

The Featured Nativity Artists

Gerd Sjökvist

Raised in the woodlands of northern Sweden, Gerd Sjökvist joined the Church at age thirty-six. She earned a degree in fine arts at Brigham Young University and now lives in Mockfjärd, Dalarna, the center of Sweden's most distinctive type of folk painting. One tradition is handed down from eighteenth-century farmers and miners of northern Sweden. To brighten long winter days, they decorated the inside walls of their houses with scenes depicting their daily lives. People are shown in traditional, formal Swedish costume, and the figures are highly stylized and somewhat stiff but very bright and colorful.

Sjökvist chose to sculpt her nativity figures in the style of those painted figures. To maintain fidelity, she matched the colors of her nativity sculptures to the traditional colors of the paintings. In pottery work, colored glazes are applied to the clay before the piece is fired, but during the firing, the colors change. This trait renders creating a glaze for a very specific shade rather difficult. Drawing upon her undergraduate training in chemical engineering, Sjökvist spent three years experimenting with chemical mixes in the glazes before succeeding in obtaining the traditional colors.

Lapita K. Frewin

Lapita Keith Frewin, a Navajo, grew up in a northern Arizona village just south of Kayenta and near Monument Valley. The Navajos are among the most eclectic of all of the American Indian tribes. They borrowed silver-smithing from the Mexicans, basket making from the Piute, and weaving from the Pueblos. In reaching out and embracing other cultures' ideas and incorporating them into her own work and life, Frewin continues that wonderful tradition in Navajo art.

Frewin became fascinated with buckskin and beadwork—art that traditionally was practiced by the Plains Indian people. Her interest in Plains Indian arts led her to that people's tradition of making buckskin dolls. These small figurative pieces, done with buckskin, are quite simplified anatomically, but the beadwork on them is meticulously done in the style of indigenous Great Plains tribes. Someone with a trained eye can look at the style of the beadwork and of the costume and tell exactly which tribe each doll is from.

Harrison Begay Jr.

Many Native Americans of what some call the Navajo tribe prefer to call themselves the Dinee. Harrison Begay Jr., a Dinee, was raised in Arizona. The custom of his people is for a man to live with his wife's family in her village, so when he married a woman from the Pueblo of Santa Clara, New Mexico, he moved and also adopted Pueblo culture. He became a potter.

The Pueblo people were agricultural and needed the means to store grains and carry water. Because their lifestyle did not require portability, they developed pottery, which became a distinct Pueblo art form. Clay pottery is a natural medium for an agricultural people since both their sustenance and their art materials come from the earth.

“Behold the Condescension of God”

A Scriptural Perspective on Three Nativity Scenes

Doris R. Dant and Richard G. Oman

In the midst of the Christmas season’s commercialization, frenzied preparations, and parties, families worldwide set aside time to arrange a nativity scene on a mantelpiece or table. More than any other traditional Christmas object, these nativity sets bid us heed the message of Christ’s birth. What the nativities specifically say differs with the endless variations played out by their creators and those who arrange the scenes, but certain scriptural themes are common. To show how some of these themes are presented by nativity scenes, this article will analyze three world-class nativities created by Latter-day Saints Gerd Sjökvist, Harrison Begay Jr., and Lapita K. Frewin (see facing page for information on the artists).¹

“Behold the condescension of God” (1 Ne. 11:26)

Long before the event, Nephi saw in vision what we celebrate annually: the great Jehovah descended to earth as a lowly baby. “Look,” an angel commanded. And Nephi beheld the “condescension of God”: “a virgin, most beautiful and fair, . . . bearing a child in her arms” (from 1 Ne. 11:15–26). We are unlikely to receive a vision similar to Nephi’s. Nonetheless, we experience something of what he saw, for each time we view a traditional nativity scene, we behold the condescension of God. “Here is something more than a babe in a manger,” Gordon B. Hinckley emphasizes. He continues, “I think . . . of the words of John: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men’ (John 1:1–4).”²

Nephi's vision reminds us that the virgin and her child are the fundamental elements in the Christmas nativity. While a seemingly obvious point, it is one to remember in an age when nativities are under attack from several fronts. At the least, critics claim inauthenticity, dismissing the stable setting and complaining that nativities often collapse time to show the wise men and shepherds arriving simultaneously.³ But those are not elements essential to the condescension of God. Other critics adamantly state that Jesus was an ordinary man who certainly did not have an immortal father.⁴ In that view, reminding us of the condescension of God is not a legitimate function of nativities, as such condescension did not take place.

