

Reprinted with permission from:

FineArtConnoisseur

800.610.5771 or International 011-561.655.8778.

[CLICK TO SUBSCRIBE](#)

HISTORIC MASTERS

When Comedy Went to Church: 19th-Century Cardinal Paintings

BY BILL RAU



Comedy and the Roman Catholic Church have rarely crossed paths in history. For centuries, clergymen commissioned portraits exuding dignity and reverence, the qualities they sought to define their public image. With the Church's inner workings hidden behind closed doors, the public felt only awe for the clerics in these grand portraits. In the late 19th century, however, a small but talented group of Continental European artists brought the public into those sequestered chambers, revealing clerics' human side through the unique, short-lived genre of "Cardinal Paintings."

CHANGES EVERYWHERE

Late in the 18th century, the shroud of secrecy that had long enveloped the Catholic Church began to slip. In France, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes altered all of society's pillars, including the Church, toward which feelings of awe and reverence were replaced by doubt and mistrust. Were cardinals, bishops, priests, and monks as devout as their portraits suggested, or were they the same as everyone else, succumbing occasionally to petty foibles?

The Church responded by shuttering itself even more thoroughly to reinforce its aura of power, particularly under Pope Pius IX, the longest-serving pontiff in history (1846-78). In 1869 he convened the First Vatican Council, which produced the decree of Papal Infallibility. This meant that the Pope's stance on all moral and religious matters would thereafter be unassailable. This was exactly what most Europeans did not want, however: they wished to glimpse the humanity of their clergy, rather than its superiority. Their questions remained unanswered, and doubts continued to swell.

The art world also felt the effects of the trend toward skepticism. Early in the 19th century, art had been revered, essentially governed by the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where the annual Salon exhibition could make or break an artist's career. To succeed in this hier-



JEHAN-GEORGES VIBERT (1840-1902)

THE DIET

N.D., OIL ON CANVAS, 28 3/4 X 23 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION



GEORGES CROEGAERT (1848-1923)

TUNING THE VIOLIN

N.D., OIL ON PANEL, 10 ⁵/₈ X 8 ⁵/₈ IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

enjoy the fair's spectacles. Historicizing narratives had been replaced with snapshots of humanity that everyone could discuss, and which many more viewers could afford. As it happened, the blossoming of this type of painting coincided with unprecedented challenges to the Catholic Church, leading directly to the rise of Cardinal Paintings.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

This school's leaders, the Frenchman Jehan-Georges Vibert (1840-1902) and the Belgian Georges Croegaert (1848-1923), began their careers as talented painters of conventional genre scenes. In turning to depictions of the clergy, their message was simple: although clerics deserved both respect and prestige, they nevertheless fell victim to the same foibles as everyone else. The painters' aim was not to offend or belittle the clergy or its supporters, but to offer a light-hearted look at the daily trials with which anyone might become preoccupied.

This is the theme of Vibert's superb *The Diet*. Its focus is a cardinal, one of the Church's pillars of strength, gazing heavenward for the resolve to abstain from the culinary temptations passing his door. The placement of his foot on a pillow suggests he suffers from gout, an ailment aggravated by too many rich foods and alcoholic drinks.



GEORGES CROEGAERT (1848-1923)

A PINCH OF SNUFF

N.D., OIL ON PANEL, 18 X 14 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

archical milieu, students were encouraged to paint grand scenes from mythology, history, or classical literature. Mastering such subjects made acceptance to the Salon likely, yet did not guarantee that one's work would actually be seen. The walls of the Salon were packed from floor to ceiling with a jigsaw pattern of paintings, so praise came most readily to monumental canvases depicting momentous scenes from the golden past.

This began to change in the 1830s, as artists realized popularity was best when allied with profitability. Middle-class Europeans were earning enough to purchase luxury goods for their homes, yet few could afford a typically massive composition from the Salon. Even if they could, where would they display it? The average parlor could not comfortably accommodate a Salon work measuring 60 square feet. Moreover, investing in a classicizing scene was risky: the only embarrassment worse than not knowing the classical narrative playing out in your own parlor would be your guests not recognizing it either.

Realizing that substantial profits were to be made in middle-class parlors, most artists shifted from grand themes toward anecdotal scenes of everyday life, painted in more modest sizes. By mid-century, this had become the norm, with artists exploring a multitude of genres in which they could tell a little story or make a little joke to engage the viewer.

Like earlier World's Fairs, Paris's *Exposition Universelle* of 1867 overflowed with genre paintings, which entertained the masses coming to



The same playful tone is found in Croegaert's works, a prime example being *Tuning the Violin*. The title leads us to expect the delicate tweaking of an instrument, but instead we find a cardinal engaged in a pitched battle with its strings, his facial expression a blend of intense dedication and frustration.

