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Imogen Hart

History Painting and Its Critics, ca. 1870–1910

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Abstract:

Art critics in the years before and after 1900 frequently discussed British history painting using terminology associated with drama and decoration. This article explores these themes in contemporary criticism of history paintings by Edwin Austin Abbey, Frank Dicksee, Edward Poynter, Solomon J. Solomon, and J. W. Waterhouse, among others.

History Painting and Its Critics, ca. 1870–1910 by Imogen Hart

History painting has received little attention in the scholarship on art production circa 1900. Once the most respected of artistic genres, history painting had lost its privileged status by the end of the nineteenth century. According to standard accounts, in the eighteenth century history painting offered the *exemplum virtutis*, or model of virtue, functioning as a moral guide and a source of universal truth;^[1] by the late nineteenth century, history painting had become official art and was mobilized for propagandist and reactionary purposes.^[2] Among scholars, there has been an emphasis on the emergence of “historical genre” as representing a shift toward depicting imaginary everyday scenes set in the past, as opposed to the *exemplum virtutis* of traditional history painting, which was required to represent a critical narrative moment and embody a moral message.^[3] As I will demonstrate, however, artists continued to communicate moral or philosophical meaning via subjects taken from the traditional sources of history painting—Biblical, mythological, literary, or historical. Though limited in quantity, scholarship on this subject refutes the widely held view that history painting was dead by 1900, and indicates that investigations into history painting in this period can prove fruitful, since artists did produce works in the category and critics found many of them original and significant.^[4] While definitions, terminology, and the treatment of subjects changed, critics offered insightful, complex interpretations of the history paintings still being produced.

If we look closely at contemporary criticism of history paintings by Edwin Austin Abbey (1852–1911), Frank Dicksee (1853–1928), Edward Poynter (1836–1919), Solomon J. Solomon (1860–1927), and J. W. Waterhouse (1849–1917), among others, certain tendencies emerge, two of which I examine in detail. One is the repeated use of terminology associated with drama, suggesting critics’ awareness of the ways in which history paintings both engaged their viewers’ attention and drew on the visual idiom of the stage. In the light of this critical language, I explore how the genre of history painting enabled artists to connect with their audiences and deal with contemporary concerns. The other theme I discuss is critics’ frequent use of the word “decorative” in relation to history painting. I argue that history painting pursued its dramatic and expressive goals in this period partly by adopting characteristics that critics identified as “decorative.”^[5] As we shall see, the issue of history painting and its critical reception is bound up with the fate of the Royal Academy in this period, partly because the genre was usually seen as belonging to the academic tradition. Hence much, but not all, of the relevant criticism takes the form of reviews of the Royal Academy exhibitions.

The Persistence of History Painting

Throughout the period under discussion critics acknowledged—sometimes indifferently, sometimes mournfully—that history painting was decreasing in popularity among contemporary artists.^[6] Yet it was not understood to have disappeared completely, and critics repeatedly welcomed what were seen as promising developments in history painting, often prizing works in the category as among the most important at a given exhibition.^[7] Significantly, critics frequently discussed history painting in terms of the criteria established by authorities such as Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) and Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), examining, for example, the artist’s choice of a particularly suggestive moment, the expressiveness of the figures’ gestures, and the effectiveness of the composition.^[8] In particular, the viewer’s ability

to draw out a general message from the artist's treatment of a specific subject was considered important, as we shall see. Jonathan Richardson (1667–1745) had counseled, "As to Paint a History, a Man ought to have the main qualities of a good Historian, and something more; he must yet go higher, and have the Talents requisite to a good Poet."^[9] In the late nineteenth century, history painting continued to bear expectations of a profound moral or poetic truth.

Modern artists took advantage of history painting's capacity to contain layers of meaning. As I have argued elsewhere, history paintings of the period could hold contemporary significance for their audiences.^[10] Edwin Longsdon Long's *Babylonian Marriage Market* (1875; Royal Holloway College), for example, called to mind the ongoing, heated debates about the legal status of married women.^[11] History painting offered a way of mediating meaning that other genres did not; rather than representing current events directly, they commented on the issues while maintaining the "distance of metaphor."^[12] As Shelley Wood Cordulack has argued, an important way in which artists engaged with contemporary concerns was "to allow the subject itself to allude subtly to the problem, and through idealization, to allow the powerful contrast between myth and reality to speak for itself."^[13] Thus, as Cordulack demonstrates, Waterhouse's *The Danaïdes* (1906; Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums) could be interpreted in relation to the London water crisis of the previous century, or, as I have discussed, it could be understood to refer to the tension at the fin-de-siècle between the dutiful housewife, engaged in unthreatening repetitive activity, and the femme fatale.^[14]

Another advantage history painting offered artists was the genre's capacity for exploring the breadth and depth of human emotion. The subjects of history painting frequently involved moments of heightened passion, tension, or tragedy. The history painting tradition was founded on the principle that, in Reynolds's words, "a painter of history shows the man by showing his actions."^[15] This concept of painting contrasted strongly with the modernist approach that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. T. J. Clark has famously argued that it is a characteristic of "bourgeois society" in this period that "the 'inside' cannot be read from the 'outside,' and that the determinant facts of mind need have no visual effects."^[16] Clark explains that this is due to social insecurity, since "to express oneself would be to have one's class be legible."^[17] What Clark is describing completely refutes the principle of history painting expounded by Reynolds and Alberti. Indeed, Clark acknowledges this, noting that "the previous pictorial concept of the psyche had depended on a notion of the self as something acted out, in familiar contexts and informing roles."^[18] According to Clark, then, modernist painting required that the body be represented as unreadable in terms of expression or identity. History painting, in contrast, challenged artists to make the painted body as expressive and readable as possible.

