By Stanley Meisler
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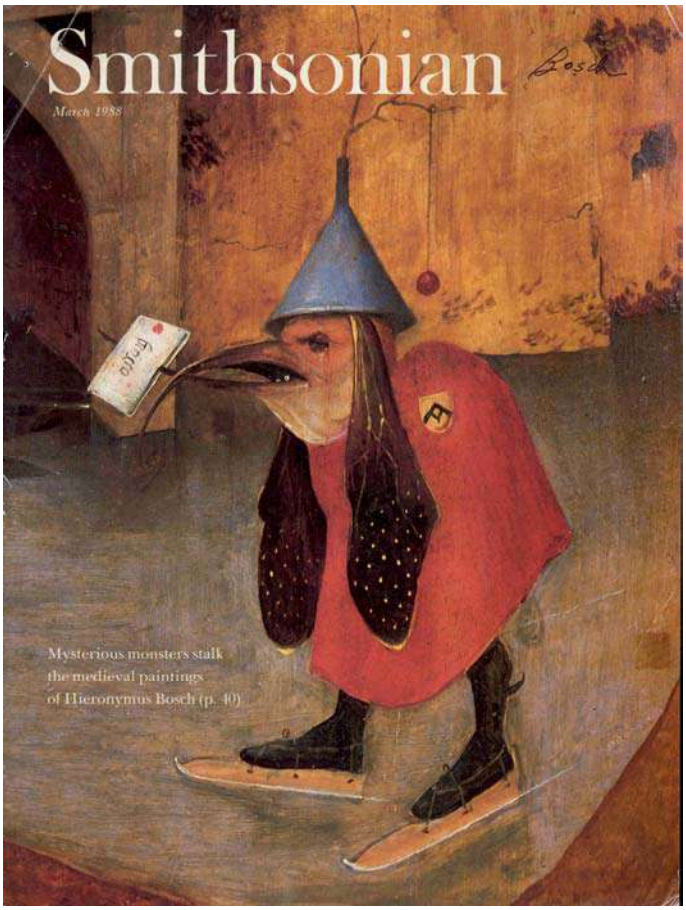
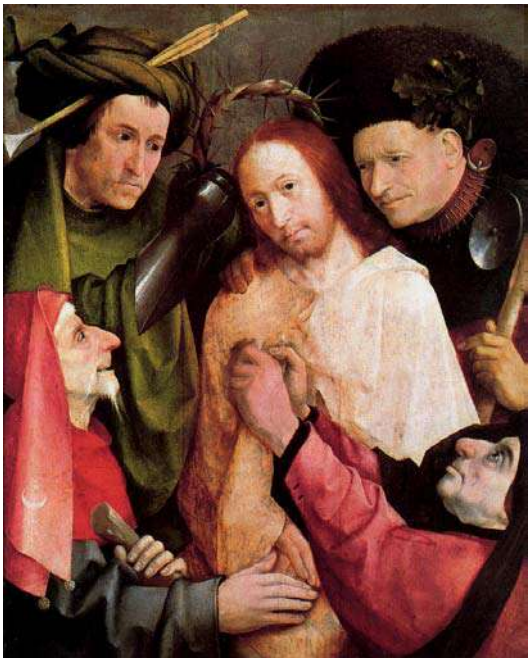


The World of Bosch

With his bizarre and fearsome images, the enigmatic master of apocalypse still speaks to us across five centuries.
A half-millennium ago when Europe was moving out of the Middle Ages, Hieronymus Bosch, a prosperous painter and landowner in the duchy of Brabant in what is now the Netherlands, was widely admired as one of the cleverest, most pious, most perceptive, most apocalyptic masters of his times. He then slipped into several hundred years of obscurity. The symbolism and message of his terrifying masterpieces seemed bizarre and unsavory and even heretical. But he has been rediscovered in the 20th century. American tourists, who have little Bosch at home, now crowd through the museums of Europe to be awed by his great triptychs or to track down his smaller masterpieces.

