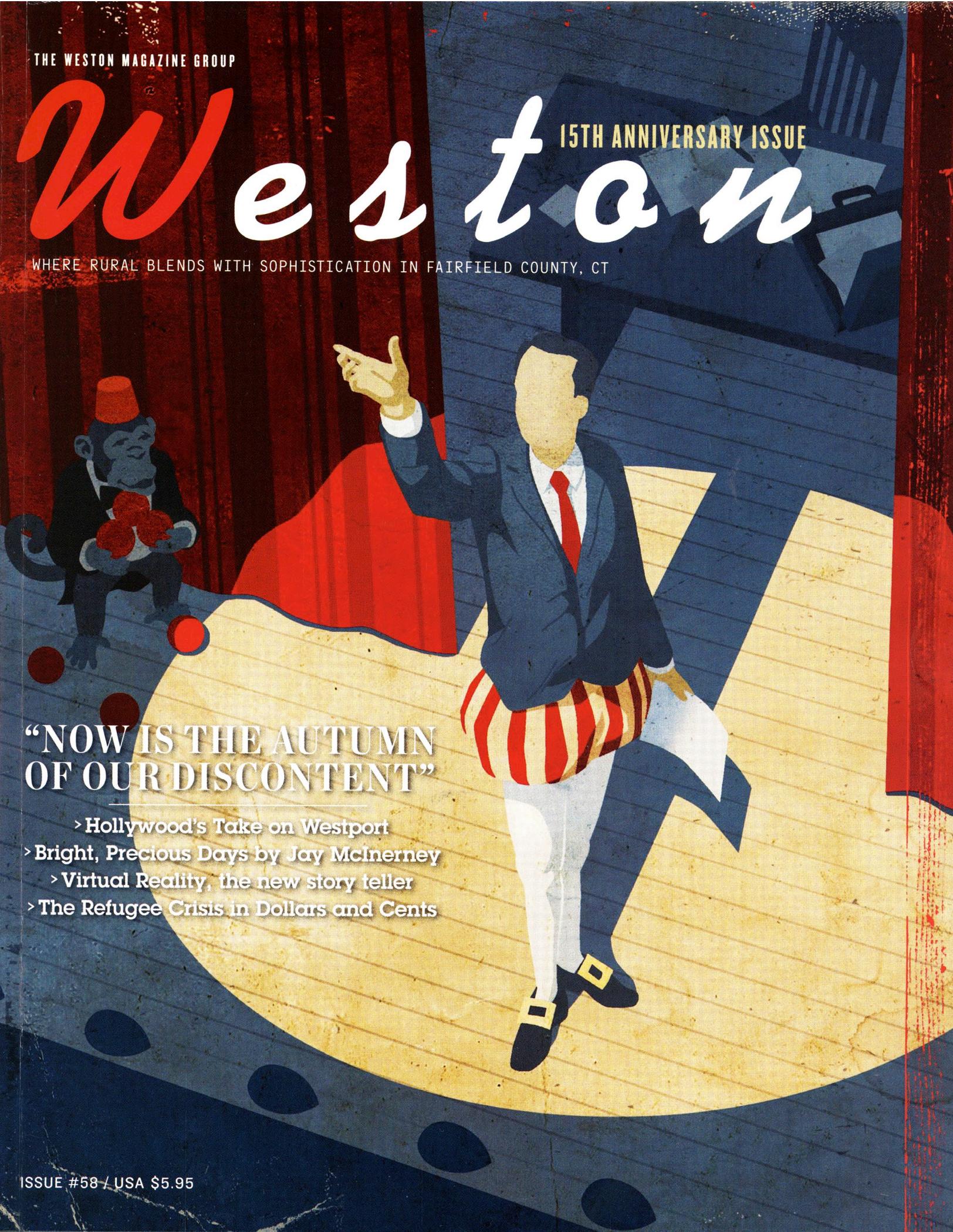


THE WESTON MAGAZINE GROUP

# Weston

15TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

WHERE RURAL BLENDS WITH SOPHISTICATION IN FAIRFIELD COUNTY, CT

An illustration of a man in a dark blue suit, red tie, and white shirt, wearing a red and white striped skirt and black shoes with gold buckles. He is pointing upwards with his right hand and holding a white paper in his left. To his left, a monkey in a black suit and red fez hat is holding a bouquet of red flowers. The scene is set on a stage with a yellow floor and a blue background with a red curtain on the left.

