

## What is an LDS Artist?

Glen Nelson. *Joseph Paul Vorst*. New York: Mormon Artist Group, 2017. 236 pp. Paper: \$29.95. ISBN: 9780692950227.

*Reviewed by Micah Christensen*



Image 1. Joseph Paul Vorst (1897–1947) *After the Flood* (c. 1940) Oil on canvas. 28 x 36 in. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville.

“Joseph Paul Vorst was arguably the most culturally significant Latter-day Saint painter of his time.”<sup>1</sup> So, starts the Church History Museum’s

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1. Glen Nelson and Laura Allred Hurtado, “An introduction to Joseph Paul Vorst, Video Script,” *Joseph Paul Vorst A Retrospective: Exhibition Press Guide*

video for the exhibition on the life and works of Joseph Paul Vorst (1897–1947). The video and the exhibition is a joint collaboration between the museum’s curator, Laura Allred Hurtado, and the independent writer Glen Nelson, who authored a catalogue detailing the life and known works of the German-American artist. Both exhibition and catalogue seek to rehabilitate the reputation of an artist that has largely been overlooked. Vorst’s life is beautifully evoked and contextualized on every page by Nelson, who raises questions about conventional definitions of what it means to be a Mormon artist.

Vorst’s tumultuous life would make a remarkable biopic. Wounded in WWI, he converted to the Church in his early twenties, moved to America before WWII, returned to paint Adolf Hitler’s portrait from life, shared a studio with one of the greatest American artists, and died prematurely from a brain hemorrhage at the age of fifty. The style and content of his art changed with the times and locations he lived, from expressionist linocuts in Germany to mid-western genre scenes heavily influenced by Thomas Hart Benton. Working among what art historians today called the Regionalists, Vorst’s *oeuvre* is different in style and content than any of the preeminent contemporary LDS artists of his era.

Little is known about Vorst’s early life. The chaos inflicted on German record keeping during two world wars makes it difficult to research even the most public of figures, let alone Vorst, the seventh child of a poor provincial family. (More than 90 percent of his hometown, Essen, was destroyed in WWII.<sup>2</sup>) Despite the dearth of materials in this and many parts of the artist’s turbulent life, Nelson does a great deal to contextualize Vorst in his time and place.

Vorst was seventeen years old when Germany entered World War I and, like many of his generation, was pressed into service. Wounded with shrapnel, Vorst described himself as “permanently lame in one leg.”<sup>3</sup> Sometime after the war, probably around 1919 and at the age of twenty-two, Vorst enrolled in the local Essen School of Trades and Applied Arts

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(Salt Lake City: Church History Museum, 2017), 65.

2. Glen Nelson, *Joseph Paul Vorst* (New York: Mormon Artist Group, 2017), 10.

3. Nelson, *Joseph Paul Vorst*, 21.

(EHKGS). The curriculum was a mix of practical skills like sign painting, architectural rendering, and mechanical draftsmanship, taught by a mix of engineers, architects, and fine artists. One of his earliest known works, published in Nelson's catalogue, is a traditional watercolor *Braunschweig* (1919). Though pedestrian in aesthetic terms, the work demonstrated a burgeoning arsenal of skills including command of color, perspective, and light, all in a very unforgiving medium. Vorst's work during these years reflected the kind of mimetic experimentation that is expected of any young artist.

