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The Missing Factor: A Timely Reminder

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Abstract: Responding to an article published in a previous number of the journal, a perspective is offered here on our drive to interpret and understand features of cultures in the past, and how, in so doing, we can easily lose sight of the fact that cultures are made up of people, who are themselves thinking and interpreting from diverse and sometimes unexpected perspectives.

The article on the dwarf stone in the *RMN Newsletter* 12–13 (Egeler 2017) serves as a timely reminder that in our search for the 'significance' of creations of the past we can overlook the element of just creating something for one's own and other people's enjoyment. Of course, there are mystic or religious meanings to many products of the past. This is particularly true in my field of medieval visual arts, since such things as manuscripts and sculpture in and on churches were costly and were indeed used to convey messages, but other works seem to be outside the mould of a vector for religious concepts. It is more than twenty-five years since Michael Camille published his seminal and perceptive *Image on the Edge* (1992), in which he explored the strange, fantastical and sometimes scatological images that were very often literally on the physical edge of a page or building, but, as Camille pointed out, that also indicated the edge of the Church or society. These oddities, sometimes obvious, such as marginalia in manuscripts, others hidden or at least not on general display, have long fascinated me. In some cases, there seems to be a clear didactic reason. Camille suggests that they are a commentary on the text designed to deepen the meaning and stimulate reflection. This appears to be the case in the manuscript The Hague, Koninglijke Bibliotheek cod. 78D 40, illuminated at the Premonstratensian Abbey of Amiens. From my own examination of this manuscript, there is a point of contact between the various *bas-de-page* illustrations and the text, sometimes highlighting aspects such as human frailty or inverting the conventional surface reading. In attributing this extra significance, it is as well to remember that the Premonstratensians were a particularly austere order and would be unlikely to commission a Missal to contain irreligious images without a reason. However, the stimulus to contemplate the meaning has an element of 'puzzling things out': *Why this image? Why here?* In other words, while the intention is serious, there is the implication of a little intellectual enjoyment for both the reader and the maker who set the 'puzzle'.

Having a serious purpose does not preclude the entertainment factor. On other occasions, I have argued for the apotropaic and sometimes symbolic function of such things as beakheads and grimacing faces on corbels (Bradley 2008: ch. 5), but perhaps for sheer exuberance carved misericords are prime examples. The range of these is enormous covering heavenly figures, moral proverbs, daily life and occasionally downright strange and scatological scenes. Did it amuse the members of the chapter of St. Yves in Tréguier to know that they were supported by an angel, or a defecating man (Figures 1 & 2)? Did the woodcarvers enjoy the creation of such diverse figures in a single set? One of the dangers for any researcher is projecting the interests of one's own time onto

Figure 1. Misericord in the choir of Tréguire cathedral, Brittany, France (photograph by the author).

creations of the past. We have only to look at the popularity of studies of minorities and marginalized groups, be it women, children, the mentally ill, non-sedentary and others, to realize how different the approach to the past is now to when ‘history’ was about kings and wars, with some diplomacy and a few marriages and rebellions thrown in. While we strive to ‘understand’ the language of the past and to glean how they expressed their ideas of life, death and the world in general, in doing so perhaps we forget to try to understand the people of the past. I have been as guilty as any other of trying to grasp the ideas of the people of the medieval period while not giving as much attention to the people themselves.

Every researcher builds on the work of his or her predecessors, confirming, developing and challenging data, theories and methods and knows that there is no ‘right’ theory or method, but rather hopes to add to knowledge and understanding. The current awareness of the possibility of researcher bias and preoccupation with the themes and ideals, both social and academic, is hopefully an advantage when it comes to understanding people of the past, but it does not mean we can dismiss earlier work as irrelevant: historiography is also invaluable in seeing how people in a less distant past viewed the past. Reception history can give us some clues: how people fifty or even a couple of hundred years later view a work, indicates not only the prestige of the work in question, but also a tradition of interpretation. A few years ago, I was privileged to play a small part in the Bosch 500 research project.[1] As well as being surprised by the ignorance of the general public about Bosch – seeing him as a lone, slightly mad genius, probably based on the incomprehensibility of his idiom for the present-day, non-historically-minded viewer, I was very interested to learn the views of later Spanish theologians. Their writings bring out the importance, to them, of the puzzle element, the need to understand Bosch’s idiom, which I believe had its roots in earlier marginalia such as the Croy Hours as well as local sayings, an idiom that was taken up by the many Bosch imitators, usually with less success. A publication of 1788, dealing with the royal collection of art, states “on the subject of Hyerónimo Bosco, this [his witty and strange works] is reason enough to open the eyes of ordinary viewers – and others who have less understanding” (de Guevara & Ponz 1788: 41; all translations are by the present author unless otherwise noted). The popularity of this idiom demonstrates people’s delight not only in the strange, horrific and bizarre, but also in trying to unravel the meaning of some strange image. Medieval art has always delighted in making

Figure 2. Misericord in the choir of Tréguire cathedral, Brittany, France (photograph by the author).

oblique references, creating a sort of language understood only by insiders, and indeed is the reason why much is incomprehensible or strange to most people looking at it today, and why people like me spend so much time and energy trying to fathom this ‘dead language’. The problem lies not only in the fact that the various idioms are no longer in use – a museum curator bemoaned to me that visitors no longer recognized a saint by their attributes, necessitating lengthier information signs than many visitors like – but these past idioms have been overlaid by more recent ones and symbols have taken on new meanings (see Bradley 2011).

