HANNAH PEACEY
LEVEL 6 HISTORY OF ART AND MUSEUM STUDIES

# An exploration of iconographical symbols and their reflection of moral and theological concerns in the late Middle Ages within the work of Hieronymus Bosch.

Hieronymus Bosch, *Ecce Homo*, C.1475-1485, oil on oak panel, Stadel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 71.4 x 61 cm.

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, C.1500-1510, oil on oak panel, Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon, left panel - 144.8 x 66.7 cm, central panel - 145.1 x 132.8 cm, right panel - 144.8 x 66.7 cm.

## Introduction

This essay will examine two works of art by Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch. The chosen works are from the early period and late period of Bosch's career, in order to provide a comparison of the themes and narratives found at different stages of his career. I will analyse the panel painting titled *Ecce Homo* (C.1475-1485) as well as the triptych titled the *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (C.1500-1510). In doing so, I will provide a discussion on how Bosch's art reflects the moral and theological concerns of the late Middle Ages.

Much of Bosch's personal life is left unknown due to the time period in which he was working, meaning that the only surviving records of his life are official documents with little detail about his character. It is estimated that he was born sometime around 1450 and was buried in 1516. 'Few records describe how Bosch acquired the major altarpieces for which he is famous today' (Finger, 2020, p. 13), though it is known that he would often spend time with members of the social elite in s'Hertogenbosch, the town in which he resided for the majority of his career. Because of his standing in society Bosch experienced fame during his lifetime, he had a workshop with several assistants, and it is thought that his patrons brought commissions to him.

Throughout his oeuvre, religious themes such as temptation, sin, and morality are prevalent. Over the course of this essay I will analyse my chosen works by deploying the iconographical and social history methodologies. By using these methodologies together, I aim to explore the meanings embedded in the paintings and situate them within the context of the late Middle Ages.

**Iconography**

'At its most basic level, the practice of iconography aims to identify conventional motifs, images, and symbols, in works of art' (Cothren & D'Alleva, 2021, p. 34). Iconographical analysis was invented by art historians as a method for understanding the rich visual codes often present in works of art. The process of conducting an iconographical analysis centres around the identification and interpretation of recurring symbols within an art historical period. In order to do this, scholars draw from sources such as religious texts, various mythologies, and literary works.

The first examples of systemised iconographical analysis were seen in the sixteenth century when 'iconographic handbooks that explained the different themes and allegorical personifications were published for the use of artists and audiences' (Cothren & D'Alleva, 2021, p. 35). Building on this in the 1900s, German art historian Erwin Panofsky published his influential book titled *Studies in Iconology*. Throughout the text, Panofsky outlines an analytic process which 'soon became a rigorous model that brought systematic vigour to the American practice of art history' (Cothren & D'Alleva,

2021, p. 36). He argues that there are three stages involved in a complete iconographic analysis, the 'pre iconographic description', 'iconographical analysis', and 'iconological interpretation'. It is important to note that the third stage involves the use of iconology, a process of evaluation which aims to push further than iconographical analysis and explain *why* specific visual images have been used. Whilst there will be some discussion of iconology in my examination of Bosch's work, the primary focus of my research will be on stage two, the iconographical analysis.

Panofsky believed that a pre-iconographic description must be given before an iconographical analysis could take place. To provide a pre-iconographic description, there can be no reference to outside sources, only what is easily visually recognised should be described before advancing to an iconographical analysis. Once this has been completed, the iconographical reading can begin by 'identify[ing] the image as part of a known story with recognisable characters, specific settings, and conventional symbols or allegories' (Cothren & D'Alleva, 2021, p. 36). This is the process I will apply to both *Ecce Homo* and the *Temptation of St. Anthony* as I aim to unpick the rich visual messages in Bosch's work.

**The social history method**

Social history as a critical methodology foregrounds the idea that 'contextual influences of culture and society can never be too far removed from artwork,' (Thipphawong, 2021). Providing analysis of an artwork through a social historical lens involves the consideration of broader socio-political, economic, and cultural factors which may have influenced both the production and the reception of the work. This is often achieved by undertaking research into the period in which the artwork was created, usually done through the analysis of historical documents, correspondence, or contemporary reviews of the artwork in question. By conducting a social historical analysis, scholars can gain key insights into the roles that patrons and audiences play in developing artistic practices and trends.

**Iconography in *Ecce Homo***

The first piece I will be analysing as part of my exploration into the use of iconography within Bosch's work is *Ecce Homo*. Whilst this piece is from early on in Bosch's career, I argue that the use of iconographical symbols was a hallmark of his work from the very beginning. The title *Ecce Homo* refers to the phrase (in English: 'Behold the Man') spoken by Pontius Pilate as he presented Jesus to a crowd prior to his crucifixion. From the fifteenth to seventeenth century, *Ecce Homo* was a heavily featured theme in western Christian art, with many paintings depicting Christ wearing the crown of thorns used to humiliate him before his death. In keeping with Panofsky's method, I will first provide a pre-iconographic description of the painting before advancing to the developed iconographical analysis.