Edwin Austin Abbey's Shakespearean History Paintings

One of the artists critics hailed as a significant contributor to modern history painting was Edwin Austin Abbey. Having illustrated Shakespeare's comedies for *Harper's Monthly*, Abbey produced a series of Shakespearean paintings that met with general critical acclaim at the Royal Academy exhibitions. The last of these, *The Trial of Queen Katherine* (fig. 1), was praised as "one of the most notable historical compositions that the present generation has seen."^[19] Ever since John Boydell (1720–1804) had famously commissioned a series of paintings and prints on Shakespearean subjects—a venture that, as one Victorian critic noted, was prompted by "the condition of historical painting"—the works of Shakespeare had served as a specifically British

source of material for artists seeking to succeed as history painters.^[20] Yet a Shakespearean subject differed from the traditional sources of history painting—defined by a critic in 1893 as encompassing not only “the grand events of history, but also religious, allegorical, mythological, and symbolical subjects, and even figures of idealistic beauty”—in one important respect: it not only involved interpretation of a written text but also implied the presence of additional mediators, the actors playing the characters in the scene represented (and, of course, the director, costume designers, and others involved in the production of a play).^[21] Abbey, therefore, chose to establish himself in the British art world in a mode that on the one hand was both thoroughly British and well recognized as a brand of history painting and, on the other hand, overlapped with a related yet distinct category, theatrical painting—and, by extension, with theatre itself. While praising Abbey’s reinvigoration of history painting, critics sometimes discussed his works as if they were stage performances. Of *The Play Scene in “Hamlet”* (fig. 2) one critic observed “the foot-light effect discernible throughout the picture,”^[22] while another wrote of *King Lear* (1898; Metropolitan Museum of Art) that “Here, of course, Mr. Abbey is illustrator and stage manager.”^[23]



Fig. 1, Edwin Austin Abbey, *The Trial of Queen Katherine*, 1898–1900. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection, Washington, DC. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Edwin Austin Abbey, *The Play Scene in “Hamlet,”* 1897. Oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. [\[larger image\]](#)

Yet critics seem to have been aware of a potential conflict between the arts of painting and theatre, taking care to differentiate Abbey’s works from the latter. Of *Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and the Lady Anne* (fig. 3)—a painting based on Shakespeare’s *Richard III*—one critic wrote, “As a piece of composition, of colour arrangement, of dramatic, as opposed to theatrical, effect, for qualities of earnest observation and careful painting, this canvas deserves praise that can

scarcely be exaggerated.”^[24] Abbey’s *King Lear* was described as “so fine at that that the dramatic quality of the scene is retained and the theatrical pitfall is avoided.”^[25] Two years later, *The Penance of Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester* (1900; Carnegie Museum of Art), based on a scene from *Henry VI, Part II*, was considered “dramatic and telling and yet agreeably untheatrical in atmosphere.”^[26] Sometimes Abbey was judged to fall short in this respect. Comparing *The Trial of Queen Katherine* with *The Penance of Eleanor*, one critic observed, “But, if the latter shows a little more human passion, it is also a little more theatrical and a little less dignified,” preferring “the suggestion of force in reserve” displayed in the former.^[27] Indeed, it was suggested that Abbey’s frequent recourse to Shakespearean themes had an adverse effect on his other paintings. In *Crusaders Sighting Jerusalem* (1901; Yale University Art Gallery), for example, “The slight staginess that sat so well on Mr. Abbey’s Shakespearean characters has crept into these crusaders. Mr. Abbey sees them, as Shakespeare might have seen them, and probably would have done so, with an eye to their dramatic presentation.”^[28]



Fig. 3, Edwin Austin Abbey, *Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and the Lady Anne*, 1896. Oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. [\[larger image\]](#)

History Painting, Drama, and Theatricality

The opposition of drama and theatricality found in the criticism of Abbey’s work is also a feature of the criticism of history painting more broadly in the period. Waterhouse’s *Mariamne* (1887; private collection) was considered “a little theatrical in arrangement,”^[29] while in W. Q. Orchardson’s *The Borgias* (1902; Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums) “the tragedy of the living Cesare and his victim is under rather than overdone, insomuch that one can at once acquit the artist of theatricalism.”^[30] Dicksee’s *Funeral of a Viking* (1893; Manchester Art Gallery), meanwhile, “does not altogether escape from the taint of the artificial, or, at least, the stagey.”^[31] Of Seymour Lucas a critic wrote that “his pieces are always well acted,”^[32] while John Collier’s model in his painting *Clytemnestra* (1882; Guildhall Art Gallery) was “obviously acting the character with some difficulty.”^[33] Of Dicksee’s *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (1902; Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery), one critic joked that “the actors in his drama are making the most of themselves.”^[34]

