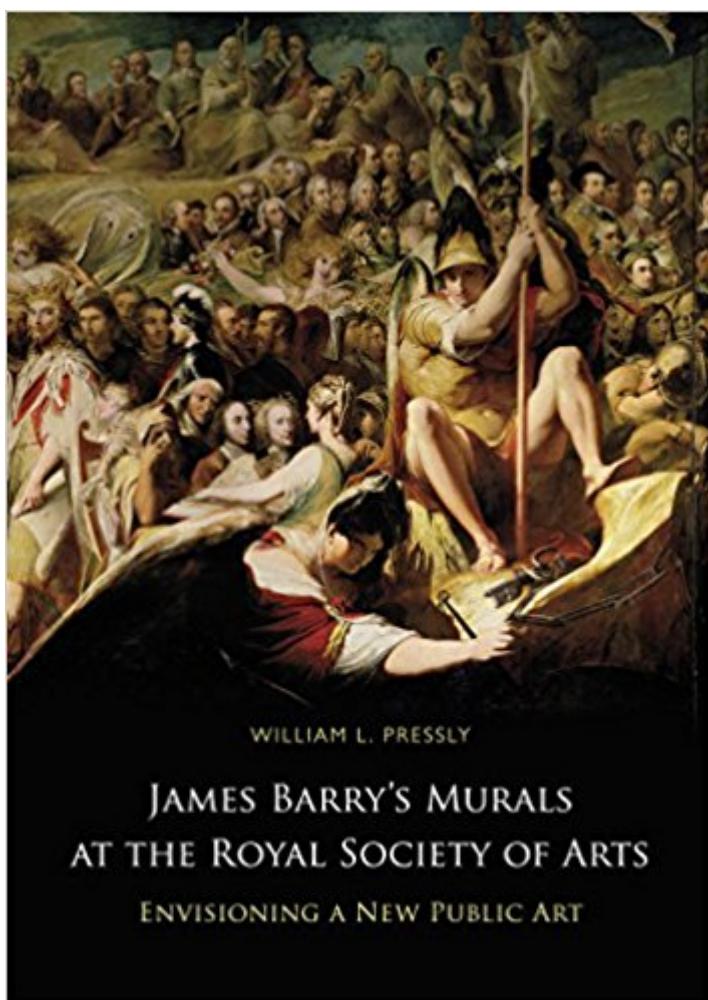


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James Barry's Murals At The Royal Society Of Arts: Envisioning A New Public Art



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

"Pressly's beautifully designed and illustrated monograph is an important book for a specialized audience. Pressly (Univ. of Maryland) is the foremost authority on this late-18th-century British history painter, and Barry's mural 'A Series of Pictures on Human Culture' is the artist's most significant work. Altogether the panels form a complex iconographic program in which the painter credits classical civilization and Christianity as the underpinnings of Great Britain's modern mercantile culture. It was the painter's expectation that the mural would "promote public welfare and virtue," thereby creating, according to Pressly, a "new public art." Recommended." (S. Webster, emerita, Lehman College and the Graduate Center, SUNY)"James Barry's Murals at the Royal Society of Arts: Envisioning a New Public Art by William L. Pressley...is an impressive 272 page compendium showcasing the life and art of one of Ireland's best and most original painters of his day. Flawlessly reproduced images enhanced a truly informed and informative commentary. The result is a work of superb scholarship and a very strongly recommended addition to academic library European Art History reference collections." (MidWest Book Review)"This is a great book. It does more than illuminate the past; it shines a light on our present way of thinking, and not just about culture. At the very least, anyone with an eye will want to look at it because it's a beautiful object. The illustrations will surprise many into wondering why it is they are seeing Cork-born James Barry's masterpieces for the first time." (Irish Times)"Pressly's elucidation of Barry's intentions is absolutely convincing and magisterial. Pressly's erudition in locating Barry's literary and artistic sources is unfailing, and he has a profound understanding of the artist's creative processes. Perhaps it is this unswerving but, in these times, unfashionable commitment to 'artistic intention' that explains the book's initial, scarcely credible vicissitudes at the hands of publishers; fortunately, on sight of the text the university press in Barry's home town had no qualms, and they are to be warmly congratulated on having lavished on the volume the production values that it fully deserves. Amid so much merely fashionable writing, this is proper art history, living in and recovering the past, enriching our understanding of the way artists thought in a way that very few recent books on 18th-century British art can claim to have done." (The Art Newspaper)

William L. Pressly is Professor of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century European Art at the University of Maryland. He is the author of *James Barry: The Life and Art of James Barry* (Yale University Press, 1981) and *James Barry: the Artist as Hero* (Tate Gallery, 1983).

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