

Latter-day Saints and Images of Christ's Crucifixion

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In his classic 1897 work *The Ministry of Art*, Frank Bristol proclaimed, “Art has glorified Christianity. It has set forth her doctrines, portrayed her saints, and even her very God and Savior. Limited only by the necessary restrictions of her powers, art has been a teacher of things divine.”¹ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (herein referred to as “the Church”) also employs the power of visual art to portray its central doctrines and perpetuate its sacred history. Religious paintings adorn hallways and classrooms of Latter-day Saint meetinghouses, fill the walls of sacred temples, and accompany published articles in Church magazines and other curricula. Indeed, the Church encourages the didactic use of art to help its members understand religious messages. For instance, the 2016 manual *Teaching in the Savior’s Way* states, “Art, including pictures, videos, and dramatizations, can help engage learners—especially visual learners—and make scriptural accounts more memorable. The art you use should be more than decoration; it should help learners understand gospel doctrines.”²

Many Latter-day Saints have indeed learned gospel doctrines from visual art, forming and framing their conceptions of historical and doctrinal subjects through the communicative power of art, sometimes unconsciously so. Consider how Arnold Friberg’s oft-reproduced Book of Mormon paintings have reared entire generations of Saints who know

1. Frank Milton Bristol, *The Ministry of Art* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1897), 54.

2. “Use Music, Stories, and Art to Teach Doctrine,” in *Teaching in the Savior’s Way* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2016), 22.

the stories of Samuel the Lamanite on the city wall and Ammon defending the king's flocks. Conversely, think of the dissonance that can occur when people learn from historical sources that Joseph Smith sometimes translated the Book of Mormon by placing Urim and Thummim stones in a hat when most Church art and film does not portray the translation process that way.³ Instead, Book of Mormon translation art typically depicts Joseph sitting with his finger on open plates, without any visible Urim and Thummim, pensively translating in his mind as a scribe writes behind a sheet.⁴

Issues connecting religious art, doctrinal understanding, and spiritual impact are not inconsequential. As art historian Jenny Champoux wrote, "[Art] has the power to shape belief, influencing the way Mormons tell scriptural stories and understand doctrinal lessons."⁵ Or as Noel Carmack, a scholar of Latter-day Saint artwork, noted, "The motivating impact that visual images of Christ have on members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints cannot be overestimated."⁶ Visual images are so important that in May 2020, the First Presidency of the Church sent a letter directing that "framed artwork that focuses on the Savior should always be displayed" in "meetinghouse entries and foyers," specifically "artwork that depicts the Savior Himself or the Savior ministering to others."⁷

Although artwork helps shape understanding and culture, art also *mirrors* cultural values and beliefs. The relationship between art and culture is symbiotic. Kerry Freedman writes in *Teaching Visual Culture*, "Visual culture creates, as well as reflects, personal and social [norms]."⁸

3. See "Book of Mormon Translation," Gospel Topics Essays, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng>.

4. See Anthony Sweat, "The Role of Art in Teaching Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine," *Religious Educator* 16, no. 3 (2016): 40–57. The first published image of Joseph Smith translating using a hat in an institutional Church magazine appeared in the *Ensign* 50, no. 1 (January 2020): 38–39.

5. Jennifer Champoux, "Wise or Foolish: Women in Mormon Biblical Narrative Art," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2018): 71.

6. Noel A. Carmack, "Images of Christ in Latter-day Saint Visual Culture, 1900–1999," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2000): 19.

7. "Principles and Guidelines for Meetinghouse Foyers and Entries," Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, May 11, 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/art-foyers-entryways-reverence-jesus-christ>.

8. Kerry Freedman, *Teaching Visual Culture: Curriculum, Aesthetics, and the Social Life of Art* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), xii.

What artists see, think, understand, and value as part of their culture is infused into their creative expressions. If something is not of value to a particular culture, it usually isn't emphasized or embraced in that people's art. If a historical episode or doctrinal teaching is important, you will find those cultural tenets adopted in and displayed through that culture's art.

Given the importance of artwork in shaping religious understanding and how a culture's given values are reflected in its art, the purpose of this article is to explore how the Church and its members view and have used artistic imagery of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. We chose to examine this issue after noticing an apparent disconnect between the teachings of scriptures and Church leaders regarding Christ's Crucifixion and the perceptions of many Latter-day Saints of its atoning value.

Latter-day Saint scriptures, including the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, heavily emphasize the salvific importance of Christ's Crucifixion relative to his suffering in Gethsemane. More than fifty passages of scripture speak of Christ *dying* for our sins, whereas only two passages speak of Christ suffering for our sins in Gethsemane.⁹ Moreover, Joseph Smith referred to Gethsemane only once in his non-canonized writings and sermons, but he mentioned Christ's death more than thirty times.¹⁰ All Church presidents have made more statements regarding Christ *dying* for our sins on the cross than they have made about Christ *suffering* for our sins in Gethsemane.¹¹

While the scriptures and Church leaders emphasize Calvary relative to Gethsemane, some Latter-day Saint populations do not. We surveyed

9. Passages counted as references to Christ suffering our sins during his Crucifixion include the following: John 3:14–15; 12:32; Romans 5:6, 8, 10; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Galatians 3:13; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20–22; 2:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; Hebrews 9:15, 26; 10:10, 12; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18; Revelation 5:8–9; 1 Nephi 11:33; 2 Nephi 2:7–8; 9:5; 26:24; Mosiah 14:12; 15:7–9, 12; 18:2; Alma 21:9; 22:14; 30:26; 33:22; 34:15; Helaman 14:15–16; 3 Nephi 9:21–22; 11:14; 27:14; Ether 12:33; Doctrine and Covenants 18:11; 20:23–25; 21:9; 35:2; 46:13; 53:2; 54:1; 76:41; 138:2, 35, 57; and Moses 7:47, 55. The two verses that specify Christ atoned for our sins in Gethsemane are Mosiah 3:7 and Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–19. See John Hilton III, "Teaching the Scriptural Emphasis on the Crucifixion," *Religious Educator* 20, no. 3 (2019): 133–53.

