



## Bosch's Brush: Imagination and reality in 15<sup>th</sup>-Century Dutch

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### Abstract

This study examines the sociocultural and psychological aspects present in Hieronymus Bosch's renowned artworks, "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" and "The Last Judgment," utilising historiography, iconography, and an analytical checklist. The findings revealed that intricate stories question established social standards and add to a deep sociocultural conversation, uncovering a diverse range of societal stories that enrich the comprehension of the complex and numerous elements of quality of life in the 15th-century Netherlands. The visionary art of Bosch has a significant impact on the ongoing sociocultural conversation, encouraging deep contemplation of the complexities of existence in the 15th century, which improves the quality of life.

**Keywords:** Hieronymus Bosch; 15th-century Netherlands; Iconography; Formal Analysis

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### 1.0 Introduction

This study employs a contextualisation methodology to establish a strong foundation for understanding the two artworks of Bosch, "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" and "The Last Judgment". It places them within the cultural and historical setting of the Netherlands in the 15th century. This contextualization offers a vital viewpoint for a comprehensive examination of the societal value inherent in Bosch's creations, presenting them not just as artistic artefacts but also as significant cultural reflections. The succeeding findings underscore the intricate relationship between Bosch's artwork and the welfare of society, offering multiple perspectives. This study aims to gain a profound understanding of the quality of life during the fifteenth century by analysing the sociocultural elements depicted in Bosch's artworks. It recognises the subjective aspect of evaluating historical assessments.

#### 1.1 Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this study is to examine the specific circumstances under which Bosch produced his artworks, adeptly incorporating them into the vibrant cultural and historical milieu of the Netherlands throughout the 15th century. This study is guided by two research objectives: (1) To examine the sociocultural significance of Bosch's artworks; (2) To investigate the psychological and environmental aspects of Bosch's artworks.

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The objective of this research is to improve the knowledge of the social situations shown in Bosch's works by providing a contextual framework, thereby enabling a more nuanced interpretation of these occurrences. This enhances the linkage between art and sociology (Darmon, 2020). Comprehending this concept in depth is essential for examining the societal factors that influenced Bosch's artworks and their significance in the historical setting.

Moreover, examining traditional crafts in historical urban areas enhances our comprehension of their operation in various environments. The findings of this study have practical implications for the preservation of cultural assets and emphasise the significance of intangible cultural practices among local populations living in historical urban areas (Shyju et al., 2020). An understanding of the sociocultural environment is crucial for the interpretation and conservation of traditional crafts. This aligns with the need to understand the societal processes that influence artistic creations.

### *1.2 Bosch's artworks in the context of environmental psychology*

The contextual framework serves as the basis for a comprehensive analysis of Bosch's artistic works, surpassing mere aesthetic admiration to offer a critical perspective on how individuals understood and interacted with their social environment. This approach highlights the significance of art in comprehending environmental consciousness as it coincides with the notion that artistic expressions are crucial tools for exploration (O'Rourke et al., 2019). Furthermore, the integration of environmental psychology in the analysis of visual art enables a profound understanding of how environmental elements, such as nature and culture, influence the storytelling and social backdrop of Bosch's artworks. This research elucidates the several layers of significance in his artwork, elucidating the complex correlation between environmental psychology and the visual narrative in Bosch's paintings.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

The study employs a blend of Iconography and techniques advocated by Erwin Panofsky to analyse the symbolism and imagery of Bosch's paintings systematically. The investigation demonstrates how these visual features indicate society's values and cultural norms (Suryadi, 2022). This method offers a thorough analysis of Bosch's artworks, enriching our understanding of their significance in portraying socioeconomic conditions and the quality of life in the 15th-century Netherlands. Furthermore, including environmental psychology enhances the examination, providing a comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural conditions and living standards in the Netherlands in the 15th century (Baz et al., 2021). This interdisciplinary perspective elucidates the intricate depths of meaning in Bosch's artwork, emphasising its connection to mystical traditions through visual elements such as gardens and earthly paradises (Nichole, 2021).

