

WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT'S EXHIBITION PAMPHLET FOR  
*THE MIRACLE OF THE HOLY FIRE*

George P. Landow

*Whether the celebration is regarded with shame by the advocates of unflinching truth, or with toleration as suitable to the ignorance of the barbaric pilgrims for whom it is retained, or with adoration by those who believe the fire to be miraculous, it has been from early centuries regarded as of singular importance. It echoes in many respects the mad excitement of the Asiatic mob in the temple at Ephesus. It has been described by many writers, but had never yet been painted; its dramatic, historic, and picturesque importance (which last it is now fast losing owing to the growing adoption of European costume) strongly recommended it to me for artistic representation and every year the survival of the early record must be more valued.*

– William Holman Hunt (2:385-86)

Introduction

William Holman Hunt painted *The Miracle (or Distribution) of the Holy Fire* after many years of trying to find the proper relation of his realist conception of painting to both religious belief and various forms of symbolic meaning. This single concern forms and informs Hunt's paintings on religious subjects throughout his long career. Each painting, in other words, offers one answer to Hunt's problem of the relation of spiritual meanings to his realist style – to a style, that is, whose depictions of objects, colours, landscapes, costume, and other details could be verified empirically by ethnography, geography, and personal experience. Although Hunt embraces this detailed realism because it struck him as the best way to communicate the truth, both the painter and his critics agreed it also threatened to create an art of irreligious materialism.

Hunt believed that some of his works, such as the landscapes of the Middle East, clearly justified their realistic style because that style, he believed, best conveyed the truth about the settings of gospel events and thereby enabled spectators to imagine Christ's life more accurately and more intensely. But Hunt, his critics, and those who purchased his paintings and the steel