Making the Absent Visible: The Real, Ideal, and the Abstract in Mormon Art

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> *But then people have always known, at least since Moses denounced the Golden Calf, that images were dangerous, that they can captivate the onlooker and steal the soul.* —W. J. T. Mitchell[1]

In April 1993, President Bill Clinton, Elie Wiesel, international dignitaries, and Holocaust survivors celebrated the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Initiated by President Jimmy Carter in 1978, the monument is one of the most expensive additions to the federal museum system. Its mission, described by the museum's project director Michael Berenbaum, is to "memorialize the victims of Nazism by providing an exhaustive historical narrative of the Holocaust and to present visitors with an object lesson in the ethical ideals of American political culture by presenting the negation of those ideals."[2] These desires are echoed by Edward Linenthal, a professor of religion and American culture and privy to design meetings, museum archives, and interviews. Linenthal describes the effect of the memorial as a life-giving "assault" on participants: "The Holocaust is to be 'inflicted' on the museum visitor as the narrative seeks to arouse empathy for victims, inform visitors about wartime America's role as both bystander and liberator, and ask visitors to ponder the power of a murderous ideology that produced those capable of implementing official mass extermination."[3] This experience serves as a kind of "initiatory passage" created to help Americans "appreciate the virtues and frailty of American democracy and designed to instill an attitude of civic responsi-

bility."[4] Invoking seemingly ironic Christian imagery in the name of nationalism and patriotism, Linenthal hopes that museum participants will be "born again."

Two competing impulses strike visitors as they stroll through the museum. First, there is an intense desire to document and historicize the Holocaust. Countless photographs, testimonies, films, displays of shoes, ovens, hair, and luggage provide the weight that allows one to anchor the Holocaust in reality.

In contrast, the nonrepresentational art displayed throughout the memorial, which includes Ellsworth Kelly's immaculate white panels, Sol LeWitt's geometric wall painting, and Richard Serra's steel monolith, as well as the void invoked by the Hall of Remembrance, allows the viewer to peer into a space but prevents access to a tangible reality. These pieces of art and architectural spaces work to some degree in refusing easy access to the time, space, and significance of the Holocaust.

This vacillation between the tangible and the ethereal makes sense, for as Jane Caplan, a professor of modern European history at Oxford, points out, discussions of historical events are often caught up in dualistic metaphysics. What she calls the "derealist" position attempts to mythify experience by making it a "transhistorical event whose real meaning may perhaps only be appropriated in its fullest sense by those who are said to have participated in it" whereas the "hyperrealist" seeks to resist this dehistoricization by fixing explanations of events in "textual sources and readings that are as precise and incontrovertible as possible."[5] Both approaches ultimately share the desire to fix or frame events in interpretive or causal terms. The Holocaust Museum insists on a narrative form that becomes the apparent core of a historical account, using countless books, photographs, testimonies, and personal visits to fill the gaps and ground the narrative in concrete sources, while on the other hand, the site simultaneously foregrounds the inability to fully represent the experience by stressing that all accounts are contaminated, skewed, and infinitely inaccessible. Visitors experience this double gesture of certainty and indeterminacy.

The museum's struggle to represent the Holocaust provides a useful framework to discuss religious art, for displays of the divine often participate in this tension between the historical and the unrepresentable, the tangible and the intangible. This particular tension is especially evident in Mormon art celebrated and privileged by official Church publications

and displays. The conflict is, oddly enough, evident in the conspicuous absence of a spectrum: Mormon art displayed in official documents and spaces reflects the Mormon confidence in the ability to know, and this emphasis indicates its greatest limitation. An essential element of spirituality—the emotional, the intangible, the inexpressible—is unacknowledged or lost.

My aim here is simply to reveal the embedded assumptions of realism and idealism in officially approved Mormon art as well as offer an apology for nonrepresentational aesthetics presently missing from those images. What follows is intended as a sampling of the representational and the nonrepresentational in Mormon art—a "making strange" of the ordinary and familiar—rather than an exhaustive survey. While I want to examine a few paintings in detail, I also want to offer a theoretical framework that stimulates discussion leading toward a wider spectrum in officially approved Mormon art. Instead of closing a gate, I want to expose a path.

