

South Piedmont Community College

Renaissance Masters – A Comparative Analysis of

Sofonisba Anguissola and Hieronymus Bosch



The Chess Game – Sofonisba Anguissola



The Garden of Earthly Delights – Hieronymus Bosch

Tera Waddell

ART 114, Art History Survey 1

Morganne Van Voorhis

September 19, 2024

Renaissance Masters – A Comparative Analysis of

Sofonisba Anguissola and Hieronymus Bosch

When one studies the artworks of the Italian and Northern Renaissance, they are introduced to many skilled and fantastic artists who were pioneers of their style. We will meet two such artists, Sofonisba Anguissola the artist who painted *The Chess Game*, 1555 from the Italian Renaissance and Hieronymus Bosch the artist who painted *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1480-1505 from the Northern Renaissance. We will get to know them by learning more about their lives and examining and comparing their artwork.

First, let us meet Sofonisba Anguissola. She is known for her amazing self-portraits. Anguissola was born in 1532 in Northern Italy and was the oldest of seven children (Myers). She came from a noble family and was painting self-portraits before it became popular. Women were not usually allowed to be an apprentice but her father, in a radical move, did arrange for her and her sister to become apprentices under Bernadino Campi in 1545. Campi was a young artist known for his elegant compositions. Anguissola received advice and instruction from many artists, in fact, even the renown Michelangelo was one of the artists who advised her with her painting. Her father played an integral part of her success as a painter and continued to introduce her to artists across Northern Italy.

She made a name for herself in Italy and was able to secure a position as a lady in waiting to the Queen of Spain, Elisabeth de Valois who was married to Phillip the II, in 1559 (“Sofonisba Anguissola”). She tutored the queen in drawing and painting, and they became close friends. Anguissola remained loyal to her until the Queens’ death in 1568. She continued to paint and tutor others throughout her long life and lived to be 93 years old.

What makes Sofonisba Anguissola a pioneer in her field? Anguissola paved the way for other women artists by being an example of what women could achieve. She became a well-known artist in a time where women artists were rare (“Sofonisba Anguissola”). Although she could not accept payment for her work since she was a woman, only gifts of gratitude, that did not stop her. She was talented in creating realistic self-portraits, group portraits, and miniatures that captured the unique details of her subjects and the objects she included in her paintings. Her ability to produce believable and lifelike scenes and self-portraits made her sought after by the nobility as a gifted portrait painter.

Now, let us meet Hieronymus Bosch, he is known for his ability to create nightmarish iconography that illustrates fantastical and unique scenes that are a pleasure to look at but hard to decipher. His preferred method was oil painting on wood, and he created many triptychs. Bosch was born in 1450 and was a Dutch painter (“Hieronymus Bosch” [The Art Story]). He came from a long line of painters. His grandfather, father and uncles were all trained in the skill. Although little is known of Bosch’s life or training, it is assumed that he was trained by his family and that he spent all his life in and near the place where he was born called, 's-Hertogenbosch which is now the Netherlands. He died in 1516.

What makes Hieronymus Bosch a pioneer in his field? Bosch was “perhaps the most brilliantly original and morally complex of all northern European religious painters. (“Hieronymus Bosch” [Wikipedia]). There are 25 of his original works that still exist today. They all have a religious theme that shows his devotion to Christianity. His works are very complex. He is known for his triptychs that usually portray the world before, during, and after an event of destruction. Many artists today will use the word ‘Boschian’ to describe the genre of the grotesque.

Now that we have met the artists and have learned a little about their lives, let us take a look at an artwork from each of them. We will begin with Sofonisba Anguissola's, *The Chess Game*, painted in 1555. This is a group portrait of three of Anguissola's sisters playing chess while a governess is looking after them (Myers). It is an oil painting on canvas 72 X 97 cm.



Sofonisba Anguissola, *The Chess Game*, 1555. [for the representation of chess see Patricia Simons, "(Check)Mating the Grand Masters: The Gendered, Sexualized Politics of Chess in Renaissance Italy," *Oxford Art Journal*, 16 (1993), pp. 59-74 (download from [JSTOR](#))]

When studying this painting, one is drawn to the subject's faces. The girl on the left has their attention on us. She is aware of us looking at the scene and is inviting us to watch the game. The other chess player is very serious about the game, and you can feel this in her facial expression as well as her hand gesture. The little girl watching the game is playful and happy and

the governess is making sure that she is not causing trouble. The details of the clothing and of the chess board are worth mentioning here and even the tablecloth that the chess board sits on. These realistic details make one feel that they are in the scene. There is a lot going on in this picture and Anguissola also adds a beautiful nature scene in the background. Her attention to detail and her skill in making art realistic is on display in this wonderful life like painting. One can tell that Sofonisba Anguissola studied people very carefully. She was able to capture her subjects' facial expressions and movements in a way that is astonishingly lifelike.