This period, in which history painting is generally held to have declined and disappeared, is conversely remembered as a time of innovation and enormous productivity in the field of drama. Alongside spectacular productions that dramatized the imperialist activities and attitudes of the late nineteenth century emerged the “New Drama” in plays such as Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879), a genre that was concerned with the minutiae of everyday human interaction rather than epic storylines or action.^[35] Simultaneously, new approaches to stage design were developed. In 1864, E. W. Godwin had argued that theater-goers wish “to witness such a performance as will place us as nearly as possible as spectators of the original scene or of

the thing represented,” reflecting a tradition in which historical authenticity was to be preserved, emphasizing the past.^[36] Later, however, directors abolished the proscenium arch, which separated the action on stage from the space of the audience, to highlight the audience’s experience of the performance in the present.^[37]

Some of the challenges faced in this period by history painting were also encountered in the theatre, and the solutions explored in the latter field can offer new ways of thinking about the former.^[38] For example, many artists chose to situate the viewer in the midst of the action rather than setting off the scene in a self-contained space to emphasize its historical distance. If we compare Abbey’s *Hamlet* with Daniel Maclise’s early Victorian depiction of the same scene (fig. 4), it is striking how directly Abbey’s figures address the painting’s viewers, not only implicating them as members of the play’s audience but also positioning them in the role of the players watched by Hamlet and his companions. In contrast, Maclise seals off the action—comprising both the play-within-the-play and its audience—from the painting’s viewers—and, implicitly, from *Hamlet*’s imagined spectators—as effectively as if a proscenium arch surrounded the composition. By inviting the viewer to enter the scene, turn-of-the-century history paintings evoked what I have called elsewhere the “participatory spectatorship” involved in contemporary pageants and political protests.^[39]



Fig. 4, Daniel Maclise, *The Play Scene in “Hamlet”*, exhibited 1842. Oil on canvas. Tate, London. [\[larger image\]](#)

Most importantly for our present purposes, the language used by critics in discussing history painting may be more fully understood when we consider the broader cultural context. Writing on nineteenth-century history painting in Britain and France, Stephen Bann has observed that “What begins as historical painting is liable to become, sooner or later, timeless melodrama.”^[40] This assessment suggests that history painting deteriorated into an over-the-top spectacle. Yet melodrama could be considered “the most important theatrical form of the age.”^[41] We can, therefore, see the continuing appeal of history painting for artists as unsurprising given the genre’s affinity with the heightened drama of contemporary theatre. At the same time, art critics’ preference for “dramatic, as opposed to theatrical, effect” suggests that something different was looked for in painting. Allan Fea offered an insight into the implications of theatricality for history painting in 1908. He deplored “the ill-treatment of historical subjects” by an artist who “only succeeds in producing a picture which at the first glance strikes one as being theatrical and unreal,” whereas the “historical painter . . . must have a keen knowledge and insight into human character, and beyond everything the rare gift of instilling life into his figures, not by mere and often over-strained action, but by subtle expression and suggestion.”^[42] There seems to be a connection between “over-strained action” and theatricality. Robert de La Sizeranne, whose French text was translated in the *Artist* in 1900, observed the tendency

of English painters toward subtlety. The “imperceptible emotions of the heart,” he noted, “are not to be revealed to the eye by well marked play of the muscles, or by any definite gestures.” Instead of “violent gesticulation” English painters invented “unusual attitudes” and “strange gestures.”^[43] The theatrical seems to have been associated with insincere, exaggerated, codified expression, as opposed to restrained, “subtle expression and suggestion,” sought by Fea and implied by La Sizeranne.

The critical reception of Solomon J. Solomon’s history paintings exemplifies this opposition. His *Samson* (fig. 5) was described with guarded enthusiasm by one critic: “So far, indeed, as it is possible for art to represent successfully a scene of violent action, Mr. Solomon has succeeded. The canvas is full of large figures in a very whirl of strife.”^[44] For another, it was “a big subject largely treated on a big canvas, full undoubtedly of life and movement, but somewhat coarse and exaggerated.”^[45] In contrast, M. H. Spielmann claimed that Solomon’s later painting *Niobe* (fig. 6) was



Fig. 5, Solomon J. Solomon, *Samson*, 1887. Oil on canvas. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 6, Solomon J. Solomon, *Niobe*, 1888. Oil on canvas. Current location unknown. Reproduced in A. Lys Baldry, “The Work of Solomon J. Solomon,” *Studio* 8 (June 1896): 8. [\[larger image\]](#)

professedly painted in reply to those critics who declared that the young artist, brought up in the traditions of the Paris studios, could only succeed where action was violent and where dash of subject diverted attention from composition and execution. He has

therefore painted this picture of absolute repose. The deep passion of silent anguish in the mother, and the sentiment inspired by the dead and dying forms of her children around her, are undisturbed by any incident calculated to add to or take from the main subject.^[46]

We might characterize *Samson*, in its “exaggerated” gestures and “violent action,” as theatrical, and *Niobe*, in its “repose” and “deep passion,” as dramatic.