Though initially not an overly complex painting, Bosch's *Ecce Homo* is full of hidden details. The background presents the view of a small town with gatherings of people, some of whom stand outside a building adorned with an eye-catching red flag. A couple peer over the bridge that connects to the foreground, watching the river below. On the other side of the bridge stands a gathering of people in brightly coloured clothing, they hold various weapons and are all looking up at the six people standing above them. The smaller crowd in the upper left portion of the painting are the main focus, in the centre we see a man wearing only a scrap of fabric around his hips. Atop this man's head we can distinguish a crown of thorns, and this is causing blood to run down his body. His hands are bound, and he leans forward in discomfort. Those behind him do not appear to be concerned, and from the expressions of those in the crowd below, it appears they are jeering at him. In the bottom corners of the painting there are heavily faded portraits of more people. Lastly, an owl watches the scene unfold from the building in the foreground.

The painting's title serves as a helpful starting point for iconographical analysis. As mentioned above, the phrase 'Ecce Homo' was spoken by Roman governor (26-36 CE) Pontius Pilate. Knowing this helps to situate the painting within the context of Christian iconography, thus making it easier to identify key symbols within the piece. For example, we can now confirm that the man with his hands bound is Jesus. It also becomes clear

that the visible scars on his body are from the Flagellation of Christ, a moment from the Passion of Jesus (the final period before his death) in which he is tied to a column and beaten by Roman soldiers with scourges. If we look along the left edge of the panel, a man in a red robe can be seen holding a scourge, identifying him as one of the soldiers who beat Jesus at Pilate's command. A scourge is a whip or lash often made of leather and used to inflict corporal punishment, and at the time it was Roman custom to use these weapons in order to punish criminals. Pilate ordered for this to happen to Jesus, according to three of the gospels (Matthew 27:26; Mark 15:15; and John 19:1-3), prior to his crucifixion.

Bosch depicts Pontius Pilate directly behind Jesus, in the red and black robes. 'Pilate's sneering words, "Ecce Homo" [...] can be seen in physical form coming out of his mouth,' (Finger, 2020, p. 50) and he holds a reed in his right hand. Here, the fact that Pilate holds the reed is heavily significant as this was something given to Jesus as a mock sceptre before being used to beat him. This suggests that Bosch is not presenting Pilate in a sympathetic light and is in fact opposing the idea that 'in John's gospel [he] orders the scourging in hopes it will be enough to satisfy the Jews.' (Stracke, 2016).

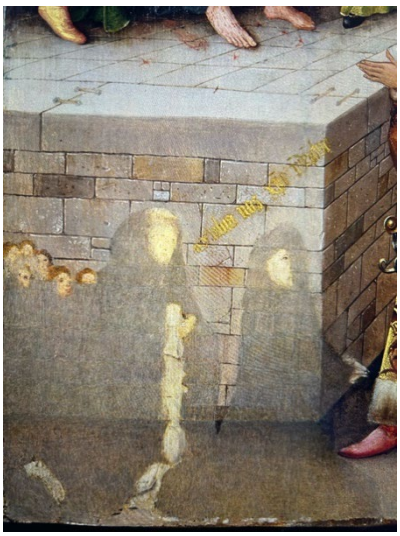
Further demonstrating this notion is the fact that above the scene, an owl can be spotted perching in an alcove of the building that Pilate and Jesus have just emerged from. It appears as though the owl is looking at us, the viewer, as it peeks from around the corner. Importantly, owls are a common theme in Bosch's work (see also *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and *The Haywain*) and they often appear in scenes of chaos. 'In Christian symbolism the owl stands for the devil and his works' (Zuiddam, 2014), and its close proximity to Pilate and the Roman soldiers who flogged Jesus could be Bosch's way of linking them to the devil. In doing so, he suggests that Pilate's plan was always to beat, humiliate, and crucify Jesus, regardless of whether the crowd below thought that simply beating him was enough.

Hieronymus Bosch, *Ecce Homo*, detail.

Hieronymus Bosch, *Ecce Homo*, detail.

