

ARS MORIENDI

A Secular Art of Dying in the Age of Covid-19

The Bubonic Plague was a time of tremendous social upheaval in Western Europe. French historian Philippe Ariès described the impact of the Plague as a transition from “death tamed” to “death unleashed.”¹ Death “tamed” was marked by the concept of *Ars Moriendi*, or the Art of Dying. This consisted of the “beliefs, practices, and rituals” which supported the dying and the bereaved in the face of mortality and loss. The imagery of a “proper” death can be seen in the painting *Extreme Unction* by French Painter Nicolas Poussin, where the space itself is as much a character as the priest, doctor, and mourners (Fig. 1).² On the other hand, death “unleashed” deprived victims of these comforts. Not only did the Plague kill many grave diggers and clergymen, but many more fled to escape the deadly miasma, or poisonous air, believed at the time to be the cause of the disease. Even families would leave their loved ones behind to die alone.¹

While modern medicine is a world away from the Plague years, society is yet again experiencing interruptions in the way in which we approach death. Victims of Covid-19 are dying alone in ICUs, funerals are being limited due to social distancing, and many cannot visit their family members in nursing homes. My father recently entered hospice care (unrelated to Covid-19) in one such facility. Fortunately, I have been able to visit him in short, 15 minute intervals, but twice now he has been exposed to the virus and put into quarantine. During his quarantine, my visits consisted of standing outside amongst the air condensers and overgrown grass, peering into his window while talking to him on the phone (Fig. 2). It had already been hard enough to give him the attention and comfort he deserves, but with even more restrictions, I longed for a scene like that Poussin’s *Extreme Unction*.

The idea of *Ars Moriendi* was largely a religious one, designed to prepare a soul for an eternal afterlife. I am proposing a secular model for the Art of Dying based on my own current experience with my father. The basis for this model stems from the physical and psychological comfort of both my father and I. The following are five characteristics of a space designed for one’s final days:

Light - The passage of time is marked in the architecture. The experience of sunrise and sunset is important in understanding one’s return to the natural order of the world.

Air – The feeling of cool, natural breeze brings thermal comfort and the physical feeling of being out in nature.

Connection to Nature - Views to gardens and nearby landscapes creep into the space, breaking down the boundary between the natural and artificial worlds.

Mobility - Movement creates a sense of freedom in these limiting circumstances. Different zones of the refuge provide a sense of variety and are all easily accessible.

Presence – Volumetric and material continuity bring my space and my father’s into union, leaving a reminder of each other’s presence even in times of privacy.

Ultimately, this is an exercise in regaining control of death in a time of uncertainty and obstacles. While merely hypothetical, this design has been a part of my grieving process.

1 Frank Snowden, “Plague (III) Illustrations and Conclusions.” *History 234: Epidemics in Western Society Since 1600* (Lecture, Yale University, New Haven, CT, Spring 2010).

2 Nicolas Poussin, *Extreme Unction*, 1638-1640, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK. ArtDaily.org JPG

