

The Seven Deadly Sins of Hieronymus Bosch
By Sally A. Struthers, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor, Department of Fine Arts
Sinclair Community College, Dayton, Ohio
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Some have tried to explain the iconography of Bosch's works through alchemy, astrology, medicine and the Adamites. Bosch's work is rich, and seems to come from a number of sources, but he always drew from traditional Christian themes. (Lyotard 82) The sinfulness of mankind is a major theme in Bosch's oeuvre, and is bound up with the late Medieval theme of the punishments of the damned at the Last Judgment. The theme of the seven deadly sins pervades every surviving painting by Hieronymus Bosch.

Today we will briefly examine three paintings by Bosch: The Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins, The Haywain, and the Garden of Earthly Delights, and note how Bosch portrays the seven deadly sins in each.

The earliest work attributed to Bosch is the Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins, located in the Prado Museum in Madrid. It was a favorite painting of King Philip II of Spain, who owned it and its companion piece, The Seven Sacraments (which no longer exists.) This piece has been dated, on the basis of style, to about 1475. In the center circle Christ shows his wounds. The written admonition reads "Beware, beware, God is Watching." The seven deadly sins are shown as genre scenes, and in the roundels in the four corners are the "four last things:" Death, The Last Judgment, Paradise, and the Punishment of the Damned in Hell.

Each of the seven deadly sins is illustrated with a genre scene, and rendered as though on a small stage. Starting at the bottom we first encounter *Ira* (Wrath). Outdoors is a scene of a fight. A table has been overturned, a cloak abandoned. The man on the left, who has a small table on his head holds a sword and yells at the man on the right, also brandishing a sword, who is being restrained by a woman. Moving counterclockwise is *Superbia* (Pride), a stylish woman in a domestic interior inspects her looks in a mirror held by a demon. A typical vanitas scene, there is a casket of jewels on the floor, and a vase of cut flowers near the window. Note the apple on the

windowsill, referring to the sin of the first woman, Eve. Next *Luxuria* (Lust). Two pairs of lovers dawdle inside a tent. Outside a jester is beaten with a big spoon, in those times an emblem of illicit love (Fraenger 274). Musical instruments litter the foreground, illustrating the Flemish proverb that “music-making leads to love-making.” In *Accidia* (Sloth) a man, possibly a monk in his study sleeps. A nun offers him a rosary. The candle, which when lit, represents the presence of God is extinguished. Here, the man is too lazy to invite the presence of God. *Gula* (Gluttony) is a gross scene of overindulgence. A fat man gorges himself at the table, while his fat wife brings yet more food. At the right of the table a man guzzles wine right out of the jug. The house is in disorder, and the fat child’s potty-chair is visible in the left foreground, showing us the end result of this overindulgence. In *Avaricia* (Greed) a corrupt judge takes a bribe from a wealthy defendant, and in *Invidia* (Envy) we see a man at a customs house collecting taxes. He withholds a bone from two desirous dogs, as he stands between a wealthy man holding a falcon, and a beautiful girl. A man laboring under the heavy burden of a sack casts an envious glance at the wealthy man.

In the roundel of Hell, the seven deadly sins are once again labeled, and the sinners are punished. A toad sits on the genitals of the proud woman, a large lizard and demons disturb the lustful couple in bed, sloth’s rear end is hammered by a blacksmith, the wrathful man is threatened by a demon poking at his genitals with a sword, the gluttonous man is seated at a table full of - not food - but toads and snakes. Envy is attacked by wild dogs.

Bosch’s Haywain, painted around 1490 - 95, is a large triptych located in the Escorial in Madrid. There is a close copy of this in the Prado. The Haywain reads from left to right - the creation Eve in the Garden, with rebel angels falling from heaven above - showing the two ways that sin entered the world (Cuttler 202). The large center panel shows a large haywagon with the whole world following - rich, poor, male, female, royals and clergy. Tolnay identified the theme as that of a Flemish proverb that said “the world is a mound of hay in which each seeks to grab what he can.” (Cuttler 203) So consumed with greed, one and all, popes and princes, paupers and people of all sorts follow the haywagon into hell in the right panel, where they will be punished for the sin of greed and its cognates.