## “NOW IS THE AUTUMN OF OUR DISCONTENT”

- > Hollywood's Take on Westport
- > Bright, Precious Days by Jay McInerney
  - > Virtual Reality, the new story teller
- > The Refugee Crisis in Dollars and Cents

# THE FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF HIERONYMUS BOSCH A PERSONAL JOURNEY

BY DAN BURSTEIN / PHOTOS BY JULIE O'CONNOR

I first saw *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in an art history book when I was 14 years old and I have been fascinated by this painting and its painter, Hieronymus Bosch, ever since.

In 1971, I spent a seminal week of my life at the Prado Museum in Madrid staring for hours every day at this 500-year-old wonder of the art world, trying to grasp its meaning, context, and surreal visual vocabulary.

I can still close my eyes and remember my first in-person impressions of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and its dazzling imagery, fantastical characters, and spectacular colors: On the left panel of this massive triptych (about 7 feet by 13 feet), Adam and Eve are in the Garden of Eden, with a Jesus/God-like figure appearing to marry them. In the upper part of the left panel we see a sweet giraffe (the *Garden* is among the earliest paintings to show a giraffe) and a gentle elephant. Looming over the panel are fairytale towers made of pink and blue materials that resemble sandcastles at the beach. In the lower area there is a pool of reptilian and amphibian figures in the midst of their evolution.

In the vast center panel, giant strawberries, raspberries, and blackberries... bubbles blown up to translucent spheres big enough to encase two people, a pool inhabited by naked bathing women surrounded by naked men riding all manner of creatures from stags to unicorns, camels, lions, and cats... humongous woodpeckers and owls, a human form lying in a massive clam shell, a red teepee, mermaids, fish, and crustaceans of all kinds... men with huge wings flying through the sky... humans, black and white, talking in groups, standing on their heads, engaged in mysterious and mostly erotic activities.

And then, in the final panel, horror movie scenes from a frightening Hellscape... A harp with its strings used as an instrument of torture... a man kissing a pig dressed up in a nun's habit... a



pink heart that doubles as a bagpipe... a sharp knife sitting between two huge ears... a tree man with tree trunks for legs and a cracked eggshell for a body... a city burning in the distance... and so much more.

For a tip of a few pesetas (maybe ten American cents back then) you could get the Prado guard to close the side panels of the triptych and reveal the grisaille scene on the painting's exterior panels depicting the birth of the round earth. (Bosch, born around the same time as Columbus, knew the earth was round, even if dogmatic clergy and officials claimed it was not).

In that snowy Spanish January of 1971, I gazed into the *Garden of Earthly Delights* and tried to discern what was in Bosch's mind when he painted it five centuries earlier. I spent time with the other Bosch paintings in the Prado as well, particularly the *Haywain*, which echoes key themes of the *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Bosch's native Brabant region (in today's Netherlands) was a kind of colony of Spain during the artist's lifetime and for most of the century that followed. Philip II was the 16<sup>th</sup> century Hapsburg Emperor who ruled much of Europe from his headquarters in Spain at the palace/monastery outside Madrid today known as the Escorial. Philip became fascinated with Bosch and bought as many Bosch paintings as he could get his hands on. It is said that Philip kept *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in his own private quarters at the Escorial where he could see it every day and share it with only his most intimate friends and visitors.

Bosch has many "firsts" to his credit:

- He is the godfather of surrealism who painted fantastical and often horrifying "*duivels en monsters*" as the Dutch like to say, four centuries before Salvador Dali pioneered what we know today as surrealism.

- Bosch's *Wayfarer* may be the first painting in history to depict an ordinary man (as opposed to a religious figure, nobleman, or wealthy family) as a hero. It is definitely the first painting of an *existential* hero—a man suffering doubt and pain and seeking to find his own moral bearings on the difficult course of life.

- Bosch may also be the first artist to use the triptych form to tell a story that was not a traditional religious one. A devout and loyal Catholic, Bosch may be the first to rail against the excess and hypocrisy of his own church through visual art rather than the written word.

