

The Mystery of Hieronymus Bosch

Ingrid D. Rowland
AUGUST 18, 2016 ISSUE

Hieronymus Bosch: Visions of Genius

an exhibition at Noordbrabants Museum, 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands, February 13–May 8, 2016

Catalog of the exhibition by Matthijs IJssink and Jos Koldeweij

Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 191 pp., \$35.00 (paper) (distributed by Yale University Press)

Bosch: The Fifth Centenary Exhibition

an exhibition at the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, May 31–September 11, 2016

Catalog of the exhibition edited by Pilar Silva Maroto

Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 397 pp., €33.25 (paper)

Hieronymus Bosch: Visions and Nightmares

by Nils Büttner

Reaktion, 208 pp., \$22.50

Jheronimus Bosch: The Road to Heaven and Hell

by Gary Schwartz

Overlook Duckworth, 254 pp., \$70.00

Hieronymus Bosch, Painter and Draughtsman: Catalogue Raisonné

by the Bosch Research and Conservation Project

Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 607 pp., \$150.00 (distributed by Yale University Press)

Hieronymus Bosch, Painter and Draughtsman: Technical Studies

by the Bosch Research and Conservation Project

Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 463 pp., \$150.00 (distributed by Yale University Press)

Hieronymus Bosch: Garden of Earthly Delights

by Hans Belting

Prestel, 125 pp., \$14.95 (paper)

There has never been a painter quite like Jheronimus van Aken, the Flemish master who signed his works as Jheronimus Bosch. His imagination ranged from a place beyond the spheres of Heaven to the uttermost depths of Hell, but for many of his earliest admirers the most striking aspect of his art was what they described as its “truth

Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

Hieronymus Bosch: The Wayfarer, circa 1500–1510

to nature.” The five hundredth anniversary of his death in 1516 has inspired two comprehensive exhibitions, at the Noordbrabants Museum in his hometown of ’s-Hertogenbosch and at Madrid’s Museo Nacional del Prado, as well as an ambitious project to analyze all of his surviving work, drawn, painted, and printed, according to the latest scientific techniques (the Bosch Research and Conservation Project). Yet despite all we have learned through these undertakings—and it is a great deal—the man his neighbors knew as “Joen the painter” remains as mysterious as ever.

How could it be otherwise with so strange and masterful an artist? His early admirers celebrated the boundless ingenuity of his work, but they also recognized the sureness of his hand and his unerringly observant eye. In the precision of his draftsmanship, his sensitivity to landscape, his fascination with animals, he shows some surprising affinities with his contemporary from Florence, Leonardo da Vinci—who else but Leonardo would have noticed, and recorded, as Bosch does, the way that evening light can turn the waters of a distant river into a radiant mirror? Both artists were fascinated by grotesque human faces, but Bosch also detailed grotesque human behavior with a bawdy abandon all his own. No matter how closely we look at his minutely particular works, there is always something more to see.

The earthly life of Jheronimus van Aken is sparsely documented; the clues to his inner life are fewer still. He grew up on the northernmost border of the Flemish-speaking, Burgundian-ruled Duchy of Brabant, in a city whose name means “the duke’s forest”: *Silva Ducis* in Latin, s’-Hertogenbosch in Flemish, Bois-le-Duc in French, Herzogenbusch in German, Bolduque in Spanish—all languages in common use in his times and in his region. The forest itself was probably an ancient memory by the time of his birth around 1450, replaced by an emporium that ranked only behind Brussels and Antwerp for size and importance within its area, famous for its steel knives and its cloth market.

ADVERTISING

[inRead](#) invented by Teads

The van Aken family had been painters for at least three generations, and residents of Den Bosch (the colloquial name of s’-Hertogenbosch) for two. In 1430, three years or so after arriving in the city, Bosch’s grandfather and grandmother enrolled as members of the Brotherhood of Our Lady, the local religious confraternity. Ever afterward, the brotherhood would provide their large extended family with spiritual solace, social contact, and artistic commissions. Their four sons, Thomas, Jan, Goessen, and Anthonius, would become painters in their own right, as, in turn, would the three sons of

Anthony van Aken: Jan, Goessen, and Joen/Jheronimus. All of them seem to have had active careers. Only one had a truly exceptional talent.

