

## Hieronymus Bosch – Both Trendsetter and Representative of His Time

Reflections on the Significance of His Oeuvre

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[ M A N F R E D S E L L I N K ]

It is remarkable that there should be so many similarities in the work and lives of the two artists Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1450-1516) and Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1525-30 - 1569), both of whom were so instrumental in forming the visual idiom of the Netherlands in the sixteenth century and, to this day, still determine the artistic image of the period. Extraordinarily little is known about their actual lives and, though highly influential, their oeuvres are small and enigmatic, revealing little or nothing of their intrinsic meaning. This is a combination that has resulted in both cases in a torrent of publications, academic as well as pseudo-academic, expounding the most diverse interpretations, which seem sometimes to say more about the authors in question than about the subject of their study. The singularity and unbridled artistic inventiveness of their visual idiom has resulted in the characterizations 'Boschian' and 'Brueghelian' becoming well established in art literature. That will not diminish in the years to come, either. On the contrary even, for something else that links the two masters is that there are major commemorative years on the horizon. In 2016 it will be 500 years since Bosch died. Three years later, in 2019, it will be Bruegel's turn, when the 450th anniversary of his death is commemorated.

That these days we often and rather too simplistically, for that matter, sum up the sixteenth century in the Netherlands with a title like 'From Bosch to Bruegel' – as in a recent exhibition on the development of the depiction of everyday life in the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam – comes as no surprise. That for Bruegel the older master's work must have been an important source of inspiration and posthumous artistic competition was of course just as obvious to his contemporaries as it is to us now. In the earliest literature about Bruegel, published during his lifetime, he was characterised as an artist who had acquired the nickname 'the second Hieronymus Bosch'. This admiring description fits with the enduring popularity of Bosch in the Habsburg Netherlands, and particularly in Antwerp. From his death until the third quarter of the sixteenth century – for longer and more consistently than is usually accepted – the master's oeuvre, or rather what was known of it from copies, variations and pastiches, was *the* benchmark for every artist who wanted, somehow or other, to depict hell; although his influence on Bruegel goes considerably further than this particular theme. The differences, on the



Jacques Le Boucq,  
*Portrait of Hieronymus Bosch*, c. 1550,  
Charcoal and red chalk on paper, 41 x 28 cm,  
Bibliothèque Municipale, Arras

other hand, are considerable too. In contrast to the solo artist Bruegel, who most probably worked completely alone, the Bosch 'label' stands for an active (family) workshop which, as we shall see, makes it extremely difficult for researchers to determine exactly what Bosch himself painted and what was done by possible assistants. The underlying tenor of their two oeuvres – profane and religious – also differs substantially in tone. In contrast to Pieter Bruegel's mild irony, mixed with an essential optimism and zest for life, Bosch's work speaks of a rather sombre and eschatological view of the world that seems to be a search for the (rare) opportunities to achieve redemption from this earthly existence.

After the fall of Antwerp, in 1585, and under the influence of the Counter-Reformation set in motion by the Council of Trent, there was a clear change in the depiction of religious themes in the Southern Netherlands. As a result, Bosch's influence diminished fast – though he would never be forgotten.

However tempting (and correct) it may be to position Hieronymus Bosch primarily as a trendsetter and instigator of artistic developments in the sixteenth century, and to name Bruegel in the same breath as his artistic successor, one should never forget that Bosch was every bit as much a typical representative

of his own period, rooted intrinsically in the late-medieval urban intellectual and religious (visual) culture in the Low Countries as it rapidly developed from the end of the fourteenth century. The image of Bosch as a brilliant and idiosyncratic eccentric, disconnected from his environment, has long been proved outmoded and untenable. Yet he was an artist who, with his workshop, developed an oeuvre that was as intriguing as it was innovative in the fascinating transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century; an oeuvre that, due to its astonishing ingenuity and its stylistic and technical mastery, will always be counted as one of the pinnacles of art history.



Hieronymus Bosch, *Saint Jerome in Prayer*, c. 1500, Oil on panel, 80.1 x 60.6 cm, Museum voor Schone Kunsten Ghent © [www.lukasweb.be](http://www.lukasweb.be) – Art in Flanders vzw. Photo by Hugo Maertens or Dominique Provost



After Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, 1510-1516, Oil on panel, 76.7 x 83.5 cm,  
Museum voor Schone Kunsten Ghent © [www.lukasweb.be](http://www.lukasweb.be) – Art in Flanders vzw.

Photo by Hugo Maertens or Dominique Provost

## 2016 - Festival and exhibitions in Den Bosch and Madrid

It goes without saying that in the long run-up to the commemorations in 2016 a variety of cities and museums have considered the possibility of putting on a retrospective of the master's work. It is an ambition as challenging as it is complex. The extant oeuvre (paintings and drawings) is not big; the format of the individual works, on the other hand, certainly is; they are painted, without exception, on panels and each of them is one of the most valuable masterpieces and public favourites in the museums concerned. In short, these are often fragile works that are never, or extremely rarely, loaned. Bearing in mind, too, that research into Bosch in recent decades has delivered an extraordinarily fragmented picture with more differences than similarities, it should be obvious that realising a large-scale retrospective is not easy – to put it mildly.

