

# Brushstrokes of Change: Hieronymus Bosch and Rachel Gadsden's Evolving Portrayals of Disability

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## ABSTRACT

There has been a notable lack of representation of disability in Western art history. Where disabilities are displayed, the artists' intentions were often to convey moral corruption, religious infidelity, and the faults of society. Other times, the representations functioned scientifically as medical records. In fact, one of the most anatomically accurate representations of physical disability is credited to the early modern artist Hieronymus Bosch, who was known for his unfiltered commentary on the flaws of human society. Contrary to his typical surreal, vibrant, and sarcastic style, *Cripples and Beggars* (after 1570) (Fig. 1), a naturalistic and observational piece, offers a rare lens into how disability was portrayed during the early modern period.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Rachel Gadsden—a contemporary, disabled artist—foregrounds her identity as a disabled artist in her work *Ubuntu* (2012) (Fig. 2) and utilizes an expressive, abstract style to convey the fluidity of the disabled human form. *Cripples and Beggars* and *Ubuntu*, separated by centuries, provide a captivating shared subject for comparative analysis that transcends temporal boundaries. *Cripples and Beggars* provides an early explicit and moralizing depiction of physical disability as an isolating scourge while Rachel Gadsden focuses on abstract, yet recognizable human bodies in optimistic motion and community.<sup>2</sup> Analysis of the varying style, medium, and intention reveals the evolved reception and, thus, depiction of disability. This transformation, from Hieronymus Bosch's *Cripples and Beggars* to Rachel Gadsden's *Ubuntu*, signifies a shift from viewing disability as a symbol of moral corruption and societal decay to an expression of identity, resilience, and community.

## Introduction

Although *Cripples and Beggars* was published decades after Bosch's death by Hieronymus Cock, it contains Bosch's signature as a designer. Two drawings of a similar subject are held at the Albertina and Royal Library of Brussels, although both drawings have been attributed to followers of Bosch.<sup>3</sup> This paper assumes that the print was indeed engraved after a drawing of Bosch and, thus, credits Bosch for the invention of the composition.

The engraving appears to document different forms of disability, such as blindness and immobility; he models the figures in various positions—crouching, kneeling, and lying down—adding variation only to their clothes and type of disability. In total, these thirty-one figures are presented as a catalog of physical disability. From the degree of accurate detail in the composition, a team of doctors was able to accurately diagnose

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<sup>1</sup> Pokorny, Erwin. "Bosch's Cripples and Drawings by His Imitators." *Master Drawings* 41, no. 3 (2003): 293–304. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1554624>.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Gadsden, "Considering the Human Condition," interview by Richard Bright, *Interalia Magazine*, last modified May 2020, accessed November 21, 2023, <https://www.interaliomag.org/interviews/rachel-gadsden/>.

<sup>3</sup> Emily J. Peters and Laura M. Ritter, "Detail of Beggars and Cripples," in *Tales of the City: Drawing in the Netherlands from Bosch to Bruegel* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2022), 188–189

the subjects with hemimelia, meningomyelocele, and arthrogyposis.<sup>4</sup> Bosch's detailed and unembellished portrayal of their physical conditions suggests a more observational approach rather than one of mockery. *Cripples and Beggars* stands as a deviation from Bosch's typical works but still fits within his body of drawings of unrefined sketches, proving Bosch's exceptional artistic ability to portray details. Furthermore, the absence of an apparent story or ideological message allows the viewer to focus on the individuals themselves, prompting contemplation on the societal attitudes towards disability and poverty during Bosch's time.