- And while a few artists before Bosch painted positive and negative views of the afterlife, no one addressed these subjects with his exotic/erotic view of Heaven or the detailed horror movie aesthetics of his vision of Hell.

As a college student in 1972, I started writing a book about Hieronymus Bosch. Although I never completed that effort (in truth, I didn't get very far at all), his work remained an intellectual passion for me. Over the ensuing decades of my life, I wrote 14 books and enjoyed multiple careers in journalism, consulting, investment banking, and venture capital. Through all that time, Bosch's enigmatic art was never far from my thoughts.

As I approached my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday three years ago, my wife and son wanted to know what we should do to celebrate. I said I didn't want a party. What I wanted was to embark as a family on a multi-year experiential adventure to see all the known Bosch paintings still extant in the world.

Sitting in our own "garden of earthly delights" in the backyard of our home in Weston, CT on the beautiful August day that was

my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2013, my wife Julie read reports from various websites about the plans to hold a 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration for Bosch in 2016 in his hometown of 's Hertogenbosch (better known by its shortened name, Den Bosch) in the Netherlands. Reading about the ambitious plans of the local Noordbrabants Museum, we knew right then that this would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see much of Bosch's work in one place. Whatever came together in 2016 in Den Bosch, we wanted to be there.

**Fast forward to Den Bosch, the Netherlands, April 2016:**

I am in my element here. The whole town has reinvented itself as a daily Bosch festival celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> year since the death of Hieronymus, its most famous citizen. In the Noordbrabants Museum show devoted to Bosch I am looking into the utterly mad



"THE WAYFARER" ALSO KNOWN AS "THE PEDLAR" BY HIERONYMUS BOSCH, THE BOIJMANS MUSEUM, ROTTERDAM, IS AN OIL ON PANEL, CIRCA 1500. THE MUSEUM IS THE ONLY DUTCH MUSEUM THAT OWNS ANY PAINTINGS BY BOSCH. © 2016 JULIE O'CONNOR PHOTO. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

scene at the heart of the *Haywain* triptych, a painting more than 500 years old that seems starkly contemporary in 2016. The central image depicts humanity's follies as a race to grab the most hay from a groaningly heavy harvest season hay wagon, even though the wagon should (theoretically) have plenty for everyone.

The *Haywain* is far more ruthless in its condemnation of social inequality than a Bernie Sanders speech. There is a murder taking place with one man slitting another man's throat in full view of the crowd. Is this the first murder scene in Western art that does not focus on the martyrdom of a religious figure? Nuns who have taken vows of poverty are loading up on grain directly from communal sacks while a fat self-satisfied priest looks on. In the right panel, a surrealist's vision of Hell provides a frightening reminder of where all this human folly may lead. Meanwhile, arriving on horseback from the left hand side of the central image to join the feeding frenzy are the Pope and the Emperor. It's the last days of the medieval

world order. Spain, which has colonized the Netherlands, is moving toward the most horrific punishments and tortures for those who run afoul of the Spanish Inquisition. Under these circumstances, who openly criticizes the Pope and the Emperor?

Hieronymus Bosch, that's who.

Or at least the artist we know in English as Hieronymus Bosch. Born as "Jheronimus van Aken" (Jerome van Aken in English) into a family of painters that included his father and grandfather, he appropriated the town's name as his own surname as his artwork became more widely known in Europe. Historians don't know for sure when he was born, but the consensus of scholars now puts his birth date at around 1450, when his native realm of Brabant was in the last throes of feudalism. Sometime in the late 1400s or early 1500s, Bosch completed the *Haywain* in his workshop on the market square just a few blocks walk from the museum and signed it: *jheronimus bosch*.

Now, in the spring of 2016, tickets to *Bosch: Visions of a Genius*

published regularly. New digital archives turn up new information about Bosch on a weekly basis. And works too frail to travel have been restored so they can be viewed by broader audiences.

