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# The Iconography of the Lisbon *Saint Anthony* triptych: Bosch and the *Vita Antonii*

*Eric De Bruyn*

## **Eric De Bruyn**

De Bruyn specialises in Middle Dutch language and literature. He earned his PhD at Catholic University of Brussels in 2000 and wrote his dissertation about the pedlar figure in Bosch's art. He is currently working on a monograph about the Lisbon St Anthony triptych. De Bruyn is a member of the Scholarly Advisory Board of the Jheronimus Bosch Art Center in 's-Hertogenbosch.

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Is it necessary to invent Bosch all over again in every new book or article published about him? Obviously, the answer is no. In spite of the many controversies regarding major and minor issues, a lot of good things have already been written about the art of Bosch, things that may be reiterated but need no further debate because their correctness is clear and generally accepted. This is certainly also true for Bosch's *Saint Anthony* triptych (Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga), at least as far as the crux of its iconography is concerned.

Recent literature has stressed two pivotal aspects of the triptych's message time and again.<sup>1</sup> First is its Christocentrism. No viewer can ignore the fact that Bosch painted Anthony in the centre of the centre panel and that the saint's right-handed blessing is pointing towards Christ, who is standing next to an altar with a crucifix. There is a clear connection between this centre scene and the exterior panels, showing *The Arrest of Christ* (left) and *The Carrying of the Cross* (right). Apparently, Bosch wanted the spectator to understand that Anthony imitates Christ's attitude during His Passion and that the wiles of the devil can be overcome by humble and passive endurance and by a strong belief in Christ's role as the Saviour of mankind.

Since Dirk Bax's groundbreaking 1948 monograph on the triptych, it has also become clear that the four scenes showing Anthony were inspired by medieval legends about the saint.<sup>2</sup> Nobody will deny that the scene in the centre panel showing Anthony and Christ can ultimately be traced back to the *Vita Antonii*, written by Anthony's (younger) contemporary Athanasius of Alexandria: even the divine ray of light explicitly mentioned in this text is present.<sup>3</sup>

In the upper part of the left interior panel, the saint is lifted up in the air and beaten by devils; in the lower part, two of the saint's brethren and one person dressed as a layman carry the fainted Anthony back to his recluse. This cannot be found in the *vita* by Athanasius, who wrote that Anthony was beaten by devils but only on the ground level (not in the air), adding that afterwards he was carried away by only one person, 'a friend'.<sup>4</sup> Bax pointed out, though, that what Bosch painted closely corresponds with what can be read in the *Passionael* printed by Gheraert Leeu in Gouda in 1478: 'And the devils came back and tore him with their teeth and bashed him with their horns and beat him with their claws. They lifted him up in the air, they threw him down again almost killing him'.<sup>5</sup> This passage in the *Passionael* is immediately followed by the emergence of the divine light from which Christ speaks to Anthony, a scene that Bosch painted in the triptych's centre panel.

The bathing naked female who is trying to seduce Saint Anthony in the right interior panel is not mentioned by Athanasius or in the 1478 *Passionael*. In this case, as was pointed out by Bax, Bosch seems to have been inspired by the *Vader boeck*, printed by Peter van Os in Zwolle in 1490. There we read how the devil appeared unto Anthony in the shape of a beautiful queen who was bathing with her maidservants when the saint was fetching water. She then

persuaded Anthony to accompany her to her city (painted by Bosch in the background of the right interior panel), where she tried to seduce him. Of course, to no avail.<sup>6</sup>

Today, it can safely be said that we have a relatively fair understanding of the basic message of Bosch's Lisbon *Saint Anthony* triptych and of the essential iconography of its four principal scenes, at least if we dispense with the exact meaning of every single detail. But the difficulties caused by the interpretation of details in the four Saint Anthony scenes are exceeded by the problems every Bosch scholar is confronted with when trying to understand what could be called the triptych's 'secondary scenes'. In 2016, the Bosch Research and Conservation Project (BRCP) team published the highly plausible suggestion that the Lisbon *Saint Anthony* triptych was purchased by Philip the Fair from Charles de Berthoz in 1505. The document referring to the purchase describes the triptych as 'a large painting on wood, richly executed in oil paint, of the life of Saint Anthony, to which several other episodes have been added, in both the two wings and elsewhere'.<sup>7</sup> It is mainly these additional 'episodes' that turn the Lisbon triptych into an enigmatic painting, reminding us of the visual riddles in the centre panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych.