### *Ecce Homo* and the social history method

The society in which *Ecce Homo* would have been received was extremely religious. Often, art was used to teach and 'establish Christian morality under the leadership of the Christian church, [it was a] representational matrix that both codified and strengthened social values and thus ensured social cohesion throughout medieval Christian society.' (Alexander, 1993, p. 6). Whilst this particular painting was probably for a donor family, whose faded portraits were restored in the 1980s, it is easy for us to assume that anyone viewing the piece would have understood its imagery (Finger, 2020, p. 50). There are no surviving records of the donor family so it is impossible to know exactly who the painting was for and why they wanted it, though we can discern a few things from their portraits. In the lower left corner of the piece, the male members of the family are most visible. Like the more faded women on the right, they wear dark robes to separate them 'visually and spiritually from the brightly coloured sinners' (Finger, 2020, p. 50). Largely indicated by their dark clothing (black being a typical funeral colour in Western culture), Bosch presents the family as mournful figures who oppose the scene unfurling in front of them. This idea is strengthened by the gothic text beside the men, it reads 'Save us, Christ the Redeemer' and reinforces the family's belief in the power of Jesus.



Hieronymus Bosch, *Ecce Homo*, detail.

Hieronymus Bosch, *Ecce Homo*, detail.

Perhaps the strongest link to contemporary society, and the point in the painting that the social history methodology best applies to is the flag in the background. When looking at the painting, no matter where your focus is, the red flag demands attention. It hangs from a building on the other side of the bridge, is triangular in shape, and upon closer inspection there is a white crescent emblazoned at the top. This helps us to identify it as what was likely a banner for the Ottoman Army/Empire as these were 'generally red with a white crescent' (Valentin, 2003) at the time Bosch was painting. *Ecce Homo* depicts a biblical scene from approximately 30–33 AD, meaning the presence of a Turkish flag here is historically inaccurate. However, in this instance the

Hieronymus Bosch, *Ecce Homo*, detail.

flag can be seen as subtle foreshadowing of the Ottoman invasion of Constantinople (modern day Istanbul). Constantinople was the capital of the Roman Empire until 1453 when the Ottomans 'breached [their] ancient land wall after besieging the city for 55 days,' (Hudson, n.d.). Once Constantinople was defeated, the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II 'slaughtered many of the population and forced the rest into exile, later repopulating the city by importing people from elsewhere in Ottoman territory' (BBC, 2009). This occurred around 20 years prior to Bosch's painting, though the rise of Islam and end of the Christian Empire was a widespread concern during that time. Crucially, the words spoken in the painting by the donor family now take on a second meaning. Their imploring phrase, in combination with the looming threat of the Ottoman Empire, connotes a sense of urgency and desperation. They plead with Christ, begging for their saviour to act and prevent the invasion of the Ottomans.

**Iconography in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony***

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, central panel.

The second artwork I will be applying an iconographical reading to is Bosch's triptych entitled *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Due to the size of this piece, I will focus my attention on the centre panel and provide analysis of the key motifs. The Temptation of Saint Anthony is a popular theme in Western culture, concerning the mystic temptation reportedly faced by the saint during his time in the Egyptian desert. According to Athanasius of Alexandria, a contemporary of Saint Anthony, these temptations involved demonic forms, earthly sins, and seductive women. Anthony remained steadfast in his rejection of temptation and Bosch acknowledges this through the vast iconography of the piece.

*The Temptation of Saint Anthony* is certainly more visually complex than Ecce Homo, with far more detail in the central panel alone. Here we are overwhelmed by detail, the eye unable to settle on one thing at a time. In the background, a fire burns what appears to be a small village as hybrid oceanic creatures fly above, some with backends that have been repurposed as boats. As we journey towards the foreground, a tower of sorts can be seen falling into disrepair. The outside of the tower is intricately carved with images of monkeys, drums, and grapes. Situated in the doorway, we can see a miniature reproduction of Christ on the cross, accompanied by a solitary man. Surrounding the crumbling tower are multiple groups of people, some of whom are not fully human. The figures closest to the tower hold out dishes and cups in front of them. Some hold musical instruments, and there is one man with an owl on his head. Towards the edges of the panel, the figures become increasingly more surreal. On the right side, a woman with a scaly tail and head inside of a tree trunk holds out an infant as she rides a giant rat. The opposite side bears detail of yet more figures with instruments, and some with weapons, emerging from a giant tomato.

Undeniably *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* has a central panel full of iconographic symbols relating to sin. The midsection of the panel is where most of these symbols can be found, though of course there are plenty more scattered about. Beginning inside the tower, the depiction of Christ on the cross forms an altar and from the faint halo above the man beside it we can recognise that this is Christ himself. Mirroring the kneeling figure of Saint Anthony opposite him, he holds up two fingers in a 'gesture intended to exorcise the sinful creatures [surrounding them]' (Finger, 2020, p. 64). Beside the image of Christ, the crumbling tower is decorated with images of sin, including dancing figures. For conservative Christians such as Bosch, dancing represented unrestrained immodesty, sensuality, and the invitation to touch (Pittaway, 2021).

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony, central panel*, detail.

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, central panel, detail.

