The Cultural Background Behind the Garden of Earthly Delights

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Hieronymous Bosch was a controversial figure in his own time, and remains one today. Some contemporaries accused him of being an “inventor of monsters and chimeras”, and even today there are art historians who refuse to deal with his works. [4, page 4] This disdain of his work, combined with a dearth of biographical information regarding Bosch, makes a discussion of the cultural influences on him difficult. [4, page 6] In addition, Bosch only signed a handful of his paintings, and dated none of them.

Despite these limitations, it is possible to make some suppositions about the influences that produced his artwork. Whether one believes “The Garden of Earthly Delights” is secular or religious, certainly it is influenced by a quickly changing world full of new discoveries and uncertainty. [1, page 27] We can augment this with a discussion of the traits of the Northern Renaissance and Flemish art to which Bosch was exposed but rejected. [1, page 18]

While Bosch clearly must have understood the artistic norms that his Renaissance and Flemish contemporaries espoused, he also just as clearly did not abide them. The Renaissance ideals combined Christian stateliness with orderly mathematical properties from ancient Greek and Roman artwork. For example, around the time when Bosch was creating the hectic “The Garden of Earthly Delights” Raphael was cre-


ating the “School of Athens”, which exemplifies precise linear perspective. [7, page 320]

As for his fellow Northern Renaissance Flemish artists, there is some debate as to whether to include Bosch with them or not. [3, page 92] It would appear that recently it has become more accepted to include Bosch in with more traditional Northern Renaissance artists such as van Eyck. [4, page 35] Bosch’s depiction of “The Garden of Earthly Delights” is far more fantastic than his Flemish colleagues, such as van Eyck’s “Portrait of Giovanni”. [7, page 290] This painting shows common, non-holy people in their own house, with a highly-detailed sense of their surroundings. It is done in oil, and makes full use of the colors that this technique provides. Bosch’s approach is not an exception to this, but merely an extension of it. He too uses oil colors to their full effect, and paints mostly common, non-holy people in “The Garden of Earthly Delights”. This is where Bosch diverges, because he paints the people in unbelievable situations.

The origin of the treatment of excesses in “The Garden of Earthly Delights” and other paintings of his such as the “Ship of Fools” could come from his membership in the Brotherhood of Our Lady [2], which was a medieval fraternity. He was among

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the most well-regarded in this fraternity, which gave him many contacts in the upper social classes and nobility. [4, page 33] Documentation exists that shows that he would have been party to and possibly responsible for many elaborate dinners and festivities for the rich. His painting of the “The Garden of Earthly Delights” could be a reaction to the decadence he witnessed. [1, page 60]

The fact that Bosch painted both the “The Garden of Earthly Delights” triptych and an earlier triptych, “The Last Judgment”, under commission is a fact that should not go unnoticed. [1, page 74] “The Last Judgment” is a painting that is quite similar to “The Garden of Earthly Delights”. “The Last Judgment” is much darker than “The Garden of Earthly Delights” but its religious and secular themes are very similar to it. The two were commissioned by aristocratic rivals, so it seems possible that the similarities were a subtle attempt at competition between the two.

The religious and secular overtones of “The Garden of Earthly Delights” are also important. The religious aspects of “The Garden of Earthly Delights” are obvious. It is clear that Bosch is well-versed with the Bible, and in particular the Creation and Paradise. In fact, in some respects, he takes the Bible far more seriously than it might appear. What seems to be a land generated from his mind is actually based


on little-noticed details in the Bible, down to the number rivers and the lust that happens on their banks. In this interpretation, the purpose of the triptych is to show how people would have lived in Paradise had they not been expelled. [1, page 88]

The plethora of creatures might not literally be from the Bible, however; there are many accounts of preachers in this period giving colorful descriptions of paradise, and Bosch might have been influenced by them instead. [6, page 49]

The secular view, rather than being in opposition to the religious view, is an extension of it. The center panel shows a lack of overt Christianity; the people frolic without concern for the sins that they are committing. [4, page 231] It also shows a menagerie of fantastic creatures, possibly in reaction to the explosion in exploration of new lands in Africa and the Americas.

After Bosch died, his artwork became known to more people than just the educated. The 16th century saw an increase in the love of terrifying and fantastic artwork and Bosch’s works were copied more and more, [5, page 205] mostly in


tapestries. Unfortunately, the subtleties that Bosch included in his paintings were lost on the less educated. [2]

Hieronymus Bosch’s “The Garden of Earthly Delights” is a complex and enigmatic work that is well-known but frequently misunderstood. The lack of historical data on this work contributes to the misunderstanding, but I think that enough contextual data can be gleaned to shed some light on what Bosch might have been thinking. While Bosch’s actual thoughts may be a mystery, “The Garden of Earthly Delights” leaves a clear legacy in artwork, up to the modern surrealist movement.


Figure 1: Hieronymus Bosch, Outer panels of “The Garden of Earthly Delights” triptych. [1, centerfold]
Figure 2: Hieronymus Bosch, Left panel ("Paradise") in "The Garden of Earthly Delights" triptych. [1, centerfold]
Figure 3: Hieronymus Bosch, Center panel ("Imaginary Paradise") in "The Garden of Earthly Delights" triptych. [1, centerfold]
Figure 4: Hieronymus Bosch, Right panel ("Hell") in "The Garden of Earthly Delights" triptych. [1, centerfold]
References


