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A Portrait of Death

Analyzing the Transi Tomb of Guillaume de Harcigny (1300-1393 A.D.)

By: Emily Heimerman

Abstract: This article delves into the topics of medieval tomb sculpture in Europe, *memento mori* spirituality in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, portraiture, the Black Death and Roman Catholic response, and the complex relationship between the living and the dead. By introducing medieval tomb sculpture with the notion that the transi tomb acts as a complete stylistic antithesis to the norm, the author suggests it may have been a direct result of the Black Death, the Late Medieval Crisis, and the Roman Catholic Church. In studying the transi tomb of Guillaume de Harcigny, a French physician who was made famous by operating on the skull of King Charles VI, this piece aims to address the question: *If this is a sculpture of a dead body, can it still be considered a portrait?* Studying death during the Middle Ages the critical linchpin in understanding transi tomb sculpture in relation to portraiture. The dead (and the harsh reality of death) were interwoven into the fabric of social life, representing a slightly distant group of people. Guillaume de Harcigny's transi tomb, therefore, encapsulates the unique personality of Harcigny while simultaneously representing an entire social class altogether. That is why, the ultimate answer to the question is *yes, Harcigny's tomb is a portrait.*

Keywords: *memento mori, transi tombs, medieval tombs, Guillaume de Harcigny, Late Medieval Crisis, Catholic Church*

Death is inevitable. Humanity, cursed by its own nature, is steadily and eternally shrouded by death. The burdensome truth of death framed a constant state of being for medieval Europeans during the fourteenth century. Amidst the overwhelming chaos of the Great Famine, the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church, the ruthless Hundred Years' War, and the unrelenting Black Death pandemic, nearly half of the European population perished between 1347 and 1352.¹ It was, arguably, the worst time in history to be alive.

In the fourteenth century, Europe endured these events that reshaped every aspect of society. This century brought the harsh realities of mortality and spirituality to the forefront of European societal consciousness. The unique nature of Guillaume de Harcigny's tomb sculpture encapsulates the spiritual beliefs and traditions of the Roman Catholic faith and melds them with the social anxiety Europe endured in the wake of the Black Death. In this regard, Harcigny's tomb is a portrait of both European society and Roman Catholic tradition during the late fourteenth century. But, above all, the transi tomb of Guillaume de Harcigny is a portrait of himself *in death*, representing the person that once was and the new social class he belongs to. However, before a proper analysis of Guillaume de Harcigny's transi tomb can be conducted, there first needs to be a firm definition of what a transi tomb looked like in the Late Middle Ages and how it developed through the centuries.

On Transi Tombs

Though medieval by design and origin, transi tombs were not built until the tail end of the fourteenth century (the 1380s, to be exact).² This morbid funerary style quickly gained popularity and became a consistent funerary feature throughout Europe for the next three centuries. Etymologically speaking, the word "transi" derives from the Latin verb "*transire*," with "*trans-*" meaning "across" and "*-ire*" meaning "to go." Together, the Latin term "*transire*"

roughly translates to “pass away.”³ Similarly, between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, “*transir*” translated as “to die” or “to pass away” in Old French as well.⁴ The term “transi” has evolved to now label and represent a specific type of funerary effigy or sculpture of the deceased in a state of corruption.⁵

Centuries before transi tombs became a well-known funerary style in Europe, uncorrupted tomb effigies were a popular form of burial sculpture.⁶ The older style of funerary effigies that were used as a type of portraiture were commonly known as “gisants.” The gisant style usually depicted the deceased lying horizontally in their “pride of life” age: about 33 years old.⁷ This image was based on Jesus’ age during His death, resurrection, and ascension into Heaven. In this tradition, many medieval effigies were designed to resemble the deceased’s body in Heaven. Similarly, other types of funerary representations like angels, saints, and other unnamed spiritual beings were common features among the gisant portraits – and in some cases even replaced gisant portraits as the monument’s center of focus.⁸ These correlative figures acted more like spiritual symbols, creating a far more “stylized and interchangeable” feel in their displays.⁹

