

The Cure of Folly:

A re-interpretation based on the life and times of Hieronymus Bosch



The Cure of Folly, c. 1488. Oil on panel. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain; PD-old-auto-expired

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The 15th century painting known as the *Cure of Folly*, the *Stone of Madness*, or *The Stone Operation*, attributed to Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516), has fascinated physicians for decades. Stimulating a broad range of speculation on its psychological or medical meaning, this curious artwork is often portrayed as a glib, satirical anachronism depicting a farcical procedure to cure a behavioral disorder perpetrated by a charlatan on a gullible patient.¹⁻¹² Amusing as it is, this interpretation may be too limited and not in keeping with the zeitgeist of Bosch's legacy of imagery, which he used to illustrate the everlasting hellish consequences of sinful behavior. Therefore, a further analysis of the *Cure of Folly* was conducted to ascertain whether a broader message of the painting had been overlooked.

It is essential to consider the cultural milieu of the artist's life, scope of work, and times five centuries ago to properly interpret the painting. Within this historical context, a broader meaning emerges that the very idea that deviant human behavior could be fixed by a simple surgical procedure was inherently foolish, immoral, sinful, and susceptible to abuse. This more serious moral interpretation is reinforced by a later painting attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder, which illustrates and extrapolates the dangerous consequences of unproven procedures on the brain becoming accepted and applied indiscriminately. This analysis of the paintings of Bosch and Bruegel may have implications for the ethical and scientific practice of psychosurgery by contemporary investigators.

Bosch

A brief history of Bosch's life and times is important in understanding the background of his painting. Born Jerome van Aken, Bosch was a member of a well-known family dynasty and workshop of painters in the provincial Netherland town of s'Hertogenbosch, from which he took his professional surname. He was an influential early representative of the Northern Renaissance school of painting during a turbulent, watershed period in Western civilization. An information revolution was beginning to

challenge orthodoxies of the Middle Ages as new worlds were discovered by naval explorers and classical knowledge was recovered, translated, and available to the public through the invention of the printing press, c. 1440.¹³ Contradictions abounded as medieval superstition and dogmatic scholasticism gave way to empirical observation.¹⁴ However, death and despair from age-old scourges of internecine warfare, crushing poverty, famine and epidemic disease remained rampant.¹³

The power of the Roman Catholic Church to provide solace and enforce social order was weakening due to internal schism, corruption, the Protestant Reformation, and fears of an Islamic invasion following the fall of Constantinople to Turkish forces in 1453.¹³ Faced with uncertainty, anxiety, and depression amidst dramatic social change and perceived threats to Christianity and Western civilization, people were vulnerable to being misled and turned to apocalyptic fantasies and conspiracy theories as the year 1500 approached. Scapegoats were sought internally as Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and the belief in witchcraft and demonic possession swept through Europe, providing fuel for the Inquisition and the slaughter of thousands.^{1,13,15}

Bosch and his contemporaries lived and worked during a critical juncture between the late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance. His reaction to the changing cultural climate is portrayed in his surviving paintings, most of which were sponsored as church altarpieces. Addressing primarily orthodox religious and devotional themes, Bosch broke with tradition by integrating and projecting surreal internal fantasies, and alchemical and astrological imagery, as much as literal scriptural events. His work drew on the travails, proverbs, legends and symbolism of everyday life in the Netherlands.

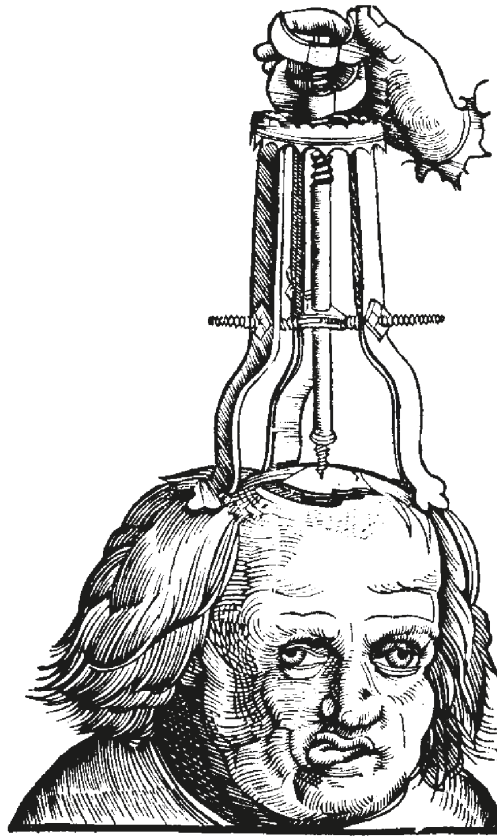
His whimsical and nightmarish allegorical paintings, which slipped into obscurity until popularized by Surrealists and Jungian psychologists in the last century, prompted historically-biased speculations that the artist was heretical, perverse or suffered from psychosis, ergotism or alcoholism.^{1,3,9} However, evidence indicates that Bosch was a prominent, successful, and popular artist who married well and joined a prestigious lay religious confraternity, The Brotherhood of Our Lady. His work was admired and imitated by his peers, especially for his lurid depictions of diabolical monsters, chimeras, demons, and devilry. He received commissions from leaders of both clergy and the ruling nobility who displayed his paintings prominently in churches and palaces throughout Europe.