Almost half a million people saw *Bosch: Visions of a Genius* over a three-month period. The overwhelming demand for tickets was so high that the museum had to do away with being closed one day a week. It stayed open later and later, and eventually, by the end of the show, it was happily embracing a 24/7 schedule. We were fortunate enough to have bought tickets online months in advance. And so we toured the show every day for the better part of a week, breaking when needed for some

**TOP TO BOTTOM:** JULIE O'CONNOR AND DAN BURSTEIN STAND IN FRONT OF A REPRODUCTION OF "THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS" IN THE JHERONIMUS BOSCH ART CENTER, 'S-HERTOGENBOSCH, THE NETHERLANDS; DETAIL FROM CENTER PANEL OF "THE HAYWAIN" A TRIPTYCH PAINTING BY JHERONIMUS BOSCH. THIS IS A REPRODUCTION IN THE JHERONIMUS BOSCH ART CENTER, 'S-HERTOGENBOSCH, THE NETHERLANDS. © 2016 JULIE O'CONNOR PHOTO. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

**FOR A TIP OF A FEW PESETAS (MAYBE TEN AMERICAN CENTS BACK THEN) YOU COULD GET THE PRADO GUARD TO CLOSE THE SIDE PANELS OF THE TRIPTYCH AND REVEAL THE GRISAILLE SCENE ON THE PAINTING'S EXTERIOR PANELS DEPICTING THE BIRTH OF THE ROUND EARTH.**



in this little-known museum in this somewhat obscure but utterly charming Dutch town have become almost as hard to get as seats for *Hamilton* on Broadway. After almost a decade of planning and relentless hard work and horse trading, the Noordbrabants Museum team has managed to bring about two dozen masterpieces by Bosch, his workshop, and his followers, back to his hometown from major museums and collections in Europe and America. That's over 80% of all the Bosch paintings that still survive. The museum team also assembled the best collection of Bosch's drawings ever in one place.

In the years prior to the show, the most intense scientific research ever done on Bosch was launched by a talented interdisciplinary team of curators, restorers, conservators, and technologists. New findings resulting from radiography approaches to the normally unseen underdrawings beneath the painted surface are being



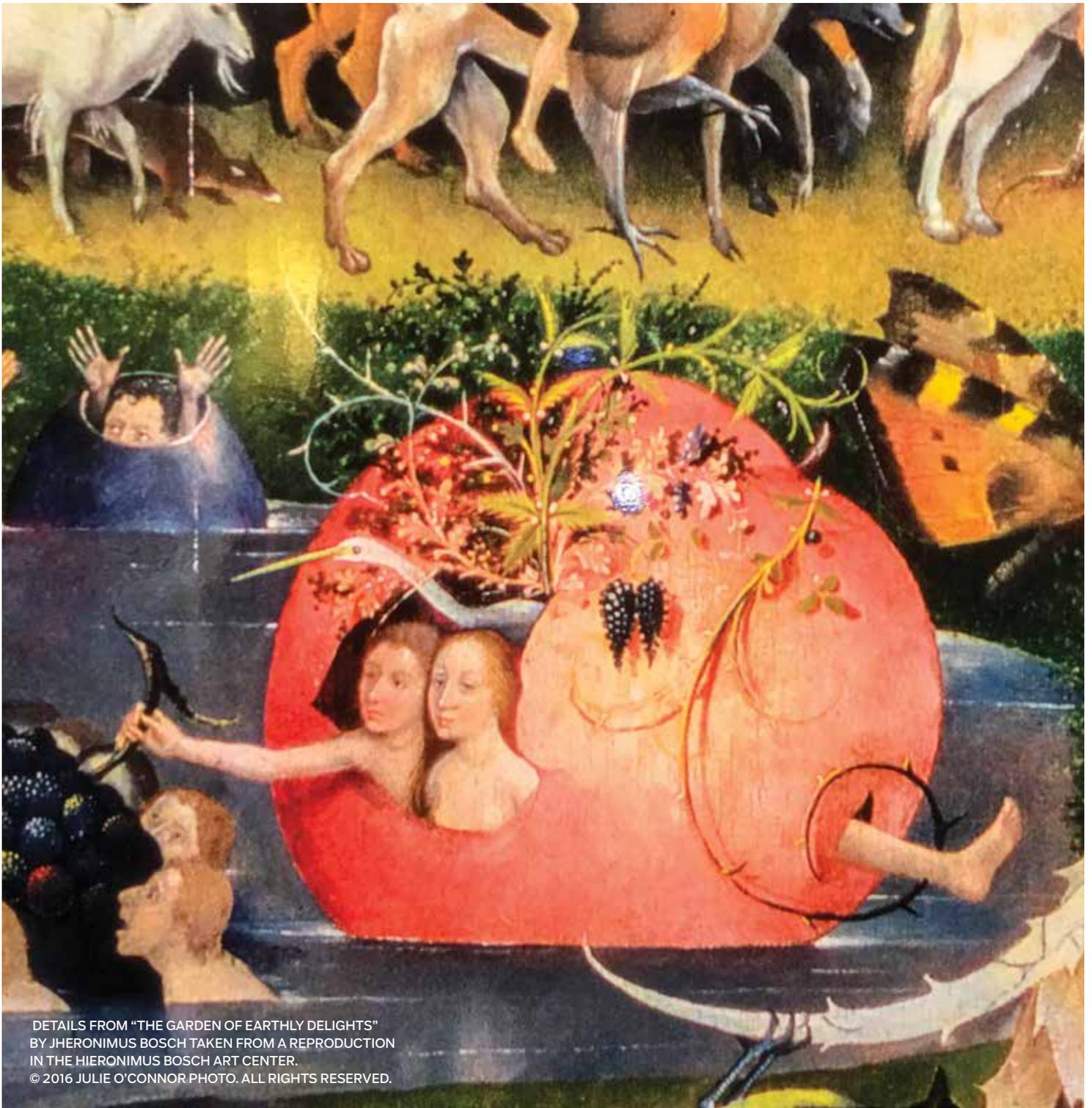
Bosch cheese and Bosch beer in the museum's brasserie, and darting out to take in the other sights of Den Bosch, such as:

- The Jheronimus Bosch Art Center in an old decommissioned church, where all of Bosch's works have been brilliantly reproduced with high definition photography and his signature monsters and demons brought to 3D life.

- The house on the market square where Bosch's family

lived and where he maintained a studio (now a souvenir store), and another house a stone's throw away—now a shoe store—where the woman he would later marry (Aleyt Goyaerts van den Meerveen) grew up in a notably prosperous family.

- The St. John's Cathedral where some works by Bosch and his father may have once appeared, where 14<sup>th</sup> century gargoyles are reminiscent of Bosch's demons, and whose associated elite society,



DETAILS FROM "THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS"  
 BY JHERONIMUS BOSCH TAKEN FROM A REPRODUCTION  
 IN THE HIERONIMUS BOSCH ART CENTER.  
 © 2016 JULIE O'CONNOR PHOTO. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

the Confraternity of Our Lady, formed the core of Bosch's social and intellectual life.

In the streets and canals of Den Bosch, the locals are thrilled to have a celebration of a man about whom only a few biographical facts are known, but who has made their town world famous. Nearly every shop window and restaurant has been decorated and festooned in Boschian motifs. New art works have been created and musical compositions written, inspired by Bosch. Bosch-themed video games, installations, ballets, and films are all having their debut during this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year.

Normally, there are zero paintings by Bosch in Den Bosch. In fact, the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam has the only original Bosch paintings in all of the Netherlands, and they were only acquired in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although Bosch's works were created in 's Hertogenbosch, they were soon collected by connoisseurs in Spain and all over Europe.

Cleverly trading conservation/restoration services as well as the chance to participate in the deepest and most technologically sophisticated study ever done of Bosch's work, the Noordbrabants Museum convinced even some of the world's most reluctant curators to loan their pieces.

We were thrilled to see several pieces from our own American “backyard.” A painting that had been in storage at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City was confirmed by the Bosch Research and Conservation Project (BRCP) to be an authentic Bosch—and we got the chance to see it at its “coming out party” in the exhibit.

Similarly, we had never seen Bosch’s *Death and the Miser* at the National Gallery in Washington, DC. But the Noordbrabants Museum put this piece together with the other presumed fragments of a lost triptych—one part from the Yale Art Museum in New Haven (*An Allegory of Intemperance*), one from the Louvre in Paris (the *Ship of Fools*), and one from the Boijmans in Rotterdam—revealing the first view (at least theoretically) of a complete version of these re-united fragments since the original masterpiece went missing hundreds of years ago.

