

Narrating Modernity: The British Problem Picture 1895-1914 by Pamela M. Fletcher. Aldershot, Hants, and Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 2003. ix, 188 pp. + 31 b/w illus. ISBN 0-7546-3568-6. \$94.95.

In *Narrating Modernity: The British Problem Picture 1895-1914*, Pamela Fletcher intends to investigate a genre of Victorian painting often dismissed by art historians – the “problem picture,” embracing, as Fletcher defines it, “paintings of ambiguous, often slightly risqué, scenes from modern life that invited multiple interpretations.” Practised by a number of artists, including Frank Dicksee and John Collier, the genre was extremely popular during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.

Fletcher notes that there were elements distinguishing the problem picture within the codes of Victorian narrative painting. Among the “visual components” were “an academic realist style..., a scene of modern life ... set at a moment of crisis or climax.” In addition to these visual elements, the genuine problem picture needed other cultural supports: it “must have been shown at the Royal Academy, must have attracted popular attention, must have appealed to some question or issue of interest to its audience, and must have been perceived as sufficiently ambiguous to excite but not completely frustrate a narrative reading.” Indeed, by the Edwardian era, the genre was as recognizable as landscape or portraiture.

One crucial element of the problem picture involved the “role of the press in creating the phenomenon.” This kind of picture was reproduced in Royal Academy guidebooks and made the focus of sponsored competitions searching for the best “solution” to the problem. During its heyday, the public expected a problem picture of the year from its specialists, such as Dicksee or Collier. This circumstance, however, existed not merely for the sake of entertainment. As Fletcher stresses, “problem pictures initiated wide-ranging cultural conversations about the contested social and aesthetic values that marked the very self-conscious transition from the Victorian to the modern.”

Fletcher correctly perceives three paintings as being precursors to the problem picture: William Frederick Yeames’s *Defendant and Counsel* (1895), Frank Dicksee’s *The Confession* (1896), and William Orchardson’s *Trouble* (1896, RA 1898). In the first, a woman is interrogated by four male lawyers; in the second, a woman appears to be making an admission to a man who covers his face with one hand; in the third, a man reacts to a letter as a woman assails him. In each of these canvases, there is an “open-ended narrative.” Is the woman under interrogation guilty? Is the confessing woman guilty or is the man also? Does the mysterious letter admit bigamy, murder, forgery, blackmail, seduction? In refusing to supply closure to their narratives, these canvases repudiate the saccharine domestic genre paintings of mid-century.

Late-Victorian problem pictures translate image into text – but *what* text?