



The Use of Transparency in the Garden of Earthly Delights

by Lee van Laer

Transparent objects, whether natural or man-made — the distinction is not always 100% clear — turn up in a number of different places in the Garden of Earthly Delights. The device of transparency has specific meanings which support one another in the symbolic language of the painting; and a study of its various uses can help shed some light on certain aspects of its story.

It should be said, then, that the question of transparency and opacity here relates not only to the ability to *see* — that is, the ability to discern, to discriminate, and to understand with more than just the factual capacity of the ordinary mind — but the question of *intellect*, that is, the difference between what is defined as *human* intelligence, and Divine intelligence; or, the difference between *deductive* intelligence — that gained from the outside world — and *intuitive* intelligence, which comes from an inward payment or an inward teaching (tuition.)

In order to understand the meaning of the word *intellect* as it would have been understood by, for example, Meister Eckhart and the great spiritual masters of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, we need to look at its roots and the origins of its modern meaning. The Latin roots all relate to understanding and discernment. The modern meaning—that is, of “a domain exclusively belonging to the thinking mind”—originated around the time of the Enlightenment, in the early 1800’s.

The idea of opacity and transparency in this painting quite literally translates to the action of discernment — the ability to *see* or *not see*, which is not intellectual but physical (sight being a physical faculty) and we can thus know that the use of the device of transparency as an indicator of discernment (the Northern Renaissance understanding of intellect) makes absolute sense. The theological schools, moreover, that discussed such matters during the late Middle Ages and of the early Renaissance were quite interested in questions about the divine intellect and its nature,

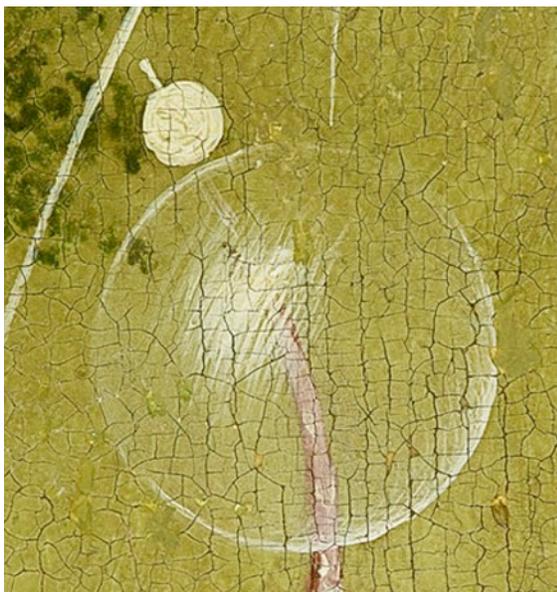
as opposed to the human intellect. We know this from Meister Eckhart's sermons alone; but the question was a living one in Platonic and Neoplatonic schools, which were of great interest to Christian thinkers across the entire range of Christianity's evolution. These ideas could not possibly have escaped the active minds of Bosch and his fellow esoteric Marians.

During the medieval period, the esoteric monastic schools of theology, philosophy, and religious thinking struggled with such questions; and it is generally agreed that the major Gothic cathedral such as Chartres embodied rich, complex symbolic languages that preserved such knowledge for the schools that studied them, while at the same time presenting them in allegorical manner for the general public. But during that period, aside from some few idiosyncratic works which survived the paroxysms of iconoclasm that swept Northern Europe after the Renaissance, it



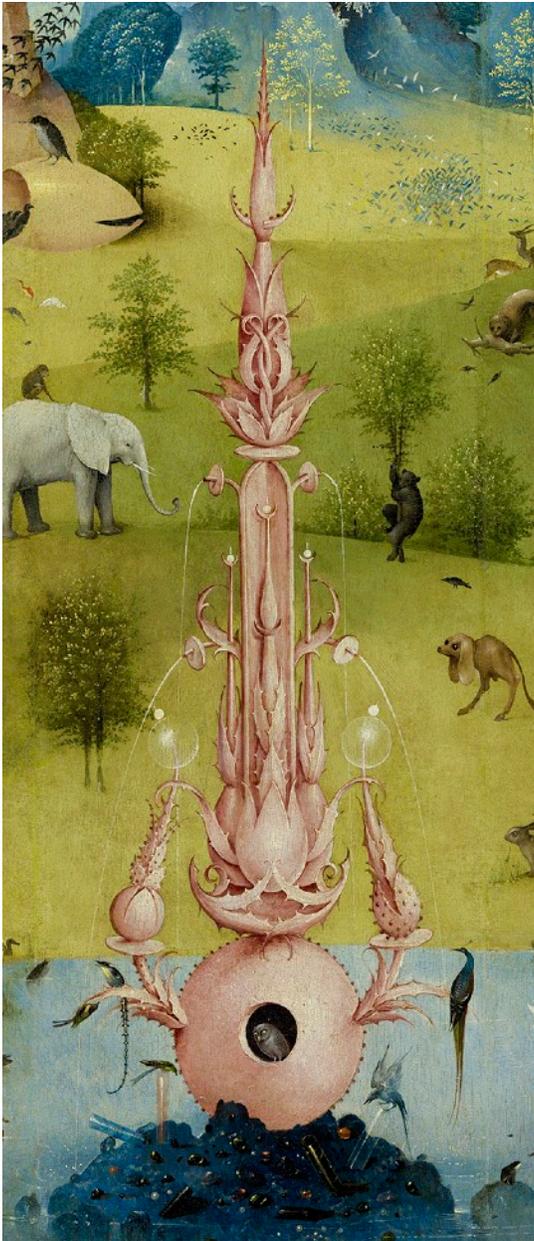
appears that very little of the Northern European painting tradition embodied that knowledge. There was, then, a void to be filled; a place for a body of work that would, in two-dimensional art, take on the task that the schools which built the great Gothic cathedrals had undertaken. There must be a way to paint the question of the divine and human intellect, and the nature of their interaction; but how? The Garden of Earthly Delights was part of the answer to that question.

