

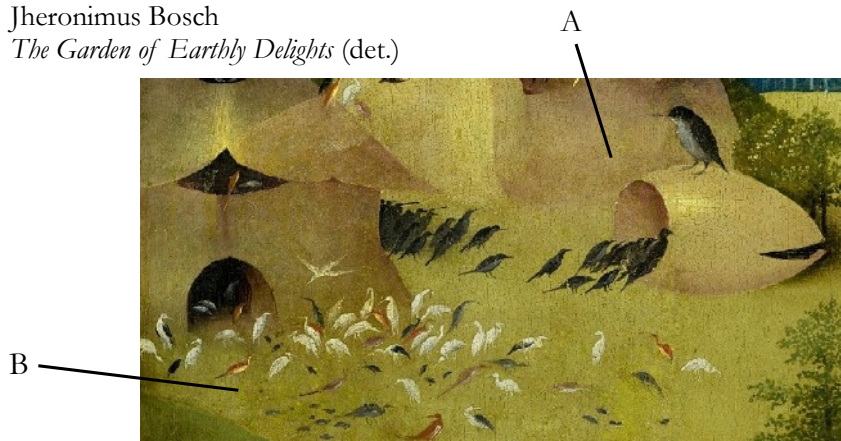
Bosch, the surdo canis

Paulo Martins Oliveira

When designing his elaborate multilayered paintings¹, Jheronimus van Aken “Bosch” harmonized various sources and inspirations².

One of the most influential was the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam (Desiderius Erasmus), who became for a time practically neighbor of the Van Aken’s workshop, in the city of ‘s-Hertogenbosch.

Jheronimus Bosch
The Garden of Earthly Delights (det.)



The hollow rock [A] is actually an ecclesiastical mitre (or miter), that is to say the Holy Church imposing its dogmas and discipline over subservient believers³.

Next to it, there is a more liberal view on the Church (advocated by Erasmus), symbolized by the diversified and free birds [B].

1 A brief illustrative example of this concept is presented in the article “Reviewing Konrad Witz – an ingenious artist of the 15th century”.

2 His works are decoded in the book *Jheronimus Bosch – o relojoeiro dos símbolos*.

3 For more on this composite element, see the article “The egg of Bosch”, in *Separata 1*.

Furthermore, Jheronimus Bosch also sought inspiration from Erasmus to integrate political layers into his paintings⁴. Thus, from the famous collection of ancient maxims and proverbs organized by the humanist scholar (*Adagia*, 1500), Bosch adapted and illustrated the Latin saying “surdo canis” (deaf dog), which Erasmus had equated to “surdo fabulam narras” (talking to the deaf)⁵.

This means the frustration of warning people who are “deaf”, i.e. stubborn and reckless. A useful definition can be found in a book from 1814, titled *Proverbs chiefly taken from the Adagia of Erasmus* (entry 92): “Surdo canis - You are preaching to the deaf; to prepossessed and prejudiced ears; to persons so besotted and addicted to their vices, that they will not listen to you, though your advice be most suitable to them (...)”.

In a first step, one can see that there is a natural correspondence between the meaning of “surdo canis” and Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

As will be better explained later on, the “surdo canis” itself is even present, with long ears that actually restrict its ability to listen.



Detail from the left panel



Detail from the right panel

As shown above, the malformed and penitent “dog” is symmetrically related to a pair of prejudiced ears on the other lateral panel, punishing there some of the “deaf” who, in the central panel, were so besotted and addicted that they could not listen to the voices of warning.



Details from the central panel

4 Bosch had a strong Dutch nationalist consciousness, despite having family roots in the Holy Empire (city of Aken, Dutch for Aachen). Specifically regarding the political layer, see the following articles and its infographics: “The nationalist and rational Jheronimus Bosch”, and “As Faces de Engelbert”.

5 For example, in the edition of 1523 (Basel), the entry “surdo canis / surdo fabulam narras” can be found in page 141 (listed under the number lxxxvii); in the edition of 1643 see page 322, etc.