Recently, there has been a modest tendency to look for the iconographical key to the Lisbon triptych's secondary scenes within the same medieval tradition that inspired Bosch when painting his four principal scenes. This was done by both Stefan Fischer (in 2009 and 2014) and the BRCP team (in 2016).<sup>8</sup> They took the triptych's analysis a step further by relating a number of its secondary scenes to particular passages in the literary sources dealing with Saint Anthony's life, thus conflicting with other art historians who only referred (and refer) to these sources to explain the four principal scenes.<sup>9</sup> This new approach seems to be based on a sound premise: if some details of Saint Anthony's temptations in the Lisbon triptych remain enigmatic to our modern eyes, this is probably because we do not look at the painting with the cultural knowledge and religious background of Bosch and his late medieval contemporaries. This automatically leads to the question of what a late medieval person in the Low Countries knew about Saint Anthony and which textual sources dealing with the saint's life were accessible to him. Some of these written sources were the following:<sup>10</sup>

- The *Bios tou makariou Antoniou tou megalou* [Life of the blessed Anthony the Great], written by bishop Athanasius of Alexandria shortly after the saint's death (in 351).<sup>11</sup>
- Probably before 374, Evagrius of Antioch translated this Greek *vita* into Latin. This version of the *Vita Antonii* [Life of Anthony] would be quite influential throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup>
- The fourth-century *Vita Pauli Eremitae* [Life of the hermit Saint Paul] written by Saint Hieronymus.<sup>13</sup>
- The *Legenda aurea* [The Golden Legend], a collection of saints' lives compiled by the Italian Dominican Jacobus de Voragine circa 1260. It has a short text about Anthony inspired by the Latin *Vita Antonii* and by the *Vitas Patrum*.<sup>14</sup>
- The *Patras legend*, written in Latin by an unknown author before 1000 and passed

down in 17 manuscripts mainly from Italy, describes how Anthony became the abbot of a monastery in Patras, how he led his monks to the Egyptian desert and how a king sent them 12 camels with victuals.

- The *Inventio et Translatio Constantinopolim*, written in Latin by an unknown author probably in the eleventh century, describes how Emperor Constantinus ordered bishop Theophilus to travel to Egypt to look for Saint Anthony's grave and transport his relics to Constantinople. The mission succeeded and the emperor's daughter, who was possessed by devils, was cured.
- The *Legenda aurea* was translated into Middle Dutch twice, under the name *Passionael*. There is a Southern Middle Dutch translation (made by Petrus Naghel in 1358, 108 manuscripts, printed 13 times between 1478 and 1516) and a Northern Middle Dutch one (first half of the fifteenth century, unknown author, 15 manuscripts). Two manuscripts and all the printed editions of the first translation and one manuscript of the second translation have a deviant, longer text about Anthony, inspired by the *Legenda aurea* but also incorporating adapted versions of the *Patras legend* and of the *Inventio et Translatio Constantinopolim*.<sup>15</sup>
- The *Vitas Patrum* (or *Vitae Patrum*) [Lives of the Fathers], a variable corpus of stories about the old fathers and first monks who lived in the oriental deserts during the early days of Christianity, was translated from Greek into Latin between the fourth and seventh centuries.<sup>16</sup> From the thirteenth century onwards, many translations into the vernacular were made, resulting in a complex written and printed tradition. For the Lisbon triptych, the translation/adaptation printed by Peter van Os in 1490 (*Vader boeck*) seems to be the most interesting source (until further notice).<sup>17</sup>