Transi tombs, however, were a far cry from this “pride of life” portrait. In order to be classified as a transi tomb, these effigies must be characterized as a portrait of the deceased, in some sort of decay (postmortem), and constructed between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Simply put, the transi tombs that were constructed between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries replaced the ideal, perfect image of the deceased with the depiction of their body as a newly dead or decomposing cadaver.¹⁰ By situating these tombs historically, it is evident that transi tombs marked a shift towards a different type of mortuary art, demonstrating a “much more complex phenomenon, encompassing an entire spectrum of meaning.”¹¹

Some medievalists also theorize that this morbid, artistic evolution from gisant to corrupted cadaver may have had less to do with artistic style changes and more to do with the massive societal turmoil occurring near the end of the Middle Ages.¹² In these cases, cultural art and architecture – especially funerary artworks – were influenced by a wide variety of factors including Roman Catholic Church reforms, foreign relations, war, cultural practices, societal fashions, and natural occurrences like the Great Famine, the Little Ice Age, and the Black Death.¹³ The tombs, in this regard, “presented death in its most grisly aspect.”¹⁴ Medievalists are unable to pinpoint exactly why transi tombs became so popular between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. There are, however, two major theories that hold the most merit when asking the questions: *Where did transi tombs come from and why were they so popular?*

The first theory concerns Roman Catholicism and its religious practices. Medieval art historian Jakov Đorđević notes that the type of death art represented by a transi tomb was acutely significant and complementary to Catholic spirituality at the time.¹⁵ Traditionally, medieval tombs were created to aid and represent the deceased’s desire to achieve salvation and be at peace with God in Heaven. That is why the previous gisant style resembled the deceased’s “pride of life” image, illustrating a portrait of the departed soul in Heaven. The same, however, could also be said for these transi tombs. Even though the image of the decomposing cadaver would not fit with the idealized concept of Heaven, it did fit with the concept of Purgatory. This theory then engages the idea that the living knew their sinful lives did not resemble the lives of saints and they, most likely, would spend time in Purgatory.

For the living, Purgatory was a place of tremendous moral cleansing that held overwhelming, contradictory feelings of pain and hope, suffering and compassion, and exchange and salvation. In Purgatory, the soul underwent drastically painful changes and spiritual

evolutions in order to enter Heaven. Medieval accounts often depicted the soul's journey through gruesome transformations involving physical feelings of decay, torment, and a lot of "burning" sensations – exemplifying a commonly understood notion that pain and suffering had the ability to transcend the body and enter the spirit.¹⁶ The transi tomb may have gained popularity over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries because it complemented this established theology.¹⁷ The image of a decomposing cadaver may be interpreted as the soul's passage between the mortal and spiritual worlds, depicting a body undergoing a gruesome physical transformation while the soul is undergoing a mirrored spiritual transformation of its own. In other words, the sculpture of the decaying cadaver on Earth personifies the deceased's soul in Purgatory.

The second theory regarding the transi tomb's genesis speculates that the cadaver image was manufactured to specifically represent the overwhelming anxieties that plagued the people of the medieval world (pun intended). It is no secret to medievalists that the fourteenth century was a time of overwhelming chaos, angst, and anxiety. This is why modern scholars believe many groups of upper class, medieval people were inspired to create transi tombs in order to cope with their relationship with human mortality and the inevitable death they were going to endure. According to this interpretation, medieval people created the transi tomb to better express a sense of humility and piety when faced with the overwhelming reality of death.¹⁸

