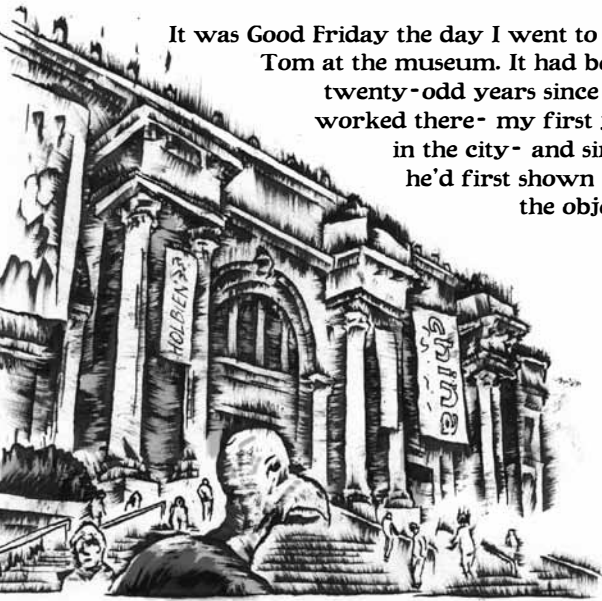
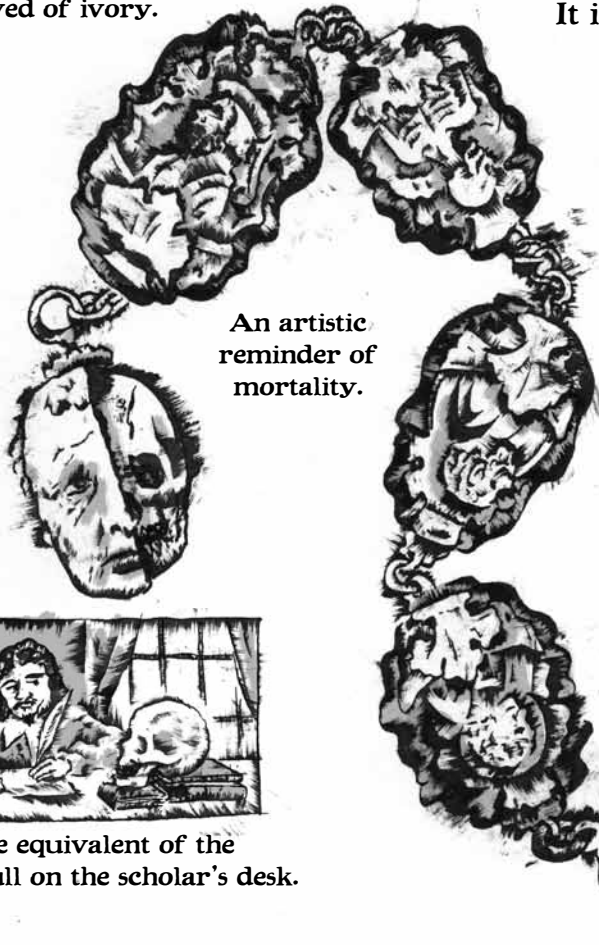


It was Good Friday the day I went to see Tom at the museum. It had been twenty-odd years since I'd worked there- my first job in the city- and since he'd first shown me the object.



The object, which has held my memory all these years, is a rosary all these years, is a rosary carved of ivory.



An artistic reminder of mortality.

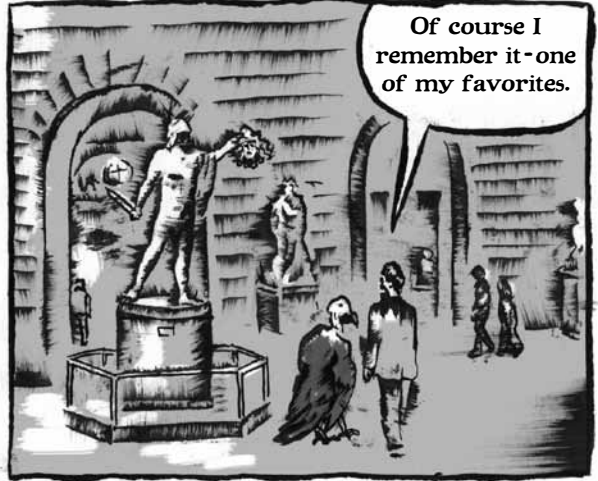
On each end is a face: half human / half skull.

