*Hieronymus Bosch*

*Between Magic and Reality*

Biography of Hieronymus Bosch

Hieronymus Boschwas bornin 1450 in Hertogenbosch, a provincial but prosperous town located in the modern Netherlands close to the Belgian border. He is one of the most famous of the Netherlandish artists, known for his enigmatic panels illustrating complex religious subjects with fantastic, often demonic imagery.

Too little information is safes about his life.His father and grandfather were both painters in the same town before him and apparently Bosch lived all his life there. From his childhood he lived in artist’s family. He married a reach and highborn woman, Aleid van Mervey. Hieronymus Bosch joined the lay of the Confraternity of Notre Dame. It was founded in 1318. The symbol of the organization was white swan. This sodality consists of friars and secular people. This organization kept away from the Catholic Church, it confessed ideas of humanism and mysticism. The sodality organized a number of printing houses and schools. Bosch was responsible for designing a stained-glass window, among several other works, for the town church.

In 1480 he was for the first time mentioned as a painter. The last time he was mentioned in the books of sodality – the 9 of August 1516. It was the day of his funeral.

Mystery of Bosch’s paintings

Bosch is one of the most mysterious painters in the world. The attitudetoward him has changed through years. His contemporaries thought that he was a strange man, who paint fantastic pictures, frightful and funny at the same time. His paintings became very popular in Spain and in Portugal. In Portugal there are the most good collections of paintings of Bosch. There are thousands of books about Bosch and his works. References to astrology, folklore, witchcraft, and alchemy, in addition to the theme of the Antichrist and episodes from the lives of exemplary saints, are all woven together by Bosch into a labyrinth of late medieval Christian iconography. Some scientists think that Bosch was a forerunner of the surrealism. Some think he was a real catholic, some that he was an atheist. From his paintings we can understand that he was a very well educated person, he knew Bible and lots of other books of past and present, he also new lots of folk legends. He was good at science, medicine, astrology and even alchemy. We can say that he also knew music because we can find lots of musical instruments on his pictures. Scholars differ in their interpretation of Bosch's art, but most agree that his pictures show a preoccupation with the human propensity for sin in defiance of God, as well as with God's eternal damnation of lost souls in hell as a fateful consequence of human folly. The main theme of his paintings was the opposition of Good and Evil, of God and Devil, of life and death.

Among the dozens of Boschian paintings, the autograph works generally accepted as his include the following: The Marriage at Cana (Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam), The Seven Deadly Sins (Prado, Madrid), Crucifixion (Museus Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels), The Hay Wain (Prado), The Death of the Miser (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), The Temptation of Saint Anthony (Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon), The Garden of Earthly Delights (Prado), The Adoration of the Magi (Prado), and Christ Carrying the Cross (Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent).

Periods of paintings

Dated works by Bosch do not exist so we cant only imagine the chronology of his paintings. Researchers divide his work into 3 periods – the earliest, mature and oldest period.

The paintings which belong to the earliest period (1470 – 1500) mostly devoted to religious themes. Most of them are illustrations to the Bible. In the manner of this time we can see an incertitude. Some of the paintings are miniatures. Among the paintings of the first period there are such works as “The Adoration of the magi”, “Christ Shown to the People”, “ Crucifixion”, “ The Seven Deadly Sins”.

We can refer such pictures as “Garden of Delights”, “The last Judgement”, ‘Monsters”, “ The Hay Wain” etc. to the middle period of Bosch’s work. His paintings in that period were full of little figures of people and other creatures, sometimes unreal and strange. But to the end of the middle period and in the last period of his work Bosch’s paintings become simply and light. Most of them devoted to the life of saint people, like “ Temptation of St Anthony”, “St John the Evangelist on Patmos” and others. The evil became more realistic, it connected with real people, not monsters.

The technics of paintings

The technics of Bosch’s painting is different from other painter’s technics of his time. The colors are more bright and rich and this make his paintings more lively and dinamic. Often he draw on the piece of wood. On the wood colors became more bright and at the same time crystal. He also used varnish atop the colour.

Bosch originally solved the problem of space. In his earliest works he try to follow the rules of the traditional perspective, but then, in his next works he invent his own technics. It is the fantastic space full of little figures, composed several chains. In his last works his technics changed again. All figures moved to the first plan. There is no perspective on this paintings.

Stylistically, Bosch worked in a manner called alla prima, a method of applying paint freely on a preliminary ground of brownish paint. He was familiar with Dutch manuscript paintings and with foreign prints, and many of his images can be traced to these sources.

Symbols

The paintings of Hieronymus Bosch are full of symbols. The symbols are so different that it is very hard to find one general key to all of them. One symbol can denote lots of different things and objects. The symbols in Bosch’s paintings came from different sources: alchemy, magic tractates, folklore, religious books and others.

The symbols, which came from alchemy, are the most enigmatic in his paintings. It is often symbols of evil, Devil and demons, and also symbols of lust. There are lots of crystal spheres in his paintings and it’s come from alchemy. We can see different stages of substance, water, gas and others.