Upon closer inspection, however, there are some hints where his typical social commentary shines through. Within the engraving, Bosch's subjects lack any facial emotion, save for a few cringes of agony, which may serve as a critique of a lack of compassion for the "less fortunate." Thus, *Cripples and Beggars* would then again seem like a fitting piece for Bosch, realistic and raw, yet critical. Additionally, the text in the lower caption reads: "Everyone who gladly lives from the blue beggar's sack / mostly goes as a cripple, on both sides / and so the cripple-bishop has many servants / who avoid a proper gait for the sake of a healthy sum."<sup>5</sup> The association of disability with begging ("blue beggar's sack") and the portrayal of disabled individuals as reliant on alms highlight the societal linkage of disability with poverty and helplessness. Additionally, the depiction of the "cripple-bishop" with many servants suggests a cynical view of disability, implying that some exploited their conditions for gain, which indicates a prevailing skepticism and mistrust towards the disabled. Lastly, the reference to individuals who "avoid a proper gait for the sake of a healthy sum" underscores a belief that disabilities were often feigned, revealing a deep-seated stigma and lack of empathy towards the disabled community in that era.

Hieronymus Bosch, renowned for his exploration of enigmatic and allegorical themes, saves his classic mockery for the caption and primarily dedicates *Cripples and Beggars* to observing the form of disabled people. His *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503-1515) (Fig. 3) and *The Ship of Fools* (c. 1490-1500) (Fig. 4) noticeably showcase a pattern of blatantly mocking religious figures by portraying the moral decay of the Church. In *The Ship of Fools*, specifically, Bosch includes clerical figures among a group engaged in foolish behavior, subtly mocking the Church by highlighting its moral hypocrisy and corruption. The painting uses the ship as a metaphor for a directionless Church, adrift in a sea of folly, critiquing its failure to provide genuine spiritual guidance.<sup>6</sup> As such, Bosch's most famous pieces are characterized by intricate and surreal compositions, populated by a multitude of bizarre creatures, symbols, and allegorical elements. The *Cripples and Beggars* engraving, however, distinguishes itself as a more factual composition.

In contrast, *Ubuntu* is an exemplary representation of Rachel Gadsden's multifaceted artistic approaches and profound engagement with themes of identity, inclusivity, and the human experience, particularly in the context of disability. Gadsden's art is a testament to her commitment of challenging societal norms and advocating for disability rights and inclusivity. Through her collaborations and artistic expression, she has become a prominent figure in the contemporary art world, using her work as a platform to promote diversity and amplify marginalized voices.<sup>7</sup> *Ubuntu* draws its inspiration from the Southern African philosophy of "ubuntu," which translates to "I am because we are." "I" and "we," mentioned simultaneously, assert Gadsden as both an individual and representative of the disabled community. The painting, in alignment with the title, captures the essence of interconnectedness, empathy, and shared humanity, showcasing the profound impact that individuals have on one another's lives. Through vibrant and expressive visual language, Gadsden's *Ubuntu* invites viewers

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<sup>4</sup> Guy Fabry and J. Dequeker, "Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516): Paleopathology of the Medieval disabled and its relation to the Bone and Joint Decade 2000-2010," *The Israel Medical Association journal* 3 (December 2001): 866.

<sup>5</sup> Peters and Ritter, "Detail of Beggars," 188.

<sup>6</sup> "The Ship of Fools (c. 1490-1500) by Hieronymus Bosch," Artchive, accessed November 21, 2023, <https://www.artchive.com/artwork/the-ship-of-fools-hieronymous-bosch-c-1490-1500/>.

<sup>7</sup> Gadsden, "Considering the Human," interview, *Interalia Magazine*.

to reflect on the universal bonds that connect us all, transcending physical and cultural differences. That Rachel Gadsden herself identifies as a disabled and visually-impaired artist and director adds authenticity to her project and an insider's viewpoint. With her abstract style, the emotion she expresses and the ideas that she promotes allow her medium to convey her constructive viewpoint on society's reaction to disability.