To the left of Saint Anthony there is a blind man, who is likely clubfooted, with his leg secured to a crutch, these are signs that he may be 'unchaste and cursed by God' (Finger, 2020). Leading the man is a figure with a large belly and the head of a pig. He carries a lute which is round like his stomach, connoting gluttony, and an owl rides atop his head. As in *Ecce Homo*, the owl suggests evil and moral darkness, and this is further supported by the figure's facial configuration. The image of a pig also often represents the devil due to its strength and wild behaviour. This pair form part of Bosch's caricature of beggars which is a prominent theme in this panel. We see it again to the right of Saint

Anthony as a ‘ ”bodiless” figure sticks his leg out to reveal an empty mug on his knee, indicating his need for charity or drink,’ (Finger, 2020).

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, central panel, detail.

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, central panel, detail.

Below the ‘bodiless’ figure stand three hybrid creatures who appear to sing from a book. The two furthest from the viewer are dressed as monks and one wears an egg whilst the other wears a funnel, the egg can be seen as a symbol of lust, and the funnel once again represents gluttony. Closest to us is a dog headed figure who wears priest’s clothing. It has been argued that the man has a dog-like face because ‘the dog represents those who make confession but then return to their sins, as a dog returns to its vomit’ (Pittaway, 2021). These three characters are examples of Bosch’s attacks on the immorality of those who cannot abide by their vows to religious institutions, a prominent theme in his later works.

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, central panel, detail.

### *The Temptation of Saint Antony* and the social history method

'During the fifteenth and sixteenth century, religious establishments and families controlled a large amount of wealth and, therefore, controlled the artistic world and its patronage,' (Beaudoin, 2021). *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* was painted in C.1500-1510 and was intended to be an altarpiece. The story of Saint Anthony and the torment he endured was a very popular topic in the Middle Ages as it exemplifies the challenge of maintaining faith in the face of worldly temptations.

> 'Saint Anthony travelled to the desert, where he would live by the smallest of means, fasting, and rejecting all worldly pleasures in the name of God and the promise of pleasure and treasures in the eternal afterlife of heaven. While depriving himself of his worldly needs, traveling Egypt's deserts as a hermit, he encountered many monsters and demons that plagued him and tormented him physically, tempting him to sin.' (Beaudoin, 2021).

It is likely that the triptych served a moralising purpose, serving as a way of educating the illiterate about the dangers of sin. In the Middle Ages, only the educated elite could read and write. This meant people who were unable to read the stories of the Bible would turn to religious art as a way of understanding Christian beliefs.

Further situating the triptych within the context of the Middle Ages is the suggestion that numerous characters featured in the work are suffering from Saint Anthony's Fire (otherwise known as *ignis sacer*). This idea is championed by scholars such as Laurinda Dixon, who argues that 'victims of this debilitating disease appear often in fifteenth-century painting[s]' (1984, p. 120). Saint Anthony's Fire caused gangrene (tissue death) of the extremities, often leading to amputation, muscle contortions and convulsions accompanied by burning pain, and often hallucinations. In the fifteenth century, 'a series of famines, peasant poverty, and the introduction of a virulent new strain of syphilis [...] caused the disease to break out with renewed force' (Dixon, 1984), when it was previously only recorded sporadically. Many disease victims were encouraged to emulate Saint Anthony and to view him as a martyr who shared in their misfortune.

The notion that *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* triptych can be viewed as a devotional piece, to be viewed by the victims of *ignis sacer*, is evidenced by some key images throughout the piece. For example, the disembodied foot in the centre panel may be a nod to 'the practice of hanging detached limbs [...] above the entrance portals of Antonine monasteries, thereby designating them as hospitals sanctioned to heal in the name of Saint Anthony' (Dixon, 1984). The limbs were then preserved for victims to retrieve them at the Last Judgement. Additionally, many cures were suggested for *ignis sacer*, though none were successful. However, some examples of proposed cures can be seen within the triptych. In the thirteenth century, a physician named Johannes Anglici thought that applying a cold fish to the hot illness would provide relief (Dixon, 1984). It was also believed that cold, or frozen, water would act in the same way to combat the extreme heat experienced by those suffering from the disease. Both of these images are present within the triptych, further evidencing the idea that Bosch is using this piece to communicate with those suffering from *ignis sacer*.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, throughout this essay I have provided a commentary on some of the key symbols found within two of Bosch's works. The first work, *Ecce Homo*, demonstrated Bosch's interest in iconography and hidden symbols from the very

beginning of his career. Social historical analysis of the piece showed that Bosch also had a strong awareness of current events and found a way to exemplify their impact on his work. Building on this, analysis of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* proved that these fascinations remained present throughout Bosch's career. The chosen pieces strongly indicate that Bosch's work was carefully considered and ultimately reflective of the moral and theological concerns of the late Middle Ages.

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