Of course, a fundamental difference between history painting and drama is that a theatrical performance unfolds over a period of time, whereas a painting is static. This could explain the anti-theatrical attitude of critics. “Over-strained action” and “violent gesticulation” may be very effective at communicating the significance of a particular moment in a theatrical performance. Yet “subtle expression and suggestion” may be more appropriate ways of conveying an unfixed emotional state or pointing to a character’s development over time. Temporality is an important aspect of the concept of history painting.^[47] Artists were taught to select what Roland Barthes summarizes as the “perfect instant”: “a hieroglyph in which can be read at a single glance . . . the present, the past and the future.”^[48] In other words, the “instant” represented should be that which most effectively summed up the entire narrative. George Moore criticized a number of artists in these terms. He wrote that “Mr. Hacker, like Briton Riviere and Mr. Dicksee, fails to perceive any difference between a picture on the stage and a picture on canvas,” describing Arthur Hacker’s *Circe* (1893; untraced) as “a bald statement,” “a mere exteriority,” that fails to communicate “the moral idea of which the legend is an expression.”^[49] The language used implies that the stage encourages uncomplicated expression that exists only on the surface, whereas a painting ought to suggest the broader meaning or “moral idea” of the subject.

In contrast, writing of Abbey’s *Richard*, a critic admired “the dramatic force with which the whole tragic episode of Lady Anne’s fatal yielding is told,” noting that “As deformed in mind as in body, there is yet a dignity in the duke’s bearing which compels attention even from the newly-made widow.”^[50] Similarly, another critic observed,

But the point of the picture lies in the vivid realization of Gloster as presented to us by Shakespeare; his face is a most remarkable study of character and expression; as we look at it, the whole result of the scene becomes intelligible; ugly and uninviting as he is, he has the power to carry the situation; the woman, in spite of her vigorous action and clenched fist, is already struggling in the toils.^[51]

Rather than simply illustrating a particular line from the play, Abbey’s painting was interpreted by both critics as an embodiment of the overall narrative. A history painting that did not achieve this tended to receive censure. For example, one critic complained that the male protagonist in Poynter’s *Perseus and Andromeda* (1872; private collection) was too small relative to the monster, and concluded that “if he does not look already a victor he is morally and physically a failure.”^[52] In a play, the contrast in size between Perseus and the monster could be emphasized at first, to heighten the drama, and then minimized at the point of conflict, to make the outcome more convincing. In a painting, however, the artist’s representation of a single chosen moment must be compatible with what the viewer knows of the rest of the story. In Peter Brooks’s elegant phrase, a history painting aims to be “a kind of temporal synecdoche: a part which eminently stands for the whole.”^[53]

History Painting and Its Viewers

While the critics I have cited seem to share the distaste for theatricality identified by Michael Fried in his work on eighteenth-century French art criticism, the concept seems to be understood rather differently in each case. Fried tracks a desire to “*de-theatricalize beholding*” by “negating the beholder’s presence”;^[54] specifically, the artist should not be “permitted to have the beholder enter the scene of his painting.”^[55] In Fried’s theoretical framework, paintings that invite the viewer in and promote participatory spectatorship, as do the history paintings I have mentioned, would be perceived as theatricalizing beholding in a negative sense. Thus while Victorian and Edwardian critics allowed for a connection with the stage by admiring the drama, as opposed to theatricality, of certain history paintings, for Fried and the eighteenth-century French critics he discusses, any acknowledgment of an audience is considered a weakness.

For history painting to “negate the beholder’s presence” in the way Fried describes would be to undermine one of the fundamental goals of the genre. Crucially, history painting needed to appeal to as broad an audience as possible in order to fulfill its role as *exemplum virtutis*. As Reynolds put it, “There must be something either in the action, or in the object, in which men are universally concerned, and which powerfully strikes upon the public sympathy.”^[56] For example, another critic analyzing Poynter’s *Perseus and Andromeda* observed that “Ideal manhood in its strength is on one side of the picture, on the other side ideal womanhood in its weakness, and the monster in the middle, type of all the dangers from which man should be swift to protect the woman.”^[57] While overt appeals to the viewer in the form of exaggerated gesticulation were considered theatrical and undesirable, the ability of history painting to communicate its underlying meaning effectively was highly prized. In David Green and Peter Seddon’s words, traditional history painting “self-consciously addressed itself to a *public*.”^[58]

As Elizabeth Prettejohn has shown, Aestheticism’s reinvention of history painting led to a more elite version of the genre.^[59] Instead of seeking to appeal to a broad public, Aesthetic history painting was aimed at those viewers whose taste and visual literacy had been honed by familiarity with a new conception of beauty. Modernism similarly prioritized form over content and thus made itself accessible only to spectators who had a sophisticated appreciation of aesthetics. Such art was best viewed in exclusive galleries where an appropriate audience could be guaranteed. In public spaces and exhibitions with wider audiences, history painting continued to find a place. While it dealt primarily with subjects that were assumed to be familiar to a majority of its intended viewers, history painting could communicate to a broad audience even via an unfamiliar narrative if the artist was skillful in his or her treatment of the subject. Interpreting Diderot, Barthes argues that the subject is far less important than the selection of the “perfect instant.” As he puts it, “the creation of the painter or the dramatist lies not in the choice of a subject but in the choice of the pregnant moment, in the choice of the tableau.”^[60] A viewer unfamiliar with the particular story on which a painting was based might nevertheless be able to recognize the implications of a depicted “perfect instant,” to read from it the preceding and succeeding events, and to draw out a general message.