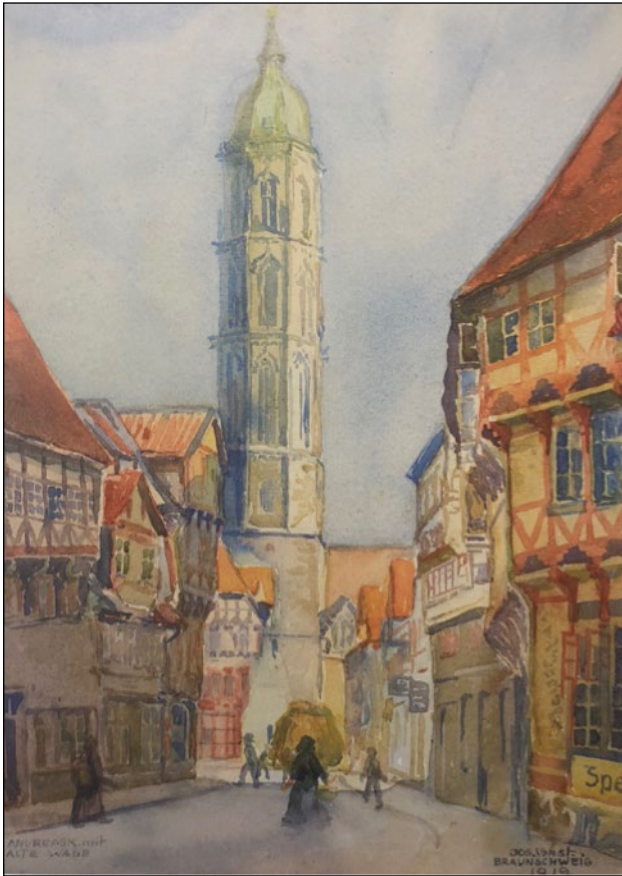


Image 2. Joseph Paul Vorst. Braunschweig (1919) Watercolor on paper. 16 x 12 in. Collection of Cris and Janae Baird. Reproduced courtesy of the Carl and Carole Vorst Estate.

It was shortly after this that Vorst joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He attended his local congregation and ticked all the boxes of membership, including regular attendance and ordinations to the priesthood.

At the time, Vorst was regularly publishing works in local German newspapers, and studied briefly with the preeminent figurative artist of the era, Max Liebermann (1847–1935), with whom Vorst maintained a lifelong correspondence. The economic troubles in Germany, however, made America more promising.

Vorst had relatives in Missouri. So, unlike many European converts who headed to Salt Lake City to take advantage of the economic and social benefits of the Saints, Vorst moved to the Midwest. He married a non-member and had children, who today are not closely associated with the Church. Despite this relative isolation from the center of the Church, Vorst remained very active participating in his local congregation and receiving missionaries.

Vorst made two trips to Salt Lake City in his life. His travels to the administrative center of Mormonism, however, bore no official commissions from Church nor any known local sales of his work. He was not alone in this. Besides a few temple projects that were given to a small number of artists, the Church did not get in the business of commissioning or distributing art until the 1960s. And, compared to St. Louis, Salt Lake City was rather provincial, with little in the way of galleries or art venues.



Image 3. Joseph Paul Vorst (1897–1947) *Einzug Christi in Jerusalem* (1930) Linocut. 17.64 x 14.69 in. Private Collection, Germany. Reproduced courtesy of the Carl and Carole Vorst Estate.

In Utah, Vorst met Alice Merrill Horne (1869–1948), the doyenne of the Utah arts at the turn of the century, who wrote the classic *Devotees and their Shrines*, founded the Department of Museum and Arts, and championed other artists, such as Minerva Teichert (1888–1976). Horne later organized a show of Vorst’s New Testament linocuts at the Deseret Gymnasium Art Room. The venue might seem less than ideal to us today, but in a time before the Church History Museum and government buildings dedicated to such shows, it would have been ideal. The Deseret Gym was frequented by business and Church leaders alike as a place for socializing and recreation. Having his work there would have guaranteed some useful exposure.

The images were not made for the show. Rather, Vorst produced them before moving to the US. Stylistically, with their heavy use of negative space and dynamic gestures, they are much in the style of other works by more famous artists of the time, such as Emil Nolde (1867–1956). In spirit, however, Vorst’s linocuts bear little resemblance to the rampant cynicism of the German Expressionists.

Back in Missouri, Vorst established himself among a group of formidable artists. This included John Steuart Curry (1897–1946), Joseph “Joe” Jones (1909–1963), and, most important for Vorst, Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975). These artists came to be known as Regionalists. And, although their styles differed, they all were dedicated to depicting midwestern subjects that, before their success, were not considered worthy of treatment for many fine artists. From the late 1930s to his death in 1957, Vorst’s paintings were dedicated to the treatment of the drama of the people and scenery that surrounded him, often with remarkable insight and empathy.

Vorst shared a studio with Benton, who is now considered one of the greatest painters of America. (Next year, Benton will be the subject a major exhibition at BYU Museum of Art.) At first, it seems that Vorst’s relationship with Benton was that of student and teacher, respectively.



Benton had already established a national reputation. But, according to Nelson's ample documentation of their relationship, they became more like companions to one another.