Next, we will look at a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. The piece is called *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, painted 1480-1505. This is a triptych depicting life before creation, human futility, and damnation (Myers). It is an oil painting on panel 220 X 390 (Myers).



The Garden of Earthly Delights in the *Museo del Prado* in *Madrid*, c. 1495–1505, attributed to Bosch, picture courtesy of Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hieronymus_Bosch

When studying this piece, one is drawn to the stark contrast of the peaceful scene in the first panel, the busyness and chaos of the middle panel, and the darkness and gruesomeness of the last panel. Bosch has introduced us to a fantastical dream world that is so unique. It helps us get a glimpse into his mind. There is a lot going on in this piece. One will see things that they have never seen before and creatures that do not exist except for in the world of Hieronymus Bosch. Careful attention to detail is commendable, even though the people and objects in the scenes are small, he takes care to give them personality and meaning. Although one could be confused about the meaning of some of the things Bosch shows us, we are mesmerized by his imagination, and it is hard to stop looking at the piece. Every inch of this triptych is filled with a feast of objects and scenes of nonsense and satire that are unforgettable. Notice how he follows the Renaissance theme of nude figures, one might even say it has a very, very small resemblance to Michelangelo's painting of The Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel, which was painted in 1537, some 30 years after Bosch's. Could Michelangelo have seen Bosch's painting and taken inspiration from it? We will never know.

After looking at artwork from Sofonisba Anguissola and Hieronymus Bosch we will now look at the artists' styles and see how they are similar and different. We will also look at what cultural influences shaped their unique styles. When comparing the artists' paintings, one might think it would be hard to find similarities but there is one that stands out right away and it is that the artists both show attention to detail.

Although Anguissola's paintings are realistic and Bosch's are fantastical, when one studies these paintings, the story is in the details. Both artists are skilled in their shading. You notice the light and dark used to highlight certain parts of their scenes. Anguissola uses dark colors behind the people she painted in order to highlight them, and she used light colors to

soften the features of their faces and hands. Bosch uses dark colors to enhance the dark scene of destruction, and he uses the lighter colors to bring attention to the people in his painting. Since there is a lot going on, one would be drawn to the light colors as they seem to stand out from the darkness. This helps us to further investigate that part of the scene.

These artists came from two different cultural backgrounds. Anguissola was a woman of noble birth, and she had restrictions on what she could do. She had to consider her station as a woman and remain virtuous with her painting. I am not sure she could have painted the type of paintings with the themes Bosch did and get away with it. Instead, she introduces us to many realistic self-portraits and group portraits that make the subjects come to life. She also details their elaborate clothing that would only be worn by people of a high status. Her painting style appealed to people of nobility, and they would request her to paint their self-portraits.

On the other hand, you can tell that Bosch's religion is important to him and he is concerned with the current state of the world and how it might end. He starts in his first scene with a tranquil and calm setting that builds into the second scene with a chaotic frenzy of people doing all manner of things that would be considered sin. He then shows what the fate of these subjects would be in his dark display of figures committing torturous acts. His painting style appealed to people who were curious, and his paintings would be used as a conversation piece.

Lastly, let us further reflect on these artists as far as their impact on society. As far as which artist had the greater impact, I would easily say it is Sofonisba Anguissola because she was seen as an inspiration for women artists, and she was also perfecting the self-portrait in a time where it was not yet popular. One, however, cannot discount the impact that Bosch had on the world with his gruesome portrayal of what hell might look like. For a religious person, this could impact one's life in a positive way. I would also imagine he paved the way for artists not to

fear straying away from the norm when it came to certain themes in painting. Bosch was unique and he was not afraid to show it, I think that took guts.

We met two popular artists of the Renaissance and took a glimpse into their lives, their work, and their culture. Although they come from two different backgrounds and produced paintings for different audiences, Sofonisba Anguissola and Hieronymus Bosch both shared a love for art and painting. One can look at their work and see the passion they had for their skill. The passion they had for painting shines through with their careful attention to detail. They made a name for themselves then and are still impressing us today.

Works Cited

“Hieronymus Bosch.” *The Art Story*, <https://theartstory.org/artist/bosch-hieronymus/>, Accessed 19 Sept. 2024.

“Hieronymus Bosch.” *Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.* 1 Sept. 2024,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hieronymus_Bosch.

Myers, Cerise, et al. *Introduction to Art History 1*. ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative, 2023, pp. 2904-2909, pp. 3102 – 3110

"Sofonisba Auissola." *The Art Story*, <https://theartstory.org/artist/anguissola-sofonisba/#:~:text=Sofonisba%20Anguissola%20was%20the%20first,flattering%20at%20the%20same%20time>. Accessed 24 Sept. 2024.