

Joseph Paul Vorst
By Glen Nelson

New York: Mormon Artists Group, 2017

Reviewed by Herman du Toit

The discovery of a Latter-day Saint artist from a former era, who had almost been forgotten to the vicissitudes of history, is a noteworthy event in the annals of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Joseph Paul Vorst's prolific painting career spanned two continents and two world wars during his short lifetime. Vorst excelled in a variety of techniques and media, producing a significant body of work. Glen Nelson's painstaking research has resulted in an eminently readable monograph compiled from multiple sources in Germany and the United States. It is the first book to explore Vorst's life and art. The founder of the Mormon Artists Group, Nelson is a seasoned writer and has published numerous books, including four *New York Times* best sellers. He is also an accomplished librettist.

A friend first alerted Nelson to Joseph Paul Vorst in June 2013, referring him to a blog post by Latter-day Saint historian Ardis E. Parshall, who had encountered a brief article about Vorst in a June 1940 issue of the *Improvement Era* and wondered if there was more to the story.¹ Nelson contacted the Church History Museum in Salt Lake City and was thrilled when Alan Johnson, the director of the museum, and Laura Hurtado, the global acquisitions curator at the time, agreed to assist him with his research and with the publication of his sumptuously illustrated monograph. Hurtado and Nelson also cocurated an exhibition titled *Joseph Paul Vorst: A Retrospective*, which opened at the museum on November 9, 2017.

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

Nelson's book has nine chapters, which are divided into three sections. The first deals with Vorst's early history in Germany and records his conversion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Part two documents his arrival in the United States and his rapid rise in prominence on the exhibition circuit of some of America's most important art museums. The third part documents his mature style as an American artist and ultimately his untimely death. The book is illustrated with 112 color images and 113 black-and-white illustrations.

Alongside beautiful color reproductions of Vorst's work, Nelson's book pieces together the few details that are known of Joseph Paul Vorst's life. He was born in 1897 into a large family of ten siblings in Essen, in the heart of the Ruhr valley in Germany. Although Vorst was born into poverty, Nelson observes that photographs of the family showed happy countenances and a humble but adequate rural environment (24). With the encouragement of his father, Vorst began to draw before he was five years old, using charcoal and pastels that other, more affluent children had discarded. After completing his secondary schooling, he enrolled at the Essen School of Trades and Applied Arts, and his studies there provided Vorst with a sound grounding for his career. He graduated in 1923 and was undoubtedly influenced by the styles of art prevalent in Germany at the time—namely, the *Jugendstil*, with its emotional and romantic view of nature; *Die Brücke* and its concern with authentic expression; and *Der Blaue Reiter* group, which produced emotional, raw imagery designed to provoke a visceral response from the genteel viewers of the day. In addition to his very accomplished teachers, several visiting figures also inspired him, including Richard Strauss and Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

After fighting in World War I (little is known of his service), he started producing artworks continuously and explored different styles during the 1920s as Europe recovered from the social and economic upheavals wreaked by the war. Soon, things began to change for the better, and the period 1924–29 was known as the Golden Twenties in Germany. Younger artists started to replace the emotionality of expressionism with a new dispassionate approach based on objectivity and realism. During this period, Vorst produced watercolors, oil paintings, linocuts, and lithographs in both the new objectivity and the expressionist styles. Reproductions of his artworks were often printed in local newspapers, and a large number of his works were of religious subjects.

The Weimar Republic was established in Germany after the end of World War I with the promise of a new democratic leadership. These

hopes were dashed, however, when the Nazi party came to prominence. Vorst's antipathy toward the Nazi party was kindled early, and in 1924 he had a skirmish with a group of Hitler's Brownshirts. Around this same time, on June 10, 1924, Vorst was baptized in Essen and became a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is unknown how he came in contact with his new religion. Church records indicate that, after his baptism, he served as the ward organist and sang in small ensembles with Church members. Vorst produced numerous prints, watercolors, and paintings that explored the incidence of streaming sunlight during the years following his baptism. According to Nelson, it is this interest in light that elevates his landscapes beyond the ordinary (45).

Around 1930, Vorst moved to Berlin, where he studied at the Academy of Arts under the tutelage of renowned Impressionists Max Slevogt and Max Liebermann. During this time, his work was widely exhibited and received notable recognition in the press. When his mentor Max Lieberman came under increasing censure because he was the son of a Jewish banker, Vorst decried fascism, and concerned about increasing financial uncertainty, he fled to the United States.

After his arrival in New York, Vorst traveled to Ste. Genevieve, near St. Louis, Missouri. Here, his extended family, who had emigrated earlier, welcomed him, and he soon felt integrated within their community. His first trip after settling in the area was to Salt Lake City, where he performed multiple vicarious ordinances for deceased relatives. Family history also became a lifelong passion for him. As the Great Depression descended on the world a few years later, Vorst was faced with stiff challenges. During this time, however, he also met and fell in love with Lina Weller, another émigré from Germany. They were married on June 15, 1935, in St. Louis, and nine years later they had a son.

Vorst participated wholeheartedly in the art world of the United States. He became an exponent of the social realist school of art, and within ten years after arriving in the country, he exhibited widely and successfully at the most prestigious museums in America, and even in the White House. Sadly, on October 15, 1947, Joseph Paul Vorst was conducting a choir rehearsal for his local church choir when he was struck by an aneurysm, and he died a short while later. He was just fifty years old.

Nelson's monograph is a valuable addition to the cannon of Latter-day Saint art. The narrative is well researched and painstakingly records Vorst's engagement with his adopted society. The book carefully explores the development of his style and provides astute analysis of individual examples of his artworks. Nelson's informed commentary on

sociopolitical developments during this turbulent period in world history is equally engaging; two world wars and the Great Depression are the ever-present backdrop to this important Latter-day Saint artist's short but significant career. The book is a fitting tribute to an artist who produced a wealth of paintings, drawings, watercolors, murals, etchings, and sculptures that prominently reflect the social realist movement of his day, but who was almost forgotten in the onward rush of modernism.

Herman du Toit is the former head of audience education and research at the Brigham Young University Museum of Art in Provo, Utah. He has enjoyed an extensive career as an art educator, curator, administrator, critic, and author, both locally and abroad. He was director (dean) of the school of fine arts at the former Durban Technical Institute in South Africa and holds postgraduate degrees in art history, studio art, and sociology of education from the former University of Natal. While at BYU, he was awarded a J. Paul Getty Fellowship for his PhD study of the finest interpretive practices at some of America's leading art museums.