

## Our Artistic Potential

The Mormon Arts Center. *The Kimball Challenge at Fifty: Mormon Arts Center Essays*. New York: The Mormon Arts Center, 2017. 156 pp. Paper: \$16.95. ISBN: 978-1977709714.

*Reviewed by Jacob Bender*

The occasion for this slim new volume of essays is the fiftieth anniversary of Spencer W. Kimball's "Education for Eternity" talk, delivered to Brigham Young University faculty at the commencement of fall semester 1967. Although the majority of the talk centered on bringing "the Spirit of the Master" into the classroom, it was Kimball's concluding remarks—which, according to Richard Bushman, were spoken almost as an afterthought—that proved to have the most influential afterlife: "Could there be among us embryo poets and novelists like Goethe?" Kimball asked. "Can there never be another Michelangelo?" He went on to ask if we could produce Wagners, Bachs, and Shakespeares of our own, or an oratorio even better than Handel's *Messiah*. Kimball's questions were interpreted by many as a sort of artistic call to arms for Zion to rise up and not only match but exceed the world in the realms of aesthetic achievement.

It was not the first time a General Authority had waxed rhapsodic on our artistic potential. We had been hearing since the nineteenth century that, with our greater light and knowledge, "We will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own"—though we always felt a slight twinge of disappointment whenever we learned that this prophecy hadn't been uttered by Brigham Young or John Taylor, but Orson F. Whitney, one of the lesser-known apostles; there was always this quiet, nagging fear that the prophecy was false and our faith was vain. But lo, Kimball *did* become a full-fledged prophet, seer, and revelator, and so his words

carried all the more heft and authority. Hence, when this portion of the talk was later reprinted in a 1977 *Ensign* article (the afterthought was now the centerpiece), Kimball's challenge became imbued with the power of a prophetic pronouncement. The Church's artists felt not only challenged, not only encouraged, but *called* to their work.

Fifty years later seems to be as good a time as any to take stock of how well that challenge is going. The essays contained in this collection were all initially delivered as presentations at the inaugural Mormon Arts Center Festival, held in New York City June 29–July 1, 2017. It features a murderer's row of presenters, a sort of who's who of contemporary LDS arts and letters. It opens with a brief introduction by Richard Bushman and a keynote delivered by Terryl Givens, and then barrels forward from there. If this collection accomplishes nothing else, it corrals together a stunningly diverse array of fascinating voices into one convenient volume.

There is no single idea or through-thread that unites all these talks besides their general responses to Kimball's 1967 address. Givens, for example, is less interested in the fallout or ramifications of the talk than in discussing how Mormon religious art can forge its own identity, distinct from that of the Catholic and Protestant traditions. In his own inimitable style, Givens argues that Mormon art focuses upon the holiness of the specific and the quotidian, as opposed to the abstract. That thread is also taken up by Jared Hickman, who examines an anecdote from the life of Joseph Smith, wherein he declared that a jovial dinner party he attended was "after the Order of the Son of God." Brother Joseph, too, found the divine in the quotidian, Hickman argues.

Many of these essayists likewise use Kimball's talk less as a focus than as a point of departure: Paul L. Anderson provides a fascinating historical sketch of temple architecture throughout the late-twentieth century; Adam S. Miller engages in a spirited defense of fiction; Steven L. Peck plugs his upcoming novel *Gilda Trillim*; Kent S. Larsen traces how the Book of Mormon's Corianton story has been adapted for print, Broadway, and Hollywood.

