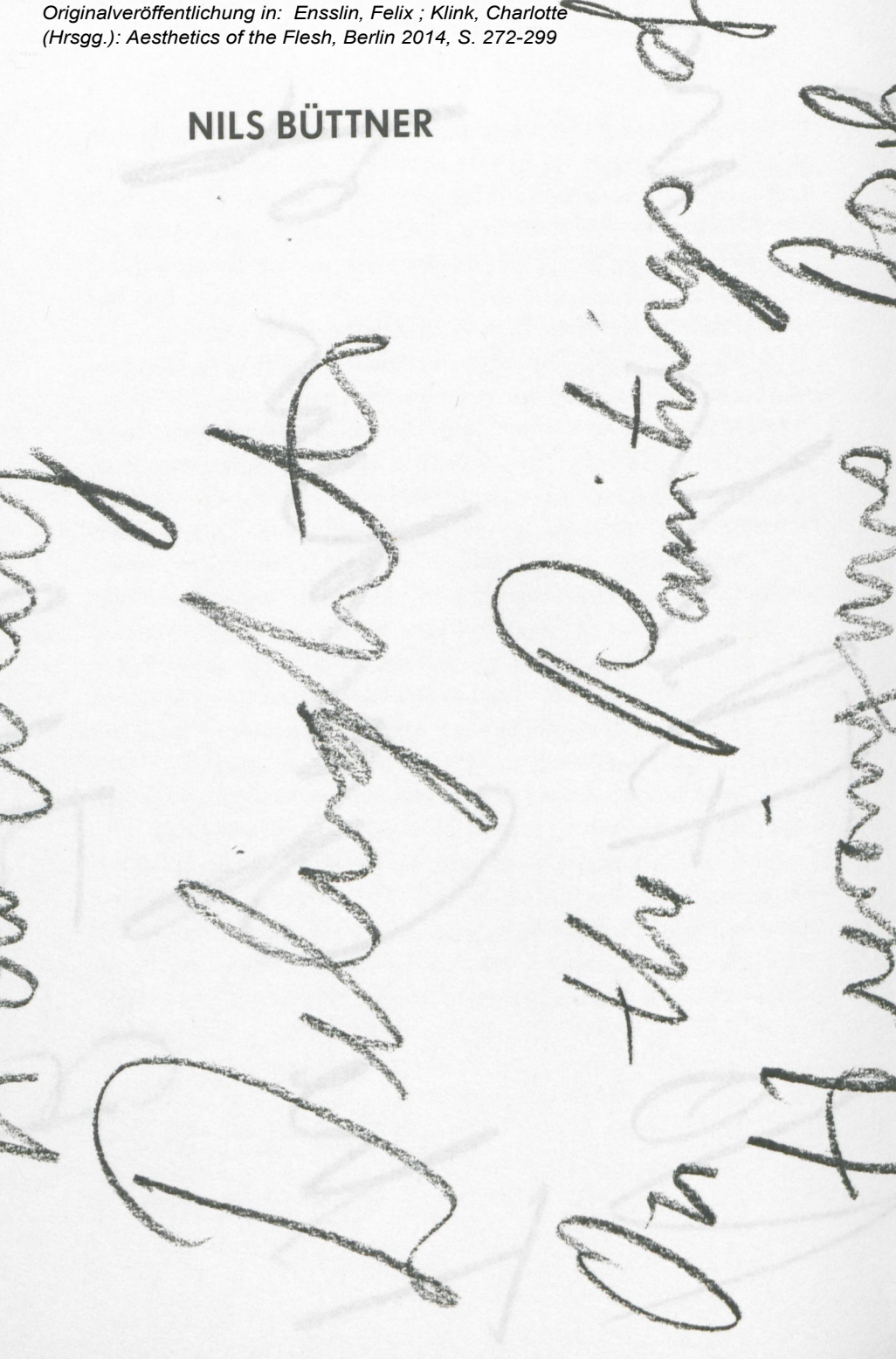


NILS BÜTTNER



NO FLESH IN THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

—On the Paintings of Hieronymus Bosch

The paintings of Hieronymus Bosch **FIG 1** are among the best-known works of art in the world. They certainly have a place of their own in the collective »Musée imaginaire,« the metaphorical collection representing the shared cultural memory of works of art through history. Not only the many digital and analog reproductions that seem almost omnipresent are proof of this impact, but also the various literary echoes which draw upon the existence of this imaginary museum. They range from Henry Miller's novel *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* to Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la folie* and the lectures and writings of Jacques Lacan.

In his famous essay on the »mirror stage,« a phase of infant development, Lacan uses the image of a fragmented body that is essential to the formation of the self as a subject. The child discovers in a moment of epiphany that the body, which was perceived only in parts and fragmented glimpses so far, is in fact a whole entity, a »Gestalt.« As this ideal image of the body can only be perceived through an externalized perspective, i.e., a glance in the mirror, a constant feedback loop between the ideal and complete mirror image and the fragmented body unfolds. To illustrate the idea of an »aggressive disintegration of the individual« which is mainly perceived in dreams, where the body »appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions,« Lacan evokes the paintings of Bosch.¹ In his dramatic merging of individual and historical processes of human development, Lacan withdraws these phenomena from »denomination of speech and thought within the symbolic order.«² Literary allusions to Bosch are usually less based on a direct

analysis and autopsy of his paintings, as they are presented in museums today, but rather hint at a general perception of his paintings and their contents. One reason for this simplified perception is that Bosch's paintings were kept alive in the collective memory by an ideal transported in literature rather than by direct art contemplation.

The first printed photogravure based on a photographic reproduction of the retable which has since been known as *The Garden of Earthly Delights* FIG 1 was published in 1898.³ After things became quiet for many years around the painter from 's-Hertogenbosch, his paintings were rediscovered by art history at the time when Sigmund Freud invented his theories on trauma and established the method of psychoanalysis. It is certainly no coincidence that in the decades following the discovery of the human psyche and its analysis there was also a rising interest in Bosch.