More specifically, Bosch uses the concept of “surdo canis” to metaphorically denounce the corruption and decadence promoted by the imperial Habsburgs in the once heavenly “Garden”, i.e. the Burgundian Netherlands, especially the old Duchy of Brabant (which comprised parts of the modern Netherlands and Flanders).

The Garden of Earthly Delights
The political layer – overall sequence



Yesterday

The Burgundian Netherlands/
Brabant starting to become corrupt

Today

The Burgundian Netherlands/
Brabant completely defiled

Tomorrow

The inevitable punishment
and doom

This multilayered triptych was symbolically undersigned and even dated from 1504⁶, and five years later also Erasmus would refer in his *Praise of Folly* (English ed.1735, p.19):

“And there is a never failing observation made of the People of Brabant, that, contrary to the proverb of Older and Wiser, the more ancient they grow, the more Fools they are”.

These words reflect the central panel of Bosch’s triptych, which subtly links such recklessness with the indifference and even acceptance regarding the Habsburg domination, especially by the local elites, rapidly transformed into courtiers.

⁶ See the details in “As Faces de Engelbert”, page 2.

The Garden of Earthly Delights (det.)



The political layer: the imperial orb surrounded by the four capitals of Brabant (Brussels, Antwerp, Leuven, 's-Hertogenbosch).

The imperial orb

Later, also in the *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus would introduce veiled criticisms of the imperial Habsburgs when referring to kings and princes in general.

Examples

- Erasmus, same ed. p.134:

“For certainly none can esteem perjury or parricide a cheap purchase for a crown”

Jheronimus Bosch
Crowning of Thorns
Symbolic portraits

Antonius van Aken

Jheronimus Bosch

Charles the Bold



Frederick III Habsburg,
with the imperial insignia
on his shoulder

Engelbert II of Nassau,
in the role of a
Swiss accomplice

Maximilian Habsburg,
with his gauntlet taking
Christ's clothes (the
sovereign Duchy of
Burgundy, especially the
prosperous Burgundian
Netherlands/Brabant

The Habsburgs were regarded as the real culprits for the death of Charles the Bold, at the hands of the Swiss (1477). This was considered a parricide because Charles (after the episode of Neuss) was to be the father-in-law of Maximilian. Moreover, it also evokes the late and infamous Habsburg Emperor John the Parricide.

As for the accusation of perjury (violation of an oath), this relates to the infringement of the autonomy and guarantees of the Low Countries by Maximilian, especially after 1482 (following the death of Mary of Burgundy).

• Erasmus, p.134:

“Yet after their reign here they must appear before a Supreme Judge, and there be call'd to an exact account for the discharge of that great stewardship which was committed to their trust”.



Jheronimus Bosch
The Last Judgment (det.frag. Munich)
 The crowned holy emperor before the Supreme Judge



Frederick III Habsburg (Maximilian's father)
 with the imperial crown

• Erasmus, p.135:

“They think they have sufficiently acquitted themselves in the duty of governing, if they do but ride constantly a hunting, breed good race-horses, sell places and offices to those courtiers that will give most for them”⁷.



Detail from the *The Hunts of Maximilian*
 (set of tapestries)



Representation of Maximilian
 in the *Deutschen Kaiser*, as a
 jousting knight, symbolizing
 his particular appreciation for
 this kind of sports

⁷ In the same way, the references to “Popes” (pages 140-144) are clearly directed to the ruling Julius II.



Jheronimus Bosch
The Garden of Earthly Delights
 The reversed hunt, as an infernal punishment



The jousting between an armoured ship (Maximilian) and a worthy spoonbill (the Dutch national bird)

Due to the hunts (and the use of war dogs), aggressive dogs became a symbol of the Habsburg domination in the Dutch and Flemish territories. In some cases Bosch combined such dogs with the concept of “surdo canis” (as will be exemplified later).

Returning the *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus focuses his criticism also on the selfish and futile courtiers.

- Erasmus, p.137:

As soon as they are dress they must go to break-fast; and when that is done, immediately to dinner. When the cloth is taken away, then to cards, dice, tables [board games], or suchlike diversion. After this, they must have one or two afternoon banquets, and so in the evening to supper. When they have supp'd then begins the game of drinking”.



