



### III The Axiology and Ideology of Jheronimus Bosch

Jheronimus van Aken alias Jheronimus Bosch cast aside the artistic conventions of his time and place with astonishing ease.\* His vision is sufficiently bold and personal as to merit the motto of his younger contemporary Erasmus (1469–1536): *Nulli concedo* (I yield to no one). This mental independence is expressed in one of his drawings [fig. III.2], *The woods have ears, the fields have eyes*, where an inscription in Latin reads: *Miserrimi quippe est ingenii semper uti inventis et numquam inveniendis* (It is characteristic of the most dismal of intelligences always to use clichés and never their own inventions). Inventiveness scored full marks in Bosch's artistic view. As he was illustrating an old saying ('The fields have eyes, the woods have ears': that is, I want to see, listen and remain silent) and topical imagery (owl and birds, fox and hen), he may well have added this caption as a form of self-criticism. It is a citation from a thirteenth-century treatise on education, *De disciplina scholarium*, then ascribed to Boethius; this text and particularly this citation were in circulation among intellectuals and humanists in the Rhineland in the fifteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

The most distinctive and idiosyncratic of fifteenth-century Netherlandish artists, Bosch produced a body of work remarkable also for its depiction of fantastic and often diabolic creatures, generally moralizing representations of the consequences of sin and folly. He was the first European artist to give free rein to an almost uncontrolled formal invention and association of ideas. Having chosen 'Bosch' as his artistic surname, he applied his dazzling ingenuity to painting an extremely wide-ranging vision of humanity, society and the world. The object of his exploring

Fig. III.1 Jheronimus Bosch, *The Pedlar* [cat. 36], detail

mind was the cosmos, both microcosm and macrocosm (which were traditionally held to be constructed in a corresponding way). This intellectual dimension – leaving aside for a moment Bosch’s extraordinary pictorial ability – is not found in any other painter of his day north of the Alps. Artists at that time were craftsmen who were expected to perform commissions; their task was first and foremost to provide clear and attractive representations of commonly held beliefs. Bosch did that as well; we know of several religious works by him that feature donor portraits, and several works with biblical and religious subjects by his hand adorned the Cathedral of Saint John in his native city.<sup>2</sup> But the master elaborated even standard religious themes in his own manner. The extent to which he did this only becomes apparent when we compare these panels with his other creations – moralizing allegories about the way of the world and the nature of humankind and purely secular works. For the same spirit permeates his entire oeuvre: the cosmos teems with demons, unbridled sexuality flows through nature’s very veins, humanity is composed of fools and sinners, and the saints – even Christ himself – are constantly beleaguered and tormented. The likelihood of salvation is minimal, yet still present. Bosch’s work as a whole displays a unity of ideas and emotion that can only be those of its maker. We do not find a formally imposed message of the kind that a patron forced upon an artist. What his oeuvre conveys instead is a deep-seated set of values that sometimes provides the principal theme of a work but which can also exist alongside or beneath the painting’s “official” message or be delivered “automatically” as part of the overall package.<sup>3</sup>

To achieve that goal, Bosch conceived a model of conduct that drew in part on religious inspiration, secondly on the survival strategies developed by ordinary people and on classical Stoic doctrines that had recently been revived by the early humanists. The model incorporated a value system that formed Bosch’s guiding principle for “getting through this world”. Human beings faced a two-fold threat: not only was the salvation of their souls in constant peril, but they were also beset on all sides within society. They were thus obliged to seek protection in faith, in a firm moral stance, in caution and, as a last resort, in individual resilience.

To communicate all this clearly Bosch developed a new visual idiom essentially from scratch. The source from which he drew was the rich one of popular culture. It is not that the master was any kind of democrat; it was simply that the new ideology of the urban middle class could not take shape in a vacuum. The urban elite formulated its own view of humanity and the world through the prolonged and turbulent process by which it cut itself free from its roots.<sup>4</sup>

For this elite too had emerged over generations from a miscegeny of rural migrants. All the same, this voluntary cultural uprooting could never be absolute: Bosch and his literary counterparts in the Netherlands and Germany remained unwittingly indebted to stylistic modes that derived from the *humus* of popular culture that they so sharply criticized. It is here that the dark and enigmatic aspect of Bosch’s visual world resides: although intended for middle-class and – certainly after 1500 – aristocratic consumption, it drew its inspiration from a plebeian world that had neither the means nor, perhaps, the desire to express itself in painting. Bosch thus functioned as a link between two very different cultures. In order to understand his work we must identify the interests, values and concerns of the urban middle class of his time in parallel with the characteristic features of popular culture from which he drew: what means of expression were available to ordinary people and into what mental categories did they fall? This fundamental duality pervades Bosch’s oeuvre and makes it so hard to ‘decode’.

Knowledge of both elite and subaltern cultures of Bosch’s environment (including literature, language and slang of the epoch) are a *conditio sine qua non* for the ‘deciphering’ of his visual universe. Research into the meaning of Bosch’s highly elusive visual world has produced a number of studies of lasting value, notable among them articles by the ‘Ghent school’ of philologists, folklorists and art historians, c. 1935–55.<sup>5</sup> It was their contention that, as a product of his time, Bosch could be understood only in terms of contemporary sources of urban and ‘popular’ culture. Following in their footsteps, Dutch folklorist Dirk Bax devoted his life to painstakingly tracking down the meaning of hundreds of details in Bosch’s works.<sup>6</sup> Recently, this approach has been followed by the Flemish philologist Eric De Bruyn, who has provided a thorough explication of Bosch’s *Haywain* [cat. 35] based on contemporary literary sources.<sup>7</sup>

By drawing on linguistic, pictorial, folkloric and legal history and many other sources, Bax succeeded in clarifying a great many symbols and meaningful details. Although some of Bax’s “decipherings” are open to challenge or improvement, his methods and most of his conclusions have stood the test of time. They are internally consistent and tally with what researchers have discovered with regard to urban middle-class culture in the Low Countries in the half century since Bax published his *Ontcijfering* (1949). Literary historians, especially Herman Pleij, made crucial contributions in this regard around 1975–90.<sup>8</sup> Bax’s work offers a vital and stable foundation for all subsequent research into the Bosch iconography. It does not, however, offer an overarching insight into Bosch’s value system – the mental structure

of the Boschian universe; it focuses too closely on deciphering individual details for that to be the case. But from the enormous and often amorphous mass of data provided by Bax, we can reach at least three general conclusions.

First, in an almost endless series of associated symbols, Bosch rounded on several forms of immorality – fornication, licentiousness, drunkenness, gluttony, riotousness (especially during festivals), fraudulence, intemperance, prodigality, excessive greed, violence, sloth. Secondly, Bosch attributed this aberrant behaviour primarily to a range of indi-

viduals from the lowest social classes and the fringes of society (itinerants and vagrants of all kinds, beggars, prostitutes, procuresses ...). This ethical system is formalist, that is, derived from societal demand. Thirdly, Bosch used a number of symbols to link all these vices with folly, madness or stupidity: all sin is folly. This ethic is rationalist, that is, derived from 'reason'. It was a new concept that went beyond the traditional scholastic system of the Seven Cardinal Sins.

Although these conclusions regarding Bosch might appear somewhat arbitrary to our minds, such ideological and

Fig. III.2 Jheronimus Bosch, *The woods have ears, the fields have eyes*, c. 1502–05, pen and brown ink, 202 x 127 mm, Berlin, Staatlichen Museen, Kupferstichkabinett, KdZ 549





Fig. III.3 Jheronimus Bosch, *The Ship of Fools* [cat. 37], detail of figures

axiological (evaluative) positions – or rather representations – of this kind are not unique for the time, nor are they either vague or incoherent. On the contrary, these social and ethical values provide the key to a new and overarching understanding of Bosch that enables us to interpret his work as a systemic whole. My research has shown that the urban middle classes in south-west Germany and the Netherlands, especially in the great commercial centres, developed a common ideology. Their new view of ethics, society and humanity was mostly expressed through literature and rituals of ‘symbolic inversion’ (role reversal: for example, Carnival revelry),<sup>9</sup> also in cheap media such as prints and, to a lesser degree, watercolour paintings on canvas. Bosch was the artist who transferred this worldview to the ‘high’ medium of panel painting, which was only conceivable at a time when clients were willing to spend substantial amounts of money on artistic expressions of their own social and ethical position.

Tax records for the years 1502–03 and 1511–12 show that Bosch was in the wealthiest decile of citizens of ‘s Hertogenbosch’<sup>10</sup> – the city where he spent his entire life.<sup>11</sup> To many interpreters, this has seemed to prove that Bosch’s iconography could not in fact be understood through middle-class values and ideas; however, this conclusion is unjustified. The documents cited prove only that Bosch was subject to steep social ascent in the latest phase of his life, coinciding with his success among the members of the highest nobility. He was of middle-class provenance, as archival study of his family (almost all of whom were artisans) proves; and he spent his formative years and most of his adult life within this social cadre.<sup>12</sup>

For Bosch’s moralizing and secular works, both preserved examples and ones which have been lost but are known from copies, replicas and inventory descriptions, there is no contemporary archival evidence. However, since they contain or visualize the essential elements of an early bourgeois ideology, it seems that they were intended mainly for an upper middle-class urban public. Some of them were executed in the popular technique of watercolour on canvas, which was less expensive. Knowledge of his early patronage is greatly hindered by the rarity of upper middle-class inventories for the citizens of the south-eastern Netherlands in the period c. 1480–1520.