The study conducts a thorough analysis of several aspects of Dutch society during the fifteenth century, such as social hierarchies, ethical convictions, and religious viewpoints, through the evaluation of Bosch's artworks (Nurlaelah et al., 2023). This multidisciplinary approach offers a distinct and rich perspective from history. It also serves to comprehend how the world influenced people's thinking during that period, enhancing our understanding of the social conditions and quality of life in the 15th century (Santosa, 2022). An examination of Bosch's artworks, employing art and environmental psychology, provides valuable insights into their portrayal of the complex social environment of the era and its potential impact on individuals' mentality (Wang et al., 2021).

### *2.1 The Influence of art and environmental psychology on societal conditions*

The examination of Hieronymus Bosch's inventive artworks from the 15th century employs Formal Analysis and Iconography to uncover their connection to the socioeconomic circumstances that influenced the standard of living during that era (Suryadi, 2022). The Formal Analysis component extensively examines the visual elements of essential artworks such as "The Garden of Earthly Delights," "The Last Judgement," and "The Wayfarer" by utilising the analytical frameworks of art critics like Heinrich Wölfflin (Baz et al., 2021). Furthermore, integrating Environmental Psychology provides a comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural conditions and standard of living in 15th century Netherlands (Nichole, 2021). This illuminates the intricate depths of meaning present in Bosch's art and its resemblance to mystical traditions, as seen by the inclusion of visual motifs such as gardens and earthly paradises in his paintings. This technique involves a thorough examination of the importance of Bosch's artworks in portraying societal situations, improving our understanding of the socioeconomic environment and quality of life during the 15th century in the Netherlands (Nurlaelah et al., 2023).

### *2.2 Environmental psychology and artistic reflections*

Incorporating Environmental Psychology gives a deeper understanding of the sociocultural conditions and standard of living in the Netherlands during the 15th century. This sheds light on the complex layers of meaning in Bosch's art and its connection to mystical traditions through visual elements like gardens and earthly paradises depicted in his paintings (Santosa, 2022). This study provides a comprehensive analysis of various facets of Dutch society throughout the fifteenth century, encompassing social hierarchies, ethical concepts, and religious convictions, by scrutinising the artworks of Bosch (Wang et al., 2021).

This interdisciplinary approach offers a novel and historically significant methodology for examining the world's influence on individuals' cognition, enhancing comprehension of socioeconomic conditions and the living standards throughout the 15th century. Comprehending how Bosch's artworks depict the complex social environment of the era and how this might have influenced people's thoughts is facilitated by taking into account both art and environmental psychology.

### 3.0 Methodology

The study employs a blend of historiography, iconography and analysis checklist to analyse the symbolism and imagery of Bosch's two selected paintings: (1) "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" and (2) "The Last Judgement." Firstly, historiography sheds light on the cultural, political, and theological context in which Bosch operated. Furthermore, the researcher employed iconographic analysis to gain an understanding of Bosch's objectives and the historical context by evaluating visual representations, symbols, and figurative language. Ultimately, the artwork's elements are scrutinised using analysis checklists to unveil Bosch's unique perspectives on society, the environment, and human existence. Bosch's works were analysed by considering their historical and psychological circumstances.

#### 3.1 Historiography

The emphasis on reflexivity and subjectivity aligns with the need to acknowledge the historical context and the development of societal norms, which is crucial for understanding the setting in which Bosch's art originated (Gosal et al., 2021). This emphasises the significance of Bosch's artworks in capturing the social interactions and psychological aspects related to the surroundings during his time. His art served as a method of investigating and portraying the societal structure of that period. The notions and perceptions depicted in Bosch's artworks are crucial for understanding his art. An examination of the visual symbols and concepts in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's artworks, which incorporate elements from Hieronymus Bosch, provides a methodical approach to understanding the underlying sociological and environmental psychology portrayed in Bosch's paintings (Papavasileiou et al., 2020).