The first monograph was released in 1907. With this book, Maurice Gossart met the growing interest in the »faiseur de Dyables.« The epitheton »devil maker« has been connected with the painter since the sixteenth century. The first mention can be found about half a century after the painter's death in the writings of Marcus van Varnewijck, who writes that Bosch used to be called the »duvelmake-re.«⁴ A rising number of opulently illustrated books catered to the renewed interest, yet the art historian Max J. Friedländer still wrote in

1 Jacques Lacan, »Le stade du miroir. Théorie d'un moment structurant et génétique de la constitution de la réalité,« in *Écrits*, vol. 1 (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 89–97, here: 94: »Ce corps morcelé, dont j'ai fait aussi recevoir le terme dans notre système de références théoriques, se montre régulièrement dans les rêves, quand la motion de l'analyse touche à un certain niveau de désintégration agressive de l'individu. Il apparaît alors sous la forme de membres disjoints et de ces organes figurés en exoscopie, qui s'aillent et

s'arment pour les persécutions intestines, qu'à jamais a fixées par la peinture le visionnaire Jérôme Bosch, dans leur montée au siècle quinzisième au zénith imaginaire de l'homme moderne.« 2 Ursula Amrein, »Das Groteske als Existenzchiffre der Moderne,« in *Das Groteske*, ed. Martin Hedinger (Fribourg: Paulus, 2005), 243–65, here: 260f. Cf. also Stefanie Wenner, »Ganzer oder zerstückelter Körper: Über die Reversibilität von Körperbildern,« in *Körperteile: Eine kulturelle Anatomie*, ed. Claudia Benthien



FIG 1 Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, ca. 1503, panel, 220 x 195 cm, wings: 220 x 97 cm.

1927 that »most of what was written about Bosch reads as though it were taken from detailed descriptions of lost works.«⁵ Independent of this assessment, the various literary reactions show that Bosch has been fascinating to thinkers for over 500 years now.

The earthly existence of the painter Jheronimus van Aken, who called himself Bosch, is astonishingly well documented for a fifteenth-century painter.⁶ In total, there are more than fifty documents from a period of forty-two years that allow drawing conclusions on the life

and Christoph Wulf (Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2001), 361–80, esp. 376f.

3 Hermann Dollmayr, »Hieronymus Bosch und die Darstellung der Vier letzten Dinge,« *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, no. 19 (1898): 284–343, »Garten der Lüste,« pl. 42 and 43.

4 Marcus van Varnewyck, *Van die beroerliche tijden in die Nederlanden en voornamelijk in Ghendt 1566–1568*, ed. Ferd[inand] Vanderhaeghen, 4 vols. (Ghent: Annoot-Braeckman, 1872–1876), here: vol. 1, 156:

»die men hiet den duvelmakere.«

5 Max J. Friedländer, *Geertgen van Haarlem und Hieronymus Bosch* (Berlin: Cassirer 1927), 84: »Das Meiste, was über Bosch geschrieben worden ist, liest sich, als ob es ausführlichen Beschreibungen verschollener Werke entnommen sei.« **6** For a concise introduction to the life of Hieronymus Bosch see Nils Büttner, *Hieronymus Bosch* (Munich: Beck, 2012).

and work of Bosch in the Flemish town of 's-Hertogenbosch. The sources are mostly documents of the city and give an impression of the wealth the painter and his wife enjoyed. They show him as a cornerstone of the Catholic upper class of his home town, a well-adjusted and well-connected citizen with acquaintances in high court positions. Contemporary sources speak of his fame, and everything suggests that he drew the attention of court patrons early in his career. His international reputation is documented by some of his works that were part of courtly collections in his early years. Last but not least, the countless numbers of copies and reproductions, the first of which were crafted in Bosch's own lifetime, bear witness to his extraordinary popularity.

Shortly before 1504, he was commissioned to paint a winged altar by Philip the Fair, his sovereign who was at the time mainly residing in Brussels. His sister, the Flemish governor Margaret of Austria, owned a *Temptation of St. Anthony* as early as 1516, i.e., during the painter's lifetime. Queen Isabella of Castilia, who passed away in 1504, also owned some of his paintings.⁷ Just as early, his paintings became parts of collections in Italy.⁸ He was a very well-to-do citizen in his home town and belonged to the top one percent of the wealthiest tax payers. Besides his riches, Bosch's position within society was determined by joining the »Brotherhood of our Ladyship« in the accounting year of 1486/87, an order that still exists today.⁹ This spiritual brotherhood founded in 1318 became so popular by the end

7 Erwin Pokorny, »Hexen und Magier in der Kunst des Hieronymus Bosch,« in *Lexikon zur Geschichte der Hexenverfolgung*, ed. Gudrun Gersmann, et al., historicum.net, www.historicum.net/no_cache/persistent/artikel/6751 [last accessed July 7, 2012].

8 Carl Justi, »Die Werke des Hieronymus Bosch in Spanien,« in *Jahrbuch der königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, no. 10

(1889): 121–44, here: 122. 9 Roger H. Marijnissen, *Hieronymus Bosch: Das vollständige Werk* (Antwerpen [1987]), 12; Godfried C. van Dijck, *Op zoek naar Jheronimus van Aken alias Bosch* (Zaltbommel: Europese Bibliotheek, 2001), 173; Gerd Unverfehrt, *Wein statt Wasser: Essen und Trinken bei Jheronimus Bosch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 56;

of the century that it came to a distinction between the several thousands of lesser members and the inner circle of oathbound brothers.¹⁰

The approximately fifty to sixty brothers of the inner circle were obliged on penalty of a fine to attend to Sunday mass, vespers on Tuesdays and Wednesdays as well as vesper and mass on about twenty church holidays. Moreover, they were to participate in three annual processions.¹¹ Every six to eight weeks, there were communal meals which were just as binding as the participation in the passion plays, which were held at irregular intervals from the late fifteenth century onwards.¹² The other spiritual town institutions, members of which were regularly invited to shared meals, were closely connected to the Brotherhood of our Lady. Good and frequent contacts were kept with the Brethren of the Common Life, the strict Dominican brotherhood, but also with the town guilds such as the rhetoricians guild »De passiebloem« that also staged spiritual plays. It is very likely that Bosch knew many of the 1,100 clerics in residence personally.¹³ Thanks to the close contacts of the Brotherhood of our Lady to the Brethren of the Common Life, Bosch came in touch with the *devotio moderna*, the religious reform movement that took the pious »Desert Fathers« as a model and promoted a mythical inner »Imitation of Christ.« Therefore, Bosch might have known the book by Thomas à Kempis dedicated to the *Imitatione Christi* that originated from this movement. It is highly likely that Bosch's religious peer group discussed the books of Dionysius van Rijckel, whose topics included

Stefan Fischer, *Hieronymus Bosch: Malerei als Vision, Lehrbild und Kunstwerk* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009), 23f. **10** Fischer, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 23. **11** Godfried C. van Dijck, *De Bossche Optimaten: Geschiedenis van de illustere Lieve Vrouwebroederschap te 's-Hertogenbosch, 1318–1973* (Tilburg: Stichting, 1973), 72. **12** *Ibid.*, 70f., 107f., 108–12; Unverfehrt, *Wein statt Wasser*, 83.

