

RELATIONAL OBJECTS: STUDIO PROPS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS IN VICTORIAN PAINTING

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Victorian paintings are famously filled with things. From the claustrophobic parlour overstuffed with commodities in William Holman Hunt's *Awakening Conscience* to the fairyland bazaars in which Dante Gabriel Rossetti's stunners lounge, many mid-century British paintings share an aesthetic of detail and excess. Critics have long reflected on the challenges this plentitude poses for interpretation, from John Ruskin's attempts to provide narrative symbolic meaning for each object in *The Awakening Conscience* to twentieth-century scholars' theories of the "reality effect," whereby seemingly superfluous details work as guarantors of the truth claims of realist representation. Less well explored is the challenge this world of things posed for artists. William Powell Frith, writing in the 1880s, emphasized both art's fundamental reliance on observation and the challenges that commitment could pose:

Among the ignorant – and how large that class is as regards matters of art it would be impossible to calculate – the idea commonly prevails that pictures are evolved out of the painter's inner consciousness, or, in other words, are created out of nothing. The fact that nature is constantly referred to, that for the most trifling detail the artist never trusts to his memory, that he not only uses models for the human beings which may fill his compositions, but that he seeks far and wide for the smallest object to be represented, will be a revelation to most people. (390)

In Frith's account, it is part of the artist's task to seek out each thing he needs to build his composition, and he advises younger artists to "be as determined as I was to 'seek until he finds' the object, dead or living, required for his work" (90). Frith is insisting here on the literalness of the depicted objects in paintings, insisting that they are *things*, pieces of material culture – produced, owned, sold, stored, moved, shared, and loved.