But others do, in fact, respond to Kimball's challenge directly. Campbell Gray, for example, somberly declares that, "Generally speaking, [Kimball's challenge] has not been achieved by Mormon visual artists," though he optimistically contends that it is still possible for Mormon artists to do so—and that without having to make any special concessions to "Western social conditions [that] currently exist . . . other than applying deep thought, analysis and creativity in constructing intelligent visual theses." Meanwhile, Kristine Haglund explores bureaucratic reasons for why our artists have perhaps fallen short of Kimball's vision: she discusses Handbook 2's emphasis on keeping sacrament meeting music "appropriate," which typically only means "non-distracting" or "inoffensive," and hence mediocre. But rather than merely attack the term "appropriate" itself, she instead seeks to expand it: "At its root," she argues, "the word is from 'propriare,'—to make one's own. It is about belonging. 'Appropriate' art for Mormon worship, then, is art that reminds us of the deep covenants which bind us to each other, and to God in a network of transcendent belonging." Similarly, John Durham Peters argues that our LDS predilection toward inoffensiveness is a stumbling block in our quest toward artistic excellence: "Perhaps Mormons fill the ranks of accountants, agronomists, and dentists," he muses, "precisely because these fields seem safe from soul-wrenching questions." He argues that instead of avoiding the proverbial abyss, Mormon artists should gaze into it, engage with it, even seek to redeem it. Likewise, Michael Hicks disputes Kimball's imputation that, say, "a temple-worthy Wagner would have written better music," claiming that "a transgressive personality goes hand in glove with exploration, which we instinctively attach to the idea of art." The problem is not our worthiness, but our daring.

Hicks is one of several essayists who openly critiques Kimball's challenge; he takes direct issue, for example, with the flagrant Eurocentrism of Kimball's list of great artists. Hicks calls for an LDS aesthetic that looks beyond Utah, beyond the Western tradition, to encompass the whole world and see the "Mormonism" in everything. The gospel, he argues,

is not geographically bound, and neither should our art be (Hicks's and Givens's essays are the two that feel the most like sermons). Jana Riess for her part not only criticizes Kimball's Eurocentrism, but also contends that his list focuses too much on the "lone genius archetype," a paradigm with which Mormons have had little success. "We're valuing and honoring the wrong things, the things that Mormons don't do well," she argues. Rather, we tend to excel at communal artistic efforts, e.g., the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, ballroom dancing, and genre fiction. Eric Samuelsen, in turn, finds Kimball's very categories hopelessly outdated, far too beholden to "hierarchal" attitudes toward artistic achievement. Nowadays scholars tend to judge artworks as cultural artifacts, he argues, not against some arbitrary definition of artistic "greatness." "Our contemporary post-modern approach to literature . . . is altogether good and right and worthy and virtuous," he provocatively argues, and he consequently dismisses Kimball's challenge as a mere cultural artifact as well.

Still others contend that many LDS artists have *already* fulfilled Kimball's vision, and it is to our own condemnation that we have failed to recognize them. Glen Nelson argues as much for the Great Depression paintings of Joseph Paul Vorst, while Nathan Thatcher claims the same for Spanish composer Francisco Estévez. The implication of both essays is that we as a Church do not know what to do with the artistic geniuses we already have, and we will not be able to cultivate more until we do. Hopefully the sheer existence of these essays will be a first step toward better recognizing these neglected figures in our midst; in fact, one of the chief values of this collection may simply be that it provides an excellent series of rabbit holes to explore, as each essay introduces the reader to a wealth of new artists. Even if you've already heard of many of these folks, odds are you haven't heard of them all.

Each essay has something to offer, though of course not every essay will hold the same interest for the same readers. It is also not a flawless volume: a few stray printing errors crop up here and there, and many

of the images discussed therein are represented only by long URL links that were clearly copy and pasted from someone's web browser. But then again, the entire production has a sort of informal, conversational air about it—much like the conference proceedings themselves were, I imagine. This collection is not intended to provide the final word on anything, but rather to stimulate the conversation, to keep it going, as we continue to wrestle with what it means to be a Mormon, to be an artist, and to be both and neither at once.



## As the Savor: The Poetry of R. A. Christmas

R. A. Christmas. *Saviors on Mt. Disneyland: New and Collected Poems*. Self-published, Lulu, 2017. 180 pp. Paper: \$20.00. ISBN: 9781365463686.

*Reviewed by Dennis Clark*

If you have never read a poem by Bob Christmas, this book is your chance to catch up. Take it.

If you have read poems by Bob Christmas, this book is your chance to enjoy yourself all over again. Plunge in.

If you have no interest in reading poems by Bob Christmas, it's only because you haven't yet read any. This review is your introduction.

I like reading poems by Bob Christmas. This is not because they are pretty, fluffy, light-filled evocations of young love, true faith, or the beauty of nature. You do not inhale fresh mountain air through these poems. Reading a Christmas poem is more akin to changing a flat tire on your Ford Fairlane in the grit of the shoulder of I-15 as eighteen-wheelers and