

10.

A 15th-Century Three-Wheeler

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In 1996 Eric Delanghe published a photograph in *The Boneshaker* (Vol. 14 no. 140, Spring 1996) and simultaneously in the *Journal of the International Veteran Cycle Association*, of a woodcarving at the St. Salvador Cathedral in Bruges, Belgium. Experts state that the woodcarving dates back to 1425–1450. It depicts a woman and a child; the latter is pushing some sort of tricycle, or three-wheeler. Delanghe is of the opinion that the tricycle is probably a dirigible.

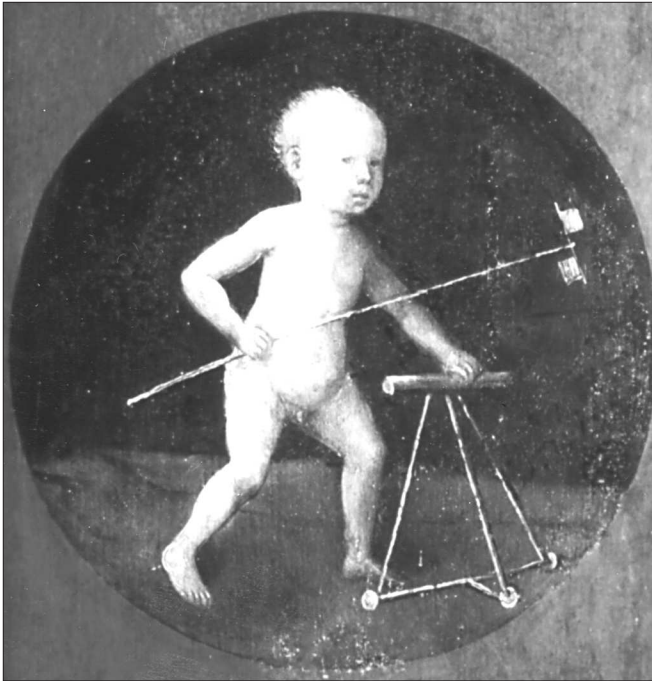
As he notes in *The Boneshaker*, at this time Bruges was one of the most populous and affluent cities of northern Europe where all kinds of novelties and crazy ideas first saw the light of day. Even though the carving of the tricycle is adapted to the period style, it is evident that it is a construction of pyramidal shape. At its peak is the handlebar, against which the child is pushing. At the bottom end of each of the three struts there is a wheel, two at the back and one in front. (Fig. 10.1)

We know of a similar three-wheeler in a picture by Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516). It is the oil painting “The Child Jesus at Play” (57 x 32 cm, approx. 1480), executed on the back of a wooden tablet (Fig. 10.2). The front of the tablet bears the painting “Jesus Carrying the Cross.” This work is the



Fig. 10.1. Detail of woodcarving in the St. Salvador Cathedral in Bruges, Belgium, showing child with three-wheeler.

property of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Austria. The Child Jesus is playing, holding a two-bladed toy windmill in his right hand, his left hand is grasping the handle bar of a three-wheeler that evidently serves as a prop to help the small child to learn to walk. The three-wheeler is depicted to perfection here although the meaning of the picture has not been definitively clarified. It may be an allegory for human ignorance and foolishness. (see Ludwig