To grasp how Bosch may have been inspired by these texts when painting the secondary scenes of the Lisbon triptych, a crucial difference between these secondary scenes and the principal scenes needs to be pointed out. In the four scenes showing Anthony, the saint is being tempted in a *physical* way: in the left interior panel, his body is attacked with violent actions; in the right interior panel, the weapon used by the devils is carnal lust; and the principal scene in the centre panel focuses on Christ, who is comforting the saint after he has been beaten. Anthony is absent from all the other scenes and yet it is obvious that these scenes are also meant to be understood as temptations. Apparently, the devils are creating diabolical illusions to disturb the saint in a *mental* way by enacting blasphemous and disparaging parodies of things that are precious to him and by offensively abusing them.

This method of 'mental teasing', which sometimes has a comical touch to it and also accounts for the fact that Bosch's diabolical scenes were and are often seen as entertaining rather than horrifying, is also used by devils in other Bosch paintings depicting saints. In the lower part of the *Saint John on Patmos* panel (Berlin), a bespectacled little devil is trying to steal the saint's inkwell (a motif that can also be found in other late medieval depictions of Saint John). In the *Saint Christopher* panel (Rotterdam), devils have turned the saint's tree cabin into a metaphorical brothel. And in the *Temptations of Saint Anthony* panel (Madrid), probably painted by a Bosch

follower, little devils are emptying the pitcher the saint used to fetch water while on his other side a monster is on the brink of hitting the saint's pig with a hammer.

When Anthony delivers a speech to his followers in the *vita* by Athanasius, he uses many words to describe the characteristics of devils and the tricks they use, saying literally:

The evil spirits can do nothing, they only play some kind of theatre, using changes of shape and terrifying the children by appearing as a troupe and by means of their disguises ... But these evil spirits are unable to do anything and they can only try to cause anxiety by means of illusions.<sup>18</sup>

Apparently, this was also what José de Sigüenza had in mind when he wrote about 'the countless fantasies and monsters created by the enemy' to confuse and disturb Saint Anthony in Bosch's paintings treating this subject.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, in the Lisbon triptych it was actually Bosch and not the devil who concocted all the illusionary tableaux surrounding Saint Anthony, but this was something that could safely be left to the *duvelmakere* [creator of devils] from 's-Hertogenbosch. At the same time, no Bosch scholar will deny that Bosch can hardly ever be caught in the act of literally copying a visual or textual source: he always assimilated and adapted his sources of inspiration according to his own needs and imagination. This seems to have also been the case in the Lisbon triptych, but because of Bosch's almost inexhaustible fantasy life it is not always easy to discover exactly which passages in the legends about Anthony inspired him to invent the 'mental' temptations in the Lisbon triptych.

However, in some cases it *is* fairly easy. The left upper region of the centre panel depicts an army on its way to a village. At first sight, this detail does not seem to have a direct connection with the story of the triptych's protagonist, until we consider that in the Greek and Latin *vita* Anthony points out more than once that the devils sometimes appear in the shape of 'troops of soldiers' (chapter 23). In chapter 39 the saint says: 'How many times did they threaten me like armed soldiers!'<sup>20</sup>

Another example involves the lower right interior panel, which depicts a number of devils who have prepared a table with food and drink. This reminds us of a passage in the *Vader boeck*, where Anthony says there are three things that lead man to unchastity: the first is man's carnal nature, the third is the devil's instigation and 'the second is immoderate food and drink'.<sup>21</sup> The fact that the principal scene on the right interior panel is about carnal seduction turns this secondary scene into a very appropriate and cynical comment on Anthony's words. The monster to the right of the table, whose belly is also its head, seems to be an equally cynical joke on the part of the devils referring to Saint Anthony's words in the Greek and Latin *vita*: 'Have faith in Jesus; keep your mind pure from wicked thoughts and your body free from all sordidness. In accordance with the divine sayings, do not be seduced

