

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

THE BLACK AND THE WHITE:  
FEAR IN A SELECTION OF WORKS BY  
BOSCH, GRÜNEWALD, BECKMANN AND GROSZ

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## Introduction

Fear<sup>is</sup>(could be seen as) a continuous theme in the Western European artistic tradition; it can be traced through a chronological analysis, for the cultural artifacts of these societies have always held a discourse between human beings and finite death. The nature of this discourse is active on many different levels. Foucault clearly expresses this :

'Fear in the face of the absolute limit of death turns inward in a continuous irony; man disarms it in advance, making it an object of derision by giving it an everyday, tamed form by constantly renewing it in the spectacle of life, by scattering it throughout the vices, the difficulties, and absurdities of all men. Death's annihilation is no longer anything because it was already everything, [...] The head that will become a skull is already empty. Madness is the *deja-la* of death.'<sup>1</sup>

There are many multi-layered facets to this concept. I propose to analyse four key elements that may be deduced from the above quotation. These will centre around the prophetic, the physical, the mythical and the political nature of fear.

Roland Barthes has said : 'Myth is a type of speech',<sup>2</sup> and I would like to use this as a structural model. Cross-references can clearly be made during any consideration of fear and death, as in the end all are to be reduced to signifying functions. First it is necessary to define what is meant by the four different elements.



Prophecy is not the fortelling of death but rather its prognosis. It is loaded and ominous but does not propose an indication of future events : it fulfills itself only for its own ends; in this sense it is both self-fulfilling and self-revealing.

The Physical element under analysis is an inquiry, a probing through the rendering of human flesh and blood, it draws upon an affinity, a disturbing familiarity to evoke the struggle between Man's mortality and his longing to transcend it.

Myth is discourse, it is the expressiveness of language, already known and appropriated. In the context concerning us here, myth is used to refer to accepted or already received images. These are paradoxically alienating through our uncomprehending responses to their universality.

The political element deals with power structures. It directs our attention to a condition within a specific culture, place and time. Of interest is the oppressive nature of those structures : the political dimension is an aggression against fear engendered by authority. It is thus liberating while it's subject is one of constraint.

The shared sensibility between these four aspects is reflected in the four artists whose work I have chosen. They are Bosch, Grünewald, Beckmann and Grosz. They all come from a Northern European tradition and work in the figurative tradition.



Their use of space and visual constructs can be seen as feeding from the Northern Medieval traditions : these may be said to be based on multi-layered stage scenery with separate unconnected settings all crammed into one picture or the triptych. Bosch and Grunewald both worked in the triptych format as it was still the most popular in their time; Beckmann also worked in triptych format, because it could be read as a unity from left to right or vice versa, and Grosz used the multi-layered technique to record fast moving urban life. Violence appears in all their work, in the form of violence done to the human figure. From the crucifixion to sex murders, these artists use such violence as a strong moralising force.

This can be seen in examples of the nature of Bosch's prophetic work, The Haywain, The Last Judgement and The Garden of Delights, which will be considered in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, I will use two sections from the Isenheim Altar painted by Grünewald and his Dead Christ to analyse the physical element.

Beckmann's work which, in his own words, tried to 'create a new mythology from present day life' will be represented by Night, Departure and Temptation.

In the last chapter, 4, examples of Grosz's work between 1916 and 1921 will be used to define the Political aspect of fear.



Footnotes Introduction

1. Foucault, Madness and Civilisation, p.16
2. Barthes, Mythologies, p.109



## Chapter 1

The 'Dance of Death'<sup>1</sup> reigned supreme in the Middle Ages : the memento mori, like the birds in Huxley's 'The Island', found expression in the grinning skeleton, the scythe, the hour glass. Death was the finale, the full stop which fell in front of everybody's path. It bespoke of a social balance founded on the church.

It was not a break in tradition which slowly changed the images of death at the turn of the 15th century but rather a torsion : 'death turned upon itself'.<sup>2</sup> It was the allure of madness and folly, of chaos and unreason, of the other side of knowledge which formed a great part of the literary discourse at the end of the Middle Ages.

These traditional literary sources of the Vision of Tundale which tells of Lazarus, Brant's Ship of Fools and Erasmus's Praise of Folly were echoed in the images produced; figure and speech illustrating the same fable of folly in the same moral world. But by the end of the 15th century, painting, through the very nature of its own plastic values, holds forth its own discourse on the disquieting properties of the great madness.

Freed from wisdom, and from the teaching that organised it, the image begins to gravitate about its own madness.<sup>3</sup>



Bosch's work contains all the anxiety of this time. His paintings deal with a great invasion and unravelling of order; it is in this particular light that their prophetic quality can be discerned. Bosch employed everything ever conceived in popular culture from local proverbs and superstitions to the topography of hell expounded in such literature.

In analysing the prophetic quality inherent in Bosch's work, I would like to look at three of his major triptychs : The Haywain, The Last Judgement and The Garden of Delights.<sup>4</sup> Although worked in the traditional triptych manner of three panels, all three pieces 'read' from left to right without the central panel dominating, and all three contain a massive reversal of proportion. It is this misproportion that leads to an ominous reversal : Heaven shrinks to accommodate Earth and Hell.

Bosch used both the International Gothic style and employed the decorative repertory of the illuminators. The grimacing faces of grylli were well known motifs of his time and he used them like satirical references. He seemed to turn deformity into a sign of reality itself by excessive individuality and caricature. The figures, the landscapes, the whole chain of events he depicted seem contaminated and burdened to the point where a rupture seems imminent.

Using no middle ground, in the archaic division of



dual perspective, Bosch added even more to the feeling of uncertainty which pervades his work. The themes, at that time, were still predominantly religious : the universal course of events under divine dispensation, but the increasing interest in the folly of man, in his faults and flaws was often part of the discourse within the religious and it was within this format that Bosch painted his prophetic visions.

The Haywain, which depicts from left to right the fall of man and the haycart being pulled towards hell on the far right, is full of impending doom and terror. The outer shutters of the Haywain show, in the background, a person being physically assaulted and robbed, and an itinerant pedlar fleeing from the scene. Skull and bones are scattered in the right foreground. Avarice, one of Bosch's favourite sins, fills the centre panel.

'The world is a haystack from which each takes what he can.'

