

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

*The Laboratory  
of God*

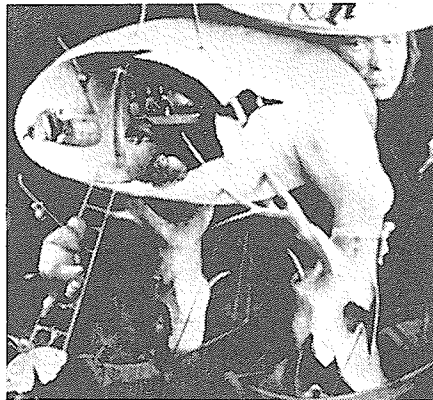
"Bosch's *Garden of Delights* Triptych: Remnants of a 'Fossil' Science" by Laurinda S. Dixon, in *The Art Bulletin* (Mar. 1981), College Art Association of America, 16 East 52nd St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

The fantastic imagery of Hieronymus Bosch's three-panel painting, *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1505–10), now hung in the Prado in Madrid, has long puzzled art historians. How and why did his 16th-century mind invent creatures that seem part animal, part vegetable, and part machine? Dixon, an art historian at Indianapolis's Museum of Art, contends that Bosch's exotica constituted, in effect, a code easily decipherable by many educated Europeans of his time. *Garden* portrays the medieval alchemists' view of life.

Today, "alchemy" conjures up images of evil sorcerers obsessed with distilling gold from lead. Yet in Bosch's time, alchemy was a comprehensive Christian philosophy. Its practitioners manufactured useful dyes, medicines, and cosmetics. But the most ambitious alchemists also strove to create a "second Eden" by restoring to humanity the emotional balance and physical purity that it enjoyed before the Fall.

Bosch (1450?–1516) lived in Leiden, Holland, a center of alchemical learning. His in-laws were pharmacists. In *Garden*, he depicts alchemy's guiding allegory—likening the process of distillation to the world's divine creation, destruction, and rebirth. The left panel shows Christ joining Adam and Eve: It represents the first phase of distillation—the "marriage of opposites." The pair's multiplication into mankind, shown in the center panel, corresponds to the "coagulation" of earth, air, fire, and water into a balanced whole substance. Similarly, Bosch's bizarre flower/animal/humans represent alchemical experimentation—"marrying the elements indiscriminately one form to another," as one early alchemist put it. Alchemists called the third stage of distillation "putrification"—blackening a mixture over a hot fire.

*The "egg man" of Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights. Do the brittle, ovoid shells that populate this 16th-century masterpiece represent a vessel used by medieval alchemists for their experiments?*



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Bosch, like his contemporaries, compared this procedure to the agony of hell.

Bosch's wildest images incorporate alchemical devices. The beaker-shaped fountain of life in the central panel—whose neck culminates in a blooming pinnacle of buds and veined tissue—is one of many alchemical “marriage chambers” represented.

Bosch, writes Dixon, believed in a benevolent God, the ultimate Healer. He painted *Garden* to express his faith that the road to salvation was through science combined with Christian devotion.

### *The Literature of Nightmare*

“The Gothic Origins of Science Fiction”  
by Patrick Brantlinger, in *Novel: A Forum  
on Fiction* (Fall 1980), Box 1984, Brown  
University, Providence, R.I. 02912.

Gothic romances, set in “sinister Italy or wicked France” and drenched with madness and demonism, and science fiction such as Arthur C. Clarke's interplanetary *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) share more than just their perches on the fringes of “respectable” literature.

Both defy the primacy of reason that began during the Enlightenment in 18th-century Europe. And both portray reason carried to extreme to make their point. But they differ, says Brantlinger, professor of English at Indiana University, in the scale of the mayhem they depict.

Gothic writers focus on internal disaster and psychological disintegration. Employing unreliable narrators (such as the opium addict of Edgar Allen Poe's “Ligeia”) and filling their stories with claustrophobic dungeons, secret passageways, and coffins, they chronicle the “inward journey” into madness and death—usually of a highly educated individual. In Mary Shelley's famous 1818 tale, for example, Dr. Frankenstein pushes science (reason) too far. Yet the chaos caused by his monster seems to affect only the good doctor, his family, and friends. In science fiction, the damage inflicted by technological progress pervades all of society and threatens to wipe out individualism itself. Witness the hi-tech dictatorship of George Orwell's *1984* and the treacherous computer “Hal,” of *2001*.

In Gothic tales, the message is that the irrational will conquer the rational. The villain-hero is often in league with the devil or endowed with supernatural powers. In science fiction, people are also dehumanized, but powerless—“sub-natural.” The Gothic protagonist may be a vampire or necrophiliac; the super-technicians of later fiction sap people of life by subordinating them to machines. Invasions from outer space are simply demonic possessions of another kind.

“When Aristotle fails,” the well-known science-fiction author Isaac Asimov has said, “try science fiction.” But to demonstrate reason's pitfalls, science fiction, like the Gothic novels of old, extrapolates too far. As Asimov's colleague, Ursula K. Le Guin wrote in 1976, “Almost anything carried to its logical extreme becomes depressing.” The true monsters, suggests Brantlinger, are the authors' imaginations.