The inscription says: "Meditate on death; This is what you will be."



The equivalent of the skull on the scholar's desk.

Tom had been there all this time- rising from book warehouse manager to a restorer of medieval objects. I envied his pension and glorious work environment.



It is what is known as a

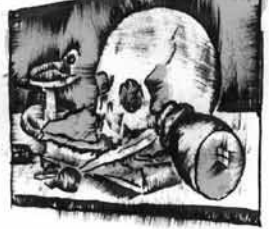
Memento Mori.

Not much is known about the rosary, save that it was made sometime from 1500-1526. As we walked, Tom put it in context for me.



The thinking is that you see a lot of death imagery around this time in response to the outbreak of Bubonic Plague.

This is especially true of the Vanitas paintings- still lifes with skulls in them done around 16th and 17th centuries in Northern Europe.

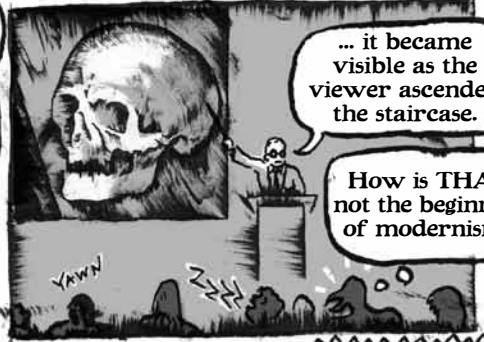


Hmm-I wonder if that's what's going on with that Holbein painting.- the one with distorted skull in the carpet.



the Ambassadors.

Yes! That's one of my clearest memories from art history class.



... it became visible as the viewer ascended the staircase.

How is THAT not the beginning of modernism?

Have you seen the More portrait at the Frick?



Oh man. The realism in that painting is fucking psychedelic...

A print of Holbein's painting hung in my studio for years. I always wondered if the perfection of the painting somehow reflected the admiration of the painter.



the electricity in those red velvet sleeves...

the wispieness of the fur...

the translucence of his skin...

I love that painting.

Curiously, the painting is hung across the fireplace from another Holbein portrait: More's adversary Thomas Cromwell.

To my eye, Holbein is far less admiring of Cromwell.

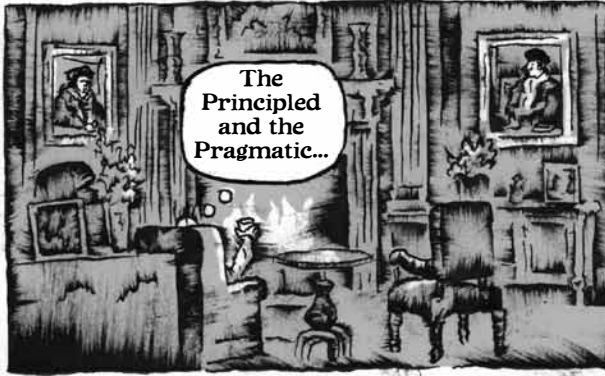
Cromwell's portrait seems painted with less care than More's.

His eyes are beady and his mouth pinched. Was Holbein showing a preference?

In any case, both More and Cromwell would eventually lose their heads to Henry the VIII.



Given that Frick himself hung these portraits facing each other, one wonders if he pondered their fate? Did they function as an object lesson in politics?



