

What do Victorian paintings of religious subjects and themes reveal about Victorian attitudes and values.

Victorian values and attitudes to such painting must be considered in the light of their times as it will undoubtedly affect or alter their beliefs causing controversy over certain images and approval or acceptance of others. Queen Victoria's reign was extremely long from 1837 to 1901, and saw many social and technological changes, the population changed from being primarily agrarian to industrial and urbanised. A succession of bad harvests in the 1840's had brought starvation and 1848 was a year of revolutions across Europe, reverberating social unease between the rich and the poor, and to add to this period of tension there was serious division within the Church of England.

The Victorian age was predominately Christian but Protestantism which many felt was central to national identity, and had up until recent times been the dominant religion was now seen as under "threat", by the growth of Catholicism. The cause of this was two-fold, firstly the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 had given the Catholics citizenship rights previously denied and a huge influx of Irish catholic immigrants had led to a growth in Catholicism which many people held with suspicion and even fear.

In 1850 the Pope Pius IX had re-established the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England, a move so unpopular to cause civil unrest in the form of the so called "No popery riots". To compound the anti-Catholic feeling amongst many Protestants particularly amongst the fast growing branch of Nonconformists, namely the Methodists, Unitarians and Baptists, Anglicanism was becoming divided by Oxford academics that wished to reinstate the church of England into a universal Catholicism adopting some of the rituals of the pre Reformation particularly Holy communion. The Oxford

movement as it was known, by aligning itself with many catholic practices became known as 'High Church', whereas the Nonconformist/Evangelistic movement were regarded as 'Low Church' who emphasised the importance of Bible reading rather than the more visual experience of the Catholic or High Church. |It worth noting that the nonconformist churches were largely based in the industrial cities of the north and among them were an ever increasing number of new middle class entrepreneurs, money buying respectability and large houses to decorate with suitable works of Art.

It can of little surprise that members of the Pre –Raphaelite Brotherhood, formed in 1848, received mixed if not hostile criticism when they first exhibited some of their paintings, particularly as there was a widespread belief that during their early years they were a quasi monastic group who were sympathetic towards Catholicism or the Oxford movement.. Certainly Millais had connections to the Oxford movement, his friend Thomas Combe who was a major Pre-Raphaelite patron was friends with the movement's leading theologians. It is also interesting to note that the famous Art critic of the day John Ruskin before defending the Pre-Raphaelite's work distanced himself from any association with the Oxford movement.

One of the most controversial Pre-Raphaelite pictures of the day was first shown at the Royal Academy in 1850. Painted by Millais it originally had no title just accompanied by a biblical quotation it was later known by the image it portrayed: Christ in the House of His Parents (The Carpenter's Shop'). In keeping with the Pre –Raphaelite doctrine it attempted to regain the purity of vision of the early Italian period unaffected by later academic teaching. The early work of the Pre-Raphaelites was, archaic in appearance making it distinctive from the contemporary narrative painting. The unpopularity of this work was due not only to its unconventional representation of the Holy family but also slated by the critics who declared it unfinished and crude. The Times described the painting as 'revolting' and

‘with no omission of misery, of dirt, of even disease, all finished with loathsome minuteness’. Charles Dickens in the publication ‘Household Words’, 1850 was shocked by the appearance of the young Christ and described him ‘as hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-headed boy, in a bed gown.’ Ruskin coming to Millais’s defence quoting ‘truth to nature’ or nature is truth and therefore rightly belongs in religious painting. Ruskin was an extremely influential art critic and if it had not been for him coming to the defence of the Pre-Raphaelites work they may have not achieved the success they did. Millais’s painting was deeply unpopular because it did not fit in with the stereotype classical derived pictures of the time, and its symbolism may not have been obvious viewers. The painting was bought by the non-conformist stockbroker, Thomas Plint.’ We can speculate that he saw the painting as enshrining the idea of Christ as a working man, implying an active ministry, a very acceptable notion in Broad Church, Evangelical and and Nonconformist circles’ Barringer, Yale publications 1988. The unfavourable ‘High Church symbolism had probably been ignored or misunderstood by its purchaser.

In later works Millais steered towards main stream subject matter, and achieved wealth and respectability by painting stirring historical scenes, society portraits, and sentimental pictures of children and lovers. He continued to paint pictures on religious themes but fitting in with the mind frame of the time. This abandonment of Pre-Raphaelite principles angered some of its members who thought Millais had sold out to public opinion and profitability.

