

# The Gold Plates in the Contemporary Popular Imagination

*Saskia M. Tielens*

*Note: This paper was originally delivered in conjunction with a slideshow of web-sourced images. These illustrative figures may be found at [www.dialoguejournal.com/2012/the-gold-plates-in-the-popular-imagination](http://www.dialoguejournal.com/2012/the-gold-plates-in-the-popular-imagination).*

The gold plates occupy an interesting place in Mormon culture. Although they are an essential part of the Mormon foundational narrative, the plates have a peripheral place in Mormons' ordinary discourse. Take, for example, the 1989 Primary songbook.<sup>1</sup> According to the index, there are sixteen songs about being reverent in church, and an additional three concerned with the need for quiet. In contrast, only two explicitly deal with the gold plates. And when one thinks about Mormon material culture, sacred garments and temple art come more readily to mind than the plates. Yet in this paper I argue that the gold plates are actually prime examples of Mormon material culture, and that, in fact, the practice of invoking the gold plates in the popular imagination shapes and reflects Mormon culture in significant ways.

## **Material culture**

An extensive treatment of material culture studies is beyond the scope of this brief paper. Instead, I offer illustrations of the power of material culture in everyday lived religion—starting with a Catholic and Protestant perspective and then ending with a Mormon view. The material dimension of religion is central to re-

ligious experiences, as religion is more than knowledge gained from saints or scriptures. Throughout history, the faithful of all religions have engaged in physical expressions of religious feelings, beliefs, and traditions.<sup>2</sup> The body is a central mediator of religious experience, and it is the physical nature of material culture that allows it to play a role in affirming those beliefs and experiences.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that material culture is not a neutral byproduct of peoples' lives. Material culture, in the form of apparently inanimate objects, acts on people and is acted upon by people to realize social functions, control social relationships, and give meaning to human enterprise.<sup>4</sup> While material culture in general might be an indication of the particular subculture or class to which a person belongs, or the occupation and/or status they hold,<sup>5</sup> material culture that expresses religion has its own specific signifiers. It is through material culture than people learn the habits and discourses of their religious communities. After all, symbolic systems are not just passed down but must be re-learned in every generation, through seeing, doing, and touching.<sup>6</sup> Catholic children are extensively prepared for their first Holy Communion at age seven, but it is when they kneel in their fancy, new, white clothes and touch, see, and even taste the body and blood of Christ that they begin to understand the power of the Eucharist and, in that sense, what it means to be Catholic (figures 1 and 2). Encountering the material in religion helps generate religious values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes. It is through images that one becomes religious in a particular manner.<sup>7</sup> A Catholic might wear a scapular (figure 3) or hang a picture of the Sacred Heart on the wall. A Protestant might have an organ in the living room (figure 4) or a lavish family Bible. A Mormon might prominently frame a "Proclamation on the Family" or have a small temple ornament hanging in the Christmas tree (figure 5). In all these instances, the material culture surrounding people is used to construct meaning. People from different faiths use religious objects in fairly similar manners, as a set of theological and cultural tools that respond to people's spiritual, psychological and social yearnings.<sup>8</sup> However, when comparing a Catholic First Communion at age seven to a Mormon baptism at age eight, the similarities in symbolism and doctrine (the white clothes, the age at which the ritual happens) do not preclude a different experi-

ence. Similar theological concepts, mediated by similar objects, will be experienced differently because the objects are acted upon and interacted with in a different manner. Material religious culture, therefore, is both ecumenical and highly specific. The specificity lies in the objects being invoked in radically different experiential frameworks. These frameworks and the resulting differences in self-understanding, rather than the objects themselves, make for the different experiences of the Catholic and Mormon children discussed above .

The power of a religious object, which Robert Armstrong calls “affecting presence,”<sup>9</sup> comes into being through the people who interact with it. Affecting presence is often closely tied to the emotion produced in a believer.<sup>10</sup> Let us take this family Bible into consideration (figure 6). It was sold at auction in 2011, and as one viewer said on her personal blog, “Despite loosing [sic] the Bible, it inspired me to want something so beautiful and meaningful in my future family. . . . I am determined to find one someday. One that will be filled with notes, papers, letters, and will be passed down from one generation to the next and hopefully preserved for many years.”<sup>11</sup> For this woman, the meaning of the Bible lay not as much in its words as it did in the Bible as a repository for memories and a reminder of her love for her family.