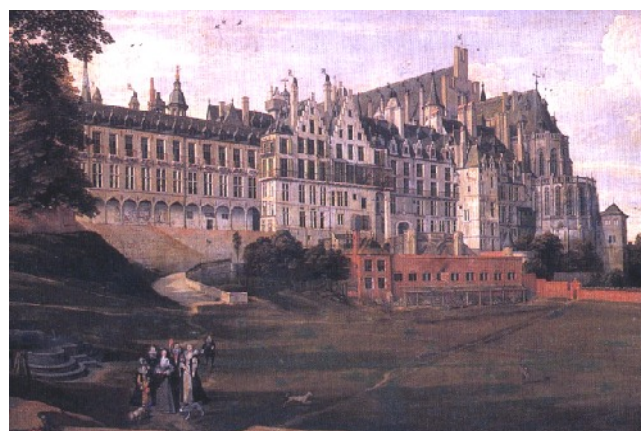
Jheronimus Bosch
The Garden of Earthly Delights
 The third panel complements the central one by showing more details of the great party, in the form of the inevitable punishments (cards, dice, board games, banquets, drinking...)

Once again it is possible to observe a reciprocal influence between the subtle writings of Erasmus and the denunciations encrypted by Jheronimus Bosch⁸, whose *Garden* illustrates the infected situation of the Burgundian Netherlands, having its epicenter in the Palace of Coudenberg (Brussels).

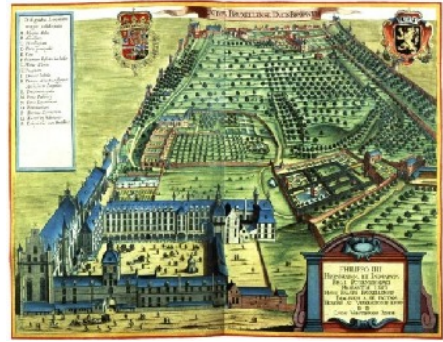


Following precise symbolic codes, this is a sarcastic depiction of the Palace of Coudenberg and its great garden, currently the Parc de Bruxelles/Warandepark, or, in other words, the elusive Garden of Earthly Delights.

The Palace of Coudenberg and its gardens (buildings destroyed by a fire in 1731)



⁸ The *Adagia* of Erasmus is dated from 1500; Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* from 1504; and the *Praise of Folly* from 1509. Moreover, Erasmus held painters in the highest regard, precisely because they were using images to express the same surreptitious views of the humanist scholar.



This landmark was an important inspiration for the construction of the Buen Retiro Palace (Madrid), and the Palace of Versailles (and their gardens).



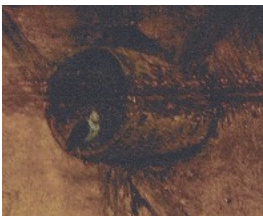
Buen Retiro



Versailles

Later in the 16th century, Pieter Bruegel (also born in Brabant) would reinvent Bosch's concepts, in order to develop new works with the same objective of denouncing the Habsburg domination⁹.

The dominant theme of Coudenberg
 Examples of metaphorical
 depictions by Pieter Bruegel:
The Dark Day
The Magpie on the Gallows
The Hay Harvest



