The Garden of Earthly Delights by Hieronymus Bosch: The Iconography of the Central Panel

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One of the earliest surviving descriptions of Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights (fig. 1) appears in the Historia de la Orden de San Gerónimo, written by Fray José Siguënza in 1605; by this time, the triptych had been in Spain for some years and was placed in the monastery of the Escorial. Siguënza called this work the ‘Strawberry Plant’, probably because this fruit is represented several times in the central panel (fig. 2). Bosch’s picture, he explained, is ‘of the vanity and glory and transient taste of strawberries or the fruit of the strawberry plant and its fragrance, which one can hardly smell when it passes’.¹ For Siguënza, there was no doubt that the Garden of Earthly Delights conveyed the same message as another work by Bosch in the Escorial, the Haywain Triptych; the inner panels of both represented, from left to right, the Fall of Man, humanity in a state of sin, and the punishments meted out to sinners in the afterlife.

Until twenty-five years ago, no one would have thought of questioning the validity of Siguënza’s interpretation. Then, in 1947, Wilhelm Fränger proposed his now famous theories which set previous assumptions on their heads.² Fränger refused to see the central panel of the Garden of Earthly Delights as a picture of mankind wallowing in sensual pleasure. ‘Quite the contrary’, he insisted, ‘these beings are peacefully frolicking about the tranquil garden in vegetative innocence, at one with the animals and plants, and the sexuality that inspires them appears to be pure joy, pure bliss.’³ Fränger also noted that the left wing represented not the Fall of Adam and Eve, but their marriage in the presence of God, while he felt that none of the punishments inflicted in the right wing could be specifically associated with carnal lust.⁴ On the basis of these and other observations, Fränger proposed that the triptych represented not the condemnation of the life of the flesh, but the glorification of it according to the practices of the Bretheren of the Free Spirit, or Adamites, an heretical group which flourished all over Europe long after their first appearance in the thirteenth century. The precise nature of their doctrines remains unclear, but Fränger assumed that sexual activity played an important part in their religious rites.⁶ He thus concluded that the traditional interpretation of the inner panels should be revised: the left wing represents the innocent state of man before the Fall, while the right wing shows not Hell but the present world plunged into sin and misery as a result of abandoning the ‘innocent
sexuality' of Adam and Eve. The central panel, finally, presents the blissful state of the Adamites, in which sexual intercourse becomes one of the means to achieve spiritual salvation. The various activities and forms in the garden allude to the doctrines and rites of the Adamites, which Fränger, as a glance through his index will confirm, derived from such heterogeneous sources as the Orphic mysteries, Egyptian mythology and medieval alchemy: an impressive display of erudition which, however, reveals more about Fränger's own scholarly interests than it does of Adamite theology. Fränger further supposed that Bosch was himself a member of this heretical brotherhood and that he was commissioned to paint the Garden of Earthly Delights to commemorate the marriage of the Grand Master of the Adamites. Fränger has since interpreted other paintings by Bosch in terms of Adamite doctrine, but his study of the Garden of Earthly Delights remains his best known work. Although severely criticized by a number of scholars, most notably Dirk Bax, the book has been favorably received by the general public, as well as by several critics and historians of art. The reasons for Fränger's success are easy to discern. His theories are sensational in nature, they appeal to people seeking medieval precedents for current ideas of free love and uninhibited sexuality, and they seem to explain the curiously light-hearted, holiday mood which prevails in the central panel. This last consideration is perhaps the most important, for it cannot be denied that the diminutive nude figures and fanciful vegetable forms appear to be as innocent of evil as the medieval drolleries which undoubtedly inspired them.

1 Hieronymus Bosch, Garden of Earthly Delights, Inner Panels. Madrid, Prado.