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The ship of fools, an incursion to the study of madness through the art history

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Abstract

The Renaissance is a period of scientific, literary and artistic renewal, associate to the humanism that begins in XIV century and it prolongs until XV and XVI centuries. The Ship of Fools is the name of one of the most important pictures of Hieronymus Bosch. This will be one of the last Dutch gothic painters, famous for its enigmatic panels with religious themes, appealing to the use of symbolic, fantastic and peculiar figures, as strange as extraordinary. In he's first paintings, the subjects are traditional and with an anachronic style, ex.: "*The Extraction of the Stone of Madness*". Here, it succeeds a *therapeutic* resource of *madness cure* - the painting depicts the extraction of a "*stone*" from a patient's head, a common operation in Bosch's time. It was assumed that this obstruction was origin of madness or could cause little intelligence. After the Middle Age, madness or mental alienation starts to substitute the leprosy, as major topic of censure and social exclusion. The picture "The Ship of Fools" passes for being one old parabola, very used in the occidental culture, reviving the mythical subject of Argonauts. This boat went collecting in its passage, the mentally ill ones that candidly don't know where they come from or where they go. In this classic painting, nuns, insane and rustic people, coexist in a somewhat uncommon and ugly way, in games of seduction, amusements, drink and food excesses, waiting for the punishments imposes to all penitents, in special the nuns, figures associates to the typical vices of convents: luxury and gluttony. For Michel Foucault, these wandering ships of insane people would be boats of great symbolism, which lead the mad people in constant search for the demand of reason. Today is a time of pessimistic humanism, so the deep meaning of a *soul state* can be revealed in daily study, on the beauty and truth that flow in subtle way of masterpieces.

Biography

Joao-Maria Nabais is a physician-writer and paediatrician. His literary work in poetry consists of fifteen books published, include: O Silencio das Palavras (1992); Novos Navegantes (1998); Sons de Urbanidade (2001); Interior à Luz (2003); Terra de Húmus e Neblinas (2007). Award three times the Prize for Poetry ANTÓNIO PATRÍCIO. Medal Cultural Merit from the Association of Medical Writers and Journalists Bucharest - Romania / 2004. He has more than two hundred articles and essays publish in the areas of Health Sciences, History of Medicine, Medical Writers, Judaism, Art, Music and Literature - in this context, conducted nearly fifty communications and other national and international scientific conferences. Among other institutions is member of Lisbon Geographical Society (Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa) and of the Sections History and History of Medicine; the Portuguese Association of Art Historians, and the International Society for the History of Medicine (S.I.H.M.)

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