Bosch’s compositions must have been in demand during his lifetime, not least because they were engraved by the architect and designer Alart du Hameel and pub-

lished. Du Hameel was a friend or at least contact of Bosch, given that he was a member alongside Bosch of the Brotherhood of Our Lady from 1478. The engravings by Du Hameel are *The War Elephant* [cat. 3], *The Last Judgment* [cat. 5] and *Saint Christopher* [fig. 1.8]. They were probably made before 1494/95, when Du Hameel left his city, and were probably also the first to promulgate Bosch’s work. A few works of art from around 1500 reveal that Bosch’s creative universe was shared by other painters (see the scenes painted on wooden plates in Berlin; [fig. III.16 and III.17]) and manuscript illuminators in Mechelen,<sup>13</sup> Liège<sup>14</sup> and other localities. Either these artists knew Bosch and repeatedly emulated his inventions in their marginal *drôleries* or they independently developed similar scenes [see, for example, figs. III.14 and III.15].<sup>15</sup>

### SIN IS FOLLY: A RATIONALIST ETHICS

A first remarkable characteristic of Bosch’s work is his equation of vice and folly. A connection had already been made in the high Middle Ages between virtue and wisdom, vice and stupidity, and a folly/wisdom (*stultitio/sapientia*) tradition had developed. As Hugo of St-Victor put it, “Ubi caritas est, claritas est” (*De sacramentis*, II, xiii, 11): where there is charity (virtue), there is clarity (wisdom). In other words, virtue engenders intellectual clarity: one gains understanding because one is virtuous. Late medieval moralists thought otherwise: one is virtuous because, and to the extent that, one is wise. A trend may be discerned in the fifteenth century whereby the notion of wisdom was interpreted in an increasingly intellectualist manner. The process made the most rapid strides in the major commercial centres of southern Germany and the Upper Rhine. Once reason was accepted as the basis for moral action and hence for all virtues – hitherto each of different origin – those virtues were provided with a common denominator allowing their contraction into a single whole – ‘reason’. The basic trend was that ethics, which was becoming an increasingly independent and significant field of study relative to metaphysics, tended in the fifteenth century towards utilitarianism and ‘practicism’ (a philosophy that stressed the value of the *vita activa* or practical life in society as equal to that of *vita passiva* or contemplative life). At the same time, a growing receptivity to Stoic ideas can be discerned. Practicism as an intellectual attitude was related first and foremost to the sudden increase in the number of university students drawn from the middle classes, facilitating a theoretical reinforcement of ideas that were already established within that



Fig. III.4 Pieter van der Heyden after Bosch, *The blind leading the blind*, c. 1551–70, engraving, 222 x 255 cm (plate), Philadelphia Museum of Art, inv. 1985-52-637

Fig. III.5 Jheronimus Bosch, *The Haywain Triptych* [cat. 35], detail of 'unwanted' behaviour, centre panel

social group and which expressed its interests. As is so frequently the case with cultural manifestations that arise spontaneously and without premeditation, these texts defined their goals in terms of what they were not: their contents revolved around the notion of folly, despite their authors' claims to be motivated principally by reason and wisdom. The most important of these texts was *The Ship of Fools* (1494) by the Strasbourg humanist Sebastian Brant. Although art historians have repeatedly linked Bosch's Louvre panel of that title [cat. 37] and Brant's *Ship of Fools*, they have tended to focus on strictly formal similarities: both feature a ship and a number of fools. They have usually not considered the content either of Brant's text or of the notion of "fool". Yet substantive research of this nature proves to be extremely fruitful for the problem of Bosch.<sup>16</sup>

The framework underlying Brant's *Ship of Fools* is straightforward: several types characterized as "fools" embark on a voyage with no clear destination. These types are then described in greater detail over more than a hundred short chapters, interlarded with general theoretical opinions, in which the nature of their folly is explained. The purpose of the work is made clear at the outset: it was intended to be "useful and salutary, an exhortation to and imitation of wisdom, reason and good morals, and also to disdain for and rejection of folly, blindness, deviancy from the norm and stupidity". Folly manifests itself here as intellectual blindness, stupidity and fecklessness – the opposite of the normative values of wisdom and understanding that are the correlate of good morals. A few of Brant's "follies" match the old framework of the Seven Deadly Sins, yet the vast majority do not. Some of them tally with what we would understand today as idiocy or folly, but many are actually examples of immoral behaviour or attitudes that are

to be condemned from a social point of view. A shift occurs in Brant away from a religious attitude towards ethics. He considered moderation and reason to be the true moral criteria. The fool or sinner is an immoderate and impulsive creature who, unlike the saintly hermit (his converse in Bosch's work) is therefore unable ever to find peace. Like the peasant, the fool is a type that embodies the opposite of praiseworthy behaviour. He is prey instead to grotesque, uncontrolled whims, wild gestures, senseless swings between the most contradictory moods and an infinite capacity for turmoil. This unrestrained type, governed solely by its passions, serves as a negative example of the morality and right behaviour promulgated and required by the literate public. A large body of so-called 'fools' literature' was created in the Netherlands and in surrounding countries during this period. Apart from literature, numerous 'symbolic inversion' events – above all Carnival revels – provided representation of these values. Symbolic inversion, with, for example, enactments of debauchery, drunkenness, prodigality, violence, laziness and similar vices, expressed, by antithesis, the core values of a community – sobriety, self-control, parsimony, chastity and hard work. It was within this framework that Bosch identified almost all of his sinners as stupid and foolish. He shared the axiology of his social class, which he expressed by symbolic inversion. He explored the connection between vice or evil behaviour and folly or stupidity specifically in such paintings as *Extracting the stone of madness* [cat. 51], *The blind leading the blind* (known through an engraving by Pieter van der Heyden) [fig. III.4] and *The Ship of Fools* [cat. 37], but it is also present in countless symbolic details in other works.

#### SIN IS ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR – A FORMALIST ETHICS

A second fundamental characteristic of Bosch's world, besides its rationalist ethics, is the social alignment of his morality: he associates sin/folly primarily with a wide group of people from the lowest ranks of society, an attitude which is termed "formalism". The notion of sin is defined on the basis not of an abstract ethic, but of a social reality – or social reality at least as perceived by the middle classes. Those who failed to abide by bourgeois norms were branded sinners, fools, undesirables.

In line with contemporary attitudes towards social deviation, Bosch associated sin and folly with whores, convicts, drunkards and revellers, vagabonds, beggars and travelling mountebanks, procuresses, common soldiers and poor people of all sorts. Whereas earlier the poor had been accepted, in the later Middle Ages they began to be stigmatized as good-for-nothing parasites and idlers. This reached a climax about 1525, when the regulations for poor relief were extensively revised in the Low Countries. From the fourteenth century onwards, and especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a number of satirical texts contained long lists of depraved persons, who, it was urged, should be banished from society. Fools and social undesirables were thus condemned to suffer a similar fate in both literature and art.

It is beyond the scope of this article to catalogue and discuss the innumerable kinds and characteristics of figures from society's fringes that appear in Bosch's representations of temptation and the Last Judgment. Bax has already studied this aspect of his art extensively. In his pictures Bosch portrayed countless 'deviants', whom he placed in Hell or in the company of demons. Vagrants are another common subject in his work, as in *The Pedlar* [cat. 36], *The Conjurer* (preserved only in copies and imitations) [see cat. 54], in the foreground figures of the centre panel and the outer wings of *The Haywain* [cat. 35], and in several other lost works – *Justice*, *The Fosterer* and *The blind leading the blind*.<sup>17</sup> At least two phenomena came into play here. First, there was a strong socio-economic polarization, which resulted in large numbers of unemployed, wanderers and poor; secondly, there was the emergence of a middle class ideology characterized by such required norms as diligence, thrift, sobriety, stability, indoor work, domestic life and social 'conversation' (or civility). Consequently, the attacks on those who represented the diametric opposite of these values became more vehement: such people had no place in the estates of the realm and were generally portrayed as poor through their own fault, and lecherous, dim, foolish and antisocial.

From the fourteenth century, but especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a number of texts emerged containing lengthy lists of characters and occupations that were to be banned from society, alongside fools. Fools and the socially undesirable were, at least artistically, doomed to the same fate. The moral system behind these artistic genres is not only intellectualist, but also formalist: 'vice' and 'sin' are not defined as abstract notions, but in terms of the prevailing standards of a middle class existence. Bosch, through inversive iconography, promoted a work ethos and parsimony, stability, and sobriety.





