

Contemporary Christ in European painting from the second half of the nineteenth century

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ABSTRACT

In a nineteenth century of ideological, religious, and political upheaval, a number of European artists from the 1880s onward engaged anew with the Christ-like figure, which they set within the heart of Paris or the rural world. This phenomenon of *contemporaneization* was symptomatic of the the artistic, literary, and ideological displacements at work in pre-secessionist Europe. We will also attempt to respond to the question Zola asked regarding Jean-Charles Cazin's *Agar and Ismaël*: "Why take biblical subjects and dress them up in the modern manner?"



Léon-Augustin Lhermitte, *Among the Humble*, 1905, oil on canvas, H. 1.04, L. 0.90 m. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The rationalist seeds sown by the Enlightenment profoundly disrupted our relation to the world and religion. The positivist nineteenth century converted the very foundation of Christianity into a subject of investigation. For instance, the German theologian David Friedrich Strauss or the French thinker Ernest Renan published, in 1835 and 1863 respectively, two polemical rereadings of the life of Christ, which were narrated in a way that had nothing supernatural about them. At the same time, the construction of modern European nation states, and more particularly of republican and secular France, profoundly disrupted the social bond previously provided by religion, notably by postulating the separation of Church and State. In this confused context of a society in transformation, religious history painting seemed condemned to evolve in a permanent state of crisis, yet rather than disappear, European religious painting moved apace with the century. Artists from the orientalist to James Tissot adapted the rationalist project by endeavoring to carry out a historical reconstruction of the life of Jesus, while “religious genre painting” emphasized a shift in focus from the object of piety to the representation of piety itself. In the final years of the nineteenth century, the weakening of naturalism in favor of a vast idealist renaissance, along with the calming of relations between the Church and state, favored the return of traditional Christian iconography in a syncretic style. A number of painters thus attempted to engage anew with the figure of Christ, while at the same time preserving the gains of the international naturalism that had spread throughout Europe in the late 1870s. The structuring principle of this new religious painting overlaps with one of the five “revitalization strategies of Christian themes” defined by Julia Bernard, namely *contemporaneization*, which entailed “reconceptualizing their relevance for the present” by transplanting the Christ figure to the heart of the rural or urban nineteenth century.

Historians generally attributed the birth of this movement to Fritz von Uhde, one of the most popular German painters in the European artistic world of the 1880s. From his *Let the little children come to me* to *Flight into Egypt*, between 1885 and 1895 von Uhde accustomed the public to his simple transpositions of the life of Christ in rural settings borrowed from genre painting. The context of European artistic competition promoted by the cosmopolitanism that held sway in national salons and training workshops—along with the impact of universal exhibitions—contributed to the spread and reuse of successful forms endorsed by art critics and the public, such as the one initiated by von Uhde. His *contemporaneizations* even held official appeal, as Léonce Bénédict and the musée du Luxembourg, for instance, bought *Christ with the peasants* in 1893, which today is conserved at the musée d’Orsay. Amid this environment of a naturalism in crisis and a triumphant symbolism, painters trained at the school of Jules Bastien-Lepage stepped into the breach. 1892 was a major year for Christs in the salons of the young Société nationale des Beaux-Arts: from Léon Lhermitte’s *Friend of the Humble* to Jacques-Émile Blanche’s *The Host* or Jean Béraud’s *Descent from the Cross*, a series of naturalist Christs were transposed into contemporary settings. In June 1892, Edmond Potier pointed out in the *Gazette des beaux-arts* that “the same mysticism, endowed with more precise forms and dressed in the realist fashion, is currently striving to rejuvenate scenes from the *Gospel*, and to once again create religious painting.”

This is a typical example of a “cultural transfer” as defined by the historian Michel Espagne: “a deep transformation linked to the changing structure of the host space.” If the pictorial proposition formulated in Munich by von Uhde against a background of *Kulturprotestantismus* took root in Paris, it was precisely because it fulfilled the spiritual expectations of 1890s France, a country parched by the “intellectual chemistry” of Ernest Renan, and marked by a “thirst, an eternal thirst,” as the viscount of Vogüé wrote upon the death of the famous biographer of Jesus in 1892. Yet the very nature of these *contemporaneizations*—a Christian and naturalist updating of the old romantic project—grew from a desire to “re-enchant the world”: by introducing Christ in trivial daily life, it entailed immersing the ordinary within the extraordinary, and transcending the commonplace through an unexpected return to classical Christian iconography. In this respect, the recurring theme of the *Meal at Emmaus* was given priority by von Uhde, Lhermitte, and Blanche, as it allowed for presenting the entire range of contemporary reactions to this impromptu Christ by playing on the expressions of the guests.

Rather than expressing a desacralization, this “mystical naturalism”—to use Émile Zola’s expression—aligned itself with a “neo-Christian” movement that imposed itself at the same time in literature. In March 1892, Abbé Klein

published a brochure on *Le Mouvement néo-chrétien dans la littérature contemporaine*, in which he distinguished between two groups of “Christians of letters,” those who intended to spread the evangelical morals in contemporary society, and those who sought to adapt Christian morals to a secular state. Such a gap in intensity between two more or less assumed forms of Christian revival had repercussions in the very exercise of *contemporaneization*. While they all agreed on the non-historicity of Christ in order to provide the *Gospels* with their character of sacred legend, we can distinguish between different degrees of anachronism and different conjunctions of the Gospels from one painter to another.

Some played on the confrontation, without using any transition, between faith and reason, or the Bible and the century, going so far as to identify protagonists with contemporary personalities in an almost evangelical posture. This was notably the case for Béraud, who reinterpreted the *New Testament* in the heart of Hausmannian Paris, and who turned his polemical Christ in his *Madeleine chez le Pharisien* against a discredited Renan, as emphasized by Richard Thomson. On the other end of the spectrum, in a gradual elimination of traces of anachronism, artists altered the spectator’s temporal awareness so much that it created the illusion of a natural encounter between the Bible and the century. By placing Christ in the countryside for instance, von Uhde and Lhermitte preserved him in a distant and dreamed backcountry within a present exempted from the “modern,” a paradoxical present that in the eyes of the Parisian enthusiasts or professionals was characterized by his absence.

As a result, the geography of anachronism—between city and country, *center* and *periphery*—determined the success of the “neo-Christian” message presented by these painters. The dissimulated anachronism of von Uhde and Lhermitte succeeded in naturalizing the supernatural in order to express the atemporality of the Christian message, whereas Béraud’s excessive secularizations became the avowal of his own failure, despite earning him a *succès de scandale* and even a “Protest by Christ.”

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