Pieter Bruegel, *The Peasant Wedding*

Symbolic portraits of Pieter Bruegel



The stabbed
 Burgundian saltire

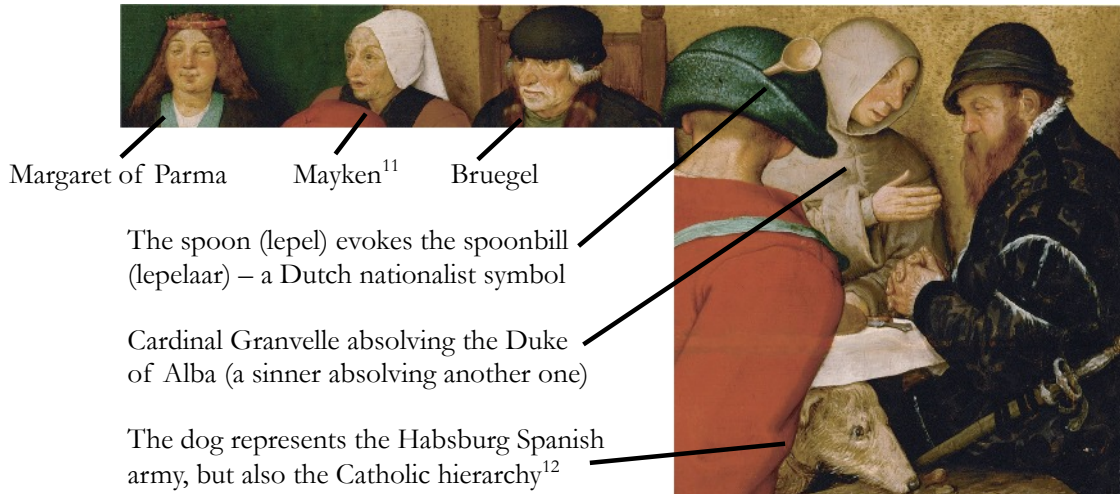
The Duke of Alba
 and his "dog"

⁹ The works of Pieter Bruegel are truly a compendium of ingenious nationalist devices, in large part adapting Bosch's solutions.

Bruegel considered the political union with the Habsburg Spain as an unwanted marriage (Spain as an expensive and futile wife). The famous wedding is actually a symbolic representation of the Palace of Coudenberg and its courtiers.

In penitence for his own personal sins and sells, the painter takes part in the banquet in a prominent position, always by means of a symbolic and insinuating character¹⁰.

Symbolic portraits - detail



Pieter Bruegel
The Triumph of Death (det.)



Cardinal Granvelle, who bought several Bruegel's paintings.

The leaders of the Habsburg repression in the Low Countries (mid-16th century)¹³.

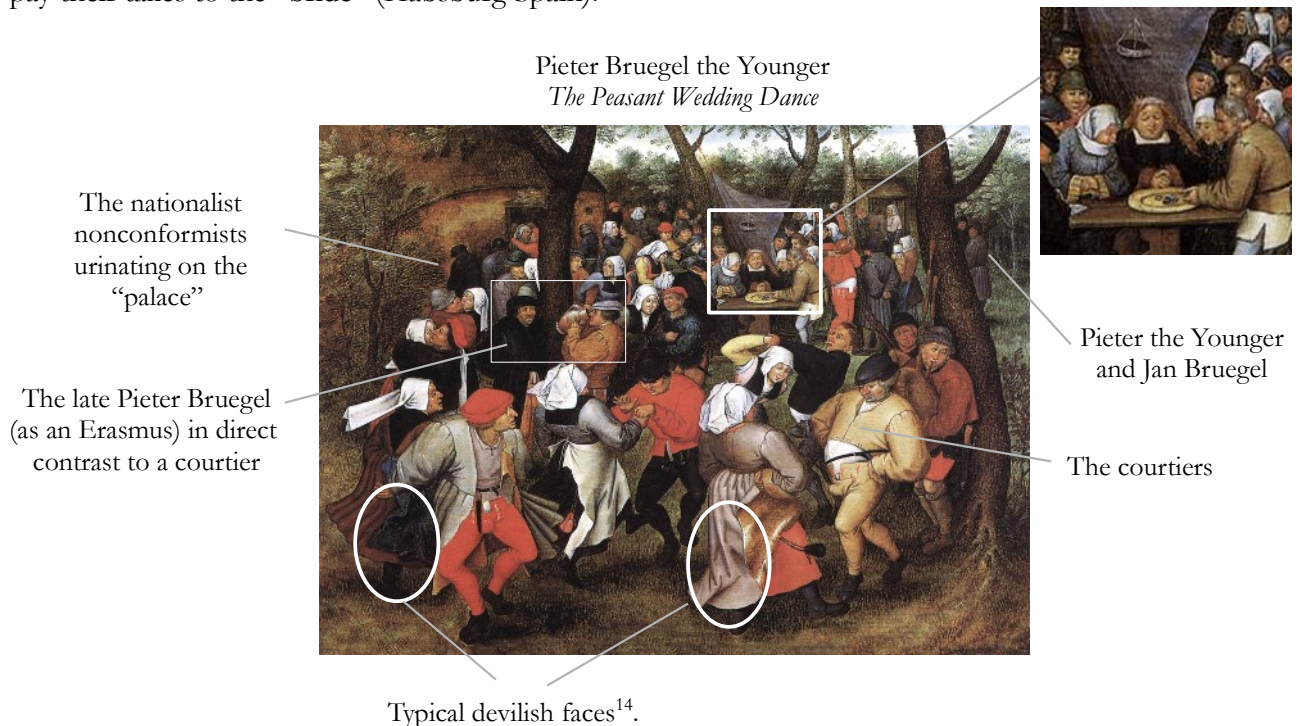
10 On this matter, see for instance “The Sistine Chapel and the new Jeremiah”, and “The L(eonardo) and the S(alai)”.