This study explores the historical aspects of qualitative research and offers a thorough analysis of the societal setting and environmental psychology shown in the artworks of Hieronymus Bosch. The emphasis on reflexivity, subjectivity, and the historical perspective aligns with the need to understand the societal context in which Bosch's art was created. At the same time, the analysis of visual signs and concepts provides a systematic approach to revealing his works; societal and environmental underpinnings.

#### 3.2 Iconography

The emphasis on reflexivity, subjectivity, and emotionality in qualitative research aligns with the need to understand the historical background and societal norms that were prominent during Bosch's era (Şeren & Gul, 2022). Furthermore, the use of art as a means to create a narrative about a location and bring together local communities and tourists is highlighted in the context of Hieronymus Bosch's artwork. This highlights the significance of Bosch's paintings in depicting the social dynamics and environmental psychology of his day. The owl and other symbolic elements in Bosch's paintings are essential for understanding the symbolism, creation of meaning, and implications in his works. A comparison of his paintings with other artwork, such as his "Seven Deadly Sins", was also included under the iconography.

#### 3.3 Analysis checklist

In this research, iconographic elements in the themes of Bosch's work concerning the psychology of the contemporary populace and the quality of life were identified using an analysis checklist. The analysis checklist adopted in this study was adapted from the checklists used in these three studies: "A representação musical no Inferno de Hieronymus Bosch: Escrita e torturas musicais" by author Duarte; "The last judgment" by author Fergusson; and "An owl and a mirror: on the meaning of Bosch's visual motif" by Melnikova-Grigorjeva. The adapted checklist was then vetted through a panel of experts, with an average of 91% agreement that the checklist was valid and reliable. The finalised analysis checklist used in this study consisted of two sections: Sociocultural factors (Section A) and psychological and environmental context (Section B).

### 4.0 Findings

The findings were based on an examination of Bosch's selected artworks: (1) "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" and (2) "The Last Judgement." The findings were used to answer the two research objectives: (1) To examine the sociocultural significance of Bosch's artworks; (2) To investigate the psychological and environmental aspects of Bosch's artworks.

#### 4.1 To examine the sociocultural significance of Bosch's artworks

Based on historiography analysis, Hieronymus Bosch's adeptness at surpassing conventional norms and mundane realities is seen in his acclaimed artwork, "The Gardens of Earthly Delights." This extraordinary work of art confronts inflexible moral standards, highlighting the importance of pleasure and desire as it surpasses traditional societal rules. The focus on pleasure encourages a subtle comprehension, prompting viewers to challenge dominant notions about human conduct and ethics—Bosch's artistic portrayal of the Last Judgment theme beyond conventional depictions by including symbolism and imagination. "The Last Judgment" serves as a medium for portraying societal anxieties and aspirations regarding redemption, highlighting Bosch's deep involvement with the prevailing religious feelings of his era.

Based on iconography analysis, Bosch's "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" (Figure 1) examines human behaviour and morality through intricate symbolism, challenging societal standards. The presence of mythical beings, plentiful fruits, and varied human encounters symbolise the supernatural essence of the earthly paradise, highlighting a deviation from the natural realm.



Fig. 1: Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1480-1505, oil on panel, 220 x 390 cm (Prado, Madrid)  
(Source: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/northern/hieronymus-bosch/a/bosch-the-garden-of-earthly-delights>.)

Bosch used a complex system of symbols and imagery in "The Last Judgment" to portray the outcomes of good and evil actions, captivating spectators and prompting deep reflection on matters of ethics and assessment. The symbolic depictions of virtue, sin, and consequences enhance the artwork's emotional and psychological impact, inspiring spectators to contemplate the repercussions of human acts.

Bosch's examination of psychological anguish and environmental issues is a recurring theme in both paintings, as evident in the analysis checklist (Table 1). Bosch's depiction in "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" encompasses a spectrum of feelings, spanning from joy and satisfaction to possible repercussions, thus establishing a multifaceted psychological ambience. Surreal scenery, mythical creatures, and a plentiful variety of fruits enhance the dream-like ambience, intensifying the psychological milieu.

