

REVIEWS

Edited by Davis Bitton

Theology and Aesthetics, Mormon Arts, Vol. I

EDWARD GEARY

Mormon Arts, Volume One. Edited by Lorin F. Wheelwright and Lael J. Woodbury. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1972. 88 pp. \$13.95.

Mormon Arts, Volume One, is a strange hybrid, a combination anthology, review, picture book, aesthetic primer, and philosophical discourse, not to mention the phonograph record bound inside the back cover. An outgrowth of the annual Mormon Festival of Arts at Brigham Young University, the volume includes the work of some sixty or more hands, but its prime mover is Lorin F. Wheelwright, musician, lithographer, and dean of the College of Fine Arts at BYU. Except for its rather awkward square shape, the book is handsomely turned out, with abundant and colorful illustrations, and will certainly please the casual purchaser who is looking for something to display in the living room when the home teachers call. The more serious reader should also find the book interesting but will probably be somewhat dissatisfied with it, even though—or perhaps because—the editors have obviously tried to provide something for everyone. As a primer of art and music appreciation, *Mormon Arts, Volume One*, is useful; as a literary guide it is unsatisfactory. As an exhibit of Mormon artists it is highly revealing; as an attempt to define Mormon art, to “postulate a theological base for an aesthetic reality,” it is overly ambitious but deserves serious attention.

Dean Wheelwright begins by asking, “What is Mormon about art?” and then proceeds through a series of six essays to develop the thesis that we are on the threshold of “artistic expressions as characteristic of the Mormon people and as ‘peculiar’ to this world as are our theology and resultant patterns of personal and family life.” In “Is There a Mormon Art?” he identifies “certain distinguishing lines that infuse Mormon artistic expression.” In “Art as Joy of Man and Instrument of God,” he attempts to distinguish “consummatory” from “instrumental” values. “Seeking Aesthetic Experience” is an elementary guide to appreciation. “Divine Creation” is an adaptation of the old “argument from design” for the purpose of showing that God is an artist himself and that His works provide inspiration for human artists. “Man Creates in the Image of God” carries this idea further, culminating in a veritable key to all knowledge, a chart that reduces the universe to a few simple principles which apply equally

to theology, physics, and aesthetics. Finally, "Art Expresses Opposition in All Things" is an attempt to deal with that troublesome teaching of Father Lehi's in such a way as both to justify conflict and to preserve the doctrinaire insistence on the triumph of good. ("The aesthetic necessity of showing opposing forces, particularly in drama, is balanced in Mormon art by the value of showing how evil is overcome by forces of righteousness.")

To the reader who has had some experience with critical theory, these essays will seem both oversimplified and narrowly prescriptive at times. However, their intention, and the intention of the book as a whole, is clearly to extend and liberalize the aesthetic outlook, to improve the taste of the Mormon audience in general. I suspect that the book is also aimed, though very cautiously, at improving and broadening the tastes of Church leaders in particular. For example, the dust jacket reproduces a rather stylized and expressionistic painting of the martyrdom of Joseph Smith—a far cry from the "official" art on this subject—and the final illustration in the volume is a photograph of the Coalville tabernacle standing in dignity above the decayed village, calling attention to the failure of taste that permitted its destruction. More explicitly, Dean Wheelwright asks for tolerance of different styles, suggesting that abstraction may be as valid as representationalism in the visual arts and that proponents of the Viennese musical tradition may not be "the only occupants of the celestial kingdom." In addition, he points out that almost all the artwork commissioned by the Church has been "didactic and commemorative" in character, and suggests that although the Church is justified in using art as an "instrument of God" in achieving conversion and strengthening testimony we should also learn to appreciate the value of art as a "joy to man" and to satisfy the "hunger for aesthetic experience."

Among the artworks reproduced in *Mormon Arts, Volume One*, though several are fresh and creative, many others are burdened by ideology in one way or another. Some are clearly designed to flatter the Mormon self-image: for example, the wholesome Lamanite boys blessing the sacrament, the beatific old man in testimony meeting, and the courageous Samuel Smith, "the first Mormon missionary," making his way along a muddy New England lane. Other artists, trying to avoid this Mormon version of "Socialist Realism," have attempted naïve and unsuccessful adaptation of medieval symbology to Mormon themes. In yet other cases, the artists evidently felt obligated to stress in their statements about their work religious qualities that are not apparent in the works themselves. Thus a painting of the southern Utah red rock country is described by the artist as recording "a religious experience" and a "testimony of God's creative powers, of his love for us in providing our environment." Yet there is nothing in the painting itself to indicate that it couldn't have been painted by an agnostic who simply happened to be fond of the landscape. (Dean Wheelwright claims that an inspired Mormon responds to the physical environment differently from other people; he goes so far as to suggest that an atheist cannot respect the natural world, since "irreverence for both the structure and the Architect go hand in hand." This is an interesting claim but one that is not substantiated by the book.)

Despite these limitations, *Mormon Arts, Volume One*, makes a much better case for the vitality of Mormon visual arts (and music) than for Mormon litera-