MAHONRI YOUNG AND THE CHURCH: A VIEW OF MORMONISM AND ART

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Mahonri Young was perhaps Mormonism's most noted artist in the first half of the twentieth century. Highly individualistic and creative, he produced much of the famous sculpture that is most highly revered by Mormons today, including the magnificent statue of his grandfather, Brigham Young, which now stands in the rotunda of the national capitol in Washington D.C. At the same time, Young was not particularly active in the Church and found himself distressed by certain policies and restrictions which, he felt, affected not only his art but the general cultural heritage of the Mormon people. The following article is an attempt to present with understanding the perspective of one artist who tried to preserve the Mormon heritage as he understood it.

> "Mahonri Young belongs among . . . those who are of the strain of Michelangelo, Titian, Rubens, Goya, Renoir and Millet. I say at once that he is a rare sculptor in America and one of that little band that is putting life and vitality into an empty shell which has been made so long to represent American sculpture."
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> — *Guy Pene Dubois*

So much of Utah's early history has religious significance that the artist attempting to preserve its heritage has often found himself interpreting people and events of some concern to the Mormon Church. To the truly creative artist, dealing with a vested interest group such as a church in interpreting history and life through art can be frustrating. Mutual cooperation can lead to great artistic achievements which otherwise would go uncreated for lack of interest and funding.

An artist of the first half of the twentieth century who worked intimately with the Mormon Church in attempting to interpret Mormon history was Mahonri Mackintosh Young. During a career which spanned some fifty years, Young won several national and international awards as a sculptor and etcher, presented numerous retrospective exhibitions, and was elected to prestigious national societies. Young's works are on display in the nation's most illustrious galleries. In a 1912 review entitled "The Bronzes of Mahonri Young," J. Lester Lewine gave the following estimation of his artistry:

> His work was distinguished by nobility and breadth of conception. It often displayed a close and conscientious observation of nature and evidenced a predilection for virile form and "plastic lines" of great beauty and power. Critics praised him for creating "complete works of art," works which few artists were capable of matching in so far as being "significant and telling." He was also noted as a very versatile artist with wide sympathy which responded to much in nature and the human condition.[1]

Although Utah-born and raised and a grandson of Brigham Young, Mahonri did not create Mormon art from religious motivation. He dropped out of Church activity as a teenager and as an adult did not observe the Word of Wisdom, attend church, or contribute financially to the Church. He confessed that religion left him hollow,[2] even though he did admire some Church leaders and did identify with the Utah pioneer heritage. His lack of commitment to Mormonism did not, however, retard his sometimes strenuous efforts to gain art commissions from the Church. His first Church-sponsored project was the statue of Joseph Smith, Jr., which, along with that of Hyrum Smith, now stands on Temple Square in Salt Lake City. This commission presented a challenge which would not only demonstrate Young's creative talent, but would also symbolize the frustrations often faced by artists as they confront the necessity of earning a livelihood and the disconcerting dilemma of having their creative work closely supervised by non-artists who hold the purse strings.

A plaster cast of Joseph Smith's face, made shortly after his death, was deposited with Young by the First Presidency of the Church, to be used in preparing a clay bust.[3] He soon completed "a very good likeness,"[4] which he hoped would earn him the commission for the full statue. Since he was in need

of work and was soon to marry, he was very anxious to secure the commission of $4,800.[5] The Church, however, felt compelled to be cautious with its limited funds.

The general authorities eventually authorized President Joseph F. Smith to contract with the artist to construct a cast. Because Young desired modified terms from those initially offered, the negotiations took what seemed to him an interminable time, but "in his greatest hour of need," President Smith finally commissioned him to do the life-sized cast of Joseph under a contract providing him with $150 a month for a twelve month period.[6]

The casting was done under what the artist felt were "adverse circumstances."[7] Due to the absence of a suitable studio, he modeled the cast in his dining room. He also maintained that the clay, plaster, and casters available in Utah were totally unsatisfactory.[8] After all this, Church authorities did not like the cast and insisted on alterations before it could be bronzed. In sheer desperation, Young offered to construct a new cast at no expense to the Church if the Church in turn would give him a contract for a $4,500 companion piece of Joseph's brother, Hyrum. He also suggested that he should complete the figures in a city where facilities were more convenient and better suited for productive work.[9]