This theory may also explain why transi tombs are often interwoven into conversations about *memento mori* art, literature, and imagery.¹⁹ Even though the subject of transi tombs remains relatively understudied, some medievalists believe that the genesis of transi tombs came from Europe's psychological aftershocks from the Black Death.²⁰ This theory, held by medievalists like Helen M. Roe and John Aberth, centers on medieval Europe's understanding of human mortality, expressing the idea that medieval people coped with the Black Death by

creating dark, funerary art called *memento mori*. Translating from Latin to “remember your death,” *memento mori* art and literature was designed to embody a culture coming to terms with mortality and death. This type of artistic expression was first understood as the medieval coping mechanism for Europe’s overall “sense of failure” during a time of great chaos and fear.²¹

Memento mori art and literature produced artistic themes like the Dance of Death (“*Danse Macabre*”), the Grim Reaper, imagery of death personified as a horseman or chess player, and various stories and images of the Black Death and the apocalypse. In accordance with the creation and rise of transi tomb sculpture, these morbid concepts overwhelmed the cultural and artistic environments of medieval Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²² That is why many medieval historians today are still asking the questions: *Is this a change in religious practices? Is this a death-obsessed world coming to terms with the terrifying reality of human mortality during the Black Death?*

Unfortunately, these theories suggesting transi tombs were a direct result of Roman Catholicism and the Black Death cannot be unconditionally proven. This particular topic, in fact, is still widely debated among medievalists today.²³ It is apparent, however, that theological traditions from the dominating Roman Catholic Church and the repercussions of the Black Death influenced the emergence of transi tomb sculptures. Undoubtedly, both themes were heavily intertwined with everyday medieval society. To divorce them from medieval artistic trends would be to outwardly ignore major cultural attributes.²⁴ Thus, the correlations between the cultural ramifications of the Black Death, Catholic religious traditions, and the design of the transi tomb are too similar to not be interrelated.

On Portraiture

Taking a step back from the historical implications of the transi tomb, it becomes apparent that this type of funerary sculpture carries centuries' worth of cultural, social, and religious connotations with it. Transi tombs, as an artistic funerary style, shoulder the weight of fourteenth-century themes like the Black Death, medieval Roman Catholicism, and *memento mori*-inspired art and literature. This evolves, however, when analyzing each transi piece individually. In this example, the transi tomb of Guillaume de Harcigny stands as one simple thing: a portrait of Guillaume de Harcigny in death.

Born in 1300 A.D., Guillaume de Harcigny lived to be ninety-three years old. Harcigny is still remembered as one of the greatest French physicians of his time. Over his long life, he worked closely with the courts of Kings Charles V and Charles VI of France. Harcigny also traveled across the Mediterranean (notably to Italy, Palestine, Syria, and Egypt), learning new medical techniques and compiling information in medical manuscripts as he went. He became most famous, however, for operating on the skull of King Charles VI of France during the Hundred Years' War.²⁵ At the ripe age of ninety-two, Harcigny was able to temporarily cure the king's bout of insanity during a critical time of the war, solidifying his status as one of the greatest physicians of his time.²⁶ Many historians also note that Harcigny had many friendly and working relationships with aristocratic Frenchmen like King Charles V, King Charles VI, the Lord of Coucy, the Duke of Bourbon, and Jean Froissart.²⁷ In 1393, Harcigny died in his home in Laon, France. Just before his death, Harcigny commissioned a corrupted effigy to be created to mirror and overlie his entombed corpse. His transi tomb, per his request, was created. The sculpture is currently displayed at the Musée de Laon.

One of the many unique factors about Guillaume de Harcigny's tomb is that, having been built in 1393, it was the third French transi in recorded history and the first of France's three-dimensional transi tombs.²⁸ This suggests that Harcigny wanted his tomb to go in a different stylistic direction. Instead of the common "pride of life" effigy many noblemen had at the time, Guillaume de Harcigny's effigy was designed to mirror his corpse in death, resembling the ideas presented in the traditional gisant style, but in a new, corrupted appearance.