One of Millais’s most popular works was ‘A Huguenot on St Bartholomew’s Day, refusing to shield Himself from Danger by Wearing the Roman Catholic Badge,’ inscribed by the artist 1852. This was based on an incident that occurred in Paris in 1572. The painting shows a Catholic girl trying to persuade her Protestant Huguenot lover to escape the massacre by binding a white cloth around his arm thus identifying himself as a Catholic

and saving himself. But while one hand holds the head of his beloved the other hand tries to pull away the cloth, the implication being that he would rather die than deny his faith. The inspiration for this painting was based on a verse from Meyerbeer's opera *Les Huguenots* performed regularly at Covent Garden since 1848 which Millais had recently seen. Victorians were very keen on the symbolism denoted by certain plants and flowers. This so called language of flowers was put to good effect by Millais in this painting; Ivy covering there wall can stand for friendship in adversity, the Canterbury bell in the bottom left side represents constancy or faith and the nasturtiums, patriotism or loyalty.

This picture shown at the 1852 R.A. exhibition was extremely popular and very well reviewed. It is thought that some of its popularity may have been due to its anti-Catholic stance, in tune with the public opinion of the day with its paranoia over what was seen as papal aggression. However interestingly most reviewers merely commented on the good looks the couple rather than any other significance. This painting also fitted in with the stereotype image of male and female roles, the man heroically sticking to his principles, and the female supporting him by converting to Protestantism and being killed alongside him in the massacre, this is the story in the opera which the viewing audience would have known.

We can see from this work how Millais reacted with compromise and adapted to public censorship i.e. unpopularity and unsaleability. The Art buying public, now mainly middle class rather than academic or aristocratic influenced the subject matter and how it was to be represented, if it pleased them the artist would be assured of success and a comfortable living. According to Julian Treuherz in his book 'Victorian Painting,' 'The taste of the new collectors embodied the middle-class values of propriety and respectability, hard work, the sanctity of family life, piety and self-improvement. These values were expressed in the many domestic subjects representing home and

family, the innocence of children other virtues of obedience and charity.’ The Victorian genre painting was in its heyday in the early Victorian period but remained present throughout, changing size to match the fashion and religious subjects became more anecdotal within contemporary scenes of weddings, or funerals, Church scenes, or of families gathered round for a Bible reading. Examples of such paintings are as follows; ‘A village wedding ‘ by Frith, monumental size and ‘Her first born’ by Frank Holl 1876.

Unlike Millais the Pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt stuck to the ideals of the brotherhood, using vivid colour and detail to represent ‘true’ nature, painting landscape from nature in the open air. He followed the Ruskin belief that art in its truthfulness will teach a moral lesson. In the Hireling Shepherd, 1851-2 although there is a symbolic message Hunt made it clear that his first priority was truth to nature, ‘Describing the picture, Hunt later wrote : “My first object was to pourtray (sic) a real shepherd and shepherdess....sheep and Fields and trees and sky and clouds instead of the painted dolls with pattern backgrounds called by such names in the pictures of the period (1850s)’.Barringer 1988.

There is a straightforward narrative of the painting a newly hired shepherd is neglecting his flock to order to make advances to the seductive Shepherdess, but Hunt said at a symbolic level it was referring to the Church of England split. The metaphor of the escaping sheep being the lost flock of believers, while the shepherd’s i.e. the Protestant Church paid court to the Roman Church i.e. the Shepherdess.

The real reason for the success of this picture was not necessarily its religious symbolism but its accurate rendering of nature. ‘The breakthrough here was Hunt’s rejection of the careful balancing of areas of light and shade (chiaroscuro).....Hunt attempted to paint the entire canvas, as it would appear in nature, lit by sun, with shadows falling

naturally. This was as Stephens put it ‘an entirely new thing in art,’ Barringer 1988. The painting was sold for its full asking price of 300 guineas by the eminent naturalist W.J .Broderip. In later years when dialectic paintings had fallen out of fashion, Hunt wrote; ‘In a letter to J.E. Phythian(MAG) Hunt explained his reluctance ‘to force the moral’ of the painting as he must have realised that too intellectual interpretation would deflect attention from the work’s sensual, physical qualities.’ Parris Tate Gallery pub. 1984. To give you an idea of how a contemporary art critic reviewed this work, a critic in the British quarterly review of August 1852 remarked; ‘the very reflectiveness of Hunt inclines him a little more than might be wished to conceptions of his own having a doctrinal purport’

