

# American Religious Art

J. PAUL STAUFFER

THE HAND AND THE SPIRIT: RELIGIOUS ART IN AMERICA,  
1700-1900  
By Jane Dillenger and Joshua C. Taylor  
University Art Museum, Berkeley, California 1972 192 pp \$10.00

67

*The Hand and the Spirit* is the title of an exhibition of American religious painting and sculpture that was first shown last summer at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, subsequently in Washington at the Smithsonian's National Collection of Fine Arts, then at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, and finally at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, where it closed April 15, 1973.

Jane Dillenger, associate professor of theology and the arts at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, conceived the idea of the exhibition as an outgrowth of some work she was doing on Thomas Eakins. She succeeded in arousing enthusiasm and generating support for her idea from museum and foundation people, and after some three years of intense involvement, she brought to reality the exhibition of 123 works and an impressively annotated, generously illustrated, and handsomely printed catalogue.

Joshua Taylor, the director of the National Collection of Fine Arts, became the most actively involved consultant and coworker in the endeavor, helping to select from some 700 works, mostly from underground storage areas of the country's major museums, and contributing an erudite introductory essay that reviews attitudes and beliefs about religion and art that lay behind the production and the reception of art in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America.

If you have visited more than casually the collections of American painting in the major galleries of this country, or if you have read typical histories of American art, you have probably had the impression that American painters did not very often or very seriously deal with religious subjects and that few of them appear to have painted from strong religious impulses. This book and the exhibition it catalogues will then surprise you, as the discovery on which the exhibition rests surprised Mrs. Dillenger, for the works she uncovered represent a far richer body of religious art than is revealed in the permanent exhibits of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century holdings in our major galleries.

I first learned of the exhibition when I was invited to review the catalogue. The catalogue itself offered a refreshing view of a body of work very little known and promising a revised estimate of interrelationships between the arts and religious attitudes and impulses in the United States. But inasmuch as the catalogue was intended primarily as a guide for viewers of the exhibition rather than as an independent book, it raised a significant question: How adequately did the photographs and text reveal the range and quality of the works of the exhibition to someone unable to see the

show itself? The 62 photographs showed just half the total exhibition, and only 10 of the photographs were in color. I concluded that I would have to see the exhibition in order to appraise the catalogue. By the time I learned of *The Hand and the Spirit*, however, the exhibition had already closed in Berkeley, where I could most easily have seen it. Fortunately, an appointment in Chicago in March made it possible for me conveniently to stop in Indianapolis, where it was still on display in the handsome new Museum of Art. Not surprisingly, the impact of the works themselves was considerably greater than the illustrations in the catalogue had promised.

*The Hand and the Spirit* displays a varied and arresting sampling, both from "naïve" artists and from academically trained ones. The works are arranged in six groups on the basis of similarity of intention on the artist's part but also in a roughly chronological fashion. Group I, with only 7 paintings, is made up of eighteenth-century representations of biblical subjects, with little apparent relationship to traditional academic painting, though several of them appear to have been based on illustrations from Bibles. Three are by unknown painters, 4 by John Valentine Haidt, who as official church painter for the Moravian community in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, emphasized the blood and the anguish of Jesus in the crucifixion.

Group II includes such major artists as John Singleton Copley, Benjamin West, Washington Allston, Rembrandt Peale, Horatio Greenough, and several others in the principal academic tradition in the period up to approximately 1860. These paintings are mostly illustrations of biblical events, usually with a clear debt to European religious painting, but not trite nor merely imitative. Altogether it is an interesting and pleasant section, but without many surprises. The 8 works by West, though most of them are small, seem to me the most significant part of the group.

In Group III, the largest section, Mrs. Dillenger places "works that closely follow the dictates of religious teaching, largely sectarian." All but two of the artists represented in this fascinating section are naïve artists, innocent of the training or the technical concerns of the academic painters. Of them all, Edward Hicks and Erastus Salisbury Field were for me the most compelling. Hicks, a Quaker leader, is thought to have done some eighty versions of his favorite subject, *Peaceable Kingdom*, and more than forty of these still survive. The note to one of them includes Hicks's paraphrase of the passage in Isaiah that inspired the paintings:

The wolf shall with the lambkin dwell in Peace,  
His grim carnivorous thirst for blood shall cease,  
The beauteous leopard with his restless eye,  
Shall by the kid in perfect stillness lie;  
The calf, the fatling, and young lion wild,  
Shall all be led by one sweet little child.

Besides the animals and children, Hicks ordinarily shows in the painting somewhere William Penn making a treaty with the Indians, a group which he has adapted from Benjamin West's painting of that subject. Hicks is represented by three versions of *Peaceable Kingdom*, each quite different from the others, and, an equally compatible subject for one who enjoyed painting animals, *Noah's Ark*. Field is represented by a quaintly idyllic *Garden of Eden* and 4 highly original interpretations of the plagues on

the Egyptians and the departure of the Israelites. While his enormous masterpiece, *Historical Monument of the American Republic*, is not included in the exhibition, an engraving of it, with explanatory notes, is. It is a fantastic construction, full of patriotic and religious symbols, painted in commemoration of the centenary of American Independence.