10. John Hilton III, "Joseph Smith, Gethsemane, and the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ," in *How and What We Worship: Christology and Praxis in the Revelations of Joseph Smith*, ed. Rachel Cope, Carter Charles, and Jordan Watkins (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020), 320.

11. John Hilton III, Emily K. Hyde, and McKenna Trussel, "The Teachings of Church Leaders Regarding the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ: 1852–2018," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2020): 76.

992 students at Brigham Young University (BYU) and asked them this question: “Where did Jesus Christ atone for our sins?” This was a free-response question, and students could write as much or as little as they wished. In total, 541 people (55%) wrote “Gethsemane,” 416 (42%) wrote “Gethsemane and Calvary,” and 35 (3%) wrote additional answers, such as “on earth.”

We next surveyed 835 students at BYU and asked, “Where would you say the Atonement mostly took place?” We provided students with only two choices—Gethsemane or Calvary. In total, 737 people (88%) selected “Gethsemane,” and 98 (12%) selected “Calvary.” Less rigorous, anecdotal surveys with other Latter-day Saint adult populations in the United States, Europe, and Mexico yielded similar results.

Admittedly, this second question presents a false choice of having to locate Christ’s Atonement primarily in Gethsemane or Calvary. We remedied this issue by asking this same question but adding a third possible response. We asked 792 BYU students (who were not part of the previous groups surveyed), “Although Christ’s Atonement was a process, where would you say Jesus mostly atoned for our sins?” This time students had three choices: “In the Garden of Gethsemane,” “On the Cross at Calvary,” or “Christ atoned for our sins equally in Gethsemane and on the Cross.” Even when students had the option of choosing both Gethsemane and Calvary, a majority (58%) chose Gethsemane only. Forty percent of students chose Gethsemane and Calvary, and 2 percent chose Calvary only.

While larger sample sizes from different populations would be needed to make more broad and concrete assertions, these results indicate that at least some Latter-day Saints emphasize Gethsemane as the *primary* location where Christ atoned for our sins, with Calvary being a secondary location.¹²

12. We note that several scholars, both inside and outside the Church, have discussed this emphasis that members place on Gethsemane. For example, John G. Turner, a Protestant scholar, explained that for Latter-day Saints “the principal scene of Christ’s suffering and, thus, his atonement, was at Gethsemane rather than on the cross.” John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 284. Robert Millet wrote, “It is probably the case that if one hundred Protestants were asked where the atonement of Christ took place, those one hundred persons would answer: At Golgotha, on the cross. It is also no doubt true that if one hundred Latter-day Saints were asked the same question, a large percentage would respond: In Gethsemane, in the garden.” Robert Millet, “This Is My Gospel,” in *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003), 401.

Although there may be many reasons for the apparent difference between authorized Church teachings and the perceptions of Latter-day Saints, we hypothesize that artwork is one important factor.¹³ In this article, we seek to do some preliminary explorations of the intersection between artwork and doctrine in connection with Christ's Crucifixion. Specifically, our research questions are as follows:

1. When Latter-day Saints are asked to select artwork to display in their homes, do they select Crucifixion or Gethsemane images? What appears to influence their choices? How do their choices of Crucifixion or Gethsemane art compare to Protestant Christians' selections among the same images?
2. To what extent does Crucifixion artwork appear in Church buildings relative to images of Gethsemane?
3. To what extent has Crucifixion artwork appeared in the Church periodicals for adults (the *Millennial Star* [1840–1970], the *Improvement Era* [1897–1970], and the *Ensign* [1971–2020]) relative to images of Gethsemane?
4. Which Crucifixion artwork has been most frequently utilized by the *Ensign*?

Latter-day Saints Choices Regarding Displaying Artwork

We surveyed 853 BYU students to identify their perceptions of artwork portraying Christ's Crucifixion and his suffering in Gethsemane. These students were in a required religion class (REL C 225), and they took this survey as an optional question on a quiz delivered electronically before class. Students were shown three images of the Crucifixion and three images of Gethsemane. To help mitigate for bias in artistic expression, we chose one painting of Gethsemane and one of Calvary produced by each of the same three artists, representing different time periods and styles: Carl Bloch from the 1800s with a more classical style;

13. Other hypotheses for an emphasis on Gethsemane include the powerful prose Elder James E. Talmage wrote regarding Gethsemane in *Jesus the Christ* or Elder Bruce R. McConkie's memorable final conference talk, "The Purifying Power of Gethsemane." It may also come from past Church curricula that have emphasized Gethsemane over Calvary. See John Hilton III, *Considering the Cross: How Calvary Connects Us with Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 96–100. Perhaps because the Latter-day Saint doctrinal teaching that Gethsemane played a part in the suffering for sin is unique in Christianity, it has been emphasized by some Church members.



FIGURE 1. Survey Images. Image 1: Carl Heinrich Bloch, *Christ on the Cross*, 1870; image 2: Harry Anderson, *Jesus Praying in Gethsemane*, 1973, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.; image 3: Carl Heinrich Bloch, *Christ at Gethsemane*, 1880; image 4: Harry Anderson, *The Crucifixion*, ca. 1970, © Intellectual Reserve Inc.; image 5: J. Kirk Richards, *Crucifixion*, courtesy J. Kirk Richards; image 6: J. Kirk Richards, *Gethsemane*, courtesy J. Kirk Richards.

Harry Anderson from the 1900s with a more realistic, illustrative style; and J. Kirk Richards from the 2000s with a representational, somewhat abstracted style. While being able to see all six images on the same page, students were asked, “If you had to choose one of the following six paintings to hang in your home, which would you choose?” The paintings were displayed as in figure 1.

