

THE BOOK OF MORMON ART CATALOG: AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR JENNIFER CHAMPOUX

Margaret Olsen Hemming

MOH: Please introduce the project and tell us a bit about how it works.

JC: Thank you, I'm so excited to share this great new resource! The Book of Mormon Art Catalog is a comprehensive collection of visual art based on the Book of Mormon. It includes images that may be familiar from their use in publications of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as well as lesser-known images from artists around the world. Thanks to the support of our sponsors—the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University and the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies—we are able to provide free and open access to the catalog (<https://bookofmormonartcatalog.org/>).

My team and I have systematically gathered art from a range of sources including Church media, the Church History Museum, the Brigham Young University Museum of Art, the Springville Museum of Art, Church magazines and books, academic journals and books, private collections, Scripture Central (formerly Book of Mormon Central), commercial galleries, and artist galleries. We've already cataloged more than three thousand artworks and are constantly adding more! The art comes from fifty-one different countries and represents more than six hundred unique artists. I'm especially thrilled that we're able to host hundreds of images that can't be found anywhere else online.

As the only central repository for Book of Mormon art, the catalog seeks to be a resource to scholars, artists, Church members—really, anyone! In addition to gathering the art, we’ve also done extensive research on each piece. We’ve included information on copyright, scripture reference, country of origin, gender of the artist, use in Church media, appearance in other published or digital sources, links to the artist’s website, and much more. If you find an artwork or artist in the catalog that you want to know more about, we’ve provided the tools to get you started.

If you want to simply look through the catalog, a great place to start is with the six browsing categories on our home page. Here, you can look through a list of artists by name or a timeline of art by year. You can find a directory of Book of Mormon scripture chapters or topics. Or you can look through a list of countries or a guide organized by style and technique.

If you have a more specific search in mind, the “Advanced Search” tool will let you filter the catalog in multiple ways. For example, you could look up all images of the tree of life done in textile. Or you could find Diné (Navajo) artists who have been published in Church magazines.

MOH: How do you define Book of Mormon art?

JC: For this project, we’ve limited the scope to images that are inspired by content within Book of Mormon scripture. Most often that means depictions of people and events described in the book. Sometimes it means more abstract visualization of themes discussed in these scriptures. If an artwork portrays a theme such as repentance and references a Book of Mormon scripture either visually or in the title of the work, then we include it. We did not include images of the book itself in modern times (such as Joseph Smith translating the plates).

We’ve attempted to include all known images of Book of Mormon content, with no judgment or exclusion based on their style, interpretive

approach, or skill. Visual arts are defined here as painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, textile, ceramic, carving, pottery, photography, digital illustration, installation, video and film, and mixed media. We've included works that are figurative, abstract, and nonrepresentational.

MOH: You are well-suited to this project with your art background, but what brought you to the idea of doing this project? And what convinced you that something so ambitious was possible?

JC: Sometimes there is a sense in Latter-day Saint culture that we follow a sort of Protestant iconoclastic tradition in terms of our relationship with art. For example, we may use art to beautify the walls of our meetinghouses, temples, and homes, or to instruct children. The famous series of Book of Mormon paintings by Arnold Friberg, for instance, was commissioned by the Primary General President at the time, Adele Cannon Howells, to help children learn about the scriptures. But we generally don't put paintings and sculptures in our most sacred religious spaces, and we don't invest art objects with any meaning other than their didactic purpose. Yet, members of the Church are surrounded with religious art—in their manuals, scriptures, magazines, websites, and places of worship. Often, these images become a kind of background noise to our religious practice. We are very familiar with the art, but we haven't ever thought about it that much. We tend to take it at face value. We don't usually consider the choices that the artist has made to depict something a certain way. We generally don't know how to understand the language of art, so we can't read the ways an image creates meaning.

It's not just members of the Church that suffer from this visual illiteracy—many people today are unfamiliar with the history of art, the meaning of visual symbols, and the ways artists use formal elements (like line, shape, color, and light) to tell a story. Because we don't know the language of art, we feel we can't get close to an artwork or that maybe only highly educated critics are able to understand it. I taught as an

adjunct instructor in art history for a dozen years, and I saw this discomfort in my students over and over again. So, we explored the different ways to interpret a work of art. I encouraged them to slow down and look carefully. I made them spend forty-five minutes looking at a single piece of art before writing about it. Many of these students began to see things they hadn't before and to feel more comfortable looking at art.