13 Adrianus M. Koldeweij, ed., *In Buscoducis: Kunst uit de Bourgondische tijd te 's-Hertogenbosch, de cultuur van late middeleeuwen en renaissance* (Maarssen: Gary Schwartz, 1990), 119.

»Virtues and Vices,« »On Contemplativeness« or »Vanity of the World.« Even if one had not read all 187 books published by the founder of the Carthusian monastery in 's-Hertogenbosch until his death in 1471, one was certain to know the basic convictions of his faith. Bosch may have even met Erasmus of Rotterdam, who was interested in art and artists. Erasmus studied in 's-Hertogenbosch from 1484 until 1487 and, in his later years at the monastery Steyn, he was granted leave at evening prayers in order to pursue his own art.¹⁴ Unfortunately, none of Erasmus's paintings survived, just as no formal evidence exists that Bosch had a theological education. Nonetheless, a formal theological education exceeding the obligatory Latin school would explain the gaps in Bosch's artist biography and offer an explanation for his swift ascent in the elite of the inner circle of the Brotherhood. As an oathbound member of the Brotherhood of our Lady, Bosch was a cleric. He was married and, unlike a priest or a deacon, not bound by celibacy. Yet he received one of the four lower ordinations as a clericus, and, in accordance with the rules of the Brotherhood, he received a *kruinschering*. Thus, Bosch was at least for some time tonsured, which clearly marked him as a man of the church.¹⁵

Probably, Bosch held a church office, as most of the oathbound brothers. For instance, he could have been responsible for order in the church as an *ostiarius* or read from the Bible during sermons as a lector. It is just as likely that he performed altar duties as an *acolythe* or that he was an *exorcist*.¹⁶ His contemporaries had no reason to doubt his righteous faith. Yet there was a time to come when his paintings gave rise to criticism. At the Council of Trent that was held between 1545 and 1563, Catholic reformers discussed the question of appropriate imagery. This was of no little consequence to the reception of Bosch's work. Some of Bosch's paintings were the target of open criticism during an official visit to the Cathedral of 's-Hertogenbosch in December 1615. Especially the naked figures on two of Bosch's lost masterpieces, the *Creation of the World* and his rendering of the Judgement Day, were perceived as »obscene« and »scandalous« and

caused offense.¹⁷ As their artistic merit was acknowledged, the paintings were removed from the cathedral and transferred to the town hall. One of the earliest extensive accounts on Bosch can be seen as typical of this critical view.

The *History of the Order of St. Jerome* dating back to 1605 includes an extensive chronicle of the monastery El Escorial, which was founded by the Spanish King Philipp II. Four decades after the Tridentinum, which operated in accordance with reformatory principles and strongly opposed the imagery of Bosch and his contemporaries, Fray José de Sigüenza tried to explain why his most Catholic king took a fancy to Bosch's paintings. The king's authority is used by Sigüenza to vouch for the impeccability of Bosch's paintings and elevate them over every possible suspicion of heresy. Sigüenza explicitly attacks »people who observe little in what they look at; and [...] I think that these people consider them without reason as being tainted by heresy. I have too high an opinion—to take up the last point first—of the devotion and religious zeal of the King, our Founder, to believe that if he had known this was so he would have tolerated these pictures in his house, his cloister, his apartment, the chapter house, and the sacristy; for all these places are adorned with them. Besides

14 Gerd Unverfehrt, *Hieronymus Bosch: Die Rezeption seiner Kunst im frühen 16. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1980), 61, with reference to Regnerus Richardus Post, *The Modern Devotion* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 391–98. For Erasmus's painting: Robert L. Delevoy, *Bosch* (Geneva: Skira, 1960), 13.
 15 Van Dijck, *De Bossche Optimatien*, 69f.; Unverfehrt, *Wein statt Wasser*, 84.
 16 Unverfehrt, *Wein statt Wasser*, 84.
 17 »Optaret visitari statuas et tabulas omnes ecclesiae nostrae et tolli impudicas seu propter nimiam nuditatem scandalosas, ut est statua pp. Mariae Egiptiacae et tabula creationis mundi retro sedem episcopalem

extra, necnon tabulam extremi iudicii circa altare S pp. Crispini et Crispiniani emendari.« Frenken, A. M. »De latere kerkvisitatie (na die der eerste Bossche Bisschoppen),« *Bossche Bijdragen*, no. 27 (1963–1964): 1–231, here: 108. See also Pater O.F.M. Gerlach, *Jheronimus Bosch: Opstellen over leven en werk* ('s-Hertogenbosch: Vereniging »Gerlach-Publikaties,« 1988), 59f.; Ester Vink, *Jeroen Bosch in Den Bosch: De schilder tegen de achtergrond van zijn stad* (Nijmegen: Nijmegen University Press, 2001), 102.