The Quest for Certainty

Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. —Pablo Picasso[6]

Mormon theology is surprisingly unburdened by epistemological hand-wringing. That is, while Mormons certainly address epistemological questions—"How do we know what we know? How can we know God? How can we know truth?"—these questions don't seem to vex the community because most rank-and-file members are comfortable with the idea of personal revelation: "Ask, and ye shall receive" (John 16:24). What could be simpler than a parent answering a child's question?

Two foundational texts provide the Mormon epistemological paradigm. First, the archetypal model of Mormon epistemology is the narrative describing Joseph Smith's First Vision, first published in the *History of the Church*, and now canonized in the Pearl of Great Price. This event sets the pattern rehearsed in Church-sponsored films, countless images, and expressions of belief over the pulpit. The process is simple: First, acknowledge ignorance or uncertainty. Second, demonstrate faith by seeking the answer by direct prayer to God. Third, interpret the consequences of that petition in spiritual terms. While Joseph Smith was not alone in his era when it comes to claiming divine revelation, Terryl Givens reminds us that nineteenth-century mystics often avoided censure and critique by

couching their revelations in terms of the "subjectively real and privately experiential."[7] However, Joseph Smith insists that "I had actually seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me" (JS—History 1:25). This emphasis on the literal, the concrete, and the rational distinguishes Joseph Smith's story and early Mormonism from many of the early nineteenth-century mystics and congregations and provides the epistemological framework that persists today.

The second text is a key passage in the Book of Mormon, Moroni 10:4–5. Near the end of the book, the ancient editor Moroni directly addresses the reader:

> And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.
> And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. (Moro. 10:4–5)

Although the passage certainly reinforces a nineteenth-century celebration of individualism and the possibility of personal spiritual epiphanies, Terryl Givens is again helpful by reminding us about the more important insight of Moroni's editorializing: "Our knowing that the particulars of Moroni's history are true . . . is clearly not the point of his challenge. Knowing they are knowable is."[8] Givens further points out that Mormon theology rejects an ineffable God, the "negative mysticism" of medieval theology. And this insistence on "knowability" is echoed loudly every first Sunday during fast and testimony meetings when individual members take the opportunity to speak from the pulpit and proclaim: "I know . . ." The phrase is not mandatory, of course, but one can easily sense the hierarchy between faith and knowledge, belief and certainty.

I dwell on this concept of knowability because of its relationship with pictorial literalism and realism. Spiritual experiences and artistic realism enjoy a dialectical relationship, a connection that now deserves more attention.

Portraying the Historical Real

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . . (Gen. 1:26)

Much of the art we see in Church publications and the Museum of Church History and Art exemplifies this desire to ground spiritual experiences in a knowable and palpable reality. Figures and events are rooted in a specific time and place. And this grounding does not merely refer to, for example, Joseph Smith as a real person who had a vision during the spring of 1820 near his home in Palmyra, New York. What is literalized is the vision itself. Joseph does not maintain that he saw God and Jesus Christ in a dream, that he saw Jesus and God with his "spiritual eyes,"[9] that his vision was an internal, subjective experience. Instead, Joseph maintains that God and Jesus were actually present, in flesh and blood, taking up space in real time, and they "did in reality speak to me." Joseph also maintains that he was awakened by the angel Moroni who was equally tangible and concrete, and he recounts another episode in the Kirtland Temple when he and Oliver Cowdery were visited, in person, by Jesus. For Mormons, these spiritual experiences are not spiritual in the sense that they are not tangible. Instead, they are spiritual because they involve spiritual beings who are also corporeal.[10]

What is also significant in many of these narratives is the embedded rationalism of Mormon narratives. E. Brooks Holifield, a historian of early American Christianity, points out that early American Christian thinkers simultaneously resisted rationalism even as they used it to defend their faith.[11] We see this tension in Mormon representations. While I will address the battle *against* rationalism shortly, the literalism that we see in the First Vision narrative and the Book of Mormon reinforces rationalism by insisting on the viability of our senses to gain knowledge about the world around us. Sound certainly plays a prominent role, and texture has its place, but the accounts privilege sight. Joseph Smith maintains that he saw God and Christ. The Three Witnesses testified that "we have seen the plates," and the Eight Witnesses claim that they "have seen and hefted" the plates.[12] And a much-cited episode in the Book of Mormon describes how the Brother of Jared gains spiritual knowledge by seeing the finger of God: "And the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord; and it was as the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood" (Eth. 3:6). Time and again, sight is equated with knowledge, but sight is not merely a metaphor for spiritual perception. People gain knowledge by literally viewing the divine, thus reinforcing the rational basis of Mormonism.

