

**BEYOND HERMENEUTICS IN NORTHERN RENAISSANCE VISUAL  
CULTURE: A CASE STUDY OF BOSCH'S *THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY  
DELIGHTS***

**MÁS ALLÁ DE LA HERMENÉUTICA EN LA CULTURA VISUAL DEL  
RENACIMIENTO NÓRDICO: UN ESTUDIO DE CASO DEL *JARDÍN DE LAS  
DELICIAS DEL BOSCO***

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Recibido: 20/9/2023; Revisado: 29/11/2023; Aceptado: 30/11/2023

**Abstract**

Hieronymus Bosch's triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is frequently described as a symbolic piece that can be deciphered through hermeneutics. However, as Susan Sontag proposes in her essay "Against Interpretation," this act only reinforces the idea that cultural objects cannot be self-contained but are mere portrayers of meaning. When confronting Bosch's work through the ideas of Sontag, approaching it by understanding the sensory experience it entices, its physical decontextualization, and questioning our own contemporary semiotic constructions, viewers might be capable to achieve an experience more in tune with the perceptual nature of the object.

**Keywords:** Bosch, Susan Sontag, *The garden of earthly delights*, interpretation, hermeneutics

**Resumen**

*El jardín de las delicias* del Bosco suele describirse como un tríptico simbólico que puede ser descifrado a través de la hermenéutica. Sin embargo, como propone Susan Sontag en su ensayo, "Contra la interpretación", este enfoque refuerza la idea de que los objetos culturales no son autónomos, sino que son meros portadores de significado. Al enfrentar la obra a través del lente de Sontag, abordándola al comprender la experiencia sensorial que incita, su descontextualización física y cuestionando nuestras propias construcciones semióticas contemporáneas, los

espectadores podrían ser capaces de lograr una experiencia perceptual acorde a la naturaleza del objeto.

**Palabras claves:** El Bosco, Susan Sontag, *El jardín de las delicias*, interpretación, hermenéutica

## Introduction

Described by many as one of the most bizarre objects of the Early Modern European visual inventory, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1490-1500) has become a highly debated case of interpretation among scholars. Painted by the Dutch-Netherlandish artist Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450-1516), this oil painting of an oak triptych has garnered extensive attention for its implied symbolic mystery. In general, art historians have converged into two major approaches to its interpretation: first, the biblical creation narrative, and second, the account of the deluge. Stemming from the ideas of Reindert Falkenburg, the historian of Hispano-Flemish art, Pilar Silva argues that Bosch painted a symbolic depiction of the creation narrative conducted by the theme of sin (2016). On the other hand, the art historian Ernst Gombrich says, “Thus the message of the triptych is not one of unredeemed gloom. The rainbow in the storm-cloud contains the promise that no second deluge will destroy the whole of mankind...” (1969, p. 12). Despite the wide range of institutionalized interpretations that have framed this painting as highly symbolical, this article's scope and primary focus is precisely to provide an alternative view of this work, stemming from the rejection of hermeneutics, as a primary concern in the relationship between the object and the viewer.

In 1966, the American theorist and essayist Susan Lee Sontag (1933-2004) published her provoking essay “Against interpretation”, in which she criticizes the notion that the activity of interpretation is a fundamental part of experiencing art. She argues:

And it is in the defense of art which gives birth to the odd vision by of which something we have learned to call ‘form’ is separated off from something we have learned to call ‘content’, and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and a form of accessory (p. 2).

In other words, in attempting to interpret works of art, we are uncritically engaging in the fallacious division of form and content. Bosch’s work results be an ideal case study in the discussion of such phenomena; its figures lack congruence with the observable physical world, luring a hermeneutical analysis. Despite this, the

proposal is to reengage with visual media through the senses. That is to say, to reconcile the act of understanding to the sensual experience. Following Sontag's theory of art, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* presents a solid case against interpretation: its understanding is stifled by the evasion of the sensuousness of objects, the ephemeral nature of lost historical context, and the imposition of contemporary semiotics.



*THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS*, CLOSED (LEFT) AND OPENED (RIGHT) TRYPTEIC  
 HIERONYMUS BOSCH, C. 1490-1500  
 MUSEO DEL PRADO

## Literature Review

### *The Sensuousness of Northern Renaissance Paintings*

One of the primary characteristics that define the objects created in Northern Europe during the 14th up until the 16th century is the sensory richness of their representations. The paintings of this period are characterized by their attention to detail, the imitation of textures, the compositional arrangement of elements, and the experimentation of mass and space—a trait that was possible due to the properties of oil painting, an innovation developed in this area. A fascination with the specific qualities of physical objects prompted the widespread adoption of naturalistic tendencies in the production of works that dominated painting up to the impressionists. In short, the illusory forms of representation are properties not only of the object but perceptible by the observer and its creator.

