

John Hafen: Art As Visual Poetry

Art yields [an] uplifting influence because the painter is an ardent and sincere student of nature. . . . [H]e communes with it, he loves it; God is the author of nature. Anything which He has created is elevating and refining in its lessons and influences. (Hafen 1905, 403)

This statement by John Hafen about the purpose of art, though stated as an ideal, actually best describes his own beliefs and the great legacy of his work. Hafen's landscape paintings reveal a humble man in awe of nature. His gift for painting, his love and reverence for nature, and his unique style springing from French and American Impressionism have transformed these realities into images filled with truth and poetry. While many regional landscape artists around 1900 attempted to portray the spectacular scenery of the Rocky Mountains, Hafen's intimate paintings express the depth and harmony of nature, conveying subtle moods and quiet moments.

John Hafen (1856–1910) was the son of Mormon immigrant parents who joined the Church in Switzerland and arrived by wagon in Salt Lake City in 1862. The family settled temporarily in Richfield and Tooele but returned to Salt Lake City in 1868, where over the next decade Hafen studied painting with the pioneer artists George M. Ottinger and Danquart Weggeland at the University of Deseret. He also met painters of his own generation: John B. Fairbanks and Lorus Pratt, son of apostle Orson Pratt. In his early twenties, Hafen decided upon a career as a professional artist and learned the photographic trade. After marrying in 1879, he assisted talented Utah documentary photographer George Edward Anderson in opening a tent gallery at Springville, Utah. Earning a living was a challenge for Hafen, but he always tried to stay close to creative art. He was also an illustrator for several commercial projects, including two fine lithographs of Joseph Smith as general of the Nauvoo Legion and a color booklet illustrating Eliza R. Snow's poem "O My Father."

In the early 1890s, largely through Hafen's urging, the Church sent him and four other artists to France to gain the expertise needed to paint extensive murals for the new Salt Lake Temple. The First Presidency set these five men apart as "art missionaries" and gave them financial support for their studies. The students enrolled in a demanding program of classically based academic training at the Julian Academy in Paris and also became conversant with the techniques and values of impressionistic easel painting which had become an accepted tradition in France by then. After returning to Utah in 1892, Hafen played a major role in planning and executing the murals for the Salt Lake Temple, which opened in April 1893.

Exposure to recent French landscape art, particularly the tonal art of the Barbizon School and the plein-air work of the Impressionists, totally changed John Hafen's work. Before his French studies, his art contained mostly narrative subject matter. His canvasses had been tightly executed, highly detailed, and painted in darker "Rembrandt" pigments; afterward, his landscapes were painted in the open air. Fresh color and light capture the reality of the moment, and the artist's feelings and astute observations become evident. Hafen now applied paint in visible, short broken strokes. In his own words: "In paintings that you may see hereafter cease to look for mechanical effect or minute finish, for individual leaves, blades of grass, or aped imitation of things, but look for smell, for soul, for feeling, for the beautiful in line and color" (in Gibbs 1987).

Commencing in the middle 1890s, Hafen concentrated on depicting the meaning and spirit of the Utah rural landscape. He completed many of his finest works, now considered masterpieces of Utah art, during this period, which lasted until 1907.

With no reliable private patronage in Utah, Hafen drifted into debt, unable to adequately support his large family. For several years beginning in 1901, the Church contracted with him for \$100.00 or more each month to complete a designated number of pictures, mostly landscapes and portraits of leading Mormon officials. The Church thus acquired scores of paintings, including some of his best, which became the nucleus of the finest existing collection of the artist's work. Several are currently on display at the Museum of Church History and Art, including "Forest Solitude, Brighton" (1901) and "Girl among the Hollyhocks" (1902), the latter a masterpiece of American Impressionism.

Finally, Hafen left Utah to settle in Brown County, Indiana, and became part of a loose-knit group of artists who painted the local landscape in a regional impressionistic style. He also received important commissions, including a portrait of the governor of Indiana. Just as financial prospects became brighter, Hafen contracted pneumonia and died in 1910. Today collectors and museums in the Intermountain region hold the work of this great Latter-day Saint artist and Utah impressionist in the very highest esteem. Of all Utah artists of his generation, he was likely the most successful in communicating the poetry and substance of nature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Gibbs, Linda Jones. *Harvesting the Light: The Paris Art Mission and Beginnings of Utah Impressionism*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987.
- Hafen, John. "Mountain from an Art Standpoint." *Young Women's Journal* 16 (Sept. 1905): 403-5.

ART CREDITS

- Cover : "Girl Among the Hollyhocks," 1902, oil on canvas, 36" X 41", Museum of Church History and Art
- p. 12 : "Mothers Home in Switzerland," 1891, oil on board, 19" X 13", Rachel Hafen collection
- p. 43 : "Sunset," 1902, oil on canvas, 12" X 18", Museum of Church History and Art
- p. 62 : "Blackrock," 1902, oil on canvas, 26" X 30", private collection
- p. 63 : "Sevier Farm," 1901, oil on canvas, 30" X 42", Museum of Church History and Art
- p. 80 : "Early Evening," 1888, pastel on paper, 10" X 30", private collection
- p. 96 : "Mountain Stream," 1902, oil on canvas, 26" X 22", collection of Springville Museum of Art
- p. 122 : "Teepees," 1907, oil on canvas, 22" X 31¼", collection of Springville Museum of Art
- p. 138 : "Hollyhocks," 1909, oil on canvas, 36" X 42", collection of Springville Museum of Art
- p. 140 : "Geneva Dance Hall," 1896, oil on canvas, 20" X 38", collection of the Springville Museum of Art
- p. 172 : "Grist mill," 1887, oil on board, 18" X 12¼", collection of Springville Museum of Art

Special thanks to Robert Davis, curator of the Church Museum, and Vern Swanson, director Springville Museum of Art.