Representations of these experiences do not simply make them ac-

cessible to others, but they shape our perception and define the experience itself. Art historian Noel Carmack asserts: "Latter-day Saint visual perceptions of Christ throughout the last century were images born out of a form of biblical literalism. Mormon literalism disregarded the skepticism of textual scholarship in favor of studies that supported the LDS canon of scripture. Consequently, official Latter-day Saint publications adopted images from a large body of Western art that substantiated Christ's ministry as a historical reality."[13] Carmack points out that, not only does the theological emphasis on an objective experience encourage artists to represent these events via realism, but also that artistic realism encourages interpretations that literalize internal, subjective experiences. Thus, realism and literalism reinforce each other. Or, as Carmack puts it, "The affection for highly realistic art, then, reinforced a literal view of the scriptures,"[14] but I would add that a literal view of the scriptures and literal interpretations of spiritual experiences such as Joseph Smith's First Vision and nocturnal encounters with the angel Moroni encourage highly realistic art grounded in specific times and places.

This literalism, this desire to rationalize spiritual experiences by making them concrete, is evident at every turn. For example, the Church encourages teachers to use the Gospel Art Packet, a small, portable portfolio containing images displaying stories from the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, events from Church history, and a few miscellaneous images of temples, baptismal fonts, and latter-day prophets. Printed instructions suggest, "Carefully select appropriate pictures that illustrate gospel stories or principles." Of the ninety-seven images highlighting stories from scriptures and Church history, not one strays from a literalist reading of the texts. Of course, we should not be too surprised, for most of the images merely offer a pictorial account of a specific story. But the stories that are, perhaps, more allegorical (as with *The Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the Ark with Animals*) or more subjective (as with *Moses and the Burning Bush, The Announcement of Christ's Birth to the Shepherds, The Brother of Jared Sees the Finger of the Lord, The First Vision,* and *Moroni Appears to Joseph Smith in His Room*) convey a concreteness that offers nothing other than a literal reading of those passages or events. As for "principles," one could, as the Gospel Art instructions recommend, reorganize the images according to categories like "Family," "Service," and "Ordinances"; but again, the images convey a highly tangible representation of those principles. For example, "family" is not a subjective impression with flexi-

ble boundaries, but a husband, wife, and children. Service is not an ab-
stract concept suggesting a giving up of self, but the act of giving a man
sight, defending one's group from invaders, or rescuing a frozen pioneer.

The *Ensign* is equally committed to literalism. While we could ex-
tend my assertion to previous years, a quick look at the 2004 issues re-
minds us of the complete commitment to pictorial realism. There are
twenty-five paintings on the covers, inside covers, and inside back covers
of the twelve issues. Four portray images directly depicting Jesus (with the
Nephites, with Mary after the resurrection, breaking bread with the apos-
tles, and raising Jarius's daughter) and two depict New Testament scenes
(one of Mary and Joseph and the second of Mary alone). Seven depict
scenes from the Book of Mormon (Laman and Lemuel tormenting
Nephi, Lehi building an altar, Lehi and the Tree of Life, an
Anti-Nephi-Lehite woman and child, an angel visiting the sons of Mosiah,
and two depictions of the waters of Mormon); eight paintings portray
events from Church history (three of the pioneer trek, two of Joseph
Smith, one of Nauvoo, another of Adam-ondi-Ahman, and one of a
mother quilting with a child nearby); and four others depict a baby being
blessed, a winter scene of Salt Lake City, and two temples. In every case,
the images simply illustrate a person, an event, or a place. While the
degree of detail differs, each painting is representational and literal.

My point is not to undermine this impulse to "illustrate" a story or
principle, but merely to identify the persistent desire to ground scriptural
stories, people, or principles in historically specific times and places, thus
privileging a rationalist epistemology. External appearances—what we see
with our eyes—count as knowledge. From this point of view, spiritual expe-
riences are objective realities, not subjective impressions. All we have to
do is open our eyes.