Bosch left no doubt as to the central role of this question of transparency, the ability to *see*, to discern, in the painting, by showing us a transparent globe with a whole (but tellingly divided!) world in it on the outside panels.



Contrast this with the two transparent globes of the divine fountain, empty, pure, and unoccupied: awaiting the arrival of that same world which is depicted on the outside panels — the birth into the material realm not just of material things, but an *entire world of the intellect* which is born into mankind and womankind, in the form of individual souls — each one of which comprises an entire individual universe, encased, so to speak, in the bubble of its own Being.

Each of the clear, transparent globes in the inside left-hand panel is penetrated, you will note, by a slender thread of pink, divine influence, foreshadowing the penetration of the divine



intellect into the “egg” of humanity’s intelligence: that same divine intellectual spark of the soul Meister Eckhart spoke of so often. Remember that we speak here of that intellectual spark as a spark of *insight*, of *seeing*, of discernment—not a thought-based intellect of the rational mind, of literal facts to be listed and categorized. It represents an intuition or intelligence of a different order than the one we usually use to analyze the world with. Simply by using these globes, Bosch has already brought us to the threshold of this question in a simple, elegant, and intuitive way which is obvious—once we understand what he’s up to.

In this first instance, the Divine faculty of discrimination appears in the form of not one, but *two*, transparent spheres, symmetrically arranged on either side of the fountain. Each of these spheres represents, first, the whole, balanced, and perfect vision of God. They are *empty* (except for the subtle divine thread that penetrates them) because they’ve not yet reached the material world, and there is nothing for them to reveal. Don’t forget, as you think about this, to understand that the world — as depicted on the outside panels, is also a whole and perfect vision of God: but the fact that the sphere is on the *outside* panels, *split in half* (with God off to one side), represents the duality that arises between the transcendent and the immanent, that is, the division of the universe into God and his creation. The world, and man, are embodiments and reflections of that paradox. Putting the transparent globe containing the world on the outside of the altarpiece is a clever way of referring to all of



those questions in the simplest possible manner — a signature characteristic of Bosch's approach to symbolism.

The act of seeing is *fecund* — the spheres represent two eggs, or testicles — but it has not given birth to any action when we first encounter it. Rather, they emanate purity, freedom, and clarity: the state of God's divine wisdom before it encounters the material

This state, of course, cannot persist. The divine force enters the material world, generating an intellectual world of idealized values, represented by gemstones of varying description. Those gemstones have many aspects, some of them opaque, such as black tourmaline; others are ruby cabochons representing the blood of Christ; and still others evoke aquamarine and emerald. Most prominent, however, are the crystalline rods which represent known mineral forms: aquamarine on the left, with what is probably rose-colored tourmaline or morganite next to it; and, on the right-hand side, what appears to be green or yellow tourmaline, and a clear, uncolored crystal.



The three colored crystals are probably meant to represent the primary colors red, yellow, and blue; but the clear, transparent crystal has become the perch for a blue bird, who (along with its partner on the other side) represents the divine intellect in its first earthly manifestation. (The birds perched just above these two material or earthly birds are birds of paradise, or divine intellect, which reside just above the place where heaven touches the earth.)

The combination of the bird with the transparent crystal is an indicator that spiritual thought, that is, the thought closest to heaven, has the ability to *see through* the material world, otherwise obscures the real and the true.



The next place we encounter transparency is at the base of the Divine mountain in the upper left-hand corner of the central panel. (This assumes we adopt the standardized convention of reading the painting across its levels left to right, top to bottom, in the first two panels. The third panel, hell, has to be read bottom to top, because hell is upside down relative to heaven. Because of the complexity of the work, other readings are not only possible but necessary, but we will stick with this one for the time being.)

The transparent crystals embedded in the base of the Divine mountain are found here—and only here—in this top one-third of the central panel. The placement of the crystals is intentional.

The pink mountain of Divine influences in the heavenly realm is pure—*unblended* with earthly influences. Its foundation incorporates Divine insight; crystalline structures literally shoot through it because Divine insight is a part of its inward formation, that is, the core of its nature (note the two individuals in the center next to the vertical transparent column.) It provides support both vertically and horizontally (see the bar that joins the two mountains at the base) and it also provides insights directed towards the outward world (see the rod projecting outward in the bottom left-hand corner.) None of the other mountains have transparent crystalline features of this kind, although all of them have similar *structural* features.



I mention this to emphasize the fact that the transparent crystals have a special meaning related to divine insight and action, which cannot be translated to the other mountains in the divine realm, all of which have far more earthly influences blended into them. It's notable that the

tower on the right hand side, which represents dominant earthly influences that have corrupted the Divine ones, has very similar structures underneath the Divine pink leaf, but all of them, although they are white, are *opaque*. The opacity, here, reveals a wish to imitate— but such intellectual rivalry is nothing more than human vanity. We will discuss that more near the very end of the essay.

Even though true Divine insight and heavenly wisdom cannot be attained on the earthly level, the device is employed throughout the remainder of the central panel in various ways as a critique on what man *believes* insight to be, using his rational mind, as opposed to what real insight consists of. Because the central panel takes in a range of action which, once it leaves the top one third of the painting (the heavenly realm) is exclusively located in the human mind, wherever we see transparent objects, they represent either (a) an idealized way which the Divine intellect *ought* to manifest or (b) mistaken manifestations which man has appropriated for himself. As we will see, the depictions of transparency usually indicate the latter.

In keeping with the understanding of the painting as representing *levels*, it's quite important to understand that transparency signifies discernment, insight, and understanding of different kinds, *according to the level of the painting it appears in*.

In the central panel, the upper portion — the realm of the Divine and earthly mountains — has transparent crystals only on the left-hand side, where the Divine reigns supreme. Only heavenly insight can exercise its powers here. All other forms of intellect are inferior.