Bosch's work and its meaning

Although the absence of dates and signatures on most of the several dozen paintings attributed to Bosch make authentication problematic, the works that do survive illustrate consistent stylistic themes and iconography that were likely familiar within the social, folklore, and literary traditions of the Netherlands during his lifetime.¹⁶ The *Cure of Folly* was but one relatively minor unsigned work and its attribution to Bosch has been questioned. There has been prodigious scholarship in art history concerning Bosch and his contemporaries, but given the barriers of culture, language, customs and time, the hidden meanings he wished to convey to his peers through the symbolism in this and other paintings remain opaque and may be uncertain.¹⁶

Within the scope of his commissions, Bosch painted as a social critic and moral authority representing the diversity of human behavior through sin, immorality, and foolishness and the inevitable spiritual consequences. Although his response to the moral crises of his time reveres traditional Christian doctrine and liturgy, his iconography transgressed ecclesiastical conventions and took on a veneer of social commentary including disdain for hypocrisy and using imagery from everyday secular life and the natural world to appeal to a broader audience of common people.

The *Cure of Folly* should be understood not as an entertaining diversion depicting a humorous apocryphal medical travesty, but rather as a critique of physicians and medical practice within the theological and moral code. The *Cure of Folly* may be seen as a corollary to the *Seven Deadly Sins and Four Last Things*. In the latter, Bosch depicts everyday scenes of people engaged in behaviors exemplifying sins of anger, vanity, lust, sloth, gluttony, avarice, and envy in a round tableau or tabletop with Jesus Christ watching and judging from a central eye. In the four corners, Bosch illustrates in roundels the consequences of these behaviors progressing through death, judgment, heaven, or hell.



Trepanation, from Hans von Gersdorff, *Feldbuch der Wundartznei*, 1517, Strasburg, Germany. PD-old-auto-expired

Stones in the head

Bosch's allegory of madness, or folly, resulting from stones in the head had wide cultural currency as an idiomatic metaphor or figure of speech at the time, and still does today such as references to someone having “rocks in his head,” or “lost his marbles.” Evidence suggests that stones were considered as a cause of neuropsychiatric conditions such as epilepsy, headache, and behavioral disorders extrapolating from attempts to alleviate distress by finding and removing stones, foreign bodies, or tumors elsewhere in the body.^{6,10-12} Modern day reports of idiopathic brain stones (calcifications and tumors) found post-mortem have been invoked as real-world correlates of this idea, though there are few historical sources documenting

autopsies to support this as a rationale at the time.^{10,12}

The operation in the *Cure of Folly* recovers flowers, not stones, the implication of which remains unclear. Much has been made of the possible symbolism and semantics, whether “flower head” was another derogatory term for a fool, or whether the “golden flower of wisdom,” or the long sought “philosopher’s stone” can be found in the mind of a fool. Perhaps, finding flowers reflects the irrationality of the procedure with the joke being on the surgeon for spurnously seeking stones in the first place.^{14,15,16}

It is unclear but considered doubtful that operations like this to remove stones to alleviate mental illness or intellectual disability were actually attempted or widely used in this era, although medical treatises of the time do contain anecdotal testimonials and illustrations of how trepanation for insanity or headaches might be performed, and human skulls have been found bearing marks of surgery.^{5,6,11,14,16} There may have been charlatans who took advantage of the desperation of people with behavioral disorders and the cultural cliché linking stones with foolishness by performing sham cures, palming stones and displaying them after incising the scalp, although documented evidence of this has been hard to find.⁵ This spectacle may have been painted, or staged, as comedic entertainment or as an advertisement for services by itinerant barber-surgeons.^{5,16}

The Cure of Folly

Consistent with the social, spiritual and moral implications of the *Seven Deadly Sins and Four Last Things* and other paintings by Bosch, the extraction of the proverbial stone of madness must also convey a moralistic warning for physicians. The painting depicts four figures situated anomalously in a garden or courtyard backed by a pastoral scene extending to a far-off horizon with minute ghostly peasant figures going about mundane business. Portrayed within a circle, as if viewed through a window or under the watchful eye of the deity, the idea of an open-air surgical procedure shows at the outset that this is not meant to be taken literally, but is presented as an allegory within the cultural landscape of life in the Netherlands during the 15th century.

The central figure is a plump, ostentatiously dressed figure restrained in a chair with a bulging money bag at his side presumably for payment undergoing a surgical procedure to remove stones from an incision in his head. Thanks to the ornate gothic script surrounding the picture, we know his identity as he pleads in Dutch, "Master, cut the stone out quickly My name is Lubbert Das." Lubbert Das was a folk figure personifying the ignorant fool or lubber, but historians have also speculated that his name may be translated from Dutch as "castrated dachshund" or "geldered badger," considered by some to imply a cuckold, a subject of ridicule in that era, having either delusions of infidelity or being cheated on and sent by his wife to be cured.^{2,16} His bulbous genitalia or codpiece lend credence to this sarcastic interpretation.