One afternoon in Madrid, during the troubled late 1970s when Spain was transforming itself from a dictatorship to a democracy, I entered the dark gallery of the Museo Nacional del Prado that displays Bosch's enormous triptych Garden of Earthly Delights and came upon a surprising assembly. The room was filled with 50 members of the gray-uniformed armed police--despised under the dictatorship of the late Generalisimo Franco as agents of oppression, and still looked upon with suspicion. A curator was lecturing to them about the fierce and wondrous work. Why were the police there? "They were probably learning new torture techniques," a friend remarked later. But I learned that the police, all young recruits, were taking part in a new educational program aimed at changing the mood and image of their organization. They were being shown one of Spain's strangest and most terrifying treasures.



Many of the artist's works treated traditional Christian subjects; here is his *Christ Crowned with Thorns*.

I have sometimes wondered what the police—and the puzzled-looking tourists--make of Bosch's furious symbolism and dark visions. What does a master artist of the 15th century have to say to his large public in the 20th century?

There is little doubt about his popularity. Some of his monstrous images have become clichés, almost camp. Few paintings have had the kind of attention that has been lavished on the *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Together, the three panels of this triptych measure nearly 13 feet in width and a little more than 7 feet in height. Yet every inch of the enormous painting was reproduced in full size in John Rowlands' out-of-print book published in France, England and the United States in the late 1970s. Choreographer and director Martha Clarke startled and delighted New York audiences in 1984 with her Off-Broadway dance-theater work based on her interpretation of the painting. Joyce Carol Oates used the name of the triptych as a title for a novel in 1967. And earlier, in 1957, Henry Miller published a

book entitled *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*.

The Bosch cachet persists despite two nettlesome problems in getting to know and understand him. One, especially for an American, is the difficulty of getting to see him. Of the dozen or so paintings attributed to Bosch in American collections, only *Death of the Miser* in the National Gallery of Art in Washington can probably be counted as a work of first rank. There has never been a full exhibition of Bosch in the United States. The works of Bosch, in fact, have not been gathered together since his native city of 's-Hertogenbosch, which possesses no Bosch paintings of its own, celebrated his genius with a grand exhibition in 1967. The heart of his work is in the Prado in Madrid. Yet many critics believe that Bosch's greatest work is the *Saint Anthony Triptych*, which hangs in one of the less-visited museums of the world, the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon. There are masterpieces as well in the Louvre in Paris, the gallery of the Akademie der Bildenden Kunste in Vienna, the Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen in Rotterdam and other European museums. It's not easy to gather up Bosch in one swoop.

Bosch, Saint Anthony Triptych, doors open. Museu Nacional de Arte Antiqua, Lisbon.

The second problem is that admirers cannot always find the keys to the mysteries of Bosch in the books of the specialists. His extraordinary images have often evoked flights of self-indulgent, poetic fancy that reveal more about the critics than about Bosch. Scholarship, moreover, is frequently confusing and contradictory, even on what seem to be elementary issues. Some scholars, for example, believe that *The Wayfarer* in Rotterdam, a circular portrait of a tired, saddened, tattered man, is that of the Prodigal Son in the Bible. But other scholars insist it portrays a peddler, a thief, a drunkard, a wandering shepherd or a symbol of sloth. Bosch himself left no journal, no description of his goals, not even titles for his paintings. The known facts about his life are few.

Hieronymus Bosch was born around 1450 (the exact date was not recorded) in the duchy of Brabant, which was then the realm of the dukes of Burgundy. He lived during unsettled and anxious times. The old medieval order imposed by the Church was straining and cracking under the onslaught of the growth of cities, the new vigor of commerce and capitalism, the rise of national states, the demands for religious reform and the beginnings of science. Minds were growing curious, analytical, adventurous. During Bosch's lifetime, the Dutch humanist Erasmus wrote *Praise of Folly*, the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus proposed that the sun was

at the center of our solar system, and Christopher Columbus discovered the New World. In 1517, a year after Bosch died, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. Historians

The theme of *Cure of Folly* was current in the literature of the time. A stupefied and stricken patient is half-reclining in a chair while a surgeon draws, no doubt very painfully, a stone of folly from his head. Typical Bosch images--the funnel, a closed book --are interpreted in the field guide below.

point to these events as the beginnings of the modern world.