Relationships are one of the primary ways in which objects become meaningful.<sup>12</sup> Take, first of all, the relationship between individuals and Christ. Although Protestant culture is known for being sober, the Reformation did not entirely eliminate images; instead, reformers sought to change the kind of relationships believers created with these images. Saints were felt to be too Catholic, so art exhibited figures from the Old Testament, placed within their narratives in order to downplay any sense of devotional use.<sup>13</sup> However, in time, close-ups of paintings were reproduced, like Hofmann’s Head of Christ (figure 7). These were accorded a place of honor within the home and slowly began to be used to cultivate a personal relationship with Christ through his image. A similar thing happened with Sallman’s Head of Christ (figure 8), an image that might be familiar to you. In her book *Material Christianity*, Colleen McDannell argues that Protestants “empowered [that image] in much the same way that Catholics find an affecting presence in home shrines.”<sup>14</sup> Protestants consciously or un-

consciously felt that this image of a friendly, personal, involved Christ with such kind eyes could serve as a mediator between them and God.<sup>15</sup> But material culture also cultivates relationships between people. Giving religious goods as gifts in a social context can build up friendships, as it binds people to the sacred as well as to each other.<sup>16</sup> In that manner, giving a friend a bookmark on her birthday for use in her Bible affirms community affiliation and shared values. Displaying a religious object helps “embed individuals . . . within a social world.”<sup>17</sup> Thus these religious objects represent culture and resonate culturally because the in-crowd, so to speak, recognizes them as their own.<sup>18</sup> A quick search of Pinterest reveals many, many religious goods given as gifts (figures 9–11). Giving and receiving these gifts not only demonstrates who is in the group (and who is not), but also teaches how to act and think like Christians through categorization.<sup>19</sup>

This brings us to another major use of material culture: namely, creating and sustaining collective memory. Through spaces, images, gestures, and objects, we embody memory and try to recreate an authentic past. Take the cross, for example. The presence of the cross in church, or the act of making the sign of the cross at home before meals, is in essence a “condensed commemoration, a narrative made flesh” of the foundational belief of Christianity.<sup>20</sup> Images and/or objects such as the cross operate as a link in the chain of memory; one scholar calls this the “religious act of recalling a past which gives meaning to the present and contains the future,” and, in so doing, “enables a group of believers to demonstrate publicly and privately that they belong to a distinctive religion.”<sup>21</sup> Because objects are highly visible assertions of lineage, in that sense,<sup>22</sup> they are excellent mediators of religious memory. In fact, material culture often functions to “create a continuous and personal narrative of the past,”<sup>23</sup> a narrative that is wholly individual. Taking home a souvenir from a pilgrimage, for example, allows its owner to partake of the power of the original experience<sup>24</sup> or pass it on to a third party,<sup>25</sup> thus perpetuating and expanding the chain of memory.

### **Material Culture within Mormonism**

At first sight, Mormon culture seems to lack powerful symbols. Mormon meetings are rather low church in their liturgy:

there is no art in LDS chapels, for example, and the trays used to pass the sacrament of bread and water, as well as the sacrament itself, are very pragmatic. However, the simplicity of Sunday meetings does not tell the whole story of Mormon symbolism. One only has to look at a temple to see that (figure 12), as the soaring buildings are usually accompanied by extensively landscaped gardens and the celestial room is explicitly said to mirror the exalted and peaceful state open to eternal families.<sup>26</sup> But temples are not the only place where material culture comes into play in a Mormon context. Mormon cities are laid out in a particular way. Mormon homes usually contain an abundance of family photos, reflecting the emphasis on the family. Remembrance books (figure 13) can be found on the shelves. Mormons are likely to have food storage hidden away somewhere, a tangible reminder of the self-sufficiency ingrained in Mormon culture and a practice requiring Mormon cookbooks to learn how to rotate storage foods (figure 14). And let us not forget about funeral potatoes, whether they are made with some kind of cream-based soup or fresh *gryère* (figure 15). It should be clear that identity markers abound.

While the LDS Church is structured and hierarchical in nature, and this institutionalization is reflected in Mormon culture when it comes to acceptable modes of behavior and beliefs, popular culture is still free to intersect with more sacred concepts, as it does within mainstream Christianity. In doing so, it creates a hybrid culture in which it is perfectly acceptable to spread the gospel by invoking a TV show, for example (figure 16). Although evangelical Protestants are particularly adept at this practice, Catholic lay members also participate in this, as you can see in this *iPray* t-shirt, with a design that is likely to be familiar to a lot of you (figure 17).