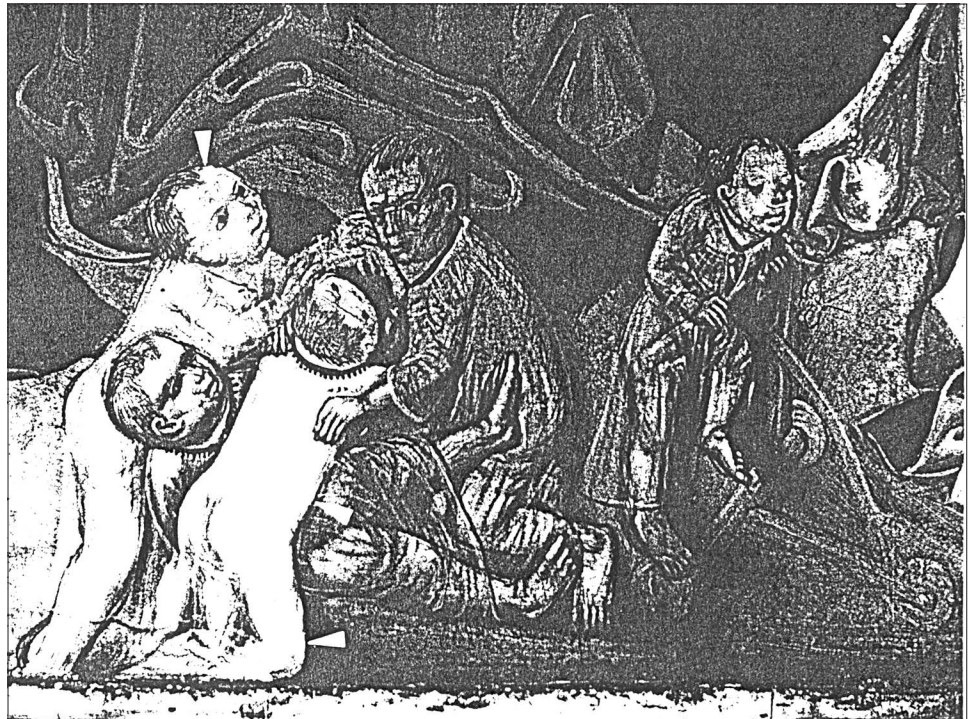


Above: Fig. 10.2. Hieronymus Bosch oil painting "The Child Jesus at Play," in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Austria.

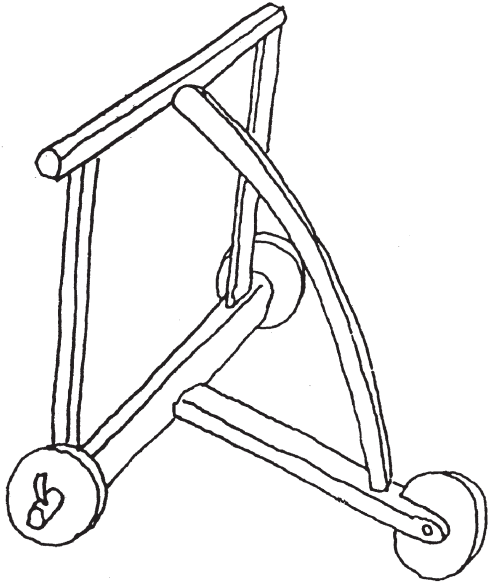
Baldass: *Hieronymus Bosch*, unter Mitarbeit von Günther Heinz, Verlag Anton Schroll & Co., Vienna and Munich, 1968).

To my astonishment, I discovered a third picture of a similar three-wheeler in Prague, at the U. Krizovniku Art Gallery near Charles Bridge, on the right riverbank. In the lower part of the three-part altar painting we see depicted a group of four children at play and a fifth child is pushing a similar walker — a three-wheeler (Fig. 10.3, infra-red illumination). The somewhat crooked figure shows that the artist was only an average painter. The triptych originated in Prague after 1490, and was probably based on some Nuremberg woodcut (see Jaroslav Pešina, *Czech Paintings of the Late Gothic and Renaissance*, Prague 1950). The child with the tricycle was only discovered under infrared radiation. After having painted the scene, the artist must have decided that so secular a motif was not fitting for an altar painting and he over-painted the whole scene with the children. Only during the renovation project did Vendula Latalova remove the upper layer and the group reappeared on the tablet (Fig. 10.4).

All three tricycles are on the same principle, based on a T-shaped undercarriage with a wheel at each of the three ends. All the wheels are set in the same direction, parallel to the longer bar of the letter T. Two struts are set at right angles on the shorter bar, linked with a horizontal bar at the top. If we stay with letter-comparisons, it is like an upturned letter U. The



Right: Fig. 10.3. Infra-red photograph of Prague altar painting including a child holding a similar three-wheeler.



Above: Fig. 10.4. Reconstruction drawing of the three-wheeler design.

Right: Fig. 10.5. 20th-Century three-wheeler of similar design.



child grasped the handle bar and pushed the tricycle forwards as a support during its first tottering steps. The construction could have been reinforced with a brace from the centre of the handle bar to the longer bar of the undercarriage, as is the case on the Prague triptych. Looking at the picture, and judging by the function of a tricycle for young children of one year and more, I am of the opinion that none of the tricycle wheels were dirigible.

It seems that the first three-wheeler originated over five hundred years ago; the paradox is that it was not made to ride on, but to learn to walk with. And so three-wheelers, or tricycles, were known in Western and Central Europe during the latter half of

the 15th century, as a walking aid for very young children.

Until recently, in fact, until April of the year 2000, I would have bet that so primitive a toy would long since have disappeared from the face of the earth. But then I suddenly came face to face with a German tourist, walking out of an antique shop in Prague, holding... this three-wheeler (Fig. 10.5). Luckily he showed understanding, and I had my camera. Judging by the workmanship, I would estimate it to be a product made before the Second World War.

And so, it seems, the three-wheeler is immortal.