This is an old Flemish proverb which Bosch uses : his haycart, symbolising material wealth, becomes the cause of discord, violence, greed and murder. The people, hustling and jostling, are as unaware of the tiny divine light above in the clouds as they are of the demons which pull the cart towards hell. As in most of his other compositions the figures form a chain in the narrative, an expressive diagonal that descends into hell. They form an ignorant mob, topped off by the



lovers perched upon the hay. The sin of lust is displayed by two genteel lovers playing music and, behind them, two appropriately rustic-looking characters mauling each other in a bush. On one side an angel prays to God, appearing to be the only one aware that there is a god, and on the other side a demon hops blithely round the lovers blowing his horn. We have here definite moral and political references but everything and everyone will burn in hell, which, in the right wing, appears simultaneously to be under construction and destruction.

The derelict sites that Bosch often uses to depict hell recall the lazaar houses about which Foucault talks. These were slowly being emptied of lepers during the 15th century, as leprosy disappeared, but the structures remained and the legacy of the formula of exclusion. The nightmarish silhouettes that make up the horizons in Bosch's hell scenes, seem to echo this formula but in reverse : everything is included in hell and there is nothing beyond.

The triptych's tale is one of deception and seduction, the trap into which everybody from the pinnacle to the base of the hierarchy is subjected. Though Bosch is using the religious format of the 'Last Things'<sup>5</sup> : that which began all human history and will terminate all human history, the painting is not just a doomsday prophecy. Rather it 'speaks' of a 'state of being' to which humankind seems to be



perpetually condemned. A continual temptation, attack and counter attack. Although Bosch's agony of hell is portrayed in a very physical way, the demons and devils are subjected to an irrational surrealism. Bejewelled, bloated and misproportioned, they barely lie on the surface, thin translucent paint stretched to combine animal, vegetable and mineral. They form 'an anarchy of organic form.'<sup>6</sup>

In The Last Judgement, (Pl.1,2) the 'last thing' in the reasoning and ordering of Christendom, Bosch painted a chaotic, frenzied orgy on Earth with a very small handful of people up in Heaven with God.<sup>7</sup> The central panel is alive with grotesque activity : green and red predominate on the burning, waterlogged Earth that once, on the left wing, had been the green idyllic Garden. It is a painting crammed with meaning. Like a tapestry it is rich with many recognizable symbols of the decaying gothic world, such as the appropriate punishments for the appropriate sins and the grylli, the many references to mysticism and alchemy. The Egg, the key symbol of the alchemist, the image of sexual creation and of the alchemist's crucible, reappears again and again in various guises. Those false doctrines of heresy, familiar also to Brant and Erasmus, are simultaneously concealed and revealed within the painting. It takes on a new meaning which, as Foucault says,



no longer read in an immediate perception,  
the figure no longer speaks for itself;  
between the knowledge that animates it and  
the form which it is transposed, a gap widens.  
It is free for the dream.<sup>8</sup>

Bosch's dream was prophetic in its very nature. He was

one of those extreme moralists who, obsessed  
with what they fight, are haunted, not  
unpleasurably, by visions of unheard-of  
obscenities, perversions and tortures.<sup>9</sup>

His revelations were the product of his  
observations and interpretations. In The Garden of Delight  
(Pl.3,4,5,6) Bosch takes the iconographic format even further  
from its origins, manipulates the surface structure into a  
flatter, more illustrative function, and pushes its decorative  
capacity to its limits while maintaining an even greater  
control of form, to produce a true phantasmagoria out of what,  
at first, looks like a deliciously tempting pleasure dome.

With delicate pinks and greens, blues and yellows,  
rhythmic lines and carefully weighted composition forming a  
pattern effect, appropriately oriental in flavour, the exotic  
and the lush within the central panel exudes a probing  
pleasure. A regimented mass of tiny bodies, some in the most  
bizarre postures, are worked across the picture plane  
surrounded, cocooned and erupting from a wealth of symbols.  
They nibble, peer and probe at exotic fruit swollen out of all  
proportion. The fruit, once again, refer back to the Egg in



that they are seeds. Strange structures, the product of what could be pink membranes, blue eggshells and weird vegetation rise out of the earth and water.

Many of the symbols have been decoded. Amidst all the abandonment to carnal pleasures, there is an urgent inquiry, and it is this absorbed activity of humankind which Bosch illustrates. It is not condemned but treated with an objective eye. Balanced out by the outer panels, this triptych contains strong central points, exploding and imploding. The act of looking, touching, listening, tasting and smelling are all there, it is at once fascinating and repulsive.

Many of the symbols, apparently, are directly appropriated from the alchemists. The Egg appears in hundreds of disguises and deformaties : from a thin transparent bubble containing a man and a woman, together with umbilical vegetation, to the deformed egg-like structure on two tree-legs perched dangerously in two boats that float in the waters of Hell.

Among all the erotic temptations which bring about the forgetfulness of the soul and all the searching for knowledge, there are ravens, symbolising the magician, fish, reminders of past joy, and rats symbols of the rejection of false heresies. In the very act of trying to unravel the secret of sexual creation, and in the heart of the fountain of



life, in the left panel, the searching eye, with the owl peering out through the pupil, returns the gaze. Everywhere there is a movement from eggs to eyes. The discontinuous representation of proportion expresses most strikingly the dream quality of the painting's conception, but the presentiment Bosch visualised is not concerned with the individual psychic experience, rather with the observed collective response. He distorted the proportions of nature to 'speak' about mankind's meddling with the natural order of things. From microcosmic to macrocosmic, the world in the picture spins into the chaos of its own hell, and not Satan's.

The power and balance of the 'last things' gives way to the folly that is existence itself. With the daunting prospect of all that is unknown invading Bosch's vision, the prophetic becomes self-revealing.



Footnotes Chapter 1

1. The 'Dance of Death' was a very popular theme, the most famous example is probably Hans Holbein the Younger's woodcuts which first appeared in book form in Lyons in 1538.
2. See Foucault, Madness and Civilization.
3. Foucault, p.18.
4. The dates for his paintings are debatable, it is thought that he lived between 1450-1516, but it is difficult to place his work in chronological order.
5. The 'Last Things' is a medieval term used to describe heaven, hell, birth and death.
6. See Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting, p.358.
7. Usually the proportion of people saved and those condemned were equal.
8. Foucault, p.19.
9. Panofsky, p.358.



## Chapter 2.

The physical concept of fear manifests itself most clearly within the realm of realism, but realism can of course take many forms. Grünewald<sup>1</sup>, painting around the early years of the 16th century, was to use both the developments of the Renaissance and yet retain the medieval principles of 'size according to importance'. The realism with which he depicted his crucifixions did not stem from a desire for naturalistic representation, but rather a desire to confront the fear of the physical; the ultimate in pain and suffering.

