

Humboldt State University

Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University

Communication Senior Capstones

Senior Projects

Fall 2020

Bosch Creates the First Surreal Painting of Hell

Sayed Ahmad Shah

Humboldt State University, sas1367@humboldt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/senior_comm



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shah, Sayed Ahmad, "Bosch Creates the First Surreal Painting of Hell" (2020). *Communication Senior Capstones*. 7.

https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/senior_comm/7

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Senior Projects at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Senior Capstones by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.

Ahmad Shah

Comm 310

Bosch Creates the First Surreal Painting of Hell

The Garden of Earthly delights was painted somewhere in between 1490-1510. It is hard to tell exactly when the painting was painted because Bosch never dated any of his work. Bosch was between the age of 40-60 when he created this masterpiece. The painting was done on an oak panel by early Dutch master Hieronymus Bosch. The triptych is a little over 7 feet tall and almost 13 feet long. The painting now resides in the Museo del Prado in Madrid and has been there since 1939 thanks to the Spanish Civil War and King Philip II. The central theme of the triptych is the corruption of the Word of God. The temptation that drives man and woman to sin so carelessly. The triptych has three panels where Bosch illustrates Paradise, Hell and the garden of worldly possessions. The Garden of Earthly Delight is also known as “the strawberry painting.” When the wing panels are folded shut, it shows a picture of Earth on the third day of Creation. The triptych is meant to be read as a book according to art historians. Bosch is telling a story with the Garden of Earthly Delights. The main panel I will talk about in the essay is Bosch’s depiction of hell. The way this panel is painted is very different from what others are painting at the time. The Garden of Earthly Delights was the first surreal painting of hell.

When you open the triptych, it lays out in three panels connected by hinges. The far-right of the triptych is an illustration of Hell. This panel is divided into three tier levels to represent different periods of the end time. The top tier is eerie and has the glow of the fire in the background which doesn’t help much due to the amount of darkness that overcomes the fire. The top tier is most likely Hell. It is very dark in terms of lighting than the rest of the panel. The farther back one moves in the picture plane, the harsher it seems to get. Bosch almost makes it seem like a secret on what is happening within this area. Just what seems to be people, marching towards their eternal doom. Also, there seems to be some light rays right behind a castle looking structure. These light rays are different from the ones that are caused by the fire and it also seems like there could a sun behind the structure. I wouldn’t know if that is exactly what that is or what

Bosch would be trying to symbolize but adding that in. The mid-tier is what I believe is Bosch's illustration of purgatory. The mid-tier is what art historians believe is a self-portrait of Bosch. He depicts himself as a head attached to a shell-like body which is cracked. His arms and legs are set in two boats. The left leg has a fire in it, which could symbolize Hell. The boat which his right leg is standing on has coals in it and a boat man with two passengers. Maybe the boat man is Charon taking Bosch down the river into Hell's Gates. On his head, there seems to be flat surface on which a bagpipe rests which many believe is the symbol of evil and lust. The middle ground is metaphorically a no-man's-land. This place of judgement, where your inner impulses are weighed. This is also where your punishments are chosen in correlation to your sins. In the bottom tier, it seems that the sinners are now being confronted for their sins. This seems like it might be life on Earth itself and the final day of judgement. Bosch illustrated this by personifying the seven deadly sins as tormenters who are torturing humans as they scurry away. It is important that we analyze each section of this painting to better understand the symbols and what Bosch could be trying to express. Especially since it doesn't seem to have any correct order.

Surrealism is defined as a 20th-century avant-garde movement in art and literature which sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images. These had to be visions that Bosch had seen in his dreams for them to be as detailed and vivid as they are. Other paintings in Bosch's time that tried to depict Hell were very much more tamed and conventionally focused around religious beliefs. Bosch's illustration is unworldly and different. It took the concept of hell (at the time) and innovated a brand new style of painting. From the top tier to the bottom, this painting is the first time art historians place an illustration in the surreal genre. Famous artist, Salvador Dali, who is widely known for his work with surrealism was very much inspired by Bosch's work and has been consistent in letting that be known. This painting was created somewhere between 1490 and 1510, way before anybody else was painting anywhere near this level. Historically, surrealism was a cultural movement in that began in the 1920s but way before that we had the Garden of Earthly Delights. These illustrations that created unnerving, illogical scenes. Bosch

had innovated the style of surrealism almost 450 years before it was looked at as a style of painting.