Students selected the following paintings, listed in order from most to least chosen:

- 41.7% chose image 2, of Gethsemane by Harry Anderson
- 29.6% chose image 3, of Gethsemane by Carl Bloch
- 25.6% chose image 6, of Gethsemane by J. Kirk Richards
- 1.8% chose image 5, of the Crucifixion by J. Kirk Richards
- 0.9% chose image 1, of the Crucifixion by Carl Bloch
- 0.4% chose image 4, of the Crucifixion by Harry Anderson

In total, 829 (97%) students in our sample chose a painting of Gethsemane. When asked why they chose the painting they did, 410 people (48%) specifically wrote something negative relative to Crucifixion imagery, suggesting that part of their decision was influenced less by what they *liked* about the Gethsemane images and more by what they *did*

not like about the Crucifixion images. We examined these 410 responses looking for common themes. A process of emergent coding led to five themes that we used to code each reference. Table 1 summarizes our coding structure.

TABLE 1. Negative Statements about Crucifixion Artwork

Theme	Key words	Sample phrase	Percent of the total respondents who spoke about the Crucifixion in their response to why they chose a specific painting
Violent	Graphic, gruesome, dark	"They all seem too graphic or painful to look at."	32
Don't like	No connection, wouldn't want in home	"I never liked the paintings of him on the cross."	32
Sad	Sorrow, uncomfortable	"When I look at [the cross] I feel sad and uncomfortable."	21
Focus on death	Dying, death	"Christ on the cross focuses too much on his death, and I prefer to focus on Christ's resurrection."	10
Church position	As a Church, LDS culture, in our faith	"Other churches use crosses so much, and I was always taught that we don't use the symbol of the cross."	5

Of those who explained their choice in artwork in terms of their feelings about Crucifixion artwork, 32 percent said that the Crucifixion images were too violent and graphic. For example, one student wrote, "The [paintings of the Crucifixion] seemed more gruesome and made me feel guiltier about being human and making mistakes in my life." Another responded, "I don't want to always remember Christ in pain and agony, it seems like it is almost celebrating his suffering." One student captured the sentiment of many, writing, "It is sad to see Jesus Christ on cross and too violent for my future children to look at everyday even though it is important to remember."

Another 32 percent of respondents said they did not like or feel a connection to depictions of Jesus on the cross. One student wrote, "Maybe it is bad of me, but I have never been too keen on seeing pictures of Christ on the cross. Yes, it invokes a feeling of respect, love, and admiration of the Savior, but I also get extremely uncomfortable seeing it as well." Another student explained, "I don't really feel a connection to Crucifixion artwork, it just doesn't speak to me." Most respondents in this category stated something like, "I don't like to focus on the cross," "I wouldn't want to see Christ on the Cross in my home," or "I do not like to see Christ hanging on the Cross because many criminals were hung like that as well."

Related to the previous two categories, 21 percent of respondents said the cross makes them sad or uncomfortable. For example, "[Crucifixion paintings] honestly make me feel slightly uncomfortable, as Christ would be hanging on the cross almost fully naked in my house every day," and "I love the truth of the cross, but I feel the image of the cross is often focused on sadness and despair rather than hope and joy."

Ten percent of students said they did not like that the cross focuses on Christ's death. Sample statements include, "Sometimes just a picture of the cross seems to celebrate His death over the fact that He lives," and "While I recognize the significance and importance of Christ's death on the cross, I'd rather not focus on the moment that He died." Finally, 5 percent mentioned their belief about the Church's position on the cross. For example, one student wrote, "As members of the church we don't dwell on the fact that he suffered on the cross, we focus on the atonement." Another said, "I think focusing on the crucifixion is not how [members of the Church] view the Atonement." For these individuals, there was clearly a connection between their understanding of Christ's Atonement and their perceptions of artwork.

Of the twenty-four individuals who chose a Crucifixion painting, seven chose Carl Bloch's depiction, three selected Harry Anderson's, and fourteen chose J. Kirk Richards's. When examining the comments of those who chose a Crucifixion image as to why they chose a specific image, we found that about two-thirds centered on the aesthetics and style of the painting, as well as its uniqueness. The other third mentioned how they felt the depictions of the cross were meaningful and symbolic. For example, one student wrote, "I feel a sense of awe when I consider the Savior giving his life for me. The image of his lifeless body represents His condescension, submissiveness and love for me." Another student responded, "Christ's crucifixion was a symbol of love

and hope. And it literally enabled us to escape the bands of death and be resurrected one day.”

While intuitively these results appear to indicate something unique about the Latter-day Saint population, we wanted to determine whether other Christians would respond differently about their artistic preferences when choosing from the same six paintings. Consequently, we surveyed 100 students at the University of Pikeville, a Christian University in Kentucky founded in 1889 by the Presbyterian Church.¹⁴ Today, two-thirds of the student body self-identify as Christian. Students at the University of Pikeville indicated their preferences for artwork by taking the same survey described above. The following are the results from this population, from artwork selected most to least:

47% chose image 2, of Gethsemane by Harry Anderson

22% chose image 1, of the Crucifixion by Carl Bloch

14% chose image 3, of Gethsemane by Carl Bloch

12% chose image 4, of the Crucifixion by Harry Anderson

5% chose image 6, of Gethsemane by J. Kirk Richards

0% chose image 5, of the Crucifixion by J. Kirk Richards

In total, sixty-six of one hundred (66%) of our sample chose a painting of Gethsemane. While this was still a strong majority, students at the University of Pikeville chose a Crucifixion painting 34 percent of the time, compared to 3 percent from the BYU sample. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between students at the two schools and their artwork preferences. The relation between these variables were statistically significant.¹⁵

Moreover, University of Pikeville participants also had very different reasoning for selecting their paintings than those at Brigham Young University. In describing why they chose the artwork they did, only 17 percent wrote something negative about the Crucifixion images, as opposed to 48 percent of the BYU students. Those who did write something negative about Crucifixion tended to focus on feelings of sadness or wanting to avoid violent images.

However, in most instances, those who didn't choose a Crucifixion image did not negatively discuss the Crucifixion but instead explained why they chose a Gethsemane image. Their responses centered on three

14. “History,” University of Pikeville, accessed March 16, 2021, www.upike.edu/about/history.

