



he probably set up his own business in his new home with Aleid. Joen's workshop would grow to include several assistants as he acquired more commissions. Yet, as with his personal life, records of these commissions are extremely scant. Documents from the early 1480s suggest Bosch may have worked with his brother Goessen on an altarpiece for the chapel of the Brotherhood of Our Lady. Other recorded projects show his diverse talents, but they are relatively minor in scope. They range from a calligraphy project, in which he added names to a decorative panel that listed all the sworn brothers of the confraternity, to the decoration of sculpted altarpieces and the design of stained glass windows.

Few records describe how Bosch acquired the major altarpiece projects for which he is famous today. The finest documented project came from Philip the Fair, Duke of Burgundy and King of Castile. From 1504 to 1505, Philip stayed at s'Hertogenbosch, where he may well have met the town's most celebrated painter. He also commissioned "Jheronimus van Aken, called Bosch" at this time to paint a large panel of the Last Judgement. Though this particular version of the Last Judgement has not survived, the record of the commission offers important proof of Bosch's fame even among the highest members of European nobility. It also confirms his use of the name "Bosch" as a moniker. Joen may have done this in part as a form of publicity for both himself and his growing home city. Europe in 1500 was becoming more mobile, with both patrons and artists travelling to places where they could purchase or

produce art. Bosch's fame, and his close ties with s'Hertogenbosch, likely meant that most of his patrons brought commissions to him. Records indicate that Bosch travelled little, if at all, during his lifetime.

Bosch probably died in 1516, the year an epidemic that may have been plague or cholera spread through the town and killed many of its citizens. A funeral mass in his honour was held in August of that year at the chapel of the Brotherhood of Our Lady in St. John's church. When documenting this funeral, the Brotherhood recorded an unusual budgetary detail: the amount paid for Bosch's mass was 1 stuiver more than necessary, leaving the Brotherhood with a small financial surplus. Aleid lived for about 6 more years after her husband's death. She and Joen were childless, though Bosch may have worked with two of his nephews, Jan and Anthonius, who were also artists.

MESSAGES IN BOSCH'S ART

When describing the style of an artist, historians often rely on a general timeline over which that style appears to have evolved. However, none of Bosch's paintings are dated, and scholars still disagree over which of his works are "early" and which are from a more "mature" or "late" period. Other factors have also complicated the development of an artistic timeline. Certain paintings long attributed to Bosch have been found to be inauthentic, as the wood in their panels dates from well after the master's lifetime. Lastly, most experts tend to believe Bosch reached artistic



Beune Altarpiece, c.1450

resulting artwork could achieve a glowing, perfectionist quality. But this method also had its drawbacks. Its time-consuming nature limited a workshop's output, and it also restricted an artist's ability to revise and re-imagine a work during the painting process.

Hieronymus Bosch, on the other hand, adopted a technique that gave him creative flexibility. Like other panel painters of his day, his workshop began the artistic process by laying a light-coloured "ground" layer of chalk on the wooden panel. Bosch would then use a dark, carbon-based material to make the underdrawing on which the painted image was based. Bosch was a superb draughtsman, and modern infrared imaging—which can reveal the original carbon underdrawings below the surfaces of Bosch originals—has shown that the master often altered his underdrawing as he painted. Most of these changes are small, but many involve significant adjustments to the narrative of the final image. Recent studies by the Bosch Research and Conservation Project, a project dedicated to studying and preserving the artist's surviving works, found a striking change in Bosch's *Death*

and the Miser (p. xx)—which depicts a greedy man on his deathbed and the forces working for his damnation or salvation. In the final painting, Bosch shows the miser with closed mouth gesturing towards a bag, which represents worldly wealth and is being held by an amphibian-like creature. The underdrawing, however, shows the man clasping the bag in one hand and a lamp in another. Both he and the demon have open mouths, and are possibly in the act of "bartering." Bosch's changes have made the miser somewhat less avaricious, and the overall image more nuanced in its character and meaning.

Another hallmark of Bosch's experimental nature was the way he applied paint. Eschewing the thick layers of oil paint typical in fifteenth-century Flemish art, Bosch applied thinner paint layers that dried more quickly, enabling him to work at a faster pace. He also applied fewer layers, and he often left details in the underdrawing exposed in the final artwork, making them a part of the visible composition. Art historians have long noticed this aspect of Bosch's technique; author Karel van Mander mentioned it as early as 1604. In addition,



Adoration, c.1470–1480

Bosch would alter and work his paint layer in several ways. He added highlights to show the play of sunlight on the surfaces of objects, and he used a variety of brushwork that ranged from thin to thicker impasto strokes. Bosch even employed the opposite end of his paintbrush to work his surfaces. This variety of applied paint could capture subtle details, help define individual elements of the composition, and provide a sense of energy and movement to the overall work.

