

18. Playing with Reality Games and Toys in the Oeuvre of Hieronymus Bosch

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Toys and playthings are recurrent motifs in the oeuvre of Hieronymus Bosch. They appear as details among other artefacts in a variety of contexts. Bosch depicted games boards, dice, toy windmills and hoops wherever he could as ordinary objects in his pictures. But he was not the first artist to do so. Games had been illustrated as details in drawings and illuminated manuscripts in the Netherlands before his time, and Bosch was familiar with the theme. He was the first, however, to develop the motif on a grand scale. The objects that Bosch's adults, children and even demons use for their games are faithful representations of those in use in his day – however untrue-to-life the context in which most of them appear seems to be. In other words, Bosch himself 'played' to his heart's content with his repertoire of playthings.

Delight in games

The way Bosch played with reality is illustrated best by his triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.¹ The lower left section of the right wing, which is a depiction of hell, shows a group of sinners, whom we recognize as such by their playing cards, dice and backgammon board (p. 64). For centuries, all these objects, and games boards in general, were stock symbols of iniquity in art and literature. In this respect, Bosch simply linked into an iconographic tradition that others continued after him. One example of a later work along these lines is Pieter Bruegel's *Triumph of Death*, which hangs opposite *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in the Prado.²

On the same wing of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, we see skates worn by a bird-like creature and naked human figures. They are wooden skates with iron blades and leather straps to secure them

to the foot. The bird in the foreground and the figure furthest to the right behind it have their skates fastened on their feet. The person second from the right has a skate that has been enlarged to form a boat; the straps used to fasten it serve as 'reins' to steer the vessel. A similar boat to the left has sunk through a patch of thin ice, and only the point of the skate protrudes above the surface.

The objects Bosch has depicted here actually existed in his day. Archaeologists have found similar skates or parts of them, such as a wooden skate in Haarlem (ill. 18.1)³ and an iron blade in Amsterdam.⁴ Bosch uses the realistically rendered skates as unusual attributes of 'ordinary' users on the one hand, and on the other, as ordinary attributes for unusual skaters. The exotic bird-messenger, for instance, in the triptych of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* in Lisbon is wearing a pair of skates (ill. 18.2).⁵ These elaborate improvisations on the theme of a wooden skate are typical of Bosch's treatment of artefacts of his day. They invariably look like contemporary objects, in so far as they are known to us today, whether Bosch intended them to or not. But Bosch often – indeed most often – removed them from their original context, so that the cumulative effect of all these otherwise ordinary objects is highly exotic.

Christ Child with whirligig

The most common children's attributes in Bosch's paintings are the walking frame and the toy windmill depicted with a naked child on the back of the shutter of *Christ Carrying the Cross* at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (p. 192).⁶ It is the only representation of its kind on the outside of a shutter and many theorists, Walter Gibson among them,⁷ have speculated about the meaning of the

1. Madrid, Museo del Prado, inv.no. 2823.

2. Foreground of *The Triumph of Death*, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Madrid, Museo del Prado, inv.no. 1393.

3. Haarlem, Bureau Archeologie, inv.no. 83RAS, BPIV/10.

4. Amsterdam, Dienst Amsterdam Archeologie, inv.no. MW2-17, see J. Baart et al. *Opgravingen in Amsterdam, 20 jaar stadskernonderzoek*, Haarlem/Amsterdam 1977, 458.

5. Foreground of the left wing; Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga.

6. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.no. 6420.

scene and the identity of the boy. Gibson draws attention to the position of the vaned rod, which corresponds to that of the Cross on the reverse, suggesting that the child could be the infant Jesus and the scene as a whole a prefiguration of the bearing of the cross. However, the two pictures were never visible at the same time.⁸

It is almost certain that this panel was the left shutter of a crucifixion triptych illustrating, from left to right, the bearing of the cross, the crucifixion and the descent from the cross. The outside of this left shutter shows a small boy walking to the right, pushing a three-wheeled wooden walker. In his right hand he holds a long rod with two white, textile vanes at the end, a type of windmill that Lucas Wüthrich aptly called a 'Windrädchenlanze'.⁹ The windmill is a stock substitute for the lance in duels on hobbyhorses, which can be seen as a children's game and a parody on adult tournaments in fifteenth-century manuscripts and tapestries.¹⁰

We can assume that the outside of the adjacent shutter would also have depicted a child with a windmill and a walker or perhaps a hobbyhorse, but this time walking towards the left and with the vanes facing left. When closed, the triptych would have presented a picture of two children staging a battle with toy windmills, similar to one drawn in a border by Israhel van Meckenem (ill. 18.3),¹¹ where two children attack one another with windmills.¹² Angels look on and encourage them; their nimbuses and hairstyles show them to be the infant Jesus and the young John the Baptist.