15. The chi-square statistic is used to calculate whether there is a relationship between categorical variables. The results were (X^2 (1, $N = 953$) = 152.3.9, $p < .00001$).

themes: the painting was aesthetically pleasing (36%), they liked to see Jesus praying (27%), and they felt that the painting was peaceful or comforting (25%).¹⁶

No University of Pikeville students mentioned Gethsemane in their response or identified Christ as atoning for our sins in a Gethsemane image.¹⁷ In contrast, 230 (27%) of BYU students specifically commented on Christ's Atonement as taking place in Gethsemane. Although more than 25 percent of University of Pikeville students specifically mentioned choosing a Gethsemane image because they liked seeing Christ pray, almost no BYU students reported selecting a Gethsemane image because they enjoyed seeing Christ praying. This was most likely because BYU students perceived the paintings of Christ in Gethsemane differently from students at the University of Pikeville.

Of the 34 percent (34/100) of individuals at the University of Pikeville who chose a Crucifixion image, 41 percent specifically said it was because the image showed Jesus dying for their sins.¹⁸ One stated, "It would be a daily reminder that he died on the cross for me." Another wrote, "The crucifixion of Jesus is very important to me as Christian because this act made it possible to be saved from sin." In contrast, 21 percent of the BYU students who selected an image of the cross said something about Christ dying for our sins. Put differently, across the entire survey population, at the University of Pikeville, when commenting on their chosen artwork, 14 percent (14/100) of people wrote about Christ dying for their sins, compared to .01 percent (5/853) of BYU students.

These results appear to verify what Douglas J. Davies wrote: "Amidst Christian traditions Mormonism stands out both iconographically and theologically, in the way it gives higher priority to Christ in Gethsemane than to Christ on the Cross, as favoured by Catholic traditions, or to the bare cross preferred by Protestants."¹⁹ Is this iconographic preference for Gethsemane over the Crucifixion—strongly reflected in the BYU student survey—similarly mirrored in the paintings that are hung in the hallways of Latter-day Saint chapels?

16. Additional student statements were categorized as miscellaneous.

17. It is not surprising that most Christians do not identify Gethsemane as a location of the Savior's Atonement—a reasonable position from their perspective, since the Bible also does not do so.

18. The other three main reasons students reported for choosing a Crucifixion image were that it looked realistic (23%); it evoked powerful feelings (20%); and aesthetics (17%).

19. Douglas J. Davies, *Mormon Culture of Salvation* (London: Routledge, 2018), 46.

Images of the Crucifixion in Latter-day Saint Meetinghouses

To gather data on paintings that hang in the foyers and hallways of Latter-day Saint buildings, we informally used social-media channels (Instagram and Facebook) to ask willing individuals to share with us information about artwork in the hallways and foyers of their chapels. Participants were asked to count and report in their respective meetinghouses (1) how many total paintings of the Savior hang in the hallways, (2) how many paintings of Christ in Gethsemane are displayed in the hallways and, (3) how many paintings of Christ on the cross hang there. We note that by policy, a typical Latter-day Saint Sunday meetinghouse does not allow any paintings, statues, murals, or mosaics in their main chapel interior, where the congregation meets to partake of the sacrament. Those who have responsibility to care for the building, however, may choose approved artwork to adorn the hallways, offices, and classrooms of Church meetinghouses.²⁰

We received responses regarding 146 Latter-day Saint meetinghouses across 25 states. Of those, 42 were from Utah and 8 from Idaho, with the remainder coming from other states. We also received responses for 5 international chapels, giving our sample a total of 151 Church buildings. Every meetinghouse had pictures of the Savior, with the average building having seven. Slightly fewer than half of the meetinghouses (72/151) had a picture of Gethsemane, and only four had a picture of the Crucifixion. In one of these four cases, the meetinghouse was a large institute building in Idaho, which displayed an image from the The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos series of Jesus Christ being crucified. In another instance, a small, framed picture of Harry Anderson's depiction of Christ's Crucifixion had been placed in a meetinghouse in Florida. Clearly this was an informal survey based on a social-media convenience sample, and thus the results are exploratory; however, it is notable that while close to half of the meetinghouses displayed artistic images of Gethsemane, only 3 percent displayed an image of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This iconographic scarcity is likely noticeable to newcomers from traditional Catholic or Protestant backgrounds who are used to images of the cross or Christ's Crucifixion. The disparity between Crucifixion and Gethsemane images suggests a similarly strong visual preference for Gethsemane images rather than for Crucifixion images in Latter-day

20. See "Artwork," Policies on Using Church Buildings and Other Property, in *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2020), 35.4.1.

Saint worship houses, similar to the sampled BYU students' preferences for images in their homes.

While more in-depth and robust research is needed to investigate this phenomenon, one factor alone may explain the scarcity of Crucifixion artwork in the hallways of Latter-day Saint meetinghouses. As mentioned above, those assigned to custodial care of Church meetinghouses can select artwork to be hung based on the policy guideline that "Church-approved artwork for meetinghouses is obtained through the facilities manager using the *Church Facilities Artwork* catalog."²¹ This catalog has a limited set of approved artworks for hanging in chapels. As of March 2021, the Church Facilities Artwork Catalog contained eighty New Testament images, including three of Gethsemane, but none of the Crucifixion. This is particularly interesting given that guidelines for Church artwork include having the artwork "serve as a teaching resource for missionaries and members" and help "portray Church doctrine accurately."²² It may be that the omission of Crucifixion paintings unintentionally works against these objectives by minimizing an event that Joseph Smith referred to as one of the "fundamental principles of our religion."²³

Moreover, the May 2020 guidelines that require an image of Christ to be hung in the welcoming foyer of all Church meetinghouses limit the choice to twenty-two approved paintings. There are images of Christ ministering, teaching, sitting at the Last Supper, suffering in Gethsemane, and rising from the tomb, but there are no images depicting his Crucifixion.²⁴ Thus, even if a local Church leader or facility manager wanted to order an image of Christ's Crucifixion to be displayed in a foyer or hallway, no such options are currently available in the Church-approved facilities catalog.

