

The Guilt of Winter
Northern European Renaissance Art

by
John Williams

for
HUM2230.0M1

31 January 2014

The art of Northern Europe during the renaissance is comparable to that of the Italian city-states in their use of perspective, color, and detail. Rogier van der Weyden and Hieronymus Bosch were two artists that often captured a sense of brooding pessimism in the elements of their work. This paper will examine those attitudes and present possible causes for them.

The art of both Northern and Southern Europe often depicted Biblical scenes with Italian paintings projecting a feeling of exaltation and the divine qualities of man. In stark contrast, northern renaissance art cast a dark pall over the scenes and highlighted the pessimistic attitudes endemic to the region. The influence of the Catholic Church was also felt in the north. Pope Innocent III delivered a sermon entitled *On the Misery of the Human Condition*. The desolation from the Black Death had long lasting effects on the minds of Europeans and those feelings persisted “from the 1340’s well into the sixteenth century” (Sayre 546). Another cause for pessimism might have been the northern climate. The higher latitudes experience fewer hours of sunlight and might have caused depression – what today is called S.A.D. or seasonal affective disorder. The cold weather common in the north would have encouraged the residents to remain indoors to avoid exposure to the elements. Unfortunately, the close proximity of individuals within enclosed spaces contributed to the spread of disease that often resulted in death, something not likely to be a positive influence on mood.

Both regions shared the techniques and materials however the themes shown in the north differ in their tone and have a sense of conflict and anxiety. The bright colors are representative of wealth and prosperity while contrasted with heaviness in the religious context of the art. In the *Descent from the Cross* by Rogier van der Weyden, the scene was composed showing the body of Christ being lowered from the cross after his death. The weight of the body is borne by others in the painting. The heaviness of the composition “falls with Christ to the ground, [and]

to death” and strong emotion is shown by “every tear on every face” of the other characters who are dismayed by their loss (Sayre 544). Similarly, the composition of Hieronymus Bosch’s *Carrying of the Cross* shows Christ with his “eyes closed ... whether ... from exhaustion or from sorrow and pity for the grotesque menagerie that surrounds him” (Sayre 546). The colors are dark and muted but the detail remains. The facial expressions with their missing teeth give the scene a pitiful feel and evoke fear and disgust. Bosch painted another more complex scene called *Garden of Earthly Delights*, which is “full of hybrid organisms, part animal or bird ... [and] sometimes part mechanical contraption” (Sayre 548). To the viewers of the time, these images would have seemed like extremely improper behavior and at the same time would represent the indulgences that would have been available to them because of their wealth.

The art of Northern Europe during the Renaissance contained a complex mix of emotions and simultaneously embodied human frailty, punishment, despair and the desire for salvation. The wealthy class became patrons of the arts to symbolically buy a reduced sentence in Purgatory but also wanted to enjoy the richness of life their wealth afforded.

Works Cited (Bibliography)

Sayre, Henry M. *The Humanities. Culture, Continuity and Change*. Book 3. Saddle Rock, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2012. Print.