

Hieronymus Bosch
Garden of Earthly Delights



Hans Belting

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Garden of Earthly Delights



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central panel (detail)

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Jan Gossaert, *Portrait of Hendrik III
Count of Nassau-Breda*, c. 1517
Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth

The guardian of Emperor Charles V came into possession
of *Garden of Earthly Delights* as a young man.

A TALE OF FASCINATION

Ever since research on Hieronymus Bosch began, his paintings have captivated the imagination, exerting a fascination that has spawned an insatiable demand for ever new interpretations, none of them quite satisfactory. Not even repeated failure has stemmed the flow of proposals and, over the years, scholars of literature, anthropologists, historians and even novelists have joined art historians in celebrating the descriptive power of the word to convey the content of these pictures. What all of them have in common, whether they admit it or not, is their quest for a key that they hope to use for the work of Bosch as a secret code, as though the content could neatly be separated from this painted poetry. From the point of view of the surrealist, André Breton, in his *L'Art magique*, he even claimed for Bosch a gnostic approach that systematically denied easy access. He saw in the work of Bosch “a strange marriage of fideism and revolt.” In the modern gaze, the ubiquitous presence of this œuvre has been in inverse proportion to the obscurity of its creator in the mists of history. In the absence of information about his life, the search was on for even the tiniest clue in his paintings. Modern cameras provided the mechanical eyes that were to track down new details that might just betray something.

Of all the works by Bosch, none is more fascinating than the painting known as *Garden of Earthly Delights* – a work of which we do not even know the original title. It is unsettling not only because the subject matter is so enigmatic, but also because of the remarkably modern freedom with which its visual narrative avoids all traditional iconography. The central panel of *Garden of Earthly Delights* is the apex of this unfettered venture into the realms of the imagination. The American writer Peter S. Beagle, who has published an excellent book on the subject, describes the work in terms of an erotic derangement that turns us all into voyeurs, as a place filled with the intoxicating air of perfect liberty. In his description, Beagle touches upon the same utopian aspect of the painting that informs my own interpretation of it. This is a paradise that does not exist anywhere because it has never become reality. Today, it would be called a virtual world. The *scandalon* in this picture lies in its eroticism, which is nevertheless couched in biblical terms. The artist is not asking us to discover the sinfulness of the scene. That would indicate hereticism. Wherever the painter depicts his own world with mockery and pessimism, it is easier to accept his stance than it is when he paints a paradise that depicts neither earthly sin nor Christian heaven and which thus appears to represent an imaginary world.

None of this provides a satisfactory explanation for the fascination that this work exerts in the distorted mirror of a highly contradictory and controversial

range of interpretations. Art historians repeatedly admit, somewhat reluctantly, that, in spite of the triptych form of the painting, it was almost certainly not an altarpiece. Yet this tells us only that that Bosch adopted the form of an altarpiece for something that was never used as such. There is a similar contradiction between the ecclesiastic iconography of the middle ages and an approach to art that heralds the coming era of art collecting.

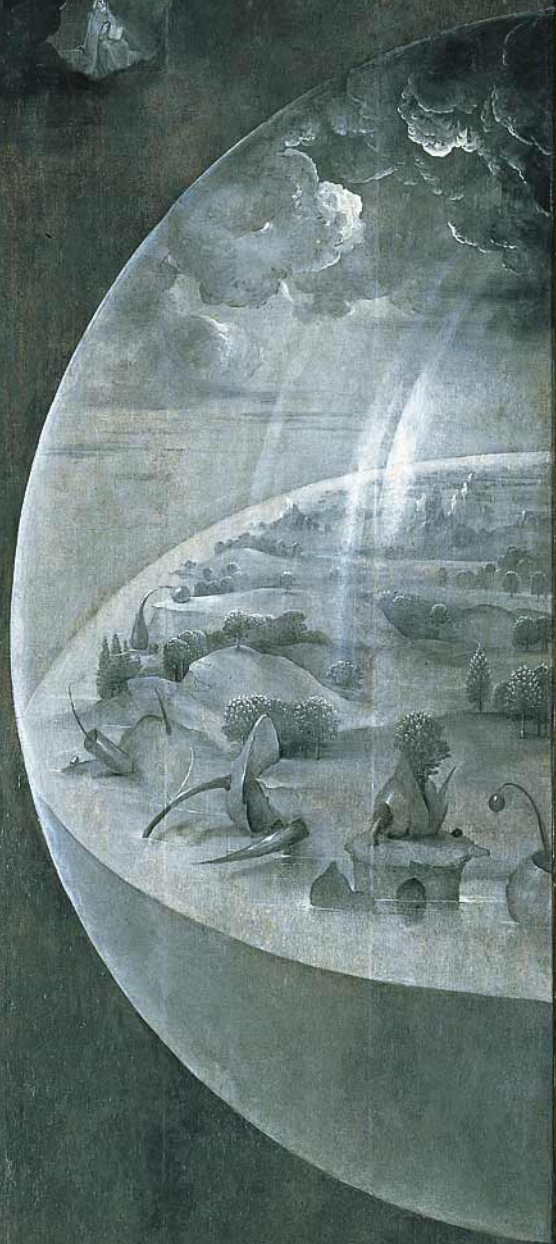
Bosch stood between the generations that met at the threshold of the sixteenth century, and he gained personal freedom by his stance which was both 'no longer' medieval and 'not yet' modern. Had he painted scenes from classical mythology that were soon to gain a firm foothold in his homeland, we might have taken scant notice of his art. Instead, Bosch scholarship is fuelled time and again by a sense of some breach of taboo. We cannot help but be fascinated by his psychological and sociological realism. Yet the realist side of Bosch is of little use to us in interpreting *Garden of Earthly Delights*. For all his critical thinking, it is a work in which Bosch seems to clash against his own *weltbild*. How can this painting be interpreted so that it fits into the remaining oeuvre of the painter in the way the wing panels depicting Heaven and Hell do? No known commentaries dating from the period have survived, albeit with the important exception of one statement made almost a century later when the painting was already in Spanish hands, having been purchased from the confiscated estate of a Dutch rebel. In the Escorial, the monastic residence of that implacable enemy of heresy, Philip II, its imagery appeared alien and suspicious to the eyes of a new era, in spite of its fame.