We can see different fruits and berries that symbolized lust. There are lots of symbols of male and female in his paintings. Always sharp objects like arrows, knifes, horns are the symbols of man. Symbols of woman are circles, shells, jugs, etc.

Bosch took lots of symbols of animals from bible: we can find camels, rabbits, pigs, horses and other “impure” animals, which symbolized sin and evil. Often we can see an owl on his paintings. It is a symbol of wisdom and at the same time of heresy. Also there are lots of skeletons of animals and stale trees on his paintings.

Other symbols that we can often find in his works are steps, which symbolized cognition in alchemy and also sexual intercourse. Also the symbol of cognition is the key. One of the most fearful symbols is the clip leg – the symbol of pain, torture and magic.

The works of Hieronymus Bosch (aspecially the paintings of the second period) are full of different images of Satan. We can see a traditional demons with horns, wings and tale, but also there are bugs, half-human half-animal creatures, anthropomorphic machines and other grotesque figures. Often Bosch painted demons as a music instruments, mostly wind-instruments. Finally one of the most prevalent symbol of his paintings is a mirror – the symbol of temptation.

The first period of Bosch’s work: Seven Deadly Sins

We don’t know exactly when Hieronymus Bosch created “Seven Deadly Sins”. It was somewhere between 1475 – 1480. It’s painted with oil on the piece of wood, and it was a surface of the table. The size of this painting is 120 x 150 sm. According to Mr. Feldman this painting concerned with the style of emotion, like the most paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. It can be also a style of fantasy but this painting is more sarcastic than fantastic. Primarily it belonged to Spanish king Philip the Second. Now it is situated in Madrid, in Prado museum. It is signed by Hieronymus Bosch.

The central, circular composition symbolized the eye, eye of Universe, eye of God. In the apple of the eye there is a figure of Jesus Christ and a sentence under him: Cave,cave d[omi]n[u]s videt (Beware because God look at you). The light rays radiate from the figure of Christ. Some researchers said that it is a symbol of mirror that fends off all human sins. Around him there are 7 miniatures represented 7 sins and each sin is named. There are: *Ira* (ire, rage, anger), *Superbia* (vanity), *Luscuria* (desire), *Accidia* (laziness), *Guia* (guzzle), *Avaritia* (avarice) and *Invidia* (envy). At the corners of the painting there are four other miniatures represented Death, The Last Judgement, Hell and Heaven. There are two sentences from Bible at the top and bottom of the painting. There are no allegories on this painting, everything is concrete, taken from life. Bosch depicted people of different sections of population, but all of them are sinners. The main idea of this painting that our blood and our money is nothing for God. Every person will be on the last Judgement and if he is sinner he will be send to Hell.

**Ira** – on this miniature we can see the scrimmage of two drunk peasants. *Ira* is the result of the alcoholism. A woman try to stop them, but without any result. Bosch depicted the sin with the help of such symbols as kicked off wooden shoes, a chair on the head of one man and others, but most of all with the help of grotesque. The figures of peasants are awful and ugly, they are very fat with crooked legs. The beautiful nature is also served to show their unpleasantness.

**Superbia** – we can see a woman in her room, staying in front of the mirror (the symbol of temptation), which is kept by the devil. The woman trying on a new hat. The room is painted in the style of Bosch’s time and it is look like many others rooms in the Holland houses. This picture is pointed against the interest off many women in thefashion.

**Luscuria** – on this part of painting there are man and woman in the tabernacle. We can see musical instruments on the ground – they symbolize passion.

**Accidia** –the lazypriest is sleeping, instead of prey. A cat on the floor is sleeping too.

**Guia** – the picture show us the scene of diner. I think it is the most terrible picture because the food is given by nun. All characters are awful and ugly. They look like animals, not people. One man is very fat while the other is thin. They are very dirty.

**Avaritia** – in this picture we can see how the bribed judge is going to accuse of the innocent man. The book on the wooden box is like a dig under the justice.

**Invidia** – on this picture Bosch show us quarrel between the neighbors. And their dogs like their masters bark at each other.

Other four pictures show to us what will happened to us. First it is a fragment of death. It is the death of a reach man. The priest gives him absolution. There is a skeleton behind the dying man. And above his head the angel and the demon are fighting for his soul.

The next picture represent Doomsday. It is painted in the traditional way. The Christ is seating on the throne with many angels around him. And reveal people are below him, on the Earth. The Heaven is painted in a traditional manner too. St Peter and other angelsmeet saintly people near the gates of Heaven.

On this painting Bosch depicted Hell for the first time. This picture is the key to other Bosch’s paintings of Hell because Bosch wrote an explanation under every torture. For the sin of ire people are crucified. Avid people siting in the fleshpot with a molten golden coins. Voluptuous people are enchained to the bed and a terrible monster bite them. Drank people are drinking dishwater. Bosch took some of the elements of tortures from the book “Visions of Tundhall” about his vision of Hell. It was very popular book in Bosch’s times.