11 Bruegel included his wife in this expiatory representation, as Bosch had introduced several symbolic depictions of his wife (Aleid).

12 The dog is visually related to the religious character above. A similar device (by Michelangelo) is presented in the article “The Sistine Chapel and the new Jeremiah”, note 8).

13 After 1567 the Duke of Alba (sent by Philip II) became the main symbol of the Habsburg repression. This could also explain why Bruegel eliminated the “h” from his original name (Brueghel), in the same manner that “Bosch” has dropped his original family name “van Aken” (from Aken/Aachen, the historical capital of the Holy Empire).

Also Bruegel's son Pieter the Younger will recreate this concept, as can be seen for instance in *The Peasant Wedding Dance*, in which the "courtiers" enjoy the party at Coudenberg, whereas the real peasants pay their taxes to the "bride" (Habsburg Spain).



The inclusion of the father and his two artist sons corresponds to a device earlier developed by Jheronimus Bosch, who systematically included several symbolic portraits of his two artist nephews¹⁵.



The Garden of Earthly Delights

Accompanied by his two artist nephews, Bosch returns the gaze, standing behind a sarcastic version of the three Magi¹⁶, led by Emperor Maximilian Habsburg.

¹⁴ This particular issue is contextualized in the book *The Devils of Art*.

¹⁵ Jan van Aken was mainly a sculptor, while Anthonis van Aken was a painter (Bosch's assistant). Also Bosch's deceased elder brother, father and grandfather were artists, and in some cases the symbolic depictions of Bosch and his two nephews intend to summarize all the family, mostly with a penitent, expiatory purpose (by using the imperial origin as a symbol of the current foreign domination, repression and corruption).

¹⁶ Bosch sarcastically explored the three Magi in numerous ways, because they were a main symbol of the Holy Empire (their relics are entombed in Cologne, a major imperial city located near the Burgundian Netherlands, like Aken/Aachen; see also note 17). Moreover, the three Magi were the counterpart to Bosch and his two nephews, as can be seen in the presented detail.

Bosch was indeed a major reference of this protean concept, having earlier experienced the palatial ambience of Brussels, accepting well-paid commissions from the Habsburgs as he delivered finished works to the Nassau (at that time the main courtiers of the imperials).

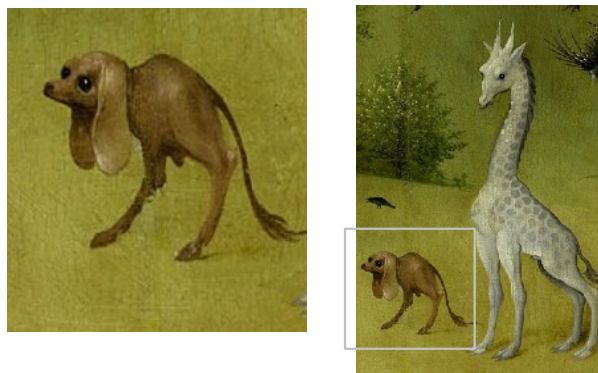
For this reason, the nationalist Jheronimus Bosch enciphered ingenious criticisms of his clients, as well as numerous symbolic, expiatory self-portraits throughout his works.



The Garden of Earthly Delights

In this multilayered representation, Bosch himself plays the role of an eternal hangover (the consequence of the dissolute party seen in the central panel). This materializes specific Biblical writings, among other issues carefully combined.

