



HIERONYMUS BOSCH: TOUCH BY THE DEVIL

A film by Pieter van Huystee

Official Selection IDFA 2015

2015 / Netherlands / 87 min. / Color / In Dutch, English, Spanish & Italian with English subtitles

<http://boschproject.org>

Press materials: www.kinolorber.com

Distributor Contact:

Kino Lorber

333 W. 39th Street

New York, NY 10018

(212) 629-6880 x16

Rodrigo Brandao, Rodrigo@kinolorber.com

Publicity Contact:

Film Forum

(212) 627-2035 x306

Adam Walker, Adam@filmforum.org

Short Synopsis:

In 2016, the Noordbrabants Museum in the Dutch city of Den Bosch is holding a special exhibition devoted to the work of Hieronymus Bosch, who died 500 years ago. This late-medieval artist lived his entire life in the city, causing uproar with his fantastical and utterly unique paintings in which hell and the devil always played a prominent role. In preparation for the exhibition, a team of Dutch art historians crisscrosses the globe to unravel the secrets of his art. They use special infrared cameras to examine the sketches beneath the paint, in the hope of discovering more about the artist's intentions. They also attempt to establish which of the paintings can be attributed with certainty to Bosch himself, and which to his pupils or followers. The experts shuttle between Den Bosch, Madrid and Venice, cutting their way through the art world's tangle of red tape, in a battle against the obstacle of countless egos and conflicting interests. Not every museum is prepared to allow access to their precious art works.

Long Synopsis:

The documentary *Hieronymus Bosch: Touched by the Devil* follows a team of art historians who try to reveal the mystery of the 25 still remaining paintings of Hieronymus Bosch.

Over the course of five years the research team travelled the world, visiting museums such as The Louvre, The Prado and the National Gallery of Art in Washington to make an in-depth analysis of Bosch's paintings. By using modern techniques, such as X-ray, infrared photography, and multi-spectrum analysis, they allow us to penetrate into the deeper layers of his paintings thus helping the audience to look at the works of Bosch with new eyes.

The research raises the question whether all works are really painted by Bosch. The museum world is waiting anxiously for the results. Is their Bosch a real Bosch? In addition, The Noordbrabants Museum has organized the largest exhibition to date of the medieval painter in 2016 in Den Bosch, The Netherlands to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Hieronymus Bosch's death. The museum plays a political chess game to get as much paintings as possible to the exhibition. The Prado owns several masterpieces and will organize their own exhibition on *El Bosco*. Will The Noordbrabants Museum manage to bring the masterpieces home to the Netherlands?

From The New Yorker:

Hieronymus Bosch's Five-Hundredth-Anniversary Homecoming

By Becca Rothfeld, March 24, 2016

The Dutch city of 's-Hertogenbosch is as unlike Hell as a place could be. A pleasant assemblage of canals, bikeways, and colorful buildings, it often seems to border on the heavenly, at least for a certain brand of bourgeois millennial. Earlier this month, on the five-minute walk from the train station to my bright, modernist Airbnb, I encountered not one but two health-food shops, one of which specialized in artisanal yogurts. But quaint appearances notwithstanding, 's-Hertogenbosch—known colloquially (and much more manageably) as Den Bosch—is also the birthplace and lifelong home of Hieronymus Bosch, the late medieval painter famed for his bloody, sensationalist depictions of Hell and its beastly denizens. Until this year, a bronze statue of the artist looming over the market square was the most visible sign that Bosch had once lived here. But this month, in honor of the five hundredth anniversary of his death, a major exhibition at the Noordbrabants Museum and several citywide celebrations of Bosch's work have studded the innocuous landscape of his home town with tributes to the infernal bacchanals he depicted.

Biographical details about Bosch's life are famously scant, but we know that he was born Jeroen van Aken around 1450 and remained in Den Bosch until his death, in 1516. He came from a family of painters based in a workshop on the east side of the Markt, the central city square. (Today a sleepy town of around a hundred and fifty thousand residents, Den Bosch was at that time one of the Duchy of Brabant's four capitals, and a bustling regional center.) When he wasn't busy dreaming up abject sinners and vengeful devils, Bosch was performing mundane tasks like designing stained-glass windows, and, though he was one of the first painters in the Low Countries to sign his work, he probably considered himself more of an artisan than an artist.

Yet despite the modest size of his oeuvre—his confirmed works consist of only two dozen panels and triptychs and a slightly smaller number of drawings—Bosch managed to exert an outsized influence on the religious imagery of his day. His fantastic demons, impossible amalgamations of animals, humans, monsters, and household objects, had little precedent in earlier devotional art, nor in the somewhat formulaic depictions of Heaven and Hell that prevailed among his contemporaries. Bosch's hellscapes presented palpable pandemonium, and even his more routine works were enlivened by inventive details: a winged fish with an unfriendly expression following Christ across a river; a tottering demon protruding from a funnel. It wasn't long before Bosch's idiosyncrasies were incorporated into the medieval mainstream: some of his followers went so far as to work from "model sheets," which provided stock images of the artist's demons and ne'er-do-wells for workshops to copy. Centuries later, Bosch's vision would inspire the nightmarish works of Surrealists like Odilon Redon and Max Ernst.