Bosch's contempt for beggars and marginal people comes to the fore in several versions of a composition of *Saint Martin and the Beggars*, preserved notably in a tapestry<sup>18</sup> after Bosch [fig. III.6] and in a print published by Hieronymus Cock. Like the literary texts mentioned above, Bosch draws up extensive "lists" of deviants who, in his representations, are transferred to Hell or a demonic context. Furthermore, vagabonds appear in several of his works as the main theme. All this is indicative of the prevailing discourse on these groups around 1500.

Life on the fringes of society fascinated Bosch more generally, however. On the one hand, he banished all beggars and outcasts to Hell or represented them as demons intent on tempting a holy hermit. On the other, he puts forward the hermit, living as a recluse in the wilderness, as a behavioural model, notably in the example of the Church

Fig. III.6 Brussels factory after Jheronimus Bosch, *Saint Martin and the Beggars*, before 1560, gold, silver, silk and wool, 296 x 364 cm, Patrimonio Nacional, Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo del Escorial, inv. 1005803

Fathers Anthony – his father's patron saint – and Jerome (Jheronimus) – Bosch's own patron saint – as well as in Saint John the Baptist [see cat. 28]. These hermits are equally "extra-social" deviants. Following another tradition, the poor, wandering itinerant, who is likewise a social outcast, is also – as presented on the outside of *The Haywain* or on the Rotterdam *Pedlar* [cat. 35 and 36] – a metaphor for the good, repentant sinner.

Bosch was absorbed with the notion of standing 'outside society'. He regarded it as an extraordinary position, either for better or for worse. To Bosch, life in the fringes was folly, negative in the case of riffraff but positive in the

case of the ‘fools in God’, the hermits he depicted as holy ascetics in the Byzantine tradition – and perhaps there was folly also in the ‘madness’ of the artist, madness sublimated in his fanciful creations. There is an intriguing paradox in Bosch’s view of mankind and society. He condemns outsiders on the one hand but also praises and promotes a ‘sublimated’ marginality under the character of the most austere, ‘extremist’ anchorites from early Christianity, who are seen as self-maintaining (not dependent upon others, unlike beggars), wise, virtuous, ascetic and courageous against the devil’s violence and sexual assaults. The constant presence of threats in Bosch’s worldview goes some way to explaining the contradiction: the moral and spiritual integrity of the individual was liable to attack by his own impulses, rooted in sensuality, by the external world and by supernatural forces of evil. Fear both of material ruin and of spiritual damage was a basic element of bourgeois culture around 1500. The ideal of utilitarian wisdom became an obsession with self-preservation. The self was regarded as an extremely weak entity, constantly obliged to resist and remain firm. Hence the admiration for stern anchorites who were strong, courageous and self-contained.

#### FORMS OF ‘UNWANTED’ BEHAVIOUR, SIN, FOLLY AND CRIME IN BOSCH’S WORK

A third fundamental aspect of Bosch’s ideology and axiology affecting his entire oeuvre is the way he conceives of sin (or folly or socially reprehensible behaviour). The vices condemned by Bosch can be divided into four categories. In the first place, he condemned giving way to ‘wild’ bodily impulses – aggression, excess consumption of food and drink, and, above all, sex. This attitude accords with contemporary ideas expressed in both pictures and moral treatises by the opposition of nature and culture, of savagery and civilization. Bosch interpreted these ideas concretely, from a well-defined social point of view, using common or stock social types. He also condemned popular festivities and amusements, seen as opportunities for carnal sin and for shows of ill breeding, for the pursuit of pleasure and for boisterous behaviour – vices invariably associated with the common people. In the third category work is opposed to idleness, wealth to poverty, thrift to avarice or prodigality. Here Bosch’s position was more moderate: he seems to have condemned the love of gain for its own sake but was even more opposed to extravagance. The poverty of those on the lowest rung of the social ladder was regarded as largely self-inflicted and ascribed to vices from the first two

categories – drunkenness, whoring, excessive merrymaking. In contrast, Bosch commended a positive attitude to work and moderation in the spending and acquisition of money and property. All this is reflected in *The Haywain* [cat. 35], *The Death of the Miser* [cat. 39] and *Scenes of Idleness* (known only through sixteenth-century prints). The fourth and last category with which Bosch was concerned was rash and baseless aggression. He was an advocate by contrast of constant watchfulness, reticence, attentiveness, detachment, restraint and caution, as can be seen in the drawing *The woods have ears, the fields have eyes* [fig. III.2] and the painting *Keep a weather eye open* (inventoried c. 1600; Heverlee, Arenberg collection).<sup>19</sup>

Although Bosch himself belonged – at least at the end of his life – to the wealthiest and socially highest class in ’s Hertogenbosch, the attitudes to work, money and possessions expressed in his paintings are typical of the contemporary urban middle class. The main emphasis is on moderation, avoiding unbridled acquisitiveness and also blind squander. Next to this comes defence of the ethos of hard work and an antipathy to extravagance, which leads to poverty and ruin. All this is related to *oeconomica* or domestic economy – a life of peace and contentment with the fruits of one’s labour, eschewing the desire for excessive gain and novelty. Bosch endorsed the ideology of an urban middle class of craftsmen and small producers, for whom ‘economy’ was also a moral issue. This was certainly not a capitalist vision, although the emphasis on reason and work (expressed inversely by Bosch – the rejection of laziness and wastefulness) and the denial of prodigality and other forms of impulsive behaviour were helping to prepare the way for capitalist discourse. Bosch’s moderate view is manifest in his depictions of the pedlar on the outer wings of *The Haywain* [cat. 35] and in another, dismembered triptych [cat. 36]<sup>20</sup> on the front side of which were *The Ship of Fools* [cat. 37] and *The Allegory of Intemperance* [cat. 38] on the left and *The Death of the Miser* [cat. 39] on the right, and the exterior of which was the Rotterdam *Pedlar*. The pedlar is an exceptional figure in Bosch’s oeuvre [see fig. III.1]. Whereas with Bosch almost all poor people are good-for-nothings, he is a good man. He is a poor vagrant (with ragged clothing), but he is repentant: at the end of his life (his hair is white) he looks back, as if to judge his own life path. He sees robbery and revelry, and the punishment of crime (reverse of *The Haywain*); in the Rotterdam version, he leaves sinful lust (the brothel) and is about to open a gate towards better times. In his oeuvre, the pedlar is the only good common man, the only secular moral example, witness to another paradox in Bosch: in his view



the popular classes consist of sinners and fools, but at the same time his most striking exemplary moral figure is a poor vagabond.

As already noted, the border between Bosch's religious and moralizing works is often quite blurred. The 'religious' works are usually coloured by ethical and moralizing concerns – the same concerns that are also visualized in Bosch's many secular works. The principal vices represented are sexual indulgence, profligacy, quarrelsomeness, gluttony, drunkenness and self-inflicted poverty. Detachment, moderation, self-knowledge, control over the passions and, above all, reason are regarded as important values. This morality, which arose in bourgeois circles around 1460–90, was founded on the defence of the status quo, though it departed from the ideology of the old order in its new rationalism, ethics and recognition of the individual. In Bosch's work the equation between folly, sin and socially reprehensible behaviour is not consciously expressed by a specific type representing folly; it is implied, as though Bosch regarded it as the self-evident basis for his moral precepts.

It is not a question of his having been 'influenced' by the literature of folly: there was a common ideology that found expression in all the various media.

An almost complete 'catalogue' of sins can be found in his depictions of tempted hermits and of the Last Judgment. Bax summarized the moral content of the innumerable episodes in the *Saint Anthony* Triptych [cat. 23]: "... there is no trace of a balanced or systematic approach to each of the seven deadly sins .... Lasciviousness, gluttony and wrath appear in countless variations; while sloth, avarice and pride do not feature anywhere near as frequently"; on the identity of the damned souls in the Vienna *Last Judgment*: "There are no clergymen ... representatives of the uppermost echelons of society are almost entirely neglected .... His principal target in our triptych, and in other works besides, was incontestably the lower classes .... The sinners in our triptych are, for the most part, frequenters of taverns and brothels (bathhouses), women of easy virtue, pleasure-seekers who take part in uninhibited popular festivals, soldiers and armed rovers (half robber, half beggar)".<sup>21</sup>

## BOSCH'S CONCEPT OF HOLINESS: THE MALE ANCHORITE AND CHRISTOLOGY

The themes of the hermit and of the Last Judgment lead us to two essential aspects of Bosch's world, his concepts of holiness (or wisdom or social obligations) and of time, or teleology, or eschatology. The core of his depictions of saints consists of numerous paintings of hermits and anchorites. These heroic figures painted so often by Bosch – for instance in the altarpiece of *The Hermits* [fig. III.7] – not only conveyed a religious lesson telling the story of the lives of the saints, but also often contained a moralizing message. They served as an admonition to self-control (especially over bodily passions), to patience and to constancy in the face of devilish temptation and natural adversity, as in depictions of *Saint Jerome* (Ghent; Venice); *Saint Giles* (Venice); *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness* (Madrid, Museo Lázaro Galdiano); and, above all, *Saint Anthony* (Lisbon; Madrid; Venice; tapestry after Bosch in the Patrimonio nacional) [cat. 30, 28, 23 and 26; fig. III.7].