In a specifically Mormon context, some of you might be familiar with the “Hey, Girl” meme going around the Internet these days (figures 18–20). I found these on Pinterest, and Mormons are likely to repin them for a couple of reasons: obviously they’re funny and slightly subversive in a Mormon context. They work very well to mark your Mormonism without actually saying, “I’m a Mormon” or pinning a picture of a temple to one of your boards. Repinning them from other Mormons strengthens that commu-

nity bond. Lastly, appropriating the meme allows its viewers to enter into a broader conversation (in this case about female desire) while staying safely within a Mormon context.

One final meme will lead us to the next section of my paper about the gold plates in Mormon material culture. I present to you Hipster Moroni (figure 21).

### **The Gold Plates in Mormon Material Culture**

The gold plates tend to pop up in Mormon material culture where you would expect them, but also where you might not. Let me run you through a quick selection. I'll start off with some more institutionalized versions, like the Primary song (figure 22). The painting, too, is fairly expected (figure 23). The world's fair exhibit is slightly more unusual (figure 24), but seems a fairly good way to tell the world what makes Mormonism special. Crafts made to resemble the gold plates (figure 25) fall somewhere in the middle, as they are a domestic product that is very much linked to the institutionalized Church through the practice of Family Home Evening. Domestic recreations of institutionalized practices are central to material religion.<sup>27</sup> Take this early morning seminary activity as an example: the students were given "gold plates" on which to chisel their testimonies, to better replicate the original experience. Seeing their testimonies set in stone, as it were, was an added bonus. Replicating the gold plates, either at home or at a church activity, is a common part of Mormon culture. Displaying the gold plates at home, whether homemade or bought (figure 26), serves the chain of memory well.

However, my interest lies not so much in the institutionalized uses of the gold plates, but rather in the creative ways members use them to their advantage. The following story is my favorite, from the BYU special collections:

The story is about "creative dating," of which Mr. M. was an aficionado during his days at BYU. Creative dating involves coming up with unique and outrageous ways to ask girls out. The story took place in fall 1986, before BYU's homecoming dance. "I made golden plates with each leaf having a word on it, asking her to the dance. I buried them in her back yard. Then I got her mother to let me in her home at 2 A.M. I dressed one of my friends up as Angel Moroni. We put flour and hairspray in his hair to make it white and dressed him in a white bed sheet. And we put a big spotlight behind him and

snuck into her room and turned the spotlight on. He said something to her, but I can't remember what it was. He accompanied her to the site where the plates were buried at she dug them up [sic]. And she said yes.<sup>28</sup>

And while the image of a young man playing Moroni with flour in his hair kind of steals the show, the story illustrates how the gold plates work in Mormon culture quite neatly. By invoking the gold plates in such a manner, the boy demonstrates that he is not only creative but also a good Mormon. He counts on the scenario impressing the girl not only because of the effort involved in producing this mini-drama, but also because it speaks to their common religious knowledge and his apparent ability and willingness to incorporate that knowledge into their future lives.

Let's move on to another example. Baptism cakes (figures 27 and 28) use the gold plates to invoke the foundational narrative of Mormonism at an important milestone in a child's life. When one thinks of the implications of ingesting the gold plates and thus having them become part of a person, the fact that there are many examples of edible gold plates becomes significant. A group of women, when asked, recalled making Rice Krispie gold plates, with licorice rings to bind them together. This was at a church activity. Another remembered receiving two mini chocolates, glued to a piece of paper and modeled after the gold plates. Another made gingerbread gold plates with her family after finishing a read-through of the Book of Mormon.<sup>29</sup> The gold plates clearly invade domestic life and are able to serve as tangible links in the chain of religious memory, at least until eaten.

Or take this rubber stamp (figure 29). It may not have the added significance of being edible, but like the cakes, a stamp speaks to that part of Mormon culture that values domesticity, in this case through crafting. It also shows its owner's allegiance to Mormon culture, not only in use, but also just as a part of someone's stamp collection.

Action figures such as Moroni burying the gold plates (figure 30) offer parents toys that socialize their children into a particular religious mode of being by reinforcing the Mormon worldview and allowing for insularity of culture. Toys such as these are an important element of religious expression, allowing children to integrate religion into their play world<sup>30</sup> and permeate all of life.

Lastly, tie pins and tie tacks (figures 31 and 32) allow members to demonstrate their belonging in an understated way. They most likely belong to the Sunday uniform, thereby functioning as a signifier not only to outsiders, but also (and importantly) to fellow members. These are explicitly marketed as a missionary gift, which means they carry the hopes and dreams of many a proud grandma for her grandson that the chain of memory will not be broken and that the Mormon heritage will be passed on to new generations.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have offered a snapshot of material culture as it relates to religious experiences. We have seen how people surround themselves with objects that mark their identity, pass on religious memory, and differentiate insiders from outsiders. Although the objects that people interact with are different, religious material culture is used in surprisingly similar ways among Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons.