Rather than carving the deceased's corpse into a coffin lid made from stone or metal, the cadaver image was created as a freestanding sculpture resting horizontally above Harcigny's tomb.²⁹ This three-dimensional sculpture of Harcigny's corpse is naked, emaciated, and gaunt. The bony arms are stretched over his body, with his hands crossed over one another to cover the corpse's genitals (see figure 1). His face shows relaxed features and his eyes are closed and sunken deep into his skull. His jaw is slack, highlighting the thin, parted lips under his non-existent nose (see figure 2). Even from afar, it is evident that almost every bone in his body is visible to the viewer. Complimentary to the sculpture's ghastly features, the stone's design appears cold, colorless, vulnerable, and solid. The effigy is also bare, lacking any garments or coverings on the corpse (i.e. there is no shroud, tunic, or drapery on the body).³⁰ The transi sculpture shows nothing else but a simple, emaciated dead body stretched horizontally across the slab.

One interesting aspect about this transi tomb was that Guillaume de Harcigny personally chose this sculpture to be made in likeness to his corpse. Before Harcigny died, he gave specific instructions to have an artist create his burial effigy to closely resemble his dead body directly after he passed away. The inscription on the tomb reads, "*Deo et Nature reddo simplicia (space) acta compositi sint Deo Grata.*" In English, this roughly translates to "I give back to God and

nature my elements. May the deeds of the whole be pleasing to God.”³¹ With Harcigny’s lifelong career, funeral effigy request, and the Latin inscription in mind, some medievalists have interpreted this as Guillaume de Harcigny’s desire to have a funerary portrait that represented the insignificant and finite nature of a mortal life.³² Here, his soul has left his body and his “humble” matter is being returned to the Earth. Some scholars note that the presence of a transi figure also signifies the deceased’s virtue – even in death.³³ By illustrating an individual’s death with a decomposing cadaver figure, said individual would have publicly humbled themselves in their final hours. This was their way of showing that they personally died a “good death.”³⁴ From this standpoint, these grim funerary sculptures are able to provide a unique and intimate look at death. In her work entitled *Portraiture*, art historian Shearer West delves into this complicated subject matter. She writes:

From the Middle Ages onwards, portraits have formed a prominent part of tomb sculpture. Originally tombs would include only effigies of the dead individuals, and often these were stylized and interchangeable. But portraits on later medieval tombs begin to show distinctiveness in individual features as it became increasingly important to allude to the person who had died, rather than making only a generic reference to life and death. The direct relationship between portraits and tomb sculpture in these earlier periods may have contributed to an association between portraiture and death that persisted for centuries.³⁵

Death, in this case, becomes personified by the deceased’s cadaver. By creating a portrait of a dead individual, the cadaver sculpture can both illustrate the legacy and memory of the deceased – in this case, Guillaume de Harcigny – while also painting a portrait of death as a “living” memory.

With this dual concept in mind, the cadaver portrait also has the ability to communicate with the tomb’s beholder. In a way, the tomb becomes a portal between the living on Earth and the dead in Heaven or Purgatory. In this theory, the dead individual speaks to the transi tomb’s

living witness to interpret this funerary sculpture as a form of *memento mori*. West, later in the *Portraiture* text, speaks to this theory, writing:

The inclusion of dead individuals in portraits of living ones was not the only association between death and portraiture. ... This was intended to be a *memento mori*, or a reminder of death, which emphasized the ultimate destiny of all the live individuals represented. ... Ironically, because of their apparent vivification of the represented person, portraits had an inextricable relationship with death. A portrait could bring the dead back to life and appear to provide both a trace of a body and a stimulus to memory.³⁶

By associating the dead with portraiture, communication, and memory in these two passages, West ends up painting a very complicated narrative. The personification of a transi tomb, or portrait of death, simultaneously hints at the communication embedded in said funerary piece. In this dual interpretation, the cadaver image becomes a communication tool between the living and the dead, reminding the living witnesses of the individual that once was - Guillaume de Harcigny- while also visually shocking them into thinking about their own relationship with mortality (*memento mori*).

