

Painting the Bible: Representation and Belief in Mid-Victorian Britain by Michaela Giebelhausen. Aldershot, Hants, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006. xiv, 246 pp. + 13 colour plates, 69 b/w illus. ISBN 0-7546-3074-9. \$99.95; £55.00.

Michaela Giebelhausen, who is a Lecturer in the Department of Art History and Theory at the University of Essex, has written an important and innovative scholarly study. In *Painting the Bible* she sets out to trace the transformations that religious painting underwent in mid-Victorian Britain and to chronicle what she calls the “troubled emergence of a unique form of naturalistic religious painting.” She adopts Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the “restricted field” of cultural production, applying his term “refraction” to her own discussion of “the delicate balance between internal and external factors impacting on the production of religious art.” Happily, such theorising does not get in the way of what really matters, namely the reconstruction (rather than deconstruction) of the intellectual and artistic context in which England’s most important biblical paintings of the nineteenth century were produced.

Perhaps the most original aspect of this study is its close attention to the principles laid down by the Royal Academy, by which biblical painting was presented as a sub-genre of history painting, and was conceived as being free from denominational concerns. Giebelhausen’s second chapter focuses on the high-art ideal inherited from Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses* by Henry Howard and Charles Robert Leslie, the Academy’s two Professors of Painting in the 1840s, and reflected in different ways in the paintings of Benjamin Haydon, Charles Eastlake, William Dyce, Daniel Maclise, and John Rogers Herbert. She also discusses the reappraisal of early art which resulted from the research of William Ottley, Karl Friedrich von Rumohr, Franz Kugler, Alexis Francis Rio, and others, and the critical work of Lord Lindsey, Anna Jameson, and John Ruskin. All the figures discussed in this section, she argues, aimed to “modify and update the traditional notion of high art” while operating “within the boundaries of the academic paradigm.” Meanwhile she rightly reminds us that the proportion of religious paintings of all kinds in the annual Royal Academy exhibitions was remarkably small, averaging 2.5% and peaking at 4.5% in 1850 (and the graphs are here to prove it).

This date brings us to the heart of the matter, because 1850 was the year in which Pre-Raphaelite rebellion met entrenched religious and artistic preconceptions with the most explosive results. For Giebelhausen, the Pre-Raphaelites “challenged the most sacred credos of academic art,” and indicated the breakdown of the “implicit connections between pictorial styles and specific forms of belief.” The central work of the book, reproduced on the dust jacket, is Millais’s *Christ in the House of his Parents (The Carpenter’s Shop)* (1849-50), which raised such a furore that other young artists were encouraged to move