The artist never strove to create faithful representations of the saint's hagiography. In some paintings (Lisbon; Venice) the events unfold amidst darkness and fire. This is

significant for the perception of Saint Anthony,<sup>22</sup> since other hermits tend to be represented in daylight. Anthony was a saint revered by country folk, who admired his uncompromising confrontation with evil. He was invoked against sickness of man and animal, incurable diseases and 'burning' temptations (in the fifteenth century, lust was even called 'St Anthony's fire'). In folk culture he became a kind of trickster possessing unusual powers and battling infernal forces. The hermit was felt to be a strong protector, but he was in particular the awe-inspiring saint of the night-time ordeal, when the world descends into frightful pandemonium. He was a man of the wilderness and a ruler over the devil and animals, and a master of fire. In Bosch, the element of asceticism and temptation (seduction by attractive women and torment by devils – in the fifteenth century, lust was called 'St Anthony's fire') always takes precedence [fig. III.8].

Invariably, the trials and enticements presented by the demons (representing sinning) are central. However, in Bosch's art there is also a prominent intellectual and aestheticizing dimension. The detailed symbolic charge of the demonic figures is an instance of intellectual recapitulation. Bosch probably gave free reign to his imagination in the initial creation of his devils. Yet the shapes, once formed,

Fig. III.7 Jheronimus Bosch, *The Hermits* Triptych, c. 1505–10, oil on oak panel, 85,7 x 118 cm, Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia

Fig. III.8 Jheronimus Bosch, *Saint Anthony* Triptych [cat. 23], detail of saint, right panel



could, in a subsequent phase, assume a more conscious meaning through the elaboration of further attributes.

The essential significance of the hermit saint's life, as seen by Bosch, is the rejection of society and the withdrawal from all earthly vices and vicissitudes; this was also a strong theme among the early humanists of the Upper Rhine (such as Sebastian Brant and Geiler von Kaisersberg) with whom Bosch had such affinity. The hermit's trials, they believed, were much easier to bear than those of worldly people – a view hard to reconcile with the practical morality of the same early humanist groups and their bourgeois sympathizers. The hermit was thus apparently more of a rhetorical model, an epitome of the wise man, impervious and invulnerable. The humanists also admired the hermit's self-control and single-mindedness. Hermits were the only group of saints whom Bosch depicted independently, in their own right as a type and an exemplary ideal. The backgrounds of Bosch's representations of hermit saints are rarely directly connected with their relevant legend. They are the artist's invention, often implying a wholly independent ethical system. This is especially the case with the famous *Saint Anthony* Triptych [cat. 23], in which Bosch used the hermit as a vehicle for his own convictions and the convictions of its audience. Through the rhetorical example of the hermit Bosch issues admonitions about the way to organize one's life within society. Furthermore, the wise man's gaze is meant to be directed inwards, and this may be the attitude expressed by Bosch's hermits. Many scholars have detected a total introversion in his hermits' gaze – for example in the Prado *Saint Anthony* [fig. VI.12] – in pursuit of self-knowledge. The social dimension of Bosch's hermit scenes becomes clear when we analyse the details: all forms of reprehensible behaviour are embodied by a motley crew of vagabonds, whores, pimps, criminals, unskilled workers and the like.<sup>23</sup>

Bosch also painted Saint Dominic, a patron of orthodoxy – *Saint Dominic and the Heretics*, a work mentioned by Karel van Mander, and the retable of the high altar of the Dominicans' church in Brussels, which must have depicted scenes from Dominic's life.<sup>24</sup> Otherwise Bosch's saints were all early Christian holy men. The Virgin, in Bosch's oeuvre, is only a bleak apparition, a mere token, lacking any personal character. She is present as the mother of the Christ Child and never appears in her own right.

In this choice of subject-matter Bosch seems to have shown a desire to return to the origins of Christian faith and devotion. This encompasses his predilection for the figure of Christ himself. Bosch painted many scenes from the life of Christ, centering on his childhood and Passion. To the first category belong *The Nativity* (copy, Cologne), *The Adoration*

*of the Magi* (Madrid, Prado;<sup>25</sup> New York, Metropolitan Museum; copies after several lost prototypes [cat. 10, 12 and 13]); *The Flight into Egypt* (untraced; mentioned by Van Mander); and *Christ among the Doctors* (copies in Paris, Castle of Opočno and elsewhere). From Christ's ministry there is only *The Marriage at Cana* (possible copy, Rotterdam) [fig. 14.1]. The cycle of the Passion is introduced by *Christ driving the Money-changers from the Temple* (several copies)<sup>26</sup> and *The Entry into Jerusalem* (untraced; G. de Haen collection, Cologne, 1581). Then come *The Betrayal of Christ* (untraced; Philip II; copies, San Diego and Amsterdam), *Christ before Pilate* (copies, Rotterdam and Princeton), *Ecce Homo* (Boston and Frankfurt am Main [cat. 9 and 17]), *Christ Mocked* (London [cat. 15] and Escorial), *The Carrying of the Cross* (versions Escorial, formerly Philip II; Ghent; Vienna [cat. 18 and 19]), *The Crucifixion* (Brussels) [fig. 1.9], *The Entombment* (drawing, London, British Museum [cat. 20]), *The Lamentation* (two untraced prototypes) and *The Descent into Limbo* (untraced; many variant versions survive).

In his Passion scenes Bosch emphasized the suffering and patience of Christ and the bestiality of his tormentors, who represent the blind and sinful world *par excellence*. It has been suggested that the melancholic way in which Christ looks directly at the spectator is intended to recall the *Imitatio Christi*, the handbook of the *devotio moderna* movement [fig. III.9]. This sorrowful glance is also reminiscent of early humanist visions such as those later described in Thomas More's *De tristitia Christi*. Christ as the only Saviour is a theme also elaborated by Bosch in allegories of his own, as in the four tondi on the reverse of the Rotterdam wings: a man, after having survived devilish temptations and misfortune, returns to Christ.

The sources of Bosch's religious outlook have not yet been fully explored. The ordinary late medieval devotional literature explains many elements, but by no means all of them. The attitude to religion manifested in his works may well have been determined by the taste of leading bourgeois circles, whose piety was a new amalgam of mainstream late medieval thought, early humanism and the *devotio moderna*. Bosch undeniably adhered to the reformist and early humanist interest in returning to sources as a means to revitalize Christian faith and devotion, even though he developed his very own version of this movement. This adherence implied a renewed interest in teleology and eschatology, and notably in the Old Testament.

Bosch depicted Old Testament scenes proportionately more often than his contemporaries in the Netherlands. To some extent, these fit into a traditional reading of sacred history through what is called 'typology'. A number of works

Fig. III.9 Jheronimus Bosch, *Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)* [cat. 15], detail of Christ and torturer



with scenes from the Old Testament – the stories of Judith, Esther, David and Abigail, Solomon and Bathsheba (previously in Saint John’s at ‘s-Hertogenbosch) – apparently functioned as antetypes (“foreshadowings”) for scenes from the New Covenant. As we have no trace of *The Story of Jonah*, a large canvas in Cardinal Domenico Grimani’s collection (Venice, 1521), it is hard to define its meaning.<sup>27</sup> This story was widely regarded as an antetype of Christ’s death and resurrection, but as Grimani’s picture was called a “*fortuna*” it may have been an allegory of Fortune, fitting into an early humanist vision of life, although it may be more likely that the Italian *fortuna* only meant ‘storm’. But Bosch was also a forerunner of moralizing interpretations of Old Testament stories, of the kind that became frequent in later sixteenth-century art.<sup>28</sup> His predilection for these themes fits with his interest in returning to Christian origins (the humanist *ad fontes* movement) and the rediscovery of the (often re-interpreted) wisdom of the Old Covenant. Among these other Old Testament scenes, now lost, to all of which a metaphorical meaning was attached in the sixteenth century, were *The Tower of Babel* (rejection of pride and discord), *Lot and his Daughters* (rejection of the unspeakable sin of incest, and of “unequal love” between old and young), and *Job* (long-suffering patience). These themes fit with the rest of Bosch’s moral outlook.

#### THE FASCINATION OF PRIMEVAL TIME AND ESCHATOLOGY

Bosch’s depictions of *The Last Judgment* (Bruges [cat. 42]; Vienna [fig. IV.6]) reveal his apocalyptic concerns, but also served as a vehicle for his moral views: he presented a fundamentally pessimistic concept of the world, in which almost all men were foolish and sinful and very few could expect salvation. Bosch did not represent the resurrection of the dead, and the division between ‘sheep’ and ‘goats’ is not very equal: compared to the few blessed, there is always a legion of damned, already tormented by devils on earth. Earth has become a premonition of Hell. In Bosch’s art, the world’s origins, the question of the nature of Paradise, the presence of evil, and eschatology were intrinsically linked and found expression in his idiosyncratic depictions of landscape.

