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**Hieronymus Bosch depicts the seven capital vices, or “deadly sins,” in scenes from everyday life that are filled with elaborate detail and symbolism.**

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# A Wearied Explorer

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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We know very little about the early life and training of the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch. He married a wealthy woman before 1481, but they had no children. The *Tabletop with the Seven Deadly Sins and Last Four Things*, because it is one of several works located in the Prado in Madrid, may support the theory that the artist traveled to Spain. Bosch's subject matter is transitional, drawing both from the religious moralizing of the Middle Ages and the humanism of the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup>

The *Tabletop* can be dated stylistically to the artist's first period (1480-1485). The composition features five circular forms that resemble the convex, bull's eye mirrors (or *specula*) of the day; perhaps this is because the mirror was used in medieval moral literature as a symbol for a comprehensive overview, as in titles such as *Speculum humanae salvationis* (*Mirror of Human Salvation*). The smaller circles in the corners of the composition depict the Four Last Things (Death, Judgment, Hell, and Glory). Around the larger circle in the middle are depictions of the seven capital vices (or "deadly sins" as they were popularly known) in scenes from everyday life.<sup>2</sup>

Bosch's selection of the seven deadly sins for this comprehensive view of human immorality is not surprising. They had become popular in art to illustrate humanity's tendencies towards sin. They were used as a rubric in the practice of confession, and were taught widely with a mnemonic, SALIGIA, based on the first letters of their names in Latin – *superbia* (pride), *avaritia* (greed), *luxuria* (lust), *invidia* (envy), *gula* (gluttony), *ira* (anger), and *acedia* (sloth).<sup>3</sup> The list ordering of the sins, however, varied from this among authors.

At the very center of the composition, representing the eye of God, is the figure of Christ emerging from his tomb; the Latin inscription here is *Cave cave d[omin]us videt* (Beware, Beware, God Sees). The brilliant colors and beams radiating outward suggest an association between Christ and the sun. The sins of the world, it would seem, are under constant scrutiny and could assure a final verdict of damnation for sinful humanity.<sup>4</sup> Placed above and below the central circle are cautionary biblical verses. In translation, these are respectively:

They are a nation void of sense;  
there is no understanding in them.

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*Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516), ACEDIA, from TABLETOP WITH THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS AND LAST FOUR THINGS (1485). Oil on panel. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Photo: Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library. Used by permission.*

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If they were wise, they would understand this;  
they would discern what the end would be.

*Deuteronomy 32:28-29*

I will hide my face from them,  
I will see what their end will be.

*Deuteronomy 32:20a*

Fascinated with the horrors of sin and eternal punishment, Bosch depicted them with elaborate detail and symbolism. The scenes of the seven deadly sins in the *Tabletop* are complex, but they are very true to life. They do not feature the elements of the fantastic and sexual licentiousness that characterize his later and more famous work, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. In the *Tabletop* Bosch reserves such elements for the outer circles in which he imagines the eschatological consequences of sin.

*Acedia* is represented by a man lounging around: he is sitting in a large chair before a fire with a pillow propped behind his head. His dog is sleeping at his feet. Behind him a nun holds a prayer book and offers a rosary to him, suggesting that he should pray. Instead the man holds a complex instrument, which may be associated with the sextant and vase filled with rolled documents (perhaps these are maps?) displayed on the shelf. Beside the man is a folio of documents secured with ribbon and leather cover. Taken together, the instruments of navigation and papers may indicate that the sitter is a sort of explorer who has been distracted from his religious duties by wandering thoughts and is now wearied.

"Acedia can show itself in the total inertia of the couch potato or the restless distractions of endless activity," Rebecca DeYoung notes. "Somewhere in between the two is a holy Sabbath rest for the heart that has given itself utterly to God."<sup>5</sup> This man represents both the couch potato and the distracted explorer. He is being offered the middle ground by the nun: to receive the rosary and prayer book would put him on a path of return to God through prayer and holy Sabbath rest.

## NOTES

1 "Bosch, Hieronymus, Jeroen or Jérôme," *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press), [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/benezit/B00023609](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/benezit/B00023609) (accessed September 7, 2013).

2 Larry Silver, "God in the Details: Bosch and Judgment(s)," *The Art Bulletin*, 83:4 (December, 2001), 626-650, here citing 628.

3 Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Loyola's Acts: The Rhetoric of the Self* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 120, [publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft2t1nb1rw;brand=ucpress](http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft2t1nb1rw;brand=ucpress) (accessed September 8, 2013).

4 Silver, "God in the Details," 628.

5 Rebecca DeYoung, "Resistance to the Demands of Love," *Acedia*, *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 49 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2013), 17.



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