The nightmare of the Calvary becomes the poignant vehicle for expressing the phenomenon of human suffering and evokes a particular association with inflicted violence. In analysing three of Grünewald's crucifixions, there is an important shift from one iconographic context to another; the expressive character of the event displayed through gesture motifs and that which is displayed through corporeality.

The central panel of what is known as the Isenheim Altar (probably painted around 1515) (Pl.7,8) conveys most powerfully sensations of the physical referent. Here the techniques of the Renaissance are used to heighten the emotional impact of the imagery. There is undoubtedly a cessation of life. The leaded and sagging weight of the body is echoed by the bowed horizontal of the cross. The fingers of



the two hands, splayed out by the force of the nails thrust through the palms, appear to have just stopped wriggling in the air, like nerve-endings : they are stretched taut registering the pain. The arms are excruciatingly extended by the hanging weight. The head sags to the left, mouth open and the torso is lacerated with a hundred festering wounds; red against the greenish tint of the skin. His feet echo the gesture of the hands : they are contorted by the physical torment, toes curled around one another.

As the details are slowly consumed, there is the consciousness that what is viewed is a body in the process of decomposing. Around the cross is the traditional group. On the left, Mary, in the garb of a widow, faints in the arms of St. John the Evangelist, and St. Mary Magdelene with her vessel of ointments, wrings her hands in sorrow. On the right of the Cross, stands the powerful figure of St. John the Baptist with the ancient symbol of the lamb, carrying the Cross and pouring out it's blood into the chalice of the Holy Communion. With a stern and commanding gesture he points towards the Saviour, and over him are written the words that he speaks (according to the gospel of St John III.30) : 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' Grünewald gives the gesture a peculiar significance. It is very much what is reflected by this carefully dramatised grouping that makes the narrative clear: 'The rotting carcass was that of a god'.<sup>2</sup>



The proportions revert back again to the medieval standards of size according to importance within the picture; these figures are dwarfed by the Christ figure. The two women with their blanched faces lean backwards, their wringing hands stretched out and upwards, creating a dynamic space between the sunken depression of Christ's torso and the concave line made by their gesticulation. All helping to emphasize that the moment of annihilation, physical annihilation, had come. This is not melodrama, despite the overwrought qualities, because there is a continual reminder of the pain through the incredible rendering of the skin.

Grünewald was known as 'the painter of the skin'.<sup>3</sup> He may well have worked in the Anthonite Abbey of Isenheim, which was a type of hospital for skin diseases, or what was known as 'burnt people' - syphilitics.

It was the Abbot of Isenheim, Guido Guersi who commissioned the polytech which includes on one wing The Temptation of St. Anthony (Pl.9). Once again the animality which haunted Bosch's work, acquires a fantastic nature of its own. The great beast of prey with knotty fingers, impossible combinations of animals, issuing from a demented imagination become the tormentors of the saint.

St. Anthony attempts to ward off his horrific tormentors who pull his hair, claw at him and are ready to beat him with large sticks, while in the background light



meets darkness ; demons fight off the angels. In the left foreground there is the most touching and pathetic of creatures, afflicted by St. Anthony's fire. A being with a man's face, little stumps for hands and webbed feet heaves a large swollen stomach, his whole skin a mass of inflamed and pussy wounds. In his agony he appears oblivious to the frantic happenings in front of him, he clutches desperately at a parcel torn to reveal what looks like a sliced white pan, which on closer inspection is in fact a book. In the other corner is a piece of paper upon which is inscribed :

'Ubi eras Jhesu bone, ubi eras, quare non affuisti ut sanares vulnera mea?'

which can be translated as: 'Where were you, good Jesus, where were you? And why did you not come and dress my wounds?'

All the confused fighting, the main section of the painting, gives way for silent contemplation of suffering, all attention converges on the agony that the scrunched up face carries, on the largest boil protruding from the centre of the painfully pink belly, conveyed with all the power of realism.

It is the same 'attention to detail [...] carried to the point of indicating the inflammatory halo which develops around minor wounds'<sup>4</sup> and this is also found on the crucified Christ.

In Dead Christ, (Pl.10) the date it was painted is probably around 1523, an elongated painting, 36 x 136 cm, the



body is crushed into the frame. Once again the weight of the corpse is felt : the corporeality is juxtaposed with the gesture. The motionless weight of the slumped head curves downwards and a pair of hands, cut off at the wrists by the frame, forms its opposite motion with intertwining fingers. On either side are coats of arms,<sup>5</sup> carried by bearers tiny in proportion to the corpse. On the right there is also another little figure, mouth open in awe, hands clutched in despair. The feeling evoked by the corpse's curved form, which appears to have been poured into the frame, is pure compassion.

It is this juxtaposition of terrifying realism and the theme of superhuman love which is itself the myth of Christ that makes Grünewald's painting a vision of the abyss of human suffering.



Footnotes Chapter 2

1. This not his real name, it was given to him 150 years after his death. It is thought that he might have been known as Mathis Gothardt.
2. Statement by Joris Karl Huysmans, 1903, quoted in Phantom of the Imagination, p.110.
3. The Book of Art, vol 4, p.91.
4. Dr Richet, L'Art et La Medécine, quoted in Grünwald, p.24.
5. On the left are the arms of Cardinal Albrect, Archbishop of Magdeburg, and on the right are those of Count Dietrich Von Erlach, Archbishop of Mainz.



### Chapter 3

As in the psychology of Jung, dream and myth are a source of healing, they suggest the unbounded depth of a 'collective unconscious' and it is to this that the imagery produced by Beckmann pertains :

'Sometimes I am helped by the constructive rhythm of the cabala, when my thoughts wander over Oannes Dagon to the last days of drowned continents. Of the same substance are the streets with their men, women and children; great ladies and whores; servant girls and duchesses. I seem to meet them, like doubly significant dreams, in Samothrace and Piccadilly and Wall Street. They are Eros and the longing for oblivion. All these things come back to me in black and white like virtue and crime. Yes, black and white are the two elements which concern me.'<sup>1</sup>

The Night, (Pl.11) 1918-19, starts and finishes with cruelty. It does not as do the later works, move through a visual narrative but remains fixed : the action carries on the same horror again and again, as if monitored forever on a television screen, because within the picture there is continuous movement. The diagonals, parallels, complementary angling and colouring all work to create a chaos of limbs carefully organised to maintain cruelty in every corner.

