

Form and Integrity

Jack Harrell

I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE AN ARTIST. Somehow I thought that meant that I had to live like an artist—to find a lifestyle and an art form that is consistent with the ideals I want to express.

I grew up in Parkersburg, Illinois, a town of about 250 people in the southeastern part of the state. My parents, grandparents, and some of my aunts and uncles were self-taught folk musicians and artists. I grew up loving art, though I never had any formal training.

When I was fourteen, I began to teach myself to play the guitar. Every day after school, I practiced on my bed in front of my amplifier. I read rock-n-roll magazines and album covers to learn everything I could about rock music. Before long, some friends and I formed a band of our own. We tried to be honest about who we were. We even wrote our own songs, trying to establish an individual voice. Everything we did, from the tennis shoes and t-shirts we wore to the old Chevy I drove, reflected our feelings about music.

However, as I saw the forces that moved some bands to the top, I began to feel that money corrupted music. Record producers seemed especially guilty of promoting only the bands that would sell. I mistrusted any influence business had on music. Many of my opinions came from the songs I listened to. "Piggies," by the Beatles, likened businessmen to pigs who stir up dirt and "go out for dinner with their piggy wives / Clutching forks and knives / To eat the bacon." Pink Floyd's 1975 "Have a Cigar" tells of a greedy record executive who takes a sudden interest in an upstart band. In one verse, the executive says:

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We're just knocked out.
 We heard about the sell-out.
 You gotta get an album out,
 You owe it to the people.
 We're so happy we can hardly count.
 And did we tell you the name of the game, boy,
 We call it Riding the Gravy Train.

Songs like these made me cynical about anyone who wore a suit and tie and represented the business world.

By the time I was eighteen, I often talked with my friends about the evils of commercial music aimed at the lowest common denominator of intelligence. My attitude may have been narrow, but it was what I believed: If it's on the radio—don't listen to it! I had a vision of what rock-n-roll should be like. I believed in what I thought was “art for art's sake,” that a musician's personal voice should never be restricted for commercial advantage or to fit some kind of model, and that even “established” musicians had to guard against stagnation within their own niche.

I realize now why I admired certain rock groups so much: they'd found an art form that was true to their lifestyle. The sound of their music, the way they dressed, and their personal values all created a consistent expression. While I didn't always agree with their standards of morality, I could see that their music had a kind of integrity. It was true to itself.

When I was nineteen, I moved to Vernal, Utah, where my sister's family lived. Work in the oil fields there was plentiful, and I wanted to get out on my own. Again I started a band. In time I came in contact with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Vernal, and I was baptized two weeks after my twenty-first birthday. After that I played with my band at a few parties, but I began to feel out of place performing at beer parties and bars. It was especially difficult for me to change my old habits while working with people who were drinking, smoking, and using drugs. Finally I quit the band and prepared to go on a mission.

As a new convert to the Church, I was full of enthusiasm. I read every book on Mormon doctrine I could find time for. My desire for knowledge about life and the gospel was very strong, but I faced a dilemma: how to appropriately express my new feelings about the gospel and my new perspective on life. At first I wondered if I should give up the guitar altogether. A well-meaning older man, whose family had fellowshipped me during my first months in the Church, nearly convinced me that any music with a drumbeat was immoral. I

composed a few songs on the acoustic guitar; but I had been emotionally uprooted, and nothing I wrote felt right.

While helping at the church farm that summer, I met someone who gave me an article from *BYU Today* about problems facing LDS artists. Though I no longer remember the author or the title, I do remember the ideas expressed. The article pointed out that art is often born of sorrow resulting from sin or misconduct. Many, perhaps most, Latter-day Saints don't want to admit that sin and misconduct are a part of our lives. Counting our blessings may make us feel better, but it doesn't always make great art. I agreed. The article only reinforced my anxiety about the connections between Christian life and art.

