, the image was placed in the church for the commemoration procedure. Second, the author focuses on the symbolism of various elements of funeral decoration such as heraldic motifs, usually integrated within the burial decor as the demonstration of the continuity of the family. Third, attention is drawn to the use of candles and its symbolism. A great quantity of candles served as a metaphor for the light of faith and the intention to see the only true light—the light of heaven. In addition, the candles' cost was substantial; therefore their abundance at the funeral testified to the prosperity of the family. The funerals were a consolidating factor for the *szlachta*. The author notices that the dramatized, lavish funeral raised the status of both the deceased and his family, but also of the entire local community of noblemen, serving as a significant factor for uniting the gentry, who did not leave the deceased alone at the moment of the exit. The author again focuses on a combination of the western fashion and local features in Poland-Lithuania.

One of distinctive case studies is the burial of the Opaliński, a wealthy dynasty who were prominent landowners in Greater Poland and took a leading role in local governance, which vividly demonstrates the *szlachta*'s appeal to the heraldic

symbols in funeral decorations. The reason for the author's choice of this particular family remains unclear. However, it would be appropriate to compare the case of the Opaliński with such magnate clans of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as the Radziwiłł, the Pacowie, and the Sapieha families, who in their prosperity and influence on cultural trends were not inferior to the Polish magnates. The fact that the second earliest Baroque church on the territory of the Commonwealth was built by the Radziwiłłs in Niasviž (today Belarus) speaks for itself.

The fifth and last chapter focuses on funeral architecture and landscape. The design of the chapels served to elevate both the deceased and the family as a whole. The researcher describes the chapels with vaulted domes in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as an allusion to the architectural monuments of the Holy Land, in which the dome is seen as a symbol of resurrection. Nevertheless, this chapter includes another controversial claim—that the spread of the Baroque elements to the territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was merely a Polish cultural influence, which is far from certain. In particular, the example of the St. Casimir Chapel in Vilnius, which was built in the Baroque style in 1636, precisely as a result of the cultural influence of the Union of Lublin, seems debatable, since the Baroque in architecture began in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania at the end of the sixteenth century (the Corpus Christi Church in Niasviž).

In the conclusion, the researcher summarizes the main points of her study. First, she emphasizes the importance of the patronage groups (nobility and wealthy commoners) and the Catholic Church (religious orders) in the development of the memorial practice, their reflection on death, and the emergence of a special style of art. Second, the author points to the mixture of pan-European fashion and local elements. Third, she explains the symbolism of the funeral ceremony and the arts and crafts associated with death rituals. Fourth,

the author reflects on the development of the funerary traditions as a factor in the unity of the nobility.

This monograph is a new, landmark study in the Anglophone historiography on death, the material culture associated with its rituals, and perceptions of it among the elite in eastern Europe. The book boasts numerous advantages. First of all, it focuses on a region that has long been regarded as the "outskirts of European civilization" and which still needs serious attention from researchers in different fields. A wide range of primary sources, both works of art and archival sources, was used in the analysis of funerary art and architecture, which allowed the author to offer a new interpretation of familiar images by revealing their symbolic connotations and explaining their use.

A weakness is the book's very limited geographical focus. The author explores mainly the territory of the former Kingdom of Poland, omitting the fact that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a federal state that included the lands of Litwa (present-day Belarus and Lithuania), which had a different social and religious fabric. The development of the funeral culture was strongly influenced by the country's Orthodox population (who were mostly concentrated in today's Belarus and Ukraine). This research would have benefited significantly had the geographic focus been expanded to the entire territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, providing the author with a wider array of material objects and images from which to showcase the evolution of attitudes to death and draw more meaningful and relevant conclusions. Moreover, at the beginning of the text, the author announced her intention to conduct an analysis and comparison of folklore and high culture in order to find their interaction in relation to perceptions of death. This promise, however, remained unfulfilled, which is unfortunate because such an analysis could help to reveal the cross-fertilization of folk and elite cultures, an extremely topical subject.

Note

[1]. Berngard D. Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland. A Social Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland from 1100 to 1800*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972).

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