But the Begay and Frewin nativities (as do most traditional nativity scenes) have it right: our focal point is a child, the King of Kings, upon whom we, with Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, and even animals, reverently gaze (figs. 1, 2). In the Sjökvist nativity (fig. 3), the child is the physical center, as Christ and his Atonement should be the center of our lives. Here the shepherds and wise men have not joined the holy family, but we know they will be there soon. In the meantime, we are invited to share a quiet moment with just Mary and Joseph. This is a time when we, too, can reverence the baby, our Lord, marveling that Jesus condescended to be “slain for the sins of the world” and to submit to all the indignities and suffering that preceded his crucifixion (1 Ne. 11:32–33).



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FIG. 1. Harrison Begay Jr. (1961–), *Dinee Nativity*. Redware pottery, 9", 2000. This nativity maintains the rounded nature of Pueblo pottery and is a beautiful example of a modern artistic sensitivity expressed through a folk medium.



FIG. 2. Lapita Keith Frewin, *Crèche*. Buckskin, bead, fabric, ca. 12", 1999. Nativity scenes bid us to "behold the condensation of God." This nativity follows the tradition of the buckskin dolls created by the Plains Indians. In this tradition, the focus is on membership rather than individualism. Thus the costumes are accurate re-creations of tribal dress while the faces are stylized.



FIG. 3. Gerd Sjökvist, *Swedish Crèche*. Painted wood and ceramic, 36" x 58½", 2001. Sjökvist has applied the two-dimensional decorative tradition of Sweden's Dalarna district to her nativity scene. True to the Dalarna tradition, the figures are rather stiff and stylized, they are dressed in formal eighteenth-century costumes, and the scene is very colorful. The more generalized faces encourage us to share the joy of seeing our salvation.

In both the Sjökvist and Begay nativities, each figure's posture and gestures are significant. In worshipful awe, her hands crossed, Sjökvist's Mary looks gently and quietly down at the baby. Joseph also appears awed, and perhaps he is still trying to process the meaning of the event. The wise men are formal and proper, symbolizing the dignity required for the occasion. In the Begay nativity, Mary kneels beside the child, one arm gesturing toward the baby, perhaps to say, "This is the promised child" (the motion is sufficiently ambiguous to allow viewers their own interpretations). Joseph is the most humbly engaged of all the participants; with his whole body, he both offers himself to and reaches for the child. The wise men, dressed in long robes, are examples of gentleness, reverence, and humility; their poses and gestures impart nothing of pride or arrogance. Their attitude conveys the fact that they worship a heavenly king, not an earthly one.

The varied responses portrayed by all these nativity figures underscore the richness of the nativity experience while also emphasizing the divinity of the Savior. That range of response makes the nativity story universal, allowing each of us to behold the condescension of God in our own way.

"For mine eyes have seen thy salvation" (Luke 2:30)

The faces in the Frewin and Begay nativities are not the focus of the scene. Begay gives only hints of features while Frewin's faces are simplified and stereotyped. Nor are Sjökvist's shepherds and wise men individualized. When faces are generalized, the characters become more inclusive. They are not just Mary and Joseph and wise men; they are people of other races, cultures, and times who also worship the Christ who was once a child. We are encouraged to imagine ourselves using the words of Simeon: "Mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel" (Luke 2:30–32).

In ironic contrast to the shepherds and wise men, who see with their spiritual eyes, are the absent villagers of Sjökvist's nativity. The buildings in the village cluster behind the stable, but no citizens are coming through the passage leading toward the child, nor are they even looking out the windows, which are blank and dark. The villagers are living in a separate world, unaware of what is happening right at their own doorstep and blind to the way leading to Christ. The village serves as a metaphor for those who do not have eyes to see the salvation of the Lord.

**"He inviteth them all . . . , black and white,
bond and free, male and female" (2 Ne. 26:33)**

Begay, Sjökvist, and Frewin relocate the nativity scene geographically, chronologically, and culturally (as do many other artists—one reason for

the popularity of crèche fests). When the scene is placed within the artists' own cultures, if not their time, the shift is a way of likening the scriptures unto ourselves (1 Ne. 19:23). On a deeper level, the practice of locating the scene in many cultures, countries, and eras reminds us of Christ's universal invitation to come unto him, for "he inviteth them all" (2 Ne. 26:33).

Sjökvist relocates the nativity to eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Sweden. The participants (except Joseph⁵) are dressed in clothing from that period with the shepherds looking like Swedish peasants straight off the farm. The three wise men wear formal suits and top hats, the appropriate dress for Swedish men of wealth and prominence. The wise men ride horses; camels would be quite out of place in Sweden. One carries his gift of gold in a leather moneybag, as proper men would. The frankincense and myrrh are obviously not common in Sweden, so these gifts are symbolized by small generic containers. Bethlehem has the architectural design of an old Swedish village.