by the fullness of the stomach'.<sup>22</sup>

In some other cases, the link between the devils' irreverent parodies and the passages from the saint's *vita* that are taken to task is less obvious and can only be perceived by someone who is familiar with the legends about Anthony in a greater than average way.<sup>23</sup> For inescapable reasons of space, I will limit myself to three examples. To the right of the 'stage' in the centre panel, three devils are reading (or singing) from an open book containing mysterious illegible signs. One of the devils is dressed like a priest and the other two seem to be dressed as monks. When Anthony speaks about the deceitful snares of the devil in chapter 25 of the Greek and Latin *vita*, he says:

Often the demons sing the psalms while remaining invisible, shocking as it is to tell. In addition, they recite the sacred words of Scripture with a foul mouth, for often when we are reading, they repeat the last words like an echo. They also awaken to prayer those who are asleep, so as to deprive them of sleep for the whole night. They disguise themselves as genuine monks and put pressure on many of the monks.<sup>24</sup>

In chapter 39, Anthony describes one of his own experiences with these kind of temptations: 'A few months later, when they were singing in front of me and quoting to each other from the Scriptures, I pretended I was deaf and did not listen'.<sup>25</sup> A remarkable detail of the scene painted by Bosch is that one of the monk-devils has a nest with an egg in it on top of his head. In chapter 24 (the chapter immediately preceding chapter 25!), Anthony says that the devil often boasts about himself and one day the devil said: 'I will pursue and overtake and I will hold the whole world in my hand like a nest and I shall take them away like eggs that have been abandoned'.<sup>26</sup> Did this inspire Bosch to give one of the three devils an egg in a nest by way of attribution?

In the right part of the centre panel, Bosch painted a weird-looking building with naked swimmers that seems to be meant as a bathhouse and at the same time as a brothel (see the dovecote, the chicken on the spit, the old procuress). Of course, the fact that the devils are enacting a tableau here in which monks sit together at a table with a prostitute would be painful enough for Saint Anthony, and bathhouses *did* have a bad reputation in the Middle Ages, turning them into a proper object of Bosch's social criticism. Nevertheless, the devils' mental badgering is taken a step further if one realises that the end of the Greek and Latin *vita* stressed that Anthony's body remained in excellent shape until he died, even though he never changed his clothes or washed his feet. Chapter 93 of the *vita* adds this sentence: 'In fact, his body looked healthier than those glistening bodies which are pampered by baths and luxurious living'.<sup>27</sup> Obviously, Anthony must have had a very low opinion of bathhouses, which explains why the devils created an illusionary bathhouse to needle the saint.

A third and final example concerns the centre part of the left interior panel, on which four devilish 'pilgrims' are on their way to what seems to be another brothel. The brothel is at the

same time a hill and the body of a kneeling giant whose indecent posture alludes to homosexuality.<sup>28</sup> One of the 'pilgrims' is dressed as a bishop, another is dressed as a cardinal and the third is dressed as a monk (a prelate?). Again, this scene can be unmasked as an insulting parody of certain words or deeds that were typical of Anthony. In chapter 67 of his *vita*, we read:

Never was he provoked to impatience by sudden anger nor did he allow his humility to become puffed up into pride. For he urged all the clerics right down to the lowest rank to pray before he did and he also bent his head for the bishops and priests to give him their blessing, as if he were their disciple in humility.<sup>29</sup>

