



Hieronymus Bosch, *Extracting the Stone of Madness*, 1501–1505, Oil on oak panel, 48.5 × 34.5 cm, Museo Del Prado.

Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch was born in S’Hertogenbosch, Netherlands (present day) around 1450, and he lived until around 1516. His given name was Jheronimus van Aken, and he was accepted to the Brotherhood of Our Lady in 1487, a sign of some social standing. Hieronymus Bosch was made famous for his large triptych paintings, including the *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1510). This type of painting coupled religious subject matter with a sense of appeal found in the visual variety present in the painting. Details of Bosch’s work show small narratives complete with symbols that could take a viewer quite some time to fully digest. This type of oil painting was a common method of conveying a complex message to viewers, who might be illiterate, in Northern Europe during the Renaissance. The use of oil paint, a new material at the time, allowed the artist to create over a large period of time; the paint’s slow rate of drying also gave the artist the ability to add a significant amount of detail to the work. It is more than likely that Bosch’s work came from a workshop of artists mostly staffed by family members.

Bosch’s work would be collected by nobility: in this instance the painting *Extracting the Stone of Madness* (1501-1505) was commissioned by Philip of Burgundy. You may have heard of someone having rocks for brains, but what about a flower? In *Extracting the Stone of Madness*, Bosch uses the idea of having a stone in the brain as the title of the work, which was a common idea in the middle ages as a source of insanity. What changes in Bosch’s painting, however, is what is extracted from the head of the patient, who is shown tied to his chair. The surgeon, in this case wearing a funnel on his head (a symbol for quackery or chicanery), is extracting not a stone, but a waterlily as also seen on the table. In this situation, with the flower being a symbol of desire, the illness in question is shown to be one of the heart and not of the mind. Given the patient’s appearance—his unkempt clothing, rather large stomach, and the symbols used—this gentleman’s ailment likely stems from his enjoyment of life rather than mental illness. The other figure in the painting of particular notice is the woman dressed as a nun. On her head is a book, which we can assume to be a holy one that keeps her from undergoing the same surgery.

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1. <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/whats-on/exhibition/bosch-the-5th-centenary-exhibition/f049c260-888a-4ff1-8911-b320f587324a?searchMeta=bosch>
2. <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/extracting-the-stone-of-madness/313db7a0-f9bf-49ad-a242-67e95b14c5a2?searchid=681585ac-d02d-fb3b-e802-6f9102965ad3>
3. Text drawn from Silva, P.: *Bosch. The 5th Centenary Exhibition*, Museo Nacional del Prado, 2016, pp. 356-363.