History Painting and the “Decorative”

At the turn of the century, history paintings were repeatedly described as “decorative,” and with approval. For example, Waterhouse’s *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896; Manchester Art Gallery) was

“exquisitely poetic, and at the same time admirably decorative”;^[61] in 1897, the work of Leighton and Poynter was judged to be “decorative rather than realistic,” with emphasis on Poynter’s “concession to the true laws of decoration”;^[62] in 1899, Abbey’s *Hamlet* was “decorative and forcible”;^[63] Poynter’s *Helena and Hermia* (1901; Art Gallery of South Australia) had “decorative grace”; and Waterhouse’s *Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus* (1900; private collection) was “essentially decorative.”^[64]

History-painting criticism is perhaps the last place we might expect to find references to the decorative, given the genre’s traditional position at the very pinnacle of artistic achievement versus the conventionally low status of decorative art. This artistic hierarchy was challenged in the second half of the nineteenth century with the rise of the Design Reform, Aesthetic, and Arts and Crafts movements.^[65] “Decorative” was a multi-purpose term during the period under discussion and it was often applied in various ways to painting.^[66] What did critics mean when they called history paintings “decorative”? In some cases the word was used to indicate that a history painting was intended to decorate a specific location. For example, when Abbey’s mural paintings for the Boston Public Library paintings were displayed at the Guildhall in London, a critic regretted that in the cramped space it was “difficult, if not impossible, to judge of the decorative value of these works.”^[67] However, at other times “decorative” referred to a work’s aesthetic or formal properties, as opposed to its subject. A. Lys Baldry offered a clue to the understanding of the “decorative” in history painting in an article on Solomon in the *Studio*. Baldry wrote, “As far as his own inclinations go, he is certainly a decorative painter. The importance of studied line composition, the value of well considered placing of colour masses, and the momentous effect of a thoughtfully schemed pictorial pattern are matters which he fully recognizes.”^[68] According to Baldry, it seems that composition is fundamental to decoration. In Reynolds’s writings, composition is also found to be an essential component of “invention,” which, for Reynolds, is closely allied to the concept of history painting.^[69] Reynolds’s principles were reiterated in academic training by teachers such as Leighton, Val Prinsep, and George Clausen throughout the period under discussion here.^[70]

According to Reynolds, when dealing with a subject from poetry or history (in other words, engaged in a history painting), the artist’s invention “includes not only the composition, or the putting the whole together, and the disposition of every individual part, but likewise the management of the background, the effect of light and shadow, and the attitude of every figure or animal that is introduced, or makes a part of the work.”^[71] Reynolds’s text reminds us that the traditional concept of history painting is defined by formal values as well as subject. The arrangement of figures and objects within the composition and the distribution of colors and forms are components that both strengthen a work’s status as history painting and contribute to its decorativeness. The *Magazine of Art* wrote of Abbey’s *Hamlet* that “If there is fine dramatic power displayed in this notable work, appreciation of colour and arrangement is even more potent.”^[72] H. Heathcote Statham seemed to have similar criteria in mind when praising Abbey’s *Trial of Queen Katherine* as “an arrangement which gives the fullest value to the figures of the King and Queen” and noting that “the parallel lines of the pikes of the attendants form a decorative background.”^[73]

Abbey’s work in particular seems to have been considered fundamentally decorative. Describing his *King Lear*, a critic noted that “his decorative style is capable of giving the fullest expression to dramatic motives.”^[74] Another wrote that “Mr. Edwin Abbey also aims at a

decorative result in ‘Hamlet,’ and certainly attains it in the darker range of his colour, which includes the finely imagined figures of the King and Queen.”^[75] A third referred to “Mr. Abbey’s big decorative composition, ‘Columbus in the New World.’”^[76] Perhaps most significantly, the *Art Journal* claimed in 1899 that “The forceful decorativeness which Mr. Abbey uses to deck out a dramatic theme is one of the most striking features of contemporary Art.”^[77] This comment echoes the same critic’s assessment of Abbey’s *Hamlet* two years earlier: “Under the guise of decoration he contrives to express much of the strong dramatic feeling which first had its expression in his picture of last year,” meaning *Richard, Duke of Gloucester*.^[78] The combination of “decorative” and “dramatic” seems to be what was considered particularly remarkable about Abbey’s art. A closer analysis of the paintings helps to illuminate this assessment.