I served a mission, then married and attended two Utah community colleges. My wife, Cindy, and I bought a multitrack recorder that enabled me to record the songs I'd written. I could record several guitar, bass, and vocal tracks onto one tape and do a one-man-band kind of thing. I had fun with this, but it didn't seem to be leading me anywhere. I wasn't interested in becoming a part of the LDS popular music industry; I had never liked the "easy listening" pop music that their songs are styled after. I was also uncomfortable with the casual way in which they dealt with sacred things. I didn't want to start another rock-n-roll band because I knew the commitment in time and money would not be worth the outcome. However, I had become very interested in writing and literature, so I enrolled at Brigham Young University as an English major.

At BYU, I was inspired by President Spencer W. Kimball's speech, "The Gospel Vision of the Arts" (1977). He said that a great artistic movement could grow out of the restoration of the gospel. I also began reading the writings of Flannery O'Connor. I knew that if O'Connor's strong Catholic voice could be recognized and appreciated by the secular world, there was hope for LDS artists, too.

In the university environment, I made friends who were also interested in art. Todd Stilson, a member of my ward, was working on a degree in fine art. Together we looked over the paintings and drawings in an issue of the *Ensign*. He explained that most paintings in the *Ensign* are really illustrations, designed to give an immediate and clear message. I learned that illustrations don't stand up to additional viewings; once you've got the message, there is nothing more to be gleaned.

Another friend, Ken, who worked at the grocery store where I had taken a part-time job, had a bachelor's degree from BYU in theater and drama. I had lengthy discussions with Ken about art, philosophy, religion, and LDS society. He was passionate and often harsh in expressing his point; and because he had recently been through a very painful divorce, he was cynical about a lot of comfortable LDS traditions. He

would say things like, “The Church promotes ignorance and mediocrity in culture and art”; “The gospel admonition to not be of the world is fulfilled by the members shunning secular learning”; “The Church has accepted the gospel of the American dream and exalts the commonplace”; or “LDS bookstores are filled with poorly written prose by Church authorities and the spiritual wet dreams of writers of popular Mormon fiction.”

I usually defended the Church, saying we should be hopeful and give other members the benefit of the doubt, if for no other reason than because being too critical of fellow saints seemed wrong. Ken insisted that this attitude only fostered their mediocrity. At times I would think to myself, “Ken is on the road to apostasy; don’t let him drag you down too! Just forget it. You know how he talks. He gets so angry, he couldn’t have the right spirit about him.” On the other hand, I wanted to deal with this conflict. I wanted to know the truth. After talking to Ken, I would struggle all day with what he had said — trying to refute his arguments, trying to understand what he had said, trying to find out what was right.

Sundays were not the same. Everything I heard and saw at church now seemed shallow. I wanted people to tell the truth, not sugar-coat reality. Even the cover of my priesthood manual irritated me. The illustration of the young, biblical Daniel turning down the meat and wine offered by the king by holding up his hand in a halting motion reduced the simple honesty of Daniel’s example to a trite, sentimental message.

I began wondering: If this is the Lord’s church, why don’t we want to tell the truth? Why does the official Church foster art without conflict, when conflict is an integral part of our growth toward salvation? Why do we act like the key to salvation is merely to ignore anything evil or unpleasant, when evil is all around us, and inside us, and is the opposition against which we work out our salvation? Is the truth simply that the world’s standards are evil, even when it comes to good art? Can an artist please the world and God at the same time, or does the very nature of telestial life prevent that? Why do we feel that artists who acknowledge doubt, immorality, and sin are risking their salvation?

While reading an interview with Hugh Nibley, I found mention of a BYU master of fine arts thesis written by Lori Schlinker entitled *Kitsch in the Visual Arts and Advertisements of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1971). “Kitsch,” a German word, describes art that is of low quality, unoriginal, and sentimental. The thesis focused on the way Mormons and other Christians debase Christ and his mission through cheap artistic representations. I began to realize that kitsch is not just an LDS phenomenon, but a universal problem.

The United States is a good breeding ground for kitsch art. Our democratic politics and our laissez-faire economics exalt the commonplace and the profitable. Nineteenth-century American immigrants were often poor, uneducated people looking for a better life. Blending in the "melting pot," these individuals produced a culture rich in individuality but poor in traditional artistic standards.

