

"CHRIST THE PILOT": A PANEL FROM
WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT'S UNFINISHED TRIPTYCH

Sometime around the end of 1893 or the beginning of the following year, William Holman Hunt began a triptych on the subject of Christ the Pilot that drew its symbolism from popular religious imagery rather than from his more usual sources, which included Biblical typology, Early Netherlandish painting, Hogarth, and major works of literature. As it turned out, Hunt did not complete his project for a variety of reasons, but one of the sketches for this planned triptych recently sold at auction tells us much about the artist, his career-long experiments with pictorial symbolism, and his conceptions of religious painting suitable for the age of Victoria.

The catalogue for the Sotheby's Belgravia sale of 29 June 1976 describes Lot 52 as William Holman Hunt's "CHRIST CROSSING THE SEA OF GALILEE, a sketch, canvas laid on panel[;] 14¼ by 25 in; 36 by 63.6cm" (Fig. 1) but the accompanying black-and-white reproduction reveals that Hunt's sketch of Christ as helmsman of a boat containing men, a woman, and children does not illustrate the episode from Mark 4: 37-41. This passage from the Bible relates that

there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full.

And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish?

And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was great calm.

And he said unto them, Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?

And they feared exceedingly, and said one to another, What manner of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?

Whereas the scriptural text tells that Jesus awoke, calmed the storm, and then admonished His disciples for their lack of faith, Hunt's picture portrays Him as a helmsman steering what seems to be a life-boat. Furthermore, whereas the biblical account mentions only Christ's disciples, all of whom were men, the sketch clearly depicts at least one woman and three children. True, Holman Hunt characteristically