The impact of such paintings was immediate. For the first time, audiences could relate to their clergymen, enlightened by the fact that men of God also enjoyed and despised activities unassociated with religion. What's more, the cardinals were not necessarily good at these pastimes. The battle with the violin might remind a parent of his child's first music lesson, while the temptation of the gout-ridden cardinal could resonate with anyone who had ever struggled to lose weight.

TECHNICAL VIRTUOSITY

What made these paintings even more engaging was their undeniable beauty. Vibert and Croegaert shared a gift for rendering textures, lights, and shadows with striking verisimilitude. In Croegaert's *A Pinch of Snuff*, the parquetry behind the cardinal glistens as if just varnished, set off by the deep aubergine wall coverings to convey a scene simultaneously opulent and relaxed.

Croegaert's attention to detail was so complete, in fact, that he often used single-hair mink brushes. If one just imagines the visual acuity and steady hands necessary to paint such subtle highlights and sheens with a single hair, surely one must rank Croegaert among the 19th century's top technicians.

To grasp Vibert's attention to detail, one need only study his *Fortune Teller*. The extraordinarily intricate patterns and textures he conveys with such accuracy — from the Oriental rug in the foreground to the stained glass windows beyond — reflect his outstanding draftsmanship. This exactitude carries over to his props, as well: Vibert owned more than 50 ecclesiastical robes, which he studied closely.

Perhaps the most striking element of Cardinal Paintings is the vivid red color of the prelates' robes, an effect difficult to achieve. Build-

ing up such rich, deep hues requires layer upon layer of oil paint, each of which must dry before a new one is added. Over several days, Vibert created a tone so distinctive it is still called "Vibert's red."^[1] His virtuosity was complemented by his inventiveness, through which he pioneered new techniques and varnishes to heighten visual impact. Inspired by the burgeoning medium of photography, Vibert sometimes treated his canvases with a photo-reactive gesso.^[2] This allowed the forms projected onto the canvas to develop on the surface, making it easier for him to record their intricate details in oils.

Given their charm and cleverness, it is no surprise that Cardinal Paintings became incredibly popular. Even the great academician Jean-Léon Gérôme dabbled in the genre, causing a stir at the Salon when he won top honors for *L'Éminence Grise*. Soon, the circle of Cardinal Painters expanded to include Frenchmen François and Marcel Brunery, then the Italian Andrea Landini. The circle did not grow much further, however, primarily because of the exactitude required to excel in this genre. Known throughout Europe, this clique ultimately attracted attention in North America early in the 20th century: all it took was one particularly endearing painting by Vibert, one depicting Napoleon Bonaparte with the Pope.

BRINGING NAPOLEON TO EARTH

At the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904, Vibert was represented posthumously by one of his late works, *Planning Napoleon's Coronation* (see page 39). A key event in French history, this occasion was usually depicted with pomp and majesty. Ever the innovator, Vibert approached it from a different angle, examining the humorous antics that preceded the event and creating a masterpiece in the process.