Bosch use very bright, full colors in this painting. They became dark and gloomy only in 2 parts of painting, devoted to Death and Hell. There is a normal perspective in this picture. Most lines are geometrical and straight. The painter doesn’t use lot’s of shades. The point of attention is at the center of the picture on the Christ’s figure. We can see balance and also harmony in this painting.

The main idea of the paintings “Seven deadly sins” is that all people are the same in God’s eyes. And He knew all our deeds and our sins. Every person, reach or poor will die and then come to the Last Judgement. No one will help you besides God. The painting is circularto show us that the sins are the same in every next generation. It is a symbol of the circle of sins, symbol of our Earth, of our University.

I think it is a very meditative painting, that make us thinking. May be because of that Philip the Second hungit in his tabernacle.

The second period of Bosch’s work: Garden of Delights

Bosch painted “the Garden of Delights” in 1500 – 1510. It is also oil painting. The size of the central part the painting is 220 x 195, the size of each fold is 200 x 97. Now it is situated in Madrid, in Prado.

The painting is full of little figures and it is very colorful. Its look like a wonderful carpet. The figures of people are dancing in a colorful roundelay. All colors are light, spring and soft. The bright light is overflow the scene.

The painting is very harmonic. It has a normal perspective. Most lines are curved and natural. It’s very hard to find the point of attention because of the lots of objects on the painting but I think it is at the one of fantastic building at the center of the painting.

At the outer part of the folds there is the third day of the Creation. There are 2 sentences at the top of the painting – “*Jpse dixit et facta su[n]t*” (He said and it’s appeared) and “*Jpse mandavit et create su[n]t*” (He said and create). In the center in the crystal sphere appears the first mineral and vegetal life.

The Heaven as usual is painted on the left fold. The first man and all animals have been already created. The heaven is full of different and sometimes fantastic animals: elephants and giraffes are pasture with unicorns, birds with three heads and fishes with wings. The cactus behind Adam is the symbol of Life Tree, the palm is the tree of the Evil and Good. God begins to create Eve. With her creation the evil and sin came. Animals begin to eat each others and in a fountain settled an owl – the symbol of evil. This fountain that look like bright globe with a half-crystals half-plants on it and a half-moon on the top is the symbol of heresy. The center of it is the center off the all fold. It correspond with a figure of human-tree-egg in the Hell. At the same manner the figure of God the Maker correspond with the figure of Devil who eat the sinners. So the folds are symbolized Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the End of the world.

The Hell on the right fold is painted in a dark colors. Some researchers think that black, red and white colours are the symbols of different stadies of boiling mercury. It is the world of iсe and fire. Bosch took some episodes from the book “The visions of Tundhall“. Another sources where Bosch could took his images are the book “Ars morendi” (1488) and “The big calendar of cattlemen” (1493). The painting “Seven deadly sins” can also help to understand this part of painting. The group near the Satan’s throne are the vanity. The man who are crucified on the table is the bowler. We also can see a man who conclude a treaty with devil. The gigantic ear with an arrow in it is a symbol of the disaster. S. De Tolnay said that Hell is Bosch’s nightmare. It is very interesting fact that we can see a self-portrait of Bosch here, as a face of human-tree-egg. V. Fenger thinks that Hell is the place where rebirth of our world begen. It happened with the help of two musical instruments – harp, lute and pipes. But other researchers think that this instruments are the symbols of evil. V. Frenger interpret them as a memory of Heaven. He also said that the village, fire, mill and flood are the symbols of four elements.

The central part of the painting is our world that is full of sins and evil. At the center of the painting there is a chain of people around the spring of youth. G. Kombe interpret it as a alchemic motive of eternal youth. In the spring there are women with a ravens on their heads and it symbolized the heresy. The peacocks symbolized vanity, ibises – the past joy, different animals in the cavalcade are the symbols of salacity and other carnal sins. There are lots of symbols of male and female origins such as half-moons, horns, cones, cylinders, spheres, etc. which are the alchemic symbols at the same time. The fruits and berries are the symbols of salacity and carnal love. The man who are carrying the shell with two lovers are the deceived husband. Lots of spheres at different parts of the painting is the symbols of the sins and vises and also the symbols of our world, full of sins. Behind the bright colour and lots of light there are sins and evil. And the colour also have it’s meaning. In alchemy red means creation and blue was the colour of illusions.

It is the most mysterious and enigmatic Bosch’s work. The meaning of the painting all in all and it’s symbols are the reason for numerous debates. The first explanation of this painting was made in 1605 by a priest, Jose de Siguensa. He wrote in a book of order of St. Hieronymus that on the painting we can see the appearance of the sin in the Heaven, the evolution of the sin in our world and the punishment in the Hell. However V. Fenger think that the painting is more optimistic and it symbolized the depuration by the fire and ice in the Hell, than in the purgatory (the central part of triptych) and than came to felicity in Heaven. Most of researchers refuse the theory of Fender.

People of all epochs invented lots of theories, sometimes fantastic and impossible about the meaning of Bosch’s paintings and I think that lot’s of theories will be created later but no one can prove it and nobody can find out which theory is right and which is not. Bosch's pictures will stay for us as a mystery forever.

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