



James Barry's Murals at the Royal Society of Arts: Envisioning a New Public Art

William L. Pressly

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Between 1777 and 1784, the Irish artist James Barry (1741-1806) executed six murals for the Great Room of the [Royal] Society of Arts in London. Although his works form the most impressive series of history paintings in Great Britain, they remain one of the British art world's best kept secrets, having attracted little attention from critics or the general public.

James Barry's Murals at the Royal Society of Arts is the first to offer an in-depth analysis of these remarkable paintings and the first to demonstrate that the artist was pioneering a new approach to public art in terms of the novelty of the patronage and the highly personal nature of his content.

Barry insisted on--and received--complete control over his subject matter, the first time in the history of Western art that the patron of a large, impressive interior agreed to such a demand. The artist required autonomy in order to present his personal vision, which encompasses a rich and complex surface narrative as well as a hidden meaning that has gone unperceived for 230 years. The artist disguised his deeper message due to its inflammatory nature. Were his meaning readily apparent, the Society would have thrown out him and his murals.

Ultimately, as this book seeks to show, the artist intended his paintings to engage the public in a dialogue that would utterly transform British society in terms of its culture, politics, and religion. In making this case, the book brings this neglected series into the mainstream of discussions of British art of the Romantic period, revealing the intellectual profundity invested in the genre of history painting and re-evaluating the role Christianity played in Enlightenment thought.

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