Review Essays

Hieronymus Bosch
The Fifth Centenary

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Nils Büttner's book on the famous painter Hieronymus Bosch appeared in 2016, the very busy 500th year since the artist's death. At the painter's hometown, Den Bosch (‘s-Hertogenbosch), a major scholarly conference was held at the Jheronimus Bosch Museum; a feature-length documentary film was widely screened—*Hieronymus Bosch: Touched by the Devil*, which followed scholars of the Bosch Research and Conservation Project (*BRCP*) as they pondered works for an exhibition at the Noordbrabants Museum in Den Bosch; Matthijs Ilsink and Jos Koldewej created a catalogue for that Noordbrabants exhibition; the *BRCP* produced two volumes on the entire Bosch oeuvre, the prodigious *Catalogue Raisonné* and *Technical Studies*; a separate catalogue appeared for the exhibition at the Museo del Prado, the preeminent trove of Bosch works. In addition, Debra Higgs Strickland published her study of the Prado Epiphany triptych by Bosch; an interpretative book by Gary Schwartz appeared; a review essay by the art historian Ingrid D. Rowland was published in the *New York Review of Books*; and Hans Belting’s 2002 study of *The Garden of Delights* was reissued. In a capstone moment of this memorable year, on 1 May, the *New York Times* reported the ongoing struggle between two major museums in Madrid, Spain for the lucrative and prestigious right exclusively to display Bosch’s great triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The *Times* mentions in passing that
each year one million viewers strive ardently to see *The Garden of Earthly Delights*—his most famous and endlessly engaging, puzzle-painting, long held at the Museo del Prado—(the Prado Museum retains its display). Adding to the congestion, more than one thousand writings on Bosch already existed by 2007, a fact that Jos Koldeweij notes in his update of the classic Bosch monograph of 1986 by Roger Marijnissen and Peter Ruyffelaere.

Amidst all this activity, Nils Büttner, a much-published and highly regarded scholar of art history, aims his new study of Bosch at general readers with an appetite for authentic scholarship. He takes his well chosen half-title, “Visions and Nightmares,” from Quevedo’s *Sueños y discursos*, a text by a seventeenth-century writer who likely saw actual paintings by Bosch then held in the Spanish royal collections. A “vision” nicely suits, say, *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*—a subsidiary episode on both *The Haywain* triptych (Prado), and *The Last Judgment* (Bruges, illus. 42 & 48)—on the left interior wings of both triptychs. A “nightmare” aptly describes the grotesque, caricatured faces of the tormentors in *Christ Carrying the Cross* (Vienna, illus. 16)—or the cities of Hell burning by night in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and *The Haywain*. The great strength of Büttner’s book is its thorough use of early documents to construct an historically accurate sense of the artist’s daily life and thus correctly to portray his cultural and social milieu.

The book’s weakness lies in treatments of the visual material, whether as printed illustrations or as appraisals of the complex problems of attribution and meaning posed by the paintings themselves. A reader soon regrets the omission of a complete list of ‘works illustrated’ with locations of the paintings and their dimensions. This omission makes it difficult to follow the author’s discussion, as his references to specific paintings are not always clear, and the illustration titles are both repetitive (three Christ Carrying the Cross versions, etc.) and fragmentary to further confuse the issue. Büttner means his small book to be an easily portable, documentation-rich complement to the visually opulent coffee-table tomes on Bosch by Larry Silver (2006) and Stefan Fischer (2013) and to the new *Catalogue Raisonné and Technical Studies* volumes just published by the BRCP—a role in which it succeeds nicely. This study takes its place among Büttner’s five previous short essays on Bosch problems (2003–2014).

At the outset, Büttner scolds art-historians for their bad method: that is, not to base interpretative conclusions upon the ‘facts’ recorded in early documents. Yet occasionally the facts themselves may give pause. Here one reflects upon Antonio de Beatis’s misidentification of the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, apparently the first writer to see it, on his visit to the Brussels hôtel of the Counts of Nassau-Breda in 1517. Beatis misidentifies it, an error charitably discounted