Similar to the Haywain, the Garden of Earthly Delights triptych, dated to about 1500-1505, can be read left to right as paradise with implications of the Fall of Man, sinful mankind as a result of the Fall, and the punishments in Hell, the result of man's sinfulness.

One of the differences between the Garden of Earthly Delights and other works by Bosch is the use of a profuse number of mammals, birds, and fish. Bosch is famous for the imaginative, grotesque animal creations found in many of his works, but there is a different use of animals in Garden of Earthly Delights. Bosch here portrays a great number of naturalistically rendered animals in both the left and central panels in this great work, the scope of which is greater than in any of his other known works. Consequently, they must have a special significance for the meaning of the triptych.

Most of the animals are rendered naturalistically in the left panel. However, in the central panel of the triptych, many birds and fish are rendered in a monstrous scale for emphasis, and, in the right panel, in Hell, the animals become devilish, monstrous hybrids. The animals portrayed in the left panel do not appear to be there simply because Adam named all of the animals of the earth nor are they there to show an earthly paradise where men and animals live together in harmony. They appear to be, instead, symbols of the sins of mankind after the Fall, particularly lust, and they seem to foreshadow the punishments which sinful man must endure in the end.

In the left panel God is introducing Eve to Adam. In front of them is a small round pond, in and around which there are many animals. In the middle ground, there is a larger pond inhabited by waterfowl mainly on the left side and by amphibious animals on the right. The centerpiece of the pond is a fantastic pink fountain. Perched in the center of the lowest section of the fountain is an owl. Drinking out of the pond on the left side are several large animals, including a boar, a horse, a deer, and a white unicorn. Beyond the pond is a wide variety of animal life.

In the central panel are even more animals, but they are not so randomly distributed. The dominant grouping of animals is found in the middle distance, where there is a great, circular procession. Here, animals, arranged in rows of three and four abreast, march in a counter-clockwise movement around a circular pond, in which nude women are bathing. The animals,

most of which are mounted by nude male riders, include boars, goats, bears, griffins, camels, horses, unicorns, panthers, and asses. The use of a procession of this type recalls the procession of personifications of virtues and vices depicted by Matthias Farinator in his fourteenth century moral treatise, Lumen Animae. In this highly influential work, Farinator portrayed the seven deadly vices as riding animals: Superbia rode a dromedary, Luxuria a bear, Avaritia an antelope, Ira a camel, Accidia a leopard, and Gula a wildcat. However, Farinator's riders were not nude and carried other attributes of sins, including the unicorn, the fox, and the peacock (Bloomfield 138). The use of a similar procession and animal imagery suggests that Bosch, in his procession, is showing a parade of the Seven Deadly Sins which lead mankind to the punishments in Hell. With this central motif of a procession of the Seven Deadly Sins in the central panel, there is good reason to examine the possible symbolism of the animals in the left panel.

All is not perfect in Bosch's Garden of Eden. The animals are not all living in harmony: some are already involved in vicious activities. Some of the animals are obvious symbols of evil; others are more subtly so.

Predatory activities are taking place in Eden. In the lower left corner of the left panel, two fanciful birds menace a toad. Slightly above them on the far right, a platypus-type of billed bird, which stands by the pond, also eats a toad. Other toads and/or frogs are visible nearby and in the front pond. Frogs and toads have traditionally been symbols of evil and death. For instance, Spenser described Envy as riding on a wolf and chewing a toad, with the poisonous juices running all over his face (Bloomfield 242). In the roundel of Hell on the Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins, Bosch showed a toad gnawing at the genitals of a woman as a punishment for the sin of Superbia. Toads also have demonic associations (Cuttler, Lisbon, 121).

Behind the toad-menacing birds, near Adam, there is an orange cat, spotted with black, carrying off a large black rat. Bax points out that the cat, in general, represents folly. Further, the tomcat was a symbol of lewdness, and the devil was known as the "tomcat of Hell" (Bax 228). Pope Gregory IX wrote, in 1233, that heretics were worshipping the devil in the form of a tomcat. Ketzerie, in the Middle High German, means heresy and sorcery (Rowland 51). Both Aristotle and

Sebastian Brant associated female cats with lechery. The rat also was associated with lust in the Middle Ages and was known as a portent of evil.