21. "Artwork."

22. "Guidelines," Church Facilities Artwork, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://churchfacilitiesartwork.churchofjesuschrist.org/guidelines>.

23. In response to a question about the fundamental aspects of his religion, Joseph Smith said, "The fundamental principles of our religion is the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets concerning Jesus Christ, 'that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven;' and all other things are only appendages to these, which pertain to our religion." *Elders' Journal*, July 1838, p. [44], the Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/elders-journal-july-1838/12>, emphasis added.

24. See "Principles and Guidelines for Meetinghouse Foyers and Entries."

Thus far we have seen how individual Church members privilege artwork featuring Gethsemane over Calvary. At the same time, the Church similarly privileges Gethsemane artwork in its meetinghouses. Is this emphasis also represented by the institutional Church's selection of artwork in its official magazines?

Depictions of the Crucifixion in Early Church Magazines

In terms of Latter-day Saint depictions of Christ's Crucifixion, John G. Turner identifies figure 2 as being "possibly the first Mormon printed image of Jesus Christ."²⁵ This depiction by an unnamed artist appeared in 1866, in the inaugural issue of the *Juvenile Instructor*.²⁶ We searched every periodical published or sponsored by the Church prior to 1866,²⁷ including periodicals in foreign languages²⁸ as well as those published by other early restoration churches that claimed belief in Joseph Smith's prophetic call.²⁹ In each case, we looked at the periodical's inaugural issue through issues published until 1866 and did not find any earlier images of Jesus Christ than this one identified by Turner. Thus, it appears that the first printed image of Jesus in a Latter-day Saint publication was of Christ being crucified.



FIGURE 2. Untitled image, artist unnamed, published in 1866. This is the earliest image of Jesus identified in a Latter-day Saint publication.

25. Turner, *Mormon Jesus*, 259.

26. "Death by Crucifying," *Juvenile Instructor* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 1866): 2.

27. The periodicals we searched include the following: *The Evening and the Morning Star*, *Messenger and Advocate*, *Elders' Journal*, *Times and Seasons*, *Millennial Star*, *Gospel Reflector*, *The Wasp*, *Nauvoo Neighbor*, *Gospel Light*, *The Prophet*, *The New-York Messenger*, *People's Organ*, *The Frontier Guardian*, *Deseret News*, *Deseret Almanac*, *The Seer*, *Zion's Watchman*, *The Mormon*, *St. Louis Luminary*, and *Western Standard*.

28. The periodicals we searched include the following: *Prophwyd y Jubili*, *Udgorn Seion*, *Étoile du Déseret*, *Skandnaviens Stjerne*, *Zion's Panier*, *Der Darsteller der Heiligen der letzten Tage*, and *Die Reform*.

29. The periodicals we searched include the following: *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, *Voree Herald*, *Star in the East*, *Zion's Reveille*, *Ensign of Liberty*, *Gospel Herald*, *Melchisedek and Aaronic Herald*, *Northern Islander*, *Zion's Messenger*, and *True Latter Day Saints' Herald*.

The text accompanying the article states that crucifixion “was usually done by driving nails through [the victims’] feet and hands, they were in some places left to lie on the ground till they died, and stakes, or sticks sharpened at the ends, were driven through their bodies; in other places the cross was raised up and the bottom end driven violently into a hole made in the earth, which often dislocated, or drove out of their places, the joints of the persons nailed to it.”³⁰ Although the author of the article writes that “a great many who call themselves Christians, or followers of Christ, pay a great deal of reverence to the cross, more, indeed, to the symbol or sign of the manner in which Christ died than to doing what He told them to do,”³¹ the overall thesis of the article seems to be inculcating in readers an understanding of the severity of what Christ suffered.

Atonement Images in the *Millennial Star*, *Improvement Era*, and *Ensign*

In this section, we examine how Christ’s suffering in Gethsemane and his Crucifixion on Calvary were portrayed in three major magazines for adult Church members: the *Millennial Star* (1840–1970), the *Improvement Era* (1897–1970), and the *Ensign* (1971–2020). We included images of Christ praying or suffering in Gethsemane but excluded images of olive trees (without Christ in the image) or the betrayal of Christ (which also took place in Gethsemane). We also excluded any documentary or location photographs that were not considered artistic expressions. We included any representation of Christ hanging on, being nailed to, or being taken down from the cross, and any representation with Christ on the cross in the background. We excluded any implicit or imminent Crucifixion representations including the crown of thorns on Christ, Christ carrying his cross, his trial before Pilate and scourging, the Christus statue (including zoomed in pictures of Christ’s hands), and any images of Golgotha without Christ represented.

Gethsemane and Crucifixion representation in the Millennial Star

The *Millennial Star* was published primarily for the British Latter-day Saints and was begun by Parley P. Pratt in 1840. It ran until 1970, becoming the longest-published periodical by the Church. It was replaced in 1970 by the *Ensign*. In its 130-year run, the *Star* included just three

30. “Death by Crucifying,” 2.

31. “Death by Crucifying,” 2.



FIGURE 3. *Christ in Gethsemane*, Heinrich Hofmann, 1890. © C. Harrison Conroy Co.



FIGURE 4. Artwork of Christ in Gethsemane published in the *Millennial Star* in 1953, attributed to Heinrich Hofmann.

images of Gethsemane and two of the Crucifixion. Heinrich Hofmann's famous image of Christ praying in Gethsemane as he kneels by and rests his hands on a rock (fig. 3) is featured in the December 1948 issue of the *Millennial Star*.³² A similar artwork, attributed to Hofmann, of Jesus praying in Gethsemane, again kneeling by a rock with hands resting upon it (fig. 4), is depicted in the April 1953 issue of the *Millennial Star*.³³ The April 1957 *Millennial Star* shows a two-page spread of a large, pulled-back panoramic view of *The Crucifixion* by Jan Styka (fig. 5).³⁴ The April 1968 *Millennial Star* has an image of Christ praying in Gethsemane accompanying a poem called "Watch with Me" by Gillian Brown-Lee. Just a few pages later, the same issue has a full-page poem and illustration of Jesus nailed on the cross; the poem and artwork were both created by fifteen-year-old Sheila Cuthbert from England (fig. 6).³⁵

32. *Millennial Star* 110, no. 12 (December 1948): 361.