Church leaders granted approval for the two statues but were unyielding in their insistence that the figures be modeled in Salt Lake City where the work could be closely scrutinized. As an alternative, he was allowed to use the Social Hall, which proved an adequate studio after being equipped with a skylight. It was large and comfortable and close to the Church offices so that President Smith could readily confer with the artist and help assure that the works would be approved.[10]

This first collaboration between the Church and Mahonri Young proved fruitful. The artist was somewhat frustrated when he could not be free from restrictions on his work, but his financial need made him anxious to cooperate. Church officials were satisfied with the statues. In fact, both sides seemed so pleased that Young found himself enthusiastically planning for another Church-sponsored commission. His attitude seemed to reflect the idea that the Church should become his patron.

A request from George Carpenter for sea gull drawings for the 1907 Christmas edition of the *Deseret News* inspired Mahonri's design for another work of importance to the Mormon heritage, the *Sea Gull Monument*. His idea was enthusiastically received, but no money was immediately available.[11] He assumed, however, that when he completed the Smith statues a contract might be granted. When the statues were finished he requested a commission, but the Church was in the midst of building the Hotel Utah and felt it could not support Young's project. His disappointment was severe, since he maintained he had declined other major works in order to devote his full attention to the monument.[12]

Failing to secure the *Sea Gull* commission, Young turned his energies toward winning the contract for a frieze design to go above the main entrance of the L.D.S. Gymnasium. Since the subject matter of this project, an athletic field day, was not as intimately related to the Church as the Joseph Smith statue, the work was not scrutinized or overseen so rigorously. Again, however, the artist suffered distress as he was prevented from completing the work to his

own specifications. He worked leisurely, believing that an artist could be forgiven for being late with his sculpture, but not for bad work. His uncle, Willard Young, head of the school, felt he had been given ample time to finish. He therefore had the scaffold removed without consulting Mahonri — before he had completed one of the figures to his own satisfaction.[13]

This was Young's last commission in Utah before leaving to seek greater opportunity in New York City. The failure to secure the *Sea Gull Monument* contract, the removal of the scaffold, and the belief that he was underpaid at $2,000 for the frieze were contributing factors in his resolve to leave Utah to escape the "worry, struggle and discouragement" he believed he had suffered.[14]

He spent the next two years trying to establish himself in New York. After a period of further discouragement he believed that he had reached a turning point in his career. He was becoming known and was beginning to see a brighter future if he could only earn a commission large enough to keep him going. The next year would be critical; if he could not demonstrate that he could be successful in the artistic world, he would have to give up his art and devote his attention to supporting his family from other sources. His belief that, "If a person has it in him to be an artist he will be, regardless of poverty, discouragements, failures, or the unreasonable desires of others who think it their duty to direct the universe,"[15] was being severely tested.

Again in desperation he turned to the Mormon Church. The *Sea Gull Monument* would carry him through, and he now almost pleaded for it, telling Charles W. Nibley that the work "means everything to me."[16] It was his hope that he would be advanced a monthly sum of $200 to live on while working on the bronze, so that he would have ample time to complete the work according to his satisfaction. His special plea proved effective and a contract was signed in 1912.[17]

Once the commission was granted the problem arose as to where on Temple Square to locate the monument. Young disapproved of the site most persistently proposed, which was just south of the Temple. It would not do to have the small monument dwarfed by the large temple, he felt. President Joseph F. Smith and other Church leaders accompanied Young to the temple grounds to hear the artist plead his case. He selected a spot between the Tabernacle and the Assembly Hall where the monument would be seen by people entering the south gate and where the gulls atop the column would be flying against the blue sky. The Church officials were sympathetic, and when the monument was unveiled on October 1, 1913, it stood on the spot he had chosen.[18]

Through this experience Young discovered that some Church leaders had strong opinions concerning certain aspects of art, but that they could be swayed by persuasive arguments. Believing this, he joined others in an effort to instruct the Church hierarchy in some of the fine points of aesthetics and the arts. The occasion was the impending destruction of the historic Salt Lake Theatre, which had been built by Brigham Young. This unique theater was, to those who wished to preserve it, a monument to the arts. It stood in the desert frontier for that which makes life pleasant and enjoyable, and was a civilizing and culturally encouraging influence of immense importance to many Utahans. The Tabernacle and Temple stood for and served the deeper things of the spirit; the old Theatre stood for cultural refinement, social intercourse, and relaxation. It was an especially significant feature of Utah's cultural heritage.