In the central portion of the panel, which contains the Tantric circle, transparency occurs in two



places: one is the the porcupine. This middle level of the painting, which represents a circulatory mechanism whereby man's soul rotates through the great cycle of life towards, and away from, Divine influences contains a critical comment about the nature of man's being and the tasks he has to accomplish on the earthly level in order to move back towards the heavenly one. All of that, tellingly, is symbolized by the porcupine, who's contained in a transparent bubble.

In order to understand this (at first odd) device, we need to refer back to the left-hand panel, where the porcupine is a signifier for the presence of conflict, negativity, and suffering. Yes, even in Paradise—even in the Garden of Eden—such struggle is necessary.

We see it embodied in the events taking place above and to the right of the sacred white giraffe.



Bosch has chosen a complex set of creatures to depict negativity and conflict here in paradise; the weasel, the boar, and the hedgehog each deserve a monograph of their own. But we'll focus for the time being on the porcupine, which — in its European version as a hedgehog — is:

“...the image of the Evil One as the Destroyer of Souls and ravisher of spiritual fruits; and William of Normandy advised the Christian to take care lest this demon come to shake his vine or his fruit tree to rob him of his fruit, that is, the fruit of good works.”

—Louis Charbonneau-Lassy, quoting William of Normandy in *The Bestiary of Christ*, Parabola Books 1991, p. 145

Well, this is a bit dramatic, and we will have to allow for the fact that Bosch usually concealed more sophisticated and intelligent aims behind his symbols. But the point of the porcupine is that it represents our negativity, our anger. In this sense, we understand why it presides over conflict of this kind in the left-hand panel; it's aligned with the weasel, whose negativity is all too apparent.

When the porcupine reappears in the Tantric circle, encased in a transparent ball, it does so in the early stage of the cycle through the lower, earthly realm. The porcupine is elevated above the circle itself, representing (like the white crane in the background, held by the man on the white boar) a dominant influence. He appears next to a bird with a cherry, indicating that temptation is the other dominant influence.

Encapsulating the porcupine in a transparent globe implies an ability to *see*—that is, exercise a form of self observation. What is to *be* observed is the porcupine—who embodies one's negativity, one's anger. The principle of self observation and a mindful awareness of one's negativity has been well-known to esoteric practitioners since ancient times; yet rarely, if ever, has it been so succinctly depicted in a visual form.

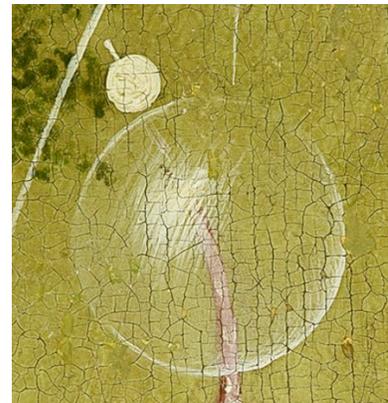
This act of self observation — knowing oneself, knowing one's negativity — is a holy and sacred activity during this action, and in all the other panels. The message is fascinating: in the midst of this melee, this complex procession of the objects, events, circumstances, and conditions of an external life and the way it affects our inner being, the most important thing we can do is *see how we are*. This visibility is given as a kind of gift; it produces what is arguably the most totemic, magical, and unusual element in the entire Tantric circle. In doing so, it visually (and literally) elevates the events it presents to a talismanic entity.

It's thus worthy of a great deal more contemplation; far from a casual tease, visual trickery, or some arch piece of decoration, it's a key to understanding the operative conditions that are about to arise in the midst of ordinary life, where so many other creatures are packed together in a dense confluence of conflicting and confusing events: a spiritual struggle. Like other elements hoisted on posts of various kinds throughout the painting, it is a *signifier*. Viewers might want to keep that idea in mind as they inspect other parts of the painting to probe for meaning.

The central level contains one additional transparent element: a man with a bubble around his head on the left side, surrounded by outsized birds. His head is enclosed with a tear-shaped divine shroud that mirrors the empty, pregnant globe on the divine fountain; and the intention of



the divine intellect, its spark of the soul, its clarity, is apparent: here Bosch tells us that man's consciousness ought to be *illuminated* by the thoughts he has, his rational parts. Yet already something is going wrong; the outsized birds suggest that the thoughts he's having aren't the products of divine consciousness — as originally intended — but rather those of his own egoistic imagination.



On the earthly level, we have to understand that a formal translation of symbols takes place. The earthly level is a reflection of the heavenly level, and symbols we see on it mirror — but do not precisely *replicate* — the meaning that they have on higher levels. Because clarity—transparency—is a perfect aspect of the Divine insight, which consists of discernment and understanding, transparency here represents *material* discernment and understanding in all its guises, and there is a dialogue about the nature of this transparency throughout the bottom, or earthly, level of the painting. This

dialogue of transparency is deeply embedded in the argument about the human intellect; and to be fully understood, one needs to read the essay on that subject in conjunction with this one.

Let's run through all the different transparent elements and what they mean.