33. *Millennial Star* 115, no. 4 (April 1953): 73.

34. *Millennial Star* 119, no. 4 (April 1957): 112–13.

35. *Millennial Star* 130, no. 4 (April 1968): 15, 22.



FIGURE 5. *The Crucifixion*, Jan Styka, created 1895. This monumental painting (195 feet by 45 feet) is now displayed at Forest Lawn Museum, Glendale, California. Published in 1957.

Gethsemane and Crucifixion Representation in the Improvement Era

We examined every *Improvement Era* magazine between 1897 and 1970 for images of both Gethsemane and Christ's Crucifixion. We note that images in general in the *Improvement Era* were much rarer than in the later *Ensign* magazines. For example, in the decade of the 1930s, there were only twelve images of Jesus Christ in any form in the 120 issues of the magazine. Across the corpus of *Improvement Era* magazines from 1897 to 1970, there were eight images of Christ in Gethsemane and two portrayals of his Crucifixion, reflecting a heavier visual emphasis on Gethsemane than the more balanced results from the *Millennial Star*.

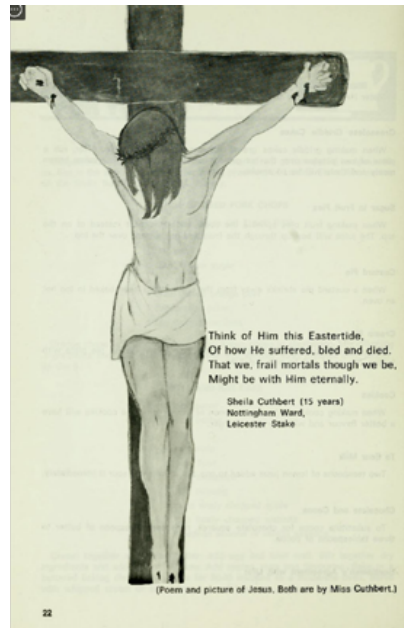


FIGURE 6. Poem and artwork by Sheila Cuthbert, published in 1968.



FIGURE 7. Artwork depicting Christ in Gethsemane published in the *Improvement Era* in 1964. The artist is unidentified.

The earliest *Era* image of Gethsemane was in November 1940 accompanying an article called "Armistice."³⁶ It contains a black-and-white reprint of Heinrich Hofmann's well-known image of Christ praying in Gethsemane (fig. 3), the same one previously mentioned as printed in the December 1948 issue of the *Star*. Four more distinct Gethsemane images were printed in the *Era* in the 1950s. In April 1952, accompa-

nying an article by Orson F. Whitney on the Resurrection is an image of Heinrich Hofmann's other, less well-known Gethsemane painting, the same used in the April 1953 *Star*. This same Hofmann painting was used again in July 1956 and in March 1957. Hofmann's painting of Christ in Gethsemane, used in 1940, was again reprinted in February 1958, December 1962 (although the image was reversed and cropped), and April 1964. The last Gethsemane image (by an unidentified artist) was also in the April 1964 *Era* (fig. 7). It was printed in color as a small thumbnail but matches the same Gethsemane image printed in the April 1968 *Star*. It shows Christ praying calmly but sorrowfully by a tree, hands resting on his knees, with the sleeping Apostles and city of Jerusalem behind him, a common artistic composition by Christian artists at the time when depicting Gethsemane. Thus, between the *Star* and the *Era* there were twelve depictions of Gethsemane using only three paintings by two artists.

The only two images of Christ's Crucifixion in the *Era* were in March 1958 and April 1964. Neither of these were printed in the *Star*. The 1958 illustration was a half-page image of the Crucifixion named *It Is Finished* by Johann von Kdeler-Wiliandi (fig. 8). The painting is in neoclassical style and is masterfully executed. The beloved disciple holds a fainting Mary, the mother of Jesus, at Christ's feet, while another woman (likely representing Mary Magdalene) buries her face in her hands in sorrow. The only other Crucifixion image to appear in the *Era* is a very small image of the Crucifixion, part of a mural by Sidney E. King that was created for the Church pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair (fig. 9). Several

36. *Improvement Era* 43, no. 11 (November 1940): 653.



FIGURE 8. *It Is Finished*, Johann von Kdeler-Wiliandi, published in 1958.



FIGURE 9. *Jesus Is Crucified*, part of *Life of Christ Mural* created for the 1964 World's Fair, by Sidney E. King.

images from the mural are included in the April 1964 issue. This scene shows the Crucifixion, with three crosses, Jesus's cross larger and in the middle, with a crowd of mourners, soldiers, and onlookers. Between the *Star* and the *Era* there were four depictions of the Crucifixion using four different paintings, each by a different artist.

Gethsemane and Crucifixion in the Ensign

Using the same methodology described for the *Millennial Star* and the *Improvement Era*, we searched the *Ensign* magazine between 1971 and 2020 for artistic images of Gethsemane and the Crucifixion. The *Ensign* began in January 1971 as the official English magazine for adults of the Church, subsuming and replacing other Church periodicals such as the *Millennial Star* and *Improvement Era* (along with the *Juvenile Instructor* and *Relief Society* magazines). At the end of 2020, the *Ensign* was discontinued, replaced by the worldwide *Liahona* magazine. In comparison to the *Star* and *Era*, the *Ensign* historically made greater use of visual imagery to accompany the printed word. We identified 100 total representations of Christ's Crucifixion in the *Ensign*. Of those 100, 53 were smaller than a quarter page, 24 were a quarter page up to just under a half page, 9 were between half a page and just smaller than three-quarters of a page, and 14 were three-quarters of a page or larger.

