

Imaging the Word: Art & Theology

Social Critique in Two Victorian Nativity Paintings

When visiting museums, we often walk past artworks that seem at first glance dull and conventional, in favor more famous or more visually exciting pieces. We assume the visually conventional have nothing to show us. But, the fact is, if we were to look more closely, and appreciate the context of their creation, we often find something unexpected, even subversive.

This is the case with *The Nativity* and its companion piece, *The King and the Shepherd*, both of which were painted by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Coley Burne-Jones in 1887 for the chancel of Saint John's Church in Torquay, England.ⁱ Both are large pieces—seven by ten feet each—and were commissioned to hang on the north and south walls of the church, which they did for over a hundred years before being sold by the church in 1989 to pay for a new roof. Musical theater composer—and Victorian art collector!—Andrew Lloyd Webber bought them and donated them in 1997 to the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.ⁱⁱ

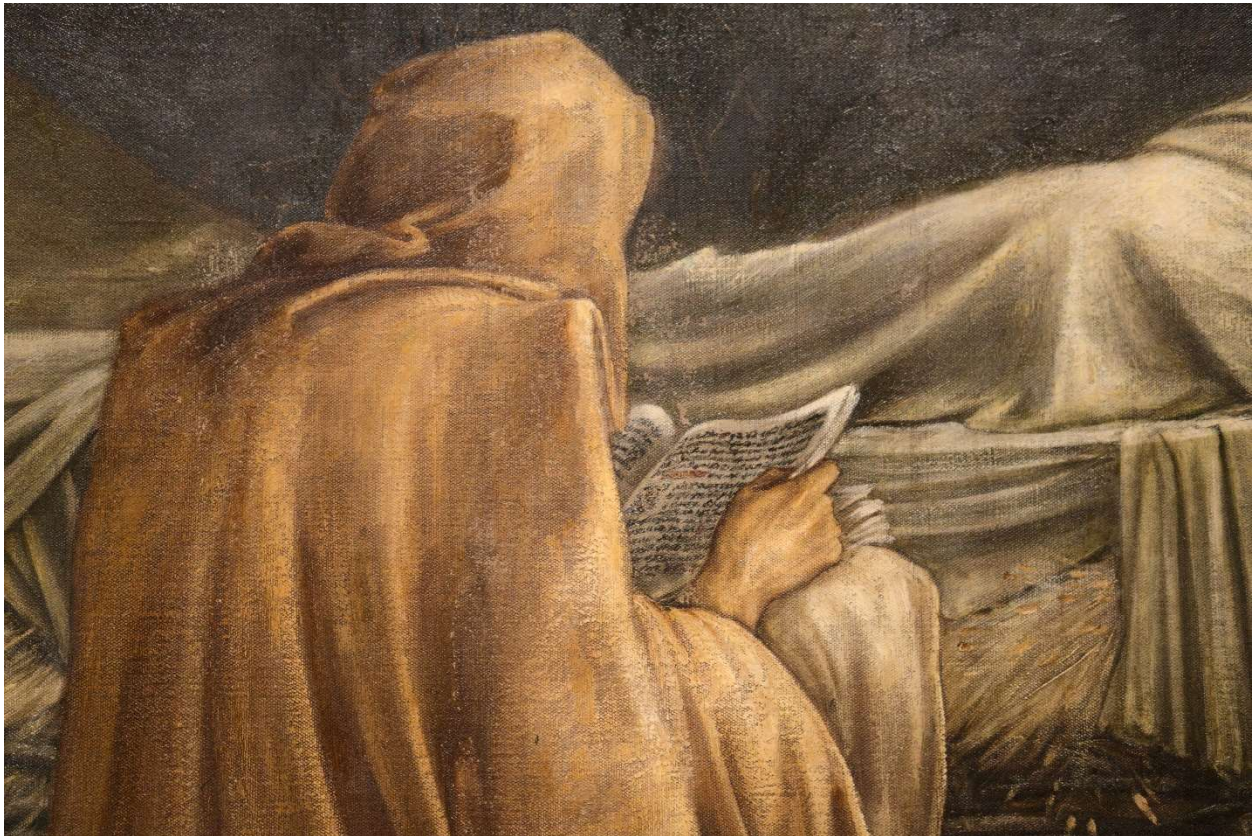


Sir Edward Burne-Jones (British, 1833–1898), *The Nativity*, 1888



Sir Edward Burne-Jones (British, 1833–1898), *The King and the Shepherd*, 1888

The Nativity shows Mary reclining outdoors on a rustic bed that looks like a funeral bier with her newborn son, Jesus, both wrapped in shroud-like garments. Her betrothed, Joseph, sits on the ground beside the bed with his back to the viewer, reading a manuscript. The text is illegible, but likely it contains the prophecy of the birth of a savior—or his sacrificial death. The latter option is likely, as the three angels stand to the side holding symbols not of Christ's birth, but the *arma Christi* (instruments of the passion): a crown of thorns, a chalice, and a jar of the burial spice, myrrh. The painting, therefore, connects the birth of Jesus to his saving act on the cross.





