



Debra Higgs Strickland. *The Epiphany of Hieronymus Bosch: Imagining Antichrist and Others from the Middle Ages to the Reformation.* Studies in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art History Series. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2016. Illustrations. 301 pp. \$143.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-909400-55-9.

Reviewed by Kimberlee Cloutier-Blizzard

Published on H-Low-Countries (August, 2017)

Commissioned by Nicolaas P. Barr

Debra Higgs Strickland's provocative new book centers on Hieronymus Bosch's Prado *Epiphany* (ca. 1495) as a speculative case study for how early modern Northern Europeans formulated Christian hegemony over—and condemnation of—all non-believers in the form of “subaltern society”: for example, Jews, Muslims (Turks, Saracens, and others), black Africans, “orientals,” beggars, thieves, heretics, magicians, and other outcasts. The theme of the Adoration of the Magi is deemed a natural starting point for the author, as it constituted the eschatological moment when primacy was given to Christ by all of mankind in the form of the three Magi from distant lands submitting to him. In discussing the triptych, the author wishes not to “second-guess Bosch's personal motivations” but rather to expound on well-known popular legends and Christian beliefs that would have been available to contemporaries, through the first and second generations of viewers (p. 12). The book offers excellent-quality images (including appreciated close-up details); a plethora of cultural and artistic source material; and a captivating plunge into the historical context of the periods before, during, and after Bosch's lifetime. The introduction outlines Strickland's project, followed by six chapters that move from the emergent subject of the Magi (chapter 1),

the history of the antichrist (chapter 2), ideas of disease and the Modern Devotion (chapter 3), the Mass of St. Gregory and eucharistic defiling by Jews (chapter 4), later satires of the pope, Turks, and Muslims (chapter 5), to Reformation ideas surrounding the Jews, especially those of Martin Luther and Erasmus of Rotterdam (chapter 6). The book culminates in an epilogue that provides color illustrations and consideration of copies of the Prado *Epiphany* by Bosch's followers, noting essential carried-over characters and details (such as the pale “antichrist figure”) versus those aspects that were “tamed,” edited, or deleted—especially concerning what Strickland terms Bosch's signature “contingency” (pp. 270, 272). In this way, Strickland brings possible interpretations of the work into the sixteenth century and beyond.

Inevitably, as the volume surveys the work of the notoriously inscrutable Bosch (ca. 1450-1516), problems of interpretation arise. Bosch was a master of hybridity, enigmatic detail, and inversion of accepted form, perhaps as a form of satire or even a method to develop religious ideas poetically, rendering legible intentionality dubious. In this study, the central detail of the mysterious pale figure in the doorway of the dilapidated shed becomes Strickland's lynchpin of interpretation, the author largely supporting Lotte Brand Philip's

reading of the character as the antichrist/Jewish Messiah, though Strickland directly states early on that she does not seek closure concerning the figure's identity. As Strickland aptly notes, this man does seem to be a signature of the composition since he is steadfastly copied by later artistic emulators, even as other details of the composition ebb and flow. Still, it is not clear that the esoteric and apocalyptic texts and traditions that Brand Philip cited in support of her argument would have been available to Bosch. Thus, the reader is left to ponder what would happen to Strickland's argument if the figure were instead the biblical King Herod, as E. H. Gombrich convincingly proposed.[1] This substitute interpretation is simpler, and thus more elegant, based as it is on late medieval legends of the three kings and the claim that Herod and his army followed the Magi in order to discover the newborn king, whom Herod feared. The story is known from Epiphany plays and processions (many staged in the fifteenth century by Bosch's own confraternity—one actor's Magi costume was even painted by Bosch's uncle, Goesse de Maelre),[2] and from contemporary works of art, such as Hans Memling's *Seven Joys of the Virgin* panel, originally housed in Bruges (1480, currently in Alte Pinakothek, Munich). This tack also follows local Dutch traditions, rather than esoteric and apocalyptic texts, or the many French, English, and German artistic, literary, and theatrical traditions that Strickland cites in her text.[3] Indeed, there are very few Dutch sources included in the bibliography.