The landmark exhibition at Noordbrabants, “Jheronimus Bosch: Visions of Genius,” is the culmination of a nine-year project, coordinated by a multi-disciplinary team of curators, researchers, and historians, to restore the master’s works and negotiate loans of pieces that are normally distributed across the globe. (None of Bosch’s works reside permanently in his home town.) This impressive effort ended up redrawing the boundaries of the artist’s compact canon: the Dutch museum scandalized the art world and outraged the Prado when it disputed the authorship of two of the Spanish museum’s Bosch paintings; it also made two new attributions and restored a total of nine works, all of which are now on display for the first time. (The project’s findings are detailed in a thousand-page scholarly monograph—and in a somewhat more accessible format on the Web site boschproject.org.) Its most important discovery is “The Temptation of Saint Anthony,” a small painting held by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, in Missouri, that was previously thought to be the work of either Bosch’s workshop or a Bosch follower. It depicts the saint in humble garb, surrounded by a motley assortment of demons. Notably absent from the Noordbrabants show is “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” the artist’s best-known and most ambitious triptych; it is jealously guarded by the Prado, which will host a competing quincentenary exhibition later this spring. (The Noordbrabants show runs through May 8th.)

Bosch’s great theme was human fallibility in the face of temptation—the tenuous intermediary stages at which ordinary people make decisions, assailed by nefarious forces that might lead them astray. Though we can only speculate about the specifics of Bosch’s religious life, we know that he was a member of an élite religious order devoted to the service of Mary, and scholars believe he was likely influenced by *Devotio Moderna*, a medieval movement emphasizing the role of personal choice in salvation. One highlight of the museum show, “The Haywain,” a strikingly colorful triptych borrowed from the Prado, depicts a lone wanderer surrounded by moral chaos. In the leftmost panel, the idyllic serenity of Eden is dually disrupted—in the foreground, by Adam and Eve’s descent into sin and subsequent exile; in the background by the violent expulsion of angels who plummet like a hoard of insects from Heaven—while in the center panel a throng of greedy peasants is overtaken by a battalion of demons. Hell, whose smoky darkness dominates the rightmost panel, teems with fish wearing military boots, putrid green ghouls, and winged rodents, all of whom are absorbed in meting out gruesome punishments.

Bosch’s audience would have read such images literally, fearing the monsters swarming out of Hell and craving the refreshing serenity of Heaven. But today we may recognize ourselves less in the vacant, blissful expressions of the saved than in the joyful depravity of the demons. “Four Visions of the Hereafter,” a newly restored painting and the exhibition’s striking concluding work, features one of Bosch’s few renderings of paradise. In the work’s upper left-hand corner, angels guide the pious through a tunnel of light and toward the blinding brightness of paradise. But it’s the demons—tiny creatures with funnels on their heads or boats projecting from their backs—who seem amiable, even good-natured, and incontrovertibly fun. While examining Bosch’s drawings, which are free of the moralizing that sometimes deflates his more developed religious scenes, I caught a dignified elderly Dutch gentleman chuckling aloud at a work entitled “Man in a

Basket, Old Woman with Tongs and Children,” which features a bare bottom protruding from a barrel.

The “Bosch 500” festivities that have taken hold of the city extend deviously comic scenes like this one beyond the walls of the Noordbrabants Museum, in the form of sculptures, parades, and dance performances. (The proceedings have proved wildly popular—according to the museum, as of March 10th more than three hundred thousand tickets to the “Visions of Genius” exhibition had been sold.) In an unassuming square flanked by the usual boutiques and bistros, a truncated naked torso protrudes from a flowerbed; between its legs is a broken red pod, home to an unexpected tropical bird. Down a narrow, winding street, a half-hidden house in a residential neighborhood sports an enormous Bosch-themed mural of a woman with luminous, glow-in-the-dark hair. On the boat tour (which will not open until the city’s fittingly macabre bat population has vacated the tunnels for the summer, an unperturbed boat driver told me), giant mer-creatures and Lynchian disembodied ears will take to the city’s waterways. “Bosch by Night,” a light-and-sound show projecting animations of Bosch’s paintings onto the façades of the buildings in the Markt, would have been the most dramatic alteration of the city’s familiar spaces—but, in a Boschian twist, it was delayed after one of the relevant buildings collapsed mere days before the start date.

Taking in the city’s festivities on a mild spring day, surrounded by svelte Dutch bikers and well-tended flowerbeds, I was reminded of the extent to which Bosch’s imagery has escaped its original moorings. His demons have decamped not only to the posters in the Noordbrabants gift shop and the alleyways of his home town but also into our collective imagination. Even to a modern secular viewer unencumbered by thoughts of her fate at the Last Judgment, his lively conceptions of the infernal remain more captivating than any paradise.

About the Director:

In 1995 Pieter van Huystee started his own production company. Since then he has produced many film projects, most of them documentaries, but also feature and short films and single plays – with both renowned Dutch filmmakers like Johan van der Keuken, Heddy Honigmann, Renzo Martens and Leonard Retel Helmrich and young talented directors. Many of its documentaries and features are screened at festivals all over the world and have been awarded many times. After 20 years of producing Pieter made his first feature length documentary. *Hieronymus Bosch: Touched by the Devil* is his debut as a director.

Credits:

Directed and written by.... Pieter van Huystee

Produced by.... Pieter van Huystee Film

Research by.... Hans Dortmans, Pieter van Huystee

Cinematography by.... Hans Fels, Gregor Meerman, Giovanni Andreotta, Rogier Timmermans, Erik van Empel, David de Jongh

Edited by.... David de Jongh, Chris van Oers, Tim Wijbenga, Michiel Rummens

Sound by.... Bert van den Dungen, Mark Wessner, Carla van der Meijs, Pieter van Huystee Jr., Menno Euwe, Charles Kersten, Hens van Rooy

Sound design by.... Mark Glynn

Music by.... Paul M. van Brugge DFC

Line producers.... Lotte Gerding, Zoë de Wilde