

Hieronymus Bosch's art featured in two exhibits 500 years after his death

by [S. Brent Plate](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue

Hieronymus Bosch, who gave us many of our modern visions of hell, has inspired episodes of *The Simpsons*, rock 'n' roll lyrics, a children's book character, movies *The Exorcist* and *Seven*, and Dr. Martens boot designs. How does an artist who has been dead for half a millennium pull off such a feat?

Two major exhibitions this year mark the 500th anniversary of Bosch's death. The first was in the spring at the Noordbrabants Museum in his hometown of 's-Hertogenbosch (Den Bosch) in the Netherlands. The show shattered records for the museum, attracting more than 400,000 visitors during its three-month run, in a city of only 140,000. On May 31, Bosch: The Fifth Centenary Exhibition opened in Madrid's Museo Nacional del Prado.

Most of Bosch's surviving works are on display, showing how he painted in new ways for his day. Paintings such as the triptychs *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (permanently installed in the Prado) and *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (on loan from the National Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon) are large, colorful visions of life on earth, with its sins and temptations, and a potentially tormented afterlife.

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, professor of religious art and cultural history at Georgetown University, noted how Bosch's images initially seem to be "easy to read."

"Bosch provides an intimate experience between the viewer and the figures within his paintings," Apostolos-Cappadona said. "He is able to draw the viewer into the painting so that the painted environment envelops her and she comes to believe that the 'coded message' within the frame of the painting is being communicated directly to and solely for her."

Bosch's devoted, almost obsessive, attention to the hellish details makes it seem that he had an intimate knowledge of these other worlds—as though he'd been there himself and seen the misery and horror. The other great artist who offered as much knowledge about devilish worlds was John Milton. His epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) is filled with so many rich and vibrant details about Satan that the poet

William Blake accused Milton of being part of the devil's party.

Was Bosch part of the devil's party? His biographical details, sparse as they are, suggest otherwise. His hometown, colloquially known as "Den Bosch," from which the painter took his name, was a prosperous market town. He grew up in the Catholic Church, in a local sect called the Illustrious Brotherhood of Our Lady, when early rumblings of religious reformation were being felt across northern Europe. Bosch died the year before Martin Luther famously nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg door.

Bosch was an apocalyptic painter—*apocalypse* here meaning an unveiling. Triptychs such as *Visions of the Hereafter*, with its rendition of a light at the end of the tunnel, and *The Last Judgment*, in which barely anyone seems to survive the ordeal, suggest why the Lutheran doctrine of grace would have been attractive at the time.

One viewpoint shared by most commentators is that Bosch does not provide a flattering view of the common man. People are depraved, and although redemption is possible through Jesus, Mary, and the saints, there seems little hope for it. Bosch's heavens are empty and his hells are full.

One visitor to the exhibition, a theology student from Mexico City, didn't care for the negative view of humanity. "Too much dualism," she said. "Too much of a view that sex is evil, the body is evil. It's just not a good view of Christianity." — Religion News Service

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