

Kristin Schwain, *Signs of Grace: Religion and American Art in the Gilded Age*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008, xi + 172. ISBN978-0-8014-4577-4. £14.95/\$29.95.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1892), William James sidestepped some of the troubling implications of his own acute understanding of evolutionary theory by stressing not the truth of religious belief but the experience of it. James is an important point of reference in a monograph whose title picks up an antinomian tradition in American culture, dating back to the courtroom clash between the pragmatist, John Winthrop, Anne Hutchinson, the defender of an original, unmediated relationship with truth. 250 years later religion was still everywhere in the popular and elite culture of the United States. During the 1870s-1890s, religion socialised immigrants, underpinned social order and linked individual and national progress. Kristin Schwain comments on these sometimes blunt but occasionally subtle motives in the visual culture created by department stores, museums, world's fairs, and magazines. She is knowledgeable on the cultural context, and implicitly registers the role of religion as a "vanishing mediator" easing the passage to the modern, to recall Fredric Jameson's phrase in an essay on Max Weber, who might reasonably have been expected to figure in the conceptual infrastructure of *Signs of Grace*, as might Karl Marx on the ideology of icons and of one-point perspective. But Schwain is primarily interested in how the individual religious experience appears in the work of Thomas Eakins, Henry Ossawa Tanner, F. Holland Day, and Abbott Handerson Thayer. The chapter on Tanner is particularly welcome, given that he has, at last, received due recognition in a few recent exhibitions of American art. And the chapter on Eakins keeps the book in contact with the mainstream tradition of American art, as it engaged with European styles and forms, at least as we now know that tradition. It is one of the qualities of *Signs of Grace*, however, that we are shifted away from a view of nineteenth-century American art that does not inevitably lead to urban realism and modernist abstraction, but asks

us to look again at artists, two of whom we might otherwise hastily consign to what George Santayana called a backwater of gentility. Although the book consists primarily of four chapters, one on each of the above artists, Schwain skilfully brings out historical issues – race, ethnicity and gender – and theorisations of art and visuality by paying close attention to art-works, and the artists' own views of what they thought they were doing. Not surprisingly, Eakins is particularly useful in these respects, and his theories of perspective and signification are carefully integrated with the culture of the time. Schwain's is, then, a thoughtful account, and when she focuses on individual paintings in a book that makes maximum use of illustrations, she helps us grasp how aesthetics and modernisation intersect; and how the promise of salvation and the experience of art might have come together for Americans buffeted by change and in need of reassurance and compensation. "Experience", of course, remains both something we all have, yet cannot always agree upon.

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