A ``perspective of feeling'': The expressive interior in nineteenth century realist painting

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Abstract

The image of the interior seemed to be everywhere in nineteenth-century urban culture—in genre painting, photographs, popular illustrations, and pattern books. The most advanced novelists of the time used descriptions of their characters' settings to convey mood as well as social class; and in the domestic dramas of the new realist theater, the interior setting assumed the role of a protagonist. From around 1850 to the years just before World War I, a period of radical change in the history of painting coincided with the emergence of the idea of a private psychology. Historians of the nineteenth-century have shown that for the first time among the urban middle classes, there was a widespread, conscious need to experience an inner life. And it was a life thought to be at its most concentrated and authentic within the self-reflecting enclosure of the domestic interior. How and why new interior compositions were invented for the express purpose of conveying psychological effects is the subject of this dissertation. This study focuses on a coherent network of painters, writers and theorists who were concerned with psychologically-revealing interior imagery and encompasses works by Edgar Degas, James Whistler, James Tissot, John Singer Sargent, William Merritt Chase, Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard and Walter Sickert. Each chapter is organized around a principal artist and at least one literary counterpart, someone known directly to the artist, and in some cases a collaborator. These pairings, at once conceptual and social, include Degas and Louis-Emile Duranty, critic and theorist of realism, Sargent and Henry James and Edith Wharton, Vuillard and playwrights Maurice Maeterlinck and Henrik Ibsen, and Walter Sickert and Virginia Woolf. In broad terms, the dissertation offers a new way to understand the continuity within realism from 1860 until the years around World War I. All these painters viewed psychological authenticity as a basis for realism, and strove to convey it by inventing new compositional structures, which in turn became a shared set of conventions.

Subject Area

Fine Arts

Recommended Citation

Sidlauskas, Susan J. "A ``perspective of feeling'': The expressive interior in nineteenth century realist painting" (1989). Dissertations available from ProQuest AAI9004826. https://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI9004826