The age was marked by violence and a new and pervasive pessimism. Kings and dukes murdered and warred for glory and vengeance. Marauding soldiers pillaged farmhouses and killed peasants. It was a time of pestilence, of misery for the poor, of cruel and incredible torture for criminals. The future seemed ominous with visions of demons, darkness and hell. People saw pious virtue overwhelmed by terrible sin. Preachers and poets cried out against the enormous greed around them. There was a sense, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga has written, of impending calamity and perpetual danger. "I, man of sadness," wrote Georges Chastellain, the 15th-century chronicler of the dukes of Burgundy, "born in an eclipse of darkness and thick fogs of lamentation." There is an honorable and portentous precedent for this point of view in the Bible's *Lamentations of Jeremiah*. The prophet, tormented beyond endurance, sets out a catalog of woe and agony, which he specifies in detail.

A field guide to Bosch's bizarre images

On the following gatefold pages are two of the artist's most famous triptychs, *Garden of Earthly Delights* and the *Saint Anthony Triptych*. He worked at a time when symbols constituted a basic visual language. Paintings displayed in public—mainly in churches—were proclamations for all to "read." Today the problem is to decipher what was, for the most part, clear to the medieval viewer. Although scholars don't always agree on interpretations, this sampler suggests possible meanings for some symbols found in the paintings.

pig: false priest; gluttony

fruit: carnal pleasure

rat: lies against Church; filth; sex

fish: false prophets; lewdness

closed book: futility of knowledge in dealing with human stupidity

flames: ergotism; fires of hell

flying monsters: hallucinations of ergotism sufferers; devil's envoys

keys: knowledge

lute and harp: instruments for praise of God and pursuit of love

breasts: fertility

mussel shell: infidelity

black birds: unbeliever; death or rotting flesh

knives: punishment of evil

rabbits: multiplication of the race

egg: sexual creation; key symbol of alchemy

ice skater: folly

funnel: deceit and intemperance; false alchemist or false doctor

strawberry: fleeting joys of life, love

owl: great learning

ears: gossip

spheres: alchemical apparatus

Bosch was among the pessimists. A member of a lay religious fraternity, he witnessed the corruption in the medieval Church and the sins of his townspeople, and cried out his warning of a wrathful retribution. The idea of an impending punishment was not new, of course, for it came directly out of the teachings of the Church. But

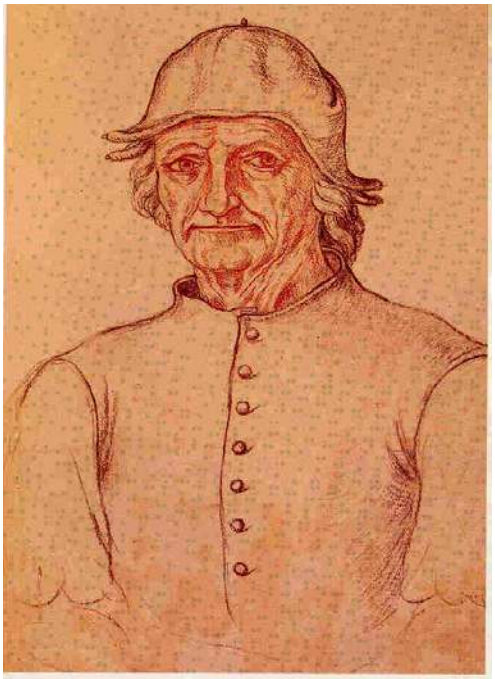
Bosch issued his message with an imagery so fierce it could astound and chill his contemporaries and still fascinate his admirers 500 years later.

Bosch came from a region that was then the most urbanized and among the most industrial in all of Europe. The cities in what are now the Netherlands and Belgium dominated much of the commerce of Europe with their manufacture of textiles. Then as now, 's-Hertogenbosch was a small, thriving regional town, overshadowed by larger and richer towns of Brabant like Brussels and Antwerp. A market for the surrounding farmland, it also produced textiles and was known for its bell makers and organ builders.

In training as a painter, Bosch followed family tradition. His father, grandfather, three uncles and a brother were all painters. The family name was not Bosch but van Aken and Bosch was baptized Jerome van Aken. When he signed his works years later, however, Bosch Latinized his first name and for his surname substituted a shortened version of his hometown. This need to identify his hometown has led scholars to speculate that he must have spent some time away from 's-Hertogenbosch as a young man, perhaps to further his apprenticeship, possibly in Utrecht.

