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Salvation Spectacle:  
The Judgment Paintings  
of Jheronimus Bosch

A man is pulverized on an anvil by a demonic blacksmith while another is goaded towards them as if he were next. A person is roasted on a spit by a rotund monster who nonchalantly pours broth over the cooking corpse. Several bodies are ground to a bloody pulp in an oversized medieval-style grinder powered by the forced labor of few unfortunate souls. Naked figures are maimed and tortured by the fantastical demons and creatures spawned from the mind of the late-fourteenth/early-fifteenth century painter Jheronimus Bosch, whose works earned him the title of “Devil Maker” over the course of his career. His monsters inhabit many of his paintings, but take center stage in each of his two *Last Judgment* triptychs. Despite having been finished roughly twenty years apart, the piece completed in 1486 that resides in Bruges, Belgium (Fig. 1), shares much in the way of presentation with its cousin residing in Vienna, Austria, created in 1505 (Fig. 2). While the Bruges painting was long ascribed to the artist’s workshop, recent technological examination has reopened the debate and suggested Bosch’s own authorship. Both of these works break the mold of the typical judgment piece from this time period by emphasizing the fate of the damned souls, while ignoring those saved by Christ. This shift in focus towards damnation transforms them into fantasies dominated by violence and destruction overwhelming the viewer to the point that the beholding of the spectacle drowns out the essential message that the works were meant to convey. To further understand this phenomenon, the theories of Guy Debord and Roland Barthes are useful in analyzing the nature of this staggering overstimulation. These *Last Judgment* pieces, seen as stepping stones over the course of Bosch’s career, build towards a salvation spectacle that reaches a crescendo in his late masterpiece of 1515, *The Garden of Earthly Delight*.

Bosch’s *Last Judgment* altarpieces, together with the majority of Bosch’s oeuvre, were on display in early 2016 during the “Jheronimus Bosch: Visions of Genius” exhibition in the artist’s hometown of Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands. The event that drew nearly half a million people to the Noordbrabants Museum was organized in celebration and reverence of the five-hundred-year anniversary of Bosch’s death. It also spawned an explosion of new scholarly material, much of it based on the endeavors of the Bosch Research and Conservation Project. This team of technical art historians have revealed what lay below the surface on many of Bosch’s works by means of infrared reflectography, revealing the work-in-progress drawings and other details covered up by the outer layers of paint. Thanks to the dedicated work of the BRCP, this influx of technical information has allowed for further interpretation on the part of art-historians, leading to new viewpoints in old debates. This is particularly true of Bosch’s Bruges *Last Judgment*, which had previously been considered workshop piece. BRCP coordinator Matthijs IJssink claimed in his 2016 publication that in light of the new technical information, the piece can safely be classified as original to Bosch himself.<sup>1</sup> IJssink bases his claim on several factors related to the underdrawings of the work, but mainly on the nature of the artist’s signature at the bottom of the central panel (Fig. 3). While his enthusiasm for re-attributing this piece to Bosch has been echoed by other scholars, claiming that these underdrawings can settle the debate on their own remains a difficult case to make.<sup>2</sup>

The iconography of the subject matter in both of the pieces has its roots in the cataclysmic Second Coming foretold of in the biblical New Testament. The description in the Gospel of Matthew provides a blueprint of the iconology found in many *Last Judgment* works of art, while the Book of Revelation emphasizes its importance and finality in the last pages of the bible. These verses describe Jesus returning with an ensemble

of angels to sort the souls of the righteous from those of the damned, for a final time.<sup>3</sup> It also mentions how those in good standing with the Son of God will be placed to His right, while the rest sorted to His left.

The *Last Judgment* painting by Stephan Lochner, completed in 1435 (Fig. 4), captures this scene in a more traditional way, but may still have influenced Bosch's pieces as well. Lochner's work features mortals being escorted into Heaven, while others are dragged towards fire and brimstone on the opposite side of the panel, and very little space is left in between the two groups. This middle area is occupied partially by an angel that wrestles for control of a man in the foreground, directly underneath the massive depiction of the Virgin Mary. Bosch furthered this idea of bridging the middle ground, as he removed this divider in his judgment pieces completely. Lochner's "tug-of-war" over the mortal takes place so far to the left, because the entire area underneath Christ is taken up by a horde of souls pleading for mercy, as demonic figures escort them towards Hell. The damned souls not only outnumber those who are saved, but are also allotted nearly twice the amount of space on the panel. While Lochner's depiction pushes the boundaries of the typical judgment piece without breaking away from them, it sets a precedent for the ways that Bosch's Vienna and Bruges Last Judgments would later deviate from the standard iconography.

