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Hieronimus Bosch – Visions of Genius, Het Noordbrabants Museum, review: 'a tour de force'



By **Alastair Sooke**, ART CRITIC

11 FEBRUARY 2016 • 5:01PM

Has there ever been a more inventive artist than Hieronymus Bosch? By “inventive”, I don’t mean wielding a brush in an original manner, or devising new motifs. Rather, I am referring to Bosch’s inexhaustible genius for summoning unforgettable images, seemingly out of nowhere.

Consider the shape-shifting demons and monsters for which he is famous: menacing, prancing, sharp-fanged things, with fishy faces and whiskery snouts, sticky scales and gossamer wings.

Bosch was a devoted student of the murky night terrors that plague the hinterland of rational thought. Freakish beasts throng the hellholes of his paintings, devising sadistic methods for tormenting sinners, and exulting in a never-ending pageant of bizarreness.

Without this Netherlandish visionary from the artistic backwater of ’s-Hertogenbosch, now the capital of the Dutch province of North Brabant, there would be no Goya, no Dali, no Bacon, no Chapman Brothers. Bosch was the original auteur of horror.

And yet, as we discover in a prodigious new exhibition in his hometown, marking the fifth centenary of his death, for all of Bosch’s delirious fantasies, he was also a great realist.





Bosch, 'Saint Jerome in the Wilderness' (c.1485-95) CREDIT: RIK KLEIN GOTINK/HET NOORDBRABANTS

Look closely: his patchwork goblins and infernal contraptions are cobbled together out of readily recognisable elements. Surprisingly, they bear witness to close observation of the natural and manmade worlds.

Take Bosch's diabolical torture instruments, for instance. Many incorporate simple,

everyday objects: funnels, barrels, paddle wheels, knives.

A typical Bosch fiend may have, say, the neck of a swan, a scaly torso, hind parts from another beast, and a sawn-off bone for a left foot. But each part is delineated with sensitive attention to detail.

The result is that, for all their mishmash absurdity, Bosch's monsters boast clarity and coherence. This is why they have endured. We understand that they are impossible figments, yet they still convince us of their own reality.

Nine years in the planning, the exhibition at the Noordbrabants Museum is a tour de force. Bosch's small oeuvre only amounts to around 50 paintings and drawings. Even so, to bring together so many of his artworks, which are usually scattered across 25 collections in 10 countries, is a feat of stamina and silver-tongued curatorial cunning.



Bosch, 'Triptych of the Hermit Saints' (c.1495-1505) CREDIT: RIK KLEIN GOTINK /HET NOORDBRABANTS

Some of Bosch's biggest-hitters – including *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, his famous triptych in the Prado – did not make it. But 17 of the 24 surviving paintings currently agreed by scholars to be by Bosch do feature in the show. There are also six paintings from his workshop, and a scintillating display of 19 of his drawings.

Seeing so many works by Bosch together in one place will not happen again for decades. Walking around the exhibition, I couldn't help wondering if the museum's

director had entered into a Faustian pact to make it happen.

Presented within dramatically darkened galleries, with little explanatory text in order to encourage looking, the spot-lit artworks are arranged according to theme rather than chronology – not least because establishing a reliable timeline for Bosch's career is tricky.

There is an early section that situates Bosch, who was born Jeroen van Aken around 1450, and grew up in a family of painters, within the prosperous town from which he took his name.

We are then invited to look at Bosch's paintings of the life of Christ, before considering the impish invention unleashed in his drawings. His sketches of massing birds are especially sinister: long before Alfred Hitchcock, Bosch understood the suppressed menace of the avian world.



Next comes a gallery full of pictures of saints. The Temptation of Saint Anthony, from Kansas City, has been reattributed to him as a result of the findings of the Bosch Research and Conservation Project. Since 2010, this ambitious scholarly enterprise has been systematically examining his entire oeuvre, in anticipation of the exhibition.

The final room focuses on eschatological matters, including the Last Judgement. This was the subject for a large altarpiece that the artist's most illustrious patron, Duke Philip the Fair of Burgundy, commissioned in 1504.

There are revelatory moments throughout the exhibition. The opening, for instance, reunites various elements from Bosch's so-called Wayfarer Triptych. In the middle is a round painting, from Rotterdam, which depicts a grey-haired, threadbare traveller.