Despite the fact that Bosch has more subjects, Gadsden's painting expresses more diversity through the various means to transportation and manifestations of disability: the subject closest to the left uses a cane, and the third person to the left leans against their peers. Even between the four people, Gadsden shows how disability can affect different parts of the body. In fact, physical disabilities can vary widely in causation and encompass a broad range of conditions; some of the most common types of physical disability include vision, hearing, and mobility impairments.<sup>8</sup> Gadsden likely explores mobility impairments in *Ubuntu*. In *Ubuntu*, the person on the far left suffers from trouble using their legs. In contrast, the far right figure is comparatively shorter than the other figures, which could be indicative of upper-body disability.

Bosch and Gadsden espouse different conceptions of disability. In line with sixteenth-century generalizations of social outcasts, Bosch conflates beggars with the disabled. Bosch's observational approach to depicting each disabled individual as a beggar indicates that society was oblivious to the emotional and human side of disabled people and rather unenthusiastic to interact with them. As a result of Henry VIII's split from the Roman Church and the subsequent Dissolution of the Monasteries in the mid 1530s to early 1540s, many religious houses that provided care for the sick and disabled were demolished.<sup>9</sup> This led to many disabled people experiencing poverty and living on the streets. *Cripples and Beggars*—engraved decades after—could, therefore, express a very real blurred line between the disabled and beggars for late sixteenth-century viewers. The disabled figures in the engraving are shown holding various implements associated with begging, such as bowls or hats extended for alms; their crutches or makeshift supports underscore their reliance on public charity for survival. This grouping of the physically disabled with beggars is significant as it highlights the social realities of the time, where physical disabilities relegated individuals to the fringes of society, compelling them to beg for their livelihood. Bosch's portrayal may also comment on the broader societal attitudes towards disability, where such conditions were poorly understood and often met with ostracization rather than support. By merging these groups, Bosch documents the social truth by exploring the notion of "outcast" in his portrayal of the disabled.

During the early modern period, people with illnesses and disabilities were seen as traitors of Christianity as they were thought to be incurable by the Lord. This ideology stemmed from biblical stories that recounted Jesus miraculously curing sick, devout people. Thus, a disabled person would have been considered incurable.<sup>10</sup> As Will Eggars describes in his discussion of medicine in a religious context, "Within the Gospels, impairment is consistently portrayed as something in need of healing and therefore resembles in some ways the 'medical models' of disability, though what medieval scholars might identify as medicine might be thought of as religious."<sup>11</sup> This background is essential to understanding *Cripples and Beggars*, which presents disabled individuals in need of healing, akin to this "medical model" of disability. Those with disabilities were doubly

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, "Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults with Disabilities," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified August 5, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pa.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "Disability from 1485-1660," Historic England, last modified December 1, 2023, <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/disability-history/1485-1660/>.

<sup>10</sup> Irmo Marini, Noreen Graf, and Michael Millington, "The History of Treatment Toward People With Disabilities," in *Psychosocial Aspects of Disability*, 2nd ed., accessed October 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome, St., and Will Eggars. "Selected Episodes on Healing and Disability from the Vulgate Bible—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (ca. 382)." In *Medieval Disability Sourcebook: Western Europe*, edited by Cameron Hunt McNabb, 113–37. Punctum Books, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hptcd.10>.

marginalized—physically by their impairments and spiritually by being viewed as embodiments of sin. The engraving reflects this complex interplay of religion, morality, and societal attitudes. Bosch offers a critical view of Christian hierarchy and disability, specifically, in his depiction of the “cripple bishop” and retinue. Placed on the right-most side of the page, halfway down the sheet, a man, donning a large hat and carrying a hurdy-gurdy, appears to be propped up by a cane and wooden extensions to his legs. This figure’s unconventional mitre and the badge on his clothing reveal him to be a bishop scattered among the thirty other disabled people. Portrayed in the exact same manner as the other disabled people, the “cripple bishop” may signify Bosch disparaging the Church’s neglect and moral failure to adequately care for the most vulnerable in society.