Bosch's painted figures do not display the rounded, sculptural quality of Renaissance Italian art, which was being produced at the same time, but they do reveal his exceptional powers of observation and detail. In *The Adoration of the Magi*, often considered one of his later works, Bosch depicts the black Magus's African features with great subtlety and precision (see p. xx). He also captures the sunlit folds in his robe, as well as the fine details on the decorated white pix in his hand, which contains a gift of incense for the Christ child. This



Big Fish Eat Little Fish, 1556

a favourite artist of the king from his youth. Before ascending to the throne, Prince Philip made two extended visits to Flanders and the Netherlands. During one of these trips, in 1549, he witnessed a religious procession in Brussels that included, in his words, "some devils that looked like paintings by Hieronymus Bosch."

When Philip became the Spanish king in 1556, he also inherited s'Hertogenbosch and the Low Countries from his father, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500–1558). Philip was the most religiously conservative of all Catholic monarchs,

making it his mission to stamp out the scourge of Protestantism in Europe. He was also the head of an empire that had claimed much of the New World for itself. Gold and other precious resources from Spain's colonies had made Philip the richest monarch on Earth; and he used this wealth, in part, to build his massive El Escorial monastery and palace just outside Madrid. Here he would display remarkable works of art, including *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, *The Adoration of the Magi* and other Bosch masterpieces.



Anger, 1558

Because of the prominence of Bosch's art in Renaissance Spain, Spanish authors were among the first to write extensively about the painter from s'Hertogenbosch. In around 1560, the humanist and art critic Felipe de Guevara, son of a royal minister, discussed Bosch in his *Commentaries on Painting*. In 1605, José de Sigüenza wrote a lengthier treatise on Bosch's art in his *History of the Order of Saint Jerome*. De Sigüenza took pains to explain Philip II's appreciation for Bosch, whose art by that time was being criticized in Catholic Spain as too old-fashioned and possibly heretical.

De Guevara wrote that Bosch should not be maligned this way because the King was a man of "piety and zeal," and if he thought Bosch to be a heretic, "he would never have allowed these paintings in his house, in his monasteries, in his bedchamber, in the chapterhouses and in the sacristy. All these places are adorned with these paintings."

Bosch's popularity in Spain may also have had an effect on one of the country's greatest artists. In 1577, Philip commissioned a major work from the Greek-born Mannerist painter El Greco (1541-1614),

The Garden of Earthly Delights, c.1495–1505

Oil on oak panel

Left panel 187.5 × 76.5, central panel 190 × 175 cm, right panel 187.5 × 76.5 cm

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

"...there are some panels on which bizarre things have been painted. They represent seas, skies, woods, meadows, and many other things, such as people crawling out of a shell, others that bring forth birds, men and women, whites and blacks doing all sorts of different activities and poses. Birds, animals of all kinds, executed very naturally, things that are so delightful and fantastic that it is impossible to describe them properly to those who have not seen them."

(From *The Travel Journal of Antonio de Beatis, 1517–1518*)

As early as 1517, only one year after Hieronymus Bosch's death, the Spanish Cardinal Luigi d'Aragona was undertaking a journey around Europe, along with his secretary and chaplain, Antonio de Beatis. The latter kept a diary of the trip, in which he included commentaries of many great artworks seen by the Cardinal's entourage. When visiting the palace of Count Henry III of Nassau in Brussels, the secretary described an image of "bizarre" animals and people that he witnessed there. Many historians consider this document to be the first description of Bosch's most famous work of art, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

The painting was constructed as a triptych, a format typically reserved for churches. But the work's sensual, often shocking imagery indicates that it was never intended as an object of worship. Scholars have long argued over the meaning Bosch's imagery. Most triptych paintings are meant to be "read" from left to right. In Bosch's day, the viewer's eye would have focused initially on Adam and Eve in the left panel. The two are being joined by God, who is represented in the form of Jesus Christ. Bosch's Garden of Eden is particularly verdant, swarming with exotic animals and plants, most of which were inspired by early "travelogues": etchings and illuminated manuscripts from travelers who had been to northern Africa and the Middle East. This lush world extends into the central panel, which depicts a garden of "delights." Here, descendants of Adam and Eve, while still unclothed, no longer appear innocent and devoted to God's teachings. Their engagement in erotic pleasures suggests the beginnings of sin and decadence. Oversized figures of owls, a common theme in Bosch's art, may indicate an ominous future—a future realized in the image of hell in the right panel. The Fall of Man is now complete, as the once playful animals and plants have been transformed into demons meting out God's punishment.