The control executed within this composition of brutality, reminiscent of the Germanic gothic tradition, and the Flemish tradition of Bosch and Bruegel, situates the fear within the reading rather than the methods of production of the picture. As in the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, which



emerged in post - 1st World War Germany, with its reaction against expressionism's neurosis and narcosis, to which Beckmann subscribed, it is a desire not to :

'attempt to deny existential pain, but [...] situate[d] it in society, rather than the individual.'<sup>2</sup>

Nothing can prevent the torture and rape that is happening and is going to happen; no amount of the rational can dismiss the daemonic and it is here that the prophetic quality emerges again:

'I feel the need to be in the cities among my fellowmen. This is where our place is. We must take part in the whole misery that is to come. We must surrender our heart and our nerves to the dreadful screams of the poor dis-illusioned people ... we must give them a picture of their fate.'<sup>3</sup>

In the foreground of The Night there is a phonograph, the speaker gapes open to symbolize consummate despair and a picture of nothingness. The music it plays transcends the action within the painting and echoes Antoine Roquentin :

'And at that very moment, on the other side of existence, in that other world you can see from a distance, but without ever approaching it, a little melody started dancing, started singing : 'You must be like me; you must suffer in strict time.'... But behind the existence which falls from one present to the next, without past, without a future, behind these sounds which decompose from day to day, peels away and slips towards death, the melody stays the same, young and firm, like a pitiless witness.'<sup>4</sup>



The triptych afforded Beckmann a stage upon which to create an anti-mythological mythology :

'The best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology.'<sup>5</sup>

Departure, (P.12) painted in 1932-33, is what Stephen Lackner called a 'three act drama.' Each panel contains a different setting, a wealth of symbols and a jumble of figures dressed in costumes from different epochs. The outer panels, both working in the vertical, contain confusing scenes of abased and abused humanity. The central panel works on a very strong horizontal force and depicts a journey by boat, either end of the boat cut off by the outer two panels. The light issuing from the strong and pure blue, red and yellow hues of the central panel is jammed between the contrasting darkness of the outer panels. There are two things (apart from style) which all three panels have in common : the fish and Beckmann's dramaturgy.

The fish, according to Lackner, represent the transcendent life force in Beckmann's private mythology. In the left panel a muscular man in a striped t-shirt wields a net containing two fish in the direction of the central panel. In the right panel a uniformed hotel attendant walks blindfolded and carrying a large fish towards the central panel. And in the central panel an anonymous, helmeted



Viking, obviously captain of the vessel, lays a gentle hand upon a large fish lying at his side. A king, back turned to the spectator, keeps his hand on a net full of small fish about to swim free.

The dramaturgy which Beckmann uses appears as clearly : from symbols to actions, everything within the Departure becomes a part of it, drawing inspiration from the Commedia dell Arte tradition of the Renaissance, in which texts were secondary to the performance of the actors. Characters were developed as 'types' which the actors used as a starting point for his or her improvisation.

At first strong bold lines and clearly defined space, function to create an order and correctness : everything appears, through dramatic action and yet there appears nothing behind that : all the 'props' subtract rather than add, and so like the myths, from which they were first stolen, they 'remove from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance.'<sup>6</sup> The confusion arrested by the precision and clarity of method plays upon the Dionysian and Appollonian fusion, which, as Nietzsche shows in The Birth of Tragedy, produces in the plastic arts a 'redemptive vision'.

The triptych Temptation, 1936-37, (Pl.13) is even more of a visual synthesis of many complex mythical sources,



it appears to yield such a wealth of esoteric material yet simultaneously denying it. The temptations on the two outer panels, both sit on water, are carefully balanced by each other. On the left an Athena-like warrior stands to attention facing the central panel, sword in one hand and a pair of upside down legs, presumably a slayed victim, in the other. On the right her counterpart, the uniformed hotel attendant, strides forward (again) towards the central panel. His eyes face out, as a soldier would do parading past, and in one hand he carries a platter on which is borne a crown and in the other holds the reins of a slave. Behind both is a captive woman. Proportion is reversed : the background comes forward, on the left, in the shape of a large sailor and on the right, in the shape of a large parrot. As in the medieval principle of size according to importance which dictates a certain 'known' reading, this suggests a certain ordering but only in the context of the picture.

Within the central panel, littered with mirror frames, a column or two, a pagan idol and various bits of newspaper, sits a bound, archetypal-looking boy/man and a monumental woman holding a wilting lotus flower. He stares at her; she stares out towards the right. There have been many different myths extracted from the sexual connotations of the central panel : the pagan idol in the background is hermaphroditic and perhaps refers to the Chaldean myth that



Oannes taught concerning the origin of mankind : the two-headed being with a hermaphrodite body, one head was male and the other female. Plato tells that these beings, who lived a blissful existence and were eventually split apart by the envious gods, together with burning passion, crave reunification to heal their wounds. There are also allusions here to Freudian psychology : that each human psyche contains elements of both sexes.

Ultimately, the material of all this mythical speech is the painting itself, reduced to a pure signifying function : 'I hardly need to abstract things, for each object is unreal enough already, so unreal that I can only make it real by means of painting itself.'<sup>7</sup> Beckmann's triptychs bring together the Apollonian and the Dionysian, reasserting the reason and the unreason of existence; 'his dialectic manages to rescue this insight from the hell to which history has condemned it.'<sup>8</sup>



Footnotes Chapter 3

1. Quoted in Theories of Modern Art, a Source Book by Artists and Critics, p.187-192.
2. Hymen, Artscribe, vol 8 p.32.
3. The Expressionist Revolution in German Art, 1871-1933, p.24.
4. Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea, p.248.
5. Roland Barthes, Mythologies, p.135.
6. Barthes, p.142.
7. Theories of Modern Art, a Source Book by Artists and Critics.
8. Hymen, p.36.



#### Chapter 4

Grosz used realism to seek out methods of dealing both with real subjects and real human needs. He produced a sharply critical view of existing society and individuals, and this harsh scepticism comes out most powerfully in the pen and ink drawings and paintings produced in the wake of the 1st World War and during the Weimar Republic.

Franz Pfemfert writing in Die Aktion, in 1912, said:

Europe's insanity seems incurable. What gives us the right to babble about the progress of a civilization that puts its most wretched instincts on display? that is so criminal as to proclaim murder-on-command as a duty of 'national honour'? that glorifies fanatical ignorance as courage? [...] what matter all the cliches of our platonic friends? Not a single bullet stays in the barrel because a few innocent dreamers are on the look out for peace! Here and there peace prizes are distributed and peace conferences held, but there remains no time to get to the heart of the insanity with serious remedies!<sup>1</sup>

And it is the 'heart of this insanity' that Grosz attempts to expose in his work. Even at the apparently sanest moments of the mid-20's the work produced in the different arts reflected a precarious unease which was often electrifying. 'I felt the ground shaking beneath my feet, and the shaking was visible in my work' Grosz was later to write in his autobiography. Anger over the government's ineffectual control of the military and nationalistic elements which it was hoped the



formation of the Weimar Republic would defeat, and disillusionment with the Spartacist revolt, led to many artists such as Dix, Beckmann and Grosz launching scathing attacks on the society and more especially on the middle-class. In a German tradition of emphasizing differences; the traditionally schematized view which prefers the sharp contrast of black and white, they intensified conflict and portrayed the world through a clash of warring opposites : as in Hegel's thesis/antithesis and in Nietzsche's polarity.

