**Bosch, Hieronymus: The Temptation of St Anthony**

c. 1500; Oil on panel, tryptych describing the ordeals of St Anthony; Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon

Bosch's spiritual heroes were the saints who endured both physical and mental torment, yet remained steadfast. Among the saints, Bosch's favorite was Saint Anthony, the subject of his triptych The Temptation of Saint Anthony (c.1500; Museo National de Arte Antiga, Lisbon), which features physical punishment on the left wing, a Black Mass in the center, and the blandishments of food and sex on the right wing. St. Anthony's triumph over such trials is mirrored by those of other hermit saints and by the Passion of Christ, whose arrest and carrying of the cross adorn the exterior of the Lisbon altarpiece.

Bosch was preoccupied with themes of torment and the sinfulness of man, which replaced earlier, more optimistic visions of Christ and the Virgin with feelings of anxiety, fear, and guilt. His sources for such unusual images were the dark corners of the medieval imagination, the gargoyles and monsters of cathedral decoration, and the marginal illustrations of books and popular prints.

In Bosch's day, temptation not only had the meaning it has today, but also meant physical/mental assault by demons. So St Anthony is not only tempted by the pleasures of the flesh and so on, he is also beaten up and terrorized by the demons.

The central panel of this triptych illustrates the kneeling figure of St Anthony being tormented by devils. These include a man with a thistle for a head, and a fish that is half gondola. Bizarre and singular as such images seem to us, many would have been familiar to Bosch's contemporaries because they relate to Flemish proverbs and religious terminology. What is so extraordinary is that these imaginary creatures are painted with utter conviction, as though they truly existed. He has invested each bizarre or outlandish creation with the same obvious realism as the naturalistic animal and human elements. His nightmarish images seem to possess an inexplicable surrealistic power.