To the right of Eve are two rabbits. In Classical Antiquity the rabbit was an attribute of Venus, the goddess of love. The rabbit is (justly) known for its prolific reproduction and thus is associated with lust. In the Middle Ages the rabbit was associated with woman and the sexual parts of her anatomy. This is seen in the Roman de la Rose (Auden and Pearson 49). In Bosch's triptych, the rabbit seems to be associated with the first woman, Eve.

Perched on the inside of the pink fountain, in almost the very center of the Paradise panel, is an owl, a creature of night and of darkness. According to the Book of Deuteronomy, the owl is an unclean bird. It is also a symbol of the Jewish people, according to the Physiologus, because they rejected Christ; therefore they loved darkness more than the light (Physiologus 11). The owl was a popular Medieval symbol of the heretic (Cutler 123). It is significant that a creature of darkness, heresy, and evil is perched in the center of Bosch's Paradise. Where there is no sin there can be no heresy. The owl indicates the presence of evil, already in Paradise.

Climbing out of the pond in which the fountain is located, on the right side, are various unsavory reptilian/amphibian creatures. Some of these are salamanders, which were believed, in the Middle Ages, to be very poisonous, toxic creatures. The salamander's poison, it was believed, remained in the water in which the creature dwelled (White 182). Lizards and their kind are symbols of evil, danger, and death. Bosch shows a giant lizard climbing into the bed of a person being punished in Hell for the sin of Luxuria in the Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins. In light of that previous example, the lizards in the Garden of Earthly Delights may be symbols of sin and, most likely, the specific sin of lust. One of the salamander-like animals has three heads, as does a bird in the foreground, by the other pond, which appears to be menacing a unicorn-fish. In Medieval sin imagery, trios often symbolized the three sources of sin: the world, the flesh, and the devil (Bloomfield 181 See *Gesta Romanorum* c. 1300 & *Example of Virtue* 1504).

A unicorn drinks from the pond on the left side, accompanied by a boar, a goat, a horse, a deer, and a bull. These are some of the same animals that serve as mounts in the circular procession

of sins in the middle panel of the Garden of Earthly Delights. The unicorn symbolized many things in Medieval lore, one of which was death. A parable which was incorporated into the Golden Legend told of a man who, fleeing from a unicorn, fell into a pit with rats in it, symbolizing time, and a dragon, symbolizing the mouth of Hell. The unicorn symbolized death (Rowland 154f). Death rode a unicorn in the Hours of Chantilly from the fifteenth century, and Pluto's mount is a unicorn in Dürer's Rape of Persephone. In Matthias Farinator's Lumen Animae, in the procession of the Vices, Avarice wore a unicorn on her mantle (Bloomfield 138). In the Ancren Riwe, of the mid-thirteenth century, we are told that foes pursue us like beasts in the wild. One of those beasts is the Unicorn of Wrath (Bloomfield 149).

The boar near the unicorn is a common symbol of vice. In the Lumen Animae, Luxuria rides a boar (Bloomfield 138), and, in the Scale of Perfection, written in the fourteenth century, it is written that men lustful in flesh become swine (Bloomfield 181). In Gower's the Mirror of Man, Wrath rides a boar in the marriage procession of the seven daughters of Sin (Bloomfield 195). In other processions, Gluttony rides a boar, which is also an attribute of sloth.

The goat has been a perennial symbol of lust since antiquity. The goat was associated with Dionysus and lasciviousness and had phallic associations (Rowland 81). In Christian lore, the devil became associated with Pan, the goat-god, who was a symbol of lust. In the Mirror of Man, one of Sin's daughters, Lechery, rides a goat (Bloomfield 195). The Medieval bestiary referred to the he-goat as "a lascivious and rutting animal who is always burning for coition" (White 74).

The horse, deer, and bull also have associations with lust in the Middle Ages. The horse is a symbol of virility and riding is a term associated with sexual intercourse, thus the horse represents lust. (Rowland 23, 109)

The bull was worshipped in ancient times and by primitive cultures for its amazing powers of fertilization (Rowland 44). Early on, it became a symbol of sexual perversion, also; i.e. the Cretan queen who, in Greek mythology, copulated with a bull and bore a son who was half-man, half-bull, the Minotaur. The bull is also an attribute of the Roman god, Bacchus (Rowland 45), the god of wine and drunkenness and bacchanals. Zeus made off with Europa in the guise of a bull.