Ecce Homo, c.1475–1485

Oil on oak panel

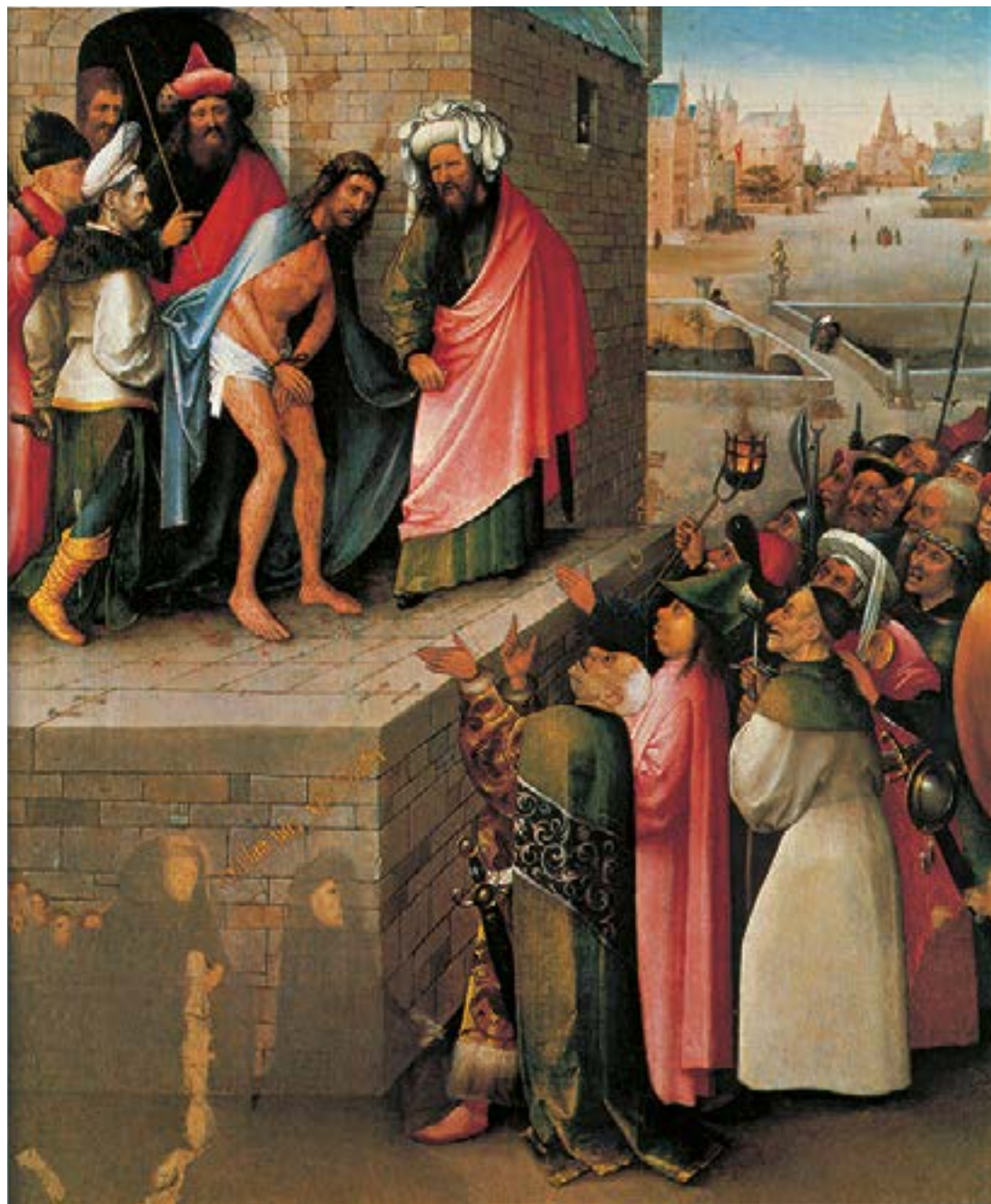
71.4 × 61 cm

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main

This small painting, likely made for a donor family, has long been grouped among Bosch's earliest surviving artworks. The most recent evidence suggests that it may date from as early as the 1470s. The subject of the image, an important scene in the Passion of Christ, depicts Jesus after he has been beaten, bound with shackles, and crowned with thorns. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate, shown here in a red cloak, now parades the humiliated Christ in front of an unruly mob. Pilate's sneering words, "Ecce Homo" (or "Behold the Man") can be seen in physical form coming out of his mouth. In the 1930s, analysis of the painting identified the presence of donor portraits. The male members of the donor family kneel in the lower left corner, while the female members kneel in the lower right. These portraits had been painted over, perhaps not long after Bosch's death, and they were restored in incomplete form during the 1980s. Among the male donors, which are better preserved than the female ones, a figure of a Dominican monk (possibly a family member as well) is imploring Jesus: "Save us, Christ the Redeemer"—words that also appear in physical form in Gothic lettering. Bosch scholars note that the donor figures are dressed in sober, modest fashion, which separates them visually and spiritually from the brightly colored sinners.

Unlike Bosch's more mature works, this image presents its characters with rather stiff, caricatured faces and bodies. Other parts of the work are more expertly painted. The atmospheric cityscape in the background resembles similar images by Jan van Eyck, with its delicately painted architecture, credible sense of space, and playful details such as the couple bending over the bridge and gazing into the dark river below. These differences in artistic quality suggest a painter still perfecting his style and technique.

Though *Ecce Homo* is an early work, it includes elements that would become characteristic of all Bosch images, such as the giant toad that decorates a man's shield and the owl that peers quietly through the tiny window above Christ and the mocking crowd.



The Haywain, c.1500–1516

Oil on oak panel

Left panel 136.1 × 47.7 cm, central panel 133 × 100 cm, right panel 136.1 × 47.6 cm

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

"The idea and the ingenuity of these paintings are based on the passage in Isaiah, where God has him cry out: 'All flesh is grass and all its glory is like the flower in the field.' To which David says: 'Man is like grass, and his glory is like the flower in the field.' One of these ... (consists) of a large painting and two wings with which they can be closed. On the first of these shutters, he (Bosch) painted the creation of man and how God placed him in paradise, ... and how he commands him as a test of his obedience and faith not to eat of one tree. And how the devil in the form of a serpent then misleads him ... The large painting that follows shows how man, banished from paradise and placed in this world, occupied himself. It depicts him pursuing a glory of hay and straw, or of grass without fruit, which exists today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, as God Himself said. In this way, it depicts the lives, occupations and conduct to which these children of sin and wrath succumb ... to seeking and pursuing the glory of the flesh that is just as transient, finite and useless as hay, because such are the gifts of sensuality, status, ambition and fame.