Begay, who is a Navajo, or Dinee, also draws upon an older form of his culture. Mary appears as a traditional Dinee woman, with her hair in a bun; Joseph also has a very traditional Dinee hairstyle, and the shepherd's costume is complete with breechcloth and high-topped moccasins. Begay could have placed his infant Jesus in the type of manger that the Dinee would use to feed their sheep, but instead the child is placed on a sheep pelt. Sheepskin is used on beds and on floors; it is soft and warm and comforting. In a traditional Dinee hogan, there is not much furniture: one sits on the ground or on a mattress or a sheep pelt or a rug. The posture of the figures follows that style of sitting. The Dinee keep sheep and horses, not cattle and donkeys, so neither of the latter two is included.

Frewin's nativity dolls (figs. 4–8) are dressed in meticulously accurate costumes from various Native American tribes. The wise men are three medicine men, the most respected men of their tribes. Because the wise men in the biblical story came from afar and tradition holds that they came from a variety of places, Frewin sets the wise men in the context of three far-flung tribes: Iroquois, Cheyenne, and Navajo. These men will carry the news of the birth back to their own peoples, spreading the gospel. The Iroquois shaman wears a black velvet cap with feathers—identifying him as Iroquois (fig. 4). The Cheyenne shaman's clothing is buckskin dyed with earth pigments. He carries the shield of a Cheyenne warrior, and his braids are traditional with his people (fig. 5). The Navajo medicine man wears a necklace with turquoise. His hair is in a bun, a distinctive Navajo style (fig. 6). Frewin represents her own people in the Navajo wise man; her father was a Navajo medicine man for many years before he became a member of the Church.

FIG. 4 (*below*). The Iroquois shaman–wise man in Frewin’s nativity scene. To represent the nations of the world and remind us that all are invited to come to Christ, Frewin’s three wise men are from widely separated Native American tribes (often called nations). This wise man presents a valuable pair of beaded moccasins to the Christ child.



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FIG. 5 (*top right*). Frewin’s Cheyenne shaman–wise man. He offers the baby a blanket representing tribal prestige.

FIG. 6 (*bottom right*). The Navajo medicine man–wise man. In recognition of Christ as the “Chief” of the world, he proffers a third-phase chief’s blanket.



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FIG. 7 (above). Frewin's angels. Dressed in buckskin and beads, they carry a native drum and flute with which to create songs of praise and joy at the time of Christ's birth.

FIG. 8 (below). Mary, baby Jesus, and Joseph. Identified by their costumes as members of the Lakota tribe, they take refuge in a teepee and strap the newborn child onto a cradleboard.



FIG. 9. The angel and the heavenly host appearing to the shepherds. Springtime, flowers, and color abound in this celebration of the joy of new birth. The message of the heavenly host is depicted as flowers cascading to earth. This arrangement follows the artist's guidelines in placing the sheep; contrast it with figure 3 to see how the difference in arrangement affects the import of the scene. If the background is altered as well, as it is in figure 14, other emotions become the focus.



The holy family is Lakota. They wear beaded buckskin clothing, and the cradleboard is completely covered with beads, the decoration being of the highest quality to reflect the sublime nature of the baby (fig. 8). They live in a teepee and are joined by animals true to the environment: a buffalo, an eagle, and a deer. The angels are also dressed in buckskin and beads; they carry a drum and a flute, instruments of the people with whom they rejoice (fig. 7). Flying high above the nativity is a fully beaded American bald eagle, symbolic of the Holy Ghost. The eagle symbolizes a connection of heaven to earth and also power, majesty, and courage, hence the use of eagle feathers for chiefs. In this sense, the eagle is also a symbol for Christ as the Chief of this world.

The meticulous care taken for costumes rather than facial features emphasizes community rather than the individual, a common folk-art trait.⁶ By following this tradition, Frewin highlights the worshipful presence of representatives of four tribes. Her nativity scene becomes a type of the Millennium, when nations will respond to Christ's invitation, the time when, as the Psalmist wrote, "all nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name" (Psalm 86:9).

"I will be glad and rejoice in thee" (Psalm 9:2)

In Sjökvist's image, Christ's nativity is a time for joyful celebration and thankfulness. It is springtime—the season of birth and new beginnings—and flowers are everywhere. Since flowers in folk art represent celebration and thankfulness, it is appropriate that flowers abound in this scene.⁷ Flowers grace the stable and background and ornament the bases holding up the angel, the shepherds, and the wise men on their horses. The manger is decorated with flowers to symbolically convey that this event is a special occasion. Flowers even cascade down from the heavenly host as if their words have turned to flowers and their praises are visible. The joyous message of the angel is printed on a banner she holds, where the words "I bring you good tidings of great joy" are written in Old Swedish calligraphy and grammar⁸ (fig. 9).