In 1462, Anthony van Aken, aged around forty, bought a house on the market square in Den Bosch, where, like his neighbors, he could display his wares out in front of the door. Twelve-year-old Joen may already have provided him with something unusual to show. Anthony and his wife had joined the Brotherhood of Our Lady as regular members in 1454, yet another sign of their prosperous middle-class life in a prosperous town; in fact, Den Bosch was renowned in the Low Countries for its hospitality to wanderers and generosity to the poor. This was the setting in which the boy Joen van Aken grew to maturity, where the routines of work, piety, and family life drew an added energy from wider worlds of trade, politics, and speculation, both intellectual and spiritual.

A wildfire swept Den Bosch in 1463. The aftermath provided the van Akens with several commissions to replace lost or damaged works of art, but their house on the market square suffered slight damage to its roof. The conflagration seared its way into the visual memory of their youngest son, who seems to have registered everything he saw, then and always, with uncanny precision. Yet the dazzling visual acuity that led him to revel in the fine points of line, color, texture, or light was matched by an ability to see beneath the surface of things, separating truth from falsehood, sincerity from hypocrisy, kindness from cruelty.

Sometime between 1477 and 1481, the thirtyish Joen married a woman of property, Aleid van de Meervenne, and moved to another, larger house on the prestigious north side of the market square, apparently setting up his own separate studio as Jheronimus Bosch. Like his father and grandfather before him, he joined the Brotherhood of Our Lady, signing its books in 1487; the following year, in a move unprecedented in his family's history, the brotherhood took him in as a "sworn brother," a member of the confraternity's eighty-man elite. The duties of a sworn brother included hosting a sumptuous banquet for the entire group from time to time, and the brotherhood's books for 1489 show that "Jeronimus the painter" treated his brethren to twenty-four pounds of beef. His artistic talent and his wife's dealings in real estate had propelled him into a higher rank of society.

As his reputation spread, he may have taken the artistic name "Bosch" as a way of telling out-of-town patrons where to find him ("van Aken" meant "from Aachen," but great-grandfather Thomas had left that city for the Low Countries by 1404). By 1505, those patrons included aristocrats, courtiers, and heads of state, passionate collectors of Flemish art who saw something uniquely desirable in the visions of Jheronimus from s'-

Hertogenbosch. There is no indication, however, that the artist himself ever moved from the house he shared with Aleid on the north side of the market square. If he traveled in his youth, no records of that travel survive. He died, childless, in his mid-sixties, during an outbreak of plague in 1516, survived by his wife for another six years. His nephews continued to follow the family's traditional calling on the same local scale as their own father, Goessen van Aken, not on the timeless, borderless scale of their uncle, Jheronimus Bosch.

Because the records regarding Bosch are so scant and the surviving works are so few and so strange, every aspect of his career is debated and debatable. The curators of the Prado and the Noordbrabants Museum do not entirely agree on what is by Bosch and what is not, or on when he created the drawings and paintings they have put on display, or for whom, let alone what they mean. On one point, though, everyone is delighted to concur, from scholars and curators to the visitors who have come to Den Bosch and Madrid in droves. Jheronimus Bosch is a master.

The Noordbrabants Museum, which owns no works by Bosch, nonetheless managed to assemble an impressive array of them: nineteen of twenty-five known drawings, including *The Wood Has Ears*, *the Field Has Eyes* and *The Owl's Nest*, as well as most of the panel paintings: twenty of the twenty-five autograph works accepted by the Bosch Research and Conservation Project. The Prado, which boasts the largest collection of Bosch paintings in the world, is displaying its treasures until September on cleverly designed curving platforms that allow viewers all-around views of triptychs like its own *Garden of Earthly Delights*, *The Haywain*, and *The Temptations of Saint Anthony* from Lisbon, as well as choice drawings like *Tree-man* from Vienna's Albertina and, once again, *The Owl's Nest*.

The wild, imaginative detail of Bosch calls for close inspection, but an implacable logic governs the phantasmagoria. Bosch's visions of Hell, with their minutely observed flames and slimy, mephitic pools, are more chaotic

than Dante's, but a similarly stern moral sense ensures that every crime receives its own excruciating punishment. By exposing the consequences of bad conduct, Bosch urges his viewers to behave themselves, and they do: in Den Bosch and Madrid, expectant crowds waited patiently for a moment of intimate scrutiny, a forest of pointing fingers suggesting how many of them were rewarded in the end by some secret insight.

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

Detail of Hieronymus Bosch's The Temptations of Saint Anthony, circa 1510–1515; from 'Bosch: The Fifth Centenary Exhibition,' on view at the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, until September 11, 2016.