This haycart, on which glory rides, is drawn by seven wild beasts and terrifying monsters, including human beings who are half lion, others half dog, others still half bear, half fish and half wolf—all symbols and representations of pride, lust, greed, ambition, bestiality, tyranny, cunning and cruelty.

Around this cart walk all ranks and estates of man, from the pope and emperor and other princes to those who stand in the lowest esteem and have the world's worst occupations; because all flesh is hay, and the children of the flesh arrange everything and use everything to achieve this vain and transient glory; and everything revolves around thinking of how they might ascend to the glory of the cart: some use ladders, others have hooks, others clamber, others jump and seek as many means and instruments as possible just to get on top of it; some, who were already on it, fall off; others are run over by the wheels, ...

The final destination of all this is shown in the last wing, in which a very frightening hell can be seen, with strange torments, terrifying monsters, all shrouded in darkness and eternal fire. And to make clear the large band of people who enter there and for whom there is no longer any room, he imagines that new quarters and rooms are being built; and the stones that are laid are the souls of the damned; and the same means they used to achieve glory have been turned here into instruments of their punishment."

(from José de Sigüenza's *History of the Order of Saint Jerome*, c.1605)



Saint Jerome, c.1485–1495

Oil on oak panel

80 × 60.7 cm

Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent

"And yet nevertheless I was oft fellow unto scorpions and wild beasts, and yet the carols of maidens and the embracements of lechery grew in my cold body and in my flesh, wherefore I wept continually, and for to ... subdue my proud flesh I rose at midnight all the week long, ... and I ceased not to beat my breast, praying our Lord to render to me the peaceable peace of my flesh."

(from the *Golden Legend*, a collection of saints' lives compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, 1275)

Jerome, or Hieronymus, was the saint after whom Bosch was named. An early Christian theologian, he translated much of the Bible from Hebrew into Latin. The story of Jerome often focuses on his years in the Syrian desert, where he repented for the sexual escapades of his youth and his other sins. To purify his soul, the saint endured severe fasting and loneliness, as well as self-flagellation with rocks. Jerome's spiritual journey was highly admired in fifteenth-century northern Europe. The popular *Devotio Moderna* (or modern devotion) movement of the time encouraged people to follow Jerome's example through prayer, meditation and the cleansing of impure thoughts.

