Would Joseph Smith Attend the New York Stake Arts Festival?

Richard Lyman Bushman

RECENTLY, LATTER-DAY SAINT ARTISTS and writers in New York City have been searching for ways to recognize one another. I don't mean recognize in the sense of honoring, but recognize as in encountering one another's work. A volume of new essays and original etchings prepared by members of the Mormon Artists Group in New York City is one product of this urge[1]; the annual New York Stake Arts Festival, a day-long program of panels, performances, and exhibitions in the stake center, is another. Besides displaying work to the public and facilitating exchange, these events have raised questions, one of them being how art by Latter-day Saints relates to religion. Are religion and art wholly divergent? Are they inextricably enmeshed? Is art the Lord's work like preaching or helping the poor? We have difficulty puzzling out answers, but one way of putting the question is to ask what Joseph Smith would say. Would he have enjoyed the Stake Arts Festival?

We are inclined to believe that Joseph Smith would have been delighted by the paintings and photographs, the music and the dance, the talk about writing, and everything else at the Festival. Does not the thirteenth article of faith say that "if there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things"? We assume that the fine arts, especially the arts of believing Latter-day Saints, must fall into the category of lovely and praiseworthy. What better example of the thirteenth article in action than an arts festival in our own meeting house? There is, of course, not the slightest reference to art in the article. And the words "virtuous" and "praiseworthy" could refer to the Red Cross as easily as to painting. Nonetheless, our prejudice in favor of the arts leads us almost automatically to an aesthetic reading of the thirteenth article.

---

1. This essay first appeared as the introduction to *Silent Notes Taken* (New York: Mormon Artists Group, 2002), a collection of fifteen essays interspersed with original etchings.

To support our equation of "lovely" with artistic beauty, we locate the Arts Festival in a long tradition of Mormon aesthetics. According to our lore, pioneer families carried barrels of china to Utah as tokens of their culture. If Mormon yearning for artistic refinement was irrepressible in the Utah desert, must it not blossom as the rose in twenty-first-century New York? I know the stories of pioneer refinement are true in the case of my own family. My grandmother Hildegarde Sophia Schoenfeld Lyman made "the finer things" part of her religion, and she was as saintly a woman as I ever knew. Her father Edward Schoenfeld was teaching art alongside Karl Maeser in a Dresden *Gymnasium* when they were converted to Mormonism. Some of Edward's precise pencil sketches from his German years hang on my apartment wall. After he came to Utah, Schoenfeld, unable to support himself as a teacher, became a shoe salesman. He was unwilling to endure the privation that Karl Maeser suffered when he refused to give up his profession. Edward's daughter Hildegarde, my grandmother, was working in the ZCMI overall factory when she met my grandfather Willard Lyman, a poor shoe salesman from Scipio. They bought a small house on L Street in the avenues where her pent-up desire for beauty and refinement manifested itself. Hildegarde turned that little cottage into a palace—at least it looked like one to me as a child. She painted and refinished the furniture, ripped out walls, made hangings, purchased little pieces of Dresden for the mantle. She had few resources beyond her will and taste, but her natural grace and beauty made art of everything she touched.

We assume that her passion, and the devotion of other pioneers like her, owed some of its fervor to the gospel and Joseph Smith. Today refinement and spirituality seem like natural companions. Love of the beautiful is embedded in our belief along with hard work and frugality. Perhaps perversely for a grandson of Hildegarde Schoenfeld Lyman, I am not sure about this assumption. Despite all the evidence for Mormon aesthetics, I am a little skeptical that Joseph Smith was a lover of the arts.

We must remember that the love of art is only partially innate. Most modern historians would deny the existence of any natural aesthetic instincts. Aesthetic impulses are more the product of nurture than of nature. They seem natural because middle-class culture instills an obligation to admire art, but this sense of obligation is not universally shared. Middle-class people are exceptional in not only enjoying art, but in thinking they ought to enjoy it. For people like us, appreciation of art is a sign of worthiness. We feel pride in admitting to our friends that we

---

Texts and images comprise a sampling of contemporary urban Mormon life in this limited edition of fifty copies, ten of which were accompanied by a portfolio with an extra suite of etchings. A paperback edition is available from Nauvoo Books.

have gone to the Metropolitan—either the Museum or the Opera—a pride that going to a movie at the multiplex doesn't give us. Working-class people will admit they find an opera boring; middle-class people feel an obligation to try to appreciate it. My middle-class parents, who never went to an art exhibit or an opera to my knowledge, still felt strongly that it was the right thing to do.