Moreover, his depiction of the “cripple-bishop” also alludes to a leader of the society of roguish beggars, a well-known character in satirical media in contemporary Flemish paintings.<sup>12</sup> When examined with the text below the engraving, the figures’ disabilities become suspect. There is precedent for this idea in Pieter Bruegel’s *The Beggars* painting (1568) (Fig. 5), where he likewise portrays a collection of people with physical disabilities. Interestingly, at first glance, Bruegel conflates the figures of “beggars” and “cripples,” just as Bosch had. Bruegel’s inclusion of foxtails—a symbol of deceit—on his figures’ costumes, however, betrays his “beggars” as feigning their disabilities. Art historian and cultural critic Anthony M. Huffman further argues that Bruegel’s decision to render the figures with all of their limbs completely covered with cloth and bandages, while leaving their joints and limbs exposed, in his depiction of “legitimate beggars”, conveys his aim to attack their ingenuity and their underserving of poor relief.<sup>13</sup> This combination of Bosch and Bruegel’s discrete mocking serves as a poignant commentary on the Church’s neglect of the real poor and needy as well as clerical corruption and hypocrisy.

Where the disabled in Bosch’s print are all confined to a category of incurable outcast, Gadsden shapes her portrait of disability fundamentally around the individual as well as the commonality between all humans and the importance of community. As she states on her website, her commitment to “making the invisible visible” is through “working to empower others to find a voice with which to challenge stigma.”<sup>14</sup> *Ubuntu* foregrounds the connection between people with physical differences. Within *Ubuntu* specifically, her use of white, yellow, orange, and red strokes to create the flesh and bone of the four individuals emphasizes their physical bodies as subjects. Even if not all the figures were intended to be physically disabled, the interconnectedness of the piece clearly defines a community of mutual care and trust. Moreover, the physical intimacy, as several subjects have their arms around each other, and their looped-together framework by Gadsden’s brushstrokes, conveys a camaraderie-like dynamic of holding onto each other. Gadsden additionally highlights the body-to-body unity. The subjects’ white silhouettes highlighted against the black background of her painting are suggestive of bones under an x-ray. Thus, Gadsden strips down the body to the core elements and sends the message that all humans are fundamentally related. Using humans’ natural instinct to group together makes her message of accepting disability a natural occurrence. The grimacing expression on the subject third to the left may convey their worry in possibly being a burden to their peers or may suggest the added difficulties of a disabled life. Three of the figures look onwards to the left, perhaps indicating a shared vision for the future. The group, made of disabled and able-bodied figures, ultimately creates a sense of trust, dependence, mutual understanding and companionship.

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<sup>12</sup> Tom Nichols, “The Vagabond Image: Depictions of False Beggars in Northern Art of the Sixteenth Century,” in *Others and Outcasts in Early Modern Europe: Picturing the Social Margins* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 49.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony M. Huffman, “Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Shifting Attitudes Towards Beggars, and Appealing to Elite Clientele in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp” (unpublished manuscript, April 10, 2016), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Rachel Gadsden, “About,” Rachel Gadsden, <https://www.rachelgadsden.com/rg-about>.

While the individuals in Gadsden's piece are comparatively unique and inter-engaged, the figures in Bosch's composition, by contrast, are independent and isolated. Though each character is related by their concealing cloaks and limited motion, the lack of interaction indicates isolation. The cloaks not only serve to conceal their physical deformities but also to symbolize insecurity and distrust. Furthermore, the clear-cut outlines and shadows produced by the print convey a sense of staidness, and reinforce the sense that each figure is a stand-alone unit. Altogether, the cloaks and stillness create an environment of reclusion. Even when grouped unnaturally together by the composition, the people presented do not communicate. The negative perception of the disabled as unredeemable outcasts is also reflected in the thoughts of Martin Luther, a key figure of the Protestant Reformation, who stated that he saw the Devil in disabled children.<sup>15</sup>