This elaborate theme raises the question: *If this is a sculpture of a dead body, can it still be considered a portrait?* From a modern perspective, one would assume that a dead body – one void of the personality, charisma, and soul it once grasped – is just decomposing matter. The body is no longer the person it once was. Thus, designing a transi tomb is sort of like creating a sculpture of an object, not a person. For the people of the Late Middle Ages, however, this could not be further from the truth.

Studying death during the Middle Ages is critical for understanding the society and culture of the time. The dead (and the harsh reality of death) were interwoven into the fabric of social life, representing a slightly distant group of people.³⁷ In fact, medievalist Patrick Geary argues that the dead have a social status all of their very own. In his work, *Living with the Dead*

in the Middle Ages, Geary points out that the rituals and religious environment during the Later Middle Ages suggests that the dead were social players capable of owning property, land, and going beyond the physical to work as mediators between the living on Earth and God in Heaven. The dead and the living had a shared connection and a relationship of “mutual dependence.”³⁸ They communicated with each other through mediums like prayer, storytelling, and cultural traditions. This communication, as Geary notes, can be best understood through the lenses of hagiographies, devotional traditions, shrines, relics, vision literature, folklore, family legacies, patron sainthood, and prayer.³⁹ The dead, therefore, are not divorced from society completely. They work within its framework, creating a bridge between humanity and God. In other words, they embodied their own social class.

This is why the answer to the question “If the transi tomb is a sculpture of a dead body, is it still a portrait?” is *yes, absolutely*. Guillaume de Harcigny’s transi tomb encapsulates the unique personality of Harcigny while simultaneously representing an entire social class altogether. The transi tomb of Guillaume de Harcigny is an extraordinary example of *memento mori* sculpture. By nature of being a transi figure, Harcigny’s tomb incorporates elements of both societal truths and individual ones. It is shocking and ghastly to look at, but it presents deeply real and spiritually grounded truths. The tomb encapsulates many medieval traditions from the Roman Catholic Church while also alluding to Europe’s shared, traumatic societal experiences from the fourteenth century. Though these tombs all share similar characteristics, they each stand alone because every tomb is a portrait. No single human being is the same, and therefore, no transi tomb is either. Each tomb is as unique as the person enclosed. Therefore, the tomb of Guillaume de Harcigny is a portrait of both the medieval society at the time and the dead man it resembles.

List of Figures



Figure 1: Garitan , G. *Transi De Harcigny*. November 9, 2014. *Wikimedia Commons*.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transi_de_Harcigny_00969.JPG. Licensed under CC-BY-SA 4.0



Figure 2: Vassil. *Tomb of Guilluame De Harcigny* . February 28, 2008. *Wikimedia Commons*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guillaume_de_Harsigny#/media/File:Gisant_Guillaume_de_Harcigny_Mus%C3%A9e_de_Laon_280208_1.jpg.