As for the deer, Nicole Bozon, in Les Contes Moralises, written in the fourteenth century, compares lecherous man to a rutting stag (Physiologus 29).

Beyond this set of lustful mounts is an elephant, in Medieval bestiaries a symbol of chastity. The Physiologus states that the elephant's "copulating is free from wicked desire" and that the elephant and his mate represent Adam and Eve, who, before the Fall, had no knowledge of sex. Afterwards, Eve became big with evil, and the couple were expelled from Eden (Physiologus 31). Curiously, there is a monkey mounted on Bosch's elephant. The ape has long been regarded as a symbol of lust. Sebastian Brant's Ship of Fools describes an "ape on the leash of Venus" (Rowland 120). In the Middle Ages the ape was often portrayed as riding goats, hounds, or pigs, other emblems of lechery. The ape is sometimes depicted eating an apple in Paradise or squatting by the Tree of Knowledge. The devil is sometimes portrayed as an ape, sometimes accompanied by an owl. The fact that an evil, lecherous ape is mounted on a symbol of chastity in the Garden of Eden would seem to prefigure the sin and lechery of the earthly world or refer to the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

Beyond and to the right of the elephant is a lion chewing on his slain prey, a deer. This gruesome duo does not give the impression of a loving, harmonious Paradise! The lion in the Medieval bestiary could represent Christ, but in this predatory aspect seems instead to represent the opposite, the devil, who is said to walk about as a roaring lion, "seeking whom he may devour." (1 Peter 5:8: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may *devour*.) Daniel's seven lions have been interpreted as representing the seven deadly sins and Samson's lion, death or the devil. (Bloomfield, Deadly Sins, 136 (the poem of Petrus Presbyter) 149 (The Ancren Riwe), 157 (commentaries on the text of Dante's Inferno), 167 Ms. Harley 2382), 181 (the Scale of Perfection), 195. (the Mirror of Life).

The lion also generally represents the sin of pride.

Below the lion is a huge porcupine. The porcupine is a Medieval symbol for fleshly temptations (Cuttler 117). Ms. Harley^[N1] 2383 equates the hedgehog with covetousness (Bloomfield The Physiologus relates how the hedgehog supposedly would roll on the ground in order to skewer

berries all over his quills and uses the hedgehog as an exhortation against concerning ones self too much with the attainment of worldly goods. “For then the prickly devil, scattering all your spiritual fruits, will pierce them with his quills and make you food for the beasts.” (Physiologus 24). The hedgehog, therefore, may be taken as a symbol of avarice or the devil.

In the middle distance is a bear climbing a tree. The bear may be associated with sloth (Bloomfield 149) or gluttony (Bloomfield 167). Bears also serve as mounts in the central panel’s parade of sins.

A definitely evil symbol, and a traditional one, is the snake, coiled around the tree to the right of the fountain. The tempter of Eve is located in the middle ground, where the Temptation was located on the Paradise panel of the Hay-Wain. In the Garden of Earthly Delights, the Temptation is not illustrated, but is symbolically implied by the snake, who is the devil, the source from which all evil springs. The Paradise panel has the devil in the guise of the snake, implying the Fall of Man, in the middle distance, and, in the foreground, God introducing Adam to Eve, who partook from the Tree of Knowledge. In the landscape are all of the animals that Adam named, but, with the Fall of Man, they represent evil, the various sins to which sinful mankind will fall prey. Lust seems to be the dominant sin suggested in Paradise and in the central panel. There are lots of examples of sinful mankind frolicking with animals, fruit and one another. The circular procession in the central panel may also allude to the vicious cycle of sins: one sin leads to another.

In Hell, monstrous animals exact punishment in creative ways for the Seven Deadly Sins: For example, Lust punished on a harp - remember the proverb that Music Making Leads to Love Making? And Satan devours the souls of men and defecates them into a pit - no doubt, the worst place in Hell! Into the pit the gluttonous eternally vomits and the miser has money, well, coming out of his butt!

I think Bosch’s purpose in this portrayal of the seven deadly sins was to literally scare **the Hell out of us!**

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