

Larry A. Silver. *Hieronymus Bosch*.

New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2006. 424 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$135. ISBN: 0-7892-0901-6.

This book joins the wealth of scholarship generated by the 2001 Rotterdam exhibition, "Hieronymus Bosch and his World." The text consists of nine chapters, beginning with a discussion of Bosch's best-known work, the so-called *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Succeeding chapters review the artistic foundations of Bosch's style, the existing documents and early works, scenes of Christ's infancy and Passion, saints, moral allegories, drawings and stylistic development, and late works. The final chapter is devoted to Bosch's "afterlife" in the sixteenth century, including his followers and imitators. Sumptuously illustrated, this exquisitely-produced book offers extraordinary close-ups of Bosch's recently restored paintings, accompanied by vivid verbal descriptions.

The text, however, offers no surprises and, alas, few original insights. Silver's primary contention is that Bosch was a good Christian and a moralist, a fact no longer disputed by art historians. As such, he claims, Bosch could not have been familiar with the imagery of Renaissance science, specifically alchemy and astrology, which Silver deems heretical. Silver sees alchemy in the same light as did early twentieth-century scholars, who interpreted alchemical references in Bosch's works as satanic, occult symbols. This archaic view has been soundly deconstructed in the past fifty years by historians of science, who properly present pre-Enlightenment alchemy as an honorable intellectual discipline, which evolved into modern chemistry. Supported openly and lavishly by princes and popes, its practical procedures were employed by physicians, pharmacists, metallurgists, and painters. At the highest level, early chemistry was a means of attaining spiritual salvation, a notion alien to the modern perception of faith and science as opposing concepts.

Methodologically, Silver allies himself with the Dutch art historian Paul Vandenbroeck, whose name is cited repeatedly in the text. Specialists will recognize material from other authors who, disturbingly, remain unacknowledged in the endnotes. Silver's reliance on secondary and tertiary sources when presenting interdisciplinary contexts occasionally results in mistakes. For example, his attempts to employ humoral-astrological medical iconography are confused. Silver wrongly equates the planet Venus with women and water — properly Luna's domain. Based on this incorrect assumption, he goes on to claim that water in Bosch's paintings must therefore allude to sinful self-indulgence. Likewise, in discussing the *St. Anthony Triptych*, Silver associates the airy, sanguine planet Venus with earth and melancholy, and concludes that the triptych's frigid, hostile realm is veneral. Though he asserts that neither astrology nor alchemy should be allowed into Bosch's interpretive realm, Silver nevertheless illustrates three astrological images, which he discusses in the contexts of the emerging Northern landscape tradition and Bosch's predilection for circular compositions.

Similar misunderstandings pervade the text. In his explanation of the musical instruments in Bosch's paintings, for example, Silver equates a psaltery, a plucked instrument, with a dulcimer, which was played with hammers — a comparison akin to calling a harpsichord a piano. Silver suggests that Bosch could have been a member of the clergy, though his title of cleric was confraternal, and did not involve taking holy orders. An expanded view of the role of the powerful Brotherhood of Our Lady in Bosch's life and work would have provided Silver further insight into questions of patronage and subject matter. Sins of omission also occur. For example, Silver does not note the left-to-right hatching in the underdrawing of the *Death of the Miser*, clearly visible in an excellent illustration, or discuss how it relates to drawings accepted by Silver as authentic, but hatched in the opposite direction. Sebastian Brant's celebrated moralistic book *The Ship of Fools* (*Das Narrenschiff*) is, incredibly, neither mentioned nor illustrated in the explanation of Bosch's painting of the same name. Silver also ignores the Modern Devotion, an important lay reform movement, which maintained two houses in Hertogenbosch. This organization was instrumental in the formulation of

Netherlandish piety, and its beliefs are echoed in Thomas à Kempis's monumental *Imitation of Christ* (*Imitatione Christi*). This influential treatise is not mentioned, though it clearly informs Bosch's passion scenes and moralistic imagery.

These weaknesses will not be noticed by the general readership, who will be impressed by the book's gorgeous illustrations. However, scholars in Renaissance studies will be aware of the questionable interpretations and factual errors which distract from this otherwise beautifully produced volume.

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