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Kristin Schwain. *Signs of Grace: Religion and American Art in the Gilded Age.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. Illustrations. xi + 172 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4577-4.

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Enthusiastic Paradox

Kristin Schwain's book *Signs of Grace* is blessedly (excuse the pun) jargon free and an intelligent contribution to a crowded field of books and essays on American art and religion in the nineteenth century. Four artists, Thomas Eakins, Henry O. Tanner, F. Holland Day, and Abbott Thayer, are the subjects of the book's four chapters. Her thesis, and it is a persuasive one, is that late nineteenth-century religious imagery became conflated with Gilded Age taste making and high-minded individualism. As she puts it: "religious leaders, publishers, tastemakers, and commercial magnates promoted a modern conception of faith that characterized religion as an individual relationship with the divine more than a formal set of theological precepts" (p. 2).

I approached Schwain's book with trepidation because of my own disinterestedness in religion and art and, in part, because of the plethora of groundbreaking works on the subject: John Davis's *The Landscape of Belief Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (1996), David Morgan's *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (1999), and Sally Promey's *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent's Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library* (1999). Schwain's book is slim. What could she add to this distinguished discourse in such a short number of pages? Her introduction persuaded me and her choice of artists was intriguing. Eakins, Tanner, Day, and Thayer are an unlikely quartet, and, with the exception of the recognition that Tanner studied with Eakins, they are seldom linked. I was intrigued and eager to read on.

In her introduction, Schwain makes the claim, rightly, that America's religious enthusiasm, while it has assumed many guises, has never waned, but in the late nineteenth century there was an important shift from the institutional to the individual. This is an important and critical observation and one that justifies this examination of the art produced by contemporary artists in response to this realignment. More specifically, it parallels a change from the traditional artistic practice of creating art for religious institutions to the formation of a visual discourse that is more spiritual in nature and more dependent on the interpretative response of the individual. To give one example, not cited in the book, one need only note the shift from John LaFarge's decorations for Trinity Church, Boston (1878), to Augustus Saint-Gaudens's private memorial for Henry Adams's wife in Rock Creek Cemetery, Washington DC (1892).

With my enthusiasm intact, I proceeded to Schwain's first chapter, the stated focus of which is Eakins's clerical portraits. I have always regarded them, as does Schwain, as anomalies. These fourteen portraits created in the 1890s and 1900s with their somber piety I could not connect to the vigor and surprise of his earlier portraits, most famously his *The Gross Clinic* (1876). I knew of his newfound religiosity (if one can call it that, maybe introspection is a better word) following his dismissal from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in the mid-1880s, a mature conviction that unhappily does not empower these late portraits of Roman Catholic prelates with discrimination. So I looked forward to Schwain's analysis. Alas, she foundered. It is not that her insights are unoriginal, rather that they are too dispersed.

She begins by citing the Logos, the word made flesh, as the trope that informs her investigation, and it is an evocative connective to Eakins's corpus. Yet she strains to join this meditative evocation and contemporary Catholicism as promulgated by Eakins's clerics to the portraits themselves. My argument is not that her inquiry is unworthy but that it does not go far enough. Unlike the other three chapters, Schwain is not alert here to paradox, which I believe is at the heart of these portraits. She states the paradox at the outset by citing Eakins's early disavowal of religiosity and links it, unconvincingly

in my mind and in a way that seems gratuitous, to his dislike of or discomfort with the "other." The paradox that remains unaddressed is the "why" of Eakins's efforts. Why did this seeming agnostic choose to paint so many portraits of Roman Catholic priests and churchmen? It is Schwain's contention that Eakins in his maturity shared a bond with these modern prelates, but unhappily she gets mired in her application of the concept of Logos and loses conviction.

This is not true of the other chapters, which appear fresh and original. And it is also in these three chapters that the author deals very effectively with paradox, which for me is the defining trope of her entire enterprise. Her chapter on Tanner has real meat, since she devotes considerable attention to the central conundrum of modern African American theology, which Tanner's work exemplifies. The challenge, simply put, is that African Americans sought parity in American society. As she illustrates, it was necessary, in the case of religious practice to abandon the high emotive religious expression of rural religious observation and adopt a more restrained and intellectualized practice that was congruent with white religious, i.e., Protestant, convention. It is Schwain's effort to illuminate this paradox and to describe how it was manifested in Tanner's work that is her great contribution.

In her section on the photographer Day, Schwain takes her time to define the paradox within Day's religious photography. She begins slowly, as she focuses on his framed photographic series called *The Seven Last Words of Christ* (1898), connecting it historically, and I think accurately, to Germany's Oberammergau Passion Play, Palestine Park in Chautauqua, and stereopticon slide shows that illustrated the life of Christ. All, including Day's efforts, were to appeal to an experiential form of Christianity. The paradox is that Day's photographs were nonetheless controversial on a number of counts: photography was not an appropriate medium for the representation of a sacred subject, and his avant-gardism, homosexuality, and aestheticism cast an unwelcome light on the divine.

Enshrined in Schwain's chapter on Thayer is the artist's paradoxical appropriation of Catholic, Marian figures for an American secular audience. As she successfully demonstrates, Thayer's large-scale figure paintings, often of members of his family, are his attempts to canonize the familiar as spiritual expression.

I like Schwain's study because it goes beyond the now familiar tropes of the Gilded Age ennui and spiritual drift, opportunism, and exploitation. Instead, she offers an in-depth study that helps us better understand the subtle but important shift in the era's religious practice, which was rethought and transformed into a more personal and subjective experience. The practice and art of four of the era's leading artists illuminated this sympathetic claim.

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