So now we only have one more confirmed Bosch to see on our list: Bosch’s *Last Judgment* in Vienna (and our son David has already seen it). Of course the index of authenticated Bosch paintings is constantly changing. The Prado in Madrid disagrees with some of the judgments made about some of their pieces by the BRCP. They are currently staging their own 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary show with their own catalog of what they believe is authentic and not according to their own experts—and as I write this, I am planning our family trip to the Prado’s show.

Several other museums are fighting for their favored pieces to be declared authentic. What is by Bosch’s own hand, what defines a piece as done by his “workshop,” and what makes a piece deemed to be done by his “followers” will continue to be debated, but the BRCP has tried to draw at least a few clear conclusions by using “dendochronology”—the forensic effort to date the wood panels used by Bosch for most of his paintings. If the dendochronology suggests that the panel comes from a tree that wasn’t even felled in Bosch’s lifetime, it’s a pretty good bet the piece is by one of his followers or imitators.

Our family Bosch Tour has been a joy. Julie sees the paintings with her own artist/photographer eyes—and finds images and clues within them that I have missed even after looking at a painting for hours. David sees all of this history with the fresh eyes of a Millennial. He understands how our 21<sup>st</sup> century time period—characterized by massive technological and social change—resonates and is reflected in Bosch’s era.

As we talk over good meals in fine restaurants in Den Bosch (a regional dining capital of the Netherlands featuring several highly innovative farm-to-table restaurants), I test out ideas I am developing:

Bosch’s epoch was a time when northern Europe was going through a wrenching change—moving from a millennium of medieval values to the following half millennium of Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the birth of modern capitalism and modern ideas. In Bosch’s art, you can see this clash of civilizations. To me, this makes Bosch highly relevant to our world today, which is undergoing a similar transition from the

industrial world order of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the new digital/social/global order of the 21<sup>st</sup>.

A constant critic of hypocrisy and corruption wherever it is evidenced, Bosch’s biting satire in his paintings is analogous to our late night comedians like Jon Stewart and John Oliver. Our comedians “skewer” politicians verbally; Bosch “skewered” them literally—often depicting swords and knives and other sharp killing machines slicing through the flesh of hypocrites and sinners in his visions of Hell.

Bosch scholarship has undergone an enormous arc of change over the last fifty years. When I first encountered the *Garden of Earthly Delights*—at the height of 1960s counter-culture—more than a few leading experts were convinced Bosch must have been munching on magic mushrooms. A German art historian, Wilhelm Fraenger,

wrote a book about the *Garden of Earthly Delights* in the late 1940s that suggested Bosch was a member of a secret heretical humanistic cult practicing free love and sacred sexual rights. There was next to no evidence for Fraenger’s claims, but they resonated with the times in the 1960s.

The leading Bosch experts today tend to see him in a much more conservative light. Bosch is described by contemporary scholars as a deep religious believer; a traditional member of a traditional church; a severe moralist; a painter committed to depicting the deadly sins not to excite us with the rich and varied nature of human experience, but to warn us of the horrific Hell

that awaits us if we stay on the sinner’s path.

Personally, I think the reality lies somewhere in the middle.

Art historians have tried to decode the meaning of Bosch’s paintings for centuries. I am not so presumptuous as to believe I will arrive at “the answer.” Like all great art—Leonardo, Michelangelo, Shakespeare—there are many different answers and many enigmas that will doubtlessly endure forever in Bosch’s work. But I believe that Bosch possessed a slightly deeper insight into ways of the world than was typical of the average person of his time, and that his paintings reflect that understanding. Maybe, just maybe, I can come to understand the essence of that insight. When I do, I will be ready to write that book about Bosch that has been in development in my mind for the last 45+ years. \*

---

*Dan Burstein and Julie O’Connor live in Weston. Dan is a venture capitalist and the author of 14 books. Award-winning photographer Julie O’Connor created the first non-Western door poster with “Doors of Tibet” in 2003, which became the basis for her interest in doing her book, Doors of Weston: 300 Years of Passageways in a Connecticut Town, published in partnership with the Weston Historical Society.*



BOSCH DESIGNS AND MOTIFS IN DECAL FORMAT IN THE STREETS OF 'S-HERTOGENBOSCH AS PART OF THE CELEBRATIONS FOR THE 500TH YEAR OF HIERONYMUS BOSCH'S DEATH IN 1516. © 2016 JULIE O'CONNOR PHOTO. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.