From the war experience, which caused permanent change and impelled those who had been involved to look anew at the structures and values which had created it, the images of horror did not, for many, stop with the end of war but were rediscovered within society. Grosz was left with a deeply misanthropic contempt for the German bourgeoisie which he expressed in his caustic pen drawings,

In order to attain a style which [...] would render the blunt and unvarnished harshness and unfeelingness of my objects, I studied the crudest manifestations of the artistic urge. In public urinals I copied the folkloristic drawings [...] Children's drawings, too, stimulated me because of their lack of ambiguity. Thus it was that gradually I came to use this hard-as-nails drawing style which I needed to transfer onto paper my observations which, at that time, were dictated by absolute misanthropy. <sup>2</sup>

He used caricature and multi-layered techniques, often putting



people in transparent clothes, to unmask them and revealing the skull behind the face to show death, [as in Contrasts, c.1917]. He constantly used the themes of violence and debauchery set within fast moving urban life and its resultant chaos, The world became an idiotic orgy.

The theme of murder which had fascinated Grosz before, in the form of detective novels and 'penny dreadfuls' was to emerge again in his work. Sex murder had become a frequent theme in the early 20th Century; E.L. Kirchner used it for his illustrations of Zola's La Bete Humaine in 1914, Kokoschka in an illustration for his play Morder, Hoffnung der Frauen in 1910, and in 1920 Dix made an etching of it. The histrionic gestures of sex murders corresponded to the mental turmoil of the works of Strindberg and Wedekind which, at the turn of the century, had explored the problems of relationships between the sexes, based on the new knowledge of latent sex drives. But Grosz, taking up the theme in drawings of 1912-13 was identifying with the criminal, and a rebellion against law.

In Jonk, the killer, Sex Murderer in Ackerstrasse, 1916, (front cover) a frightened looking man washes his hands sticky with blood and stares over his shoulder at the decapitated and bound body of a woman lying on the bed, the cleaver still beside her, at the head of the bed a phonograph, it's speaker pointing towards Jonk. All the lines are sharp



and decisive dealing directly with details within the room, its bric-a-brac and personal items strewn around, and the bloody mess upon the bed; 'the juxtaposition of braces and cleaver [...] : of idyll and violence.' It is the 'same revealing juxtaposition he used in When it was all over, they played cards, 1917.

In this drawing, three men play cards under a large naked bulb, one of the players is sitting on a tea chest out of which protrude the limbs of the murdered victim; in the centre foreground lies the cleaver. Part of the impact of these sinister drawings is their Art Brut quality : they are the work of the actual murderer or madman and not the product of an artist.

'Then I painted a big picture : in a sinister street at night a hellish procession of dehumanised figures rolls on, faces, representing Alcohol, Syphilis, Pestilence... Over the crowd rides Death on a black coffin - direct as a symbol, the boneman. The picture was related to my ancestors, the medieval masters, Bosch and Bruegel. They too lived in the twilight of a new epoch and formed its expression ... Against Mankind gone mad, I painted this protest.<sup>3</sup>

Grosz wrote this in reference to the painting Dedicated to Oskar Panizza 1917-18 which confirms that it is a socially conceived painting. The over-all colour of the painting is red - 'The blood red of my suicidal palette' - it is an allegorical warning using the formal futurist format of overlap and diagonal to depict the simultaneity of different events in one place. The carnival, a demoniac and insane



procession, is cruel and violent in both subject matter and execution. With intense malice the painting exposes the excesses of city and society. As obvious social criticism, it functions above all as a moralising statement.

Germany, a Winter's Tale,<sup>4</sup> 1917-19 also makes use of collage technique, to help unite different sections of Time and Space but above all to present an argument in a logical sequence bringing cause and effect together; the three figures at the lower edge, the 'pillars' of society, army, church and state, are the causes; the effect, according to Grosz, is 'the collapse of the bourgeois world.'

The collapse of the bourgeois world which many hoped for in the early post war years, encouraged by the Russian Revolution and its subsequent vibrations throughout Europe, led to feverish activity among the intellectual and artistic circles of the 'left'. Within Germany there was a general move away from expressionism as it was felt it lacked any social comment.

It ignored the fact that within the fragmentary nature of social experience the unitary whole of society, capitalist society, becomes totally visible and by not reflecting the reality of this situation as a whole they were repudiating the objectivity of all art, its 'faithful reflection of the real', and therefore its task should be one of 'unravelling the essence, the origins and the meditations of this distortion by comparing it with reality.'<sup>5</sup>



Though at first concerned in polemics against all traditional art forms and its desire to shock the bourgeois with the insults and scorn of its nonsensical actions, the Dada movement was becoming more and more politically motivated in Germany. Many prominent members, such as Grosz, Heartfield, Herzfelde and Piscator, joined the K.D.P.; the German Communist party. It was a time when many satirical periodicals, concerned with the politics of the day, were being produced and continuously banned as well. Heartfield, Herzfelde and Grosz founded a succession of these short-lived periodicals, Jederman sien eigner Fussball, Die Pleite and Der Gegner. They manipulated typography in true Dada style and launched venomous attacks through montage and illustration. It was the examples of Tatlin, the Dadaist mechanical fantasies and the neo-classic inhumanism of the Italians, such as de Chirico and Carra that helped to form what Hausman called in the Dada Almanach of 1920 a 'Return to Objectivity in Art'.

Grosz assimilated these influences, and the quasi-childish, graffitic element of his drawings gave way to a colder, more literal and pointedly critical approach, an aim to be deliberately objective and moralistic.

'Man is no longer depicted individually with subtle psychological delineation but as a collectivist, almost mechanical concept. Individual destinies are no longer important.'<sup>6</sup>



In 1920, Grosz painted numerous constructivist paintings that reflect his attitude but in his indignation over political events of the time he returned to the black and white of his graphic work to be more effectively political. Between 1918 and 1922, twenty assassinations were carried out by the 'left-wing', ten being punished by death, but out of the three hundred and fifty-four assassinations carried out by the 'right-wing', only one was severely punished. In 1919 the Spartacist revolt was crushed, Luxembourg and Liebknecht murdered and the old military-aristocratic-industrial alliance was regaining its old credibility.