All of Abbey’s Shakespearean canvases are on a wide horizontal format, evoking both the stage and the mural.^[79] Even the layout thus blends the dramatic and the decorative. Secondly, instead of including the “violent gesticulation” that critics associate with theatricality, Abbey seems more interested in conveying subtle psychological tensions. His figures’ poses are often expressive of internal conflict but are rarely readable in a straightforward way; Hamlet’s contortion, for example, hints at his discomfort and indecisiveness at this point in the play. Rather than representing a few key figures within a three-dimensional space, composed in a symbolic format indicating their relative hierarchy—arguably what traditional history painting strove to achieve—Abbey embeds his protagonists within a many-figured composition while still skillfully highlighting them and making them identifiable for a viewer familiar with the narrative. Combined, the self-contained restraint of his figures and the close attention to every part of the canvas results in an effect that could be described as “decorative”; the visual richness has a calming effect even as the expressiveness of the figures arouses interest and invites interpretation.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated that several concerns, particularly a preference for the “dramatic” over the “theatrical” and an appreciation for the “decorative,” were shared among art critics writing about history painting in Britain between around 1870 and 1910. It is significant that no firm distinction can be drawn between the criticism of history painting before and after 1900. The terminology and the criteria for assessment remain similar throughout the period, indicating a continuity that we might not expect from the existing scholarship. For example, Mark A. Cheetham’s excellent book *Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism in Britain: The “Englishness” of English Art Theory since the Eighteenth Century* (2012) is divided into two chapters, the first ostensibly ending in 1900 (but really not extending beyond 1892) and the second beginning with Roger Fry’s and Clive Bell’s writing in the early twentieth century.^[80] This structure reinforces the conventional periodization challenged by the present special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*. The idea that the new century ushered in a radically new modernism that superseded the derivative art of the Victorians is one that has begun to be questioned in recent years, but it is still pervasive.^[81]

The trajectory of history painting, which does not allow for a radical rupture around 1900, allows us to see this period as one of greater continuity, and by focusing on this field we are encouraged to consider other ways of assessing the significance of Victorian and Edwardian art that do not assume a march toward abstraction or high modernism to be the primary concern. Artists used history painting as a means of engaging with contemporary issues, suggesting that

the genre could be accommodated within David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry's redefinition of modernism as "art which grows out of and responds to modern conditions, whether it is formally innovative or not."^[82] We may gain a better understanding of art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by taking seriously a broader range of production than a modernist-biased mode of inquiry allows for. I have begun to show that history painting offered a framework that artists continued to find useful throughout the period. I have also demonstrated that critics continued to respond with enthusiasm and sensitivity to contemporary efforts in the genre. On the basis of this initial exploration, it seems likely that in-depth analyses of Victorian and Edwardian history paintings—many of which languish in museum storage or, worse, remain untraced—would yield valuable results that would continue to modify and enrich art history's understanding of this period in British art.

Imogen Hart teaches in the History of Art Department at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Arts and Crafts Objects* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) and co-editor, with Jason Edwards, of *Rethinking the Interior, c. 1867–1896: Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). She has published essays on William Morris, the Arts and Crafts movement, and Victorian and Edwardian painting in edited collections and journals including *Art History*. Previously she was a Postdoctoral Research Associate (2007–10) and an Assistant Curator (2010–13) at the Yale Center for British Art. Her current research projects include *Sculpture in the Age of Darwin*, *Sculpture and the Decorative* (with Claire Jones), and "The unity of the arts": *Writing about Fine and Decorative Art Together*.

Email the author imogenhart[at]berkeley.edu

Notes

[1] See John Barrell, *Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: "The Body of the Public"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 10.

[2] For summaries of this view, see Shelley Wood Cordulack, "Victorian Caricature and Classicism: Picturing the London Water Crisis," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 9, no. 4 (Spring 2003): 581; Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1984); and David Green and Peter Seddon, "Introduction: Art, Historiographical Practice and the Ends of History," in *History Painting Reassessed: The Representation of History in Contemporary Art*, ed. David Green and Peter Seddon (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 8–11. My thanks to Jo Briggs for discussing this issue with me.

[3] See Green and Seddon, "Introduction: Art, Historiographical Practice," 10. For an account of Victorian historical genre painting, see Elizabeth Prettejohn, "Recreating Rome in Victorian Painting: From History to Genre," in *Imagining Rome: British Artists and Rome in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Michael Liversidge and Catharine Edwards (London: Merrell Holberton, 1996).

[4] See "History Painting," ed. Paul Barlow and Colin Trodd, special issue, *Visual Culture in Britain* 6, no. 1 (2005). See also studies of individual artists, including Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn, eds., *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press for Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1999); "Ford Madox Brown and the Victorian Imagination," ed. Colin Trodd and Julie Sheldon, special issue, *Visual Culture in Britain* 15, no. 3 (2014); and Elizabeth Prettejohn and others, *J. W. Waterhouse 1849–1917: The Modern Pre-Raphaelite* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008).

[5] For more on history painting and the decorative, see Morna O'Neill, *Walter Crane: The Arts and Crafts, Painting, and Politics, 1875–1890* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for Paul

Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2010), 9; and Morna O'Neill, "A Political Theory of Decoration, 1901–1910," in *The Edwardian Sense: Art, Design, and Performance in Britain, 1901–1910*, ed. Morna O'Neill and Michael Hatt (New Haven and London: Yale Center for British Art and Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2010), 287–311.