Adding to the interpretive vacuum surrounding the Prado *Epiphany*, the original location and audience for the triptych is largely unknown. Thus, it is not clear if it was meant for public or private use, a religious or humanist audience. To circumvent these obstacles, Strickland instead lays out a sweeping array of evidence of period xenophobia and antisemitism (more on this below), spanning the periods before, during, and after the work's completion, in an attempt to read

possible cultural shifts in perception and projection over time. Curiously, in light of her ultimate desire for allowing visual ambiguity (ambiguity), Strickland nearly always argues from a particularly pessimistic and negative angle, hinged on the appearance of the strange pale figure, shepherds, black Magus, and the three "armies" in the background as "other": interrelated heretical groups that are to be universally overcome in the Christian era, the enemy and means dependent on the individual spiritual, devotional, or political interests of the potential viewer.

I was consistently struck by a sense of unease about whether an interpretation can include too much peripheral contemporary material. The art historian Erwin Panofsky once argued thus, and his well-known "boa constructor" metaphor may be an apt one for describing this book—one in which the author has seemingly stitched together reams of period information to create an overly neat theoretical construct that overshoots historical knowns and reconstructable meaning.[4] As Gombrich once similarly opined, "In iconology the attitude 'this interpretation goes too far, but there must be something in it' presents the broad path to one of Bosch's hells." [5] Occam's razor is indispensable in cases such as this. To wit, Strickland does intermittently acknowledge that Bosch's intentions are not clear, and therefore allows wiggle room for ambiguity, but her six chapters steadily build a case for rampant period xenophobia and racism that seem rather insistent to the contrary.

Flouting traditional art historical practice, Strickland rallies little by way of direct comparison of works within Bosch's own oeuvre as bulwarks to substantiate a sustained *Weltanschauung* of antisemitism and xenophobia for Bosch, or even within his direct artistic and social milieu. In fact, such a reading is directly undermined by recent research into connections between cosmopolitan trade centers in Europe, Asia, Africa, and beyond in his precise era.[6] For example,

though the recent Walters Art Museum exhibition *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe* (2012) is mentioned in the bibliography, Strickland does not use its findings to problematize her readings of blackness in art and literature. Instead, she unequivocally states that blackness functions primarily as “a conceptual shorthand for anti-Christian evil,” and furthermore quotes Joseph Leo Koerner’s description of Bosch’s black Magus as “a deliberately inscrutable enemy” (p. 92).^[7] To the contrary, supported by much visual and documentary evidence, the Walters exhibition demonstrated that the nature of racial attitudes in the period were of varied nature. (What about the many positive images of the African St. Maurice, patron saint of the Holy Roman Empire, for example, mentioned by Strickland only in passing [p. 91]?) Moreover, in Bosch’s day, attitudes toward people of color were informed by increasing direct contact with travelers from Africa and other foreign peoples, including a visit of Christian Ethiopians and Copts to Florence in 1441 (recorded on the bronze doors of the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome in 1445) and the Congolese delegation to Lisbon in 1484.^[8] Strickland seems to prefer to look backward to the traditions of the late classical and early medieval periods—primarily citing literary works from the fourth through seventh centuries. However, unlike their forbears, Renaissance artists had extensive first-hand access to travelers, goods, and art; as the Castilian nobleman Pero Tafur remarked in his memoirs (1435-39), there was greater global trade in Bruges than in Venice in Bosch’s era.^[9]

Moreover, other positive readings of black Africans within Bosch’s own oeuvre have been offered. Laurinda Dixon has situated Bosch’s art in the realm of alchemy, an educated pastime among Bosch’s peers and patrons, indicating that perhaps the black King Balthasar’s gift is actually a positive metaphor of transmutation, signaling a movement toward cleansing and resurrection. Dixon corroborates her reading with an alchemical image of a king, bird, and jewel beneath a lode star,

looking rather akin to Bosch’s figure.^[10] In Paul Kaplan’s work on the history of the black Magus motif, the handsome figure is seen in a distinctly favorable light, Kaplan calling him “the most glorious of all the early African Magi.”^[11] Without undeniable evidence of racism, and considering some positive views to the contrary, we must, at a minimum, accept ambiguity in Bosch’s art.

Also lacking is a sustained charting of the steady progression of prototypical epiphany imagery from Bosch’s vicinity, with side-by-side visual comparison to find consonances and divergences. A quick survey reveals that the apparent first black Magus found in Epiphany triptych form in Northern Europe was Hans Memling’s *Adoration of the Magi* (coincidentally also in the Prado collection) from circa 1470. This painting does not seem to carry negative associations of the African king, and neither does Hugo Van der Goes’s Magus in the central panel of the Monforte Altarpiece (1472, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), nor the one example Strickland provides from the workshop of Gerard David (ca. 1514, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, New Jersey) (plate 26).

