
Michaela Giebelhausen’s *Painting the Bible: Representation and Belief in Mid-Victorian Britain* is an analysis of religious painting by members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB), one that makes a significant contribution toward mending the *lacuna* concerning this genre in the art history of the nineteenth century. The focus of Giebelhausen’s book is the transformative thrust of the PRB over and against the established style of the Royal Academy. She argues that the Brotherhood’s stylization began with subversive aims that proved to be innovative and “instrumental in revitalizing this specialized genre of history painting.” Giebelhausen articulates two goals for her text. The first is to introduce the PRB as proponents of a radical and subversive movement. Initially under attack by critics, their style of painting was representative of contemporary art distinguished by archaizing forms and firmly based on scriptural texts. The second is to illustrate how shifting cultural values attached to religious art accounted for the eventual positive response to the PRB style as “Protestant biblical naturalism,” specifically because the triangulation of art/politics/religion that shaped painting existed within the general problematic of secularism, new historical methodologies, and the philosophy of Protestant liberalism.

Methodologically, her starting point is religious art as cultural production within the theoretical armature developed by Pierre Bourdieu, e.g., in his *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford University Press, 1996). Bourdieu’s theory of *refraction* states that forces external to the structured field—in this instance, the field of Victorian religious art—“are refracted, much like a prism, back into the structure . . . not simply as a cause and effect, but something more subtle.” Without dissolution of either field, internal and external forces arrive at mutual effectiveness. In light of this, Giebelhausen examines how oscillating conceptual opposites (idealism/naturalism) and conflicting forces (liberalism/sectarianism) are at play within the production and reception of PRB art.

One of the strengths of Giebelhausen’s book is its thorough delineation of popular attitudes toward religious art, in which nationalist aims, often disguised as moral imperatives for art, were at play in conjunction with
economic and commercial interests that were submerged as artistic heroics. Giebelhausen provides a broad picture of the established field as it was defined by the Royal Academy and its academicians, discussing a number of gradual modifications in the portrayal of religious art within the academy itself and touching on several minor artists. This sets the stage for her portrayal of the PRB as radical interventionists. In this regard, one of the limitations of the book is that it is necessarily restricted to the few artists in the PRB (William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Ford Maddox Brown) and even fewer works. Yet she is persuasive in her analysis of John Everett Millais’s 1849 painting Christ in the House of His Parents, which is deemed the manifesto of Pre-Raphaelite art. In 1850, when paintings by members of the PRB were shown at the Royal Academy, they received harsh criticism as “pictorial blasphemy.” The heart of Giebelhausen’s thesis is deconstructing the paradoxical and conflicting values attached to the formal tropes of the PRB stylization that caused this response. Their style was rejected first, because it followed traditional forms of pre-Raphaelite (read Catholic) art as well as the Nazarene archaizing line. Second, the style simultaneously offended proponents of transcendent universal values because it relied too closely on the observation of nature and accurate depiction of historical details.

A fascinating part of her analysis includes a description of the attacks on the Pre-Raphaelite style by an array of prominent clergymen and men of letters who shaped the discourse in a climate of heightened sectarianism and secularism. Critics considered the Brotherhood’s style tainted by its Italian predecessors. As Thomas Carlyle wrote to Hunt, it represented a “papistical fantasy” that contradicted a Protestantism equated with liberalism, progress, and nationalism. Giebelhausen illustrates the spectacular hyperbole of the discourse. *Punch*, for instance, satirized the aesthetic of the PRB as caricature, so that the “Giottoesque” became “the grotesque”; the style was “pathological” and “akin to the laboratory of Dr. Frankenstein.” On the other hand, John Ruskin was a supporter of the PRB’s historical naturalism and hyper-attention to detail and railed against the vacant formalism of academic art. But Ruskin could not offer an alternative formula for contemporary religious art primarily because he believed that it was no longer capable of conveying devotion or a feeling for the sacred.

In Chapter Four, titled “The Making of William Holman Hunt as the Painter of the Christ,” Giebelhausen argues that Hunt’s artistic challenges in creating a historically accurate image of Jesus Christ—a vision without “sacerdotal gloss”—became the central problem of the age. She deconstructs