[6] See, for example, Victor Champier, "The Salon," *Art Journal* 44 (September 1882): 269; Frederick Wedmore, "Genre in the Summer Exhibitions," *Fortnightly Review*, June 1883, 864; "The Institute," *Magazine of Art* 7 (1884): 163; M. H. Spielmann, "Current Art," *Magazine of Art* 14 (January 1891): 258; and H. Heathcote Statham, "The Academy and New Gallery Exhibitions," *Fortnightly Review*, June 1896, 961.

[7] See, for example, "Current Art," *Magazine of Art* 6 (January 1883): 430; and "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy.–I," *Magazine of Art* 21 (January 1897): 58.

[8] English translations of Alberti's *Della Pittura* (1435–36) were published in the second quarter of the eighteenth century.

[9] Jonathan Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*, 2nd ed. (London: A. Bettesworth, 1725), 18–19.

[10] See Imogen Hart, "History Painting, Spectacle, and Performance," in *Edwardian Opulence: British Art at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Angus Trumble and Andrea Wolk Rager (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art in association with Yale University Press, 2013).

[11] See Imogen Hart, "The Politics of Possession: Edwin Long's *Babylonian Marriage Market*," *Art History* 35, no. 1 (February 2012): 87–105.

[12] Thomas Crow, "Patriotism and Virtue: David to the Young Ingres," in *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History*, ed. Stephen F. Eisenman (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 31, cited in Green and Seddon, "Introduction: Art, Historiographical Practice," 9.

[13] Shelley Wood Cordulack, "Victorian Caricature and Classicism: Picturing the London Water Crisis," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 9, no. 4 (Spring 2003): 540.

[14] See *ibid.*, 580; and Imogen Hart, catalogue entry for J. W. Waterhouse, *The Danaïdes*, in Trumble and Wolk Rager, *Edwardian Opulence*, 348–49.

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[16] T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 255.

[17] *Ibid.*, 253.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] "Royal Academy.–I," *Magazine of Art* 24 (January 1900): 339.

[20] Alfred Beaver, "Boydell's Shakespeare," *Magazine of Art* 9 (January 1886): 218.

[21] Frederic Masson, "Historical Painting in France," *Art Journal* (November 1893): 320.

[22] A. C. R. Carter, "The Royal Academy, 1898," *Art Journal* (June 1898): 176.

[23] "The Royal Academy," *Speaker* 17 (May 7, 1898): 575.

[24] "The Royal Academy, 1896," *Art Journal* 58 (June 1896): 171.

[25] "The Royal Academy Exhibition.–II," *Magazine of Art* 22 (January 1898): 465.

[26] "The Royal Academy.–II," *Magazine of Art* 24 (January 1900): 386.

[27] F. J. M., "Art," *Speaker* 2 (May 12, 1900): 161.

[28] F. J. M., "The Royal Academy," *Speaker* 4 (May 11, 1901): 163–64.

[29] M. H. S., "'Mariamne.' By J.W. Waterhouse, ARA," *Magazine of Art* 11 (January 1888): 95.

[30] F. J. M., "The Royal Academy," *Speaker* 6 (May 24, 1902): 218.

[31] The Editor, "The Royal Academy Exhibition.–II," *Magazine of Art* 16 (January 1893): 258.

[32] Cosmo Monkhouse, "A Tale of Edgehill," *Art Journal* (April 1884): 100.

[33] "The Exhibition Of The Royal Academy," *Art Journal* (July 1882): 210.

[34] "Current Art: The Royal Academy Exhibition.–II," *Magazine of Art* 26 (January 1902): 394.

[35] See Gail Marshall, introduction to Gail Marshall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

[36] Cary M. Mazer, *Shakespeare Refashioned: Elizabethan Plays on Edwardian Stages* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), 10.