Instead of relying on primary sources, notoriously lacking in the case of Bosch, Strickland repeatedly notes what she sees as visual stereotypes: figures with large noses, or with certain hats, are to be read as Jewish by the viewer. The aforementioned altarpiece by David’s workshop is seen as antisemitic due to the bearded shepherd’s sidelong glance, red hair, yellow cloak, and “implied guilt by association” to the black Magus figure, for example (p. 57). Problematically, one highlighted “Jewish” hat style, shown in figure 66, is worn by the black king in the unmentioned Epiphany illumination from the contemporary Huth Book of Hours (Simon Marmion and studio, f. 83v, ca. 1480, British Library, London). Though Strickland writes of juxtapositions of Ethiopians and Jews in eschatological thought (p. 57), how are we to interpret the “good Jews” Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea wearing such hats? In

another troubling example, citing a circa 1500 Parisian book of hours's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (MS M.7, fol. 21r, Morgan Library, New York), Strickland inexplicably describes the image of adoring shepherds with their staffs as weaponized Christ-haters who will come to crucify him. This is an awkward interpretive leap, as their benign facial types and expressions are no different from Saint Joseph's. Instead of the anti-semitic fervor that Strickland believes would be stoked in the viewer by the miniature's surrounding Passion text, a consideration of the longstanding symbolism of the Good Shepherd laying down his life (found in a detail of Bosch's Prado triptych, in fact) and the widespread tradition of the Seven Sorrows and Seven Joys of the Virgin would better account for the Passion's pairing with the Nativity (figs. 18 and 19), the juxtaposition underlining Mary's bookended participation in Christ's life.

Another problematic argument in the book is the blanket statement labeling of the spitting head and slapping hand elements of the Arma Christi (instruments of the Passion) as necessarily Jewish and therefore antisemitic (p. 164). In fact, New Testament scripture specifically outlines that both Sanhedrin (Jewish) guards (Matt. 26) and Roman (gentile) soldiers of the "Governor" (whom Pilate ordered to take Christ to the Praetorium, Matt. 27) struck and spat on Christ. Moreover, the Gospel specifically states it was the Romans who hit Christ's crown of thorns with sticks and flagellated him (a common prelude to crucifixion under Roman law). These two scenes of violence perpetrated by the Romans are the only ones we see detailed in Bosch's Passion scenes arching over the St. Gregory Mass to form the exterior panels to the closed Prado *Epiphany* altarpiece. It does not follow then, as Strickland claims, that Bosch's Passion imagery is doggedly antisemitic and a clear means to incite anti-Jewish sentiment by singularly highlighting the cruelty of the Jews.

Rather than insisting on all exaggerated facial features as xenophobic, the author might have

looked more closely at the common caricatured facial and costume types shared by artist-contemporaries Leonardo da Vinci and Bosch as fruitful avenues of inquiry into proto-Reformation ideology. For example, recently, a dog with a spiked collar was rediscovered behind Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* (ca. 1483-86, Louvre, Paris) and has been cited as a direct indictment against the corruption of the papacy.[12] There is a similar trope in Bosch's work, with the Leonardesque tormentors of Christ in Passion imagery wearing both heraldic della Rovere oak leaves and acorns and a spiked collar (plate 19). In fact, to me at least, the visage of the "antichrist" in the Prado *Epiphany* actually closely resembles a youthful Pope Julius II as he was depicted by Raphael in circa 1511-12 in such works as the Vatican's "Mass at Bolsena" fresco and the oil portrait in London's National Gallery.

In the final chapter of the book, framing anti-semitism in the period following Bosch, Strickland relies heavily on the later screeds of Martin Luther (1483-1546), words penned after the death of the artist (1516), and some potentially pointed language by Erasmus (1466-1536). In the case of the former, Luther's Protestantism was but one branch of the Reformation movement, and not the one that took firmest root in the Netherlands. If the prevailing interest is in Christian ideology in the area of 's-Hertogenbosch, why not mention instead the writings of John Calvin (1509-64)? Perhaps because, as some scholars have argued, Calvin was the least antisemitic among the major reformers of his time? It is true that Luther studied under the Brethren of the Common Life at Magdeburg before going on to the University of Erfurt in 1501, but the more famous member of the brotherhood in Bosch's hometown was Erasmus. Both Erasmus and the town itself were religiously progressive, and strong parallels exist between both Erasmus's and Bosch's condemnation of the abuses and scandalous behavior of many priests, nuns, and clerics in their works, some-

times rather humorously as in Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* (1509).