As mentioned before, the mid-tier of the right panel includes what art historians think might be a self-portrait of Bosch. This isn't a traditional drawing of a human either, this is surrealism at its finest. If this figure is supposed to be Bosch, it brings to question how he viewed himself in order to illustrate this. Why is his body a shell that is cracked right at the end? Bosch draws bagpipes resting on a platform on his head. Typically, bagpipes are a symbol of lust. Is this a way of Bosch confessing his own sins and wrongdoings in the form of surreal art? Does Bosch believe he deserves a place in his very own hell? Dali also did this where he created a soft self-portrait and it is interesting to say the least. Not having the normal, human features. Dali paints himself as a mask that seems to be melting while being held up like a trophy almost. It wouldn't be a surprise if Dali took this straight from Bosch's book.

Also, in the mid-tier of the far-right panel, you see two ears on the left are pierced by an arrow and cut by the blade of a knife. Many predict this is Bosch illustrating the Man's deafness to the New Testament. Many also believe that Bosch was addressing the powerful allusion of deceptive lure of the senses. Arrows typically represents means of communication, something travels one place to another, like words do. The blade could symbolize the cutting of God's Word from everyday. Regardless of how it is perceived, it is important to note how it is illustrated. It is different from how other painters at the time are depicting the ignorance towards God's Word. These large ears scuttling across the ground with a giant knife in between them. Bosch had a distinct way to express his thought process and his creativity. Personally, I believe Bosch used a lot of visions from dreams to put this triptych together. It isn't clear on why he chose certain illustrations so far so for me, I would lean towards the possibility he has envisioned them and then portrayed those visions.

Bosch seems to symbolize animals a lot on this panel. A lot of the sinners are being tortured by animal/demon like creatures. For example, at the bottom tier you have a bird with the body of a human sitting on what seems to be a latrine throne. The bird swallows the humans whole and excretes them out again into a well he sits above. This

bird could also be the “Prince of Hell.” The reason I believe this is the cauldron it wears on its head, maybe representing a debased crown. Another example would be the spoonbill who wears a bow on his back while ice skating with arrows in his legs. The connection between the animals and demons is not apparent. Also, sinners are being forced to throw up into the well where others are being excreted out. This could be a way of Bosch symbolizing a cleanse. Another thing you want to look at is the coloring in each tier. Yellow and red ocher are the most used colors because it makes up the whole ground color. These colors could represent intelligence and thought. Which would make sense in the first two panels, but not necessarily in this section of the Hell painting. Instead we don’t see much of the intelligence as we do the thought. The colors could symbolize what the mind thinks of, all the horrific results from the lowering of consciousness.

Ultimately, the painting revolves around the seven deadly sins. Which is also the first time we see it portrayed as surrealism. Our senses deceive our thoughts into self-indulgent over-consumption. Starting at the bottom we first encounter Ira who is portraying wrath. A man with a table on his head has a sword and is yelling at another man while holding a sword in his hand. Ira is holding him back but temptation is overcoming the majority in this painting. Pride is symbolized by a woman who is staring into a mirror while an apple sits on the windowsill next to her. Lust and envy are portrayed multiple times in this painting which I believe has something to do with Bosch’s own demons he faces in his life. Why else would he have the over representation of only two sins out of the rest of the seven? In a tent, you can see two lovers inside a tent with musical instruments surrounding the outside of the tent. Symbolizing the belief that “music-making leads to love-making.” Sloth is portrayed by a man sleeping in his study. He sleeps while a nun tries to offer him a rosary and the man refuses to awaken. By refusing to wake up, he is refusing to invite the presence of God. Gluttony is the easiest to perceive, as a fat man stuffs himself with food at a table and his fat wife continues to bring him more food. Greed is a corrupt judge that is taking bribes from the wealthy. Envy, we see a man collecting his taxes. He dangles a bone in front of two dogs all while standing in between a rich man holding a falcon, and a woman. Some other examples of the seven deadly sins are the hunters are now the

hunted as a giant rabbit feasts of the flesh of a hunter. A man in armor is being eaten alive by giant lizards while holding a golden chalice. Bosch uses surrealism to create a sort of fear in the viewer. The artist's intention could be to portray the complications of human thought process and action, and how it influences the purity and serenity of the divinely mind.

