

Tomislav Vignjević

The Tree of Estates and Death in the Art of the Early Modern Period

There is probably nothing so tightly bound to man as the tree, since it offers a multiplicity of symbolic connections. The tree is presented in numerous contexts as an image of Christ and the Cross, as a Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which appears in the images of Paradise and the original Sin, or as a Tree of Life (*arbor vitae*) in Paradise, which is depicted remarkably often. However, there is yet another variety of medieval tree symbolism, the Tree of Estates, which are most numerous in the period of the transition into the Early Modern age. In the fifteenth century numerous such depictions of social hierarchy include the figure of Death, who claims its inevitable debt with a bow and arrows and in this way resembles the Dance of Death in illustrating the equality of all before Death. The Trees of Estates, whose obvious order of the estates is threatened and overturned by Death, which were produced in great numbers at the end of the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, are a kind of warning of the almightiness of death, which lies in wait and threatens this order, visualised with the levels of estates. Two very evocative and frequently copied depictions of the threat of Death towards the whole of society's hierarchy illustrated by the Tree of Estates can be found in the work of the Netherlandish engraver, Master with the Banderoles.

The influence of his engraving is also attributed to the origin of the fresco in the Monastery of St Francis in Morella in Catalonia, which adorns the *De profundis* monastery hall, where the monastic community said prayers to their dead. A similar depiction of the Tree of Estates can also be found in one of the oldest Spanish engravings from the mid-15th century, *Death, Threatening Mankind*, in which the personification of Death displays many similarities to the one in Morella, particularly in the depiction of the opened belly and legs. However, the print by the Master with the Banderols was copied very precisely in the manuscript *Vergänglichkeitsbuch* (Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Donaueschingen 704), where the meaningful connection between the Tree of Life or the Tree of Estates and the Dance of Death is present again. This manuscript was written and decorated with drawings in the mid-16th century by Wilhelm Werner Graf von Zimmern (1485-1575). It is a book that in numerous parts leans upon the tradition of the *Contemptus mundi* and *Memento mori* literature and takes up the form of a compilation of family history, various texts and images. In fol. 41v of this codex, a Tree of Estates is depicted, at which Death is shooting its arrows.

A similar idea of a Tree of Estates, but with more ambiguity and complexity, where the uncertainty and threat to the social hierarchy is evident, was expressed by the so-called Petrarcameister in the illustration in the book *Von der Arzney bayder Glueck des guten und des widerwertigen*, in the German translation of Petrarca's *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, which was one of the most widely read works of that time. It was first published by Heinrich Steiner in Augsburg in 1532. In the chapter 16 of part one, a large woodcut measuring 15 x 10 centimetres illustrates an almost two and a half pages long text entitled *Von Adelichem vrsprung* (On Aristocratic Origins). This woodcut reveals the irony of this artist, since Death, which mercilessly demands its dues from all estates, is replaced by a much more ambiguous but nevertheless clear wish to illustrate the swapped-over hierarchy of the estates, which in its own unique way illustrates the uncertainties, antagonisms, social mobility and uprising that marked the period in which the woodcut was produced.