In comparison, we found 215 total representations of Christ in Gethsemane in the *Ensign*. Of those 215, 131 were smaller than a quarter page, 39 were a quarter page to just under a half page, 13 were a half page to just smaller than three-quarters of a page, and 32 were three-quarters of a page or larger. These data are summarized in table 2.³⁷

TABLE 2. *Ensign* Crucifixion and Gethsemane Images, 1971–2020

Crucifixion Images	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010–2020	Total
Smaller than ¼ page	6	4	12	16	15	53
¼ to just under ½ page	0	8	8	5	3	24
½ to just under ¾ page	0	1	5	1	2	9
¾ to full page	2	1	7	1	3	14
Total Crucifixion	8	14	32	23	23	100

Gethsemane Images	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010–2020	Total
Smaller than ¼ page	8	14	17	41	51	131
¼ to just under ½ page	0	5	9	11	14	39
½ to just under ¾ page	0	0	0	9	4	13
¾ to full page	2	1	5	14	10	32
Total Gethsemane	10	20	31	75	73	215

Although we found more than twice as many Gethsemane images as Crucifixion images, this does not tell the complete story. Between 1971 and 1999, there were 61 images of Gethsemane compared to 54 images of the Crucifixion, showing a relatively balanced artistic representation of these two atoning events. In contrast, between 2000 and 2020, there were 154 images of Gethsemane compared to 46 images of the Crucifixion—more than three Gethsemane images for each image of the Crucifixion.

Even more disparate results occur when we examined the largest images (those from three-quarters of a page up to a full page). Between 1971 and 1999, there were eight large images of Gethsemane and ten large images of the Crucifixion, again representing a visual balance. However,

37. There are small differences between our data set and that of Noel A. Carmack in his article “Images of Christ in Latter-day Saint Visual Culture, 1900–1999.” Carmack’s study appears to have included images of the crown of thorns and zoomed-in pictures of Christ’s hands on the Christus statue as being Crucifixion images, whereas we excluded them.

between 2000 and 2020, there were twenty-four large images of Gethsemane compared to only four images of the Crucifixion—six times as many large images of Gethsemane. Curious to learn whether this large discrepancy reflected the text of the *Ensign*, we examined the text surrounding the large images of Gethsemane between the years 2000 and 2020. We found that the text accompanying these images generally did *not* dictate the necessity of using a picture of Gethsemane. In these twenty-four instances, only four spoke specifically of Gethsemane without also referencing Calvary. In ten instances, both Gethsemane and Calvary were mentioned in the text. On three occasions there was no reference to Christ's Atonement whatsoever, and text accompanying seven of the twenty-four large Gethsemane images talked about Christ's Atonement without referencing a specific location.

For example, an article about the relevance of the Book of Mormon included a section about the Savior's Atonement. Several Book of Mormon verses were used in this section; however, none of them explicitly talked about Calvary or Gethsemane. Accompanying this section of the article was a three-quarter-page image of Christ in Gethsemane.³⁸ This is representative of several other examples in which, based on the article content, an image of Christ's Crucifixion would have been equally appropriate as a painting of Gethsemane. While a complete textual analysis of *Ensign* text is beyond the scope of our study, our preliminary investigation suggests that heavy use of Gethsemane imagery relative to Calvary between 2000 and 2020 was not primarily based on the accompanying article text.

Which Crucifixion Artwork Is Most Frequently Utilized by the Ensign?

The two most common Crucifixion images appearing in *Ensign* magazines were Carl Heinrich Bloch's *Christ on the Cross* (30 times; fig. 10) and Harry Anderson's *The Crucifixion* (25 times; fig. 11). These two paintings account for 56 percent of all paintings in the *Ensign* depicting Christ's Crucifixion. Bloch's *Christ on the Cross* and Anderson's *Crucifixion* were two of the three Crucifixion images that were part of the student survey described earlier and are also shown in figure 1.

Bloch's oft-used painting of the Crucifixion of Jesus is brilliantly painted: The dark clouds cause the contrasting vertical, light image of

38. See Byron R. Merrill, "They Wrote to Us As If We Were Present," *Ensign* 30, no. 1 (January 2000), 12.

Christ on the cross in the middle of the painting to stand out. Christ hangs dead, yet serene, with a halo around his head. While realistically painted, the nail prints in Jesus's hands and feet and the wound in his side are not gory or bloody, features that—based on our surveys—would likely not be embraced by Church members. Overall, this painting presents a dignified, realistic, and masterfully painted image, which may be why the institutional Church embraces and uses it most often when portraying Christ's Crucifixion in its periodicals.

Anderson's Crucifixion painting includes the two thieves, tied by ropes to their crosses as opposed to nailed, with Jesus nailed in the middle. Like Bloch's image, Anderson's Crucifixion is realistic yet devoid of overt representations of gore and pain. It is more of a panoramic, pulled-back image, showing a crowd of people affected by Christ's death: a Roman soldier sitting pensively, women mourning at the feet of Jesus, and passersby looking on. This beautifully painted image provides a poignant picture of what transpired at Calvary.

Outside of the Bloch and Anderson paintings, only four other Crucifixion representations appeared more than twice in the *Ensign*, with twenty-nine unique artistic depictions in total. One image, *The Crucifixion of Christ* by Louise Parker (fig. 12), has appeared six times. It has a similar composition to Anderson's Crucifixion scene. A second Crucifixion image used more than twice in the *Ensign* is Wilson Ong's



FIGURE 10. Carl Heinrich Bloch, *Christ on the Cross*, 1870.



FIGURE 11. Harry Anderson, *The Crucifixion*, ca. 1970, © Intellectual Reserve Inc.



FIGURE 12. *The Crucifixion of Christ*, Louise Parker. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



FIGURE 13. *Christ Being Taken Down from the Cross*, Wilson Ong. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

painting depicting Christ as he is lowered from the cross (fig. 13).

This painting has been used four times in the *Ensign*. Ong's style is more painterly and expressive, rather than classical, but is still representational and not symbolic or abstracted expression. His scene is also dignified, showing Christ being borne lovingly by two men who carry his body as a woman waits with a white sheet to cover him.