The walker is a common attribute of small children, symbolizing the difficulty of taking one's first steps in life. It is a realistic detail: wooden walkers were widely used in the Netherlands in the fifteenth century as an aid for children learning to walk.¹³ They came in two types: the one shown here is a three-wheeled frame that the child pushed in front of him, but there was also a four-wheeled version that the child stood inside of. Children with walkers can be seen in carvings and in the margins of manuscripts. A corbel in Saint

John's Cathedral in 's-Hertogenbosch, for instance, shows a child pushing a three-wheeled walker,¹⁴ while a similar motif decorates the misericord of a choir stall in the Saint Salvator Cathedral in Bruges.¹⁵ The representation in Bruges personifies the first stage of life (*infantia*), and there are more such illustrations of a child learning to walk as a symbol of *infantia* in cycles of the ages of man.¹⁶ People in the fifteenth century would instantly have recognized a figure with a walker as a small child, and a monkey with a similar device as a parody.

Hieronymus Bosch, like other artists, combined the walker motif with figures other than that of a child. A human-like demon with a large nose is depicted with a four-wheeled walker on the right shutter of the triptych of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (ill. 17.33). A windmill with two vanes protrudes from the hood of the cloak wrapped around him. Hanging on the frame is a nursing bottle of the type used to feed children at the time (archaeologists have found similar bottles).¹⁷ Hence this demon, whose garments we would tend to associate with old people, is depicted with three attributes that clearly belong to children.

Child with a kolf club

The windmills held by the child in *Christ Carrying the Cross* in Vienna and by the demon in the triptych of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* can also be seen in other works by Bosch. For instance, one protrudes from the bottom of a figure bending forwards in the background of a *Last Judgement* triptych in Bruges, which is regarded as 'close to Bosch'.¹⁸ In the context of the sixteenth century, in particular, the windmill was a well-known symbol of insanity.¹⁹ But that did not clash with its role as a child's attribute; Bosch often used mills as an allusion to both. In his autograph oeuvre, however, it was predominantly a child's toy – the demon with a windmill in his walker behaves like a child, not a lunatic. The mill's association with madness came only later, in the reception of Bosch's imagery.



ill. 18.3 Israhel van Mecke
the Baptist as Playing Ch
Boholt c. 1475, engraving
British Museum, inv. 18.4

On the back of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* triptych is a grisaille of *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Christ, carrying the cross, is observed by a group of three children on a hill, whom we see from the back (p. 76). One of them is holding up a windmill, consisting of a shaft with two white vanes on a wooden frame. The vanes could be turned by pulling a string attached to one of the vanes. The boy on the right holds a kolf club, with its head pointing upwards. Both windmills and kolf clubs are common children's attributes in art of this period. They are used here to emphasize that the figures are children, which was usually the purpose of depicting toys.²⁰ The windmill's white vanes draw the viewer's attention to the group, which may be taken to represent the mocking crowd that gathered to watch the passage of Christ to Calvary: laughing children, sometimes with toys, can be seen in the foreground of a number of illustrations of the Bearing of the Cross.²¹

Kolf clubs also appear in other works by Bosch, and they are always associated with children. A wooden ball and a kolf club with a metal head are depicted in the section representing Greed in *The Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins*, now at the Prado in Madrid (ill. 18.5).²² They lie on the floor of the room, in the left-hand foreground. A corpulent man sits on a chair in the centre, holding a piece of meat in one hand and a tankard in the other. An equally fat little boy stands beside the chair, reaching out for the tankard. The kolf club and ball presumably allude to the boy, as they lie between him and a high chair with an opening for a chamber pot.