In stark contrast, Gadsden's painting is successful in creating a welcoming appreciation and recognition between the figures and the audience. To provide some context, organizations by and for disabled people boomed in the twentieth century, consequently bringing the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and its amendment in 2008.<sup>16</sup> More in line with Rachel Gadsden's career, the Disability Arts Movement from the 1970s to 2010s brought civil rights to the artistic realm.<sup>17</sup> Gadsden's work aligns with this recent development of social acceptance for disabled artists. Even as her title suggests, members of the disabled community accept themselves and each other. This could be symbolic of how the disabled community works together to move towards a society with less stigmas/generalizations. Additionally, the overlapping lines between the figures make it seem as if all the characters are knit together as one community, one artistic organism. The mutual eye contact between the figures also serves as a sign of trust and strong community.

*Ubuntu* provides both a dynamic and emotion-filled scene. The individuals are drawn with exaggerated motions to show their capability of movement even with disabilities. With undefined, multi-layered brushstrokes, Gadsden creates movement in her subjects. Similar to the fragmented, energetic movement in *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) (Fig. 6) by Marcel Duchamp, the wild brushstrokes in *Ubuntu* carry a similar frenetic cubist technique of showing all possible perspectives of a subject at the same time. Additionally, Gadsden employs curved framing lines above each figure, animating the viewer's eyes, as they track from one figure to another. Furthermore, the energetic brushstrokes also reflect Gadsden's ability as a disabled artist herself—an almost defiance against restrictive movement. Altogether, *Ubuntu*, but also Gadsden's style in general, reveals the current attitude of the Disability Rights Movement, advocating for a society where everyone is included regardless of their abilities, as she focuses on creating an inclusive, empathetic, and constructive outlook towards greater equality. The vitality and vigor in *Ubuntu* work towards breaking stereotypes about the inactive and restricted/impaired state of disabled people.

Considering the mediums of Bosch's *Cripples and Beggars* and Rachel Gadsden's *Ubuntu* reveal the artists' intentions in creation. *Cripples and Beggars* were engraved and published at the end of the sixteenth century, indicating the desire to spread the image widely. With *Ubuntu*, Gadsden's audience is more limited, though its collaborative and performative elements align with her distinct goal of breaking generalizations about disability. The engraver's decision to carve Bosch's design for the purpose of mass-printing means that it must have held some significance to the sixteenth-century market. The engraving portrays disabled people as religious outcasts, or materializes them for the sake of science. In addition, Bosch likely intended his drawing to

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<sup>15</sup> Colin Barnes, "Brief History of Discrimination and Disabled People," in *Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination: A case for anti-discrimination legislation* (1991).

<sup>16</sup> Perri Meldon, "Disability History: The Disability Rights Movement," National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/disabilityhistoryrightsmovement.html>. <sup>17</sup> "Review of Art and Social Change: The Disability Arts Movement," <https://www.dasharts.org/blog/review-of-art-and-social-change-the-disability-arts-movement.html>.

be a preparatory sketch or a study for his paintings (especially those with hell scenes), so he likely did not produce it to please his patrons or commissioners. It also could perhaps reflect his own personal interest. Rachel Gadsden effectively caters to her audience by creating art that is emotionally resonant and universally accessible, transcending language and cultural barriers. Her work, specifically *Ubuntu*, incorporates themes of resilience and shared human experiences, allowing diverse audiences to connect with the deeper meanings behind her art. Additionally, Gadsden's focus on inclusivity and representation, particularly of disability experiences, engages and educates her audience, fostering empathy and understanding across varied demographics.