Eschatological thinking was of lasting importance in Bosch’s work. He saw mankind in the light of eternity, with the end-of-the-world outcome serving as a final legitimization of his secular ethical views. In the Prado tabletop with *The Seven Deadly Sins* [cat. 40], roundels in the corners depict the Four Last Things (*Death, Hell, the Last Judgment and Glory*), with the all-seeing eye of Christ in the centre. Similar scenes – the Blessed in the Earthly Paradise, the Ascent of the Blessed into the Celestial

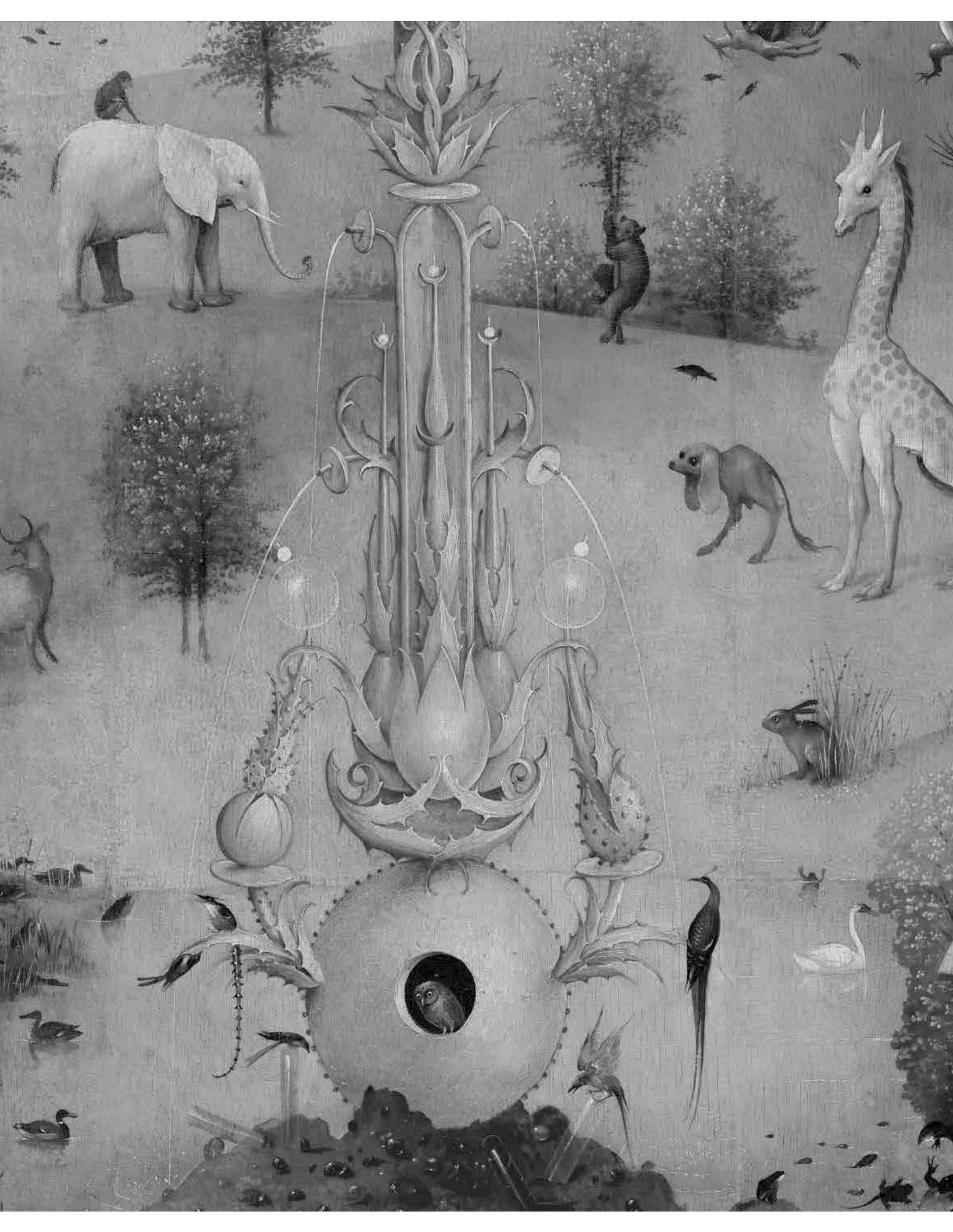


Fig. III.10 Jheronimus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* Triptych [cat. 46], detail of Fountain of Life with owl, left panel

Fig. III.11 Jheronimus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* Triptych [cat. 46], detail of wondrous flora, exterior of left wing

Paradise, the Fall of the Damned, and Hell – are represented in four panels in Venice [cat. 41]. *The Haywain* Triptych and *The Garden of Earthly Delights*<sup>29</sup> both have a representation of Hell on the right-hand panel. Hay was at that time a symbol for everything worthless and transient; Bosch applied it to all earthly possessions and pleasures that men blindly pursue, leading to eternal damnation (the wain is driven by devils towards Hell).<sup>30</sup>

In the triptych of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*,<sup>31</sup> Bosch depicted the history of the world in terms of the Creation of the World by God the Father (on the outer wings), the Earthly Paradise (Garden of Eden) on the left inner wing, and Hell on the right inner wing. On the outer wings, the newly created landscape<sup>32</sup> is already clothed in wonderful flora, symbols of the budding force of Nature and its inherent sexual drive, which are also found in the central panel and in the Temptation scenes by the artist [fig. III.11]. The left wing shows the institution of marriage (Adam and Eve) and already hints at the sexual perversion of it (the owl in the fountain [fig. III.10]). The central panel shows the false paradise of love, probably as the ‘golden age’ from the time of Adam to the time of Noah, to be repeated at the end of the world (“*sicut in diebus Noe ...*”, Matthew 24: 37–39; Luke 17: 26–27). This ‘Grail’, as the false love paradise (*pseudo-paradisus amoris*) was called in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – not to be confused with the Arthurian ‘holy grail’ – is situated between the earthly and supernatural realms and contains both heavenly and diabolical elements; thus some interpreters see it as depicting a paradisiacal state, others a state of sin or devilish deception. The ambiguity is, in fact, intended and is fundamental to a proper understanding of the popular myth and of Bosch’s triptych. Its ‘message’ is approximately as follows: sexuality can become an end in itself, owing to an unchaste interpretation of the paradisiacal state of marriage instituted by God, with the command to increase and multiply. Thus men and women erroneously believe they are living in a lovers’ paradise (Grail), but it is really false and pernicious. Bosch supported this view ‘historically’: sex and procreation were known from the beginning (the outside of the wings); in the ‘golden age’ they turned to *luxuria* (lustfulness) and at the end of the world (which may come at any time) they will again lead back to evil.<sup>33</sup> The preaching of ‘pure’ marriage was not so much a matter of religious



thinking as a reflection of the growing middle-class preoccupation with marriage, the family and the household – concerns that were strongly promoted around 1500.

Dendrochronological data and a new stylistic analysis of Bosch’s work<sup>34</sup> suggest an early dating of the triptych, around 1480–85.<sup>35</sup> If this is correct, the triptych’s commissioner cannot have been Henry III of Nassau. It has been suggested that the huge triptych was commissioned by Henry’s uncle Engelbert II, notorious for his extreme debauchery and loose morals.<sup>36</sup> However, the sternly moralizing tone of Bosch’s masterpiece would strangely contradict Engelbert’s wild life-style. In my opinion, it may have been someone else who was responsible for ordering the triptych.<sup>37</sup>

In his worldview, Bosch deviated from common opinions. Many writers, from the sixteenth century to our own time, have asserted that Bosch was a heretic. His worldview displays several ‘erratic’ aspects, above all in his concept of nature. On the outer wings of the so-called *Garden of Earthly Delights*, before the first humans were born, nature is already pervaded by wonderful, phantasmagoric vegetation that suggests sexuality. Semi-natural, semi-artificial vegetation abounds in the ‘desert’ and in the wilderness in his depictions of hermits, in the Earthly Paradise at the

beginning of time (left wing of *The Haywain*, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the Vienna *Last Judgment* [cat. 35 and 46, fig. IV.6]) and at the end of time (left wing of the Bruges *Last Judgment* [cat. 42]) and in Hell (hollow fruits visible in the underdrawing on the right wing of the *Garden of Earthly Delights*). Sexuality, and hence seduction, sin and delusion, is inherent to matter and thus to nature. By indicating that matter itself is tainted by lust and sin, Bosch is on the borderline of dualist, heterodox worldviews. The world as created by God (outer sides of the wings of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*) already bears the germs of lust and compulsive behaviour. Nature is also pervaded by an infinite number of devils, as shown on the left wings of *The Haywain* and the Vienna *Last Judgment* and on one of the Rotterdam panels: a swarm of monstrous and often insect-like fallen angels rain down upon the earth [figs. III.13 and IV.10];<sup>38</sup> the other Rotterdam panel depicts *Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat*, reflecting Bosch's interest in the oldest history of the earth.

Another idea on the verge of heterodoxy is the belief in two Paradises – an earthly one, for moderately good souls, and an immaterial, heavenly one, for the purest souls.