Fifteenth and sixteenth-century kolf clubs with reinforced heads, shaftless heads and hard balls such as were used for the game of kolf, are found

quite frequently in the Netherlands. Kolf clubs have been found in Amsterdam, for example,²³ and as cargo on a ship which sank in the Zuyder Zee in 1540.²⁴ The metal heads are obviously more likely to survive than the wooden shafts, although a head with remnants of the wooden shaft was found during excavations in the monastery of Annenberg in Rosmalen, and another in the historic centre of 's-Hertogenbosch.²⁵ Both date from the early sixteenth century. Heavy wooden balls of the type used for kolf have been found in Delft, for example, and in the cesspit of the Latin School in Groningen.²⁶ The kolf clubs and balls in Bosch's paintings resemble the simplest types found during these excavations. Kolf was by far the most popular game at the time,²⁷ and was played by children and adults alike.²⁸ Boys in particular are often depicted with kolf attributes. Bosch used them here to show that the boy is more interested in drink than in play, and thus portrays him as a little glutton. The fact that most children would have been unable to resist a game of kolf puts the point across even more clearly.

The influence of toys

Only one painting in the oeuvre attributed to Bosch, a panel called *The Conjurer*, now in Saint-Germain-en-Laye (p. 192), actually centres on the subject of games.²⁹ It shows a man playing thimberig in the street with a motley group of spectators. Leaning against the table that stands between the 'magician' and his spectators is a hoop, which, like the monkey wearing a fool's costume, is the attribute of a clown. One man in the crowd is so fascinated by the performance that he fails to notice the thief stealing his purse. A boy in a red tunic witnesses the theft and looks

8. The 1967 catalogue makes the same point: K.G. Boon et al., *Jheronimus Bosch, 's-Hertogenbosch* 1967, 106.
9. L. Wüthrich, 'Windrädchenlanze und Steckenpferde', *Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte*, 38 (1981), 279-289.
10. Wüthrich 1981 (see note 9); A. Willemsen, *Kinder delijt, Middeleeuws speelgoed in de Nederlanden*, Nijmegen 1998, 114-116 and 127-128.
11. Berlin, Kupperstichkabinett; Gibson 1975-1976 (see note 7), 11.
12. Suggested in the 1967 catalogue: Boon 1967 (see note 8), 106.
13. Willemsen 1998 (see note 10), 50.
14. A.M. Koldewij (ed.), *De bouwloods van de St.-Janskathedraal te 's-Hertogenbosch*, 's-Hertogenbosch 1989, p. 55.
15. Willemsen 1998 (see note 10), 50 (note 151).
16. E. Sears, *The Ages of Man, Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle*, Princeton 1986.
17. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, inv.no. 0M29 (fifteenth century) and

18. Bruges, Groeningemuseum, inv.no. 208; this triptych was not included in the selection in R.H. Marijnissen, *Hieronymus Bosch, The Complete Works*, Antwerp 1978.
19. Gibson 1975-1976 (see note 7); Wüthrich 1981 (see note 9).
20. Willemsen 1998 (see note 10) (passim).
21. Willemsen 1998 (see note 10), 221-222.
22. Madrid, Museo del Prado, inv.no. 2822.
23. Amsterdam, Dienst Amsterdam Archeologie, inv.no. MH2-348 and PR19-3 (ca. 1600).
24. J.M.A.W. Morel, 'Het Biddinghuizer Colfschip', in *Drooggelegd land – blootgelegd verleden, Cultureel Historisch Jaarboek voor Flevoland* 1993, 24-37.
25. 's-Hertogenbosch, archeology department, inv. nos. 13734 and 13772.
26. Willemsen 1998 (see note 10), 171-172.
27. Baart et al. (see note 4), 457-450.



18.4
 Lower of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony (Christopher?) / The Man on the Ice*, panel, 93 x 109 cm. Present whereabouts unknown

at the man, laughing. The boy holds a windmill with two vanes pointing downwards. It catches our eye and draws our attention to the boy, who in turn leads us to the point of the narrative. The windmill is a reminder that the figure before us is a child. And the role he plays here is one often assigned to children, jesters, peasants and other 'simple souls': in their naivety they are often better able to judge situations than others.³⁰