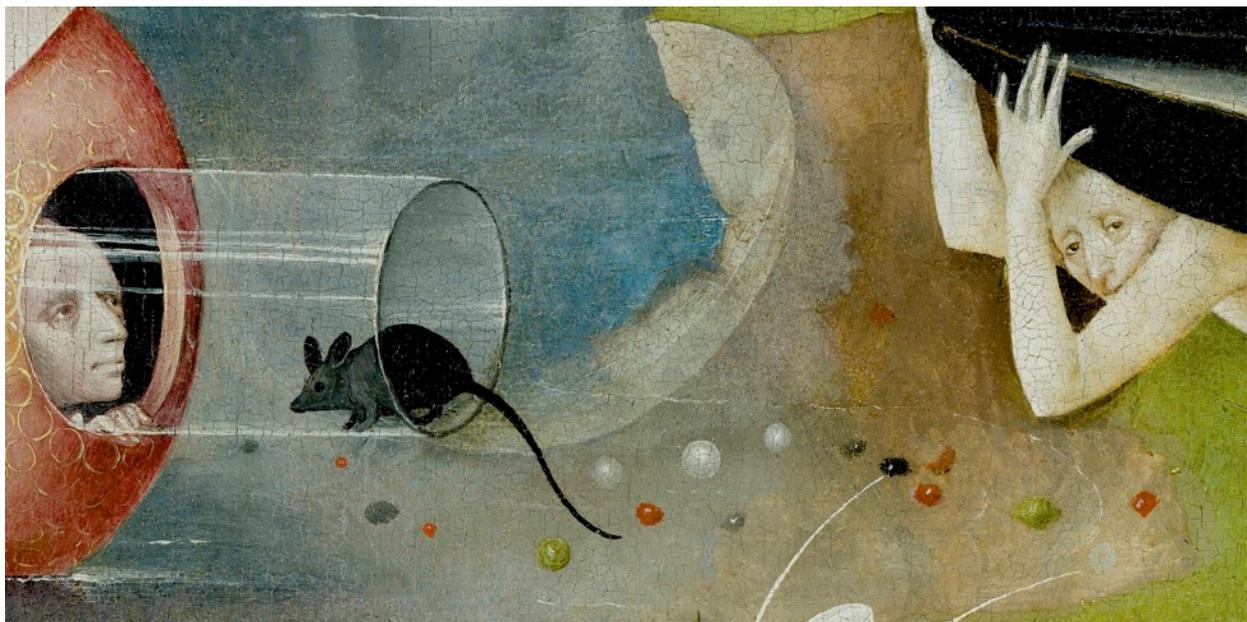
As is so often the case, the left-hand side of the painting contains a key to events that we later read across the painting from left to right afterwards. In this case, it's a transparent globe containing a tender scene of love between a man and a woman. The relationship of this globe to the outside panels—and the two glowing spheres on the divine fountain in the left-hand side—will not escape the reader; as well as the sphere containing the porcupine. Each of these whole spheres represents what ought to be a *complete* body of knowledge, something that ought to be understood in its entirety; and indeed, all the spheres in the painting represent this principle of the absolute unity of God, which is referred to as Tawḥīd in Islam.

Each sphere, of course, represents a different realm, or area of discipline: for example, the sphere at the base of the Divine fountain with the owl in it represents all wisdom in its entirety; the



sphere of the globe on the outer panels represents the inner life of man; the sphere with the porcupine represents a comprehensive understanding of anger and negativity; and so on. Spheres which are pink represent heavenly bodies of knowledge; spheres which are blue represent earthly ones. Spheres which are whole and less damaged represent more perfect knowledge; spheres which are penetrated with spikes, broken areas, or are being peeled apart or have holes in them represent imperfect, incomplete, or damaged bodies of knowledge. Using this device in conjunction with transparency has allowed Bosch to refer to many levels of teaching in subtle ways which by all rights needs an entire treatment of its own.

In any event, the sphere we are most interested in here is the one that introduces what ought to be the main focus of insight, or understanding, on the material level, and that is an insight into and an understanding of love in both its Divine and earthly qualities. This is probably one of the tenderest scenes in the entire painting; and its intentions are clear enough. Surrounded by a Divine, nearly perfect sphere of heavenly insight (it does have some veins on it), it reveals an idealized love. Yet that insight, which is born of a heavenly pink calyx beneath it — representing the foundation of earthly love in its Divine origins — is compromised. This is because man's intellect makes an active choice *right from the ground of its Divine origins* to contemplate lower things—as symbolized by the man peering at the rat.

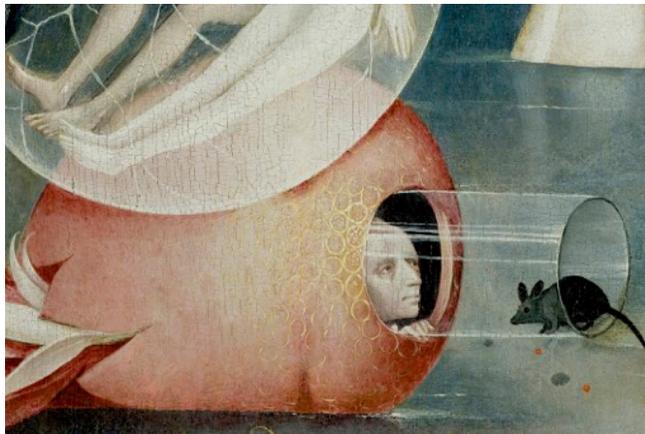


This is an unusually sophisticated esoteric argument regarding the nature of man's intellect, and readers need to absorb a wide range of inner teachings to understand how deft the treatment here is. At a minimum, one needs to read Swedenborg's *Secrets of Heaven*, especially the first three or four chapters about Genesis; in addition to that, William Chittick's *Science of the Cosmos*, *Science of the Soul* will offer insights from the Islamic point of view. The point is that the question of man's intellect and its separation from the Divine intellect was alive and well long

before Bosch painted his subjects; an effort was made to encapsulate some of these questions in this image.

Mankind was created out of love, and his primary task on the material level ought to be to gain insight and understanding into love in both its Divine and earthly nature. The noble aspect of this material nature is indicated by the gold filigree painted on the blue base of the sphere. (The only other place where a blue, earthly object is adorned with gold is in the upper central portion of the center panel, where the fountain of divine and earthly influences has a gold band placed around it.) This innocent-looking, yet highly sophisticated, structure is an encapsulation of the fall of man's intellect, where it deploys its God-given tools for attaining Divine insight—i.e., transparency, the ability to *see*—to study much lower things.

There is an objectivity to this presentation. Looking at rats is not, of itself, forbidden; yet we can see it's definitely a lower activity. Compare the man peering out of the hole to the owl in the face of the divine fountain: the relationship between the two images is clear enough. As God contacts the earth, wisdom itself (the owl) perceives creation in the form of gemstones, objects of perfect value; but when man's intellect is finally born of the Divine, it casts its gaze not on gems, but on vermin: thoughts which he perceives to be not generated by and received from God, but thoughts which he believes to be his own.