Career-wise, the association with Benton seems to have opened up opportunities beyond the midwest. The relationship had aesthetic consequences for Vorst. Even as he was accepted to major shows at the Whitney Museum or Chicago Institute of Art, Vorst rarely escaped comparison, for better and worse. Writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, one critic wrote:

Aesthetically, Vorst was heavily influenced by Benton, adopting similar subjects, treatment of figures, and pallet. A contemporary noted: "Most of [Vorst's] works, which show a strong Benton influence, are keyed up to excessively violent moods of drama."<sup>4</sup>

Another critic writing about the same show commented:

At the A.C.A. Gallery Joseph Vorst is showing new pictures. It's a pity Joe Jones and Thomas Benton keep getting in the way of a real appreciation of Vorst. There is unquestionably a strong likeness between himself and both of these better-known men . . . when you get close up to these things and give yourself over to them for a while, you realize that Vorst has qualities quite his own.<sup>5</sup>

In their lifetimes and posthumously, the changes in critical fortunes of artists are often subject to causes beyond their reach. It would be tempting for art historians to attribute Vorst's lack of name recognition today to the problem of too close of a relationship with better known artists. Nelson, however, handles this deftly, pointing out that Vorst was never critical of the comparisons.

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4. "Drama in Missouri," *New York Herald Tribune*, Dec. 7, 1941.

5. Quoted in Nelson, *Joseph Paul Vorst*, 169.



Image 4. Joseph Paul Vorst (1897–1947) Adolf Hitler (1932) Lithograph from drawing, published in *Esquire Magazine*, February 1934.

Vorst accepted a teaching position at a local college in 1936, at the height of the Depression. For even the most successful artists, finding a



teaching position would have been difficult and most welcome. Reporting on the appointment, the local St. Louis newspaper wrote:

Joseph Vorst, the 40-year-old German-born St. Louis artist, who, on a visit to Germany in 1932 painting campaign portraits of Adolf Hitler and other Nazi leaders, has been selected to supervise a new course in applied arts.<sup>6</sup>

Yes, Vorst was paid by the Nazi party to paint portraits of Adolf Hitler, Herman Goehring, Gregor Strasser, and Joseph Goebbels during the German election of 1932. In a major oversight, the Church History Museum, which described the show as “a retrospective,” does not mention or display the portraits or reproductions of them. From a public-relations perspective, their existence is a nightmare. But from a scholarly perspective the omission is unforgivable. Nelson is clearly uncomfortable with the event, characterizing it in the catalogue as the desperate act of a financially-strapped artist. In fact, in the catalogue and the exhibition, again and again, Nelson and Hurtado bring up how difficult it was for Vorst to be a German in America during the world wars.

That does not seem to be the case for Vorst. Despite all the apologies made by Nelson, this clearly-documented, uncomfortable truth can be explained, in part, by prosaic context. Many artists painted figures whom they disagreed with for artistic and journalistic purposes, and World War II had not yet happened. In 1932 most of Europe, let alone Americans, were not yet clear on who or what Hitler and his henchmen would become. Vorst’s images were not used for official purposes by the Nazi German politicians, and were subsequently printed in an *Esquire* magazine article discussing pre-war Germany. The more troubling fact is that for years Vorst continued to use the event as a resume-building talking point. That is sure to make many, including me, uncomfortable.

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6. “Joseph Vorst Names Art Supervisor at Jefferson College,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Aug. 9, 1936.



Image 5. Joseph Paul Vorst (1897–1947) *Sharecroppers' Revolt* (1939) Oil on panel. 24 x 31 in. Collection of Dan Shogren and Susan Meyer. Reproduced courtesy of the Carl and Carole Vorst Estate.

A great deal of the catalogue and the Church History Museum's exhibition are dedicated to Vorst's images of African Americans. Like Benton, Vorst chronicled the struggles of contemporary black Americans, not far removed from slavery and living on the edges of more prosperous communities. These are unquestionably the most moving and accomplished works on display.

In the painting *Sharecroppers' Revolt* (1939) Vorst depicts a scene from January 1939 when over one thousand mostly black farmers camped along the highways to bring attention to unfair practices by landowners. Vorst focuses on one family and their meager possessions huddled by a stove against the cold Missouri winter.



Image 6. A screenshot from the Church History Museum Instagram feed, dated Nov. 15, 2017.

In the catalogue and Church History Museum, Vorst's efforts are described as acts of Christian compassion. While it is certainly true that Vorst seems to have genuinely sympathized with his subjects, almost no analysis is done of Vorst's intended audience and those audiences' reactions to them.