Bosch did not represent the second one, but only painted the ascent towards it (as in the panel with the famous 'tunnel vision' in Venice). In *The Blessed in the Earthly Paradise* (Venice), and on the left wing of the Bruges *Last Judgment* [cat. 41 and 42], the good souls revel with animals, plants, fruits and angels in the Earthly Paradise, while a few pure souls ascend into a higher heaven. Only the absolutely intangible Celestial Paradise is above the material order and its inherent sexuality and evil. Hence, Bosch consistently avoided painting it. Only the ascent to this Heaven could be represented.

Essential to Bosch's religious thinking is the conviction that salvation is hardly possible. Christ has manifested himself on earth (several versions of *The Adoration of the Magi*, or *Epiphany*, which signifies literally 'manifestation, appearance', and *The Mass of Saint Gregory*; cat. 10, 12 and 13), but humankind has failed to recognize him and, even worse, tortured and condemned him (*Christ among the*

Figs. III.12 and III.13 Workshop of Jheronimus Bosch, *The Flood* and *Hell* panels, c. 1515, oil on panel, 69.5 x 38 cm, Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, inv. St 28 recto and St 27 recto



*Doctors*<sup>39</sup> and *Christ driving the Money-Changers from the Temple*;<sup>40</sup> several episodes of the Passion, for example *The Flagellation*, *Ecce Homo*, *The Mocking of Christ*, *The Carrying of the Cross* and *The Crucifixion*). A concise version of Bosch's worldview is painted on the reverse of *Saint John on Patmos* (Berlin): the universe is God's eye, its pupil shows the fire of evil in a hollow mountain, but the pelican feeding her young dominates the rock; its iris shows the Passion that redeems the world; its surroundings are a pitch-black void traversed by devils. When, as in the medieval play *La vengeance de Nostre Seigneur*, Christ comes at the end of time to judge mankind, for each blessed soul a legion of damned will be cast into Hell. Thus, the world ends as it had begun: indeed, the seeds of evil were present from the very beginning (reverse side of the wings of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*; triptych wings in Rotterdam). The only way to redemption lies in recognition of temptation, in withdrawal, in reflection, in silent virtue (wisdom) and in repentance (as shown by the hermits and the pedlar).

Bosch presented many of his lucubrations in triptych form. The triptych traditionally served as an altarpiece – a painted scene designed to adorn the altar in a place of worship. The wings were closed most of the time and the principal scene inside was revealed only on Sundays and holidays. A few exceptions to this convention exist from the fifteenth century onwards – triptychs with genealogical or heraldic, or historical or mythological themes, and portraiture<sup>41</sup> – but, in general, a triptych always displayed a religious theme setting a positive example. The altar was the place where the mystery of faith was renewed; how could the body of Christ be elevated and shown to the congregation against a background of sin? For these reasons, we have to distinguish between Bosch's triptychs. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (Lisbon), *The Adoration of the Magi* (Madrid), *The Last Judgment* (Bruges and Vienna) were surely altarpieces [cat. 23, 10 and 42, fig. IV.6]. The two triptychs in Venice [cat. 32 and fig. III.7] have wings whose backs were not painted. Unless the original paintwork has entirely disappeared, these works could not be closed and, therefore, could not stand on an altar; they were, most probably, for private collectors. *The Haywain* and the so-called *Garden of Delights* [cat. 35 and 46] cannot have been altarpieces, as their central panels are allegories of sin rather than of holy deeds. So why did Bosch paint these works as triptychs? Just as the master appropriated themes like the Last Judgment or the temptations of a holy hermit to elaborate his own vision of sin, he also borrowed the triptych form in order to imbue his inventions with a sacred – and hence irrefutable – form.

## BOSCH AND POPULAR CULTURE

Surprisingly, Bosch, who so vehemently derided the lower classes and attacked subaltern culture, made extensive use of 'folklore' – such as folk customs, rituals and revels, symbolic objects and, on a linguistic level, popular proverbs, sayings and metaphors – all of which gave rise to cleverly constructed visual puns. This 'folkishness' did not imply that Bosch was a friend of the popular classes – on the contrary. He drew his 'information' from the culture of his 'enemy', as it were, in order to deconstruct it. These folk materials were pressed into the service of a bourgeois system of morals and a method of satire. For Bosch, the language, 'slang' and proverbs of the lower classes presented a certain obscurity, which was deliberately cultivated as the vehicle of an intellectual morality: 'the wise man speaks in riddles'.

At the same time, he subconsciously used popular modes of expression and thought to give form to his ideas. As noted above, he drew extensively on the 'symbolic inversion' expressed in popular seasonal revels such as Carnival. The principle of 'inversion' is a widely recognized anthropological phenomenon: the essential categorizations of a culture are dialectically defined by proclaiming their opposite in a fictitious breach of the norm that actually confirms them, in addition to providing amusement. This may explain why Bosch constantly represents bad behaviour and never the behaviour he considered right. Although Bosch vehemently attacked popular festivities, customs and rituals, he almost systematically derived his exposition methods from the culture he criticized. Inversive depiction and corresponding symbolic inversion are essential to Bosch.

Bosch as an artist is a notorious paradox. While he endlessly opposes himself to folly, irrationality, 'wildness' and uncontrolled thought and behaviour, his art fundamentally operates through whimsical and unpredictable invention, free association and formal freedom. In the sixteenth century Bosch's works or their contents were described as "*drôleries*" (a word ultimately derived from Nordic 'troll', a protean, terrifying dwarf), "*grylli*" (a word already found in art theory of classical antiquity, used to denote 'non-canonical' artistic inventions; the term was also used in late medieval folk anthropology to describe crickets causing folly in the human brain), in Spanish *grillos* (literally, crickets)<sup>42</sup> or *disparates* (weird inventions). Orthodox writers like José de Sigüenza and others saw Bosch's art as the pictorial equivalent of 'macaronic' literature – a form developed in academic circles in fifteenth-century Italy using 'barbarolexis' or an inextricable mixture of dialect, slang, Latin or other



Figs. III.14 and III.15 Unknown Flemish artist, *drôleries* in the margins of the Chigi Codex, 1498–1503, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. Chigi CVIII.234, fols. CXXXVI (154r) and CCLVIII (266r)



Figs. III.16 and III.17 Unknown Flemish artist, *drôleries* painted on wooden plates, c. 1500–15, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kunstgewerbemuseum Schloß Köpenick

Figs. III.18 and III.19 *Grottesche* in the columbarium of the Villa Doria Pamphilj and in the corridors of the Villa Farnesina, 1st century BC, Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano

languages. This created a dreamlike, extremely cryptic exposition; trivial issues were often treated in a hilariously learned style. The comparison is not unjustified, as macaronic writers, such as ‘Merlino Coccaio’ (Teofilo Folengo, 1491–1544) in his epic *Baldus*, often expressed a worldview similar to that of Bosch.<sup>43</sup>

Bosch’s inventions are also related to medieval pictorial ‘folly’, as found in marginal *drôleries* in illustrated manuscripts, in decorative sculpture and in popular representations, as well as in the *grottesche* of antiquity [see figs. III.18 and III.9]. All of these were expressions of a subaltern worldview of continuous change, ‘becoming’, mutual interpenetration, of all organic (and even inorganic) categories of being. But such expressions were condemned by literate culture as insane, ‘low’, deviations. Bosch’s art here displays the same paradox. Intellectually devoted to reason, wisdom, order and self-containment, Bosch was aesthetically devoted to folly – to ‘insane’ invention, to ‘foolish’ creation. What was repressed in personal behaviour and social interaction became cultivated in art.<sup>44</sup>

Apart from his folkloric sources, folklore traditions also provided specific subjects for representation in Bosch’s work, as in the following paintings – *The mock tournament on the ice*, *The War Elephant* [cat. 3], *The Battle between Carnival and Lent* [cat. 56], *The blind boar hunt* (all untraced, but known through copies or by old descriptions). In these a burlesque contest is the central feature. This literal content, however, is used metaphorically to convey a more fundamental message. *The Battle between Carnival and Lent* is a metaphor for the opposition between rival sets of values; in literature from about 1500 it is always Lent that wins, but in art the outcome is uncertain: the two opponents confront each other. Bosch attached many negative connotations to Carnival, so it is most probable that the moral winner is Lent. The other scenes satirize folly (for example the children’s *Mock tournament* on the reverse of the *Vienna Carrying of the Cross* [cat. 19]; although this iconography could also represent innocence), aggressive or licentious popular amusements, the ill effects of error and rashness



(for example *The blind boar hunt* in the *Saint Martin Tapestry* [fig. III.6]), or senseless hostility between social groups and classes (for example *The War Elephant*). Other folkloric themes in Bosch's work centre on the ritual celebration of folly. *Extracting the stone of madness* [cat. 51] was not inspired by real surgical procedures (although in medieval times it was mockingly thought that cutting a stone out of a madman's head would cure him) but by burlesque illustrations of the futility of trying to make fools wise. *Shaving the fool* (London, British Museum) [fig. III.20] is based on similar organized spectacles intended to hold up folly to public opprobrium; but even these satiric performances were later forbidden by the authorities because of their 'licentious' character.