All attempts to persuade the Church to preserve the Theatre were rejected, however. On May 16, 1928, over vociferous protests of many citizens, the Salt Lake Dramatic Association, a Church corporation, sold the Theatre and adjacent lands to the Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph Company for construction of a telephone company building.[19] Mahonri's mother told President Heber J. Grant (who had been a close friend of her husband) that destroying the Theatre was the worst thing he ever did, and he would live to regret it. Just before the demolition someone bitterly changed the lettering on the marquee to read, "Erected by a Prophet and destroyed by a profiteer."[20]

Mahonri Young protested the destruction of this historic structure with a satirical painting depicting the old playhouse as a temple of the arts. To him it seemed that the second generation of Mormons were iconoclasts with no sense of appreciation for the deeper meaning of the theater. Ada Dwyer Russell, one of the former players who was a leader in the preservation struggle, proposed that Young design and create a fitting memorial. In response to her request he designed a monument of remembrance and later did a commemorative tablet. As an environmentalist, history buff, and artist, he was deeply concerned about the preservation of what was historically and culturally significant. It saddened him that the second generation of Mormon leaders had allowed the work of the first to be destroyed, "because they [the younger generation] were non-

classical."[21] A mere tablet could never replace nor adequately preserve the memory of the Salt Lake Theatre. Ironically a replica of the Theatre was erected by the Daughters of Utah Pioneers some two decades after the original was destroyed, thus vindicating Young's concern for preserving Utah's artistic-historical heritage.

At the same time the Salt Lake Theatre was being razed, the Church was considering the erection of a monument to the Mormon pioneers. The fact that a functional monument existed in the form of the Theatre was ignored. On July 21, 1920 President Heber J. Grant informed Mahonri Young that the Church was considering a "Coming of the Pioneers" monument to be placed at the mouth of Emigration Canyon. He warned, however, that the project might be a long time in coming, particularly if the Church were to pay the major portion of the cost. President Grant believed in Young's skill and ability as an artist and promised to do everything in his power to assist him in securing the commission.[22] This assurance of support was never forgotten by either party.

In 1921 the M.I.A. erected a small commemorative plaque, but as Heber J. Grant had predicted, the major project languished.[23] The possibility of bringing it to fruition seemed so remote that Mahonri put it out of his mind until the summer of 1936 when he was vacationing in Salt Lake City. He had barely checked into the Hotel Utah when his friend, Nephi Morris, a Church leader, telephoned to inform him that the project was moving and that another artist was after it. Morris assured Young that he and others wanted him to do the monument.[24]

Young rushed to Morris' office to go over sketches and discuss what could be done. He left the office "more excited than I had ever been since George Carpenter had proposed the *Sea Gull Monument* in 1907. . . . I do know that for the next days, weeks and months I thought of little else."[25] He was especially buoyed up when President Grant informed him that "Everybody wants you to get it."[26] After nearly five months in Salt Lake City, however, Young decided that nothing was going to be done, at least not immediately. He returned to New York disappointed after a long summer of "frustration or futility."[27] In the meantime, the Utah State Legislature appropriated small sums to develop tentative plans for the monument, and finally agreed to appropriate $125,000 over several years if the Church and private donors would match that amount. The Legislative appropriation made it possible for a citizens' committee to begin to seek a design. Young and Avard Fairbanks were the only artists to present models before the committee. When asked to explain the meaning of his model, Young pointed out that the focal point of the statue — a triumvirate consisting of Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball and Wilford Woodruff — was symbolic in intent. He assured the Committee that while the impression created by the model was not historically accurate (Brigham Young had first looked over the Salt Lake Valley from Wilford Woodruff's wagon), it expressed the spirit of the occasion. President Grant justified the symbolism when he told the Committee "they weren't erecting a monument to a covered wagon."[28]