- [37] Mazer, *Shakespeare Refashioned*, 9, 56. See also Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 8.
- [38] For the relationship between nineteenth-century painting and drama, see Meisel, *Realizations*.
- [39] See Hart, “History Painting, Spectacle, and Performance.”
- [40] Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clio: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 75.
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- [43] “Subject in English Painting, from the French of M. de La Sizeranne,” *Artist: An Illustrated Monthly Record of Arts, Crafts and Industries* 29 (October 1900): 27.
- [44] E. Rimbault Dibdin, “The Liverpool Corporation Collection,” *Magazine of Art* 12 (January 1889): 20.
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- [47] See Peter Brooks, *History Painting and Narrative: Delacroix’s “Moments”* (Oxford: Legenda, 1998); and Patricia M. Burnham and Lucretia Hoover Giese, “Introduction: History Painting: How it Works,” in *Redefining American History Painting*, ed. Patricia M. Burnham and Lucretia Hoover Giese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8–11.
- [48] Roland Barthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,” 1973, in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 73.
- [49] George Moore, “Our Academicians and Their Associates,” *New Review* 8, no. 49 (June 1893): 671–72.
- [50] Mrs. Arthur Bell, “The Work of Edwin Austin Abbey, R.A.,” *Artist* 29 (October 1900–January 1901): 174.
- [51] H. Heathcote Statham, “The Academy and New Gallery Exhibitions,” *Fortnightly Review*, June 1896, 961–62.
- [52] “The Royal Academy,” *Art Journal* 34 (July 1872): 182.
- [53] Brooks, *History Painting and Narrative*, 15.
- [54] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 103–4. Italics are original.
- [55] *Ibid.*, 96.
- [56] Reynolds, “Discourse 4,” 40.
- [57] Henry Morley, “Pictures at the Royal Academy,” *Fortnightly Review*, January–June 1872, 697.
- [58] Green and Seddon, “Introduction: Art, Historiographical Practice,” 7. Italics are original.
- [59] See Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Morality versus Aesthetics in Critical Interpretations of Frederic Leighton, 1855–75,” *Burlington Magazine* 138, no. 1115 (February 1996): 80 and 86; and Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Aestheticising History Painting” in Barringer and Prettejohn, *Frederic Leighton*, 89–110.
- [60] Barthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,” 76. See also Peter Paret, *Art as History: Episodes in the Culture and Politics of Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 22.
- [61] “The Royal Academy, 1896,” *Art Journal* 58 (June 1896), 170.
- [62] The Editor, “Edward J. Poynter, P.R.A.,” *Magazine of Art* 21 (January 1897): 114, 118.
- [63] M. H. Spielmann, “Edwin Austin Abbey, R.A.—Part II,” *Magazine of Art* 23 (January 1899): 193.
- [64] F. J. M., “The Royal Academy,” *Speaker* 4 (May 11, 1901): 164.
- [65] See Imogen Hart, *Arts and Crafts Objects* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).
- [66] Morna O’Neill has argued persuasively that in the late nineteenth century “history painting’s ambitions were channeled into the decorative,” citing the writing and painting of Walter Crane as an important example of this shift. O’Neill, *Walter Crane*, 9. For more on painting and the decorative, see O’Neill, *Walter Crane*, and O’Neill, “A Political Theory of Painting, 1901–1910.”
- [67] Frank Rinder, “In the London Picture Galleries,” *Art Journal* (January 1902): 28.

- [68] A. Lys Baldry, “The Work of Solomon J. Solomon,” *Studio* 8 (June 1896): 7.
- [69] Joshua Reynolds, “Notes on the Art of Painting,” in Charles Alphonse Du Fresnoy, *The Art of Painting of Charles Alphonse Du Fresnoy*, trans. William Mason, with annotations by Sir Joshua Reynolds (York: J. Todd, 1783), 74–75.
- [70] See [Frederic,] Lord Leighton, *Addresses Delivered to the Students of The Royal Academy* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1897); Val Prinsep, *Six Lectures Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy of London, January, 1901* (London: printed for private circulation, 1901); and George Clausen, *Aims and Ideals in Art: Eight Lectures Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy* (London: Methuen, 1906).
- [71] Reynolds, annotations to *Art of Painting*, 74–75.
- [72] “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy.–I,” *Magazine of Art* 21 (May–October, 1897): 58.
- [73] H. Heathcote Statham, “At The Royal Academy,” *Fortnightly Review*, January–June 1900, 1024.
- [74] A. C. R. Carter, “The Royal Academy, 1898,” *Art Journal* 60 (June 1898): 176.
- [75] *National Observer*, quoted in “The Royal Academy,” *Artist* 19 (June 1897): 263.
- [76] “The Royal Academy,” *Speaker* 14 (May 12, 1906): 137.
- [77] A. C. R. Carter, “The Royal Academy of 1899,” *Art Journal* 61 (June 1899): 162.
- [78] A. C. R. Carter, “The Royal Academy, 1897,” *Art Journal* 59 (May 1897): 178.
- [79] For more on mural painting in the period, see Clare A. P. Willsdon, *Mural Painting in Britain, 1840–1940: Image and Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. 62–108.
- [80] Mark A. Cheetham, *Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism in Britain: The “Englishness” of English Art Theory since the Eighteenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).
- [81] See David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry, eds., *English Art 1860–1914: Modern Artists and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); David Peters Corbett, “Visualising the Right Question,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 11, no. 2 (2006): 338–48; and Pamela Fletcher, “Victorians and Moderns” in Trumble and Wolk Rager, *Edwardian Opulence*, 99–107.
- [82] Corbett and Perry, introduction to *English Art 1860–1914*, 2.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Edwin Austin Abbey, *The Trial of Queen Katherine*, 1898–1900. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Edwin Austin Abbey, *The Play Scene in "Hamlet,"* 1897. Oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Edwin Austin Abbey, *Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and the Lady Anne*, 1896. Oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Daniel Maclise, *The Play Scene in "Hamlet"*, exhibited 1842. Oil on canvas. Tate, London. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Solomon J. Solomon, *Samson*, 1887. Oil on canvas. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Solomon J. Solomon, *Niobe*, 1888. Oil on canvas. Current location unknown. Reproduced in A. Lys Baldry, "The Work of Solomon J. Solomon," *Studio* 8 (June 1896): 8. [\[return to text\]](#)