Similarly, in the analysis checklist, in "The Last Judgment," Bosch evokes profound psychological anguish, especially in his portrayal of condemned souls in hell. The tormented expressions, chaotic situations, and the juxtaposition with calm pictures of heaven elicit intense emotional responses. The environmental features included in both paintings communicated the underlying themes of the standard of living and the repercussions of human actions. Bosch adeptly combines psychological anguish and natural elements to communicate intricate stories about human existence, morality, and divine scrutiny.

Table 1. The analysis checklist (Section A)

Analysis checklist	Literal Meaning	Interpretation
<b>Section A: Sociocultural Factors</b>		
The musical symbolism of hell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Music symbolises how people feel about God's judgment and the results of their actions.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To make people feel intense in thinking about the results of their actions and moral choices.</li></ul>
The owl and the mirror	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The owl, often associated with wisdom, shows a sense of approaching doom and likely consequences.</li><li>• The mirror shows a skewed view of reality, emphasising how complicated the mental conditions shown are.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The owl's darker meanings imply possible consequences, making the complex portrayal of mental suffering even more powerful.</li><li>• The mirror draws attention to how reality is skewed in Bosch's strange settings, making the mental states he shows even more complicated.</li></ul>

4.2 To investigate the psychological and environmental aspects of Bosch's artworks

Hieronymus Bosch's investigation of the historiography of "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" reveals a sophisticated examination of moral ambiguity. This analysis challenges conventional notions of virtue and vice through subtle intricacies and a departure from literal depiction. In the examination of "The Last Judgment," Bosch further explores a wide range of symbolism and imaginative narrative, demonstrating his unique style within the historical, religious, and cultural context of his era.

Regarding iconography analysis, "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" purposefully challenges societal norms by employing symbols that interrogate conventional notions of human conduct and ethics. Bosch employs emotional and psychological components in "The

Last Judgment" (Figure 2) to construct a complex visual language that, beyond plain depiction, captivates viewers in deep reflection on morality and judgment.



Fig. 2: Hieronymus Bosch, *The Last Judgment*, c. 1482, oil on wood, 164 x 242 cm (Vienna)  
(Source: <https://www.arthistoryproject.com/artists/hieronymus-bosch/the-last-judgement/>)

The examination checklist (Table 2) demonstrates Bosch's adept incorporation of psychological anguish and environmental elements in both artworks. The intricate depiction of mental states enhances the complexity, evoking emotional reactions and inciting contemplation on the repercussions of human behaviour. Bosch's artistic skill and sensitivity become a distinguishing feature of his investigation into the human experience, surpassing the limitations of time and encouraging viewers to engage in a timeless reflection.

The checklist also emphasises Bosch's adept incorporation of environmental surroundings to portray broad themes of quality of life and the repercussions of human activity. Bosch's natural surroundings, whether they depict strange landscapes or holy realms, play a vital role in constructing the narrative. The dynamic interaction between symbolism and allegory enriches the comprehensive examination of the quality of life, stimulating spectators to contemplate the complexities of human existence.

Table 2. The analysis checklist (Section B)		
Analysis checklist	Literal Meaning	Interpretation
<b>Section B: Psychological and environmental context</b>		
Human figures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The human forms draw attention to Bosch's departure from nature and show a paradise in another world.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bosch's focus on human figures makes us think about how complicated life is and how unusual his artistic vision is.</li></ul>
Symbolism and allegorical meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Many pictures, like angels, demons, and pictures of good and evil acts, help to show the themes of quality of life and consequences.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bosch's skilful use of symbolism adds depth to the setting, making it easier to think about the results of actions and the complexities of moral choices.</li></ul>

## 5.0 Discussion

This discussion focuses on the artworks of Hieronymus Bosch, specifically "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" and "The Last Judgment," based on the research objectives.