The people are dressed in their festive clothing. The shepherds and Mary are clothed in peasant holiday best to celebrate and honor the babe. Although ordinary peasant clothing tended to be monochromatic, for festivals people chose lots of color and ornamentation, so the mother's dress is beautified with color and embroidery⁹ (fig. 10). In addition to signifying status, the formal suits and top hats of the wise men fit the nativity's celebratory air.

The whole scene is filled with light, and bright yellows are everywhere, most significantly in the back of the stable, where they radiate horizontally



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FIG. 10. Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus in the stable. The holiday-best dress and the decorated stable and manger honor the baby. The scene reminds us to give thanks for the condescension of God.

from the holy family. The light and the flowers springing up on every side seem to reflect the artist's experience of learning that Jesus is "the life and the light of the world" (D&C 11:28): upon finding the gospel, Sjökvist writes, she felt she was "being moved from a room in darkness to a place with light."¹⁰ Joy and gratitude accompany those who walk in light rather than in darkness (see John 8:12).

"What doth the Lord require of thee?" (Micah 6:8)

The wise men, of course, offer gifts to the Christ child, gifts central to the cultures they represent. The well-to-do Swedish wise men bring representations of the gifts mentioned in the scriptures of their Bible-believing society (fig. 11). The gifts brought by the Dinee wise men are gifts of great value in their culture: a blanket, a rug, baby moccasins, and pottery. The Iroquois shaman also offers a pair of small beaded moccasins. The Cheyenne shaman brings a blanket with an ornately beaded strip that covers the seam; such a blanket is an item of prestige in the tribe. The Navajo medicine man presents a special Navajo rug—a third-phase chief's blanket, again a recognition of Christ's role as Chief of this world.

All these nativity gifts signify bringing our best, most-valued possessions to Christ. Aside from temporal tithes and offerings, these nativity



FIG. 11. The three wise men. These dignified Swedish men carry frankincense, myrrh, and gold, symbolic of the spiritual offerings we should bring to Christ.

scenes can inspire us to present to the Lord many other gifts, such as justice, mercy, and humble obedience (Micah 6:8); “a broken heart and a contrite spirit” (3 Ne. 9:20); and service to our fellow beings since we then are also serving Christ (Matt. 25:35–36).

James E. Faust’s description of the Savior’s message sums up the gifts that the wise among us will offer:

At the heart of the message of the Savior of the world is a single, glorious, wonderful, still largely untried concept. In its simplest terms the message is that we should seek to overcome the selfishness we all seem to be born with, that we should overcome human nature and think of others before self. We should think of God and serve Him, and think of others and serve them.¹¹

“What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?” (Matt. 27:22)

Because creating a nativity formed of multiple pieces is incomplete until someone arranges it, such scenes require their owners to literally consider “What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?”¹² In deciding where to place the figures in relationship to each other and what background, if any, to use, devout arrangers seem to convey, perhaps subconsciously, their own beliefs about the Savior and his birth.

For example, what might one communicate in placing the sheep in the Sjökvist nativity? While setting up the scene to be photographed, a volunteer at the Museum of Church History and Art made the choices pictured in figure 3. If we remember that sheep symbolize Christ’s human flock, it is significant that one sheep stays close to its mortal shepherd and turns away from the Shepherd of all. The bodies of the other sheep are turned toward the Christ child, the sheep in the foreground on a path leading directly to the manger. But several of the sheep seem ambivalent, torn in two directions. The black sheep, the scriptural symbol for the sinner, is one of those still torn but is nonetheless in the group closest to the Savior. In the arrangement that follows a placement guide provided by Sjökvist (see fig. 9), the black sheep is almost lost to our view,¹³ and the other sheep seem to mill around, oblivious to either angel or child.

A comparison of two arrangements of the Begay nativity¹⁴ reveals obvious differences in the relationships of the figures to each other and to us, differences that impart very different messages. Forming a slight curve, the men and animals in figure 12 function more as an honor guard to Mary and her baby than as active participants, particularly the men who are standing. The kneeling Mary in turn is secondary to the baby lying before her on a sheepskin and seems to beckon the viewer to him. The gazes of all



FIG. 12. A rather formal arrangement of Begay's nativity set. As co-creators of the nativity scene, those who arrange the pieces often communicate their own beliefs about the Savior. This arrangement highlights the paradox of the lowliest being the mightiest.