this reason, which seems weighty to me, there is another that one can deduce from his pictures: one can see represented in them almost all of the Sacraments and estates and ranks of the Church, from the Pope down to the most humble—two points over which all heretics stumble—and he painted them with great earnestness and respect, which as a heretic he would certainly not have done; and he did the same with the Mysteries of Redemption. I want to show presently that his pictures are by no means absurdities («disparates») but rather, as it were, books of great wisdom and artistic value. If there are any absurdities here, they are ours, not his; and to say it at once, they are painted satires on the sins and ravings of man. [...] The concept and artistic execution of these are founded on the works of Isaiah, when upon the command of the Lord he cried with a loud voice: ›All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof as the flower of the field.‹ And on this theme David said: ›Man is like grass, and his goodness thereof is as the flower on the field.‹ One of these pictures has as its basic or principle subject a loaded Haywain **FIG 2**, and atop it sit the sins of the flesh, fame, and those who signify glory and power, embodied in several naked woman playing instruments and singing, with glory in the figure of a demon who proclaims his greatness and power with his wings and trumpet.«¹⁸

In a similar way, Siguenza evaluates the painting he calls ›el quadro del madroño,« »the strawberry plant elsewhere called *maiotas*.« In the red fruit depicted on the centerpiece, which tastes shallow and does not live up to the promise made by its luscious exterior, he saw a simile of the general topic of the painting which is a warning not to fall prey to false appearances, alluring as they may

¹⁸ Quoted in James Snyder, ed., *Bosch in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 34–38. For the original see: Fray Joseph de Siguença, *Tercera parte de la Historia de la Orden de S. Geronimo* (Madrid Imprenta Real, 1605), 839.

¹⁹ Snyder, *Bosch in Perspective*, 38f. De Siguença, *Tercera parte de la Historia de la Orden de S. Geronimo*, 839.

seem. »In the painting called The Haywain **FIG 2** this is more simply presented, and in the picture of the Strawberry Plant **FIG 1** this is done with a thousand fantasies and observations that serve as warnings. This is all presented on the first wing. In the large painting that follows he painted the pursuits of man after he was exiled from paradise and



FIG 2 Hieronymus Bosch, *The Haywain*, ca. 1515–16, panel, 135 x 100 cm, wing width: 45 cm.

placed in this world, and he shows him searching after the glory that is like hay or straw, like a plant without fruit, which one knows will be cast into the oven the next day, as God himself said, and thus uncovers the life, the activities, and the thoughts of these sons of the sin and wrath, who, having forgotten the commands of God (penance for sins and reverence of faith for the Savior), strive for and undertake the glory of the flesh (·la gloria de la carne·), which is like the transient qualities of hay, short-lived and useless as are the pleasures of the senses: status in society, ambition, and fame.«¹⁹ That this explanation was shared by Bosch's contemporaries becomes evident in a text by Ambrosio de Morales published in 1585, and which the

author claims to have written in his youth.²⁰ Probably he became familiar with the painting when he was tutoring Felipe de Guevara's son in 1544/45.²¹ As a literary exercise in the style of the antique *Panel of Cebes*, he described the *Haywain*, which according to him depicts »a panorama of our miserable lives and the great enchantment that we seem to find in its vanities.« The fact that Bosch's triptych has to be read from left to right was as evident to Morales as its ethical message: »In the panel he shows us a panorama of our miserable lives and the great enchantment that we seem to find in its vanities.«²² »With subtle detail and skilful execution he painted the figures,« which Morales describes admiringly with much love of detail over several pages and which he evaluates as a simile of the vanity of amassing transient, earthly goods.

His earliest critics shared the view that all persons depicted in Bosch's works had fallen prey to avarice, lust and sin. Even the more recent critics who read the centerpiece of the mysterious triptych with the strawberry tree as a »dream of an idyllic life,« have understood this aspect as »lovmaking of nude men and women« in the »garden of earthly delights.«²³ Yet while carnal aspects seem to be the main feature according to most critics of Bosch's work, the depicted figures seem to lack a real body. »Their doll-like bodies are so devoid of individual traits,« Hans Belting wrote in 2002, »that they might even be seen as naked souls.«²⁴ »Their corporeality is so effortless—and thus so alien—that even their acrobatic acts of erotic play seem childlike.«²⁵ In fact, the way in which Bosch depicts the human body is without precedence in the art of his time. Where-

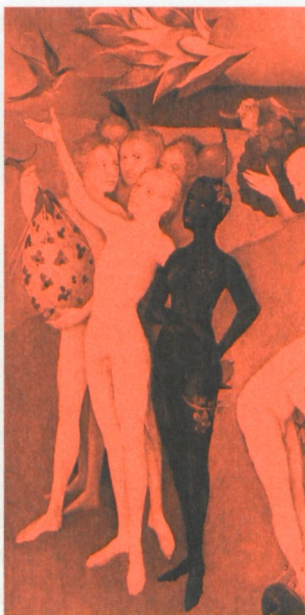
20 Fernán Pérez de Oliva, *Las obras con otras cosas que van añadidas, como se dara razon luego al principio* (Cordoba: Gabriel Ramos, 1586), 268–83. For the English translation quoted see Snyder, *Bosch in Perspective*, 31. 21 Eric de Bruyn, *De vergeten beeldentaal van Jheronimus Bosch* ('s-Herto-

genbosch: Adr. Heinen, 2001), 36.

22 Snyder, *Bosch in Perspective*, 31. Hans Belting and Christiane Kruse, *Die Erfindung des Gemäldes: Das erste Jahrhundert der niederländischen Malerei* (Munich: Hirmer, 1994), 268. 23 For the »dream of an idyllic life« (=»Traum vom idyllischen Leben«) see

FIG 3

Hieronymus Bosch,
*The Garden of
 Earthly Delights*
 (detail), ca. 1503,
 panel, 220 x 195 cm.



ever Bosch depicts nudity, he uses almost abstract signifiers. He reduces the human body to flat figures that are almost pictograms. FIG 3 They are slim and fragile, they are »silhouettes meaning men.«²⁶ In contrast to the fellow painters of his age, Bosch dispenses with artistic illusionment that depicts the body based on an ideal of stereometric plasticity. The human body is mostly represented without any voluminous features.

Jean Wirth, *Hieronymus Bosch: Der Garten der Lüste. Das Paradies als Utopie* (Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer, 2000), 90. For the »love-making of nude men and woman« Hans Belting, *Hieronymus Bosch: Garden of Earthly Delights* (Munich: Prestel, 2002), 47.
24 See the description in Wirth, *Hieronymus*

Bosch, 40: »Die Mitteltafel hingegen mit ihrer bevölkerten Paradieslandschaft, die keine im Fleische auferstandenen Menschen, sondern eine große Zahl von Seelen zeigt.«
25 Belting and Kruse, *Die Erfindung des Gemäldes*, 54. **26** Unverfehrt, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 31.

