



Signs of Grace: Religion and American Art in the Gilded Age

Kristin Schwain

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Religious imagery was ubiquitous in late-nineteenth-century American life: department stores, schoolbooks, postcards, and popular magazines all featured elements of Christian visual culture. Such imagery was not limited to commercial and religious artifacts, however, for it also found its way into contemporary fine art. In *Signs of Grace*, Kristin Schwain looks anew at the explicitly religious work of four prominent artists in this period—Thomas Eakins, F. Holland Day, Abbott Handerson Thayer, and Henry Ossawa Tanner—and argues that art and religion performed analogous functions within American culture. Fully expressing the concerns and values of turn-of-the-century Americans, this artwork depicted religious figures and encouraged the beholders' communion with them. Describing how these artists drew on their religious beliefs and practices, as well as how beholders looked to art to provide a transcendent experience, Schwain explores how a modern conception of faith as an individual relationship with the divine facilitated this sanctified relationship between art and viewer. This stress on the interior and subjective experience of religion accentuated the artist's efforts to engage beholders personally with works of art; how better to fix the viewer's attention than to hold out the promise of salvation? Schwain shows that while these new visual practices emphasized individual encounters with art objects, they also carried profound social implications. By negotiating changes in religious belief—by aestheticizing faith in a new, particularly American manner—these practices contributed to evolving debates about art, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender.

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