The obligatory admiration of art was not part of Joseph Smith's culture. He was brought up in rural New England before gentility had made many inroads into his level of society. His mother Lucy was developing embryonic genteel sensibilities, but she was the only one. She bankrupted the family by insisting they replace their log house with a frame house–the one we visit in Manchester today. No one else in the family had much sense of genteel ways. By his own admission, Joseph, while not rude, was rough. He never promoted genteel virtues like taste or polite manners. He went for hardier traits like loyalty and honesty. Genteel people who visited said he was coarse in his manner. After meeting Joseph in Nauvoo in 1844, Josiah Quincy reported that he "wore striped pantaloons, a linen jacket, which had not lately seen the washtub, and a beard of some three days' growth."[2] Joseph quickly changed into a suit to escort his distinguished visitors around the city, but he did not, it is clear, clean up every day.

These small indications of his personal culture suggest that Joseph would not have been prejudiced in favor of art. He would not have gone to museums out of a sense of obligation nor felt automatically that art must be good. His culture did not predispose him to admire art, as my grandfather Schoenfeld's German education did. Any attraction to beauty would be personal and perhaps idiosyncratic rather than dutiful and obligatory.

If Joseph had looked deeper into theories of art of his time, he might have had reason to be suspicious as well as neglectful. These were the years when belief in the Bible and revelation was fading among the educated classes, and art was replacing religion as the source of spiritual insight. Emerson quit his Unitarian pulpit because he could not bear to administer the sacrament. With the loss of belief, skeptical intellectuals like Emerson looked for substitute religions infused with revelation but not confined to a single text like the Bible. Emerson berated the Harvard Divinity School students for contenting themselves with ancient revelation when new revelation was needed. "Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead." But he did not desire a single fixed truth from God. He believed all revela-

2. Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past*, new edition (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1926 [orig. pub. 1883]), 320.

tion had its moment of glory and then was replaced by the next wave. Now something new and fresh was required.[3] In this atmosphere of half-doubt, half-belief, the artist emerged as the most likely spokesman for the transcendent. Whitman who thought of himself as preeminently qualified for the role said, "the priest departs, the divine literatus comes."[4] The artist was the one to carry people to greater heights and deeper insights. In a way, the artist replaced the prophet as the person to speak for God.

From that day to this, religion and art have bordered on and rivaled one another. Art fans speak about art in the way religious people speak of religion, using terms like "spiritual" or "mystery" or "inspiration." Artists are said to speak the truth, or see into our souls, or descry the future. Art is supposed to lead to the hidden dimensions of life and help us experience it more deeply.

Would Joseph have accepted art as a substitute religion? Whether or not he admired art, it seems unlikely that a person who actually heard from God, who looked into heaven and saw angels, would say that a poet's writings could equal actual revelation. He probably would not have even understood the question. How could one possibly equal the other? If he had been aware of the pretensions of art in our time, he might have held back and wanted to know more. But how could he endorse an art that undermined revelation or substituted a man-made product for the real thing?

If Joseph Smith was not bred to appreciate art for its own sake, and if he would have doubted artistic claims to prophethood, what grounds are there to think he would have come to the Stake Arts Festival? Why would he not have seen art as trivial or antagonistic? On the side of art, I think he might have seen our New York creations as standing in a long tradition of worship through art. In time, he might have come to appreciate the goodness of artistic reverence. Works like Handel's *Messiah* are all the more convincing because we have reason to think the composer was believing as well as ambitious. Handel wanted to glorify God with his music. He wrote the *Messiah* in an amazing rush because it came from his heart as well as his brain. The same, I think, must be true of Bach. How could he have turned out such a vast quantity of church music week after week if faith in God had not been part of his being? My wife Claudia and I visited Istanbul over the holidays and were overwhelmed by the architecture of the Hagia Sophia with its huge vaulted, interlocking domes. Though the building was a political statement as well as an act of devotion, it still offers an eloquent tribute to God's power and wisdom in its great arches.

---

3. Quotes from Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 51-52.

4. Quoted in Delbanco. *The Real American Dream*, 52.

In Joseph's own day, the Hudson River painters were men of acknowledged belief who struggled to capture divinity in their paintings. They pointed toward God, for example, by not bringing the perspective lines together in their landscapes, but by focusing on a bright point that leads through the picture into infinite space beyond. The sincerity of this art is surely a recommendation for art in the service of religion. Would not Joseph Smith have reacted favorably to these efforts and added them to his own faith?