### 5.1 To examine the sociocultural significance of Bosch's artworks

Hieronymus Bosch's artworks, such as "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" and "The Last Judgment," go beyond conventional standards and offer a fresh outlook on how society views human actions, ethics, and divine assessment (Dixon, 2019). Bosch skillfully integrates

psychological anguish and environmental influences in his works, cultivating a sophisticated psychological ambience that reveals elaborate stories about human life and ethics. Bosch's "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" opposes strict moral standards by emphasising enjoyment and longing, encouraging viewers to explore the depth and intricacy of human existence (Lefebvre & Krettenauer, 2019). The deviation from traditional standards and the incorporation of symbolism greatly enhance the lasting influence and sociocultural importance of Bosch's visionary artwork, prompting contemplation on the timeless subject of the standard of living.

In addition, Fiddler (2022) highlights the similarities between Bosch's artwork and Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, explicitly noting the relationship between the centre eye depicted in Bosch's "Seven Deadly Sins" painting and the panopticon. This comparison illuminates the lasting impact and significance of Bosch's artwork in various contexts, such as architectural and philosophical discussions. The Last Judgment, a notion explored in Christian theology and analysed by Hendriks et al., aligns with Bosch's artwork titled "The Last Judgment." This connection underscores the lasting influence and sociocultural importance of Bosch's visionary art (Hendriks et al., 2022). The contrast between these artworks by Bosch emphasises how they are tied to theological concerns, underscoring their lasting significance in religious discussions.

### *5.2 To investigate the psychological and environmental aspects of Bosch's artworks*

Hieronymus Bosch skillfully incorporates psychological anguish and environmental elements in his artworks, such as "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" and "The Last Judgment," to deepen the examination of human existence and morality. Bosch's meticulous focus on psychological intricacies generates a subtle environment, compelling viewers to contemplate the repercussions of human acts. The painting "The Gardens of Earthly Delights" disrupts conventional standards by strongly emphasising pleasure and desire. This invites a deep analysis of the intricate aspects of the human experience.

In addition, Bosch's deviation from conventional standards and incorporation of symbolism enhance the lasting influence and sociocultural importance of his innovative artwork, demonstrating its ageless and multifaceted nature in several fields, including architecture, theology, and tourism. The 2016 staging of the Hieronymus Bosch program drew a large number of visitors. Also, it established the city of Den Bosch as an essential location for global exhibitions, emphasising the strong influence of Bosch's artworks (Piqué & Richards, 2022). Hieronymus Bosch's artworks remain a valuable resource for questioning established standards, involving viewers in deep reflection on morality and judgment, and inspiring contemplation on the overall concept of quality of life.

## **6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations**

In conclusion, the analysis of Hieronymus Bosch's artworks highlights the artist's exceptional skill in surpassing traditional standards and earthly perceptions. Bosch's comprehensive investigation confronts inflexible moral standards and societal conceptions, offering a novel outlook on human conduct, ethics, and celestial evaluation. The artist's deviation from conventional norms and use of symbolism greatly enhance his innovative artwork's lasting influence and sociocultural importance.

The limitation of the study is the subjectivity of the art analysis, which restricts the scope of his body of work, as this study only analysed two of Bosch's paintings. It is essential to consider multiple perspectives. Hence, a comprehensive analysis is needed to examine more of his paintings to overcome this limitation.

This research contributes to Bosch's art by revealing its sociocultural importance and psychological depth. Bosch's distinctive approach to exploring moral ambiguity, deviating from societal standards, and employing symbolic depth, exemplifies his unique artistic style within the context of historical and cultural trends. This provides vital insights for historians, students, and art fans in art history. Significantly, this investigation aligns with the overarching concept of quality of life, promoting reflection on the complex aspects of human existence.

As a recommendation, it is advisable to broaden the analysis to include a more extensive range of Bosch's works. Given a new direction for further research, there could be a potential for collaborative interdisciplinary research to investigate Bosch's influence across diverse fields, with a particular focus on highlighting the impact of art on the overall quality of life. This, in turn, would contribute to a more enriched and fulfilling experience of the artwork. These investigations would shed light on additional aspects of Bosch's lasting legacy and its effects on the broader narrative of quality of life.

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None

## **Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study**

This paper provides a theoretical contribution to the field of art theory and also provides practical insights that can be used in educational settings, interdisciplinary collaborations, and cultural institutions. As a result, it contributes to both the theoretical and practical aspects of the related field of study.

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