If not for lack of space, more examples could be given here. However, one more thing should be mentioned. In some of the Lisbon triptych's secondary scenes, it seems as though not Saint Anthony but Jesus is the major victim of the devil's parodies. Bax was the first to point out that the monstrous bird devouring its own young in the lower left interior panel may be a persiflage of the pelican bringing back to life its own young with his blood (a well-known symbol of Christ) and that the group around the giant rat in the centre panel may be a parody of the Flight to Egypt.<sup>30</sup> If the little child using a walking frame in the exterior panel of the Vienna *Carrying of the Cross* wing should indeed be interpreted as the Christ Child, it becomes highly probable that the ugly manikin dressed as a child and using a walking frame in the Lisbon right interior panel is intended as an insulting mockery of the Christ Child. That the devils are poking fun at Jesus in order to hurt Anthony's feelings should come as no surprise. The original Greek *vita* by Athanasius mentions Jesus at least forty times (in a positive way, obviously). According to his legends, Saint Anthony's world was focused on Christ. So is Bosch's Lisbon triptych.<sup>31</sup>

- 1 Most recently, in Cat. Madrid 2016: 238-45, and BRCP 2016a: 140-59, with further bibliographical references.
- 2 Bax 1948. English translation: Bax 1979.
- 3 Athanasius ed. 1981: 59-60 (chapter 10), Athanasius ed. 2002: 19-20 (chapter 10).
- 4 Athanasius ed. 1981: 55-8 (chapters 8-9), Athanasius ed. 2002: 17-19 (chapters 8-9).
- 5 Passionael 1478: fol. 166v. '*En(de) die vianden quame(n) wed(er) en(de) scoerden mit horen tande(n) en(de) stieten mit horen hoernen en(de) sloeghen mit hoeren claeuwen. si worpen op in die lucht. si worpen weder neder alsoe dat si he(m) bi nae ter doot ghebrocht hadden.*'
- 6 *Vader boeck* 1490: ff. D1v-D6v (chapters 11-13). The *Vader boeck* also mentions the divine ray of light and the devils attacking Anthony, but does not report the devils lifting Anthony up in the air. Therefore, the sentence 'the four scenes in the triptych showing Anthony beset by Satan correspond most closely with the principal demonic threats described in the *vader boeck*' (BRCP 2016a: 147) is not completely correct. Apparently, Bosch used more than one textual source when designing his triptych.
- 7 BRCP 2016a: 156-7.
- 8 Fischer 2009: 304-23, Fischer 2014: 62-72, BRCP 2016a: 151-2.