Seven Deadly Sins and Four Last Things, c.1490. Oil on panel. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain; PD-old-auto-expired



The Conjurer, c. 1496 or later. Oil on Panel. Municipal Museum, St-Germain-en-Laye, France; PD-old-auto-expired

The artist's message is also revealed by his portrayal of the operative team; a surgeon with a uroscopy flask at his side, a common tool for the better known procedure of cutting for urinary stones, and an upturned funnel on his head like a dunce cap which suggests science turned upside down. The funnel was a valued tool and symbol from the laboratory of alchemists, a respected and serious scientific discipline.

A gallows in the distant background is painted near his head perhaps as an ominous warning portending an adverse outcome from the procedure for the surgeon or patient. A clergyman extends his hand blessing or condoning the procedure, and holds a tankard containing spirits that may be meant as anesthesia for the patient, or more likely as balm for himself. And, a woman dressed

in a nun's habit balances an absurdly heavy unopened book on her head, seemingly disinterested in knowledge that is above and beyond her.

What is the message?

Bosch appears to be asking the viewer rhetorically, who is the fool here, the gullible and unfortunate Lubbert Das who cooperates against reason, or the ambitious, duplicitous, clueless operative team? Most have concluded that Bosch implies both the surgeon and his victim are guilty, and likely to suffer for their transgressions.¹⁴

While the *Cure of Folly* has been characterized as a satirical critique and allegory of charlatanism and gullibility, there may be a deeper moral issue that Bosch is proposing. In a contemporaneous painting, *The Conjurer*. Bosch illustrates a clearer example of the sins of fraud and deception perpetrated by a swindler or huckster acting for financial gain.¹⁶

However, in the *Cure of Folly*, it is ambiguous whether the operators cause harm by being knowingly deceptive or by ignorance, denial, and enthusiasm for a procedure that is not evidence-based. The upturned funnel on the head of the surgeon signifying lack of training and incompetence, plus the inebriated clergyman who heretically provides institutional approval for the procedure, and a woman or nun who seems impervious to knowledge, all suggest that for Bosch, regardless of consciousness of guilt, and the ignorance or innocence of the patient, the rationale for anyone

participating in, accepting or condoning an operation to extract a stone from the brain as treatment for abnormal behavior is inconsistent with scientific understanding and in violation of Christian morality.

Regardless of whether this procedure occurred in historical reality as a clinical intervention or as deliberate quackery, Bosch's larger statement is that the belief that madness or folly comes from a stone and could be cured, or that wisdom and knowledge could be gained by



Cutting Out the Stone of Madness, Bruegel, c. 1550. Copy of a missing original. Musee d l'Hotel Sandelin, Saint-Omer, France; PD-old-auto-expired

a quick surgical fix is foolish, misguided, immoral, and sinful.^{4,7,14} He ridicules and condemns “the ineptitude of attempting a physical cure of a moral disorder”⁵ and implies even more broadly that “only a fool believes in a short cut to success.”¹⁴

For Bosch, abnormal, foolish, or perverted behaviors captured in his paintings were equally damning and should be understood in religious and moral terms with the cure depending on spiritual repentance, penitence, prayer, piety, and seeking redemption and salvation. Maintaining a pious and mentally stable life also required reverence for, and balance between, sacred internal humors, astrological signs, and elements of nature as proposed by classical authorities and adopted by alchemists whose Church-sanctioned work in search of the transmutation of substances is also richly denoted in the symbolism of many of Bosch’s other paintings.¹⁴

An epilogue by Bruegel the Elder

Numerous artists copied the *Cure of Folly* in paintings and drawings depicting variations on the theme throughout the 16th century and 17th century.⁵ Most notable in confirming and extending the implications of Bosch’s message is a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525–1569), a Dutch Renaissance artist and admirer of Bosch. In Bruegel’s painting, *Cutting Out the Stone of Madness*, he characteristically depicts a chaotic scene of numerous figures in frenzied behaviors on an asylum ward. We again find Lubbert Das in the center, but this time he is an unwilling subject who protests, resists and fights against the stone operation which has now been seized upon by the frustrated keepers who chase all the residents to remove their stones, having accepted the fashionable cure regardless of evidence. As Bruegel moved further away from medieval dogma and broadened the subject matter of his work to include a more empathic, down-to-earth view of the ordinary struggles of the peasantry,¹⁵ he exonerated Lubbert and his fellow patients as innocent victims, but still held the keepers, operators, and those watching from outside responsible as perpetrators, for their appropriation and forced administration of an unproven surgical procedure.

Five centuries ago, artists in the Netherlands struggled to reconcile newfound knowledge with past prohibitions during a time of great cultural upheaval and scientific uncertainty. They sent a clear and prescient warning that transcends time and place to be wary of the hubris and ambition of those who, whether unconsciously or deliberately, proclaim unfounded successes and foist unproven interventions on vulnerable people with behavioral disorders.

They provide a warning that holds true today: Public authorities and medical leaders must be vigilant to step in and scrutinize any procedures before they are commercialized prematurely and spread throughout the countryside where they may be abused and applied indiscriminately to unsuspecting citizens.

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