illus. page 72

The artist had to be cleared of the suspicion of heresy before he could even be discussed. As regards paintings in which questions of faith played a role, the royal collection was constantly under the keenest scrutiny. It was not just that the suspicion of heresy lurked everywhere; ever since images had become an issue in religious dispute, proof of the profoundest faith was needed to defend them against the iconoclasts. The fact that Bosch himself had not actually lived to see the Reformation was of little help. Bosch had to be proved "unjustly suspected of heresy," as the monk José de Sigüenza warned the doubters who were already starting to dig for dirt. He added that viewers should not be blinded by the 'farces' (*disparates*) because Bosch had clad his truths with poetic licence. Indeed, he was to be credited with shedding light on the chaos and sins of man's soul (as opposed to man's outward appearance) in a manner so unprecedented in the tradition of painting that there were no rules for him to break.

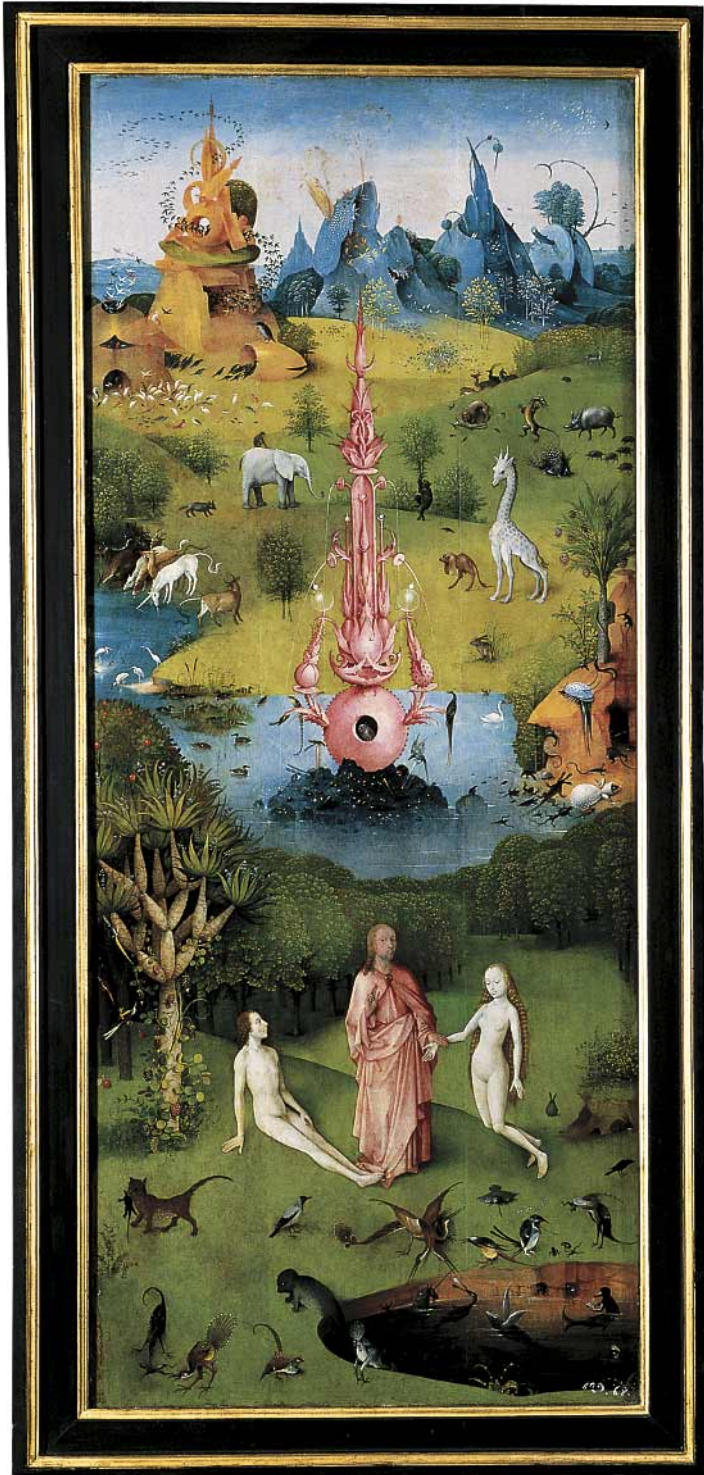
In the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, the librarian of the Escorial draws upon a formula that had already played a role when the painting was recorded in the inventory of 1593. For him, the strawberry is a symbol of the *variedad del mundo*, alluding to the foolishness, inconstancy and fickleness of the wicked world.

Hic dicit et facta sunt



Hic mundum et creatura facta





Hieronymus Bosch
Garden of Earthly Delights, 1480–90
Triptych, oil on panel, 220 x 195/390 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid



Paradise (left-hand panel)
Imaginary Paradise (central panel)
Hell (right-hand panel)