Once again, Bosch hasn't left anything to chance here; just in case the direct and important connection between this image and the owl at the base of the divine fountain escapes us, they both sport the same texture of circular "scales" on their surface; and to top it off—the thing that settles the matter once and for all—is that he's *scattered a deposit of gems* in the immediate vicinity of the rat, indicating the difference between what man is contemplating and where the actual value lies.

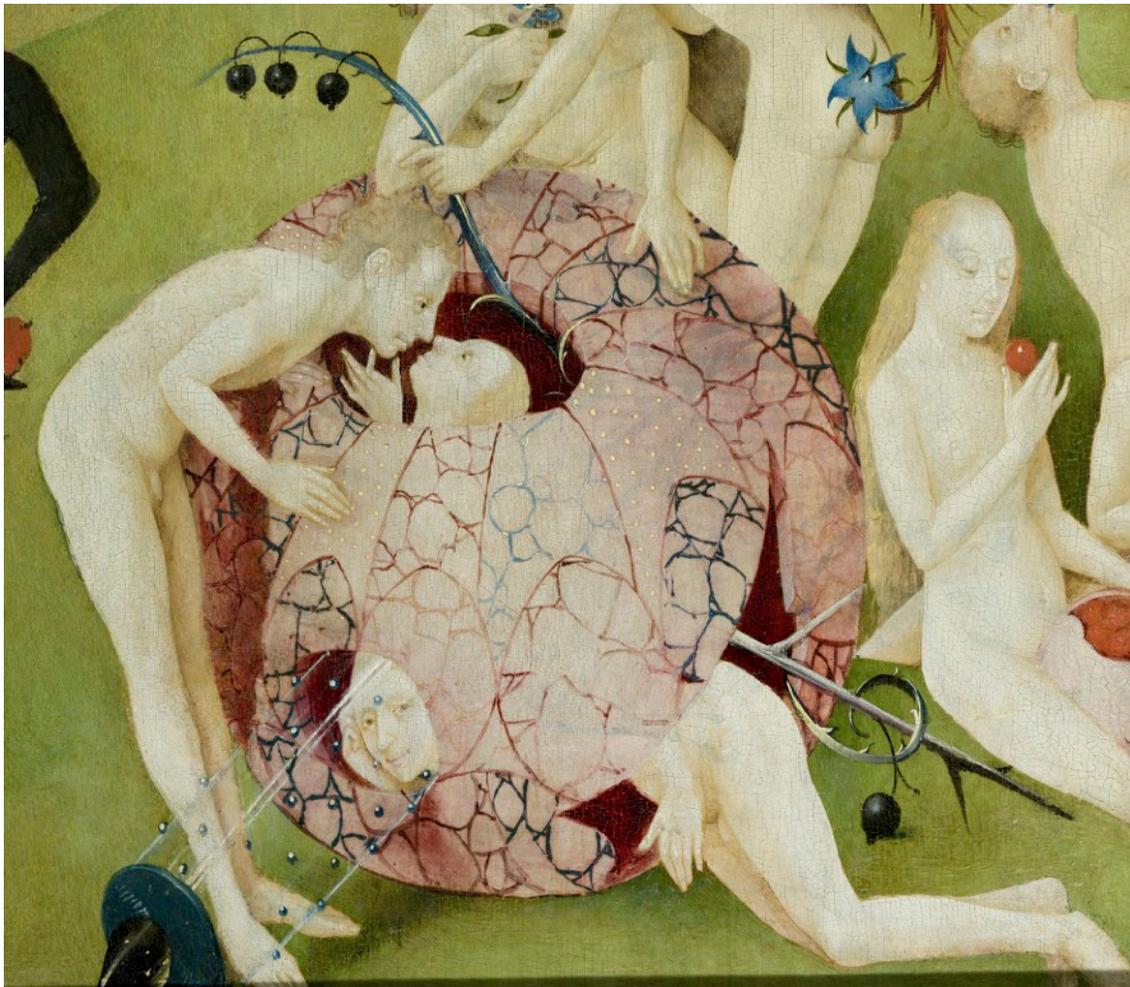
The deposit, intriguingly, is eroding out of a patch of soil, representing man's mind; and (inevitably) some of the gems eroding from that soil are, incongruously, pearls. These represent,

as they so often do in Bosch's works, lies. They are, to be sure, interspersed with gems; but a man who chooses to focus his gaze on a rat won't know the difference, will he?

Let's recall, as well, that this is the first appearance of a *manmade* transparent object: a glass cylinder. Unlike the gemstones and the sphere, which clearly grow from natural things, the glass cylinder is an unambiguous reference to human manufacturing: as it happens, the only type to be found anywhere in the left and central panel of this painting. Every other object is organic and entirely natural in its essence. Even the spears held by the Angels of the armies of temptation are sticks, not manufactured human weapons; and even their "helmets" aren't armor, but are to be understood as natural, organic parts of their Being.

Directly beneath the sphere of the contemplation of Divine and natural love, we encounter a corrupted pink sphere, shot through with blue lines, and containing holes with human beings inhabiting it, like grubs or maggots.

Disturbingly evocative, this represents a further corruption of Divine intellect in the human realm; and it lies at the very bottom of the painting, that is to say, the lowest level of earth. The



allegory of the intellect is explained in my essay on the intellect, so we will just focus on the man in the lowest part of the sphere, who—although he inhabits what ought to be perceived as a unified Divine teaching (understanding and intuition of the divine)— does so much like a worm eating rotten fruit. He peers through yet another glass cylinder at a person’s feet: like the rat, the lowest level one can look at. In this case, the glass cylinder is studded with pearls, representing lies; and since he casts his vision directly through the cylinder, he has *surrounded his vision with lies*; it is the lens he sees everything through. The artist has employed emotive value to convey the great satisfaction humans find in their own education and intelligence; everyone here is serenely happy, smiling, even though thorns and black fruit creep out of the divine sphere like a harbinger of death itself... who indeed lurks not too far above them in the form of a coffin made from a mussel shell. Man casts his vision down, not up; a misdirected understanding.