I've done some of this kind of work among Church members too, with presentations on how to look at religious art. Here, too, I saw a real eagerness among members to be able to engage more deeply with art. As I studied the history of LDS art it became clear that in addition to the familiar and readily accessible images in the Gospel Art Book, the Church's media library, and the Church History Museum's online galleries, there are many other images out there inspired by LDS scripture, history, and belief. But the sources for this more independent art were far-flung and sometimes inaccessible to the public.

I began by collecting images of Lehi's dream as recounted in 1 Nephi 8. Once I realized how many interesting yet little-known images of this scripture existed, I wanted to create a space where anyone could have access to the full history of Book of Mormon art. I spent a year researching the images on my own and then decided that for a project of this scope I was going to need institutional support. I'm very thankful for the support of the Maxwell Institute and the Laura F. Willes Center. The grant funding has allowed for several terrific BYU students to work on the project as research assistants. Noelle Baer, Emma Belnap, Candace Brown, Elizabeth Finlayson, and Aliza Keller have each done a fantastic job helping me with research, data entry, design, and content development. Many scholars and artists have contributed to the project as well. I love that this endeavor is, by necessity, a collaborative one. I hope that both the size of the catalog as well as the connections made between scholars, artists, and Church members continue to expand.

MOH: In what ways do you see this endeavor changing Book of Mormon scholarship?

JC: The catalog aims to recover the full history of visual imagery based on the Book of Mormon. This has never been done before, so we are posting some things that people simply haven't seen until now. This will allow scholars to explore the history of Book of Mormon art in new ways, such as considering how members engaged with scripture at different times, which scripture stories or figures have been emphasized in art, and how art has been used in official Church channels.

Pulling this history together also makes possible more careful analysis of issues of race and gender in the arts. There has been a shift in recent years to include more non-American artists and to depict figures in a less Eurocentric manner. But there are depictions of race in Book of Mormon art that are problematic and even hurtful, and they need greater contextualization and awareness so we can move forward with a better understanding. Looking at the statistics from the catalog, it's also evident that the inclusion of women artists and the depiction of female Book of Mormon characters has grown in recent years. But there is still lots of room for growth.

By pulling all this data together, scholars and artists can also start to see what is missing. What are the figures that aren't depicted very often? Which stories tend to always be depicted the same way and might there be an alternative way they could be visualized? Hopefully, the catalog will help inspire new and varied artistic production.

MOH: There is sometimes a sense in the Church that we know how to read the Book of Mormon and that the answers to questions we may have about it have already been answered. To me, art has the potential of opening up that conversation and displaying the broad and diverse spectrum of how people interpret sacred text. In perhaps a more accessible way than the written word, art can show how reading scripture is deeply personal. Can you say more about this?

JC: I think you are right on both counts: that art can help us consider familiar stories in fresh ways, and that art can affect us in a way that

text cannot. In my study of traditional European Christian art and of modern LDS art, I've seen patterns and formulas used to tell a story through a visual medium. Sometimes these formulas are helpful because they make the message of the artwork more readily understood. For example, in Renaissance and Baroque paintings of Christ's deposition from the cross, his mother Mary is often shown collapsing at the foot of the cross with the shape of her swooning body echoing that of Christ's body. Visually, this not only signified Mary's great compassion as the mother of Christ and the mother of the Catholic Church but also reminded viewers that they should likewise seek to emulate Christ in all their actions.

But there are also cases where formulas for depicting a particular scripture are used so repeatedly that it becomes difficult for the viewer to consider the passage in any alternative way. I've written about how this has been the case for images of the New Testament sisters Mary and Martha in both LDS art and in the larger Christian tradition, with very few exceptions to the mold.¹ Tropes have also developed over the years for Book of Mormon art. Lehi's dream, for instance, is most often visualized using a particular set of symbols (e.g., tree, white fruit, iron rod, large building). There is very little art that pays attention to certain other aspects of the dream, including Lehi's harrowing journey before reaching the tree. Perhaps because so little of our Lehi's dream art depicts that journey, our discussions and sermons on the dream also tend to overlook it.