In this vein, the most promising critique of the altarpiece in Strickland's book seems to come in the epilogue, where she postulates that the altarpiece could be a satire of Bosch's contemporary Christians in their zeal for law over grace (my words), suggesting that Bosch (as did Erasmus) wished to bring to the fore the shortcomings of his fellows in their inability to reframe their faith within New Testament rhetoric of love and charity over rote ritual, ceremony, and mass. Incidentally, this is the same reading suggested by Leonardo's collared dog. Here it is well that Strickland cites Shimon Markish's book *Erasmus and the Jews* (1986), but it is perhaps Markish's concept of "asemitism" (a form of practiced indifference) rather than antisemitism that is a more historically sound, nuanced, and apt description of Bosch's open-ended, multivalent approach to Jews in his works—a concept that Strickland does not pursue.

As Marc Bloch and others have written, there is a natural tendency among historians to gather the scattered evidence of the past and order it in ways that mirror our times and create relatable narratives. In the time and circumstances in which I am writing this review, one can well appreciate great sensitivity to hate speech and intolerance, and the admirable desire to foster increased dialogue around these subjects. That said, there is a great gulf separating our intellectual universe from Bosch's, and it is incumbent upon us not to unnecessarily privilege select evidence, nor to overwhelmingly assign negative impulses when positive ones also demonstrably exist. In the end, I simply cannot find the overwhelming tide of xenophobia and racism in the Prado *Epiphany* suggested by Strickland, though select viewers across time of course may have. While the period evidence of exclusion she marshals is considerable, and its study is invaluable, I do not

see it insistently or convincingly echoed in the mysteries of Bosch's poetic pictorial language.

Notes

[1]. E. H. Gombrich, "The Evidence of Images," in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles Singleton (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 35-104, esp. 75-89. As Larry Silver points out, because the supposed "antichrist" is holding the second Magus's helmet, he must be "a follower of kings rather than a commander in his own right, he cannot be the Antichrist, but he is surely another parody of religion and its authority." Larry Silver, "God in the Details: Bosch and Judgement(s)," *Art Bulletin* 83, no. 4 (2001): 638-639.

[2]. Gombrich, "Evidence of Images," 86-87. Also, Erwin Panofsky to Hans Butzmann, October 7, 1958, in *Erwin Panofsky Korrespondenz: 1910 bis 1968: Eine kommentierte Auswahl in fünf Bänden*, ed. Dieter Wuttke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), 4:323.

[3]. See R. H. Marijnissen, *Bosch* (Antwerp: Mercator, 1987), 239-240 (citing a fifteenth-century Dutch version of the fourteenth-century retold Gospel in Latin, the *Vita Christi*, by Ludolph the Carthusian), cited in Silver, "God in the Details," 648-649n45.

[4]. Gombrich, "Evidence of Images," 71, 103.

[5]. E. H. Gombrich, "Bosch of Hertogenbosch," review of *Hieronymous Bosch*, by Charles de Tolnay, *The New York Review of Books*, February 23, 1967, 3-4.

[6]. Carol M. Richardson, introduction to *Locating Renaissance Art*, ed. Carol M. Richardson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 15-22.

[7]. Joseph Leo Koerner, "The Epiphany of the Black Magus circa 1500," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010), 3.1:79.

[8]. Kate Lowe, “Visual Representations of an Elite: African Ambassadors and Rulers in Renaissance Europe,” in *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Joaneath Spicer (Baltimore, MD: Walters Art Museum, 2012), 100, 104; and Joaneath Spicer, introduction to *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe*, 9.

[9]. Richardson, introduction to *Locating Renaissance Art*, 17.

[10]. Laurinda Dixon, *Bosch* (2003; repr., New York: Phaidon, 2006), 205.

[11]. Paul Kaplan, *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 113.

[12]. “Dog Found behind Leonardo’s Virgin of the Rocks—Expert,” ANSAMED (March 2, 2017), http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/culture/2017/03/02/dog-found-behind-leonardos-virgin-of-the-rocks-expert_7138e7ed-4237-4d28-882a-96cfc210e54f.html (accessed June 1, 2017).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-low-countries>

Citation: Kimberlee Cloutier-Blizzard. Review of Strickland, Debra Higgs. *The Epiphany of Hieronymus Bosch: Imagining Antichrist and Others from the Middle Ages to the Reformation*. H-Low-Countries, H-Net Reviews. August, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50337>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.