The next transparent feature appears as part of a complex temple-like structure— which is perhaps as close as we get to any other kind of “manufactured” thing anywhere in the central panel — as we move towards the right hand side. There are two transparency features here: one



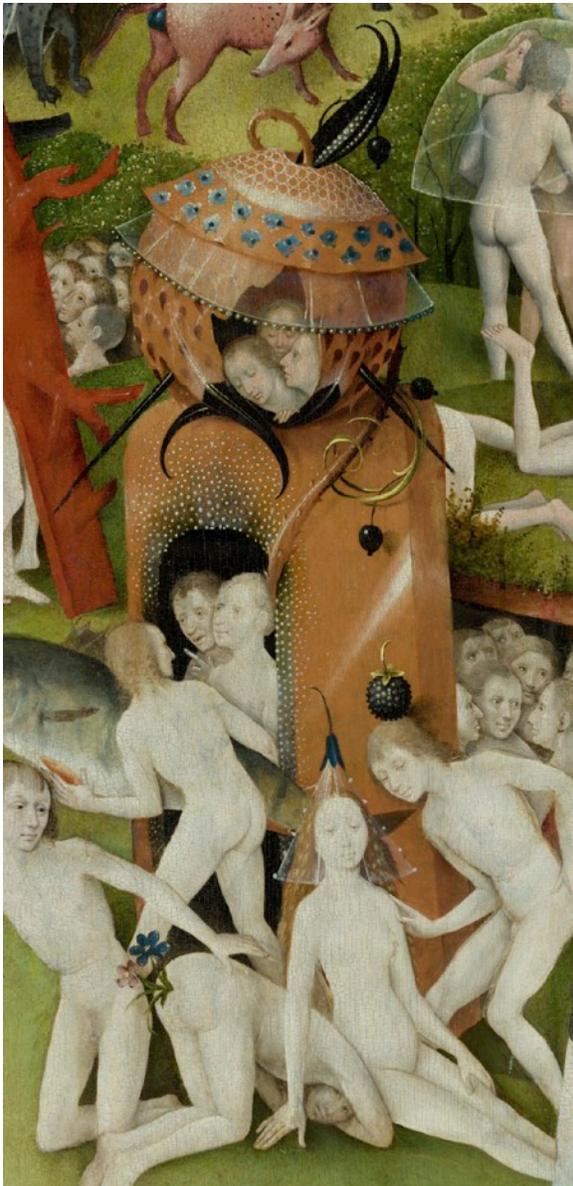
at the top, a veil covering a thorny globe, and another in a cone shape covering what appears to be a beatific woman.

The upper veil is suspended from an object that has a clear relationship to the gourd-shaped fruit in the lower left-hand corner of the central panel; both are colored in the same range of earth and ochre tones representing man’s mind, and both support the same pattern of blue trefoil flowers. While the objects both belong to the dialogue of the intellect, it takes some digging to understand why there is a veil on this figure.



First of all, as with the other critical spheres found in dialogues on the unity of understanding and divine inspiration, all of them covered with a pattern of round scales, this also has a pattern of scales at the top. The reason for the pattern of scales is as follows: each round scale represents a *whole body of knowledge*, part of what is called the multiplicity. They cover

the surface of the spheres because each sphere is an indicator that the multiplicity of creation, its apparently infinitely diverse nature, is an *illusion*— and this is why all of the scale patterns are themselves transparent, that is, they consist of rounded white outlines overlaying the completely unified sphere they are on, which symbolizes the unity of God. In cases where they do not form perfect spheres or are breaking down into mottled patterns, it represents the *disintegration* of various individual unified bodies of knowledge which contribute to the divine understanding — in other words, decay and corruption of understanding.



The top portion of this temple structure depicts a hierarchy of understanding which ought to devolve upon man's mind. Each sphere in the painting represents a wholeness, or a whole body of knowledge: the body of knowledge may be a reference to be unity of God (as in the left hand panel) or of an understanding that is related to the unity of God. So every sphere has its own significance.

This particular structure has a sphere on *top* of it, and that sphere represents, in a certain abstract sense, man's mind: so it's what sits atop the temple of man, so to speak. This sets the stage for a complex allegory in which the whole sphere represents the nature of man's thought as the ego (the fish) is installed below as the central feature of man's being.

The sphere has a hole in the top of it, representing an openness into which Divine influences can flow; and the black wings that come out of it represent, as it were, an ability to fly that's related to the already established allegory of the bird. Yet the wings, like the thorns on the sphere, are *black*; this implies an *absence of light*, along with all the danger that goes with it.

Directly beneath the aperture, we see the pattern of golden circles on top of the sphere that represent individual-yet-unified bodies of knowledge which, taken altogether, represent individual-yet-whole contributions to understanding the absolute unity God; and in an encircling band directly beneath it, an area containing the trefoil blue floral pattern which marks as a signifier of man's individual thoughts. Directly beneath this is the veil; yet as we can see, it isn't completely transparent — it obscures the portion of the sphere directly beneath it. It is, furthermore, *hemmed with pearls*; so although it purports to provide clarity, to reveal, it actually encircles the sphere with lies.

Despite its superficial innocence, this object may represent the most dangerous, thorn and claw-studded object in the entire center panel. The dominant tone of the structure—which relate it both to the dominant tonalities of hell and the corrupted earth tonalities in the left-hand panel—mark it as representing an architecture of man's degraded intellect. Earth tones, in the *Garden*, always depict barren and lifeless areas – striking departures from the majority of the composition, rich with life and green in color. In *Secrets of Heaven*, Swedenborg explains that in Genesis, earth represents the outer self: in Genesis 1:9 it is first referred to as *earth*, and then as *dry land*. Dry land is, of course, barren; whereas produce and greenery are fruits of the inner life and the soul. We see this idea presented quite consistently in every area of the painting.