However, the artistic concerns in the Northern Renaissance did not end at the representation of elements that can be found in the natural, physical world, as is demonstrated by the sheer existence of *The Garden*. The naturalistic and detailed

depiction of what is anomalous, imaginary, and impossible is also within the range of things that can be portrayed in the painting. The right panel on the opened triptych presents the spectator with an obscure landscape filled with imaginary creatures and figures. Near the upper left margin, two great ears of monumental scale are divided by the blade of a knife while they press on a pile of kneeling humans. The sensorial appeal of this image may provoke a sense of dissonance, the disruption of a sweet melody, and the overbearing feeling of discordance. Despite this, even in encountering such opulent objects of visual culture, it seems that the prevalent approach to its study is understanding such qualities as signifiers. Concerning this general tendency of art historical research and criticism, Sontag states, "interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there" (p. 9). In other words, the actual experience of confronting the object in question is, in fact, not the primary function of its existence.

Bosch's triptych presents itself as an opportunity to reflect on the artificiality of separating what is visible in contrast to what it means. In the upper-middle section of the right panel of the triptych, a particular figure occupies a significant landscape space. The creature has a rigid, pale body supported by two branch-like limbs standing on boats. Its hollow body inhabits an array of significantly smaller figures, and on the flat projection of its head stands a wind instrument. An oxymoronic smile is suggested by the slight upward arching of its lips. This creature, the Tree Man, provides more room for an uncomfortable sensual experience rather than a clear and programmatic, meaning-inquisitive approach. In his article "Impossible Objects: Bosch's Realism", the art historian Joseph Koerner points out a relevant observation about the portrayal of Bosch's Tree Man, which doesn't only appear on the right panel, but also in other drawings and engravings by the artist:

No matter how anomalous or outsized his Tree Man seems to be, Bosch insists on placing it in a landscape. The surrounding world is another argument for the reality of the impossible thing. Sight is given its avenue by framing elements of land, and by the meandering water, which draws our eye into a distance, were it not for that conspicuous thing floating there. This landscape is one of Bosch's most precocious achievements. (2004, p. 81).

Koerner suggests that there is an intentionality in framing these imaginative figures within a physically familiar setting. This assertion points out the concreteness of the Tree Man, whose formal features contrast with the composition of the subject itself. Nevertheless, Bosch insists on depicting them with an evident naturalism. Searching for concrete meaning in such complex figures eludes the figure's existence. In this sense, it resists the logic of hermeneutics in order to create a sensorial-based affect.



DETAIL OF THE RIGHT PANEL OF *THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS*, HIERONYMUS BOSCH, C. 1490-1500  
MUSEO DEL PRADO

### ***The complexities of historical context***

It is a well-known fact that, in the contemporary world, creative visual works are frequently removed from their original contexts for their preservation, amongst many other reasons. Bosch's triptych was probably commissioned by Engelbert II of Nassau, count of the region of his toponymical last name, who lived in the second half of the 15th century and was to be placed in the coldness of the Coudenberg Palace (Pilar, 2016). Now, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is standing on a pedestal of the Prado Museum in Madrid, decontextualized from its original space, illuminated by a dramatic light that significantly affects our perception of this object. In her essay, Sontag reminds the reader of an essential aspect of interpretation that is sometimes eluded when she argues: "Thus, interpretation is not (as most people assume) an absolute value, a gesture of mind situated in some timeless realm of capabilities. Interpretation must be itself evaluated, within a historical view of human consciousness" (p. 4). As revealed by the essayist, the assumption of interpretation as a transcendental activity, whose implications are true across time, cultures, and historical paradigms, can lead observers to impose contemporary notions and values on objects created outside our time of existence. Stating, for example, that Bosch's right panel is a visual metaphor for hell or an apocalyptic world is attributing hundreds of years of accumulated knowledge and interpretation to the object. This not only incentivizes a reconstruction of the mind of an early modern observer, but it also disregards the actual effect of the work on contemporary viewers.

Another aspect to consider in the decontextualization of objects of visual culture is the way they are present in the institutions that have custody over them. As the art historian Susie Nash, an expert on the Northern Renaissance, explains the mobility of works of the period: “Their static presentation today, fixed to walls in galleries or in cases in museums, often obscures this fundamental aspect of their nature, and takes us far from the drama and inherent meaning in the process of their manipulation...” (2008, p. 229). *The Garden* was made to be open and closed. The grisailles of exterior panels, with their geometric emphasis on the gray sphere of Earth, may feel silent. In complete contrast, the interior feels strikingly vociferous; action is portrayed everywhere the viewer looks. An erratically harmonious array of bright and saturated colors creates a world full of noise. Expanding on Nash’s observation, it becomes clear that the stillness of the isolated tryptic separates it from its dramatism and functionality, which is fundamental to the experience of such creations.