While most of these depictions of African Americans are clearly sympathetic, some, like *White Gold* (n.d.) are painful caricatures of African Americans, showing them with exaggerated features while picking cotton. It seems that Vorst and his Missouri regionalists were painting African Americans much like Jean-François Millet's paintings of rural peasants for sophisticated Parisian salon audiences. Viewers at the Whitney Museum were not given the identities of the figures in Vorst's paintings. They were shown a foreign and exotic world within their own country. It is not clear from the catalogue whether Vorst had a serious relationship with African Americans, despite his clear sympathy for them. Did he paint them from live models, or were they invented? Again, Nelson is working in unexplored territory with Vorst, and perhaps

struggled to explain these works using the artist's own words, if there were any. In any case, more should have been done to address issues of race and the appropriation of images, both in Vorst's time and today.



Image 7. Joseph Paul Vorst (1897–1947) *White Gold* (n.d.) Oil on canvas. 37 x 24 1/2 in. Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago and Vallarino Fine Art, New York. Reproduced courtesy of the Carl and Carole Vorst Estate.



Image 8. Photograph of Vorst in his studio, c 1925. The whereabouts of the painting, depicting Joseph Smith Jr. receiving the gold plates from Moroni, are unknown.

The genesis for the catalogue and exhibition on Vorst was a June 24, 2013 blog post, “Joseph Paul Vorst: Regionalist Artist” by Ardis E. Parshall, a freelance historian. Parshall had come across a few images and appealed for more information. In the comments section, Glen Nelson reached out and proposed the idea of doing a project for the Mormon Artist Group.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Ardis E. Parshall, “Joseph Paul Vorst: Regionalist Artist,” *Keepapitchinin* (blog), Jun. 24, 2013, <http://www.keepapitchinin.org/2013/06/24/joseph-paul-vorst-regionalist-artist/>.

Within two years, the Church released an interview with Glen Nelson and Laura Hurtado, Global Acquisitions Collections Manager and curator for the exhibition, announcing that the Church had acquired several works by the artist. “[Vorst] widens the discussion regarding Mormon art and the definition of who is included in the canon of Mormon artists,” according to Hurtado.<sup>8</sup> Nelson added, “To have someone like this, of this quality, completely unknown, this is like a curator’s dream come true.”<sup>9</sup>

While his name is almost totally unknown today, in his time, Mormons had heard of Vorst. In June 1940, the Church’s premier publication, *Improvement Era*, ran a lengthy profile on the artist with the teaser: “Why Joseph Paul Vorst, artist, chose to live in Missouri?”<sup>10</sup> The question reveals the mindset of members of the Church when everyone was tacitly expected to join the Saints in Zion. It also acknowledges the practical consideration that by living in Missouri, Vorst’s audience was not the LDS community. Yes, he made a few images with Mormon subject matter, such as the First Vision seen in the photograph above. These seem to be private images, however, not included in the many shows in which he participated. While Vorst certainly was Mormon, with the exception of a few works, his *oeuvre* was not particularly Mormon in content, nor was it directed toward Mormon audiences. To his contemporaries this was not a problem, Vorst was not a Mormon artist, he was a Regionalist. It is a problem for Nelson and the Church History Museum, however, who spent a great deal of energy—and the precious resources of Church exhibition space—explaining his posthumous relevance to Mormon audiences. The existential question, then, put forward by the catalogue

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8. R. Scott Lloyd, “Church Acquires Art of Unsung LDS Artist Joseph Paul Vorst,” *Church News*, Apr. 2, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/church/news/church-acquires-art-of-unsung-lds-artist-joseph-paul-vorst?lang=eng>.

9. Sarah Harris, “Discover the fascinating Mormon artist you didn’t know existed at the Church History Museum,” *Deseret News*, Nov. 16, 2017, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/900004082/new-church-history-museum-exhibit-recononizes-lesser-known-mormon-artist.html>.

10. William Mulder, “Missouri Artist,” *Improvement Era* (Jun. 1940), 326–37.



and the exhibition is: should Mormon art be considered Mormon if the only consideration is that it was made by a Mormon?