Bosch, 'Visions of the Hereafter' (c.1505-15) CREDIT: RIK KLEIN GOTINK/HET NOORDBRABANTS

Sometimes misidentified as a pedlar, he is actually “Everyman” passing on his journey through life, looking back towards the worldly temptations visible through the doorway of a bawdy house, while contemplating his onward route through a closed gate to the right.

On either side of him we see three painted oak panels that would have been revealed when the two halves of The Wayfarer, which used to be divided down the middle and located on hinged wings, were opened up.

To the left, The Ship of Fools, from the Louvre, depicting a boatload of good-for-nothing revellers, hangs directly above another panel known as Gluttony and Lust,

from Yale. These can now be confirmed as two halves of the same continuous vertical composition, reunited here for the first time.





'The Ship of Fools' (c.1500-10) CREDIT: RIK KLEIN GOTINK/HET NOORDBRABANTS MUSEUM

The culmination of this gallery is one of the highlights of the show: Bosch's large Haywain Triptych (1510-16), from the Prado. It is a spectacular piece of painted pandemonium, with the Garden of Eden on the left.

Above Adam and Eve, the rebellious angels, cast out from heaven, swarm in silhouette against the sky. In a brilliant touch, the lower they tumble, the more they look like vicious bugs.

Dominating the triptych's central scene is an enormous haystack on a cart, drawn by demons in the direction of Hell. The haystack is a courageous compositional device, since it creates what is essentially a rectangular void in the middle of the painting.

Offsetting its blank bulk, though, is a jostling, squabbling mob, embellished with accents of red. Featuring members of every class, from popes to peasants, this throng scrambles to grab hay as though it were gold.

Bosch's point is that our obsession with material wealth is wrongheaded. Ultimately possessions are as lasting as wispy straw. It's a message that resonates in our own moneygrubbing times.

Of course, this is one of the tests of all great artists: do they continue to stimulate interest in the centuries following their deaths?



Bosch is a curious case, because after he died he fell out of favour (except in Spain)

and remained unloved until the end of the 19th century. He was later championed as a forerunner of Surrealism.

It would be easy to make a case for why Bosch still matters today: his bleak visions of the hereafter, in which the poor, bare, forked animals of humankind are savaged by ghoulish marauders, prove especially potent in a chaotic world imperilled by war and international terrorism.

Yet there is another side to Bosch that continues to compel, and that is his abundant ability to fashion new and astonishing forms. Few geniuses, in any discipline, can summon what Nature, in her limitless variety, wasn't able to create.

This is Bosch's central achievement. He invented supernatural images with surprising solidity. His topsy-turvy imagination was an extravagant gift.

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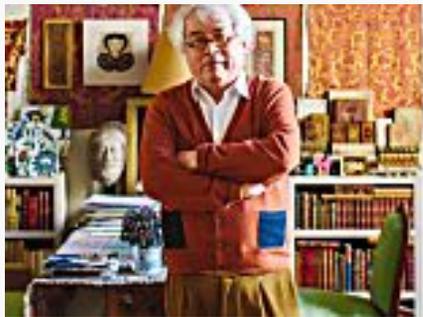
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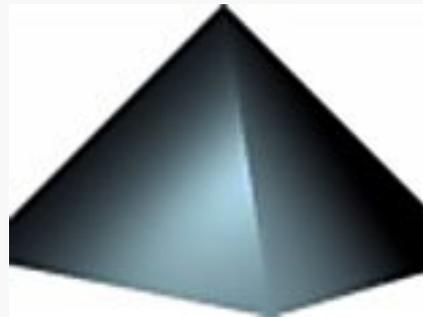
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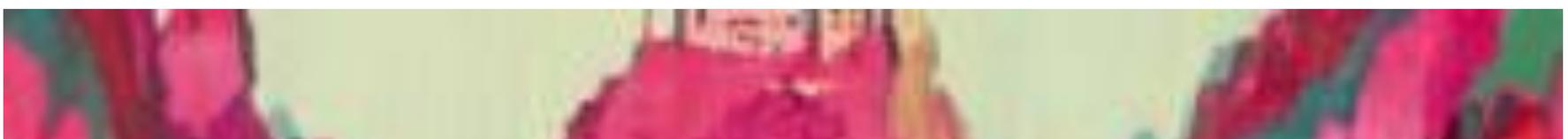
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