It is clear that, unless the tryptic is irreparably broken or perhaps permanently lost, it can still be experienced. However, the inquiry for meaning outside context stifles the physical language that can only be felt. In recent studies such as Margaret Sullivan’s 2014 article, “The Timely Art of Hieronymus Bosch”, the prescriptive incorporation of interpretative action is the primary concern of confronting the panels. As such, she argues:

The painting on the exterior establishes the religious context and introduces the triptych as a dream, a vision of the world after the flood. When the triptych is opened Antichrist begins his reign by presenting the male with a demonic woman and tempting him with the sin of lust. (p. 186).

By assigning a particular interpretation to the historical function of the mobility of the panels of *The Garden*, the author equates its functionality and formal elements to a concrete, unwavering religious meaning. On this precise tendency, Sontag suggests that “The interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, is altering it... He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning” (p. 3). That is to say, the temporal gap between an object and the interpreter provides ample space for prescriptive attitudes to inform the reading of a text. Similarly, in *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger notes that “the visual arts have always existed within a certain preserve; originally this preserve was magical or sacred. But it was also physical: it was the place, the cave, the building, in which the work was made” (1972, p. 32). Thus, the contemporary observer must recognize that in the

world of sequestered, still frames in museums, a prescriptive interpretation only reconstructs a text that is physically absent in the image.

### ***Semiotics as a contemporary construction***

Bosch's work is perhaps one of the most discussed, studied, and interpreted in the history of Western art. Its figures, the interplay of technicality, and the sui generis mode of representation have generated a contemporary desire to treat it as a puzzle to be solved, which may hinder the capacity to open up the senses to perception. The last argument of Sontag's essay proposes a clear approach to the object of observation: "Our task is not to find the maximum content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work that is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all" (p. 10). To exemplify this idea, the writer suggests that the primary interaction should be where the image is, not where it could be. This couldn't be more assertive in the case of the Northern Renaissance, where the property of what is represented is extensively detailed.

*The Garden*, as a self-contained object, still speaks to the fascination, discomfort, and enjoyment of many. As proved by its general recognition and diffusion, the image created over five hundred years ago still solicits attention. As the art historian James H. Marrow establishes:

First, it seems to me evident that the meaning of works of art from this period cannot be adequately defined by analyses, no matter how full of their iconographic content; for the effects of these works are constituent and ultimately both overt and dominant elements of their meaning (1986, p. 169).

In other words, even though the possibility of iconographic analysis seems inherent to the complexities of this piece, the effect it provoked on its first viewers and still produces is where the experience takes its most holistic form. In fact, it is a sort of pathos that drives the connection humans develop with objects designed to be felt somehow.

### **Conclusion**

As the American art historian Anne D'Alleva explains in her text *Methods and Theories of Art History*, "art history has a hermeneutic orientation, in that art historians are self-conscious about the process of interpretation" (2012, p. 122). A non-interpretative approach is based on observing the object as it is; such reflections pay attention to the physical properties and their reception through our perceptive

innate abilities. One may focus on how the saturation of colors affects the eyes, how shapes and patterns make the observer imagine textures and sensations, or how represented figures evoke feelings of fear and anguish. The semiotic, positivist, and logic-seeking attitudes that are currently carrying the discourses about visual culture are, in fact, hindering our innate relationship with objects. That is not to say that objects cannot be “liberated” from their physical attributes, but that objects and images are created to be affective, to instigate emotional and physical responses, to induce changes in behavior, and to invite the act of reflection. Assuming that meaning is an inherent trait of visual culture, without considering the decontextualization of images from their intended habitat, our historical distance to their conception and paradigms, and without questioning the transcendentalism of contemporary thought only separates us more from experiencing works like *The Garden of Earthly Delights* as the sensory experiences they have the potential to convey. The strident brightness of its green landscapes of the left and center panels and the incandescent fires of the dark left panel invite the spectator to ponder over the sensual world of images. Whether the triptych is seen at the museum, through a printed book, or even as a digital image, Bosch’s painting will never be seen again as it was in its genesis. For this reason, facing the image as it is, rather than as a symbol for a hidden, hermeneutic system, may reveal more about its nature. Humans may not entirely share paradigms and thought patterns throughout time, but without a doubt, all humans, regardless of their time of existence, have the capacity to feel.

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