President Grant's support for Young's model was critical, since he was so influential in determining who would be awarded the commission. In the end, Young's proposal was selected, and he was so elated that he declared, "I would rather have the *This Is The Place* commission than any other that could come to me."[29]

The project still moved very slowly, so much so that Young wrote President Grant reprimanding the Committee for not giving him greater consideration. He was already out many dollars and a great deal of time.[30] He ran into additional frustration in obtaining approval for alterations. He felt that the monument presented a particular artistic problem when viewed from the rear, where there was little to relieve the repetition of the three pairs of legs. A friend suggested that he might place a sea gull flying behind the men. Young liked the idea and traveled to Salt Lake City to obtain the committee's sanction. They reluctantly agreed that a gull could be placed flying in the background to tie the legs together, so that they would not look "like a row of six stove pipes." When the changes were approved, Young took the new model east where he constructed a larger six foot model. This had to be sent to Salt Lake City to secure the Committee's final approval and then returned east before the artist could begin the work with granite and bronze.[31]

Young was bothered by the fact that all preliminary work on the project was done under provisional contract. He felt the Committee was very slow with funds and sometimes he became "impatient and sometimes despondent" at the way he had been treated.[32] Finally in November, 1945, Young and his assistant, Spero Anargoras, were called to the Eastern States Mission headquarters in Boston to meet with President George Albert Smith and others for the purpose of signing a final contract. Young had played a major role in drawing up other contracts he had negotiated with the Church; this time the contract was professionally prepared. Because of the length and complexity of the document, he did not read it, but simply asked if certain things had been included. Assurance was given that they were, that there was enough money, and that the Church was behind the project. Although Young signed the contract, he had a premonition of trouble. For two weeks he did not sleep, and he described himself as "pressed and worried."[33] But he had spent years working to secure the commission and a lifetime preparing for it, and he wanted it more than any job which had ever come his way. The time was short and the date for unveiling fixed, so he put the contract out of mind and began to work.[34]

Almost immediately an artistic problem arose which overshadowed mundane contract considerations. Some of the "busy bodies" who had seen the models complained that Wilford Woodruff's clothing was not dignified enough. They maintained that he looked like a servant instead of an equal to Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball. This grievance was taken to George Albert Smith, who suggested that Young remodel Wilford Woodruff. Young genuinely felt that his first design was authentic, for he had borrowed suits of the era for his models, including one which Brigham Young had actually worn.[35] Nevertheless, to placate the Monument Committee, which he complained was nagging him, he remodeled Wilford Woodruff so that he wore a Prince Albert coat.[36]

The monument was unveiled on July 24, 1947, as scheduled. Young felt he had completed the terms of the contract and expected an immediate financial settlement. His efforts seemed frustrated, however, by John D. Giles and George Q. Morris.[37] Young maintained that Giles was attempting to deprive him of $11,000, $8,000 of which had been advanced to develop the monument and which Young had believed to be in addition to the $50,000 contract, and $3,000 of which Giles had disallowed because of a contract technicality.[38]

When the contract problem began, Young contemplated communicating his

displeasure to President Smith, whom he was sure had not read the contract before he signed it. Because of the President's serious illness, Young was reluctant to write him, but he continued to resent his treatment at the hands of Giles, even though he realized the legality of Giles' action. Finally his frustration reached such a point that he wrote to President Smith. This brought a severe rebuke from George Q. Morris, who instructed him never to write the President again about this matter.[39] Young never recovered the $11,000 and was bitter about it to the end of his life.

Over a forty year period the relationship between the Mormon Church and Mahonri Young had blown both hot and cold. His first major commission was the Joseph Smith statue; his first major group piece and perhaps his best was the L.D.S. Gymnasium frieze, and these two projects provided the major portion of his sustenance for five years. The *Sea Gull Monument* provided him with an important commission at a critical time; it was also the basis of much of his early fame. All these commissions provided some personal crises, but all generally proved to be satisfactory to the artist and the Church. The Salt Lake Theatre Tablet was a labor of love and was not of personal or financial importance. The matter of preservation of the Theatre was, however, a deeply important artistic issue to Young, and its destruction left him disappointed and cynical. The *This Is The Place Monument* he always referred to as "The Job." It was the climax of his career but was also the trial of his artistic life. What could have been the personal triumph of his career left him bitter and critical.

