

Hieronymus Bosch (aka Jeroen van Aken), Eco-Revolutionary

Hieronymus Bosch is one of the most mysterious figures in art history, and we might almost say in cultural history of any kind. Dante is said to have invented the vernacular written in Italian, cursing the rich swindlers and damning them to eternal suffering; Shakespeare, according to his Marxist devotees (and I am one of them) portrayed the crown as too heavy for any human head and observed famously that the “times are out of joint”; Bosch, breaking with all the traditions of European religious art, depicted horrors in such cartoon-like caricatures that they might well be the model for Bugs Bunny and the Simpsons as well as the Surrealists.

They responded, all of them, to the crisis sweeping across society as commercialism stirred the pot and rulers moved to squeeze more out of peasants and artisans. Religion, as everyone learned first hand, had become a naked rationalization for accelerated exploitation, often accompanied by war. The morals of the upper class were laughable. And any serious effort at change was drowned in an ocean of blood.

But until recent decades, Bosch has never been thought of as a revolutionary moralist. His half-human beasts and careful depiction of suffering were viewed instead as the condemnation of Original Sin, or as the sour views of a disillusioned genius. No such thing.

Let’s begin with the painter himself. No one knows when he was born, but 1453 is the latest estimate. He seems to have lived nearly all his life in Hertogenbosch (thus the adopted name), in what is now Belgium. His birth name give us the clue that his family had emigrated from the German province of Aachen, and indeed, his grandfather and father were, like himself, officially registered as local painters.

Hertogenbosch was not on anyone’s Main Drag. It was set off at great distance, for the day, from the artistic centers of Bruges, Louvai

and Turnai. But neither was it a sleepy rural zone. On the contrary, the town was modestly famous for its cloth and metal manufacture. Like other regions of the Low Countries, it would be racked with spiritual and social unrest in the generations to come. Already by Bosch's youth, it had given forth the society that commissioned his works: the Brotherhood of Our Lady.

Was it radical or even reformist? We don't know, but there is a tantalizing hint in its charismatic leader and apparent confidante of Bosch, a Jewish convert who, after a few tumultuous years, returned to Judaism. Why should that matter? Because in so many other cases but most of all in the reinventor of the dialectic, Jakob Boehme (who comes a century or so later, on the Eastern fringes of today's former East Germany), the wholesale reinterpretation of the Biblical drama in the cosmic terms of Jewish mysticism is altogether crucial. "If you know it to be true, you learned it from a Jew," as the witticism went (simultaneously, of course, with the anti-Semitism roused by the Crusades and used frequently by Church and rulers to provide an outlet for public rage). I can't prove this point, but it is evident enough in the famous or notorious paintings.

And what are these paintings? We have no sure dates at all for their creation, except of course that they were completed before 1516 when Bosch died—although some may well have been revised by others, afterward. We can trace no certain artistic influence on him, and he had no known disciples. He married a local wealthy woman in his late twenties, moved to her estate, and apparently spent the rest of his life in his own studio. Most of his works appear to have been displayed locally, and one can only wonder at the response, although many of CNS's readers living outside the capitals of culture and prestige will understand that "local artist" like "local author" is often the acceptable heretic, so long as he or she creates the new contents within well-known forms.

That is the key to Bosch's genius. He uses subjects standard for the day: Christ Carrying of the Cross, the Last Judgment and so on. But he turns the contents upside down and inside out. Much could be written about the abundant ecological themes, and every interested reader will see something different and unique. But let me confine my observations to just a few paintings.

"The Garden of Delights" (now situated in the Prado) has both paradise and hell, and for that reason critics and collectors for centuries were sure that they saw the punishment of sin, especially of sexual desire (and worse, sexual activity) as the real theme of the triptych.

They missed the point for the best of political reasons. In the Left Wing (literally), we find a stunning pre-Adamic scene: creatures real and mythical flourish on all sides, but especially birds, known in so many cultures as the messengers to and from the celestial heights. Here and there one creature is eating another, in nature's way, but elephant, giraffe, unicorn and egret seem peaceful side-by-side, in a scene which bears a splendidly surrealistic pink fountain at the center.

Now we move toward the center panel, and things get a great deal weirder. Around the same fountain now grown huge and grotesque, there are humans marching, riding on horses, bathing, cavorting upside down, sometimes entering a giant egg or holding up a giant strawberry, while mythological creatures fly by. Look closer, and the scene is more like some mythical premonition of an also mythical 1969. These humans are young, naked and having a beautifully innocent time exploring the mysteries of nature and of each other (including a fair amount of petting). Occasionally, an upturned man or woman has a flower come out of an anus. Flower children?

Naturally, this detail would be seen by collectors, in the centuries to come, as the reckless sexuality that precedes downfall, mirror to the Free Spirits or Adamite communities that gave themselves over, in the throes of the revolutionary moment, to untrammelled sex as a decisive step toward bringing back Paradise. (The first American disciples of Utopia neatly reversed the logic with total sexlessness, and absolute equality for women, but the shared worship of Nature and the accompanying moral sentiment itself is not so different.)

The official art world's observations had a visual proof that seemed decisive. The Right Wing of the Triptych has as much horror as anything that Bosch ever painted. The sky is horribly darkened with disaster, burning buildings, men marching off to war and using the new weapons of war (notwithstanding their armor plate) on each other most horribly, humans slaughtered under a giant knife held together by two giant ears, parading monsters of all kinds torturing people, but most especially interesting for us, a dying body of water with corpses floating and humans streaming out of it to die on the banks. As the keenest critic of the scene suggests, there is no fiery pit of Hell: earth itself has become the hell.

A yet closer look suggests that Salvador Dali had very little new to contribute to art, and that Bosch's proper descendents, the true Surrealists, shared (and still share) with him the vision of possible redemption that makes the trip through hell essential. Here, in the scariest of detailed looks, a creature with a bird's face and a chamber pot

for a hat is swallowing a human (blackbirds fly out of the anus), meanwhile passing out his earlier human waste through a toilet-chair into a pit where dead souls look upward from the liquid crap. Gold coins are defecated simultaneously into the same hole. On the side is a soldier blowing an instrument of battle, and the denizens of religious orders look on piously.

The artist's intent could hardly be clearer, at least to me. His view in this and other paintings of desert-like landscapes virtually bereft of creatures is not likely an evocation of the Holy Land. The desolate ruins may well be the outskirts of Hertogenbosch, trees clear-cut for generations, factory poisons already poured into the rivers. The Arts of War and their consequences are unmistakable. "The Seven Deadly Sins," another of Bosch's most famous works, puts gluttony at the center of sin, permeating all the others: the cravings of the bloated rich symbolize all human failings, including lust, sex that is no longer innocent or erotic, only gluttonous.

At the end of his creative work, Bosch is tired and discouraged, evidently himself the model for the itinerant peddler (a detail in the famous, "Hay Wain") who wanders as pilgrim past the clearly-drawn whore house with a customer bargaining—in the foreground human bones, in the background thieves, a quarreling couple, a lone fiddler and a gibbet awaiting some future hanging. He can only turn away from human folly. But he has already seen it all.

Useful reference: Carl Linfert, *Hieronymus Bosch* (Harry N. Abrams, 1989).



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