Many people were surprised that 's Hertogenbosch was the first city to take up the gauntlet, with a striking and ambitious initiative. Den Bosch, as the city is affectionately known, is of course the city where the artist lived and worked, but apart from that rather nice starting point it has few assets in museum terms to achieve this type of project. The Noordbrabants Museum is, certainly since its renovation, a valued and active player in the Netherlands, but it does not possess a single work by Bosch himself, nor does it have the sort of collection that would allow it to be an active player in the loan traffic between the major international museums. Den Bosch is not a university city either, and the museum does not have a research tradition relevant to this type of undertaking.





Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1503-1504,

Oil on oak panel, 220 x 389 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid

Detail from the central panel

Nonetheless, a remarkable and eventually successful strategy was chosen well in advance. With help and (robust) financial support from various other partners, a substantial investment was made in fundamental research into all the materials and techniques used in the artist's entire oeuvre, in preparation for the planned exhibition.

The Bosch Research and Conservation Project (BRCP) was set up in 2010, in collaboration with Radboud University Nijmegen and the Jheronimus Bosch 500 Foundation, in particular. The BRCP's objective is the systematic study of as many of the paintings and drawings attributed to Hieronymus Bosch as possible, with particular attention to scientific examination of the materials and techniques. That means *in situ* analysis of works using the most modern

technology, in order to chart the painting techniques, workshop practices and so on, thereby obtaining structural insight into the production and the methods used by Bosch and his assistants in his 'workshop'. This type of research, which more or less got off the ground in the 1970s, has led in recent years to important innovations in the way anything concerning objects' material properties is charted, thanks to developments in ICT and other technologies, plus the systematic combination of research results with knowledge and insight garnered from 'traditional' art history research and the insight restorers have gained with experience. All of this brings us closer to the crucial question of how an artwork is produced and constructed ([www.boschproject.org](http://www.boschproject.org)).

Because Den Bosch financed this research into collections worldwide – regardless of whether a work might be available for an exhibition or not – Den Bosch and the Noordbrabants Museum, in close collaboration with the BRCP, have not only compiled unparalleled knowledge of Bosch's oeuvre, but have also built up the trust and credibility essential to a potential recipient of works on loan. Investments were also made in financing the restoration of works such as the *Four Visions of the Hereafter* in Venice and the triptych of the *Last Judgement* in Bruges. This approach has been so successful that, from 13 Feb-



Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1503-1504,  
Oil on oak panel, 220 x 389 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid  
Detail from the central panel





Hieronymus Bosch,  
*The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1503-1504,  
Oil on oak panel, 220 x 389 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid  
Detail from the right panel

ruary to 8 May 2016, an ensemble of about twenty panels from Bosch's own hand and an equal number of drawings that have never before been seen together will be on view in Den Bosch with some other works that put the oeuvre in its context. It is quite an achievement! In addition to that, the exhibition will be part of a broadly conceived Bosch year in which the life and work of the artist will form the basis and the source of inspiration for an extremely varied programme of exhibitions, concerts, theatre productions, lectures and public events of all types ([www.bosch500.nl](http://www.bosch500.nl)).

At a later – actually surprisingly late – stage, the Prado also joined the exhibition initiative in Den Bosch. The Madrid museum is most probably the only institution in the world that could organise a monographic retrospective of Bosch on the strength of its own collections, for it is there that, for historical reasons, several absolutely top works by Bosch himself hang. Moreover, given the strength of its broader collections as well, this museum can obtain additional works on loan, something that is not feasible elsewhere, including Den Bosch ([www.museodelprado.es](http://www.museodelprado.es)). Real devotees should therefore definitely go to Spain too, where the exhibition will run from 31 May till 11 September 2016.

### **The importance and need for a commemorative year**

It is not unusual for theme years and major exhibitions linked to the anniversaries of the births and deaths of important artists to be frowned upon in museum and cultural circles, with the obvious reproach of pure and simple touristic (city)

marketing. Although the programmes of such festivals are sometimes, but by no means always, somewhat unbalanced in terms of content and quality, there is little reason, in my opinion, to criticise the principle. It is a fact, and always will be, that a symbolic year makes it considerably easier to generate resources and public attention, to stir up the enthusiasm of the media and thereby make it possible to realise projects with powerful (and extremely expensive) content, which it would be far more difficult, if not impossible, to do in other years.

In the case of the Bosch anniversary year and the two exhibitions, the great value lies in three indisputable assets. First of all, the systematic study of just about all the works attributed to Hieronymus Bosch, compiled over several



Hieronymus Bosch, *Four Visions of the Hereafter*, Palazzo Grimani, Venice.