This foreshadowing approach was not new in Nativity art (see, for example, the ‘Prado Annunciation by’ Fra Angelico). But in addition to signaling Jesus’ fate (how he was “born to die”), the painting also quotes at the top a verse from a communal lament psalm in which God’s people cry out for deliverance from oppression: *Propter miseriam inopum et gemitum pauperis nunc exurgam dicit Dominus*, which translates as “ ‘Because the needy are oppressed, and the poor cry out in misery, I will rise up,’ ” says the LORD, ‘and give them the help they long for.’ ” (Psalm 12:5) When God’s people are abused, the psalmist promises, God is aroused to action. By including this unusual verse for a Nativity painting, the artist reminds us of the socio-political context of Jesus’s birth—and that of the artist’s own day.

Jesus was born at a time when Israel was occupied by Roman forces and governed by a despotic ruler who was so obsessed with power that he ordered the extermination of Jewish male babies in Bethlehem because he feared a challenge to his power (Matthew 2:16-18). This is the harsh reality into which Jesus was born. And though Jesus did not deliver the Jews from Roman occupation, he did establish a new “kingdom” in its midst and declared a release from bondage, a “jubilee” (Luke 4:16–21).

In addition to reflecting the context of 1st century Israel, the biblical inscription in this painting speaks also to the contemporary situation in Britain, which was marked by high unemployment and great hardship among London’s working class. It’s “a subtle allusion to the social miseries of Victorian Britain,” says Louise Lippincott, curator for the Carnegie at the time of acquisition. She speculates that Burne-Jones intended the painting “as his public statement, albeit a muted one, on 19th-century social horrors...It is quite likely that he was thinking of reports of the

inhumane living conditions of the London poor that were appearing in the press in the early 1880s.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the years when Burne-Jones was planning and executing the painting (1886-8), violent strikes and riots were erupting in London to protest economic inequality.^{iv v} As people starved, those in power continued to fatten themselves with apparent obliviousness. The artist’s inclusion in this humble scene a promise of God’s commitment to the poor expresses the hope that God will again arise to deliver from affliction those who trust in him.

The companion painting, *The King and the Shepherd*, extends this critique of economic inequality of Victorian Britain by showing the two titular figures—one rich, the other poor—coming to the Christ child as equals. As has been common among artists and theologians, Burne-Jones combines Matthew’s account of the magi with Luke’s account of the shepherds, showing both as worthy participants in the same event. An angel leads each traveler by the hand, reminding them to keep quiet lest they wake the sleeping infant.

The Latin inscription at the top comes from Luke’s account of the journey of the shepherds: *Transeamus usque Bethleem et videamus hoc verbum quod factum est quod fecit Dominus [et ostendit nobis]*, which translates as, “Let us now go unto Bethlehem,” they say, “and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord [has made known to us]” (Luke 2:15).





“The pairings visually suggest the equality, in the face of divinity, between the wealthy king and the humble peasant,” reads the museum wall text. “In the context of the enormous social inequalities rife in Victorian England, this message smacked of social and political radicalism.”

In echo of the New Testament accounts, Burne-Jones portrays in these two paintings the radical truth that God chose to reveal his Son’s birth not only to royalty but also to a bunch of blue-collar laborers. The shepherds’ and kings’ shared presence at Christ’s bedside was only the start of the healing of the divisions that mar human society.

ⁱ <https://victorianweb.org/art/architecture/street/17.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://collection.cmoa.org/objects/05ad5ca1-0128-4c0a-b3c8-fc85a902897b>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://carnegiemuseums.org/magazine-archive/1997/sep/oct/feat1.html>

^{iv} <https://pasttenseblog.wordpress.com/2019/02/08/today-in-london-riotous-history-1886-unemployed-riot-in-the-west-end/>

^v <https://pasttenseblog.wordpress.com/2019/02/08/today-in-london-riotous-history-1886-unemployed-riot-in-the-west-end/>