Bosch was the first artist<sup>45</sup> to depict a peasant wedding, which was to become a most successful theme in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art. Other folk figures like the witch or the old couple were also painted by Bosch, though such compositions are only known through archival documents.<sup>46</sup>

Bosch used very heterogenous sources: *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is inspired by contemporary historiography (ideas about the ages of the world, primitivism and primeval mankind), fantastic ethnography, botany, biology and

popular myth. Many writers from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries bear witness to the folk belief in a kind of earthly paradise, where everyone indulged in bliss and sensual pleasures until the end of time, at which point all inhabitants would be thrown into Hell. This place was called 'Grail'. It was believed that there were real entrances on earth. This in-between paradise of sensual delights was half earthly, half supernatural; hence it shows elements taken from exotic places, from earthly and from heavenly paradise. The dreamlike sensual paradise was described in dozens of Dutch, German, Italian and French texts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>47</sup>

Bosch's art bears witness to a wider phenomenon of repressing direct bodily sensations in favour of a transposed secondary or mental experience through word and image, that is, literature and the visual arts. Throughout the later Middle Ages, a seemingly endless stream of edicts, promulgations and interdictions were issued by municipal and higher entities. Their aim was to control, expurgate or abolish

Fig. III.20 Follower of Jheronimus Bosch, *Shaving the fool*, c. 1550–80, pen and brown ink, 174 x 207 mm, London, The British Museum, inv. 1854,0628.46



countless popular revels, festivities, performances – in other words, cultural expression of and through bodily display. This ‘bodiliness’ had gradually come to be felt as unacceptable, ‘low’, shameful; it had to be purified and replaced by secondary expression. These social demands contributed to the emergence of landscape<sup>48</sup> and genre<sup>49</sup> painting, for instance. The bodily joy felt in nature or during feasts or revelry was “dangerous” to the soul – and to social order as re-defined by late medieval and early modern municipal or higher bodies of power. One of the main issues in Bosch’s art is precisely the body, its urges and drives.

#### SUMMARY: BOSCH PARADOXES

In sum, a deep tension runs through Bosch’s vision and art. One paradox is that he criticizes, rejects and loathes popular culture, but almost systematically uses popular exposition methods (visual puns based on folk language and sayings, satirical practices, inversive symbolism, assimilation of folk myth and folkloric performances). He stands against popular ‘folly’ and subaltern depravity, yet constantly deploys themes and rhetorical methods taken (consciously or unconsciously) from that very same popular culture.

Another paradox lies in Bosch’s rejection of outcast and marginal figures but then his cult of a ‘sublimated’ marginality in the guise of the social withdrawal of hermits and anchorites, persevering in a life of austerity and courage in the face of devilish assaults. Bosch attacks many forms of antisocial behaviour and chastises all people on the fringes of society, yet also adopts as his model the holy outsider who withdraws from society and who is thus himself also marginal.

A third paradox is Bosch’s defence of measure, wisdom and orderliness and his rejection of all forms of impulsive behaviour and ‘folly’ (equated with sinfulness and evil), despite his cultivation at the same time of artistic ‘folly’, whimsical invention and unpredictable and ‘excessive’ freedom (called *grylli*, *drôleries* or *disparates* by his contemporaries). He is a fierce critic of folly in all its guises, yet he adopts an aesthetic based on foolishness. A sense of inner tension pervades, if not splits, Bosch’s creativity.

A fourth paradox is that while he systematically rejects mundane preoccupations, promotes the austere withdrawal of uncompromising anchorites as the saintly example *par excellence*, and depicts Jesus as the ultimate model Bosch simultaneously develops an ethical code of behaviour that is almost entirely secular. He even adopts the sacred triptych format to depict his own non-religious ethical system.

In one more paradox, Bosch casts entire swathes of humanity – especially the poor and those esteemed anti-social – into Hell, yet takes a lowly, down-at-heel vagrant pedlar who has led a sinful life as his secular model of repentance (Rotterdam *Pedlar*; exterior of *The Haywain*).

Bosch imbues his work with a highly moralistic tone and message, clearly aiming at ethically ‘reforming’ his public; yet he codes his inventions in such a way as to create an overall effect of hermeticism, which is hardly understood: ‘the wise man speaks in riddles’. This is in accordance with his rationalist attitude: only the intelligent individual – one who is able to decipher Bosch’s own musings – can attain wisdom and virtue. The ‘stupid’ spectators are not capable or worthy of the insight needed for ethical behaviour – and remain excluded from Bosch’s teachings.

Bosch defends the values and norms of an urban bourgeoisie and of the Catholic faith (in his interpretation), but does so in such a way that one might suspect him of the opposite – and even of being heretical. Around 1500, there seem to have been certain ideological tendencies in Spanish aristocratic and court circles that, while not strictly heretical, but linked to apocalyptic and messianic phantasms among the Franciscan Tertiaries, prepared the way for an interest in the potentially heretic aspect of Bosch. By about 1520–30 some humanist circles, hitherto vaguely inclining to heterodoxy, had gone still further, and they probably saw Bosch as a kindred spirit. Humanists like Felipe de Guevara,<sup>50</sup> Ambrosio de Morales,<sup>51</sup> and the Portuguese Damião de Gois (1502–1574),<sup>52</sup> suspected of or actually condemned for heresy, were Bosch *aficionados* or collectors. The collection of paintings by Bosch assembled by Mencía de Mendoza, Marquesa de Cenete and third wife of Henry III of Nassau,<sup>53</sup> suggests that Spanish interest in Bosch’s work may have been linked to an uncoordinated but widespread tendency towards eschatologism and millenarism that verged on heresy. The group of the Alumbrados (‘Enlightened ones’), associated with the Franciscan Tertiaries, show features of Erasmian and other such free thought, as well as apocalyptic claims; and their earliest centre in 1519 was the castle of Mencía de Mendoza in Guadalajara!<sup>54</sup> Spanish and Spanish-Burgundian circles, having initially seen Bosch as a ‘curious’ painter of phantasmagoric inventions, very soon reinterpreted or endowed him with a spurious content, giving rise to the contrary readings that prevail even today – an orthodox Bosch<sup>55</sup> and a heretical one. The latter conviction persisted in Spanish literature of the Baroque era.<sup>56</sup> The paradoxes inherent in Bosch’s art led to this interpretative ambiguity.

\* My sincere thanks to my dear colleague Pilar Silva Maroto, who invited me to write this text, and to Caitlin Spangler-Bickell and Paul Holberton for their revision of my English text.

1 Vandenbroeck 1981, pp. 151–88.

2 According to J.B. Gramaye (1610) and other records, there were several altarpieces by Bosch in the cathedral in 's Hertogenbosch (now all untraced, except perhaps for the inner wings of an altarpiece for the chapel of the Confraternity of Our Lady, *Saint John the Baptist in the desert* and *Saint John the Evangelist*, respectively Madrid, Museo Lázaro Galdiano and Berlin, Staatliche Museen; cat. 28 and 29). They included the wings of the sculpted high altar retable with scenes of *The Creation of the World* commissioned by the tailors' guild; the altarpiece of the chapel of Saint Michael (commissioned by the tailors' guild) with six scenes from *The Story of Esther*; a retable in the chapel to the guild's Virgin, with *David and Abigael* and *Solomon and Bathsheba*; and an altarpiece beside the Sweet Virgin Mary chapel, with *The Adoration of the Magi* – four retables and two small wings for the Confraternity's altarpiece. There follow the original texts: (1) "*Altaris summi chori et D[ive] Virginis superioris extant tabulae singulari arte Hieronymi Bosz delineate referentes ille opus creationis hexameron mundi, he historiam Abigaelis quomodo Davidi supplex cum muneribus et commeatu offensam deprecata et Solomon Bersabis obvius veneratus est*" (manuscript "Chronicle of the city of 's-Hertogenbosch", written 1608, 's-Hertogenbosch, Rijksarchief Noord-Brabant, Aanwinsten 1889, no. 63, fol. 10r–10v); (2) "*Altarius 50 ecclesia exornatur, praxiteli sulptura, & Apelli pictura non cedentibus, inter quae preciosissimum est summi chori, Venerabilis Sacramenti., & Divae Virginis, d. Catharinae, d. Barbarae. Virginis superioris extant tabulae singulari arte Hieronymi Bosz delineate, referentes illud opus Creationis Hexameron mundi, idem historiam Abigaelis, quomodo Davidi supplex cum muneribus & commeatu offensam deprecata, & Salomon Bersabeam matrem veneratus est. Altari d[ive] Virginis inferioris exhibetur eodem auctore, oblatio munerum trium Regum. Altari S[ancti] Michaelis Archangeli, obsidio Bethuliae, Caedes Holoferni, fuga & strages exercitus Assyriorum, victoria per Iuditham obtenta, Mardochoaei & Hesteriae, liberataeque gentis Iudaeorum triumphus*" (Gramaye 1610, fols. 13–14); (3) in an early seventeenth-century description of the church the high altar is described: "27. *Verum summi chori adjacet lateri lata quaedam aedicula metallo munita, undique simul caelatis defensa lignis. Istud continet altare duplicem formam. Diebus enim profestis picturam repraesentat adeo artificiosam, ut nec velum Parthasii, nec uvae Zeuxis (quas decerpere studuerunt aviculae) elegantius fuerunt depictae, quam hae sunt formae. Festis diebus tabula praesentatur aurea. 28. Omnibus his ordine enucleatis, non omittendum summum credo chorum, qui tantum sacris patet presbyteris. Construxit in hoc, nescio quis artificiosus faber lignarius, sedes maximum occupantes chori locum, caelataeque undique ridiculae sunt hominum formae. Nullae ex tot asseribus patent rimae, verum undique omnia in unum copulata sunt ligna adeo quidem artificiose, ut contextum credas opus; ut enim ex filis variis unus connectitur pannus constrictus arte quadam, sic haec sedes aliis atque aliis exsculpta asseribus unum videtur lignum. Quisque in hac suum (ut aequum est) continet locum: canonici superiorem enim occupant locum, inferiorem caeteri sacerdotes. 29. Haec ara (quae medio quasi instructa est choro) duplicem habet picturarum figuram; saepe colorem asseribus impressum videre licet monstra quaedam continentem tartarea vivo depicta colore; subinde caelata refulget Domini passio, auroque obductae imagines oculos pascent spectantium. Arae satis*