Both museums issued their own catalogs, and several other excellent books have appeared in this centenary year to introduce Bosch and his work to the general public. Nils Büttner's *Hieronymus Bosch: Visions and Nightmares* is an attractive little hardbound book with good color illustrations providing an inviting, judicious overview of Bosch in his historical environment. In a larger format with lavish illustrations, *Jheronimus Bosch: The Road to Heaven and Hell* by Gary Schwartz devotes a two-page spread to each of Bosch's major panels, allowing the reader, guided by Schwartz's sensible suggestions, to develop a personal interpretation of the great artist's painted puzzles.

Both volumes are ideal companions to Bosch. The catalog for the Noordbrabants Museum's exhibition also addresses the general reader engagingly. Specialists will want to consult the two dense, beautifully illustrated volumes published by the members of the Bosch Research and Conservation Project, presenting the results of their scientific analyses and their conclusions about the dating and attribution of the artist's works. (For example, because Bosch painted on panels of Baltic oak, analyzing the sequence of tree rings allows them to determine when the individual trees were felled, sometimes connecting particular paintings to a single tree, sometimes showing that a panel could only have been painted after Bosch's death.) The Prado catalog is twice as large as the Noordbrabants's, with more detailed entries on the individual works, but it also has wonderful essays for the general reader.

In preparation for the centenary year of 2016, a Dutch documentary team followed the Conservation Project's art historians and scientists as they moved around Europe. Released in 2015, the film *Jheronimus Bosch: Touched by the Devil* records some memorable moments in Venice and some lively meetings at the Prado and the Escorial with Pilar Silva Maroto, the formidable curator of the Prado's exhibition, and former deputy director Gabriele Finaldi, who became head of London's National Gallery shortly after filming. The encounter between the earnest young Dutch team and the mighty museum is not quite the auto-da-fé scene from Verdi's *Don Carlo*, but at five hundred years' remove we can still sense the contrast between the courtly culture of imperial Spain and the merchant culture of a trading town in the Low Countries. "After all, we have the paintings," Silva Maroto says matter-of-factly, and of course the Prado also has an in-house conservation department fully worthy of the museum's stature in the world.

We can also imagine the sparks of excitement that flew when the fantastic imagery of a middle-class painter from 's-Hertogenbosch entered the ethereal haunts of the Hapsburgs at the turn of the sixteenth century, two societies inhabiting the same times and the same places, maintaining entirely distinct modes of dress and behavior, but united in their

fascination with this strange genius. Silva Maroto confides to the film crew that her own house caught fire when she was a child. She knows all about how the flames that devoured 's-Hertogenbosch in 1463 might have etched their way into the memory of young Joen van Aken.

The exhibition in Den Bosch emphasized Bosch as a local artist, albeit an artist of rare accomplishment. The Prado emphasized the remarkable history of its collection, created by King Philip II, who loved the weird Netherlandish painter as much as he loved Titian. Philip also warmed to the uptight Christian morality of a northern painter who conveniently died the year before Martin Luther unleashed the Protestant Reformation. The courtly patronage of this decidedly bourgeois artist therefore emerged as a dominant theme in the Spanish venue, along with the two stern varieties of Christian faith that linked the aristocracy with the middle class.

The Den Bosch exhibition opened, evocatively, with *The Wayfarer*, a small painting, now in Rotterdam, that once spanned the two wings of a closed triptych. (A larger version of the same subject, with the same elderly model, appears on the cover panels of the Prado's *Haywain* triptych.) At some point the triptych was dismantled, its four wings of Baltic oak sawed in half to create four separate paintings, all of which still survive. The center panel, sadly, has disappeared, but its onetime cover provides an unforgettable image. Clad in rags and mismatched shoes, the grizzled peddler bows under the weight of his pack, a wooden spoon and a catskin hanging from a loop, perhaps to advertise the wares he has to offer. His left hand clutches a traveler's hat with a spool and bodkin stuck into it—he can double as a cobbler if need be. With his right hand, he wards off a yapping dog with a cudgel-like walking stick; his bandaged left leg suggests that he has already been bitten.

The road ahead is blocked by a wooden gate; opening it represents some kind of deliberate choice. The dilapidated house behind him is evidently a brothel, with its long johns hanging in a window to dry, its symbolic broken clay pot on a pole, its pigs feasting at the trough, and its sign "The Swan" (male swans are rare among fowl for having penises). A woman in the door of the Swan is being fondled by a mercenary soldier who has left his long pike leaning against the run-down façade, while another customer urinates against an outside wall. Another woman gazes out from an upstairs window. Has the peddler just left her company or did he pass her by? Did she buy something from him? Did he buy something from her? In the spindly tree above the peddler's hooded head, an owl eyes a titmouse; just behind the gate, an ox and a magpie stand guard. Will they move aside or block the way?