Having a greater variety of visual depictions opens space for viewers to consider scripture passages in a variety of ways. Sometimes, art may even prompt the viewer to have a new insight or a moment of personal revelation. I also think that access to a greater variety of cultural styles and figural depictions creates opportunities for more people in

1. Jennifer Champoux, "Wise or Foolish: Women in Mormon Biblical Narrative Art," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2018): 71–93, available at <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol57/iss2/4>.

our global church to have a personal connection with the art and with the scriptures. Art is a very different medium than text. It communicates differently and it can affect us differently.

MOH: I imagine this work as somewhat akin to family history, where sometimes you find a thread of information and start pulling on it and sometimes it leads to a gold mine of more artists and images and then other times there's just one piece there. What sources were the most helpful? In other words, if people are looking for Mormon art that isn't necessarily Book of Mormon art, where would you direct them to start searching?

JC: Great question! I've had a number of people ask if we'll also catalog LDS art on other books of scripture, such as the New Testament. I'd love to see the project expand to include that eventually. There is such a thriving community of LDS artists, and one of the goals of this project is to give them a platform to reach a broader audience. We also want Church members to have access to this wealth of visual sources.

A good place to start searching for other LDS art is the Church History Museum website.² You can browse their Museum Store Catalog or the virtual galleries of their International Art Competitions. Held every three years, these competitions bring in new LDS art from around the globe. Similarly, the Church's Media Library has many wonderful images and videos.³ The *Come, Follow Me* manuals for each course of study include many artworks.⁴ The BYU Museum of Art also has an extensive collection of LDS artists.⁵ If there's an artist that you like, I rec-

2. Church History Museum, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/landing/museum?lang=eng>.

3. Media Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media?lang=eng>.

4. Come, Follow Me, Gospel Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/come-follow-me?lang=eng>.

5. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, <https://moa.byu.edu/>.

commend looking up their Instagram account or website and browsing their digital galleries.

MOH: Are there sections/topics/characters of the Book of Mormon that you personally would like to see more artists engage with?

JC: Absolutely! My analysis based on the catalog has revealed some interesting trends. The sixteen most frequently depicted topics account for more than half of all Book of Mormon imagery. That means that a handful of scenes are getting lots of attention and being visualized in different ways, while most of the scenes or figures have only been depicted a few times. It's worth noting that almost all these most popular scenes in the art are focused on male figures. Lehi's dream and Christ's visit to ancient America are the two most frequently depicted topics.

Many depictions of women from the Book of Mormon didn't appear until quite recently, and there is certainly room for further artistic exploration of these women. The first known image of Abish, for instance, appeared in 2000. And the wife of King Lamoni was not visualized until 2003 (although, technically, she's also in an unpublished 1950 Friberg sketch).

Other figures and topics that have been depicted very few times include Morianton's maidservant, Hagoth, Corianton, the daughters of Ishmael, Giddianhi, Mosiah, and Pahoran. And some topics that have been visualized many times have tended to follow the same interpretation or approach. I hope that artists will use the Book of Mormon Art Catalog to see what has been done and what perspectives may be lacking.

MOH: What's next for the Book of Mormon Art Catalog?

JC: As an ongoing project, the catalog will continue to grow. We are adding new entries constantly. We have a contact form on our website where users can suggest new art or let us know about information that

should be updated or added. We encourage everyone to get involved and help us expand the catalog!

You can also follow us on Instagram or Facebook @bookofmormonartcatalog. We post videos with artists and scholars, spotlights on artworks, fun facts, and news. It's a great place to learn more about LDS art and connect with others. Each week we also post an artwork and message to coincide with the *Come, Follow Me* curriculum. In 2024, when the course study turns to the Book of Mormon, we'll be rolling out an even bigger *Come, Follow Me* art supplement. Stay tuned!

We're also working with the Maxwell Institute to initiate a contest for new Book of Mormon art. This will be a great way for people to get involved and to start filling in these gaps we see in the catalog.

So many people have supported this project and helped make it what it is. I'm grateful for that shared love of art and scripture. Personally, as I've examined these thousands of images, I've felt a stronger connection to the Book of Mormon and to Christ. I'm excited to see the ways in which the catalog will help build community and faith.

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