The Heaven panel on the earlier Bruges *Last Judgment* lacks the cohesive narrative of its cousin in Vienna, and its iconography is more difficult to discern. In this version, the foreground of the left portion depicts an angelic figure preaching to a trio of kneeling mortals, while another group explores an enlarged plant. Behind them, a ship of naked mortals sail on a pond in the company of trumpeting angels, with a smaller sized ship suspended above them. The background of the panel is less coherent, with a large tower extending up above the horizon, while several nude individuals

frolic about. Winged figures resembling angels dot the sky, potentially symbolizing that only a handful of souls were saved in this version of the Last Judgment.

While the foreground introduces what seem to be two separate scenes, it could be argued that they represent the theme of sinfulness vs. piety that defines the Last Judgment. The threesome of mortals that kneel penitently before the angelic figure seem to be reveling in her presence as she sits and plays music. Cloaked in the same shade of pink as the robes of Jesus, she wears a golden tiara adorned with a golden cross (Fig. 5), as she gently flicks the cords of the harp in her hands. Both the wings on her back, and her large size, imply that she is not a mortal like those that pray with her, but rather an angel sent to instruct the pious. These figures represent the kind of subject matter that is normally found in the Heaven panel of judgment paintings, but are mirrored by another group of mortals who are entranced by the huge plant. This piece of alien flora is a staple motif in the oeuvre of Bosch, and they have been interpreted mainly as symbols of the unnatural nature of sin and evil.<sup>4</sup> Like those seen in the central panel of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (Fig. 6), the plant serves as a distraction for the trio of humans that are enthralled by its size and shape. Placed next to the angel and her flock, the bloated plant acts as a dubious distraction on the path of righteousness. The pink hue of the petals even matches the color of the angel's dress (and the cloak of Jesus) but with a cracked or veiny texture, implying that it offers merely an imitation of God's grace. The person scaling the proboscis of the plant while reaching for the stem on top even draws the attention of one in the angel's group, as the pious man demonstrates where their attention should be focused. The dove landed on his outstretched hand further implies that the salvation being offered is real. While a comparison between good and evil would appear appropriate in a

depiction of the Last Judgment, the fact that it takes place in a panel normally reserved for the gates of Heaven disrupts the typical arrangement of an apocalyptic piece. Like the later Vienna version, the Bruges *Last Judgment* exhibits a darker presence in the left panel that threatens the idea of salvation for all.

The same section of the Vienna altarpiece also clashes with the typical iconography, and it replaces the smaller vignettes of its predecessor in Bruges with a cohesive narrative. This version, completed nearly twenty years later, features several scenes from the book of Genesis, with the creation of Eve taking center stage in the foreground. Behind the depiction of God as a human, Adam and Eve are shown accepting fruit from a serpent emerging from a tree. The final creation scene depicts an angel chasing the couple into the blackness of a forest, while brandishing his sword. God is also shown amongst the clouds at the top of the panel, gazing at the conflict between the angels of Heaven, and those of Satan. Showing this battle seems to have been without precedent in a Last Judgment, and it introduces elements of conflict that have no place in Heaven. Not only does this melee happen in a space normally reserved for the saved souls, the customary parade of those who were judged favorably is absent as well. Nils Büttner pointed out that the minute figures stashed in the uppermost portion of the center panel appear to be angels carrying other non-winged individuals up to Heaven.<sup>5</sup> If these figures represent those who earned God's salvation, then Bosch drastically reduced their numbers compared to what was usually seen, and replaced them with a higher amount of damned souls in the other two panels. This artistic choice leaves the hordes of Hell-bound individuals unbalanced in the composition.