Long before the middle of the fifteenth century, Jan van Eyck had redefined the standards of representation for incarnate elements in Flemish painting.²⁷ FIG 4 The canon Antonio de Beatis, who accompanied the cardinal Luigi d'Aragona on a tour through Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Italy, had seen the retable by Jan van Eyck in August of 1517 in Ghent and was deeply impressed. He wrote that the figures of Adam and Eve in this painting are »of an appearance seeming like nature itself, and nude, painted in oils with so much perfection and naturalness, both in the proportion of the limbs and in the rendering of the flesh and shadows, that without doubt one can say that in panel painting these are the most beautiful works of Christendom.«²⁸ The technical and artistic requirements of this form of mimetic representation of the incarnate that had been widely admired by its contemporaries has only recently become the topic of examination and study. Especially the literally thin-skinned incarnate parts in van Eyck's paintings are striking. The effect is created by a very fine, glazing application of color.²⁹ Van Eyck's efficient and visually convincing depiction of carnal bodies became a model throughout the Netherlands. Bosch's contemporary from Bruges, Gerard David, was one among many to follow this popular style in his depiction of the Judgment of Cambyses which was commissioned for the chamber of the Bruges jury men.³⁰ Especially in his rendering of the flaying of the corrupt judge Sisamnes, David shows his skill and love of the depiction of incarnates and passions. The same can be said of a retable of the Antwerp painter Quentin Massys, which

27 Ann-Sophie Lehmann, »Fleshing out the Body. The Colours of the Naked in Dutch Art Theory and Workshop Practice 1400–1600,« *Body and Embodiment in Netherlandish Art: Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, no. 58, (2008): 108–131. 28 »A la man dextra di quello [il choro] è una cappella, dove è una tavola che in li doi extremi ha

due figure, a la dextra Adam et al la sinistra Eva, de statura quasi naturale et nudi, lavorati ad oglio di tanta perfectione et naturalità si de proportione di membri et carnatura come de ombratura, che senza dubio si può dire di pictura piana che sia la più bella opera Christiana,« see John R. Hale (ed.), *The Travel Journal of Antonio de Beatis*

FIG 4

Jan van Eyck,
Adam and Eve,
 from the panel
 known as *Ghent
 Altarpiece* (detail),
 ca. 1432, panel,
 350 × 460 cm,
 Ghent, Cathedral
 of St. Bavo.
 width: 45 cm.



was painted between 1507 and 1508 to decorate an altar of St. John in the cathedral of Antwerp.³¹

Massys tries to depict living and dead flesh and skin in its different aspects and takes great effort to remain true to life from the dirty, blackened skin of the guards to the detail of bodily hair of his subjects. Bosch on the other hand displays quite a different form of physiognomy, and shows far less detail in his human figures in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, even though he does not only depict white people, but also black people. Bosch also painted a black-skinned

(1516) (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1979), 95f. **29** Ann-Sophie Lehmann, »Jan van Eyck und die Entdeckung der Leibfarbe,« in *Weder Haut noch Fleisch: das Inkarnat in der Kunstgeschichte*, ed. Daniela Bohde and Mechthild Fend, (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 2007), 21–40, here: 29. **30** Hans J. van Miegroet, »Gerard Davids Justice of Cambryses:

Exemplum iustitiae or political allegory?« *Simiolus*, no. 18 (1988): 116–133; Hans J. van Miegroet, *Gerard David* (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 1989), 130. **31** Exhibition catalog: *Van Quinten Metsijs tot Peter Paul Rubens: Meesterwerken uit het Koninklijk Museum terug in de kathedraal* (Antwerp: 2009).

figure in his retable which depicts the Adoration of the Magi. **FIG 5** In this representation, Bosch shows that he is at the state of the art of his time. His physiognomic characterization of a black African does not have to hide behind the contemporary drawing by Albrecht Dürer, which is dated 1508.³² If Bosch was unquestionably capable of painting complicated, distinguished human figures, one has to inquire why he chose not to do so in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Antonio de Beatis, who was so impressed by Jan van Eyck's altarpiece in Ghent, also saw Bosch's most famous painting in his travels. On the 30th of June, 1517, Antonio de Beatis visited the palace of Henry II of Nassau in Brussels. Henry had inherited the palace—and possibly this particular Bosch painting—from his uncle Engelbrecht II in 1504. He did not spare expenses in the following years and made his residence in Brussels one of the most luxurious palaces, which became a major attraction for foreign visitors, just as the adjoining gardens with the wildlife park. Albrecht Dürer visited him in 1521 and found the palace »built sumptuously and also nicely decorated« (»gar köstlich gebaut und eben so schön verziert«).³³ He was shown »all the treasures,« a meteorite and a giant bed, »where 50 people could lay in« (»do 50 Menschen mügen innen liegen«).³⁴ However, he did not mention Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, maybe because he did not gain access to all the rooms as a traveling artist. The canon Antonio de Beatis, however, was able to recall details of the pictures he had seen there months later. Beside a *Judgment of Paris* where the three goddesses were shown in highest perfection and the lifelike

32 Vienna, Albertina, Inv.-Nr. 3.122. See Fritz Koreny, »Hieronymus Bosch – Überlegungen zu Stil und Chronologie: Prolegomena zu einer Sichtung des Œuvres,« *Jahrbuch des Kunsthistorischen Museums Wien*, no. 4/5, (2002/03): 46–75, here: 50, note 25.

