

Summary

Motif of melancholy in the 16th and in the early 17th century

The author attempts in his presented work to outline in brief basic ways of melancholy motif depiction in fine arts in the 16th and in the early 17th century. Emphasis is primarily placed on personification or allegory of melancholy that is based on the period theoretical considerations.

The basis for melancholy perception as a state on the balance of madness and brilliance were laid by classical philosophers like Plato and Aristoteles. Subsequently, these considerations were extended by interconnection of melancholy with astrology in the Middle ages. Thus melancholics get under the influence of the divine Saturn planet. This is where many depictions of so called Saturn children emerge showing allegory of crafts and professions attributed traditionally to melancholics. Frequent depictions of a mythological Saturn-motif swallowing his children are on this basis a symbol of ambivalent nature of melancholics fluctuating between divine brilliance and madness.

These ideas were revived by Florentine humanists in particular by the person of Marsilio Ficino in the 15th and 16th century who combined them into a complex theory of melancholy. Thanks to this theory fine arts ceased to be considered in accordance with old tradition a craft and were promoted to higher liberal arts. Artists were attributed creative brilliance and also melancholic temper. These period ideas are best represented on the copperplate engraving of Melencolia I by Albrecht Dürer that creates also a turning point in iconography of melancholy. Durer's winged figure of Melancholy was in the subsequent centuries accepted by many artists and stands at the start of a new and binding iconographic type. This type has been transformed into motifs allegory of astronomy, geometry, or time in the course of time.

Older conceptions of melancholy had lived on in Europe outside these humanistic traditions until the late 16th century that consider it a sin by so called acedia that has its origin with Devil as such. Melancholy is interconnected with demons and witchcraft and finds expression in many pictures featuring subjects as Sankt Anthony Temptation or in works of Lucas Cranach.

But more progressive became that humanistic conception. Pictures and graphic arts that are based just on that feature loose gradually its philosophical dimension in the 16th

century and are confined only to a melancholic gesture of displayed person. A melancholic spleen is frequently connected with motif of vanity, mortality, transience and absurdity of human endeavour.

Key words: melancholy, Dürer, Cranach, acedia, vanitas