Every religion has its own pantheon of artists who inform the aesthetics of the faithful and further articulate doctrine and identity. Catholics have looked to many, including Raphael, Michelangelo, Rubens, and Bernini. Protestants have had Hans Holbein, Lucas Cranach, Peiter Bruegel, Jan Steen, and Rembrandt. In its short, 188-year history, Mormons have cobbled together their own pantheon, even populated with artists from other faiths. It includes the pioneer artists CCA Christensen and Danquart Weggeland, the Mormon Art Missionaries (i.e., John Hafen, JB Fairbanks, Edwin Evans, Herman Haag), monument makers (i.e., Mahonri Young, Torlief Knaphus, Avard Fairbanks), Book of Mormon and historical painters (Minerva Teichert, Arnold Friberg, Walter Rane), and a host of artists whose works are used in lesson materials and meeting houses (Robert Barrett, Greg Olsen, Gary Kapp). We've grafted in a few artists I like to call NMMA's (Non-Mormon Mormon Artists): Carl Bloch and Heinrich Hofmann, both protestants whose works were adopted after their deaths. It is also true of Harry Anderson, John Scott, and Tom Lovell, three prominent illustrators of different faiths who were commissioned to make works for the Church's participation in several world's fairs and subsequently included in the Gospel Art Kit.

There is no official committee that has drawn up a canonical list. Inclusion in the pantheon requires, in my opinion, only two characteristics: first, the artist's work represents Mormon culture; and, second, the artist's work has in turn had an influence on LDS culture.

As quoted at the beginning of the article, Nelson and Hurtado claim Joseph Paul Vorst is the most culturally significant LDS artist of his generation.<sup>11</sup> Here is a short—and probably incomplete—list of prominent LDS artists of Vorst generation:

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11. Glen Nelson and Laura Allred Hurtado. "An introduction to Joseph Paul Vorst, Video Script," *Joseph Paul Vorst A Retrospective: Exhibition Press Guide* (Salt Lake City: Church History Museum, 2017), 65.

*Mabel Frazer (1897–1981)*

An influential teacher and muralist, Frazer studied at the Art Students League and Beaux-Arts Institute in New York and taught at the University of Utah from 1920 to 1953.

*Mahonri Young (1877–1957)*

The grandson of Brigham Young. He studied at the Académie Julian in Paris and at the Art Students League in New York and won international awards as both a sculptor and painter. He married the sister of J. Alden Weir, one of the preeminent American impressionists, and worked in Italy, France, and the US. Between making works for New York galleries and spending time with members of the international jetset, including Gertrude Stein, Young did the first art monuments for Temple Square (two life-sized statues of Joseph Smith Jr. and Hyrum Smith) and, later, the This is the Place Monument. His collection of over 10,000 old-master to contemporary artworks became the basis for BYU Museum of Art.

*Alma B. Wright (1875–1952)*

Studied at the Académie Julian and Académie Colarossi in Paris. In the 1920s, he painted temple murals for the Church in Canada, Arizona, and Hawaii, while teaching at the University of Utah.

*Lynn Fausett (1894–1977)*

Perhaps the best case for future discovery, Fausett was born in Price moved to New York for school and, for more than ten years, served as the Director of the Arts Students League of New York. He was regularly listed on the Who's Who of New York, and did over fifty monumental murals in various State capitols and Church buildings during the WPA era.

*Minerva Teichert (1888–1976)*

Teichert hardly needs an introduction to today's audiences. In her lifetime, however, after studying at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Students League of New York, she worked in isolation in Wyoming

painting more than five hundred scenes from Mormon history and scripture. It is only recently that Minerva Teichert, who painted her works in isolation, with no serious commissions or recognition from the Church, has become a full-fledged member of the pantheon.

Compared to these eminent and influential artists, is Vorst the “most culturally significant”? Whether from the perspective of contemporary New York critics, contemporary LDS audiences, or in the minds of today’s members of the Church, the answer is probably no. It should not be a competition, however. Rather, it should be a discussion of how Vorst, self-isolated from the predominant aesthetics of Mormon artists at the time—who mostly trained in France and New York—represented a completely different aesthetic.

Vorst should be remembered for his art. But, should the reason for remembering him be that he was Mormon? Do we remember Picasso because he was a great Catholic artist, or Modigliani for his Jewishness? This approach to remembering artists for their religious affiliations seems untenable. The question that I had at the end of the catalogue and viewing the exhibition came down to this: Does a retrospective of Joseph Paul Vorst belong at the Church History Museum? And if not, where?

Located across the street from Temple Square, the Church History Museum is the only official venue for Church art. Over the past few years, its ground floor has undergone a multi-million-dollar renovation, creating elaborate historical dioramas that illustrate the foundation of the Church and its key figures. The museum is mostly staffed with volunteer missionaries who are trained to answer the questions of non-member tourists.

The day I recently visited, a bus of Asian tourists poured into the museum. What, I wondered, did these foreign visitors think when they went upstairs to see an exhibition almost totally devoid of any direct reference to Mormon doctrine, history, or figures?