It was through cover illustrations for Die Pleite and his political portfolios, Gott mit uns and Das Gesicht der Herrschenden Klasse that Grosz temporarily abandoned art in favour of political agitation.

'My art, at any rate, was to be a gun and a sword; my drawing pens I declared to be empty straws as long as they did not take part in the fight for freedom.'<sup>7</sup>

In Gott Mit uns, 1920 for which Grosz and Herzfelde, the publisher in this case, were prosecuted for anti-militarist graphics, Grosz aggressively attacks the remaining militarism of the Kaisereich. He portrays the link between military action against the working class, with economic interests of the ruling class, as in a picture



entitled 'The Communists are dying and the foreign exchange rate goes up.' Two fat cats are dining while in the background, the military joyfully butchers a few ordinary civilians, obviously supposed revolutionaries as one clutches a torn flag. The titles of the drawings, which Herzfelde and Heartfield helped to formulate, or rather captions which accompany them, help give political direction and edge to his loathings. The Marxist interpretation of history was an obvious influence and it is brought out by Grosz's powerful characterisation of the facial expression of those who order murder and those who obey and carry them out. To this assimilation of appearance and reality is added a very personal anger at the counter-revolutionary measures, as seen in Knocking-off time or Pimps of Death. Das Gesicht der Herrschenden Klasse, was published in 1921, and had two reprints within the same year. Once again with exact delineation Grosz vehemently attacks the bourgeoisie. At 5 o'clock in the morning exposes their debauched behaviour while in the top quarter of the page, divided by a clean straight line, the workers march off to work, not looking very happy. The two different worlds are balanced against each other to produce a strong satirical comment.

The black and white, 'either-or' politics of Grosz's drawings produce powerful propaganda because they manage to retain the status of artwork; they fulfil the



artistic presentation of contradiction. The medium proposes a reality of its own, an urge to transgress the limitations of art and yet remain embedded in the culture in the hope of producing change, of being a catalyst. Through a dialectical language and direct symbolism they expose the oppressive elements necessary to the make-up of the anonymous bourgeoisie:<sup>8</sup> the myth of a civilisation born out of fear.



#### Footnotes Chapter 4

1. George Grosz quoted in Hans Hess, George Grosz, p.47
2. George Grosz, 1925, quoted in Schneede, George Grosz, p.38
3. George Grosz, Curriculum Vitae, 'Notes for the trial 3 Dec 1930,' quoted in Hans Hess, George Grosz, p.80.
4. This painting is missing, presumed destroyed.
5. George Luckacs, 'Realism in the Balance,' in Aesthetics and Politics, edited by Ronald Taylor, p.31.
6. George Grosz, 'Notes on my new pictures', 1921. quoted in Schneede, George Grosz, p.66.
7. George Grosz, autobiography, quoted in Schneede George Grosz, p.72.
8. Barthes, Mythologies, see his chapter: 'Myth today', pp. 137-142.



'The principle of violence and excess underlying all life,' is 'a superabundance at once blindly creative and blindly destructive, in which not only one's own individual life but also all human systems of meaning count for nothing'.<sup>1</sup> In all the works discussed here there is such a latent quality. Self-denial is an inherent aspect in each of the aspects considered, : the prophetic, the physical, the mythical and the political.

Through displacement, the placing of objects out of their accepted contexts, the 'last things' of Bosch's vision do not exist separately of each other but within each other. The body within which the soul is imprisoned, is in turn imprisoned within the soul. Within his triptychs all the different states of being are represented, from the most desired to the most feared. The dualism of reason and unreason gives way: 'the madness of desire, of insane murders, the most unreasonable passions - all are wisdom and reason, since they are part of the order of nature'.<sup>2</sup> The vision which thus unravels and tumbles within the contradictory constraints of the picture itself and the dizzy chaos of the world, is imagined as a totality concealing and revealing infinite possibilities. It is by excess, by taking extremes of characterisation, by jumbling deformity and perfection, the sacred and the profane, that the prophetic quality depicted



by a chain of events becomes self-contained and defies interpretation.

It is also by excess, an excess of anguish and arresting physicality with which the Isenheim Crucifixion reaffirms transgression as a quality of the sacred, the vital element is violation. Through the desecration of the Christ figure, the pain is extended providing an existential despair, a provocative shattering: mankind is made acutely aware of its own mortality at the very moment of its annihilation. Temporarily halting before the contradiction inherent in the known myth of christianity, and it is important that it is a known myth as it is an altar piece with a specific social function of its time to teach, Grünewald confronts the torment, the suffering, the destruction by using the physical language of wounds and gesture to deny the separateness of individual existence. The moment of death is also that of immortality hence religious ecstasy comes to be portrayed as physical pain and suffering.<sup>3</sup>

That experience, the fresh courage of that ordeal, all those words hurled against a fundamental absence of language, all that space of physical suffering and terror which surrounds or rather coincides with the void - that is the work of art itself.<sup>4</sup>

It is this void which Beckmann seeks to cover up with all the mythical clutter of human discourse. As with Bosch's triptychs, they function on the two levels of revealing and concealing. Through myth and its ability to play hide and



seek<sup>5</sup> Beckmann manipulates all their different propositions so no individual one can hold more meaning than the other; they are filled out like successive moments in one story to produce an image that is self-contained. It is the world that is arraigned in front of the picture, having to resolve its own responsibilities. The most basic prohibition, 'thou shalt not kill', obviously flaunted with these triptychs, becomes for Grosz a weapon for attack.

The absence of any decor, which would make it right or wrong or would justify the sex murders portrayed by Grosz, speaks of 'total night as absolute day'. Once again the vital element is violation, a violation of privacy. The power of the ruling class rests on the premise that there is a right and wrong. It decides what should be right and what should be wrong, and a balance is thus maintained ensuring its survival. Because of the sexual connections which appear in both Beckmann's and Grosz's work, the act of creation and destruction have all taken place within each other: 'Death and love are altogether carnal, hence their great magic and their great terror'.<sup>6</sup> The apparent abandonment of morals within the pictures arrest the movement from one force to another; from right to wrong. A vicious circle that maintains a power structure is exposed in its primary functions.