The most interesting aspect to this painting for me is the trio of men sitting around a table inside the cracked shell body. Could Bosch be representing the same trio from Genesis 18:2. This is where God arrives to the door of Abraham with two angels. Bosch could be trying to represent how he truly feels on the inside, that is of course if this actually is a self-portrait of Bosch. Abraham was humble and had great hospitality towards God and the two angels who accompanied him. Maybe Bosch was hinting that he was very open to letting people know about how he truly felt on the inside and sharing his ideology. Again, it is hard to tell because the painting is all over the place, but this is what I interpreted from the illustration. Surrealism can be hard to interpret since it is pieced together almost by non-sensical drawings. He also does this with the Holy Trinity. Virgin Mary is portrayed as a lizard whose belly is corrupted. She holds up a board game but it is hard to tell what that is suppose to symbolize. The Holy Spirit is a succubus with a white lace cap to conceal its evil. Eve is now an alcoholic and a gambler it seems like, no longer a child of God. This theme of demons and evil disguising themselves as the good comes up a lot in this panel. The same good that is portrayed as divine in the other left panels. Could Bosch be symbolizing the distrust he has towards the people he is closest to in his life?

Another main focus of the painting is to illustrate temptations that lead to evil and ultimately eternal damnation. At the time, Bosch was unaware that his painting would come off as surrealistic, but when you paint war, torture chambers, infernal taverns, and demons in the midground; and mutated animals feeding on human flesh in the foreground you need to have creativity flow unconsciously. These aren't visuals you witness in everyday life, so it is safe to assume that in order to perceive these images before painting them on, you need a lot of inspiration from a place in your mind where bending reality is prevalent. With all the symbolism in the painting, you would believe

that Bosch targets his own evil thoughts. He symbolizes lust and envy a lot so you have to wonder if Bosch is struggling with these impure thoughts the most. A lot of nude figures are torturing humans as a representation of lust taken over their bodies.

Compared to other panels from the Garden of Earthly Delights, the right panel is very dark and different from the rest. The center and left panel portray humans and animals elegantly. Looks very peaceful and normal. I wouldn't even consider these panels to be surrealistic art. It seems similar to what other painters are also painting on the topic at the time. When under the influence of the divine, it is beautiful and ordered. It isn't until you reach the right panel where the imagination goes wild. That that is under the influence of material is chaotic and horrifying. The contrast between the panels leads me further to believe that Hell in the Garden of Earthly Delights was the first surreal painting. It is like Bosch completely went haywire on the right panel, letting the creativity really take over. Symbols become incoherent, almost like trying to read a foreign language. Bosch also ties two panels together which is the first we see in the Garden of Earthly Delights. In the bottom left corner of the right panel you see a shield with a pierced hand on it. This is the same hand you see attached to God in the left panel of the Garden of Earthly Delights. Usually when you see a portrayal of God he is holding his hand up this same way. The hand of God himself is a symbol of his Word and his divine authority. Now no longer a part of his body and a knife piercing right through it. This is odd to see Bosch illustrate God like this, severed and in hell.

If you look at artists who have made the surrealism painting movement a large inspiration for their work, the similarities between their paintings and the Garden of Earthly Delights are akin. Artists like Salvadore Dali, Frida Kahlo, Pablo Picasso, and René Magritte are known mostly for their work with surrealism. These were artists who thrived off surrealistic paintings and made whole careers from them. The Persistence of Memory is arguably Salvadore Dali's most famous work. If you put the Persistence of Memory and the Garden of Earthly Delights side by side you can, the similarities are uncanny. Picasso had multiple paintings of surrealism which I don't believe are easily comparable to the Garden of Earthly Delights but I bring these paintings up because the genre of surrealism leaves a lot of room for creativity. Picasso had painted many of the

same scene also known as the Nude on a Beach collection. These are a lot more subtle and calm in comparison but it needed to be pointed out in order to understand the range the painting style has. You have these symbols that are open to any interpretation which is what you should strive for when creating this type of art. You want the viewer to relate the symbolism to their own ideology. What do the symbols mean to you? It is important to bring in comparison of Bosch's painting to the most famous surreal artists. The same artist who have made it clear on multiple occasions that a huge inspiration to their artwork was Bosch and the Garden of Earthly Delight's right panel. Bosch was truly ahead of his time as an artist.

Hieronymus Bosch painting Hell in the Garden of Earthly Delights was truly innovative. Being the inspiration for one of the biggest art movements. Many art historians do not see the Garden of Earthly Delights as one of the first surreal paintings but there is enough evidence to show why it is. The evidence is the triptych itself. Bosch's creative process was ahead of its time. The most famous artists to be a part of the surreal movement have looked to this triptych, even more specifically the right panel of this triptych and it inspired them to create the most famous paintings today. This painting is typically not remembered for its surrealism but I think it should be. It has gone down in history for being one of the most famous portrayals of hell but I believe it deserves more credit than that. The way Bosch faces his own demons by painting them into his most famous piece. Surrealism is now one of the most used forms of painting to this day because of how much of an inspiration Bosch was to artists.