Two 17th Century Italian Plague Paintings

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What was it like to be in a plague epidemic? I had the pleasure of photographing two 17th century paintings that give us an idea.
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The first is an anonymous painting in Bologna’s State Archive. It shows a street during an epidemic in 1630 that kills 25% of Bologna’s population. On each side of the street are apartments full of quarantined citizens. Public health workers go about their business on the street itself. It is interesting to speculate what they are doing.
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On the left side a wrapped body is being lowered from an upper floor apartment window to a stretcher waiting below. Was this simply the easiest way to move the body, or was ground floor access closed up to enforce the quarantine?
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The end of the street is fenced off and guarded. It appears only those with official business are allowed to come and go.
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On the right side of the street are men with large baskets. Are they provisioning the apartments? Quarantines last 20 to 40 days, so provisioning is necessary.
In the center of the street, health workers carry a patient to an apartment. A friar beckons to a porter to bring the patient’s belongings.
Public health workers killed this dog with a spear because they believe dogs and cats carry plague. This idea is not crazy because dogs and cats can carry infectious fleas. Unfortunately, eliminating cats and dogs increases rat populations, and rats are the source of plague.
This grisly scene at the side of the painting shows a canine execution. One public health worker appears to be holding a knife, the other a large rock. We can feel sorry for the poor dog.
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A health worker emerges carrying bedding from a vacated apartment. Today, we know that infectious fleas can survive in bedding for weeks, so removing it is a good idea. I suspect the next step is to burn it in the fire. The officials looking on may be making sure valuable but potentially contaminated household goods are burned and not resold. The seated official seems to be keeping a tally, perhaps for compensating heirs for their lost property.
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A portable altar in the middle of the street provides spiritual comfort to quarantined citizens in the apartments. We can imagine the altar moving up the street and priest performing mass in front of each apartment.
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This cart has a custom lid that opens for a body and then closes. We can see how this clever lid works in a similar painting.
This attention to detail is typical of northern Italy’s highly organized response to plague. Unfortunately, it fails because no one at the time understands where plague comes from or how it spreads. Today we know it comes from rats and other rodents and spreads mainly by fleabites and sometimes by coughing.
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Market Square during plague of 1657, Naples, by Carlo Coppola. Carlo Coppola (17th century) was an Italian painter of the Baroque period, active in his natal city of Naples. He was a pupil of the battle-painter Aniello Falcone, and was adept at the same topic. He is said to have enjoyed himself during the day, thus spending his nights painting by candlelight, only within a short time to become blind.

(Sources: Google Image Search, Wikipedia)
We will next look at Carlo Coppola’s painting of Naples’s Piazza Mercato as it appears in 1657 during a horrific epidemic that kills 150 thousand people, half the population of Naples.
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Here is a nobleman on horseback. He looks overwhelmed. Victims surround him. Body disposal was only one of many problems faced by officials.
Here victims crowd around a fountain. Plague causes a high fever and makes victims thirsty. When I look at their faces I begin to feel what it was like to be in a plague epidemic.
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A priest gives communion to plague victims while at the same time keeping his distance and covering his face. He is in a difficult position. Many priests die in epidemics, but the Church considers plague punishment for sin. An honorable priest should have little to fear. So, is this priest a coward for taking precautions? No, no one working in this piazza could be considered a coward. Braver still is his assistant. Do you see him, passing out communion wafers? He does not even have a kerchief over his face.
In the center of the Piazza are gallows. A man is hung, perhaps for breaking quarantine laws. A young child and mother stand next to the gallows, looking on. Are they family of the condemned man?
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Here a man is displayed on a platform as a warning to potential law breakers, but people pass by with little notice.
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Bodies are loaded into a wagon by workers with kerchiefs over their faces. Perhaps the kerchiefs are for protection, or perhaps for reducing the smell. When full, the wagon will go to a mass grave, a plague pit, outside the city.
The costume is a recreation of a suit invented in France in the early 1600s with a beak full of spices to purify the air, and waxed fabric to avoid picking up plague miasma particles. One plague health worker from the time wrote that the only good the outfit did was to keep fleas off which was ironic because at the time no one knew that fleas were the vectors. I suspect most plague workers could not afford this elaborate protection.
I hope you found these paintings as interesting as I do. Both provide a glimpse into truly awful times. You can see Carlo Coppola’s enormous painting hanging in the Museo di San Martino in Naples. The anonymous painting from Bologna is not on public view. A narrated version of this article can be viewed on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d71C7UIU7oE.

Sources
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