In closing, this paper has undertaken a transhistorical analysis of physical disability, from Bosch to Gadsden, in order to understand the evolution of thought and representation of a historically maligned population. By examining the themes of objectivity versus subjectivity, the conflation of disability with moral judgment, and the portrayal of communal interactions in Bosch and Gadsden's images, this paper has highlighted how the representation of disability has evolved from a perspective of marginalization and moral judgment to one of inclusivity and normalized diversity. While Bosch's works often reflected the societal and religious prejudices of his time, Gadsden's art embraces a more holistic and empathetic view, recognizing the varied experiences and dignities of individuals with disabilities. Ultimately, this study has contributed to the discipline of disability studies and the study of art history by tracing the shift from a reductive portrayal of disability to a more nuanced and inclusive representation. This evolution reflects broader changes in societal attitudes and underscores the significant role art plays in both reflecting and shaping our understanding of diverse human experiences.



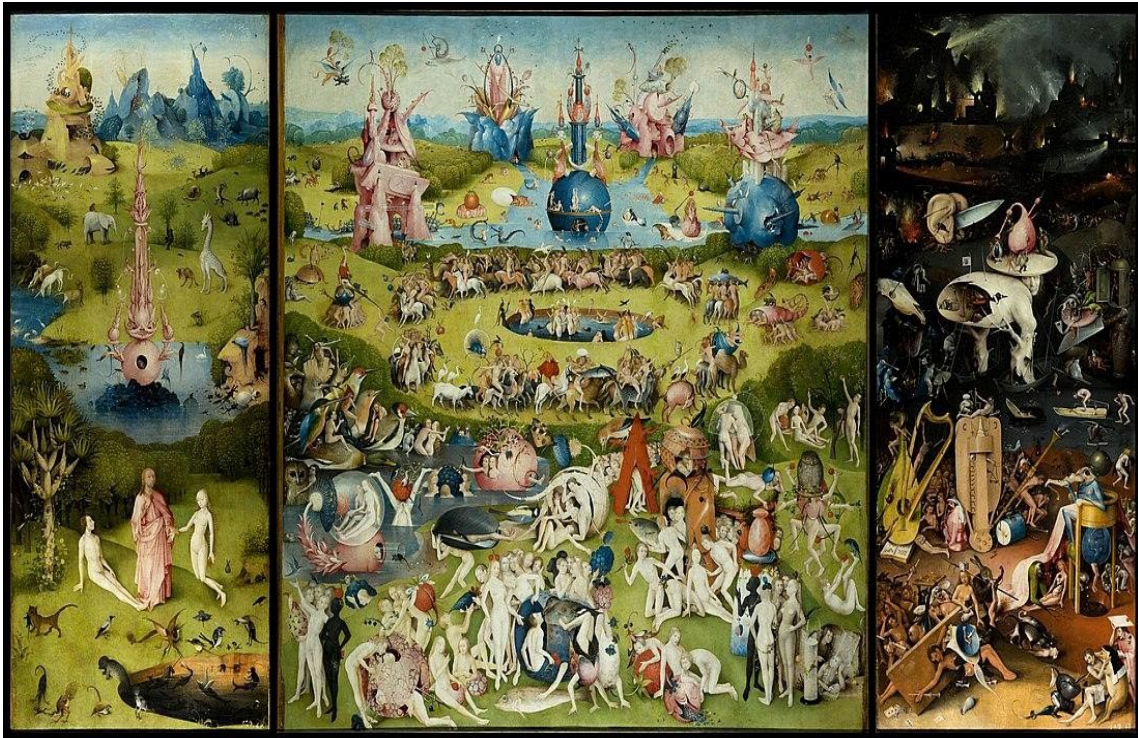


**Figure 1.** *Cripples and Beggars*, Hieronymus Bosch (designer), Hieronymus Cock (publisher), After 1560, engraving, Saint Louis Art Museum





**Figure 2.** *Ubuntu*, Rachel Gadsden, 2016, painting, Location Unknown



**Figure 3.** *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Hieronymus Bosch, 1490-1510, Museo del Prado









**Figure 5.** *The Beggars*, Pieter Brugel the Elder, 1568, oil on panel, Musée du Louvre



**Figure 6.** *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Marcel Duchamp, 1912, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art

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