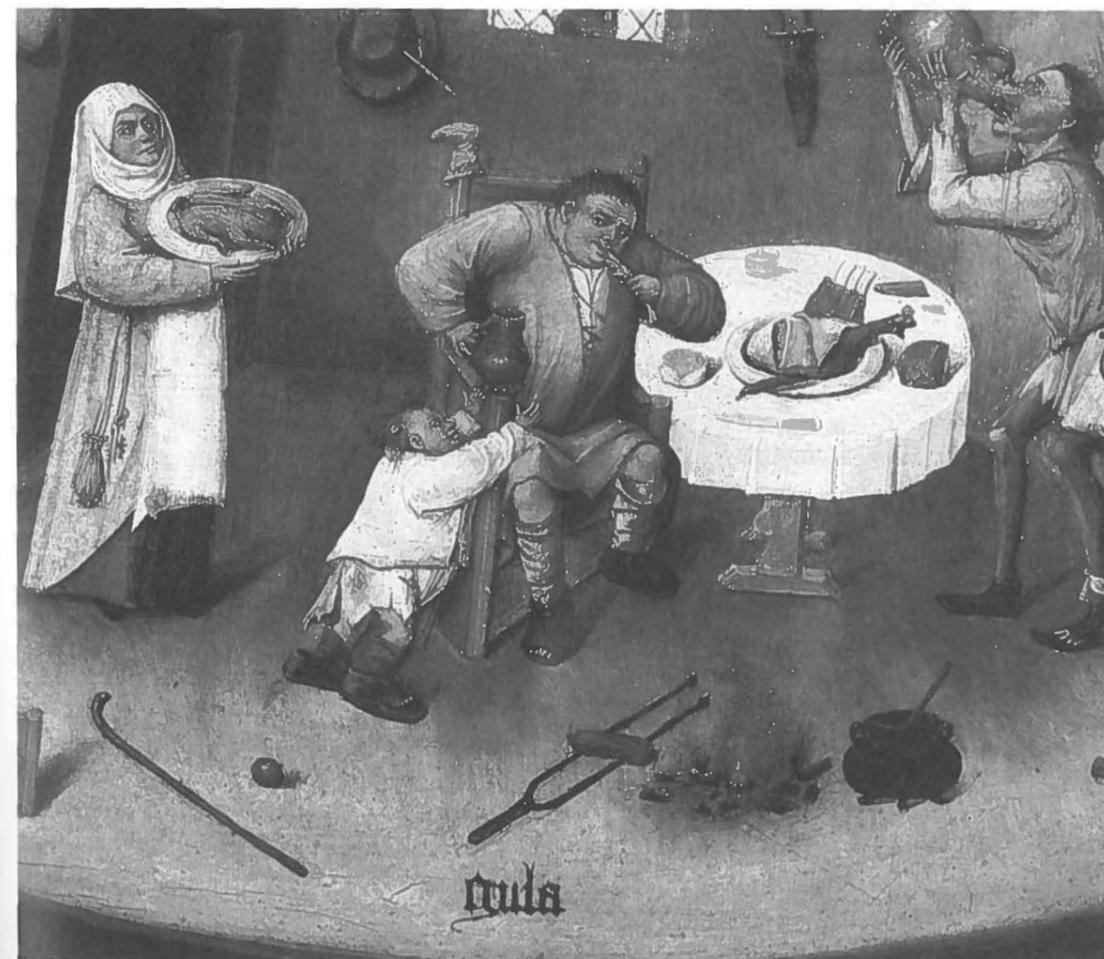
Playing cards, backgammon boards, windmills and skates can also be seen in the work of later painters who drew on Bosch's compositions or themes or borrowed details from his work. Some did little more than copy Bosch, while others used fragments separately or in combination with other motifs from Bosch's work.

A good example of the reception of such game motifs is a panel of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony / The Man on the Ice*, which was at the De Boer Gallery in Amsterdam in 1933 (ill. 18.4), and which Friedländer described as a 'Brueghel-like rendering of a Bosch-like theme'.³¹ The picture

shows a figure in a barrel fighting a man with a skull on his back. Both are on skates, and are armed with an arsenal of household objects. The barrel-figure brandishes a windmill (with a jar attached) to ward off an attack with skewer and fire-tongs. The skates recall those on the right panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, although the straps fastening the blades are less convincing. A man on a jawbone-sled rides between the two adversaries, propelling himself forward with two pointed rods.

All the game elements in the painting, except for the jawbone-sled, can be traced back to Bosch's known oeuvre. The theme as such, however, was probably not Bosch's. The artist who painted the panel used elements from the iconography he knew – one strongly influenced by Bosch – to create a new composition. The composition, too, follows a tradition: exotic creatures doing battle armed with kitchen utensils are common motifs in the margins of medieval manuscripts. The painting is of particular interest here, as it attests to the powerful impact Bosch's

30. Willemsen 1998 (see note 10), 285; P. Vandenbroeck, *Beeld van de ander, vertoog over het zelf. Over wilden en narren, boeren en bedelaars*, Antwerp 1987.



