Towards Rehabilitating "Religious Art" in Eighteenth-Century England: Defending Raphael's Cartoons and Religious Images

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Abstract

Since the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century, religion had been out of tune with—or even hostile to—art in England. During the eighteenth century, new channels began to appear which made possible reuniting long-separated art and religion: the Raphael Cartoons, originally produced as Roman apologetics, became canonical for history painting in Protestant England, while religious imagery was defended by some Anglican clergymen who put forth arguments based on contemporary theories of painting. This article aims to explore the conceptual basis for this change and the significance of this re-introduction of "religious art" in England. It first examines the ways in which English commentators dealt with religious and artistic questions concerning the Raphael Cartoons, and then analyzes some clergymen's defences of religious images, prompted by certain controversies over the use of images in churches. Finally, it argues that a certain conception of truth in painting was formulated, which helped validated a discourse of artistic value of "religious images" in a new cultural framework.