Despite such frustrations and problems, however, the association and cooperation between Mahonri Young and the Church resulted in some magnificent artistic works, and a brilliant art career was preserved, perhaps literally, at least at two critical points. The artist's reputation and pocket book were enhanced and the people of Utah gained beautiful and historically significant works of art. There were some moments of frustration in all of these commissions. Two, the Joseph Smith Statue and the *This Is The Place Monument*, were stringently supervised, and this proved to be a difficult condition for Mahonri Young to work under. He also liked to work without pressure. It was oppressive to him to be pushed and "nagged" during some of these projects, but these frustrations never outweighed his desire to secure financially rewarding commissions from the Mormon Church.

Mahonri Young was a free spirit. His sympathy was with almost any movement which promised greater liberty for the individual and which would "postpone the evil day when the setting bonds of criticism and official inertia would cramp and circumscribe the free and joyous activities of artists."[40]

[1]*International Studio*, 47 (October, 1912), 55-59.

[2]Mahonri Young MSS Collection, Box 17, "Howard MacCormack" Folder. Brigham Young University Library; hereafter cited as Young MSS.

[3]"Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," located in the Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, March 15, 1906. Hereafter cited as Journal History.

[4]*Ibid.*, January 10, 1907.

[5]Mahonri Young to Joseph F. Smith, February 13, 1907.

[6]Reply from Joseph F. Smith penciled on the back of Young's February 13 letter to Smith; Journal History, January 10, 1907; Young to Smith, February 20, 1907 and March 1, 1907; Young MSS Collection, Box 18.

[7]Young MSS, Box 18.

[8]Young to Smith, July 7, 1908.

[9]Young MSS, Box 18.

[10]Young to Smith, August 25, 1908.

[11]Young to Charles W. Nibley, July 1, 1912; Jack Sears MSS, uncatalogued collection, Brigham Young University Library; hereafter cited as Sears MSS.

[12]*Ibid.*

[13]Young MSS, Box 17, "L.D.S. Gym" Folder.

[14]*Ibid.*

[15]Sears MSS Collection.

[16]Young to Nibley, July 12, 1912.

[17]*Ibid.*

[18]Young MSS, Box 17, "Father Kino" folder.

[19]For the story of the old theater, see George D. Pyper, *The Romance of an Old Playhouse*, (Salt Lake City: The Seagull Press, 1928).

[20]Young to George Pyper, undated letter.

[21]*Ibid.*

[22]Heber J. Grant to Young, July 21, 1920.

[23]*This Is The Place Monument Commission*, Report to Governor Blood and the Twenty-Third Legislative Assembly of Utah, pp. 4-5. In 1930 the Utah Pioneer Trails and Landmarks Association was organized to promote the erection of a suitable monument. The first committees were appointed in 1933 and land acquired by act of Congress in the southeast portion of the Fort Douglas Military Reserve.

[24]Young MSS, Box 19, "This is the Place" folder.

[25]*Ibid.*

[26]Young to his son, "Bill" Young, July 23, 1936.

[27]Young MSS, Box 19, "This is the Place" folder.

[28]*Ibid.*

[29]Sears MSS.

[30]Young to Sears, May 16, 1940.

[31]Young MSS, Box 19, "This is the Place" folder.

[32]Young to Sears, October 14, 1945.

[33]Young to Sears, November 25, 1945.

[34]Young MSS, Box 19, "This is the Place" folder.

[35]Young to Sears, May 7, 1947.

[36]Young to Sears, March 3, 1947.

[37]Young to Sears, November 6, 1947.

[38]Young MSS, Box 19, "This is the Place" folder.

[39]*Ibid.*

[40]Young MSS, Box 19, "Appreciation to J. Alden Weir" folder.