

Bosch's *The Cure of Folly* (*Extraction of the Stone of Madness*)

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He was born in the Netherlands in the middle of the 15th century in a place called 's Hertogenbosch, another in a family of painters who had come originally from Aachen. He has been called, variously, El Bosco, Jeroen van Aken or Jeroen Anthoniszoon, and Jheronimus. We know him as Hieronymus Uerome) Bosch (c 1450-1516). He is famous for his scatological images, which he pressed into the service of eschatological themes, "the four last things" of death, judgment, resurrection, immortality. Like Thomas a Kempis and others of the ascetic *Devotio moderna* movement then sweeping northern Europe, he was a stern moralist, but he sweetened his pessimism with a humor that was ribald and a satire that was biting. To an illiterate Dutchman of the 15th century, steeped in folklore and bathed in symbolism, the message was undoubtedly clear. Five centuries later, it is opaque; Bosch seems more a misplaced surrealist than the misguided heretic he has sometimes been accused of being. We puzzle over his images as though he were some medieval Dali.

Evidence suggests that Bosch was an educated man, probably a cleric. He married well; his wife, from whom he received major financial support, was wealthy and 25 years his senior. His social status in 's Hertogenbosch may be inferred from his membership in an elite confraternity whose selective roster consisted of clerics, the aristocracy, landowners, administrators, and other prosperous men of the town. Bosch was the only artist to be so included and was probably a beneficiary of confraternity commissions as well. Much of his work is religious, consisting of altarpieces on subjects from both the Old and the New Testaments. His favorite figures were hermits; sealed off in their various deserts from the temptations common to the ordinary man, they wrestled mightily with their own, even darker, inner demons. Bosch also completed many private commissions. Among these, the themes were more secular and humanistic, but not the less moralizing. They dealt with the capital sins, especially gluttony and lust, or social vices such as idleness and drunkenness, and the many vanities, futilities, petty foibles, and follies peculiar to the human condition. It is to the latter group of paintings that *The Cure of Folly* belongs.

The Cure of Folly is an early work of Bosch, completed probably around 1475. It is also the forerunner of what have come to be known as "stone of madness" paintings that would become popular during the following century. Most familiar of those are works by Janvan Hemessen, Pieter Bruegel, and Pieter Huys, which show a quack surgeon removing "stones" from the heads of trusting, supposedly insane, sufferers. David Teniers the Younger also depicts a sham operation, but in that painting the stone is being removed from the patient's back; the procedure, however, is equally outside the patient's view. But, as William Schupbach, Curator of



Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516), *The Cure of Folly*
(*Extraction of the Stone of Madness*), 1475-1480, Dutch.
Oil on board. 48x35 cm.

Iconographic Collections at the Wellcome Library in London, comments, although the procedure was often portrayed in paintings, there is no documentation in the literature of the time to suggest that it was ever performed in reality. Moreover, even the format of Bosch's work puts it into the category of a staged farce or burlesque scene with actors playing roles such as might be seen in traveling shows.

In Bosch's work, we look through a large, circular opening, like a giant peephole, down onto a group of four figures set in a landscape. Tied to a chair set amidst luxuriant growth is the corpulent figure of a whey-faced patient. His clogs are tucked neatly beneath the chair. At the right, bored beyond words, is a woman whose facial expression has all the emotion of a cabbage. She carries a book on her head, closed, and leans on a table whose base is a giant flower bulb. Her function is unknown but it could be speculated that she represents philosophy, obviously of no use in this situation, as the unopened book suggests. At the center is a figure dressed like a cleric, representing theology, perhaps, equally useless, as the closed vessel suggests, at curing folly. Finally, at the left is the farcical figure of the physician, scalpel in hand, uroscopy flask at his side. As he incises the patient's scalp, a flower springs forth. Another lies on the table. His funnel hat suggests that, like philosophy and theology, medicine, too, is of no use in curing folly. Each, it would seem, is as addled as the patient.

Beyond the figure grouping, the world and its activities pass like a backdrop on a stage. On the right are tiny, grazing sheep; in the center a man and a horse till the soil, and a miniature woman milks a miniature cow; on the left, making it difficult for a traveler to escape without changing his path, is a gallows. On the far distant horizon are the silhouettes of cities, villages, and churches and beyond that the ethereal blue of eternity. For pageant goers who still may be unsure of the message, an elaborate scroll around the frame unwinds into gold lettering that may be read (approximately) as "Meester snijt die keye ras/Myne nam is Lubbert das." ("Master, cut swiftly/My name is Lubbert das.")

From a 21st-century perspective, Bosch is obscure. It is itself trespassing on folly to say what he had in mind. On the other hand, there could be some nugget of sense lying out there in plain sight, just as it was more than five centuries ago: Anyone, for example, who expects someone other than himself to cure his foolishness is a flowerhead. It could also be said that folly begets folly: anyone who tries to cure a flowerhead is as foolish as he.

Courtesy of Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain (<http://museoprado.mcu.es/>).