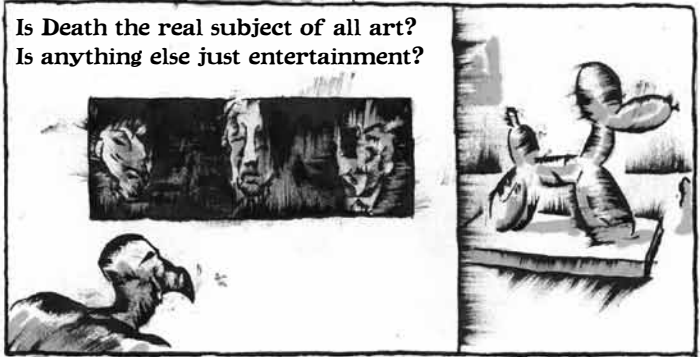
Or a Memento Mori? As is any portrait, once the sitter has died.



Tom returned to work and I roamed the museum, stimulated by our conversation.



Is Death the real subject of all art? Is anything else just entertainment?



Is art an acknowledgement of Death...



or a denial of it?

Oh right... Good Friday.



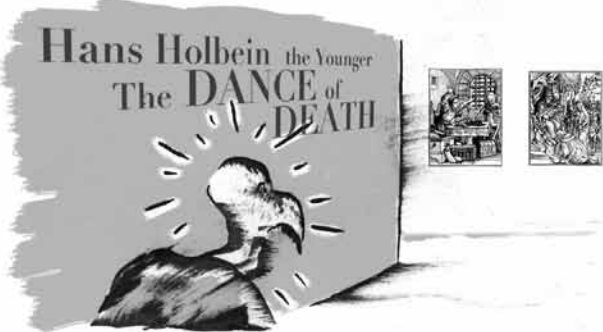
The Asmat honored their dead with feasts and rituals. The towering Asmat "bis" poles were made for these funeral feasts.

Room after room, object after object...



the spectre of death prevailed the museum.

So when I came across the sign, it shocked me. How had I not thought of them in our earlier conversation? This was, after all, the Holbien work that had transfixed me most of all.



Drawn by Holbein in 1526, the same year More sat for him. The Dance of Death is seen by scholars as "reformist satire" and an early work of social criticism.



"He is assisted by death."



Is this a museum or a mausoleum?



I'd been introduced to it years before, back in Kansas, by K. By his own telling a runaway, K's propensity for personal myth-making would make him an infamous and problematic figure.



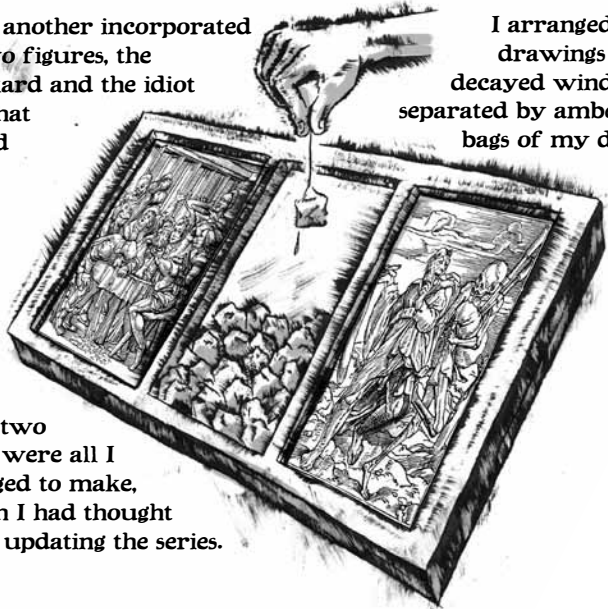
Throughout the series Death visits it's victims in all walks of life. It is at turns a punisher, a mocker, a reliever of pain, an enabler, but always an equalizer.



Years later I'd started a series of work inspired it. One collaged the Rich Man with shredded money.



While another incorporated the two figures, the drunkard and the idiot fool, that seemed closest to my own fate.



I arranged the drawings in a decayed window, separated by ambered bags of my daily tea.

