

Resilience is a quality we human beings possess in abundance, just as we have the power to rise above panic, self-pity and fear. Consider, for instance, that the very epoch when European art rose to the pinnacle of its glory was also the age of disease and death.

In early October 1347, Genoese ships docked at the port of Messina in Sicily, bringing with them a fierce plague. It swept through Europe, killing an estimated one-third of its population in the next few years and greatly affecting European art for at least the next one hundred and fifty years to come. This locates the lives of Old Masters, the venerable creative geniuses of the Renaissance, which was just beginning at that time, in the shadow of a pandemic: Michelangelo, Leonardo, later Van Dyck, Rembrandt and the rest were faced with imminent danger of falling prey at any moment to the cyclically recurring mortal contagion. Some great artists, including Hans Holbein and Titian are believed to have died from it. Others chose to fight back with their art, like Tintoretto, who painted his greatest works in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice, appropriately named after a plague-protective saint.

The art of these centuries abounds in images of death for sure, yet it is also full of hope and joy. Far from being driven to despair by pestilence, it is as though the artists were spurred to assert the glory of life, creating astounding treasures that remain to this day beacons of civilization. While Petrarch and Boccaccio decried the sorry state of human race in the grip of disease, they also wrote about the beauty of life and nature. Seeking to enjoy these fleeting pleasures, many of the elite, including the famous Medici family in Florence, took to lavishly patronizing the arts, which in turn made it possible for the artists to concentrate on creating and to produce some of the greatest works of art ever known to man. Though Renaissance masterpieces are too many to list, Michelangelo's *David* stands out, not only because it happens to be a classically proportioned, anatomically perfect pillar of figurative genre, but also because its creator dug so deep within himself that he succeeded in quite literally imbuing marble with his very own life force, capable of bringing us to our knees for centuries to come. Michelangelo's *David*, *Pietà* and the Sistine Ceiling, Botticelli's *Primavera*, Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, sculptures by Donatello and Giotto's religious paintings, just to name a few that come immediately to mind, transcend social, historical and cultural constraints of their place and time to capture something that is universal to us all: the strife and the triumph of human condition. That, to me, is what characterizes truly great art. I believe that great art is what we aspire to as contemporary artists working in the chosen medium of our respective disciplines.

We all worry that the global pandemic our society is presently facing will lead to a greater or lesser degree of total collapse worldwide. Yet history is actually full of optimistic messages. People have endured disasters that modern man living in today's world can barely comprehend, and have come out not just fighting for their lives but winning. The Black Death marked an end of an era in Italy, its impact lasting and profound. It resulted in wide-ranging social, economic, cultural and religious changes that in turn, directly and indirectly, led to emergence of the Renaissance, one of the greatest epochs for art, architecture and literature in human history.

Consider this a friendly nudge to us in the 21st century from another age comprised of everyday heroes, a not-so-subtle hint that even in a world gripped by fear, or perhaps particularly in such a world, the task of seeking authentic ways to return to a richer, deeper, more fulfilling human experience has never been more pressing. Art brings us closer by offering a single most direct form of communication: from one human being to another. It is the highest form of hope.