33 Gerd Unverfehrt, *Da sah ich viel köstliche Dinge: Albrecht Dürers Reise in die Nieder-*

lande (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 70f. **34** Dürer's journal entry: Marijnissen, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 98, note 127. **35** »In quello sono bellissime picture, et tra le altre uno Hercule con Dehyanira nudi di bona statura, et la historia di Paris con le tre dee perfectissimamente lavorate. Ce son poi alcune tavole de diverse bizzerrie,

FIG 5

Hieronymus Bosch,
*The Adoration of
the Magi* (detail),
ca. 1496/97,
panel, 138 x 72 cm,
wings: 138 x 34 cm.



nude figures of Jan Gossart's *Hercules and Daianira*, he saw a picture with »bizarre things ... men and women, whites and blacks, engaged in all sorts of different activities and poses ... things that are so pleasing and fantastic that it is impossible to describe them properly to those who have not seen them.«³⁵ The traveling canon admires the paintings and the marvelous imaginative spirit behind them without trying to interpret what he sees. Yet, there is no doubt that this rather sketchy description can point to nothing else but Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* that was passed on after the deaths

dove se contrafanno mari, aeri, boschi, campagne et molte altre cose, tali che escono da una cozza marina, altri che cacano grue, donne et homini et bianchi et negri de diversi acti et modi, ucelli, animali de ogni sorte et con molta naturalità, cose tanto piacevole et fantastiche che ad quelli che non ne hanno cognitione in nullo modo se li potriano ben

descrivere.« Quoted in Antonio de Beatis. *Die Reise des Kardinals Luigi d'Aragona durch Deutschland, die Niederlande, Frankreich und Oberitalien 1517 bis 1518*, ed. Ludwig Pastor (Freiburg/Br.: Herdersche Verlagshandlung, 1905), 116f.

of Henry II and his son William of Orange, from whom it was confiscated by the Duke of Alba.³⁶ From the inheritance of Alba's son it was purchased by Philipp II in 1591 and catalogued two years later as »a painting on the mutability of the world« (»una pintura de la variedad del mundo«).³⁷ In order to discover the aesthetic principles and the intention they are based on, one has to take into account the context of the courtly art collection, where the painting was presented. The exterior images show the world on the third day of creation, **FIG 6** in accordance with the biblical account. At the behest of God, Light and Darkness were separated, the orb of heaven and water and land were created. After that, as the book of Genesis relates (1, 11–13), he created vegetation, »and the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself.« That the fall of the angels that brought evil into the world had already taken place at this point is illustrated by the strange plants growing everywhere. The upper rim of the painting quotes the ninth verse from psalm 33, which is commonly ascribed to the repetition of the command to create »And God said«: »Ipse dicit et facta sunt, Ipse mandavit et creata sunt«; »For he spake and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.« This connection is also emphasized by the figure of God the Father, which is depicted on the left, next to the quote. It corresponds to a widespread motif, which also occurs in the world chronicle by Hartmann Schedel, where it is used as a semiotic image topos that functions on the same level as the quote from the psalms. By contrasting the artistic rendering of the earth's surface with the semiotic image equivalent of God Almighty, Bosch translates the idea of the contrast between spirit and matter into the medium of painting.

36 The inventory made at this time states: »ung grand tableau devant la cheminee de Jheronimus Bosch.« Marijnissen, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 98. **37** Marijnissen, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 23.

38 Ralf Junkerjürgen, *Haarfarben: Eine Kulturgeschichte in Europa seit der Antike* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009), 57: »Die Haltung der christlichen Theologie zur Physiognomik lässt sich nicht allgemein bestimmen, weil

A true challenge for modern interpreters and art historians is the interior of the impressive triptych. Especially the central painting caused confusion, which offers no frame for comparison, apart from some detail. In art history, the German term »Wimmelbild« has been estab-

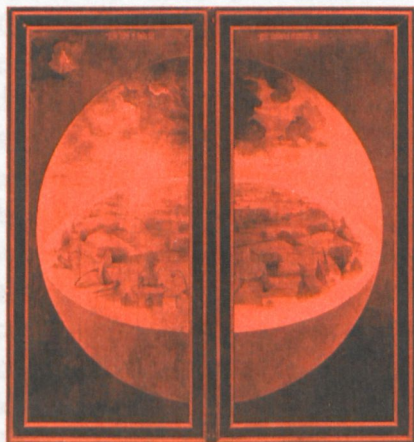


FIG 6
Hieronymus Bosch,
exterior of
*The Garden of
Earthly Delights*,
ca. 1503, panel,
220 x 195 cm.

lished for paintings like this, which also describes the conglomeration of different figures and actions, which is hard to put into words.

The distinction in a foreground, middle ground and background divides the figures and groups of naked men and women, who appear completely ageless. There are no children or old people, yet there are dark-skinned people and even some that are covered in a soft, light fur.³⁸ Their silent company seems alien, especially since the attributed animals and plants surrounding them are depicted in strange proportions and sizes. They nibble at fruits, feed each other, or are fed. Some have fruits on their head and fish in their arms. Some men and women touch tenderly, one couple sits inside a bubble, another couple has withdrawn inside a sea shell. One man raises a

flower as if he wants to smack something, while another sticks his bare bottom towards him, with a bouquet of flowers sticking from it.

What is shown here oscillates between soft eroticism and sexually drastic imagery which becomes the more obvious as soon as it is translated into the medium of speech. Bosch's language of images, however, counteracts any pornographic implications. He reduces the nude human body to a disc-like, flat form, which signifies people but lacks all sexuality and flesh. This becomes especially obvious in contrast to the depicted plants and animals, which are created with much greater mimetic effort. Yet, even though the people appear only as abstract signifiers, their actions are sinful nonetheless.

If the middle panel had been lost, one would expect an image of the Judgment Day. The more confusing is it that art historians have discussed for a long time if the scene on the middle panel should be read as positive or negative, if it depicts an innocent paradise or worst possible sin. This reading is supported by the fact that the Fall of Man is not depicted explicitly on the left wing, which contrasts with Bosch's other renderings of the same topic.