These two pieces were all I managed to make, though I had thought to try updating the series.

Strangely, by a series of subsequent events, real or possibly imagined, K has become inextricably linked to the recurring figure conjured by Holbein.



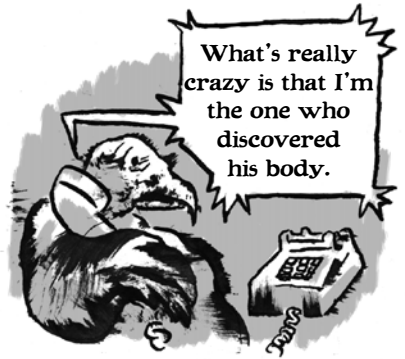
I guess K had been drinking with him all night, and he said he seemed kinda depressed.

Oh man...



She said K bought it but he told me he hadn't seen Jimbo for months.

Can't trust what either says.



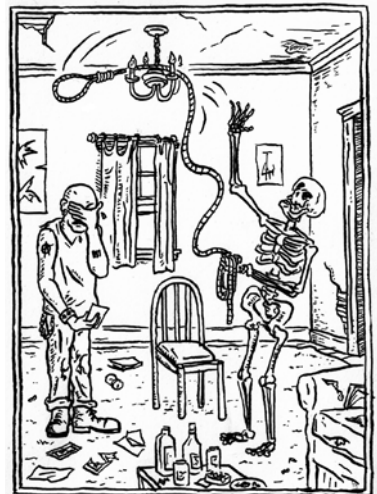
What's really crazy is that I'm the one who discovered his body.



Perhaps my updated version would include the bass player who's taste of fame could not outweigh his troubled childhood.



Or the unrecognized genius painter whose mind and spirit were destroyed by a sadly typical but deadly habit.



Or the young punk who may or may not have dated the wrong girl.

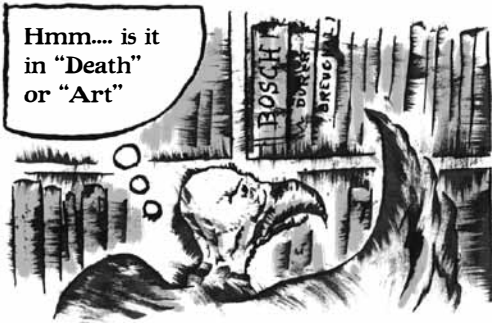
These were my happy thoughts as I stepped into the sunlight and the streets teeming with life.



As I made my way downtown, the plague-induced death obsessions of Holbein floated away.



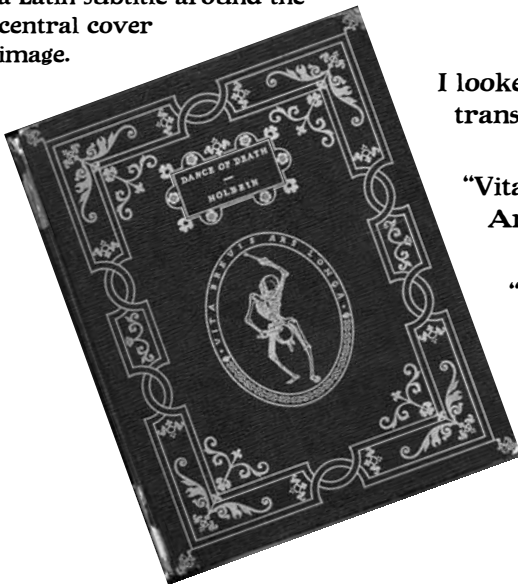
But when I returned home I sought to dig up my old copy of The Dance of Death, purchased in Kansas so many years ago.



Printed in 1947, I know I either bought it from K or with him, though my memory won't reveal which.



I noticed, for the first time, that it had a Latin subtitle around the central cover image.



I looked up the translation online...

"Vita Brevis
Ars Longa"

"Life is Brief
but Art is
long lasting."

Then I got
back to work.