As detailed elsewhere, all characters play very precise roles in Bosch's paintings, in which the artist himself is a key element, in certain cases literally as a deaf dog (surdo canis).



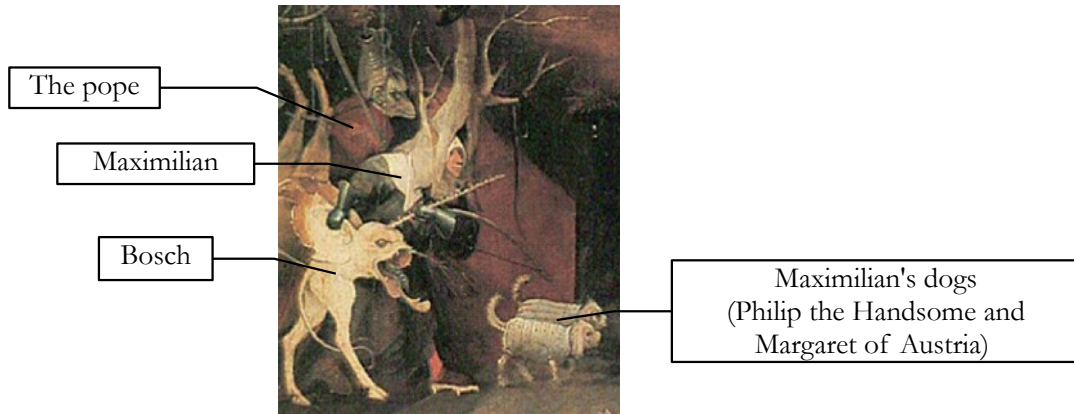
The deformed dog with long ears and hooves represents Bosch, as a pet of the “giraffe”.

The spotted giraffe symbolizes Maximilian, with one of his dogs¹⁷.

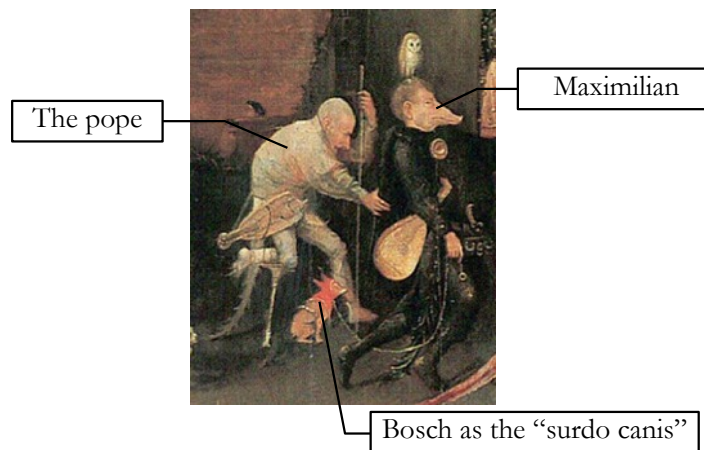
17 The spotted pattern was a surreptitious symbol of the vast imperial domination. On a few occasions, Bosch sought inspiration specifically from the coat of arms of the imperial city of Cologne (where his brother-and-law lived).

Indeed, Jheronimus Bosch constantly multiplied various types of self-portraits, often using long ears to symbolize his own guilty conscience.

As an example, in the *Temptation of St. Anthony* (also now fully decoded), Bosch pictured himself as a monstrous pet, which is following and being ominously influenced by Maximilian (accompanied by the pope).

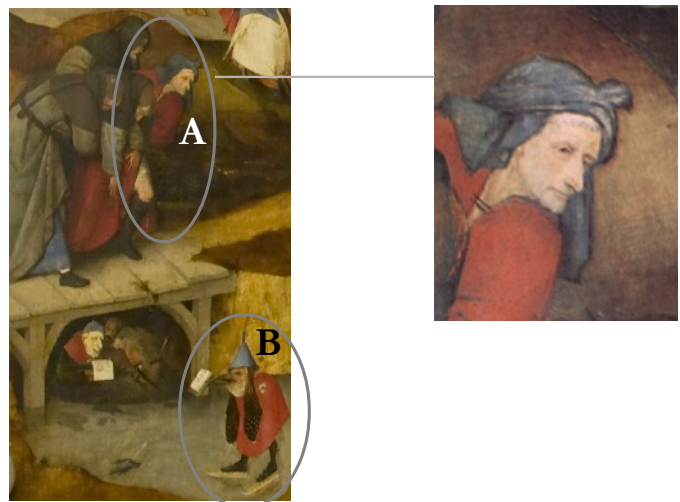


The group is replicated and reinvented immediately ahead:



St. Anthony being helped by Bosch and two other individuals (symbolizing the Van Aken family). In the same triptych, equally interesting is the relationship between the hard path of righteousness, and the easier and quicker path of sin.

Characters A/B personify Bosch and his constant struggle of conscience, among other superimposed issues and roles¹⁸.



¹⁸ The skater ibis, with a forked twig on his “crown”, represents not only the artist but also the pope and the emperor. In fact, forked elements symbolize both the Holy See (forked oak of Julius II) and the Holy Empire (double-headed eagle).

Constantly reinventing certain ideas, Bosch replicated in the two wing panels the same contrast between the fast path of sin and the much slower and expiatory course of rectitude.



Jheronimus Bosch
The Temptation of St. Anthony
 (symbolic portraits of the artist)

In fact, in several cases the artist adapted his own features in multilayered characters, sometimes merging himself with Maximilian Habsburg, no less than the main expression of the imperial domination, and to whom Bosch and the rest of the population of 's-Hertogenbosch rendered a controversial homage.

Representations of Maximilian Habsburg, by Bosch and Dürer



A



B



C



D

A: Maximilian crowned with the tree of sin, having his ears corrupted by his own devils¹⁹.

B: In this symmetrical detail, the devilish face of Maximilian has a vertical wound in place of an ear. The forked branch of his crown perforates Bosch's torso, punishing the artist.

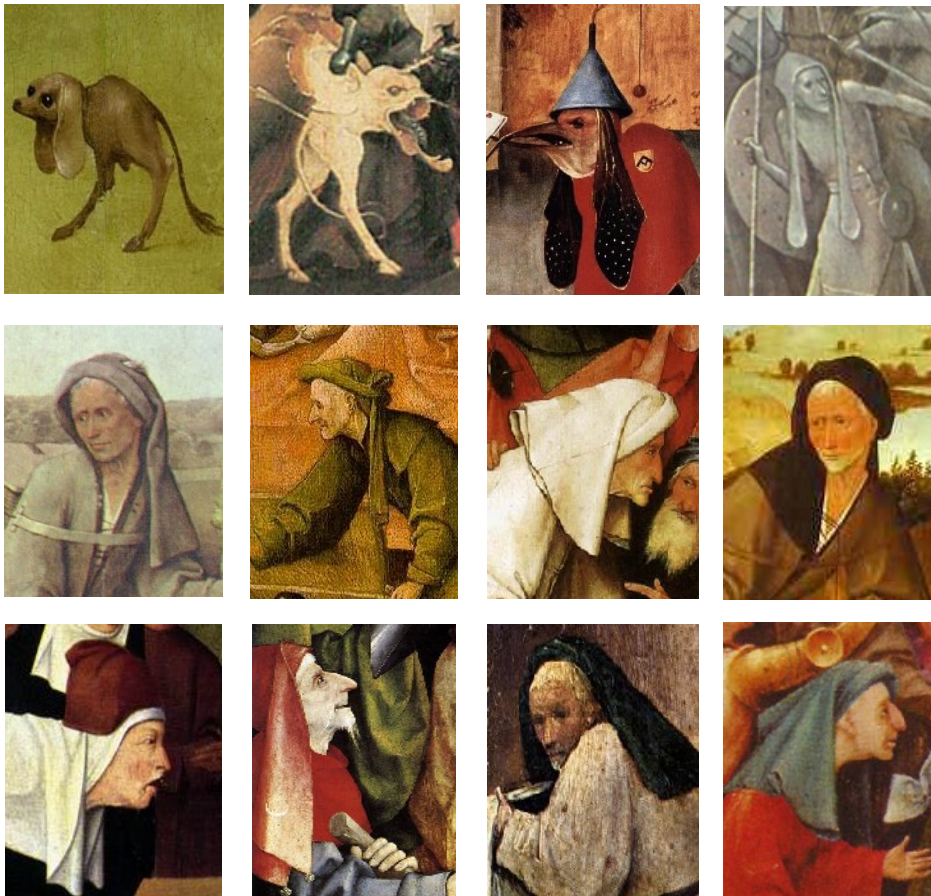
C: Maximilian kidnapping Mary of Burgundy (by Bosch).