Group IV includes work from two exotic streams of naive art. One of these is that of the *santeros* of New Mexico, makers of panel paintings and carved and painted wooden figures of saints, blending native Mexican art with Spanish traditional images. The other is made up of examples of "fraktur" from the Pennsylvania German pietistic sects. Among these latter examples, which owe something of their importance to illuminated manuscripts, is a passage from the thirty-fourth Psalm, transcribed with ornate capitals and decorative borders of plant and animal forms, painstakingly detailed, and suggesting central European peasant decorative styles. Another, from a Pennsylvania Shaker community, is *A Present from Mother Ann to Mary H* — a meticulously drawn and decorated sheet with admonitions to holy living, interspersed with such objects as the tree of life, a beehive, a watch and chain, and a lamp, all with some special symbolic value to the believers.

Group V was one of the two sections I found most interesting. It includes an unusual range of independent artists of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Some of them — like George Inness, Albert Pinkham Ryder, and Thomas Eakins — are more generally known than William Rimmer, Edwin Romanzo Elmer, Robert Loftin Newman, or Henry Ossawa Tanner. A strangely moving work in this group is Elmer's *Mourning Picture*, occasioned by the death of the artist's nine-year-old daughter. Several paintings by Tanner offer a persuasive vision of biblical events that seems personal and sincere and compatible with a reasonably modern style. Newman's *Madonna and Child in a Landscape* and *The Good Samaritan*, depending as they do on suggestion rather than explicit statement, have a good deal of restrained power.

I found Group VI the least satisfying. In these late nineteenth-century works, aesthetic sensitivity seems itself to be regarded as a legitimate religious impulse. The result in such painters as John LaFarge, Elihu Vedder, and Abbott H. Thayer comes through to me as a soft and often sentimental idealism, reminiscent of Rossetti, or Burne-Jones, or, sometimes, Puvis de Chavannes. If Vedder's *Lazarus Rising from the Tomb* and Thayer's *Virgin Enthroned* were untitled, they would contain no clue to their religious content.

I was deeply pleased, at times exhilarated, by the exhibition. Yet, when I had time to sort out my feelings and my critical responses to the body of work so enthusiastically assembled and painstakingly prepared for exhibition, I felt somehow disappointed.

Though it is clear that there exists a considerably greater body of art expressing a religious impulse than anybody seemed to realize, and that much of it is the serious work of major figures in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American art, it does not communicate, to me at least, nearly so strong a sense of a religious spirit in this country as I think I find in the social histories of the period. If, as is inevitable, one compares these works with the glory and the grandeur of the great tradition of Western European religious art of the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries, I believe he will doubt that by the eighteenth century the visual arts were a medium really capa-

ble of embodying powerful religious experience. American religious architecture of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries appears to me to offer a much more useful and reliable guide to the strength and creativeness of the religious impulse than do painting and sculpture. In *The Hand and the Spirit*, the work of the naive artists in their unselfconscious piety, reverent but not overawed by the biblical events they attempted to record, most clearly communicates a living religious inspiration behind their work. One senses that, except for these primitive workers, artists found it a matter of uneasiness, sometimes of embarrassment, to attempt to represent a miraculous event. Tanner, who succeeds better than most others in making biblical events seem understandable in modern terms, illustrates this well in his *Study for the Annunciation*, where attention is strongly concentrated on the humanity of Mary, while the angel has become simply a glow of light.

Taylor notes in his essay that the Protestantism in American culture is not enough to account for the lack of obvious religiosity in art, but it seems to me to have been one of the strong factors that made it difficult to express in the visual arts the real power of a religious spirit in America.

Having expressed that disappointment, however, I must say that *The Hand and the Spirit* is of significant interest and has far more value than the usual exhibition catalogue. The notes and the biographical sketches assemble a great deal of useful information, including excellent bibliographical matter. The scholarly interpretative and introductory matter by Mrs. Dillenberger and Mr. Taylor contribute valuable insights and considerably amplify our understanding of the place of religious art in our cultural history.

## Anti-Conversion

DONALD E. HALL

### THE FLIGHT OF PETER FROMM

By Martin Gardner

Los Altos, California: William Kaufmann, Inc. 1973 272 pp \$8.95

Avid readers of *Scientific American* will recognize the name of Martin Gardner, writer of the regular monthly Mathematical Games column. Others may recall him for *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, in which one chapter stars George McCready Price. One of my main reasons for buying *The Flight of Peter Fromm* was the feeling that its author was an old friend. This first novel shows the same inventiveness, pithy good humor, and delightful facility with words that characterize his other writing.