Most scholars interpret the wayfarer as an Everyman, making his way through life amid threats to his physical and spiritual safety. Only constant faith and vigilance will keep him on this treacherous road. The paint that details the landscape behind him is terribly worn, but tiny particulars develop the same theme of menace and salvation: as he moves onward, the wandering salesman will pass by both a torture wheel and a roadside cross. His hesitant expression, as he looks backward, is as complex as the dilemmas he faces. The curators in Den Bosch take this peddler as a faithful expression of Bosch's own attitude toward existence: earthly life is a time of trial, and only vigilance will ensure that death leads us, fellow wanderers, to salvation rather than an eternity in Hell. The moral may be simple, but the peddler's face shows that Bosch's understanding of the human condition makes room for a vast range of feeling. The wealthy, successful painter's portrait of the sad, struggling workingman is an act of total empathy.

A similar message pervades what is now considered one of Bosch's earliest works, an *Adoration of the Magi* from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. In a tiny window high up on the ruined tower that barely shelters Mary and her child, a bird has made her meager nest and laid an egg that now balances on the brink. Beneath the egg, on the far left, an owl peers out from another window, barely visible beneath a canopy. Writers on Bosch state almost unanimously that owls symbolize evil rather than wisdom, as in classical Greece, but at the same time, Bosch the observer of nature cannot help but admire the grace of these birds and their luminous eyes. Rather than ascribing good or evil to nature's predators, owls, eagles, cats, and lions, he seems to accept them for what they are, the big-eyed creatures who live, like him, primarily through their sense of sight. More than signs of evil, they seem to be signs of the artist's presence; he, too, is a predator after his own fashion.

Bosch portrays the exotic Magi with equal respect for their individuality, not as exotic Orientals but as wise kings (a respect he does not always reserve for the Jews he often paints around the tormented Christ). With a tiny brush, he picks out the sheen of the Virgin's golden hair, the bristle of the turbaned king's luxuriant beard, and a tiny blue-green landscape receding back into deep space. It is the profound beauty of these landscapes, with their cool colors and dazzling plays of light and water, that proves the full range of their painter's artistry, in dramatic contrast to the sizzle and spark of his white-hot flames. With his paintbrush, Bosch can even freeze fire.

The climax of the Prado show, prepared for by the stunning Lisbon *Temptations of Saint Anthony*, is his most famous painting and the Prado's greatest treasure by his hand: the triptych known as *The*

Museo Nacional del Prado,
Madrid/Photo Banco de
Imágenes
Hieronymus Bosch:

Garden of Earthly Delights, or simply *The Garden of Delights*. A good copy of the left-hand panel, with the Garden of Eden, was shown at Den Bosch, but the complete triptych, because of its delicate condition, can be seen only in Spain. Hans Belting's excellent introduction, *Hieronymus Bosch: Garden of Earthly Delights*, has been reprinted for this occasion in an attractive mid-sized format.

Paradise, circa 1490–
1500

The triptych developed as a form of religious painting, especially, though not exclusively, for altarpieces. Under normal circumstances, the elaborate central panel was hidden behind two wings that closed over it like two painted doors. The exterior decoration was often painted in grisaille—shades of gray—or a subdued palette, to increase the glorious effect when the two wings were flung open on feast days to reveal a three-part painting in vibrant color.

The Garden of Earthly Delights mimics the physical form of a sacred image and presents religious content, but its extraordinary central panel looks like nothing else in this world. When closed, the triptych presents a grisaille view of creation as it happens, formless void taking form beneath the crystal sphere of the firmament, moved by God, encased in his own tiny bubble in a space beyond the universe, as he holds open the book that contains the text of universal history. The plants and geological shapes brewing beneath the glassy dome of heaven are fat and swollen, bursting, as Thomas Aquinas might have it, with their potential to come into being.

When this double panel of amorphous forms is opened, a universe crowded with figures is revealed in a burst of color. The left-hand panel of the open triptych shows Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, a Christlike God joining them in marriage. Adam sits on the ground looking somewhat perplexed; Eve stands before him with downcast eyes as God takes her right wrist, the traditional symbol of giving away in matrimony. Behind the First Couple, crazily fertile plants sprout gigantic shoots in improbable pastel colors, carrying out God's injunction to be fruitful and multiply.

