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The Garden of Earthly Delight: The Iconography of Left Panel

In the left panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delight*, a Eden-like scene is presented.

On the foreground of painting, a young man is standing at middle, praying and holding a marriage between two naked youngers. There are crowds of animals and chimeras in front with a deep pool. On the middle ground, a fascinated pink fountain appears in the middle of the lucid lake, creatures hanging around on the bank freely. On the background, there are fascinated-shape mountains, and a flock of birds are shuttling through the caves in fascinated-shape mountains. Compared to the other two panels, the left panel looks peaceful and is more like a “paradise”. However, I argue that Bosch intentionally depicted the peaceful atmosphere of the Genesis but implicated in details that it is a hypocritical paradise, a trap that is set by Antichrist.

First, the woman and the robed man on the foreground are Antichrist and demons that tempts the naked man and lead him astray. In the middle, there is a young bearded man standing with brown curly long hair and wearing a pink robe. His right hand is in blessing gesture, while his left hand is holding the naked young woman’s arm. His costume and his acting tend to convincing others that he is the Christ. On his left side, a naked young man is sitting on the grass and staring at the young woman, seems being fascinated by her. On the right side, the naked young woman with curly blond

hair is suspended above the grass. She drops her eye and reacts to the man's staring in a shy way. The naked couple is often considered as the iconography of Adam and Eve. Without further research, nowadays audience will prefer to understand the picture as a classical religious story: Christ is holding marriage for Adam and Eve¹.

However, there is several details that can disprove the understanding. The skin of the Christ-like man is reddish, which is contradicted to the pale and weak image of Christ from the Bible. To make the red skin more obvious, Bosch contrasts the color. He places the naked man's feet near the Christ-like man's feet under his robe and let the Christ-like man hold the naked woman's arm. Both of naked people have normal, alabaster skin, which shows the unusual of the skin of Christ-like man. In ancient literature, the reddish skin is often related to demons and evil people². So, the robed man neither the true Christ nor holy people related to him. According to related iconography in fifteenth century, Antichrist is depicted as a man who owns almost all the characteristic of the Christ³. Thus, the robed Christ-like man is Antichrist. According to the naked female's bending legs, she isn't in balance position if she is standing as normal person. The only possibility is that she is levitating, which is one of the capacities demons have⁴. Thus, the naked female is a demon, which contradicts the assumption that she is Eve in Genesis.

Secondly, the scene and creatures surround three figures further support that the

¹ Sullivan, Margaret A. "The Timely Art of Hieronymus Bosch: The Left Panel of 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'." *Oud Holland* 127, no. 4 (2014): 168. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24766228>.

² Sullivan, "The Timely Art of Hieronymus Bosch: The Left Panel of 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'."174.

³ Sullivan, "The Timely Art of Hieronymus Bosch: The Left Panel of 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'."168.

⁴ Sullivan, "The Timely Art of Hieronymus Bosch: The Left Panel of 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'."173.

robed man and naked woman are Antichrist and demon and lead the naked man astray with temptation. According to the set of woodcuts that represent important events in Antichrist's life, we know that Antichrist commands skill of alchemy⁵, performs false miracle⁶ and is often accompanied with demons⁷. In Bosch's left panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delight*, a vine winds around the tree trunk on the left side of naked man, budding gold and round-shape leaves. The leaves imply that antichrist is minting fake gold coins to tempting the naked man to follow him⁸. Besides the temptation of greedy, lust is the other temptation that antichrist uses in the scene. Behind the three figures, there is an apple-tree forest. The distribution of apples forms a "mock halo" for the Antichrist, because apple is a classical symbol of lust, and the halo made by symbol of human's sin is some kind ironic⁹. For the female-shape demon on the right side, two rabbits near her shows that she is not innocent shy female as she looks like, for rabbits are related to sexual promiscuity¹⁰, which implicate that the demon is tempting the naked man using her sexual attraction.

Third, novelty-shaped landscape and constructions reveal that the whole scene is a hypocritical and artificial garden of Eden, for those objects are shaped like the tools of alchemy. The Pink fountain in the center of panel are constructed like a flower and branches winding around the top of the fountain as decoration. But in general, the

⁵ Enndkrist, Von dem. "Initiation in the Alchemist's Art." *The Illustrated Bartsch*, German Book Illustration before 1500. Vol. 83, 1482/413, New York 1982.

⁶ Enndkrist, Von dem. "Introduction to Unchaste Love." *The Illustrated Bartsch*, German Book Illustration before 1500. Vol. 83, 1482/410, New York 1982.

⁷ Enndkrist, Von dem. "Making a Tree Blossom." *The Illustrated Bartsch*, German Book Illustration before 1500. Vol. 83, 1482/41, New York 1982.

⁸ Sullivan, "The Timely Art of Hieronymus Bosch: The Left Panel of 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'."171.

⁹ Sullivan, "The Timely Art of Hieronymus Bosch: The Left Panel of 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'."173.

¹⁰ Sullivan, "The Timely Art of Hieronymus Bosch: The Left Panel of 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'."173.

fountain is in a shape of flask: the buds place on both sides are small flasks connected to the main flask¹¹. And there are artificial tubes that are placed in the dark mound under the pink fountain, that represent the education of alchemy Antichrist takes¹². Moreover, the yellow mountain on the upper part of picture is shaped as furnaces and flasks, while the flock of birds symbolized as gasses. The mountain represents the common process of distillation: black birds (the foul gasses) fly to the top of mountain (flasks), then become white birds (purified), which is the basic process of alchemy¹³. Those alchemical settings that integrated in environment shows that the scene is not simply the Garden of Eden, but the tools Antichrist uses to performing pseudo miracle.

In conclusion, based on the identified the figures, analysis the symbolization of the objects and creature surrounds the figure, the remote landscape and fountain. Bosch created a hypocritical paradise that implicates the trap that tempting people astray

¹¹ Dixon, Laurinda S. "Bosch's Garden of Delights Triptych: Remnants of a "Fossil" Science." *The Art Bulletin* 63, no. 1 (1981): 101-2. doi:10.2307/3050089.

¹² Sullivan, "The Timely Art of Hieronymus Bosch: The Left Panel of 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'."172.

¹³ Dixon, "Bosch's Garden of Delights Triptych: Remnants of a "Fossil" Science."106-7.