FIG. 13. A different response to "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?" With this intimate grouping emphasizing quiet, wholehearted worship, the viewer is invited to complete the circle.



FIG. 14. Sjökvist's nativity with a black background. When compared to figure 9, this version conveys a more dramatic awe of the wonders of the advent.

converge on the Christ. This arrangement symbolizes two paradoxes: the smallest is the greatest and the lowliest is the mightiest—the one to whom we all must look for our salvation (see Luke 9:48; Matt. 11:29).

In contrast, the arrangement in figure 13 is an intimate, protective circle. Far less formal, the parents and visitors are directly engaged in quiet worship of the Christ child. They all bend humbly toward the Savior, even those who are standing. A gap in the arrangement invites the viewer to join the fellowship and finish the circle. “O come,” the arranger seems to say, “let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our maker” (Psalm 95:6).

The choice of background also changes the nativity message. A black background was used in one arrangement of Sjökvist’s nativity scene (fig. 14). Although flowers are still abundant (in the bases of the figures), the black is the more dominant element, heightening the drama but subduing and almost eliminating the joyous, celebratory air of the scene as shown earlier (see fig. 9). The feeling is of awe at the miracle of Christ’s advent and of its herald. The “great joy” is yet to be realized, for the shepherds must first act upon the message—as we must move beyond hearing to faith and action (James 1:22) for us to be reborn as joyous “new creature[s]” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Conclusion

By allowing us to feel their faith and see through their eyes, the creators of these and other nativity scenes convey many implications of the Savior’s birth and the salvation it portends. Through our own annual ritual of setting up a nativity—of partaking in the creation of an image of Christ’s birth—we can communicate our own vision of the wonder, joy, and love of this evidence of God’s condescension. Nativity scenes help center us in a season of many distractions, reminding us that “he whose birth we commemorate this season is more than the symbol of a holiday. He is the Son of God, the Creator of the earth, the Jehovah of the Old Testament, the fulfillment of the Law of Moses, the Redeemer of mankind, the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace.”¹⁵

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1. All three are owned by the Museum of Church History and Art. Each Christmas season, the museum displays nativity scenes from its collection.

2. Gordon B. Hinckley, "What Shall I Do Then with Jesus Which Is Called Christ?" *Ensign* 13 (December 1983): 3.

3. Some critics also say other elements are fictional. See for example, <<http://www.geocities.com/paulintobin/jesus.html#nativity>>, a page which claims the nativity story "*is almost surely 100% mythological*" (italics in original).

4. Richard Gilbert, "The Christmas Myth Deconstructed and Reassembled," <<http://www.rochesterunitarian.org/1997-98/971214.html>>, December 14, 1997.

5. Joseph's clothing represents the eighteenth-century folk perception of what a middle-eastern person would wear.

6. One reason the Museum of Church History and Art commissions and collects and displays folk nativities is that the nativity scene by its nature amplifies and communicates the universality of the gospel and the Savior's message. The gospel is not restricted by geography or culture or time; it transcends all of those things. Folk art is the perfect medium to express that community and continuity because folk art celebrates those values. As we become an increasingly worldwide church, we can use folk art to communicate with other cultures. Cultures we cannot understand linguistically can be understood visually. We can feel of their faith and see through their eyes. Their spiritual insight is a gift to be shared. By understanding more pieces of the world's cultural puzzle, we come to an understanding of the whole.

7. The flower patterns are based on a very traditional motif used in the Dalarna district of Sweden. The actual translation of the name of the motif is "cucumber."

8. Across the top of the nativity setting is written an explanation of the scene. Translated, the text reads, "About the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, the shepherds and their herd, and also the wise men from the land in the East." According to Sjökvist, the traditional folk painters, whose style she duplicates in her nativity set, "often had an accompanying text of explanation to the pictures." Gerd Sjökvist, email to Richard G. Oman, November 5, 2002.

9. Color is sometimes the only luxury that exists in peasant cultures.

10. Gerd Sjökvist, email to BYU Studies, October 2001.

11. James E. Faust, "A Pattern of Love," *Ensign* 29 (December 1999): 2–3.

12. In applying Pilot's question to ourselves, we are following President Gordon B. Hinckley's lead. See note 2.

13. Sjökvist stated that she put the black sheep in for interest. Gerd Sjökvist, phone conversation with Richard G. Oman, October 2001.

14. These nativity scenes were arranged by museum volunteers and staff months before the ideas in this section were developed. The scenes were not staged specifically to make our point.

15. Hinckley, "What Shall I Do Then," 5.