

As Ziyian Kwan noted, “... art is a medicine. And we’re not going to get through any of the horrors that exist—whether they’re around the pandemic or around oppressions of people—without art” (Smith et al., 2021). Pandemics often transform societies and a common thread among them is their effect on themes presented in artwork. Artists will often depict life events and the emotions associated with them in their artwork. Pandemics affect almost every aspect of artists’ lives all around the world which will oftentimes result in a shift in what is portrayed in art. Disease, death, and human suffering evoke strong emotions and provide fuel for the creative process. This can result in many artists portraying similar themes in their artwork and lead to a new era in art, as evidenced in the bubonic plague pandemic, the 1918 influenza pandemic, and the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The bubonic plague pandemic led to major changes in various fields of art including the birth of an entirely new genre referred to as “plague literature,” which focused on and discussed the disease in works of literature. One area of art that was particularly affected was architecture. As a result of the Black Death there were numerous cathedrals constructed in honor of Christ, the virgin Mary, and various plague saints that saw more worship during the midst of the pandemic. Additionally, themes and symbolism in artwork shifted towards the representation of death as a certainty and individual life as a temporary and insignificant moment in the grand scheme of the existence of the human race (Snowden, 2020). As Snowden wrote, paintings of this time, “... often display temporal goods embodying the hubris of human aspirations – gold, musical instruments, scholarly tomes, globes, and elegant garments” (2020). These images were used in tandem with the theme that life is short in order to show the meaninglessness of superficial accomplishments and possessions (Snowden, 2020).

After the 1918 influenza pandemic the art world turned away from romanticism and as Spinney said, sought to, “... strip back, pare down, and slough off the exuberance of an earlier

misguided age” (2021). Artists returned to classical themes with a new pessimism from experiencing the horrors of a pandemic. In architecture designs became more functional and contained less color (Spinney, 2021). This new “Art Deco” style emphasized a presentation of cleanliness which included a sleek modern look with white as the main color. This was meant to be a contradistinction to the, “... dark, cluttered interiors of the pre-war world where microbes might lurk” (Beckerman, 2020). However, there was almost no mention of the pandemic in literature of the time (Spinney, 2021). This likely indicates a desire to move away from memories of the disease and return to life as it was before influenza spread.

One of the most noticeable effects of COVID-19 on the art world is the expansion of online access. This has increased the accessibility of artwork and removed restrictions on viewing pieces such as time, money, and geography. Society will continue to benefit from this change as artwork will likely continue to be available through the internet. This transition online has also increased price transparency as many galleries have begun to display the cost on their websites. Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic has caused some artists to start creating smaller, more affordable pieces of artwork to increase sales due to the economic struggles of being an artist during a pandemic (Artwork Archive, n.d.). The pandemic also spurred an increase in unique ways of sharing both art and the artistic process of creating it to help compensate for being unable to view works in person. This includes livestreams and timelapses of artists creating or presenting their work.

With COVID-19 there also seems to be an increase in reportage art pieces which are rough sketches of one’s environment that seek to capture a fleeting moment in time and tell a story. It’s often used as a form of documentation and requires the artist to draw quickly without time to think about mistakes (Taria, n.d.). Presumably, this form of art would have been very appealing during quarantine when many people wished to document what was going on around

them. On social media I observed numerous people keeping art journals during quarantine to archive each day. This type of art would have appealed to those picking up a new hobby during isolation as well, as it puts emphasis on mistakes being irrelevant to the final piece.

As far as literature goes, it's too soon to see the true effects of the coronavirus pandemic as literature has a longer production period. However, in television shows I have noticed a similar effect to that of literature in the influenza pandemic. Most shows that are meant to take place in current day make no mention of the pandemic and those that do acknowledge it do so only in passing. Shows that did mention COVID-19 made it a plot point early on in the pandemic and soon abandoned the narrative. This is reflective of the push for life to "return to normal." It's difficult to discern the effects on architecture at this time as well, but it's theorized that there will be a shift away from minimalism and open concept spaces as a consequence of people realizing the benefits of private and interesting spaces in homes while being trapped in them during quarantine. Staying in a minimalistic home for months could potentially feel akin to living in a prison and become dreary over time (Chayka, 2020).

As Picasso said, "I didn't paint the War ... but I have no doubts about the fact that the War is in these paintings I made" (Giunta, 2017). Even if artists do not directly portray aspects of the pandemic, the disease and its effects will still manage to creep into their artwork. The bubonic plague, 1918 influenza, and COVID-19 pandemics each exhibit changes in art caused by the focus on death or the passing of time made prominent by widespread disease. Major pandemics have an effect on culture and these cultural changes will be reflected in the art that people create.

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