Based on this observation, many art historians read the middle panel in the sense of a »what if« scenario—what would have happened if Adam and Eve had not committed the sin. Yet Bosch does not depict an idyll. The left wing of the Garden of Eden is far from a perfect idyll, as it also shows many markers of evil all over the

sie von einer der theologischen Hauptfragen überhaupt abhing: dem Verhältnis von freiem Willen (*liberum arbitrium*) und göttlicher Allwissenheit (*praescientia*). Erst die Annahme eines menschlichen Willens macht das menschliche Handeln überhaupt moralisch bewertbar. Wenn der Mensch aber frei ist, dann kann er nicht durch seinen Körper prädestiniert sein und der Physiognomik wäre damit jede wissenschaftliche Grundlage entzogen. Die göttliche Allwissenheit

hingegen impliziert eine Determinierung des Menschen durch Gott, der nicht nur sein Schöpfer ist, sondern auch dessen Schicksal kennt und seinen Willen im menschlichen Körper zum Ausdruck bringt. Das Verhältnis von *liberum arbitrium* und *praescientia* wurde noch zur Zeit der Reformation diskutiert, aber letztlich nie gelöst. Somit war es theologisch schwierig, ein endgültiges Urteil über die Physiognomik zu fällen, da sie sowohl gerechtfertigt als verworfen werden

place that are familiar from other works of Bosch. Slimy, glittering reptiles are pointing towards the presence of the dark forces, just as the fact that the cat in the foreground has caught a mouse. The first human couple will not escape their fate, as in the opinion of Augustine and many medieval theologians the Fall of Man happened just at the moment depicted by Bosch. It is the moment when Adam turns away from God and toward his consort in flesh, the woman. It is this orientation toward the carnal which shapes the further course of salvation history.

It is against the background of this common theological base theory that all details of the painting have to be read, including the seemingly idyllic middle panel. Dionysius van Rijckel had put an end to the assumption that everything evil had to be ugly, as there was »no more abhorrent cesspool in the world than the unrepentant sinner and vicious men, which however has much natural beauty in his nature and appearance.«³⁹ If one takes this warning seriously, that evil can appear with outward beauty, one can unravel the little hints Bosch drops on the middle panel as a warning. Here Bosch depicts a proverbial world turned upside down, which becomes especially tangible in motif as the shape doing a headstand, which Bosch uses in other works. The aesthetic principles applied drop another hint, such as the crazy and upturned proportions in size. The middle panel cannot stand as a positive utopia if one takes into account the context

konnte. Hier sei noch einmal auf die bereits zitierte Randbemerkung in der vatikanischen Adamantios-Handschrift verwiesen, die jeden Zusammenhang zwischen Farbe und Moral des Menschen ablehnt. Eine vergleichbare Haltung suggeriert auch Hieronymus Bosch in seinem Triptychon Der Garten der Lüste, in dessen Mittelteil schwarze und weiße Menschen ungeachtet ihrer Farbe sich in einem paradiesischen Garten tummeln und am Bildrand links unten auf

die gemeinsamen Ursprünge in Adam und Eva verweisen.« ³⁹ Rosario Assunto, *Die Theorie des Schönen im Mittelalter*, 2. ed. (Cologne: Dumont, 1987), 249: »Nec est turpior in mundo cloaca, quam peccator impenitens, vitiosusque homo: qui tamen in sua natura et specie multum naturalis pulchritudinis habet.«

of salvation history. Even with all its merit as an entertaining and amusing scenario, it was rather too much in conflict with the everyday ethics and the concept of rank of its time. The courtly audience, who also understood the three panels of the *Haywain* as a chronological order, might have understood the middle panel as an allegory of unchastity and a drastic description of the moral decay of the present world. This succession of scenes illustrates the big drama of salvation history, which begins with the first act of Genesis and concludes with the inferno. Just as in the other big triptychs, Bosch depicts humankind as foolish, forgetting all godly promises. The background of the paradise wing, depicting Satan's fall from the choir of angels and with it the moment when evil entered the world, leaves little room for a positive reading of the goings-on on the middle panel. The whole composition seems to point toward hell. Evidence of this are the measurements of the human figures, which get smaller from right to left.

There is little or no doubt about the motif of the right wing. Scholars agree that this is the most impressive vision of Hell in the history of Western visual art. From the dark brown background, an impressive hurly-burly of hellish figures develops, with single motif and groups of figures that stand out strikingly. Exemplary figures are the oversized musical instruments, the blue toilet devil with a bird's head and the tree man which is also well known from one of Bosch's drawings. While Hell in the middle ground, where the knife sticks between the ears, appears covered with ice, the dim outlines of buildings in the distance are ablazed with flames. Guevara noted with regard to the panel that shows the deadly sins, that Bosch painted disturbing and alien things, as »he wanted to portray scenes of Hell, and for that subject matter it was necessary to depict devils and imagine them in unusual compositions.«⁴⁰ This observation that seems to be so plausible at first glance is not really convincing if one takes a closer look. Some of Bosch's motifs are not quite so unusual. The burning landscape, for instance, is depicted quite lifelike, just as the

contemporary musical instruments and the kitchen tools that are abused as instruments of torture. Hell becomes a world turned upside down, where a hare drags away a human on a spit or an egg beats open a man. In other scenes, men are eaten, quartered like game, put on the wheel, or beheaded with a sword.

What is only implied in the middle panel as a diffuse carnal aspect is elaborated in a rather drastic way here. The damned are treated like meat, are butchered, fried, salted, and cooked, and »prepared for the great devourer, Satan, Lucifer or one of his minions.«⁴¹ The devils use meat hooks (»crauwel«) and other devices that were familiar to Bosch's contemporaries from their everyday life. All in all, the repertoire of this hellish executive force does not differ much from the common bodily punishments that were in use at the time. Especially the focus on details such as these clarifies that the horror in Bosch's vision of Hell is not the contact with an unknown underworld. Much appears familiar but becomes uncanny through the distortion of size and perversion of their normal uses. The depicted actions imitate familiar things. Yet they are not acted out by men, but performed on them. This Hell is uncanny, as it seems so familiar. The Uncanny, as described by Freud in his famous 1919 essay, does not appear as new or strange, but as something intimately familiar, »which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.«⁴² Some things that Bosch shows are inspired by commonly experienced discomfort. The pains that fire and sword can inflict on a person are easily imagined. Who doesn't know how a burn or a cut feels? The paintings of Bosch and his successors come alive by the fact that they show a distant but uncannily familiar Hell. That a pig in a nun's habit on the right hand side presses against a poor sinner to get his signature, matches Dionysius van Rijckel's church criticism as well as

40 Snyder, *Bosch in Perspective*, 28f.

41 Fischer, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 303.

42 Sigmund Freud, »Das Unheimliche,«

(1919), in id., *Studienausgabe. Psychologische Schriften*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer, 1970), 241–74, here: 264.

the unrelenting opposition against any form of unchastity as depicted in many varieties on the middle panel.