*expressae sunt, quae oculos afficere poterint voluptate*" (see Schutjes 1873, p. 778). These wings of the sculpted high altar retable (otherwise called *The Six Days of Creation*) were sold by the church in 1616–17. The *David and Abigael* and *Solomon and Bathsheba* are known through later copies, attributed to Gielis Panhedel (whom some scholars believe to be their original author); see Elsig 2006, pp. 35–41.

- 3 This text summarizes some elements from Vandenbroeck 1987c and Vandenbroeck 2002, which see for the relevant scholarly apparatus.
- 4 This is the main theme of the second parts of the author's two books just cited. As they have not been translated into an international language, they remain virtually unknown.
- 5 Domien Roggen, Louis Lebeer, Paul de Keyser and Jan Grauls, who all published their studies in Dutch in the periodical *Gentsche bijdragen tot de kunstgeschiedenis* (Ghent).
- 6 Bax [1948] 1949 (English edn, Bax 1979); Bax 1983.
- 7 De Bruyn 2001. See also his essay in this catalogue.
- 8 See the fundamental and groundbreaking study Pleij 1979.
- 9 "Symbolic inversion" is a fundamental concept in cultural anthropology; one of the pioneering studies is Babcock (ed.) 1978. See also note 48 below.
- 10 Blondé and Vlieghe 1989, pp. 699–700. See also Blondé 1987.
- 11 Although no relevant documents have yet been found, Bosch may have travelled to North Italy; several of his works belonged to early sixteenth-century Venetian collections (Domenico and Marino Grimani), and several Venetian painters of the time show apparent Boschian influence. Four panels (collectively known as *Visions of the Hereafter*) and two triptychs, not described in the Grimani inventories, are currently held in Venice (Doge's Palace; see cat. 32 and 41 [fig. III.7]). A triptych with *The Martyrdom of Saint Wilgefortis* (Venice, Doge's Palace) [cat. 32] was painted for Italian patrons, judging by the clothing that is now visible only under the surface, having been covered over and repainted by Bosch himself.
- 12 Van Dijck 2001a.
- 13 Vatican, Bibliotheca Apostolica, Ms. Chigi CVIII.234 [figs. III.14 and III.15].
- 14 Brussels, Royal Library, Ms. IV-448.
- 15 For example, Bosch's disciple Gielis Panhedel, who was also from Brussels, where his father Aert van den Bossche was a painter as well; see Bücken and Steyaert (eds.) 2013, pp. 247–79 and 281–83.
- 16 For the iconography of the Ship of Fools around 1500, see Hartau 2001b, pp. 63–84.
- 17 The works by Bosch no longer extant are described in old inventories, above all those of the Spanish Crown. See Silva Maroto 2001, pp. 41–46; Vandenbroeck 2002, pp. 308–40; Vandenbroeck 2001a, pp. 49–64.
- 18 On the iconography (and the history) of the five tapestries after Bosch, see Vandenbroeck 2011a, pp. 212–69.
- 19 First published by Steppe 1967, esp. pp. 23–24.
- 20 Hartau 2005, pp. 305–38.
- 21 Bax 1983, p. 278–79.
- 22 Still more than in the Netherlandish tradition, he was strongly venerated among folk communities in Spain. See Nuet Blanch 1996, pp. 111–24; Beltrán 1995; Palomar i Abadia and Fonts i Pallach 1993; Monferrer i Montfort 1993; Verdejo 1988, pp. 6–10; and Barroso Gutiérrez 1982, pp. 86–93.
- 23 Apart from the hermits, Bosch made few paintings of saints, and none, for instance, of the Virgin, or Saint Anne or other devotional saints (Catherine, Barbara) who were then so popular. He was certainly not working to meet the needs of the ordinary devotee,

- but for particular patrons for whom his own intellectual contribution was generally decisive. Other depictions include *Saint John on Patmos* (Berlin) [cat. 29] and *Saint John the Baptist* (Madrid, Museo Lázaro Galdiano) [cat. 28], panels from the wings of the triptych of the Confraternity of Our Lady in 's Hertogenbosch (see note 2).
- 24 Vandenbroeck 2002, p. 326.
  - 25 Painted for the Antwerp alderman Peeter Scheyve and his wife, Agnes Gramme; there are other extant versions as well: Vandenbroeck 2002, p. 314.
  - 26 Copies in Glasgow, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum; Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst; Tallinn, Kadrioru Kunstmuuseum; private collection. See Hermens (ed.) 2012.
  - 27 See Eichberger 2011, pp. 107–37.
  - 28 Veldman 1977.
  - 29 Silva Maroto 2000a, pp. 11–31.
  - 30 Vandenbroeck 1984a, pp. 39–66, and Vandenbroeck 1987b, pp. 107–42.
  - 31 I have analysed this triptych in detail in a book-length study, Vandenbroeck 1989, Vandenbroeck 1990, and Vandenbroeck 2016 (forthcoming). This text has appeared only in Dutch.
  - 32 See Silva Maroto 2006, p. 327–39.
  - 33 Vandenbroeck 1990, p. 72–162.
  - 34 Vermet 2001, pp. 84–99.
  - 35 See, however, the alternative dating proposed by Pilar Silva in the present catalogue [cat. 46].
  - 36 Vermet 2005 (accessed online December 2015), and Vermet 2010.
  - 37 Vandenbroeck 2016 (forthcoming).
  - 38 This is a subject sometimes painted also by other masters, such as the Master of Ávila, c. 1480, *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (panel, 92 x 79 cm, Ávila, Museo Catedralicio), or, by anonymous Flemish master, c. 1530, in an exceptionally rare triptych with the story of Adam and Eve (panel, 48 x 75 cm, Mexico City, Museo de San Carlos).
  - 39 See *Hieronymus Bosch “Christ among the doctors”* 1994.
  - 40 Vandenbroeck 2012, p. 103–21.
  - 41 For examples of secular triptychs see Vandenbroeck 1983.
  - 42 See Vandenbroeck 1987d.
  - 43 See Lazzarini 1982, pp. 11–33; Zaggia 1994; Bonora and Chiesa (eds.) 1979; and Bernardi Perini and Marangoni (eds.) 1993.
  - 44 See Vandenbroeck 2006b.
  - 45 Vandenbroeck 1984b; Smolderen 1995.
  - 46 Silva Maroto 2001; Vandenbroeck 2001a.
  - 47 Barto 1916.
  - 48 Vandenbroeck 2006–07.
  - 49 Part of this phenomenon is the early modern ‘inversive self-definition’, through which the urban middle classes developed new artistic ‘genres’ featuring their ‘others’ (fools, peasants, wild or exotic men, beggars); see Vandenbroeck 1987a; Vandenbroeck 2006a, Vandenbroeck 2008; Vandenbroeck 2011b.
  - 50 Vázquez Dueñas 2011.
  - 51 Salazar 1955. Morales was mentor and teacher of Diego, son of Felipe, whose friend he was: Redel y Aguilar 1908, pp. 141–46; Serrano Cueto 2005.
  - 52 Hirsch 1967; Torres 1981, pp. 57–105; Tavares 1999; Benazzi, D’Amico and Rêgo 2001; and Marques 2002.
  - 53 García Pérez 2004b; García Pérez 2004c; García Pérez 2009.
  - 54 See Márquez 1980. I am preparing a study on the reception of Bosch in Alumbardo circles.
  - 55 The ultra-orthodox Philip II was the greatest Bosch collector of all: see Silva Maroto 2000b.
  - 56 De Salas 1943; still unsurpassed is Heidenreich 1970 (esp. pp. 171–99). See also Vázquez Dueñas 2016 (forthcoming).