The spotted cat carrying a mouse in its teeth in the left foreground, like the lion attacking a stag in the distance, is usually interpreted, like the serpent that coils discreetly around a tree in the middle ground of the panel, as an indication that evil is already present in Creation. But the book of Genesis never specifies that the animals God created in the Garden behaved otherwise than the animals we know; instead, we read that "God saw that it was good." The cat is being a good cat, doing what a cat is made to do, and so is the lion. Do we really want rodents infesting the Garden of Eden?

Bosch was relentless in portraying nature as it is, red in tooth and claw. His captivating drawing of an owl's nest shows a mother owl feeding her fledgling in full recognition

that the food she brings is living prey; but how can we be sure that his accurate, unblinking portrayal of this reality implies a negative judgment of what the Bible has proclaimed as good? The owls and an infinitesimal spider dangling from a branch are simply carrying out their duties as owls and spiders.

The right-hand panel of the triptych undoubtedly portrays the kingdom of evil, and the ingenious punishments that await sinners in Hell, where the pitch-black depths are dominated by a curious figure with a man's face attached to the trunk of a hollow tree. Bosch had already invented this creature in a gorgeous drawing now in Vienna's Albertina. This tree-man looks wistfully over his shoulder, his trunklike legs firmly planted in two little boats. The boats, in turn, float on a river beneath a gorgeous tumble of cumulus clouds traced with the finest of pens and an astonishing delicacy of touch. Bosch has so sure a hand that he can create space with one stroke of his pen.

In the painted Hell where another tree-man reigns quizzically over a gluttonous banquet taking place in his hollow belly, monsters—creatures of improbable shapes and cockeyed proportions—slice, rip, devour, digest, and defecate their designated victims with fiendish concentration. Musical instruments become instruments of torture, and we can imagine the blaring, twanging cacophony that underscores the general crackle of brimstone and the screams of the damned.

But what to make of the triptych's central panel? Naked people, male and female, black and white, cavort with birds and animals among succulent pastel plants, feeding on ripe, oversized fruits. Around a pool full of naked bathing beauties, a troop of young men circles, each riding an emphatically masculine beast. There are horses, unicorns, bears, a lion, and a big-eyed spotted cat. Beneath this living carousel, the air is heavy with sexual promise; some couples go about their business discreetly, encased in pods or a conveniently gigantic mussel shell. Others are lingering lazily at the stage of foreplay. One man bends over as flowers sprout from his posterior; a neighbor is either picking the flowers or inserting them one by one into this unusual vase. Some men are clearly captivated by other men, and there are several interracial couples.

Is this a good world or a bad world? It is certainly a world contrary to present reality, and most writers about the *Garden* suggest that it may be the world as it might have been if Adam had been sensible enough to refuse the apple that Eve offered him in the Garden of Eden, fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Larry Silver, in the catalog to the Prado exhibition, is more pessimistic. He sees this unbridled indulgence in pleasure as a sure ticket to the Hell we see so vividly spelled out for us on the painting's right panel.

On the other hand, this sophisticated, sexy vision of the world as it might have been is just the sort of content that would have amused the aristocratic patron who commissioned it. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* reflects some of the real social divisions in the borderline world inhabited by the man who was both Joen the painter and the famous master Jheronimus Bosch.

The slight uneasiness the *Garden* engenders may point to the fact that we are suspicious of unbounded bliss. The Garden of Delights brings us back to the old Christian theme of the *felix culpa*: the conviction that if Adam had not eaten the apple, humanity would never have been redeemed by Jesus Christ. Painful as its consequences may have been, Adam's mistake, in this view, provided the occasion for God to display the immensity of his mercy. In the words of the fifteenth-century English poem "Adam lay ybounden":

*Ne had the apple taken been,
Ne had never our ladie
Abeen heav'ne queen.
Blessed be the tyme
That apple taken was
Therefore we mounne singen
Deo gratias.*

Rather than young people eternally sporting in the Garden of Delights, we are destined to move through life as weary, wounded wayfarers, a few of whom, in another of Bosch's indelible visions, will be led by angels through a luminous heavenly tunnel before we leap naked into a burst of absolute light. Bosch's early admirers were surely right to regard his fantastic visions as firmly rooted in the world as it is, a world whose beauty and struggle and cruelty he grasped with rare penetration. But where did his real world end and fantasy begin? That is the enduring mystery of his art.

RELATED



Sad and Supreme 
Andrew Butterfield




Sublime, Exhilarating del Sarto
Ingrid D. Rowland



Botticelli: Love, Wisdom, Terror
Andrew Butterfield

© 1963-2017 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved.

More than one instance of Sumo is attempting to start on this page.  Please check that you are only loading Sumo once per page.