JEHAN-GEORGES VIBERT (1840-1902)
THE FORTUNE TELLER
 N.D., OIL ON CANVAS, 27 X 40 IN.
 COLLECTION FRED AND SHERRY ROSS

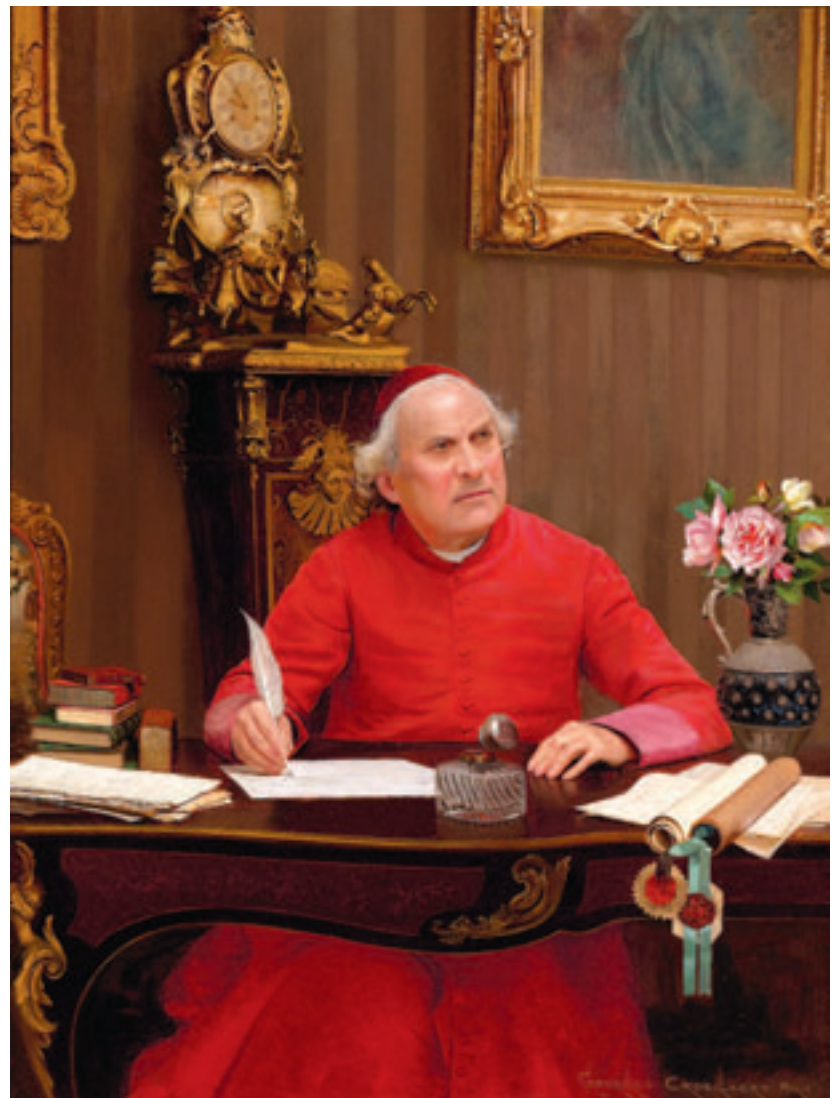


JEAN-LÉON GÉRÔME (1824-1904)
L'ÉMINENCE GRISE
 1873, OIL ON CANVAS, 27 x 39 ³/₄ IN.
 MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Once Napoleon had decided to crown himself Emperor, he assigned responsibility for designing the celebration to his wife, Josephine. She passed it to her friend, the designer and artist Jean-Baptiste Isabey. He began sketching ideas, but soon realized Napoleon wanted a more definitive plan. With only a week left, Isabey hurried around Paris purchasing every doll he could find, then dressed the dolls in mock-ups of the coronation costumes. He then spent hours negotiating with Napoleon, moving dolls around a floorplan of Paris's Cathedral of Notre Dame, finally striking upon an impressive choreography that remains legendary even now.

This is the unusual episode Vibert highlights in *Planning Napoleon's Coronation*. Executed on a modestly sized canvas, it admits us to a grand salon where we behold Napoleon hastily moving the dolls around the unfurled floorplan. Isabey kneels before him, reaching out with more dolls for Napoleon's use. The powerless Pope sits watching them as Josephine gazes into the distance, clearly bored. Two red-robed cardinals stand behind Napoleon, totally ignored. Instead of a model of decorum, Napoleon comes off as a petulant child skirmishing with his equally young friend, while the Pope is re-cast as a bemused father figure. When Americans saw this work, they fell in love with its humanity. Instead of a stodgy spectacle with which hardly anyone can identify, Vibert offers child's play, a humorous take on history that also makes Napoleon more accessible. At St. Louis, *Planning Napoleon's Coronation* was immediately hailed as a highlight and became an international success.

GEORGES CROEGAERT (1848-1923)
A LETTER
 N.D., OIL ON PANEL, 13 ³/₄ x 10 ¹/₄ IN.
 PRIVATE COLLECTION



END OF AN ERA

The age of Cardinal Paintings was not a long one, ending with the lives of its leading exponents early in the 20th century. While there is no way of knowing exactly how Roman Catholic leaders perceived these gentle comedies, it is intriguing to note the changes in Church practices that coincided with them. Early in his papacy, Leo XIII tried to undo Pius's edicts favoring Church secrecy, even opening Church archives to the public for the first time. Moreover, by 1900, fewer clergymen were sitting for elaborate portraits, and some even resorted to photography to speed up the process.

Setting aside their institutional impact, Cardinal Paintings offer unique insights into 19th-century European history, along with a playful cleverness and technical virtuosity that entertain and impress even today. ■

BILL RAU is a member of the third generation of his family to run M.S. Rau Antiques (rauantiques.com), a leading gallery based in New Orleans.

Editor's Note: This article is adapted from the author's forthcoming book on 19th-century European painting. His volume will contain chapters devoted to such topics as the Barbizon School, sporting art, Pre-Raphaelitism, Impressionism, and Venetian views. Closing each chapter will be brief biographies of the genre's leading artists.

1 As quoted in the obituary "Vibert the Artist, Dead," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1902.

2 Eric M. Zafran, *Cavaliers and Cardinals: Nineteenth-Century French Anecdotal Paintings*, Cincinnati: Taft Museum of Art, 1992.

JEHAN-GEORGES VIBERT (1840-1902)

PLANNING NAPOLEON'S CORONATION

N.D., OIL ON CANVAS, 15 3/4 X 23 3/8 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