18.5
 Hieronymus Bosch or follower next to a child, detail from *Seven Deadly Sins* (see p. 15)

18.6
 Jester's stick, France or Southern 15th century, bronze. Florence

imagery and motifs had on the repertoire of artists who came after him.

Bosch's game with reality

In the iconography of Hieronymus Bosch – and of northern and southern Netherlandish manuscript illustrators and printmakers – windmills, walkers and kolf clubs are always associated with children, just as cards allude to profligates and baubles, or jester's sticks, to jesters (baubles can be seen in both *The Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins* (ill. 18.5) and *The Ship of Fools*³²). These attributes were not merely objects that people associated with certain types or that were used as part of a visual idiom: they did in fact exist. No windmills have survived, but kolf clubs, backgammon boards and dice have indeed been found, while playing cards and jester's sticks are known to have existed in the fifteenth century.

A fragment of a fourteenth-century backgammon board and a counter belonging to it were excavated in Leiden,³³ and a board was found in Freiburg.³⁴ The triangular divisions that characterize the board are discernible in the Leiden fragment; Bosch needed only to suggest them. Dice have been found in excavation sites in virtually all Dutch cities (including 's-Hertogenbosch);³⁵ a particularly large number dating from the fourteenth century come from what was once a watering place on the common in Amersfoort.³⁶ As far as fifteenth-century playing cards from the Low Countries are concerned, only a few outstanding and beautifully decorated packs have survived.³⁷ The less unusual specimens have been lost, as there was no special reason to keep them. A fifteenth-century jester's stick from France has survived (ill. 18.6).³⁸ This particular specimen was cast in bronze, whereas wooden jester's sticks,

32. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv.no. RF 2218.

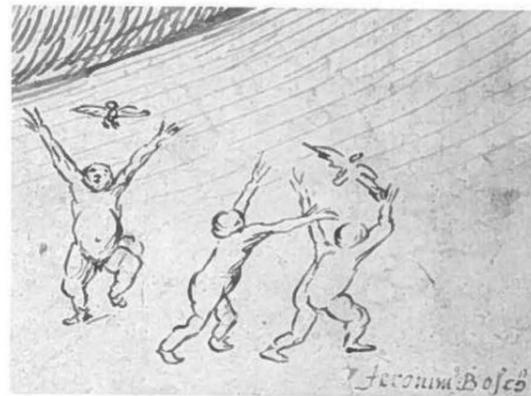
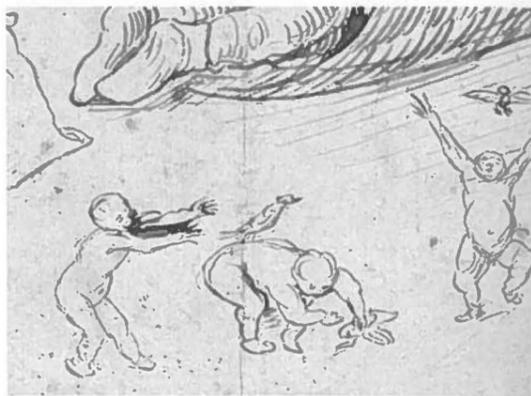
33. Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, inv.no. h 1993/11.1.

34. Konstanz, Landesdenkmalamt Baden-Württemberg, Aussenstelle Konstanz, inv.no.

35. 's-Hertogenbosch, Archeology Department, inv. no. i 11633

36. M. Krauwer and F. Snieder, *Nering en vermaak, De opgraving van een veertiende eeuwse markt in Amersfoort*, Utrecht 1994, 155-157.

37. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art – The Cloisters, inv.no. 1983.515.1-52 (Flemish, 1470-1485); Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.no. 2018-2071



Hieronymus Bosch, *Playing children*, details
 of a figure with bare buttocks in a
 and playing children, pen and brown ink,
 cm. Vienna, Graphische Sammlung
 a

which were undoubtedly far more common, have been lost.

