

## Hieronymus Bosch and Ergotism

Hieronymus Bosch was a Netherlandish painter living from 1450-1516. He grew up in a family of artists, including his father, grandfather, and uncles. There are limited records of his life or thoughts and only a few of his paintings. Like many artists of the day, religious motifs were predominant. He painted complex pictures that included satire, morality lessons, metaphors, and visual translations of verbal puns. The most original of his art was his portrayal of hell, monsters, demons, and chimeras. Some see a resemblance to surrealism.<sup>1</sup>

I theorize that Bosch had a near-death experience as portrayed in “The Ascent of the Blessed” (Figure), part of a 4-panel work that shows angels assisting a person approaching a tunnel of light with a being at the far end. This depiction corresponds to modern descriptions of near-death experiences.

I also theorize that hallucinations from ergotism may have been the source of his amazing depictions of hell, demons, punishment, and chimeras. Ergotism is also known as “St. Anthony’s Fire,” named after a Roman hermit saint who was born in Egypt in 251. The syndrome is caused by an alkaloid that grows in rye and sometimes wheat. The blight, which was identified in 1676—200 years after Bosch—caused occasional outbreaks recorded

throughout history. The symptoms include a painful burning, vasoconstriction, and central nervous system manifestations including hallucinations, seizures, headaches, vomiting, and mania. Ergots have had a medicinal use in modern medicine for migraines, oxytocic effects postpartum, and the treatment of prolactinomas. LSD, a drug used in the drug cultures of the 1960s and 1970s, is an ergot alkaloid.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the saints that he painted—St. Anthony was depicted most extensively—I think it plausible that Bosch himself had lived through ergotism. These fantastic images are most prominent in “The Temptation of St. Anthony”<sup>3</sup> and “The Garden of Earthly Delights.”<sup>4</sup>

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### References

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Figure



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