The portrayal of life as death in Grosz's work, like the portrayal of death as immortality in Grunewald's work, and the simultaneous creation and destruction in



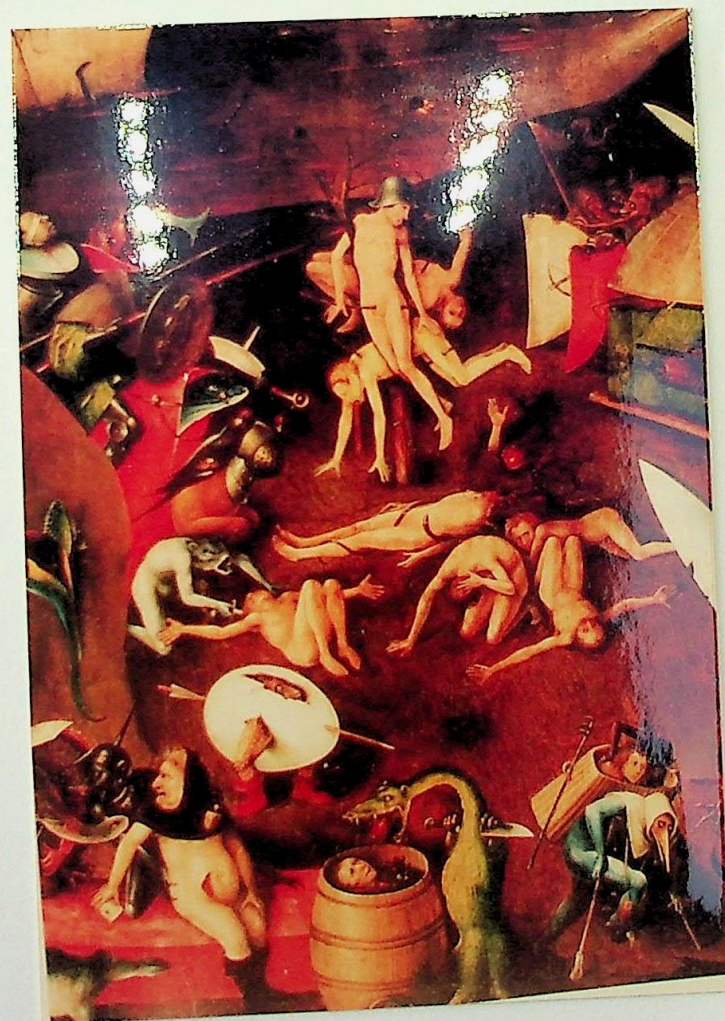
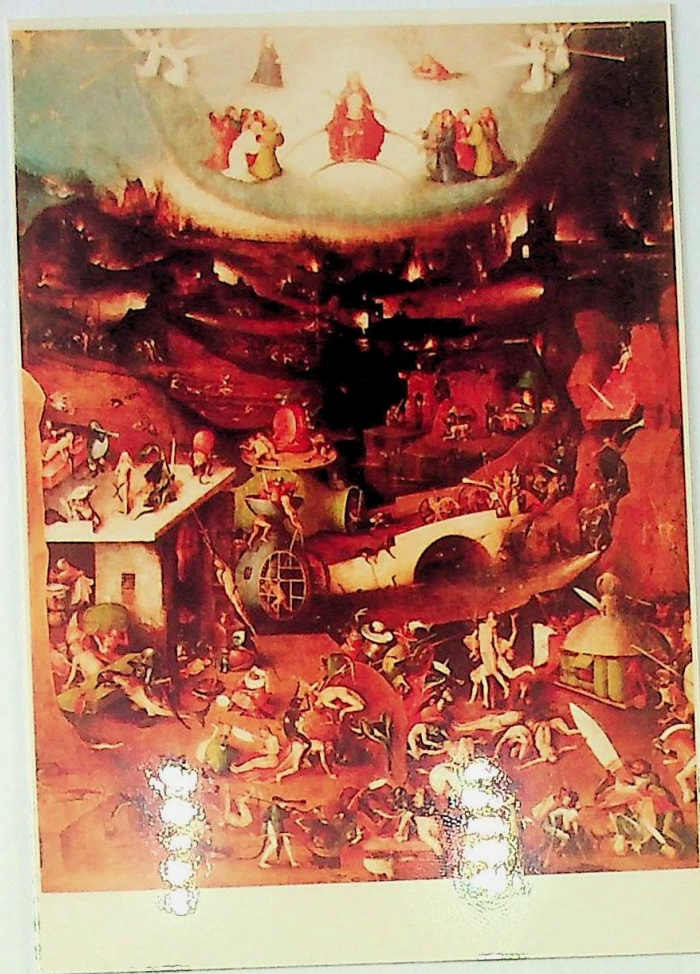
Beckmann's and Bosch's work all attempt to compensate for Man's inability to overcome the final physical obstacle of death and fear by the act of painting itself.



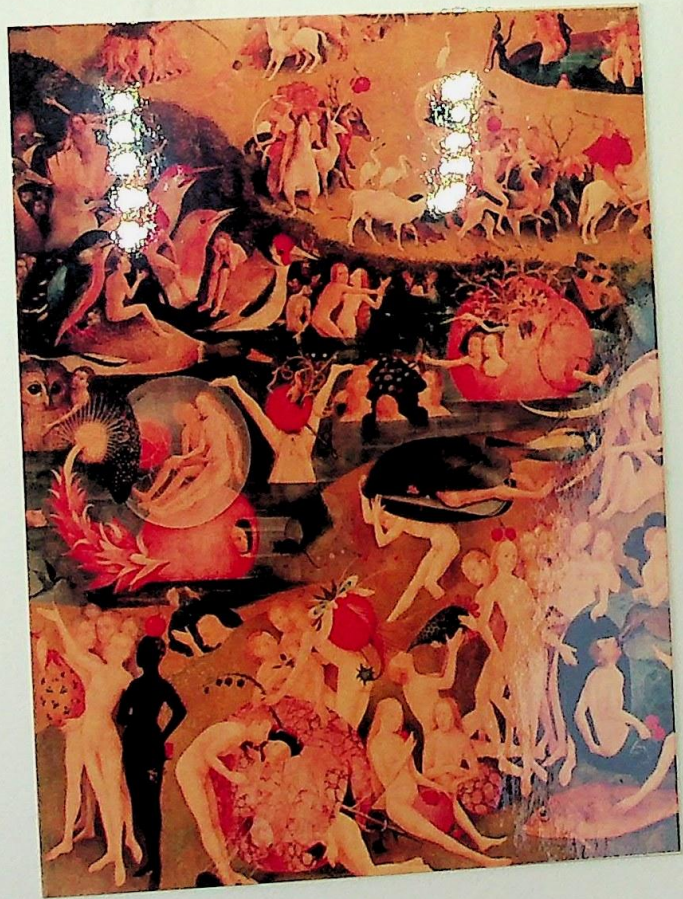
Footnotes Conclusion

1. Watson, 'The resurrection of the body', ZG, p.9.
2. Foucault, 'Madness and Civilisation', p.282.
3. It would be tempting to refer to this as sadism.
4. Foucault, 'Madness and Civilisation' p.287.
5. Barthes, Mythologies, p.109-137.
6. Norman O. Brown, excerpt from Love's Body, quoted by Watson in 'The resurrection of the body', ZG, p.9. It may be more appropriate to speak of death and sex as being 'altogether carnal'.