Joseph was eclectic by nature. He spoke repeatedly against having a creed that set bounds to religion. He wanted his religion to be open to every form of truth, to be accepting and seeking. That is the spirit of the thirteenth article of faith. The statement supports art not because the word "lovely" appears there, but because the entire article implies a search for the worthy, an openness to all forms of goodness. True religious art falls into that category.

We would have more theological support for art if Joseph Smith had derived his doctrine from Jonathan Edwards. Edwards, the greatest American theologian, put beauty at the center of faith. He argued that a sense of God's beauty was the essence of grace. In Calvinist theology, grace was a divine influence that enabled a person to see God in all his magnificent beauty. In Edwards's interpretation of grace, a person learned to love God by loving his beauty to the point of sacrificing all to the divine magnificence. A divine and supernatural light helped a person to extinguish pride and egotism by revealing the beauty of what Edwards called "Being in General." He hypothesized a deeply aesthetic human nature that could not resist beauty and a God so aesthetic that he communicated with humanity through the beauty of the universe. Beauty is how he told people about himself, and beauty was how they came to love Him.[5]

For Joseph Smith, the key word was not "beauty" but "glory." Moses chooses God over Satan in the first book of Moses because God is glorious and Satan is not. "Where is thy glory," he asks Satan in the confrontation, "that I should worship thee?" Satan is darkness; God is glory. God's works, Moses is told when he first sees God, reveal his glory. "No man can behold all my works, except he behold all my glory."[6] The word exercises its powerful influence through all of Mormon scripture. We strive for the kingdom with the highest degree of glory. At the zenith of our hope, God promises us we may partake of his glory. In the ideal life, we are to have an eye single to God's glory. His glory rather than his

5. Roland A. DeLattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

6. Moses 1:5, 13.

beauty attracts us. Joseph's theology does not aestheticize God as Edwards's does. If anything, Joseph intellectualizes divinity. "The glory of God is intelligence, or in other words light and truth."[7] Truth precedes beauty in Joseph's scriptures. Glory implies something beyond beauty—and art.

On the other hand, the word "beauty" does figure in Mormon scriptures. The tree which awed Lehi and Nephi in their common vision was notable for its beauty. "The beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty."[8] "Beauty," the word for emphasizing the preciousness of the tree and its fruit, is closely connected with the love of God. We certainly do not think of holy things as ugly. Quite the contrary, we often describe godly things as beautiful. Zion itself, we are told, must put on its beautiful garments, and even more directly we hear that "Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness."[9] The scriptures say that glory and holiness have an aesthetic. Zion must be made beautiful, and artists will be the ones to create that beauty.

The beauty principle stands out in Joseph's vision of the city of Kirtland. According to Wilford Woodruff,

> Joseph presented us in some degree the plot of the city of Kirtland. . .as it was given him by vision. It was great, marvelous and glorious. The city extended to the east, west, north, and south. Steam boats will come puffing into the city. Our goods will be conveyed upon railroads from Kirtland to many places and probably to Zion. Houses of worship would be reared unto the most high. Beautiful streets are to be made for the saints to walk in, Kings of the earth would come to behold the glory thereof, and many glorious things not now to be named would be bestowed upon the Saints.[10]

The same was true of all Joseph's cities. They were beautiful as well as glorious. Nauvoo, after all, signified "beautiful place." In a sense, cities were Joseph Smith's art form. Using them to embody God's plans for life on earth, he wanted them to be beautiful.

Sidney Rigdon, who did have genteel aspirations to refinement, expanded this idea in the *Messenger and Advocate.* In an article called "The Saints and the World," published in 1836, he outlined the work of building Zion and posed a question: "Now let me ask the saints of the last days, what kind of people must you be, in order that you may accomplish so great a work?" How was Zion, he asked, "to become the joy and

7. Doctrine and Covenants 93:36.
8. 1 Nephi 11:8.
9. Doctrine and Covenants 82:14.
10. Scott Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal: 1833-1898 Typescript* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 134.

the praise of the whole earth, so that kings shall come to the brightness of her rising?" The people of Zion had to shine. "Surely, it will be by her becoming more wise, more learned, more refined, and more noble, than the cities of the world, so that she becomes the admiration of the great ones of the earth." Zion will attract attention "by the superiority of her literary institutions, and by a general effort of all the saints to patronize literature in our midst, so that the manners of the saints may be properly cultivated, and their habits correctly formed." Besides the people themselves, "her buildings will have to be more elegant, her palaces more splendid, and her public houses more magnificent." "Neither are we to leave out of the question," Rigdon went on, "the dress of the saints, for this supplies a place also in effecting this great object; the beauty and neatness of their dress is characteristic of the degree of refinement, and decency of a society."[11]