Detail from *Ascent into Heaven*, Oil on oak panel, 88.8 x 39.9 cm



Hieronymus Bosch, *The Haywain*, c. 1516,  
Oil on panel, 147 x 212 cm,  
Museo del Prado, Madrid.  
Detail from the central panel



years by one (multidisciplinary) research group has yielded a treasure trove of new information and insights, which will be the basis not only for the various publications that are brought out during the year, but more importantly for further research and interpretation in subsequent years. Added to that, the exhibition, where so many works will hang next or near to each other, will itself evoke more new insights, questions and comparisons in a manner which is absolutely incomparable to working with reproductions in books or on websites, whatever the resolution or the number of megapixels. A good exhibition is not an end in itself and certainly not an answer to all the research questions, rather it is a stimulating overview and comparison of artworks where, besides new insights and interpretations, just as many new questions are raised and scientific discussion is provoked, laying the foundations for years of further research. Finally, and not least, every generation of art-lovers has a right to get to know and appreciate the grand masters of art history in the original.

There can be little doubt that the exhibitions in Den Bosch and Madrid in 2016 will attract considerable interest, not least from the media, and will draw large numbers of visitors. It is pretty certain, too, that the results of the *Bosch Research and Conservation Project*, which will be presented simultaneously in various publications, will also attract plenty of attention from the press, the public and the profession, and get people talking. While this text was being written a press release arrived by way of a teaser, announcing three new attributions in the press: one drawing, in private possession but known from the literature, was apparently done by the master himself, while a couple of well-known works that were always considered to be from his hand, the painted *Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins* in the Prado, and *Christ Carrying the Cross* at the MSK in Ghent, were apparently not painted by Bosch after all. That the last two works have been demoted comes as no surprise to specialists; there had already been the necessary discussion about them behind closed doors. Nonetheless, pending the argumentation in the scientific catalogues, the results are highly unlikely to convince everyone. Occasionally Bosch experts find their world is like a can of worms, full of sharp differences of opinion and judgement, both in terms of interpretation and of attribution. Moreover, for museum directors demoting works

that were previously considered 'original' and from a famous artist's own hand is rather sensitive, although the intrinsic quality of the work in question does not actually change one iota.

In the case of Bosch even more sensitive and high-profile discussion topics press, with the (now open) question of what else the BRCP research has yielded. Those who have had the privilege to study the most famous Bosch triptychs and panels - like those in Lisbon, Madrid and Vienna - under favourable conditions and with the aid of modern research techniques, can hardly believe that just one and the same artist has worked on them; something which has, for that matter, been the subject of fierce discussion in the professional literature and at congresses in recent years. It will be fascinating to hear whether the research into the materials and techniques has brought more clarity or new insights into this and, if so, what that clarity will be. In advance of the exhibition and publications, it looks very much as if what has long been seen as exclusively the work of Bosch must actually have been a 'collaborative effort' by a large workshop - a workshop with an intellectually coherent and artistically clearly recognisable mastermind at its head, where, besides the master himself, a variety of different assistants (family members?) actually carried out the work.

As has already been said and cannot be repeated too often, an exhibition is not an end in itself and certainly not a future canon carved in stone. The changing insights and opinions about artists like Hieronymus Bosch over the last century betray as much about our own time as they teach us about this enigmatic great master. However, the importance of these two exhibitions, in the Netherlands and Spain, cannot and should not be underestimated. They represent a unique (a word that is often misused, but which is absolutely justified in this context) opportunity for every art-lover to see Bosch's oeuvre in its context, diversity, wealth and complexity, all together in one location. So this year is the ideal time to (re) discover his work and to learn to understand it better. Moreover, I am convinced that this oeuvre has much to offer us both in terms of artistic quality and inventiveness, and in intellectual levels and depth. Don't miss it! ■

## EXHIBITION

### **Jheronimus Bosch - Visions of Genius**

13.02 - 08.05.2016

Het Noordbrabants Museum,  
's-Hertogenbosch  
([www.bosch500.nl](http://www.bosch500.nl))

31.05 - 11.09.2016.

Museo del Prado,  
Madrid  
([www.museodelprado.es](http://www.museodelprado.es))

## FURTHER READING

Walter S. Gibson, *Hieronymus Bosch*, London 1973.

Roger Marijnissen and Peter Ruyffelaere, *Hieronymus Bosch; het volledige oeuvre*, Antwerp 1987.

Jos Koldewey, Paul Vandenbroeck and Bernard Vermet, *Jheronimus Bosch; alle schilderijen en tekeningen*, Rotterdam 2002.

Paul Vandenbroeck, *Jheronimus Bosch; de verlossing van de wereld*, Ghent-Amsterdam 2002.

Matthijs IJssink, *Bosch en Bruegel als Bosch; kunst over kunst bij Pieter Bruegel (ca. 1528-1569) en Jheronimus Bosch (ca. 1450-1516)*, Nijmegen 2009.