Around 1480, when Bosch was about 30 years old, he married Aleyt Goyaerts van den Meervenne, who came from a wealthy family in 's-Hertogenbosch. Now a burgher of some means and a painter who attracted commissions, Bosch lived with his wife in a house on the market square and became a member of the Brotherhood of Our Lady, which was devoted to the veneration of the Virgin Mary. This wealthy organization adorned a gentle, wooden statue of the Virgin with sumptuous clothing, supported a chapel for it within the Cathedral of St. John, and commissioned musicians and artists to infuse the chapel with holy music and works of art. Most of the van Aken painters, including Bosch himself, worked on the chapel for token fees.

The most important recorded commission received by Bosch came from Philip the Handsome, Duke of Burgundy, in 1504. The duke ordered an altarpiece, 9 feet high and 11 feet wide, depicting scenes of the Last Judgment, heaven and hell. This painting has never been found. But the commission makes it clear that Bosch was regarded as a master painter of great respectability and deep religious faith.



Copy of self-portrait of elderly Bosch (original is lost) reveals the ravages of time and a "show me" stare.

As for Bosch's physical appearance, only copies of what may have been a self-portrait (right), showing an elderly, austere man, survive. In this drawing, the eyes are large and intelligent, the lips tight and haughty. It was once believed that the sharp-nosed, intense hermit helping to support an unconscious Saint Anthony in the left panel of the Saint Anthony Triptych was a self-portrait as well.

In a remarkable analysis done some 40 years ago, the Dutch scholar Dirk Bax concluded that Bosch was a moralist with contempt for the lower classes. He had no sympathy for the poor and used his most bitter symbolism to satirize beggars, monks, nuns, soldiers, peasants, pilgrims, whores, gypsies, vagrants, minstrels and jesters. From time to time he lashed out at emperors, bishops and nobles as well, but rarely against burghers like himself and others of the wealthy middle class. He was most upset by the vices of lust, license, drunkenness, gluttony, folly and stupidity. He liked to dwell on erotic scenes and on cruel moments when pain was inflicted on others. Some art historians have since interpreted Bosch's paintings as displaying less pessimism and more understanding of the difficult plight of his fellow human beings.

His obsession with bizarre images has led to fanciful theories about Bosch. In 1947, Wilhelm Fraenger, a German art historian, concluded that Bosch had been a member of the Brethren of the Free Spirits, also known as the Adamites, a secret, heretical sect that practiced nudity and sexual promiscuity in an attempt to re-create the innocence of the Garden of Eden. The central panel of *Garden of Earthly Delights*, according to Fraenger, did not condemn free love but glorified it. He insisted that the triptych served as an altarpiece in secret Adamite worship. Fraenger's theory has been overwhelmingly rejected by scholars, but it enjoyed a vogue for a while. Its popularity, in fact, reflected one of the problems in understanding Bosch. While Fraenger's fancy did not fit the historical evidence, it did fit some of the feelings that the paintings evoke in a modern viewer.

As with many of Bosch's works, the theme of *The Wayfarer* has been construed in many ways. One reading has it that the melancholy, tattered figure is a pilgrim traveling through a dangerous world. The tavern, the drunken man urinating and the embracing couple are all symbols of the real world's plentiful temptations.

All of Bosch's paintings pulsate with a lavish symbolism that is obscure today but must have been widely understood five centuries ago. Dirk Bax has pored over antique Dutch plays, tales, poems, maxims, paintings, drawings and prints to unravel the symbolism. In one book, he devoted six long and detailed chapters to the symbols of a single painting, the *Saint Anthony Triptych*. In the lower corner of the left panel, for example, a monster on ice skates approaches three fiends who are hiding under a bridge across which pious men are helping an unconscious Saint Anthony. The monster (right), wearing a badge that Bax says can be recognized as the emblem of a messenger, bears a letter that is supposedly a protest of Saint Anthony's treatment. But the letter, according to Bax, is in mirror writing, a sure sign that the monster and the fiends are mocking the saint. The monster wears a funnel that symbolizes intemperance and wastefulness, sports a dry twig and a ball that signify licentious merrymaking, and has lopping ears that show its foolishness. All this might have been obvious to the artist's contemporaries when the work was created, but the average modern viewer can only hope to understand the overall intent of a Bosch painting, while regarding the scores of bizarre monsters and demons as a kind of dark and cruel comic relief.