Bosch's paintings used to be part of a visual culture that was not only understandable in principle to his contemporaries, but rather familiar. In Bosch's time, especially church and court were involved in a vivid dispute on the use and disadvantage of paintings. This illustrates the argumentative framework in which the meanings and contents of images were widely discussed. Wherever there are statements about the creation of images that transcend mere formulas for making paintings and the acquisition of motifs and imagery, both their creation and their reception are regarded just like the production and reception of texts.

The most poignant observation of this is made by the Italian Leon Battista Alberti, whose texts were widely circulated north of the Alps. He systematically applied the familiar rules of rhetoric that were common knowledge to every scholar to the visual arts. The rhetorization of images that was practiced all over Europe evolved into a semiotic system of its own that was regarded and valued analogously to text. »Ut pictura poesis«—»As is painting so is poetry«—, the Roman poet Horace had written in his »Ars poetica« (361). From this sentence that was originally meant to initiate greater visibility in literary texts, a new doctrine was derived that demanded from paintings adherence to rules of poetic coherence. Paintings were not only meant to be artfully created but also artfully composed. Alberti thought that the different tasks of the visual arts were meant to be directed towards a common goal. According to him, they serve as a means of aesthetic education that should further the well-being of society. This aspect of his theory is modeled on rhetoric as well, according to which the aim of every elocution shares a common goal: to delight, to educate and to inspire the listeners and convince them to follow moral actions and views. Theologians of the time used the commonly applied communication doctrine of rhetoric and demanded its appliance to images. They saw the salvation of souls as a central aim of the visual arts.

Especially the third genus of rhetoric, *movere*, has been treated extensively by art theoreticians, who disputed the emotional impact of imagery. St. Thomas Aquinas was one of the first to demand from paintings of Christian content that they should not only educate the viewer (*instruere*), but contribute to the »evocation of devout passions« (*ad excitandum devotionis affectum*).⁴³ Especially paintings of Evil were believed to be an effective means to make a direct sensual impression on the viewer, even on those who were far from the grace of God. The horror that was elicited by the depiction of Evil was believed to inspire the inherent desire for Good in those viewers. This is one reason that the horrors of Lucifer were depicted in all possible detail.⁴⁴ The mobilization of affects which was meant to be inspired by horrid imagery is in accordance with medieval Christian ethics to elicit abhorrence of Evil and admiration and desire for Good. A long standing church tradition regarded images as a medium of faith as more efficient than texts.⁴⁵ Bernard von Clairvaux, for instance, emphasized that the adoration of the simple people who are focused on the body (*carnalis populi*) could be elicited by ornaments of the body (*corporalibus ... ornamentis*).⁴⁶ This principle could be put into action by using works of art as a medium of spiritual education, as was recommended by Pope Gregory the Great, whose famous dictum that pictures are useful because »a painting presents to the uneducated who look at it, what they ought to follow, and in those who know no letters can read,« was to be valid for the entire Middle Ages.⁴⁷

43 Norbert Michels, *Bewegung zwischen Ethos und Pathos: Zur Wirkungsästhetik italienischer Kunsttheorie des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts* (Münster: Lit, 1988), 143.

44 Michels, *Bewegung zwischen Ethos und Pathos*, 146f. **45** Durandus (1230/32–1296) wrote in the thirteenth century: »Pictura namque plus vedetur movere animum, quam scriptura.« Quoted in Meg Twycross, »Beyond the Picture Theory: Image and Activity

in Medieval Drama,« in *Word and Image*, no. 4 (1988): 589–617, here: 591.

46 Bruno Börner, *Bildwirkungen. Die kommunikative Funktion mittelalterlicher Skulpturen* (Berlin: Reimer, 2008), 56.

47 Greg. M. epist. 105 MPL 77, 1027f.: »Idcirco enim pictura in ecclesiis adhibetur, ut hi, qui litteras nesciunt, saltem in parietibus videndo legant, quae legere in codicibus non valent.«

Yet, Bosch's paintings were not directed to the illiterate only especially to a courtly audience.

Bosch's imaginary worlds have to be regarded closely in accordance with Vergil's widely quoted demand that »images have to be read with the eyes.« Bosch was unquestionably working towards the *concupiscentia oculorum*, the so-called »indulgence of the eye,« which was criticized by theologians, but legitimized it by the educational merit that was connected with the »eye candy.« The almost abstract way in which Bosch presents his figures keeps the strange, obscene and pornographic aspects of his work from inviting the viewer to gawk or play Peeping Tom. It instead inspires contemplation and wonder. The carnal is thus transferred from the surface of the painting into the imagination of the viewer, in accordance with the rhetorical theory of affect transfer.

In the palace of Henry II, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* invited the spectator to reconcile his or her personal canon of values with topics of the pictures. This context explains many aspects that appear mysterious when regarded with a modern eye. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* was part of a collection in a castle dedicated to entertainment and fun, whose art-loving proprietor had a preference for oddities and where a bed that held enough room for fifty guests was sometimes used at courtly entertainments.

Yet the seemingly bacchanal feast culture followed a firm course of courtly decorum and a strict social discipline, which contributed to the values and norms and the morality reflected in Bosch's paintings. That Bosch's innovative vision and his unique imagery were very popular with the courtly audience is not only reflected by the inventories of court collections and the wide circulation of the painted copies, but also by the reproductions in the courtly medium of tapestry which were created until the sixteenth century from both the *Haywain* and *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. In these tapestries, the

poorer mimetic quality is compensated by a multiplication of proportions. The Duke of Alba, for instance, who had seen an impressive set of tapestries at the palace of Cardinal Granvella, ordered »the figures to be made bigger (Fait fere les personnaiges plus grant),«⁴⁸ when commissioning his copy of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The tapestries that are faded today have lost their former luster. If they are exhibited at all, they are no longer presented as decorations aimed at immersion. As opposed to the countless painted reproductions of Bosch's works, the tapestries are almost forgotten today. Yet they can help illustrate the tension between perception and signifiers, between body and spirit, as well as the flesh made impossible and the flesh of the impossible.

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