

Review of journal article by Laurinda S. Dixon: “Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* Triptych: Remnants of a ‘Fossil’ Science”

Robert Milton Underwood, Jr

© 2008

Citation: Dixon, Laurinda S. "Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* Triptych: Remnants of a 'Fossil' Science." *Art Bulletin* 63.1 (March 1981): 96-108.

Review

Laurinda S. Dixon's analysis of "Garden of Earthly Delights" (Fig. 1) by medieval artist Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) from The Netherlands argues that the medieval science of alchemy can help explain the symbolism and meanings associated with this work. Alchemy is referred to as a "fossil" science in Dixon's analysis because it is essentially an antiquated science, having been replaced by modern scientific study and methodology.

The traditional symbolism of the triptych is usually understood to be the following. In the first panel, the first man and woman are in the Garden of Eden, blessed by a benevolent God. The middle panel represents the fall of mankind into the vicious cycle of sinful ways and hedonistic earthly delights. The final panel shows the consequences of sinful living as the participants agonize in hell. With the understanding of medieval alchemy, we can better comprehend the selection of the numerous symbolic elements in the painting.

Alchemy was based on the beliefs that various combinations of the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water make up everything we see. The Rosicrucians advanced the belief system of medieval



Fig. 1: Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

alchemy once atoms were understood to be the building blocks of life. But Dixon observes that it is necessary to look at pre-Rosicrucian alchemy in order to understand what Bosch was exposed to at the time when he painted “Garden of Earthly Delights.” Once the occult emblematic images of Rosicrucianism can be isolated in old texts, then the images that remain give us a good picture of the influences that Bosch had been exposed to. And understanding those influences can help us to understand meaning in his triptych. One bit of evidence that Bosch was indeed aware of alchemy was that a member of the family of his in-laws was an apothecary, and alchemy was directly related to pharmacy.

We now consider alchemy an occult art, but it was not thought so in its time. Some of its procedures, including that of distillation, were the foundation of modern chemistry. With the process of distillation, alchemists tried to *pull* the essence from fruits, flowers, herbs and animal products to make not only healing potions, but also paint products and cosmetics. The ultimate goal of the alchemists was to save the macrocosm (viz., the world) by healing the microcosm (i.e., the human body).

Since prayer and study were a part of their practice, Alchemists gained acceptance from the Church. They wanted to return mankind to the pure state that had been lost at the time of the biblical fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. The search for a purifying elixir had been a primary objective for a long time, and in order to keep their research private from the uneducated and the undeserving, they used an esoteric system of pictorial codes. These symbolic images were developed over a period of many centuries, and alchemic texts from the medieval era would likely have included images that had been developed and refined over hundreds of years. The images were often a combination of traditional religious symbolism combined with those that were purely of the imagination. The books and paintings of the era reveal blends of both reality

and fantasy by combining allegorical images with the tools of the alchemist. These images therefore require some knowledge of alchemy to be understood.

Bosch's triptych has numerous images that appear to have been created solely from the imagination, but understanding alchemic distillation methods sheds light on their meanings. For example, alchemic distillation symbolizes the purification of the soul. Alchemists wanted to understand the essence of an object just like the religious-minded wanted an understanding of the essence of the soul. In addition, distillation was considered to be cyclical and self-perpetuating, as is nature itself. It is therefore symbolic of man's returning to spiritual union with God, and is symbolized by the globe or the circle.

In the painting, there are clearly strange images of humans in fantastical situations. We are able to understand that some of the images are religiously symbolic. Others use symbols from alchemy. For instance, the Fountain of Life portion of the painting looks like an alchemist's beaker apparatus. But it symbolizes the mixing of opposites, the mating of elements, and hence its nickname—the marriage chamber.

Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" is seen in the context of the era in which it was painted. Strong allegorical representations can be understood by knowing how alchemy was a part of the belief system of the time, combining religious, pharmaceutical, natural, and scientific elements.