A viewer may also feel a special force or emotion that Bosch did not intend because of the ways in which Western thought has changed in 500 years. This special reaction, in fact, may be the reason why Bosch fascinates art lovers in the 20th century. The *Saint Anthony Triptych* is a good example of the phenomenon. Saint Anthony, who lived in the late third and early fourth centuries, devoted most of his life to meditation as a pious hermit in the Egyptian desert, and Bosch described the events of the saint's life by setting them in the contemporary, sinful world of the late Middle Ages. Demons and sinners try to torment and distract the saint by beating him and flying him through the sky, leading him to a brothel, exposing him to scenes of terrible

destruction, and parading gluttons, adulterers, wastrels and blasphemers before him. A nude devil-queen tries to seduce him. In the background, a fire rages; some scholars believe this refers to "Saint Anthony's fire," known today as ergotism, a sickness caused by eating mold-contaminated grain. Victims suffered gangrene in their extremities, convulsions, hallucinations—also represented in the triptych—and agonizing pain. The afflicted invoked Saint Anthony's name for relief from the disease's symptoms. The saint is portrayed four times in the triptych, but not once does he look at any of the sinful scenes around him. He averts all temptations by refusing to see them. It is hard in these days not to feel anger at the saint for his indifference to the horrors. Bosch, however, did not intend to evoke that anger. In the 15th century, a man of Bosch's religious background would not have regarded Saint Anthony as indifferent, but as strong and pious enough to struggle against exposure to the evils in the world.

The Garden of Earthly Delights, probably painted between 1510 and 1515, also evokes sensations today that would have been foreign to Bosch. For a modern viewer, the central panel (detail, right) has an air of innocence, the gentle lovemaking of its naked, young people creating a mood of playfulness and joy. With earnest, child-like, wistful, pleasured features, they play in the open and make love only within shells and bubbles and fruit.

No one escapes; no one is saved

Yet for Bosch and the medieval mind, this world was brimming with symbols of sin—with water birds and fish and ripe strawberries to signify lewdness and lust, with evil crying out for damnation. As punishments, Bosch meted out some of the most terrible tortures ever devised by the human imagination. Sinners are strung on a harp, crushed between a lute and a book, abducted by beasts, severed at the neck, dipped into slime, swallowed by a bird, violated by a flute, kissed by a pig, cut open by swords, chewed by dogs, drowned in seas of fire. No one escapes; no one is saved. A modern viewer cannot help feeling anguish and anger at punishment that seems so enormously out of proportion to the sins.

A more recent interpretation of the triptych is gaining academic attention. Laurinda Dixon of Syracuse University, who has studied picture books and scientific manuscripts of the 15th century, sees the painting as an allegory of the alchemical distillation process. Alchemy was a philosophy as well as a legitimate science of the time. Among its practitioners were physicians and pharmacists and, less often, the charlatans and magicians who claimed to make gold from base metals. Throughout the triptych, says Dixon, alchemical symbols can be found. In the center panel, the red balls represent the perfect medicine, the elixir of life. And the fountain of life recalls the shape of a laboratory beaker or the "distillation chamber in which the opposites were mixed." So, too, do the glass bubbles and tubes appear similar to

other alchemical devices. But most symbolic of alchemy is the egg, the vessel where all ingredients are combined; it appears in all four scenes of the triptych.

It is easier to understand Bosch when the medieval and modern minds have similar attitudes toward a sin. In the *Haywain* (a triptych that exists in two versions—one in the Prado and one at El Escorial), a wagon of hay moves slowly across the central panel while peasants, nuns and monks batter and murder one another for a chance to clutch at the hay. A pope and an emperor with their entourage follow the wagon, which—no one seems to notice—is pulled by demons toward retribution in the towers of hell. Bosch is mocking the sin of avarice, a sin that is still condemned in much the same way in modern popular literature.