I came across another example of early church aesthetics while reading Joseph Smith's description of the Kirtland Temple dedication. A singing school was started in January 1836, three months before the dedication, to prepare a choir. They were still struggling eleven days before the dedication. Joseph noted after a rehearsal that they "performed admirably, considering the advantages they have had." On the eve of the dedication, he could say with fewer reservations, "called at the Schoolroom to hear the choir of Singers perform, which they did admirably." At the dedication, the choir was placed in the four corners of the hall so music would fill the room.[12]

What impressed me most was the source of the hymns. Four were written by the LDS composers William Phelps and Parley P. Pratt. Quite a number of hymns might have fit into the services; one by Isaac Watts was included.[13] But four were written by our own poets. That signifies one of two things. Either the church wished to encourage its own poets, or the people planning the service felt that the message of the occasion could be best expressed by our own writers. Either one of those possibilities satisfies me. We would be happy for the church to sponsor art and just as pleased if Latter-day Saint artists were considered best qualified to present our beliefs.

So I conclude that Joseph Smith would have attended the Arts Festival and would have been interested in the art being hung in our temporary gallery. The question is would we want him to be here? Would we want the Prophet of the Lord to be scrutinizing each painting and sculp-

11. *Messenger and Advocate* (Dec. 1836), 421.

12. Dean Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992), 2:129, 189, 191.

13. Ibid., 2: 193, 194, 195, 202.

ture? Artists may dream of a prophet whose visions of the heavens so liberated him that he rose above narrow conceptions of art and conventional standards. But was Joseph this kind of prophet? Perhaps the message of the Gospel weighed so heavily on his soul that only promotional art would please him? Would it have to bear an explicit gospel message to win him over? I don't know the answer to these questions. I think it is possible that Joseph Smith would not applaud everything we do in the name of art these days. He might find it unintelligible, rude, perhaps distracting. The question must hang unanswered in the space between our time and his.

The question of what to do about art, however, cannot be postponed until we meet Joseph. What are we to do with the art we make, that we look at and hear, that we buy? Should we work to create and appreciate poems and paintings that illustrate, inculcate, and promote the Gospel and its standards? Should our art have a manifest Gospel purpose? Probably many of our artists would love to join just such a program and paint for the temples and write poems for hymns. Others feel that an artist cannot make powerful, affective, and true art by conforming to some preconceived program. Art does not do its work by being self-consciously orthodox, created according to a preformed purpose. These artists believe art must come from a deeper place where we are not fully in control of the outcome. Art is not calculation but expression. We want to be true to the Gospel in our art work, but we have to be true to ourselves as we make art.

I know no easy way out of this dilemma. Some years ago, I addressed the same question in an essay on "Faithful History." How do you write history that conforms to God's plan for the world? Do you deduce it from scripture by figuring out the implications of the gospel for history and then look for evidence in support of these implications? One might try, for example, to prove that wickedness leads to the downfall of civilizations by illustrating that point over and over in history. Or one could search for remnants of the original Adamic religion in all the religions of the world.

In my essay, I concluded that I could not write history that way. I had to begin with the evidence as I was able to understand it. I had to converse with the documents and artifacts and report what I learned rather than work from some predetermined idea. Only the truth that I found in the evidence seemed like real truth. If the results were not satisfactory from a Gospel perspective, I decided, the answer was not to force myself into an orthodox program of history-writing. I had to change myself until I could see the world as God sees it. To write godly history, I had to be more godly. The answer to faulty art, in other words, is repentance. As I put it then:

> The trouble with wishing to write history as a Mormon is that you cannot improve as an historian without improving as a person. The enlargement of moral insight, spiritual commitment, and critical intelligence are all bound together. We gain knowledge no faster than we are saved.[14]

I think the same holds true for Mormon artists. Art originates in the place where our spirit resides. If that spirit seeks to know God in all his holiness, to stand in his presence and be filled with his glory, then our art will show it.

That is far from a complete answer to our inquiry, but it points to a way of striving. Perhaps we are not ready to make glorious art yet, but surely Joseph Smith would delight in a room—or a city—filled with such creations.

14. Richard L. Bushman, "Faithful History," *Dialogue* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 25.