Portraying the Ideal

Art does not produce the visible; rather, it makes visible. —Paul Klee[15]

Surprisingly, insisting on the particular time and place of spiritual
experiences often works against the appeal of sacred texts and important
spiritual events. Historicizing may ground an event in a reality accessible
to our five senses, but it simultaneously distances us from those events. As
Richard Oman, curator at the Church Museum of History and Art,
points out, "One of those problems [of realism] is that realism can focus
the viewers on the trivial instead of on the transcendent."[16] Oman's no-

tion of the transcendent echoes Aristotle's attempt to differentiate between history and poetry. Aristotle argues that the difference is that "one tells of what has happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history, for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars."[17] This difference is what makes poetry so appealing to Aristotle, but it is also the appeal for many a Mormon reader who desires to follow Nephi's lead: "I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning" (1 Ne. 19:23).

Readers, in effect, translate the story, shifting the emphasis from the concrete to the metaphorical, from the historical to the poetic. In other words, this interpretive move allows readers to take a story about Nephi, Laman, and Lemuel, three young men purportedly living in Jerusalem 600 years B.C., attempting to acquire scriptures on metal plates before their flight into the Arabian Peninsula, and turn it into a mythic story about the value of obedience, persistence, and faith. The story becomes myth—from the Greek *mythoi* meaning plots—in the sense that it offers a narrative representing the values, interests, and aspirations of the Mormon community. The story loses its historical mooring, but this portability actually makes it more useful to those seeking ethical, edifying, and timely instruction. It is no longer history but poetry.

This desire to translate an event from one context to another leads to a specific kind of aesthetic. Noel Carmack argues that representations are effective to the degree that they allow viewers to personalize the image. Referring to Del Parson's popular painting of Jesus, Carmack quotes Lynette, Del's wife: "Del's purpose in painting the Savior was to create an image in which the members of the Church could project their feelings of the Savior."[18] Oman echoes this line of reasoning when he claims that, speaking of Rembrandt's portrait of Jesus, Rembrandt communicates immanence by obscuring the eyes and mouth: "Obscuring them causes the viewer to fill the features in, subconsciously expressing his or her personal feelings about the Lord."[19] But this obscuring often has less to do with a refusal to delineate a specific feature, as Oman suggests, than with decontextualizing Jesus. Ironically, what allows viewers to personalize the image is its ahistoricism. Jesus is nowhere in particular. As we look again at Del Parson's popular painting of Jesus, we note that the clothing does not suggest a distinct time, place, or event. The background, reminiscent of a backdrop one might find at an Olan Mills photographic studio, does

not situate Jesus in history, but this absence makes it easier for viewers to "project their feelings of the Savior."

Another way to frame this desire for a portable or universal Jesus is to produce what Mormon artist James Christensen calls "an acceptable generic icon": "In struggling with the issues involved in painting Christ, I have (as have artists other than myself) come to realize that we do not actually need to have a physically accurate portrayal of Jesus Christ. For artists, the goal is to create a character in an image that we can identify with, that we can relate to. But at the same time that character should not remind us of a neighbor or some acquaintance. Christ is too personal to each of us. He must be portrayed with universal but distinct qualities."[20]

This phrase, "universal but distinct qualities," accurately describes the role of an icon, a representation that is based on a resemblance of the object yet contains elements that readers or viewers use to recognize the image. Clarifying the insights of semiotician Charles Peirce, W. J. T Mitchell, professor of English and art history at the University of Chicago, explains that "an iconic account of the relation 'stone-represents-man' would stress resemblance: a certain stone might stand for a man because it is upright, or because it is hard, or because the shape resembles that of a man."[21] That is, an icon tries to reproduce in concrete form the exterior appearance of a person, place, or thing.

Admittedly, a community must largely agree on those salient features or elements that allow one to recognize that resemblance. In other words, this strategy of representing Jesus as an icon has its limits, and a religious community defines those limits. As Christensen notes, the image must be an "*acceptable* generic icon." But what defines "acceptability"? Certainly, the answer addresses physical features. For example, I've never seen a beardless, short, dark-skinned, or chubby Jesus in Church art work. However, acceptability has less to do, perhaps, with realism than with idealism, less to do with resemblance than symbolic value. As Christensen reminds us: "It would be unseemly to depict him in an undignified way—even if that image might be historically or pictorially accurate."[22] Mormon artist Arnold Friberg takes idealism one step further when he claims that "artists are not painting a likeness, but an idea—a spiritual concept."[23] Friberg and Christensen are less concerned with iconic resemblances of physical qualities than with iconic resemblances of Mormon ideals, principles, or attitudes.

Of course, this ideal grows out of descriptions in sacred texts, but