The Ship of Fools censures a monk, nuns, and peasants. The dead branch, signifying worthlessness, serves as rudder.

The same sin is satirized in *Death of the Miser* (left). Even as Death enters the bedroom, the miser cannot concentrate on a crucifix toward which an angel guides his gaze. Instead, he reaches for a bag of gold proffered by a demon who, Bosch shows us in the foreground, helped him hoard it earlier. *Death of the Miser* fits into a series of smaller paintings in which Bosch mocks sinners and fools but does not show the terrible tortures in store for them. Thus the mood is darkly comic. In *The Ship of Fools* (left), he expresses his contempt for a boatful of reveling gluttons, including a monk and a nun who sing, drink, gorge themselves and bob for a hanging bun, while naked men, a drunken jester and others cavort around them. Bosch was obviously furious at the excesses both of carnival merrymakers and of sinners in the religious orders. In *Cure of Folly* (p. 3), a gullible fool allows a quack doctor to cure him of his madness by extracting the stone of foolishness from his head. Folly and deceit are the targets of Bosch's scorn.

A deep pessimism pervaded his scenes from the life of Christ; and the painter, even in his treatment of the most traditional themes, could not keep from lashing out in a furious rage at human evil. On first glance, for example, the Prado's *Adoration of the Magi* triptych seems idyllic. But in the background the peace is disturbed by military maneuvers and bloody struggles with beasts. Moreover, the mysterious people who lurk in the barn and stare out at the Virgin and Child have malevolent expressions. They will show up again (this time even more exaggerated) in another Bosch painting, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, now in the Musee des Beaux-Arts in Ghent. They are the fanatical, demented, crazed tormentors and executioners of Christ.

Bosch was about 66 when he died in 's-Hertogenbosch in 1516. The official notices of his death described him as a "very famous painter." He was, in fact, one of the most popular and most respected painters of his time, imitated by many younger artists.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, born barely 25 miles to the southwest of 's-Hertogenbosch a dozen years after Bosch's death, was the most successful, working in the style of Bosch before moving on to the creation of his own great allegorical paintings of village life. Bruegel's similarity to Bosch was so close that centuries later the Musees

Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels attributed *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* to Bosch—until it discovered Bruegel's signature beneath the frame.

But Bosch's reputation began to wane. By 1600, the world of Brabant had changed so much that people no longer understood his symbolism. In 1629, the Dutch troops of the Calvinist Prince of Orange occupied 's-Hertogenbosch and its Cathedral of St. John, removing all "popish" paintings. Nothing was left there of Bosch. Only in Spain, the strongest and most medieval of the Catholic powers during the Reformation, did Bosch's reputation hold for a while. The Spanish kings, through their family ties with the dukes of Burgundy and later through control of the Netherlands, gathered up much of Bosch's work and took it to El Escorial outside Madrid. But even in Spain, doubts arose over Bosch's pessimism, symbolism and attacks on the faltering clergy. By 1605, the Spanish monk Jose de Siguenza had to defend the paintings against accusations that they were "tainted by heresy." In 1621, the Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo ridiculed rival poet Luis de Gongora for writing "absurd rubbish, you Bosch among the poets, nothing but devils, buttocks and codpieces." Hardly anyone took Bosch seriously in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Scholarly interest in Bosch revived at the turn of the 20th century and mushroomed after a major exhibition of his works in Rotterdam in 1936. Popular writers soon discovered him and proclaimed their find of a 15th-century Freudian or a medieval Surrealist expressing his repressed desires and dreams in bizarre modern symbols. No one seemed to care that his symbolism was rooted in the folk literature of his times. One critic called Bosch "the first spark of that bonfire, Salvador Dali." Dali, who, as a student in Madrid, knew the works of Bosch, felt compelled to deny the influence. "I myself am the anti-Hieronymus Bosch," he proclaimed.

Yet even without Freudian and Surrealist imagery, there is little doubt that Bosch somehow strikes a chord with his modern admirers. Defending Bosch almost 400 years ago, Fra Siguenza wrote, "If there are any absurdities here, they are ours, not his." Bosch described terrible, unbearable holocausts crushing mankind for its sins. In a century of turmoil and strife, it is hard not to feel that the absurdities pictured before us may, after all, be our own.