The focus of this paper was the function of the gold plates in material culture. While institutionalized, Church-sanctioned uses of the gold plates play a role in shaping what is seen as acceptable material culture within the Mormon world, we only have to think of a young Moroni with flour in his hair to recognize the creativity with which Mormons engage with the gold plates in their daily lives. Although the uses of the gold plates in the popular imagination are myriad, and often overlap, several things have become clear. Mormonism has a strong culture of domesticity, and this is reflected in its material culture. Gold plates are not just bought at Deseret Book but also made at home for Family Home Evening. They are made out of metal, but also out of Rice Krispies or cake batter and frosting, and then happily eaten. They are worn on clothing, played with, and shared on the Internet. In replicating the gold plates and mediating them into every day life, the gold plates become links in the chain of memory, helping dispense the original experience of the angel Moroni giving Joseph Smith the gold plates and pointing to everything that was to follow. Because material culture depends very much on relationships between people, memory is transmitted not only generationally, from parent to child, but also horizontally, from church member to church



member around the world. In this manner, a web is spun that connects members to each other through their common experiences of the gold plates. It strengthens community differently than, for example, a Fast and Testimony meeting or a ward service activity. I would argue that material culture—and specifically the gold plates—should not be underestimated in this regard. Material culture is free to move beyond boundaries, whether they are geographical in nature, based on language, or tied to ethnicities. Although material culture is connected to ideas of class, it may at times also move beyond class, offering its users a way to build community that is distinctive, crucial, and truly transcendent. Invoking material culture allows believers to participate in a conversation regarding community, history, and memory that asks the dynamic yet eternal question of what it means to be a member of a particular culture in a particular time. And although the gold plates clearly function as identity markers, delineating insiders from outsiders in what sometimes seems to be a fairly non-negotiable manner, they are also used in insider culture as well. Invoking the gold plates marks orthodoxy, perhaps, or a way of thinking, or at the very least a willingness to publicly announce yourself as a gold-plate-believing Mormon invested in the insularity of Mormon culture.<sup>31</sup>

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, as physical reminders of Joseph Smith's original experience, they act to bring the past into the present. Using the gold plates in daily life in that sense means aligning yourself with the story they represent. Otherwise said, invoking the gold plates means actively shaping your life's story to be a continuation of the story Joseph Smith began. Material culture, especially if it is slightly kitschy, tends to be dismissed as unimportant or banal. After all, what kind of value can inhere in a seven-dollar tie tack or a baking mold? But once we stop judging objects based on their artistic and/or monetary value or gendered position within daily life, it becomes clear that it is the everyday humdrum nature of these objects that gives them their power. By being present where everyday Mormon life is lived, these objects enwrap Mormons and remind them not only of their past, present, and future, but also of their place in the larger story of Mormonism and the world.

### Notes

1. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Children's Songbook* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1991).
2. Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1.
3. E. Frances King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 5–6.
4. Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 3.
5. Ibid, 4.
6. McDannell, 2.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 17.
9. Robert Plant Armstrong, *Affecting Presence*, quoted in McDannell, 18.
10. McDannell, 25.
11. Rebecca, "Old Family Bible." *Living Nazareth*, May 16, 2011, <http://livingnazareth.blogspot.com/2011/05/old-family-bible.html> (accessed July 8, 2012).
12. McDannell, 4.
13. Ibid., 26–27.
14. Ibid., 28.
15. Ibid., 30.
16. Ibid., 45.
17. King, 56.
18. Woodward, 28.
19. McDannell, 45.
20. King, 15.
21. Danièle Hervieu-Leger, quoted in King, 15.
22. King, 16.
23. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1984), quoted in McDannell, 41.
24. McDannell, 41.
25. King, 3.
26. "Inside the Temple," <http://www.lds.org/church/temples/why-we-build-temples/inside-the-temple?lang=eng> (accessed July 14, 2012).
27. King, 16.
28. Jessica L. Barker and M (name withheld by request), Mormon Lore—Creative Dating: Angel Moroni and the Golden Plates, n.d. Folklore Archive, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library,

Brigham Young University, Provo. My special thanks to Christopher C. Smith.

29. "Creative Uses of the Gold Plates," posting to Feminist Mormon Housewives Society (Facebook group), July 17, 2012, printout in my possession, used by permission.

30. McDannell, 52.

31. I propose to start thinking of members that demonstrate their investment in Mormon culture in this manner as Gold Plate Mormons, echoing the well-known categories of Liahona and Iron Rod Mormons.