Wherever it has been possible to compare objects in Bosch's paintings with existent specimens, it transpires that Bosch's depiction of artefacts was generally fairly accurate. Many of the objects used for games in his pictures have been found at excavation sites and are known to have existed in the Netherlands in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But time has destroyed all but a fraction of the medieval world. Only a small, fairly random selection of artefacts has survived, and some, like the backgammon board, are no more than fragments. Even so, enough remains to confirm that Bosch's depictions of such objects are indeed true to life. It is therefore reasonable to assume that other objects he painted, but which are no longer extant, such as windmills and playing cards, look as they do in his pictures. Many of them – everyday games and toys in particular – were made of perishable materials (wood, fabric and suchlike), which would obviously not have survived over the centuries.

Artefacts in paintings and prints regarded as copies after Hieronymus Bosch or as the work of his followers are often less detailed than those in works attributed to Bosch himself. This can be

seen, for example, in the skates in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* | *The Man on the Ice* or the windmills in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* triptych. Whereas Bosch presumably worked from originals or at least objects he had seen, his followers appear to have known them only from seeing them in his work. On these grounds, Janssen has suggested that these realistic details could be a key to the attribution of work to Bosch.³⁹

Hieronymus Bosch lived on the market square in 's-Hertogenbosch – his house can be seen in pictures of the square from around 1530.⁴⁰ He produced the bulk of his work at home or in the studio of his parents' house on the opposite side of the square. He would have seen children at play in the square day after day, and the ones that appear in his paintings are just like the ordinary children from his neighbourhood in the fifteenth century.⁴¹ Bosch knew the chairs he himself sat on and the utensils he used at table, but he would also have known what was on sale in the town. He would surely have strolled through the market during the annual fair, where merchants sold game boards and dice, where magicians and quacksalvers demonstrated their skills and wares, and where children paraded their newly acquired windmills. In winter he would have seen the townsfolk skat-

ing on the river Dieze, and in summer he himself may even have played a game of kolf on the grass around Saint John's Cathedral, or spent a rainy evening drinking and playing cards in the *Gulden Leeuw* on the market square.⁴² It is not surprising that details of this kind are true to life. Deliberately or not, every artist reveals something of his surroundings, and Bosch, like any other, was a child of his time. The culture of everyday life in 's-Hertogenbosch is as present in his work as the themes depicted by artists before him – as one would expect of an artist as well educated as Bosch.

The strange world Bosch portrayed was not drawn from a 'tabula rasa'. Bosch composed it from details he knew, which he placed in the context of a theme he had mastered. His faithful depiction of artefacts of his day includes – for the first time on such a large scale – a standard repertoire of toys and games. Depicting children's toys to designate a child or a child-like character was a conventional device, as was his use of games of chance (cards, dice and backgammon boards) to characterize profligates. Bosch also used toys and game attributes to create fanciful images. All of them, however, whether they appear in their normal context or not, document the fashions of the

day and attest to the artist's powers of imagination. One of the reasons that Bosch's pictures arouse such astonishment in us is because the details are so familiar: the wonderful thing about the boat in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is that it is simply an ordinary skate. Hieronymus Bosch was the supreme master when it came to playing with reality.

39. See chapter 17 in this book.

40. A.M. Koldewij (ed.), *In Buscoducis. Kunst uit de Bourgondische tijd te 's-Hertogenbosch*, Maarssen/The Hague/'s-Hertogenbosch 1990, 100–101.

41. A. Willemsen, 'Schamele clerckkens. Bossche kinderen in de Middeleeuwen', *Brabants Heem*, 52-1 (2000), 9–10.

42. The building on the market square (no. 6) was a tavern in Bosch's day, and later 'De Gouden Leeuw' hotel. The archives of 's-Hertogenbosch contain a reference of 1483 to one Aernt die Vrieze, 'innkeeper at the "Gulden Leeuw" on the market square'. The same building, 'den Gulden Leuwe' was also described in 1506 as a dwelling and tavern. See A.F.O. Sasse van Ysselt, *De voornamste huizen en gebouwen van 's-Hertogenbosch, alsmede hunnen eigenaars of bewoners in vroegere eeuwen. Aanteekeningen uit de Bossche schepensprotocollen loopende van 1500-1810*, 's-Hertogenbosch 1914, vol. III, 481. The author is grateful to Aart de Vos of 's-Hertogenbosch Municipal Archives, who identified *De Gulden Leeuw* and several other taverns that were in the market square in Bosch's day: *In Hisnaniën or Spanie* (where nos. 01-02 now stand); *De Zwarte Arend*