Propped up against the temple is a woman wearing a cone-shaped, transparent veil in the form, more or less, of a morning glory blossom. Her blond tresses mark her as an incarnation of Eve; the couple is one of the many Adams and Eves found throughout the painting. For our purposes right now, let's note how these two flatter themselves with their acquisition of knowledge. Adam, capped with a blackberry (symbolizing not just any knowledge, but bad knowledge) which dominates his thinking. It's a knowing emphatically born of many facts collected together, an investment in rational doctrines of multiplicity which weigh him down — hence his strangely bent pose. The odd figure with his head folded under his arm represents a man whose understanding is framed only by what he can grasp with his ordinary mind; and we can see that the fruits of that action are coming out of his ass, with the help of an assistant all too eager to sign on and smell them.



Eve poses a bit more of a conundrum. She's treated sympathetically; seemingly still pure, despite her passage across the bottom section of the painting as a willing participant in the decay of mankind's understanding. She perfectly mirrors her corpse-like counterpart in the hellish right hand panel; here in the

center panel, however, she still retains her innocence.

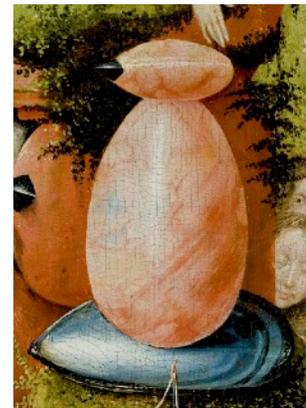
I think it's fair enough to say, given Bosch's treatment of women throughout this painting, that



the view of them in all its guises—save those of the right hand panel — is mostly sympathetic.

Despite Eve's role in the fall of man, she is treated with a graceful aspect, beginning from the left-hand side, where Christ/God holds her hands gently and in apparent blessing. She plays, in other words, not just the role of Eve, but also the role of Mary.

These two conceptual images of womankind are also mirrors of one another: Eve causes the fall of man, but Mary gives birth to the son who saves him. The potential for that saving grace is still evidence when we meet this particular Eve/Mary with the transparent veil across her face: although it is studded with pearls, the lies they represent seem to be almost gentle. And indeed, directly to her right sits the cryptic pink vessel which (secretly and geometrically) represents the triumph of Christ (See *The Esoteric Bosch.*) There are, as usual, complex and downright brilliant allegories taking place here.



The point is that the transparent veil indicates that despite the lies—despite mankind's reliance on rational thought instead of divine inspiration—despite our steady passage away from the ways of Grace and the divine intelligence—there is still a virginal purity that can receive something of the divine. We have not yet reached the place where all is lost.



We now move to the last two groups of individuals that feature transparency in the central panel. To the right of the “temple” structure we see a group composed of two men and a woman. They are enclosed by one half of a transparent sphere — in other words, 50% of what is needed in terms both of Divine generation (as in the complete transparent sphere from the left-hand panel) and, equally, only 50% what is needed to appreciate both Divine and earthly love, as indicated by the complete transparent Adam-and-Eve sphere on the left-hand side of the central panel.

This half-sphere on the right references the full sphere on the left; it represents only half of what is needed in order to properly understand the role of love in spiritual life.

In this case, the half that's missing is certainly the Divine half; a man with his back to us attempts to join the couple in holy matrimony, but perhaps to no avail. The

groom, on the left, is completely distracted; rather than focusing on the ceremony, he's peering



intently at the vast processional taking place in the Tantric circle. The figure is completely expressive; we can't possibly mistake his almost comical concern.

Familiarity with a wide range of Bosch paintings, with their deeply intertwined and interrelated themes, indicates that this couple represents the ambiguous questions of holy matrimony in one's ordinary life. A recurring theme in tiny vignettes that play themselves out in the background of other Bosch paintings (notably, the *Adoration of the Magi* at the Metropolitan Museum in New York), Bosch thereby reminds us that the seeker of spiritual value is too often distracted by the ordinary things in life—especially women and marriage. The man in this picture understands that despite the half-sacred nature of marriage (as symbolized by the hemisphere over him) he is in fact being *distracted from his spiritual search*, which is represented by the Tantric circle.

Critically, of *all* the figures in the foreground, he's the *only* one who is clearly aware of the circular rotation of animals and people which constitutes the central portion of the painting. This is an essential point; with all the activity, the tremendous amount of interaction between creatures and men in this distinctly esoteric circulation, *he alone* understands that it's of tremendous significance; and that his marriage is separating him from that critical activity.



This is, indeed, the overall theme of the figures in the bottom portion of the central panel; so placing this vignette at the apex, so to speak, of the right hand pyramid – a structure which is echoed not only by the form of the beings, but also by the second red, tree-like temple structure — he shows us how critical this act of forgetfulness can be.

Understanding the structure of the three triangular forms, or “pyramids” which represent areas of influence, in the bottom third of the central panel, will help clarify the manner in which this particular transparent image introduces the dominant theme for the right-hand triangle.

To the right of the figures encased in the transparent hemisphere, two critical groups appear: first, a group of men and women who, outside of Paradise and firmly planted in the real world of the central panel, are clearly recapitulating the original mistakes made in the Garden of Eden. These couples are, over and over again, eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in an eternally recurring cycle. Second, the dervish owl—who alone may be able to save man. The owl, of course, represents *insight*; the owl plays that role in the left-hand panel at the base of the divine fountain, and it is no coincidence that he reappears here.



In our investigation of transparency, there remains one last telling group of figures. These occur in the bottom right-hand corner of the panel, characteristically summarizing all of the themes and commentary that have taken place.

They represent, so to speak, the “end” of the central panel’s story, in keeping with the understanding that the entire painting is a psychospiritual, theological, and philosophical narrative about the inward state of man’s soul.

The area where the last two transparent cylinders appear is at the end of a long, peculiar tunnel that extends from the tomb to the right of the earthen temple. The structure seems, without any doubt, to be related to Neolithic dolmen tombs of Europe and the Mediterranean; and the tunnel that extends downward towards the bottom right-hand corner mimics similar tunnels leading to some larger Neolithic tombs. In the absence of any better explanation, it seems reasonably certain that this is the reference; and it gives us a clue to the nature of some of the other



underground areas in Bosch paintings, such as the kneeling figure in the left-hand panel of the *Temptation of St. Anthony*, now in Portugal.