Another of Hunt’s paintings achieved international recognition and became one of if not the most famous religious painting of its day. Although it was not received well initially at the 1854 Royal Academy exhibition probably because of its unconventional treatment of the subject matter, the risen Christ, it went on to become a Protestant icon and a copy of it, by Hunt was presented to St. Paul’s Cathedral by Charles Booth in 1908. The June Art Journal of 1854 criticised Hunt for realising the ideal; ‘The knocking at the door of the soul is a spiritual figure of such exaltation that it must lose by any reduction to common forms’.. Ruskin defended Hunt and in a letter to the Times explained the symbolism at length, and concluded that it was ‘one of the noblest works of sacred art ever produced in this or any other age’.Parris 1984.

The painting was full of symbolic references, but instead of relying on existing iconography and drawing on traditions of religious Art it invites the viewer to make his own interpretation, almost as a literal reading of the picture based on the quote from the Bible ‘Behold I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hears my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me.’ But to most people the overall effect was more important, even Millais writing to

Hunt in 1858 reveals 'I went to see your 'Light of the World' and was much struck with the head. I think far the most beautiful head I have ever seen of Christ.' Parris. The light of the world is linked to Hunt's religious conversion in 1851 having been an atheist as a young man. The image caught the imagination of many and sales of engraved copies were hugely successful thus fuelling its popularity even more, there were even photographic copies made. Art was within the grasp of the populace who could afford cheap copies and they bought what they liked. Often the engraving copyrights to a picture were worth more than the picture its self.

As well as religious prejudices tending to alienate the flock, scientific discoveries in the Victorian age had shaken long accepted religious dogma to the core. In the 1830's Lyell had published his 'Principles of Geology' which had in effect destroyed the creationist theory as proposed in the Bible 'To Lyell there was no doubt that earth and the universe were of far greater antiquity than the Book of Genesis might suggest' Wilson, Arrow books, 2002. Like wise the publication of Darwin's 'Origin of the Species' in 1859 caused huge controversy with the Church which found scientific proof for an evolutionary theory of man's creation unacceptable. Many people close to these scientists and even they themselves had reservations about publishing such works which they felt could destabilise the authority of the Church and could lead to revolution as witnessed in France.

Another artist that was influenced by Ruskin's dictum 'Truth to nature,' was William Dyce, a, high Anglican, who in 1860 at the Royal Academy exhibited a picture entitled 'The Man of sorrows', which showed a solitary figure of Christ in the midst of the detailed depiction of Highland landscape. It was influenced by the poetry of John Keble of the Oxford movement which referred to Christ's suffering during his forty days and nights spent in the wilderness. According to Barringer, 1988, 'Dyce deployed a rocky landscape to suggest the challenges to a

Christian interpretation of creation presented by the new scientific understanding of geological time.’ Barringer goes on to say ‘The radical gesture of placing Christ in a recognisable British context may result from Dyce’s knowledge of fifteenth century Italian art, where the life of Christ is routinely located in contemporary settings.’

Other artists used landscape and seascape settings to explore Biblical narratives. According to the Tate gallery website , artists such as John Martin and Francis Danby particularly used landscape as Turner had done in his time, to emphasis the monumental power of nature, contrasting with the helplessness of mankind. They used landscape to evoke heightened emotional states. ‘The Bible, packed with powerful stories of the Deluge, the Apocalypse and the Last Judgement, proved to be highly fertile ground.

Martin’s paintings were dismissed as vulgar by the Royal Academy, but were nonetheless extremely popular with the public. Here we have an illustration of The Royal Academy being out of step with the public taste of the time who through their increase buying power could influence the fashion and trends of art as much as academic bodies, and in fact broke the stranglehold of what was considered ‘worthy Art.’ Several Art galleries and public exhibitions were set up to cater for the ‘alternative market.’

Religion in one form or another was very much part of Victorian life especially among the ‘respectable classes’ irrespective if you were ‘Church’ or ‘Chapel.’ Individual taste naturally influenced preference in any area of life including art, but the effect of an ordered and strictly hierachial society, which operated within the boundaries of conformity and propriety’ self limited its choice to fit in with the dictums of the day. The most controversial religious works fo art are those where the public either has not understood or found abhorrent the

treatment of a sacred subject, and the most popular were where the sentiment conveyed had touched a chord of mutual understanding.

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