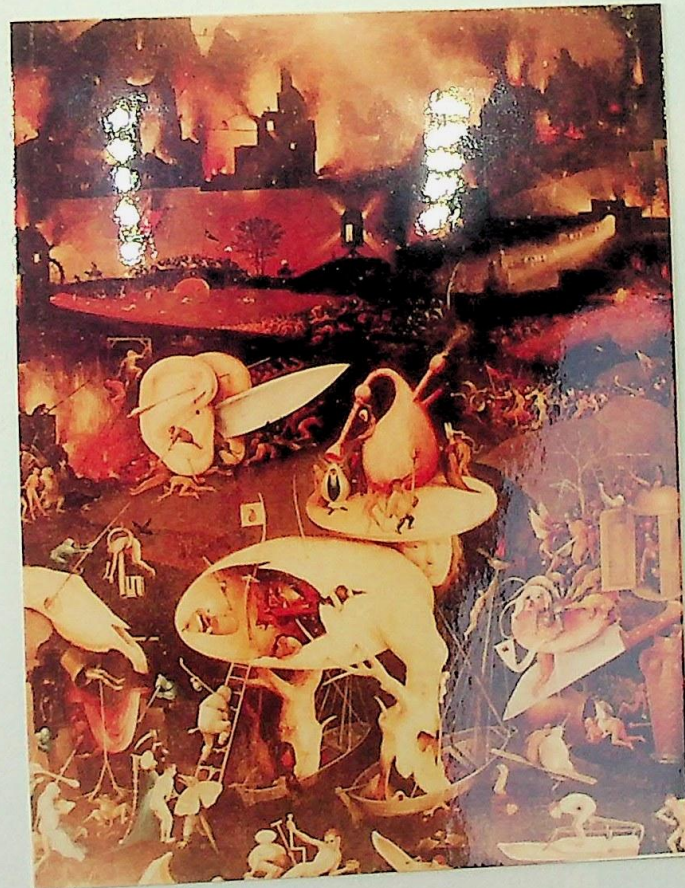




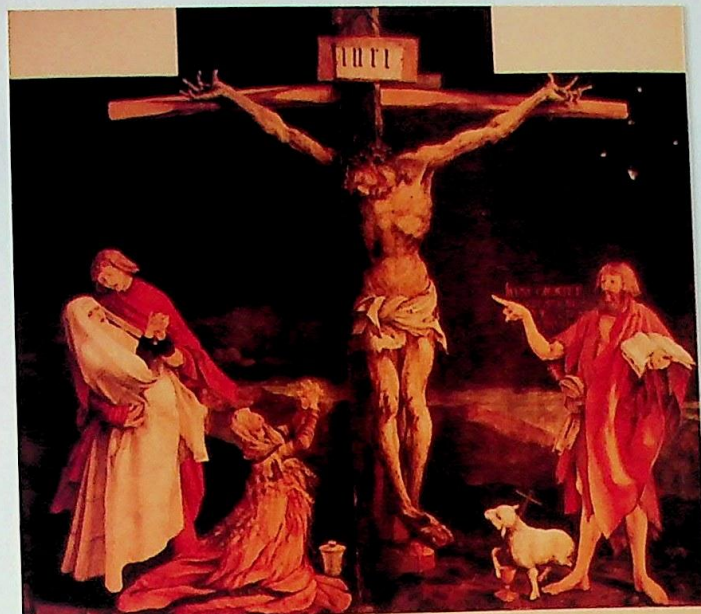




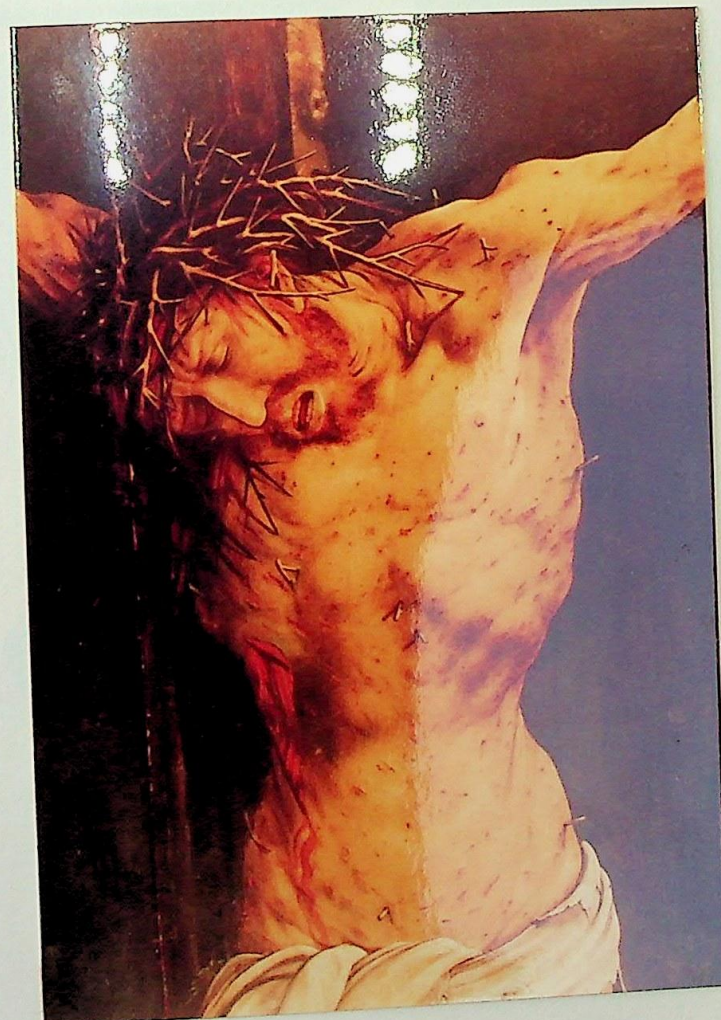








Christ on the Cross. Detail from Plate 8

















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