The tomb reference is clearly a reference to Christ; yet the underground feature, like the water in the lower part of the *Temptation of St. Anthony*, signifies the inner, hidden, or unconscious side of man's mind. It also hints at riddles and mysteries; and from this tunnel, which extends from Christ's tomb — a metaphorical extension of the story of the Passion and Christ's resurrection — emerges what is probably Hieronymus Bosch himself, pointing very specifically (and almost amusingly) towards a grisaille figure who is an obvious reference to Adam and the forbidden apple.

To his left in the image is our bird from the left-hand side of the center panel, now encased in glass which is studded with pearls. The metaphor could not be more apt; man's spiritual thoughts, which ought to be able to take wing toward the Divine, are captive, hemmed all around with falsehoods. The mistakes of Adam, Bosch is indicating are repeated over and over – and we have verification of this theme; it repeats in the group above the owl.



There is more than a hint of the theme of eternal recurrence here; and, carefully hidden in the following triangle of figures in the central panel, there may in fact be an allegory of reincarnation, which I will not go into here.

The point of including a recapitulated scene of the fall of man and the central panel is to indicate that imbibing the forbidden fruits of knowledge is not an activity that took place at some distant time in mankind's past; it's a daily activity that takes place in all of us, which is part of the



entire point of the allegories in the center panel . Mankind is trapped in a recurring series of events, where his mistaken thinking causes him, generation after generation, to partake of forbidden knowledge in pursuit of his own egoistic satisfactions. The owl looms in front of these activities not just as a mystic sage that may save mankind, but also, with his gaze fixed firmly on the viewer, as a *warning*.



Bosch uses transparencies here to multiple effect. If one looks closely at the column the bird is sitting on, one realizes that, like the white columns in the right-hand, corrupted heavenly Mountain at the top right hand side of the central panel, it's *opaque*. It mimics the cylinders of divine clarity and wisdom in the left-hand mountain, but it can't attain the clarity. So it's an *imitation* of Divine understanding—not the real thing. The blue stippling on it is a subtle reminder of all the distinctively earthly influences that cause it to be opaque. In the progression from the left to the right side of the central panel, we see a dialogue of the passage of time, during which man's understanding deteriorates, due to the influence of his rational mind. Without Christ — signified by the tomb and the barrow which extends from it — man is a hollow shell of himself, a shade. Bosch has furthermore managed to remind us, in this bottom right hand corner of the central panel, that the first two panels are, in their entirety, a dialogue about the fall of man and the gradual confusion of his spiritual and heavenly natures.



In case we were in doubt about the point of transparency and why it exists at all in this painting, we encounter it one final time — and that’s in the right hand panel, where it turns up in a single figure that summarizes the deterioration of the intellect, the corruption of man’s rational thought process, and the degradation of every Divine principle to the lowest possible level. This is in the figure of the blue Queen: a gloriously perverse combination of insect and bird, devouring humanity as though mankind were no more than grubs to be feasted on.

Transparency, here, reveals that man’s intellect has turned to excrement: a blue earthly color represents all the results of man’s passage through the intelligence of his earthbound life and earthbound thoughts. What few spiritual and heavenly thoughts he had left in him fly from his smoldering buttocks to avoid being consumed. The use of transparency tells us it should be obvious—obvious to all of us — that we’re mortal; that our earthly thoughts, our selfish and egoistic thoughts, lead nowhere and to nothing.

Over and over again, it turns out, Hieronymus Bosch uses transparency to illustrate things which he feels need to be

“made clear” to all of us. Far from being a cryptic or decorative element, transparency is repeatedly and intelligently deployed to make philosophical and theosophical points which might be impossible to get across without its use.

Following this one simple pictorial device in this painting shows a person how carefully thought out the premise of the painting itself is, and how intricately interwoven all of the details and ideas are. Following a single device of this nature, furthermore, casts much light on other elements of the painting, drawing them closer to one another and elucidating. When one sees a specific device repeated over and over in Bosch paintings, one needs to study the device in multiple manifestations to understand the artist’s intentions.

We are left, I think, with one last question about the nature of transparency in this context. Is the use of transparency here a device that *reveals*, or a device that *conceals*?

It seems, of course, to be used both ways; and yet transparency must always be indication of that which *conceals*.

God is, after all, forever hidden from our sight; and although transparency may reveal, it always indicates a veil. God is concealed behind a veil of the Divine; His is a chaste and perfect existence. We of course have a wish to penetrate this veil with insight, through a spiritual seeing which helps us to better understand God; but that spiritual seeing is always limited by the material.

In the painting, transparency plays multiple roles in revealing the evolution of God's intelligence and His creation. This faculty of *seeing* is a very active agency. It's structural and inherent to the nature of God in His creation of the Divine mountain; it encapsulates, indicates, and summarizes in the sphere of Divine love; it creates tools for examination in the various cylinders used like telescopes; it captures and encloses the bird of Divine thought and intelligence; it restrains and encloses the couple being married.

Finally, it colors the end of man's earthly existence with the deathly cold blue of corpses, as thought to warn us to be aware—above all, and after everything else has transpired—of our own mortality.

This theme — that of an awareness of one's own death — was a common theme in medieval spiritual practice, where knights and kings inscribed their sarcophagi with reminders that regardless of our station in life, we all meet the same fate. It should no surprise whatsoever to see it turn up, allegorically rendered, as one of the codas to this masterpiece.

In admitting that the nature of God and the meaning of life is ultimately concealed from us, the transparent elements nonetheless urge us to look, to see, *where we are*: to at least attempt to understand. It's understood, the painting argues, that this attempt at inquiry may fail; but it also presents an argument, in greater measure, that the effort is not just possible, but essential to our spiritual effort.