



ART AND THE CHURCH

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*It is through the performance of creative
arts, in art, in thought in personal
relationships that the city can be identified
as something more than a purely
functional organization . . .*

—Lewis Mumford

Perhaps it is presumptuous to discuss the relationship of the arts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Some would question that there need be a relationship, but due to the personal nature of religious experience and the personal nature of art, there is a natural relationship. Religious experience involves the same senses as artistic experience and they both involve a level of communication that can exceed the verbal form.

It might appear overdramatic to discuss the need for emotional experience in our religious services in this 20th century. I do not speak of emotional experience in a therapeutic context. For example, weekly religious experience is directly related to the environment in which we worship. The depth of involvement and attitude is affected by the church setting. In Arlington, Virginia, there is a simple and yet magnificent Unitarian church. As you sit in beautiful, austere space, you look up and out. The structure itself demands that you lift yourself up to the space in which you reside. You look into a beautiful wooded area with long thin straight trees. This church, architecturally, gives you a feeling of eternity and a feeling of oneness with the universe. It is a religious experience in itself merely to be in that place.

There has recently been a rebirth of interest in the arts by other religious groups. Consequently, there has been a change in their services and the congregations are now participants rather than observers. Drama and dance are sometimes employed as part of the Sunday service. A religious message is communicated through the dramatic performance of a well-rehearsed and mature play or dance. Films, prepared slides, and other media are used to emphasize the religious text. The preacher-sermon concept is changing.

Any emphasis given to the arts in the Mormon Church is related to the auxiliaries and is usually performed outside the chapel. Dance, for example, is considered a recreational (social and physical) tool rather than an art form worthy of use in the worship service. In many ways we fall short in artistic achievement and the understanding of the relevance of art to religious experience.

As a dancer, choreographer, and teacher, I find a profession in dance most exhilarating and challenging. As with all arts, my career is not without its periods of discouragement and disenchantment. In dance the demand for the technical control of the instrument and the total awareness of the body in motion is a constant, demanding reality. The discipline required of the finely tuned, responsive instrument is only one factor. There is the discovery of style and personal aesthetics that one must labor for continually. There is the communication through motion and theatre that gives me continual challenge.

As a Mormon, I feel some handicaps in my creative art. My habit of seeing only the good, pleasant, lovely, and nice in the world clashes with the reality surrounding me. Sometimes I feel slightly removed from the mainstream of secular life in attitude and perception. What I see and do is not always pertinent to the society around me. On the other hand, as a dancer and choreographer "in the world," I am somewhat removed from the mainstream of Mormon society. Many of the Mormon activities seem irrelevant. I have a tendency to "tune out" creatively.

It is interesting that I do not lack for ideas when approaching concert works in dance, choreography for television, or other commissioned works for conferences and conventions, but when approached to compose a dance or two for a church program, I draw a blank. What can I do artistically that would be acceptable to the Church and to me? What can I do that all will appreciate? Why do I immediately become pedestrian in my thinking? My faltering is not due entirely to the level of ability or lack of devotion of the performers with whom I would be working, or the lack of financial investment for costumes, etc. It goes deeper than that. Working daily in situations in which I have total responsibility and artistic independence makes the usual art by committee approach in the Church seem in comparison unfulfilling and a waste of time and talent.

What is done for professional theatre has relevance for the membership of the Church and should be equally acceptable and meaningful, but if data received by my senses are correct, it may be some time before we begin to approach or even to seek that level. We Mormons make the same error as

the television networks by underestimating our audience and continuing to program for the adolescent or the "average person."

Worship takes many forms. We can communicate on a variety of levels through various media. The level of worship is often greater when the ward joins together in song or group scripture reading than during a prepared talk. We have long been aware of the spiritual unification of the membership through congregational singing. We all find relief in the silence for meditation during the passage of the sacrament. Consider a sacrament meeting that would begin with the prelude organ music, open with prayer, continue directly into congregational singing, passing of the sacrament, speaker, and conclude with the closing prayer without an announcement or explanation or apology. This in itself might be compared to the use of drama in our services. An over-emphasis on professionalism in our Church would be disturbing and would destroy some of the beautiful simplicity we attain. However, we should constantly update our procedure for maximum value in our religious services.

It is good to remember that art for the professional is not a casual pastime. It is a very personal matter. The artist has devoted his life to this work. He must maintain integrity in his art. His standards are high. A compromise in quality for him is similar to a compromise in principles.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ contains a design for molding the individual. There is a demand for conformity, a demand for order and an obedience to law. Fortunately the pattern is not so strict that we must mold into one shape and one posture, into one color and one design. We are given guidelines by which we become the eternal personality of which we are now the embryo. These guidelines indicate a pattern that allows the creative intelligence within us to excel and grow. This conformity should not be confused with loss of identity or loss of individuality — the grey mediocre mass. Mediocrity occurs only if we lose the courage to think diversely; if we lose the willingness and ability to entertain new ideas, to accept all men; if we close our minds to new relationships, and if we become blind to the vision of other men's minds.

There is a very fertile and as yet untilled soil in Mormon artists and Mormon art. Consideration must be given as to how to enlarge the talents of the professional artist, how to promote art appreciation, and how to promote religious art that is representative of or meaningful to the Church of Jesus Christ in these latter days.

These questions hold special relevance for the "Urban Mormon." With a little imagination, the resources of the city can offer a rich supplement to our activities in Primary, MIA, and Relief Society. This city environment may call for more individualized curricula in our auxiliaries and more flexibility in the structure. We should attempt to avoid the duplication of activities that can more beneficially be handled by someone else or some other organization. We should be concerned about sponsoring events and activities unique to the Church of Jesus Christ and the needs of the membership. For example: Since in almost all urban situations there is abundant opportunity for members to act with local theatre groups, and our church stages are not designed for theatre production, we should not devote time and energy to

drama unless the play is written by a Mormon for specific Mormon consumption. (This does not include drama activity at the classroom level.) Good theatre is not, generally, a once-a-year affair.

The social attitude toward the arts is changing both in society and in the Church. The arts are now used as a primary teaching tool for young children, as a therapeutic instrument for the handicapped and culturally deprived, as a means for personal pleasure and expression, and as a respectable profession.

Two recent events in the Church were most encouraging to the visual arts. Art Fairs were sponsored with the membership contributing their individual art works. Perhaps with this encouragement and sanction by the Church more artists will emerge. Perhaps more religious art will be produced and in time be recognized. This is not the level of commitment given historically by churches in the commissioning of art, but it is a beginning. Our retarded steps toward the visual arts may be due to the lack of ritual and pageantry in the Church and our instinct to avoid the appearance of graven images. Personally, I see no relationship between these things and art expression.

The city is to live in. The arts today are in the city. With the emergence of the Urban Mormon, perhaps we will see the emergence of art more reflective of Mormon doctrine and culture. The demands of art are not impossibly severe and are not inconsistent with the purposes of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Art that clarifies and awakens is a rare and priceless thing. The Mormon artist is a rare and creative intelligence.