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Endnotes

- ¹ John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, (New York, 2010), 1.
- ² The first recorded transi tomb in existence was the 1387 tomb of Wouter Copman from Lowlands' Bruges. This "beginning date," however, is tentative. Many different parts of Europe underwent a lot of Anti-Catholic periods following the Protestant Reformation and destroyed many Catholic places of worship in the process. Many Catholic tombs, family chapels, and religious art were stripped, destroyed, and "lost" centuries after construction. Kathleen Rogers Cohen, *The Changing Meaning of the Transi Tomb in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Europe*, (Ann Arbor, 1969), v-xi.
- ³ Aberth 2010, 215.
- ⁴ Cohen 1969, 13.
- ⁵ The phrase "Cadaver Tomb" can be used in place of "Transi Tomb" as well. In this paper, however, I will only be using and referring to the term "transi" when talking about Guillaume's tomb. I will, however, refer to said sculpture as "corpse," "effigy," and "cadaver" throughout this essay.
- ⁶ "Gisant" imagery dated as early as the tenth century in Europe and was common in European art and culture through the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. Aberth 2010, 247.
- ⁷ Aberth 2010, 247.
- ⁸ It is important to note that the people who could afford these sculptures were almost always from the upper classes.
- ⁹ Shearer West, *Portraiture*, (Oxford, 2004), 64.
- ¹⁰ Medievalist Kathleen Cohen specifies that the medieval, European transi tomb in Europe dates from 1387 – 1650's exactly. Cohen 1969, v-xi.
- ¹¹ Kathleen Rogers Cohen, *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol*, (Berkeley, 1973), 181.
- ¹² Aberth 2010, 214-216.
- ¹³ Claire Downham, *Medieval Ireland*. (Cambridge, 2018), 341.
- ¹⁴ Arthur Augustus Tilley, *The Dawn of the French Renaissance*. (England, 1918), 473.
- ¹⁵ Jakov Đorđević, "Made in the Skull's Likeness: Of Transi Tombs, Identity and Memento Mori," (2017), 4.
- ¹⁶ Sander Vloebergs, "Lucifer, Save My Soul! Medieval Female Interpretations of Divine Judgement, Compassion and the Doctrine of Purgatory," (2018), 62.
- ¹⁷ These medieval ideas have mellowed with age. Modern Catholic concepts of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory do not align with these "scarier" images you tend to see in the Sistine Chapel.
- ¹⁸ Đorđević 2017,10.
- ¹⁹ Aberth 2010, 227-240.
- ²⁰ Helen M. Roe, "Cadaver Effigial Monuments in Ireland," (1969), 1.
- ²¹ It is important to note that historians have evolved with this thought. In the early twentieth century, modern historians characterized medieval people as having a "morbid obsession with death." Later, however, historians have been led to believe that *memento mori* was a far healthier version of this historical interpretation. The newer concept accepts the idea that medieval people may have incorporated this morbid art and literature into their religious beliefs, lifestyles, and culture in order embrace death with willingness, courage, and life-affirmation. Aberth 2010, 211.
- ²² Roe 1969, 1.
- ²³ Medieval historians still argue today whether transi tomb art derived exclusively from the memento mori style, or if it was just a natural progression of the gisant style fused with the Black Death "reality check."
- ²⁴ Cohen 1973, 181.
- ²⁵ R.C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue: Crisis at the Court of Charles VI, 1392-1420*, (New York, 1987), 209. Some historians also label his madness as Schizophrenia.
- ²⁶ Guillaume de Harcigny came out of his retirement to aid Charles VI. When Charles later fell back into madness,

Harcigny, unfortunately, was already dead. Famiglietti 1987, 209.

²⁷ Famiglietti 1987, 207-209.

²⁸ Cohen 1969, v-xi.

²⁹ Harcigny's transi was one of the first of its kind and the only previous (preserved) styles had the body carved into stone or metal, acting like an etching of the person. Harcigny's transi tomb is the first *known* transi to have been made as a three-dimensional, corrupted sculpture. Cohen 1969, v-xi.

³⁰ In later centuries, many transi tombs developed to contain bugs, frogs, vermin, and drapery. "Body bags," too, were very common for cadaver presentation. Rebecca Winer, "Death and Late Medieval Europe," (2018), Lecture Slides.

³¹ The same phrase, written with a semicolon after *compositi*, has also been seen depicted on the doorway of the French Baile family's estate during the same century. One could speculate, then, that the phrase used on the transi tomb may have been more widely used in France. H. Gariel, *Bibliothèque Historique Et Littéraire Du Dauphiné*, (Grenoble, 1864), 250.

³² Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*. (Great Britain, 2017), 502.

³³ Nigel Llewellyn, *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual 1500-1800*, (London, 1992), 29-30

³⁴ Llewellyn 1992, 30-38.

³⁵ West 2004, 64.

³⁶ West 2004, 65.

³⁷ Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*, (London, 2001), 166.

³⁸ Patrick J. Geary, *Living With the Dead in the Middle Ages*, (Ithaca, 1994), 78.

³⁹ Geary 1994, 78-92.