While these features alone would render a judgment piece irregular with regard to the standard iconography,

the Genesis scenes of Bosch's Vienna piece offer a darker conclusion that breaks from tradition. With the inclusion of Adam and Eve accepting the fruit of the serpent coiled around the Tree of Life, Bosch has transplanted the inception of Original Sin into the only optimistic portion of this painting. Given that the repercussions Original Sin stain the souls of even the most pious, according to Catholic thought, its depiction here in the Heaven panel renders it the darkest and most vile of the three, and decidedly more severe than the vignettes present in the left portion of the earlier Bruges work.

Both of Bosch's judgment pieces take on a darker mood without the optimistic presence of mortals parading into heaven under divine supervision. With the ratio of good versus evil tilted heavily towards the damned, the Vienna and Bruges paintings seem to serve a different function than merely warning people that a life of sin will cause them to miss out on salvation. Larry Silver makes the case that one of Bosch's strongest artistic motivations was the manifestation of evil on Earth, and perhaps reconciling with its creation under God's watch.<sup>6</sup> This assertion rests not on guessing the mindset of a fifteenth century artist, but through an examination of the themes that permeate his oeuvre. For example, Bosch's *Wayfarer* depicts a weary traveler making a pilgrimage, and passing the temptation that lay in a dilapidated tavern, while trying his best to stay on the correct path (Fig. 7). Representations of these earthly evils are to be found in nearly every painting produced by the artist, with the motifs adapting to fit the subject matter. In the judgment pieces, evil and sin appear to be the only themes that can unify the three panels on the two triptychs, but they are pushed to the extreme. Through the immense number of smaller scenes and figures in these works, and their explicitly violent nature, the Bruges and Vienna Last Judgment paintings project their own spectacles that are capable of over-stimulating the viewer, and obfuscating their appreciation of the meaning behind the compositions.

The French writer Guy Debord conceived of the “spectacle” in the 1960s to explain the emergence of the “mass-media”, and its effect on society’s vector towards consumerism, but his theory is also useful in decoding the messages projected by Bosch’s *Last Judgment*.<sup>7</sup> Debord’s spectacles existed as mere representations of experience, that demanded a person’s total attention before completely cutting them off from reality. An example of this phenomenon is the relentless stream of advertisements that drive the modern person’s need to accumulate more possessions, to the point that materialism becomes a sort of religion. The person develops a relationship with the product to the point that eventually, living one’s own life and pursuing their interests is secondary to “having,” and one worships by continually acquiring. Such an existence, Debord might argue, is a mere caricature of real life. This confusion of priorities is Debord’s spectacle at play, as it blinds the modern person and prevents them from perceiving the real world. Roland Barthes, another French author from the same era, applied Debord’s theory in branding professional wrestling a spectacle. What troubled Barthes about wrestling as entertainment, was that while the audience understands that the outcome is predetermined, they are still captivated by the performance. Barthes argued this represents an abolishment of deep thought, as the audience is concerned not with what they think, but what they see.<sup>8</sup>

The spectacle of Bosch’s judgment pieces presents a trap that is capable of completely obscuring the significance of the subject matter, in the same way that Barthes recognized the lack of analytical thinking in professional wrestling. Like many of Bosch’s works, but even more pointedly due to the subject, these paintings offer a warning to the viewer about the slew of evils that threaten to mislead and condemn them during their lives on earth. In the *Last Judgment*, this warning is cloaked by the deluge of creatures and demons, that torture the human figures in frightfully creative ways. The spectacle born from these

depictions of chaos, draws its energy from the dozens of smaller scenes that pose as equally engaging works of art. Should a viewer focus only on the man pounded by the demonic blacksmith and feel satisfied by its creativity, or stare wide-eyed at the entire triptych and its hundreds of figures without processing much at all, Bosch’s warning regarding the many vices and few virtues available during life would be left un-pondered.

