

Review: The Lure of the Weird: How Hieronymus Bosch Became a Brand

Reviewed Work(s): "Beyond Bosch: The Afterlife of a Renaissance Master in Print"

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The Lure of the Weird: How Hieronymus Bosch Became a Brand

By Armin Kunz



Johannes and Lucas van Doetecum in the manner of Hieronymus Bosch, *Temptation of Saint Christopher (or Temptation of Saint Anthony)* (1561), etching and engraving; sheet 13 3/16 x 16 15/16 inches (trimmed to image). Private collection.

"Beyond Bosch: The Afterlife of a Renaissance Master in Print"

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There are not many artists or writers who have created an imaginary world so distinctive that their names have entered everyday language as an

adjective. Franz Kafka comes to mind; someone who has never read his work but has filled in a tax return will understand a "Kafkaesque" situation as "having a nightmarishly complex, bizarre, or illogical quality," especially, but not exclusively, in a bureaucratic context.¹ Though *Merriam-Webster* fails to reference the word "Boschian," I would nevertheless assert a claim here for the comparable status of Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516). In such paintings as *The Garden of Earthly*

Delights (ca. 1500–05; Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid); *The Last Judgement* (ca. 1504–08; Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna) and *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (ca. 1500; Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon), Bosch introduced surreal worlds full of fantastic creatures—monsters, demons and devils as well as voluptuous nudes and temptresses, all seen mingling with the artist's contemporaries. Bosch typically ignored members of the nobility in favor of peas-

ants and their life in the countryside as he observed it in the environs of his hometown of 's-Hertogenbosch in the province of Northern Brabant (now the southern Netherlands).

The notion of "Boschian" is, however, associated with the "monsters and chimeras" that crowd the artist's compositions² and his "obsession with the idea of hybrid forms as the offspring of mismating and unnatural union in the world ... Horrid, malformed creatures with distended torsos or none at all wave insect-like appendages; bulbous bodies turn into fish or sharp-beaked birds; animal, mineral, and vegetal hybrids mix and squirm from rotting vestments, cracked eggs, and metallic casings."³ Before Bosch, one might have found such imagery on the margins of medieval manuscripts where the illuminators took a certain artistic license,⁴ but Bosch put his "*diablerien*"⁵ front and center in large paintings that attracted the attention of the highest-ranking collectors among the Netherlandish elite as well as in the courts of Europe. In 1504, Philip the Fair, Duke of Burgundy and son of the Habsburg emperor, Maximilian I, commissioned a painting from the artist depicting the Last Judgment. Later in the century, the Spanish king, Philip II, became Bosch's most avid collector even as his soldiers exerted an increasingly brutal rule over the Netherlands, which ultimately sparked the Dutch Revolt. Bosch's considerable commercial success and posthumous fame caused many of his best works to disappear into private collections, accessible only to a fairly small, exclusive circle of connoisseurs. With the originals gone, copies and forgeries entered the market, especially in the nearby port city of Antwerp, where a thriving art market was beginning to emerge during the 16th century.

Even more important for the wider spread of Boschian imagery was the medium of print, and it is this aspect of Bosch's "afterlife" that is addressed by the exhibition and catalogue organized by Marisa Bass of Washington University in St. Louis and Elizabeth Wyckoff, curator of prints, drawings and photographs at the Saint Louis Art Museum. The show is based on an astonishingly comprehensive private collection in Saint Louis, augmented by works from the museum's own holdings as well as a few crucial loans. But what does the show's subtitle, "Afterlife of a Renaissance Master in Print," mean? Hieronymus Bosch, who was born around



Unknown etcher after Hieronymus Bosch, *The Tree-Man* (n.d.), etching, sheet 9 1/16 x 11 1/4 inches (trimmed within the platemark, top and bottom). Private collection.

1450 and died in 1516, never actually made a print himself—unlike his close contemporary Martin Schongauer, who was not only a painter but also trained as a goldsmith. A better comparison might be Andrea Mantegna, who, though nearly a generation older than Bosch was first and foremost a painter. An exceptional group of prints is closely linked to Mantegna, and while we cannot be absolutely certain that he engraved them himself, he definitely commissioned them in order to distribute his own compositions. Raphael was a closer contemporary of Bosch and worked together with the engravers Marcantonio Raimondi and Baviero de' Carocci to make and sell prints after his designs.

Bosch prints, though, are something completely different and possibly unique in the history of reproductive printmaking. Not only did the artist never engrave a plate, but virtually all the prints connected with his name were made many years after his death.⁶ Further, only one single print can be directly connected to a surviving model that is fully accepted as being by Bosch: *The Tree-Man*, an anonymous, undated etching, possibly by David Vinckboons (1576–1632) or a printmaker in his circle and therefore removed from Bosch by about a century (cat. 4). While this fantastic creature appears in the right wing of *The Garden of Earthly*

Delights triptych, the print is based not on the painting but on a drawing by Bosch now in the Albertina in Vienna. The other touchstone for the phenomenon of the "Bosch print" is the engraving *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (cat. 11). Dated 1557, 41 years after the artist's death, it is indeed the earliest print that mentions "Hieronymus Bos" as "inventor" of the plate. The design drawing for it, to size and incised for transfer, also survives; but it is dated 1556 and signed not by Bosch but by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525–1569).