D: Official portrait of Maximilian (by Dürer).

¹⁹ See the article "Bosch and the hidden devils of the Garden".

In summary, due to the well-paid imperial commissions, Bosch saw himself as the greatest “surdo canis”, reinventing abnormal “ears” to symbolize his successive falls in temptation.

Symbolic portraits of Bosch and Bosch merged with Maximilian with abnormal ears, or visual synonyms (especially pieces of clothing)



One of many examples of the versatile use of ears by Bosch²⁰



In fact, each of these multilayered depictions is accurately embedded in different narratives, being possible to compare Bosch’s works to watchmaking.

²⁰ In the first panel of the *Garden*, the tall “fountain” splits the composition in two: on the right there is the giraffe (Maximilian), the surdo canis (Bosch) and a rabbit (the lustful pope, in contrast to the swan – i.e. Christ, also Charles the Bold); On the left there is the elephant (Maximilian), the monkey (Bosch) and the fox (the devious pope, again in contrast to Christ/Charles the Bold, symbolized by the unicorn). All the other animals (the bear, etc.) integrate very precise narratives, which complement the aforementioned characters.

The Dutch creative artist became highly respected by his colleagues, including in Italy, and for a few reasons Michelangelo would honor Bosch as a “mother”, placing him in the positive half of the *Last Judgment*²¹, forgiven for his sins and finally hearing the true voices of goodness and reason.



2013

21 See the chapter “The divided ring”, in *Leonardo x Michelangelo*.

Related writings

- Original research (2009-13, independent projects: Escriptos; Akenpapers/Akenvis)
 - Papers (until July 2013)
 - Bosch and the hidden devils of the Garden
 - Bosch, the surdo canis
 - Botticelli's Primavera: the dual wind
 - Deconstructing Caravaggio and Velázquez
 - Depicting Michelangelo
 - Leonardo's Last Supper and the three layers
 - Rembrandt and the art of compromise
 - Reviewing Konrad Witz – an ingenious artist of the 15th century
 - The (diabolic) oak of the Rovere Popes
 - The Adoration of the Magi (Botticelli)
 - The Deceptive Angels
 - The Delights of Coudenberg
 - The Devilish Chapel of Michelangelo
 - The Dutch Company
 - The dynamic concept of Sandro Botticelli
 - The L(eonardo) and the S(alai)
 - The Leaves of Caravaggio
 - The nationalist and rational Jheronimus Bosch
 - The Passion of Caravaggio
 - The Sistine Ceiling and the Holy Spirit
 - The Sistine Chapel and the new Jeremiah
 - The Sistine Chapel of Michelangelo: the Law and the Judge
 - A Bênção de Rafael (P)
 - A Última Ceia de Leonardo e as três camadas (P)
 - As faces de Engelbert (P)
 - O conceito dinâmico de Caravaggio (P)
 - O engenho de Matthias Grünewald (P)
 - O falso paraíso de Tiziano (P)
 - O mecanismo dos Painéis de Avis (P)
 - O nacionalista e racional Jheronimus Bosch (P)
 - Os Demónios de Nuno Gonçalves (P)
 - Porquê “Jheronimus” Bosch? (P)
 - Books
 - Leonardo x Michelangelo
 - The Devils of Art
 - Jheronimus Bosch – o relojoeiro dos símbolos
 - Os Demónios de Arte
 - Separata 1
 - Os Painéis de Avis
 - A Janela de Tomar
- Forthcoming main publications on the symbolic engineering of artworks (15th-17th centuries): Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Titian, Bruegel, Caravaggio, Velázquez, Vermeer (2013-15).