- 9 A recent example of this is what Paul Vandenbroeck wrote in *Cat. Madrid 2016*: 102: ‘The backgrounds of Bosch’s representations of hermit saints are rarely directly connected with their relevant legend. They are the artist’s invention, often implying a wholly independent ethical system. This is especially the case with the famous *Saint Anthony Triptych*.’ On the other hand, Bax (1948: 10, 1979: 13) already wrote about the secondary scenes: ‘It will be evident also from the right wing and central panel that Bosch was not keeping strictly to the narrative. Was he then not familiar enough with the *vitae*? A more likely explanation is that his desire to tread new paths led him to adapt some parts of the old story according to his own fantasy.’
- 10 I am aware that the manuscript and early printing tradition of these texts is often very complex, but it would take me too long to elaborate on this within the scope of this article. What essentially matters is that all these texts were accessible in the Low Countries *c.* 1500. For the time being, compare Williams-Krapp 1986, Goudriaan 1997, Bertrand 2002, Bertrand 2005, Bertrand 2006 and Studer 2012. I am also aware that there are still more texts related to Saint Anthony that may prove to be important for a better understanding of the Lisbon triptych (eg, the seven letters that were attributed to the saint), but for the scope of this article the list given here suffices.
- 11 PG 26: 837-976. Dutch translations: Athanasius ed. 1981, Athanasius ed. 2002. Although the original text was written in Greek, for the sake of convenience it is usually referred to using its Latin title, *Vita Antonii*.
- 12 Latin text: Bertrand 2005. English translation: Evagrius ed. 1998. Evagrius’ Latin translation of Athanasius’ Greek *vita* is quite faithful and reliable.
- 13 PL 23: 17-28. Dutch translation: Vita Pauli ed. 1981. English translation: Vita Pauli ed. 1998. This text is important because it tells how Saint Anthony visited and buried his fellow hermit Saint Paul of Thebes in the Egyptian desert.
- 14 English translation: *Legenda aurea I* ed. 1993: 93-6.
- 15 Bertrand 2002: 94-5. I consulted the *Passionael (Winterstuc)* printed by Gheraert Leeu in Gouda in 1478 (copy in Ghent University Library) [referred to in this article as *Passionael 1478*]. The life of Anthony is on ff. 163r-177v. Also consulted for comparative purposes: *Passionael (Winterstuc)* printed by Johan Veldener in Utrecht in 1480 (copy in Utrecht University Library) [referred to here as *Passionael 1480*]. This is the same text as in *Passionael 1478*, with only minor and fractionable alternative readings.
- 16 Studer 2012: 1. Edition of the Latin text: PL 73, PL 74, PL 21, col. 387-426.
- 17 I consulted the copy in the Antwerp Museum Plantijn Moretus [referred to here as *Vader boeck 1490*]. The life of Anthony is on ff. A6v-E4v.
- 18 Athanasius ed. 1981: 84-5 (chapter 28), Athanasius ed. 2002: 36-7 (chapter 28). Compare the Latin version in Evagrius ed. 1998: 27 (chapter 28).
- 19 As quoted in BRCP 2016a: 145.
- 20 Athanasius ed. 1981: 77/95, Athanasius ed. 2002: 31/45, Evagrius ed. 1998: 24/33.
- 21 *Vader boeck 1490*, fol. E1v (chapter 14). A similar passage is in *Passionael 1478*, fol. 167v.
- 22 Athanasius ed. 1981: 116 (chapter 55), Athanasius ed. 2002: 59 (chapter 55), Evagrius ed. 1998: 43 (chapter 55).
- 23 If the Lisbon triptych was indeed commissioned by Hippolyte de Berthoz, as was suggested in BRCP 2016a: 156-7, it would be interesting to discover whether this senior financial officer at the Burgundian court had any special relationship with the devotion towards Saint Anthony.



- 24 Athanasius ed. 1981: 80-1, Athanasius ed. 2002: 33, Evagrius ed. 1998: 25. In Fischer 2009: 323, and BRCP 2016a: 151, this scene is related to a passage in the *Vader boeck* about two ‘pagan priests’ who visit Anthony to debate matters of faith. Perhaps Bosch was also inspired by this passage, although in that case Bosch could have expressed the pagan character of the priests more clearly by dressing them up as Orientals. Moreover, Bosch painted three devils, not two.
- 25 Athanasius ed. 1981: 96, Athanasius ed. 2002: 45, Evagrius ed. 1998: 33.
- 26 Athanasius ed. 1981: 78-9, Athanasius ed. 2002: 31-2, Evagrius ed. 1998: 24.
- 27 Athanasius ed. 1981: 170-1, Athanasius ed. 2002: 91, Evagrius ed. 1998: 68. Similar passages appear in *Passionael* 1978, fol. 169r, and *Vader boeck* 1490, fol. E4r, but without the sentence quoted by me.
- 28 He is ostentatiously showing his behind and his buttocks are at the same time a gate, a word that in Middle Dutch (*poort*) could refer to the entrance of a building or to the anus.
- 29 Athanasius ed. 1981: 136-8, Athanasius ed. 2002: 69-70, Evagrius ed. 1998: 51. A very similar passage appears in *Vader boeck* 1490, fol. C3r.
- 30 Bax 1948: 18/88, Bax 1979: 23/113.
- 31 It stands to reason that in the above text I have not offered an exhaustive iconographic analysis of the examined ‘secondary’ scenes. I have only tried to show the connections they may have with the written medieval tradition dealing with Saint Anthony and to make it plausible that they have a common denominator: to badger the saint by ridiculing persons, animals and things (deeds, words, thoughts, objects) that are precious to him. In a forthcoming publication, I hope to go more deeply into all of this.

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