From the Bruges work in 1486, through the Vienna piece in 1505, to Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* completed around a decade later, the evolution of Bosch’s “salvation spectacle” can be tracked as it developed over the artist’s career. In the Bruges *Last Judgment*, Bosch laid the groundwork for this phenomenon by introducing moral ambiguity into the left panel, while dashing the motif of souls entering heaven. Hell iconography is also expanded into the central panel, a development that was further amplified in the later Vienna version, where the colors of Hell are more representative of “fire and brimstone.” The scenes from Genesis are also featured in the Vienna’s left panel, representing a much more severe depiction of evil, in Original Sin. These features are all furthered in the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, as the Genesis scene in this work sees the addition of a slew of Bosch’s creatures, and the central panel is packed even further with groups of humans and animals all cavorting in fantastical fashion. These figures are arranged to fill almost every empty space with a dizzying *horror vacui* that strengthens the draw of Bosch’s spectacle. Though the *Garden of Earthly Delights* shares much of its compositional structure with the Bruges and Vienna altarpieces, it does not fit squarely into any traditional pictorial subject, and lacks a depiction of Christ to pass judgment on the mortals, like its cousins in Bruges and Vienna. The fact that this key difference is all that truly disqualifies it as a *Last Judgment* highlights just how far



away his pieces stand from the traditional judgment iconography, but does not alter the warning behind their spectacle. Like the judgment works before it, Bosch's masterpiece offers a warning regarding the sinful temptations of the mortal world, but this time without Christ to even hint at possibility of salvation. Without the depiction of Jesus and his retinue in the central panel to elevate or damn the figures beneath him, the spectacle becomes the subject of the painting, and the narrative of the last judgment is lost, to the point where one can even question its validity as an altarpiece. While Bosch's depictions in this altarpiece will always remain uncanny, a closer examination of Bosch's *Last Judgment* pieces clarifies how he came to create the outlandish *Garden of Earthly Delights* in his twilight years.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ilsink, Matthijs, *Hieronymus Bosch: Visions of Genius*, 164-170.
- <sup>2</sup> Till-Holger Borchert confirms that the signature in lower right of the central panel is in the same style as those on Bosch's *Temptation of Saint Anthony and Haywain* and those works are considered authentic. He does not go so far as to label the *Last Judgment* in Bruges as authentic, however.
- <sup>3</sup> Matthew 25:31-33: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."
- <sup>4</sup> Walter Gibson's study on Bosch's strawberries goes into detail regarding how the fruit symbolizes life and fertility in medieval times, but later came to be seen as a sinful entity.

He interprets the oversized fruits in the central panel of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* as symbols of lust whose alluring forms are impossible to resist.

- <sup>5</sup> Büttner, Nils, *Hieronymus Bosch: Visions and Nightmares*, 149.
- <sup>6</sup> Silver, Larry, *Jheronimus Bosch and the Issue of Origins*, 5.
- <sup>7</sup> Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 47-67.
- <sup>8</sup> Barthes, Roland. "The World of Wrestling." *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 1-4. Barthes argues that this quality is paramount in the function of a spectacle, as it reduces three-dimensional thought to mere surface thinking.



Fig. 1  
Jheronimus Bosch, *Last Judgment*, 1486, Bruges



Fig. 2  
Jheronimus Bosch, *Last Judgment*, 1505, Vienna

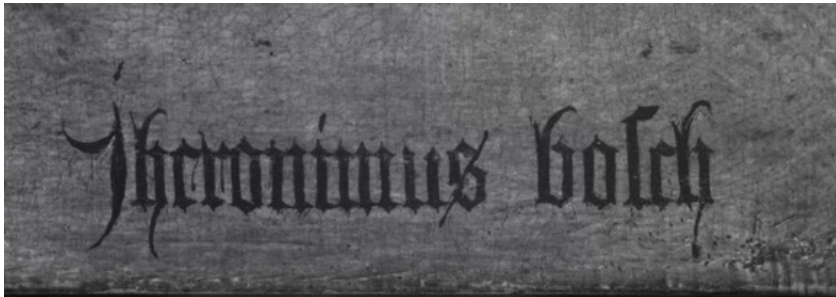


Fig. 3  
Signature of Jheronimus Bosch on the *Last Judgment* in Bruges,  
Belgium



Fig. 4  
Stephan Lochner, *Last Judgment*, 1435





Fig. 5  
Woman kneeling in Bruges *Last Judgment*



Fig. 6  
Jheronimus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1515



Fig. 7  
Jheronimus Bosch, *Wayfarer*, 1500