This brings us to perhaps the most influential person in the dissemination of Boschian images: the Antwerp publisher Hieronymus Cock (1518–1570). He opened his shop, Aux Quatre Vents (At the Sign of the Four Winds), in the late 1540s; it was later operated by his widow, Volcxken Diericx, until her own death in 1600 and became what was probably the most successful and influential print publishing house in Northern Europe [see *Art in Print* March–April 2014].⁷ It was Cock who commissioned Pieter van der Heyden, one of the printmakers working for him, to engrave a plate after Bruegel's drawing; Cock then published the print with the explicit inscription "Hieronymus Bos inventor." *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* can therefore be seen as both the paradigm of the "Boschian print" and as a shrewd marketing move on the part of

Cock. Modern scholars have managed to identify a mere 16 prints from the more than 1,500 plates listed in the inventory of Volcxken Diericx's estate as more or less directly connected with Bosch. Yet when Lodovico Guicciardini wrote about Antwerp in his *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi* in 1567, he characterized Cock as having "published many prints after the work of Hieronymus Bosch and other famous painters."⁸ A half-century after his death, Bosch's fame was undiminished, and it has been rightly pointed out that the wide dissemination of Boschian prints, especially in the second half of the 16th century, did not so much reflect a revival but a *survival* of his popularity.⁹

It is the special merit of this show and its accompanying catalogue that they not only present a comprehensive corpus of Boschian prints, but that Bass and Wyckoff examine each print in detail in order to establish its degree of dependence on Bosch's art—ranging from simple pastiches or derivative concoctions to the artistic sophistications of Pieter Bruegel, who became known as a "new Bosch." The authors venture even further, trying to unlock at least some of the elements of the kind of disguised symbolism Erwin Panofsky so successfully decoded in early Netherlandish painting. And while Bass is well aware that Panofsky passed over Bosch (he declared "This, too high for my wit, I prefer to omit"), she probes "the 'conscious' intentionality underlying Bosch's visual excavation of the demonic underworld," recognizing this as the crucial distinguishing feature between his art and subsequent "sensationalized imitations" of it.¹⁰ Such iconological explorations of the prints, however, remain problematic in light of the considerable remove between them and the artist. For example, Bass calls attention to a detail in Pieter van der Heyden's engraving *Shrove Tuesday* (cat. 23): tacked over the fireplace is an image of an owl—possibly a print—on which the inscription "Hiero. Bos. Inventor" can be read; she suggests that this alludes to the more "sinister potential of the mind's creative powers" and makes reference to "Bosch as a duplicitous creature who postures as something he is not."¹¹ But one might just as easily see the explicit reference to Bosch as another clever example of Cock's marketing, and the labelling of the image within the image as an imaginative expansion of the *cartellino*, the small piece of illusionistically depicted paper on which artists

signed their works. The history of 16th-century German woodcuts demonstrates that merely adding the name or monogram of a famous artist to a work made by someone else need not denote a "conflation" of two artistic identities:¹² when publishers reprinted the blocks for prints by Baldung, Beham or Cranach in the later 16th and early 17th centuries, they often added the monogram of Albrecht Dürer to enhance the marketability of the sheets.¹³

Even if one leans more to the purely commercial argument to explain Cock's use of Bosch's name, the success of his venture and the undisputed popularity of Boschian prints offer further evidence of the power of Bosch's artistic imagination. He had invented worlds that remain recognizably "Boschian" even if the prints associated with his name did not reproduce specific works from his hand, let alone complete compositions. On the contrary, one may even describe as the very characteristic of the Boschian print that it incorporates individual elements of his highly idiosyncratic imagery, which it then recombines—Georg Baselitz would say "remixes"—to populate new visual contexts.

These highly fantastical worlds of Bosch—"such stuff as dreams are made on"—differ from Kafka's mostly quotidian territory, Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis being the exception rather than the rule. Yet one wonders if the modern individual's tortuous experience of bureaucracy that lies at the heart of Kafka's writings might not have a subconscious affinity to Bosch's world of the weird and absurd. Did Herr K. dream of Boschian creatures? Or do tax examiners today? Perhaps readers resilient enough to work their way through David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* can let me know... ■

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Notes:

1. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th edition (Springfield: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1996), 637.
2. Felipe de Guevara, *Commentarios de la Pintura*, ca. 1560, quoted from Marisa Bass's essay in the exhibition catalogue, 17 and 31n33.
3. James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, the Graphic Arts from 1350 to*

1575, 2nd edition (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall Inc., 2005), 403.

4. Cf. Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

5. A term used to describe Bosch's paintings in sixteenth-century inventories; cf. Larry Silver, "Second Bosch: Family Resemblance and the Marketing of Art," in *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, vol. 50 (1999), 31–56, here 31.

6. The exception is a handful of prints by Alart du Hameel, Bosch's contemporary and fellow native of 's-Hertogenbosch, that betray an awareness of Boschian imagery (see cat. nos. 5, 12, and 15); impressions of these prints are exceedingly rare, however, and some are only known in impressions printed considerably later in the 16th century.

7. On the seminal exhibition on Cock held in Leuven and Paris in 2013 and its accompanying catalogue, see the two reviews in *Art in Print* 3, no. 6 (March–April 2014). Only one of the nine sections was dedicated to Boschian prints.

8. Quoted here from Elizabeth Wyckoff's article in the catalogue, 48 and 56n66.

9. Silver, "Second Bosch," 41.

10. Catalogue, 18f.

11. *Ibid.*, 25f.

12. *Ibid.*, 27.

13. To support her argument, Bass discusses the example of Beham's woodcut *The Head of Christ* of ca. 1520, which displays Dürer's monogram prominently in the center beneath the image, but even this monogram was only added when the block was reprinted during the so-called *Dürer Renaissance* around 1600.