It must be remembered that works in the past, just as today, were made not only with a specific purpose, but also with a public, sometimes a very specific public, in mind. Particular references understood only by certain people could strengthen group identity and surely the enjoyment of unravelling a puzzle was part of an ‘in joke’, however serious the subject. Indeed, it can be argued that there is almost always a moral or didactic intent. Sometimes this is very apparent and created with such a serious primary intent that the result can be regarded as a purely theological work, as in the Exeter Riddle Book, which is a prime example of such a puzzle, in this case literary, theological riddles in the form of long poems. Other examples are less obvious, taking the form of a legend or folk tale, for example; while a puzzle such as a strangely shaped rock provides the chance to create an enjoyable tale, it also gives the opportunity to elaborate on the virtues of piety. Any parent or teacher knows that things are learned better when there is an element of enjoyment, and that anyone, from a young child to academic researcher, has a better understanding of something if they have to work to gain that understanding, rather than accepting a current or obvious interpretation – and indeed it may possibly increase the depth and degree of knowledge and comprehension by discussing alternative ‘solutions’ with others who have come to different conclusions. I suggest that not only Bosch, but many others, both visually and verbally, created their puzzles, both for their own pleasure and understanding and for that of their intended public, and that tradition continues, as is shown by the 18th century work cited above. The intention of inducing people to look beyond the surface is particularly apparent in Bosch’s landscapes, sometimes obviously, as in his sketch of the woods have ears and the fields have eyes, but also in his complex major works: a cliff above a lake is a face in profile, a hummock is a crawling man, distant hills are wheels and cloaked figures. Landscape is

particularly suitable for this purpose, asking the viewer to look at the world around his or herself with new eyes.

The serious intent attributed to Bosch's work and part of the academic research tradition of searching for the deeper meaning of whatever strikes us as strange or incongruous in them and much else, can be demonstrated by a sentence from José de Sigüenza's (1544–1606) *Historia de la Orden de San Gerónimo*: "I admit that in this painting [the Hay Wain], in a brief glance, I read more than in other books in many days". The passage continues:

> The other panel[2] dealing with vain glory and brief pleasures of the strawberry or the fruit of the strawberry tree, and its scant scent that you scarcely taste when you have eaten it, is the most ingenious work of the greatest skill that one can imagine. I speak the truth when I say that – if someone should take up this plan and one or other great writer would commit it to paper – it would be an extraordinarily useful book, for here, live and clear, countless places from the Holy Scriptures can be seen that concern the wickedness of mankind... I would wish that everyone would be just as filled with representations of this painting as from the truth and the original on which Geronimo Bosque based his madness, for – apart from the refined details and considerations that are to be found in each thing (it is amazing how one head could think of so much) – everyone would profit greatly from features that he would find if he in reality withdrew into himself; if that is not so, then he is not aware of what goes on within him and then he is so blind that he does not see the passions and vices that have disfigured him into a beast or many beasts. (*Historia de la Orden de San Gerónimo*, III, p. 840.)

Up to the preset day, scholars argue about the 'meaning' of this work, the one work that most people think of when Bosch is mentioned; is it a warning of man's heedlessness of sin, or a depiction of man's state before he discovered sin? Or one of a hundred more interpretations. Nevertheless, it is interesting to read a 'learned' interpretation from a couple of hundred years ago, and evidently current more than two hundred years after Bosch's death. However Bosch intended it to be interpreted, he certainly set a puzzle.

In this tradition, even though we are from a different time, culture and society, we seek to unravel the puzzles set in the past, and we go about trying to do so in the same way. Perhaps we do not strive to understand a theological or psychological 'truth', but we seek to comprehend the understanding of it, and the ways in which both the makers and their public viewed the world.

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Notes

1. My thanks to my colleagues, in particular Jos Koldeweij and Loes Scholten. The results of this research, including a lot of work on contemporary archives, is freely available at boschproject.org/#/ and boschdoc.huygens.knaw.nl, for which I am happy to say we won the Netherlands Data Prize 2016. The citations in this article can be found on this website, along with transcriptions and translations.
2. Now known as "The Garden of Earthly delights".

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