If the United States of the nineteenth century was the "dumping ground of Europe," as one of my political science teachers termed it, what was the LDS Church? The early Church was the outcast of the United States! The Prophet Joseph was murdered, and the Saints were sent into exile in the desert. Artisans were sprinkled among the early Saints, and some fine architecture and crafts were produced under Brigham Young, but the principle business of the Saints was simply survival in a harsh and unfamiliar land.

Although the early Church's attitude toward America could be typified as "Zion against Babylon," political and economic concerns led the Church in the early twentieth century to officially and unofficially seek the approval of the American people. This meant capitalism, not cooperatives, and a host of American values. By the 1960s and 1970s, Mormonism and Americanism had converged.

As a result, many members of the Church have placed little value on a responsible attitude toward art. They don't realize that art is more than just entertainment. Latter-day Saints could use art to help them live the gospel. In accordance with our reverence for the earth, we could learn to value the materials of the environment. By crafting and buying things that will be long-lasting, functional, and beautiful, we could promote quality craftsmanship in our communities, develop our aesthetic senses, and have more joy in the atmosphere of our homes. As we each consider the struggles of living the standards of the gospel in a telestial world, we could tell the truth about the joys and sorrows of discipleship. After all, what house built on half-truths has ever stood? Actualizing a culture like this would make us a peculiar people indeed.

The spirit that troubled me after my conversations with Ken is gone now. It has only been a few months, but I can hardly remember the pain I felt. My thinking has not changed. I still believe that we deny reality, that we try to drown evil with a flood of sentimentality; but I don't feel bad about thinking that way now. Maybe it's because I've given up my naive, false beliefs about the total accuracy of the LDS world view. Or maybe I've only accepted the standards of the world.

I do know that the questions I've asked are at the heart of Mormonism. God has intentionally placed us here on an earth where we can come in contact with good and evil. We have the chance to taste

the bitter and the sweet so we will know which to prize. When I joined the Church, conflict did not end for me; it began. I was living easy outside the Church, because I could always find a way to escape. Now, in the Church, I have chosen to face conflicts, make sober decisions, and deal with the consequences.

While I'm still baffled about appropriate kinds of musical styles for LDS expression, I have learned a lot about the literature of the Latter-day Saints. In my literature classes at BYU, I've read volumes depicting the LDS experience in honest, inspiring, faithful, and sometimes even painful ways. For me, literature is the best place to begin to study and learn about art and life and Christianity. I now know that many good things are happening in LDS art, more than what can be found at Deseret Book or in the *Ensign*.

Distinguishing between art produced or commissioned by the Church and art produced by individual members is also necessary. When commissioning art, the Church's goal is to convert and strengthen, so Church-commissioned art is bound to be didactic. Expecting the *Ensign* to be an artistic magazine is wrong. Expecting the General Authorities to write fine literature is wrong. As individual members work on their own to discover the Spirit, they may make mistakes with their art (being either too didactic or too risqué); but with effort and patience, these mistakes will work themselves out.

I have not completely worked out my feelings about art and the Church. What line separates a truthful depiction of evil from a glorification of it? Where do sexuality, nudity, or profanity fit in art, if at all? Perhaps these questions have no absolute answers. Perhaps the Spirit dictates differently in each individual situation.

Even though I question, I still have a testimony of the gospel vision of the arts. I believe in Orson F. Whitney's words, "We shall yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own" (in Cracroft and Lambert 1979, 32). The gospel of Jesus Christ is rich enough to enable those who have received it to reveal further light and knowledge in the form of literature, music, and other arts that can bring truth, beauty, and understanding to the lives of all people. Good art always does something to help us understand life, and I think that those who know God can understand life better.

Whether I will become the artist that I hope to be, or just provide encouragement from the sidelines, I know that President Kimball's words will be fulfilled: great works of art *will* come from the Latter-day Saints someday. I believe that "praiseworthy" art will be produced in our future—art that praises God, enlightens humankind, and wins the praise of people outside and inside the Church.