We can see Bosch's profound connection to Saint Jerome in this passionate image. Unlike most artists of his era, Bosch does not show the saint beating his chest with rocks. Here, the flagellation has already occurred and the rock lies on the ground. Bosch focuses instead on Jerome's internal struggle, depicting him in prostrate form with his hands in prayer and his arms cradling a wooden crucifix. The focused expression on Jerome's face reveals a man completely engaged in thought. He is unaware of his ominous surroundings—the tombstone above his head, the watchful owl, the bizarre plant life growing out of the rocks and the floating dead in the murky water. These images suggest the dangers of an unclean soul, and they contrast sharply with the "untarnished" white cloth of Jerome's tunic and Christ's loincloth on the crucifix. They also contrast with the landscape beyond, where we see cultivated fields, green hills and a church nestled in the trees. Bosch's verdant countryside may symbolise the spiritual calm that is earned by Jerome's painful inner journey.



The Ascent of the Blessed, c.1505–1515

Oil on oak panel

88.8 × 39.9 cm

Museo di Palazzo Grimani, Venice

"For in the darkness there shines and is born an incomprehensible Light, which is the Son of God, in Whom we behold eternal life."

(from Jan van Ruysbroeck's *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, c. 1350)

This mystical panel is one of four surviving paintings in Venice that describe the "visions of the hereafter." Today, Bosch experts believe these works were meant as side panels flanking a larger painting, possibly a scene of the Last Judgement. Two of the panels illustrate humankind's descent into hell, while the other two show the ascent of the blessed into heaven. In this image, naked individuals float upwards toward the "incomprehensible light" of God, their souls unburdened by the weight of sin. Angels escort them on their journey, but the naked souls need no physical assistance.

Historian Walter Gibson and others have suggested that Bosch's tunnel of light may be derived from fifteenth-century manuscript illuminations. For example, in *The Seven Ages of the World* (c. 1460), often attributed to the French illustrator Simon Marmion, heaven is shown as a funnel that leads to an image of God on his throne. Such pictures may have been known to Bosch, but he went well beyond them in his own work. Marmion's funnels were two-dimensional and rather decorative in appearance, while Bosch's creation pierces the black sky and extends dramatically into the distance. He also chooses to avoid figural representations of God, and instead illustrates heaven as a mystery—an abstract, almost blinding light that only the eyes of the blessed can fully appreciate. The heads of his souls and angels are turned upward, emphasising the spiritual ecstasy of their ascent.

Medieval mystics, such as the Dutch author Jan van Ruysbroeck (c. 1293–1391), used light to describe the soul's oneness with God. But few painters were able to illustrate that concept with such intensity as Bosch did in his *Ascent of the Blessed*.



The Adoration of the Magi (detail of upper central panel), c.1490–1500

Oil on oak panel

Left panel 138 × 29.2 cm, central panel 138 × 72 cm, right panel 138 × 33 cm

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

"And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, ..."

(Revelation 21: 10–12)

For late medieval and Renaissance Europeans, the city of Jerusalem was an idealised land derived from passages in the Bible and other writings. A few intrepid voyagers were able to make their way to the Holy land in Bosch's day, but for the most part the "orient" was a region of mystery.

For much of his artistic career, Bosch depicted Jerusalem as other Netherlandish artists had done: a walled city with the Gothic architecture his contemporaries would recognise. But over time, he would use his imagination to reinvent how the Holy City was portrayed in paint. In the central panel of the *Adoration of the Magi*, the artist invents a whimsical, almost futuristic Jerusalem. The basic shape of the walled city remains intact. But the Gothic spires have, for the most part, been replaced by massive, rounded gates and temples as well as oddly shaped domes and conical structures. The buildings have smooth, unadorned walls, and their forms may have been inspired by drawings of Byzantine and Islamic architecture from illuminated manuscripts. Bosch's city, however, is largely his own creation, and its architectural style seems to prefigure the Modernist and Expressionist designs of the early 1900s. As with his other cityscapes, Bosch employs aerial perspective to achieve a sense of depth. Foreground buildings are made larger and more detailed, while background structures are smaller and hazier. The artist also adds one entirely Dutch element to his city: a small windmill that stands in front of the outer gate.

