



Museo de Sanidad Piece of the month Plague doctor



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In its central hall, the Museo de Sanidad exhibits a reproduction of the 17th century engraving *Der Doctor Schnabel von Rom* (Doctor Beak of Rome). This well-known work refers to the bizarre clothing worn by a kind of practitioner known as "Plague Doctor" while they were on duty. It depicts a character wearing a long waxed leather cloak; his face is covered by a beak-shaped mask filled with aromatic substances; his eyes are protected by glass goggles; the rest of his outfit is composed of gloves, shoes and a hat, all of them made of goat fur. He is wielding in his right hand a staff topped by a winged hourglass, which symbolizes the ephemeral nature of existence and the passing of life. It was used to examine patients from a certain distance and, when the time came, to flog them to punish them for their sins. The aromatic substances were used to fight miasmas floating in the air, which that the time were considered to be the cause of the disease. Charles de Lorme, King of France's personal physician, designed this protective suit in 1619, drawing inspiration from a soldier's full body armour. It was employed in Paris for the first time and, since then, its use became widespread throughout Europe. Since the Black Death that devastated Europe in the 14th century, Plague Doctors served as public servants in any city willing to pay their wages. Their main role was to keep public record of decease by the Plague and assist all its victims regardless their social status. Some of these doctors went too far on their duties and, as a result, satirical works, such as this engraving, were published. This one was based in a model by Columbina (as indicated on a footnote) and it includes, written in Latin and German at both sides of the depicted figure, a satirical poem that warns us about the abusive practices of some of these Plague Doctors. Underneath the poem, towards the left corner, a group of children are fleeing from the Doctor; on the right side, we find a view of an Italian city. The signature of the renowned German editor and engraver Paul Fürst can be found at the lower right corner.



Detail of the winged hourglass

*You believe it is a fable
What is written about Doctor Beak
Who flees the contagion
And snatches his wage from it
He seeks cadavers to eke out a living
Just like the raven on the dung heap
Oh believe, don't look away
For the plague rules Rome.*



*Who would not be very frightened
Before his little rod or stick
By which means he speaks as though he were mute,
and indicates his decision
So many a one believes without doubt
That he is touched by a black devil
His hell is called "purse"
And the souls he fetches are gold.*



Vestidura de médico (1656). En el pico de pájaro llevaba un algodón empapado en perfume para evitar el contagio.