James Jacques Joseph Tissot's *The Raising of the Cross* (fig. 14) has been used three times in the *Ensign*. Tissot's watercolor is powerful, full of movement and drama, depicting men strenuously pulling on ropes to raise Christ up on the cross, the beam with Christ upon it at about a sixty-degree angle. While the ropes and poles depicted to raise the cross are likely historically inaccurate,³⁹ they ingeniously divide the composition with angles and verticals.

39. Scholars estimate that crosses most frequently consisted of a six-to-eight-foot vertical beam and a five-to-six-foot horizontal beam. Thus, contrary to many modern artistic depictions, the victim would have been suspended only one or two feet off the



FIGURE 14. *The Raising of the Cross*, James Jacques Joseph Tissot, 1886–1894. Brooklyn Museum.

J. Kirk Richards's image *Grey Day Golgotha* (fig. 15) is perhaps the most abstracted, following his general style, and is beautifully composed. One thief is to the right of the viewer and closer, almost in silhouette, and a mist hazes the details of Jesus, the other thief, and the crowd, creating an ethereal feel.

All other remaining images of the Crucifixion have been used two or fewer times (see the appendix for a complete list of images and the issues where they appear). These images include five different woodcuts by famed



FIGURE 15. *Grey Day Golgotha*, J. Kirk Richards. Courtesy J. Kirk Richards.

ground. See Roger W. Byard, "Forensic and Historical Aspects of Crucifixion," *Forensic Science, Medicine, and Pathology* 12 (2016): 206.

illustrator Gustave Doré and an additional three Tissot Crucifixion paintings. After Bloch and Anderson, Doré and Tissot are the most oft-used artists in the *Ensign* with respect to Christ's Crucifixion, each with eight total depictions. Doré's black and white woodcut illustrations are dramatic and full of high-contrast drama. They do not hesitate to show expressions of suffering, pain, or anguish. Tissot traveled to the Holy Land multiple times and created over 350 biblical scenes painted in gouache (watercolor that is opaque) that have been circulated broadly. The images of the Crucifixion used by the Church are part of that series.

Additional Crucifixion paintings printed in the *Ensign* include one each from Greg Olsen, Robert T. Barrett, J. Kirk Richards, Rembrandt van Rijn, and Liz Lemon Swindle. Greg Olsen's image is actually a recomposition combining figures from both of the oft-used Bloch and Anderson Crucifixion images and a detail of a larger painting by Olsen called *The Bible and the Book of Mormon Testify of Christ*. Liz Lemon Swindle's painting depicts perhaps the most blood of all the published *Ensign* Crucifixion images, with red lacerations across Jesus's chest and back from his scourging and blood dripping down his forehead from the crown of thorns.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that although scripture and Church leaders more frequently discuss the atoning efficacy of Calvary relative to that of Gethsemane, when Latter-day Saint adults are asked to emphasize one location with respect to Christ atoning for their sins, they heavily focus on the Garden of Gethsemane. Latter-day Saint adults likewise indicate a strong preference for Gethsemane artwork over Crucifixion artwork. While most students (66%) at a Christian university also chose a Gethsemane image to hang in their home, a much higher percentage (34%) of those students selected Crucifixion images than did students at BYU (3%). The reasons provided for the choice of image indicate that BYU students do not place as much atoning value on the Crucifixion as do their counterparts at a Christian university, instead placing more emphasis on Gethsemane. Moreover, BYU students appear to have an aversion to images of Christ being crucified relative to their peers at the University of Pikeville.

Gethsemane images are represented in approximately half of the hallways of surveyed Latter-day Saint meetinghouses, whereas Crucifixion

images were reported in only 3 percent of our sample. Although our surveys do not extend beyond the populations from which our data was gathered and additional, more rigorous research is needed, based on our anecdotal experience with other Latter-day Saint groups we assume that broader Latter-day Saint populations would yield similar results because of current Church policies.

Our review of Church-published artwork of Gethsemane and the Crucifixion in the *Millennial Star* and *Improvement Era* revealed a fairly well-balanced emphasis in the *Millennial Star* (3 images of Gethsemane and 2 of the Crucifixion), with a heavier emphasis on Gethsemane in the *Improvement Era* (9 images of Gethsemane and 2 of the Crucifixion). Overall, the *Ensign* has shown a much heavier visual emphasis on Gethsemane (215 artistic images) compared to Christ's Crucifixion (100 images). Between 1971 and 1999, there was a relatively balanced visual emphasis in the *Ensign* both in total images (61 of Gethsemane and 54 of the Crucifixion) and in page size (8 large images of Gethsemane and 10 of the Crucifixion). In contrast, between 2000 and 2020, there were 154 images of Gethsemane compared to 46 images of the Crucifixion published in the *Ensign*. Of those images, only 4 Crucifixion images were three-fourths of a page or larger in size, whereas there were 24 such images of Gethsemane.

This increase in Church magazines focusing on Gethsemane visuals mirrors an increase in the frequency with which the Garden of Gethsemane has been emphasized by Church leaders in General Conference.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the paucity of Crucifixion imagery remains somewhat puzzling given that even with the increased use of Gethsemane in the past forty years, in these same forty years references in general conference to the atoning value of Christ's Crucifixion appear twice as frequently as those to the atoning value of Gethsemane⁴¹—a fact *not* mirrored in selected or published artwork by the Church and its members, or in the available artwork catalogs for Church facilities.

Although we cannot state with certainty why Gethsemane artwork has been more favored by Church members, in meetinghouses, and in

40. The use of the word *Gethsemane* dramatically increased in usage in LDS general conference beginning in the 1980s and continuing through today. For example, in the decade of 2010–19, the word *Gethsemane* was mentioned in general conference 86 times (or 69 occurrences per million words), compared to 9 times (or 5 occurrences per million words) one hundred years earlier, from 1910 to 1919.

41. Hilton, Hyde, and Trussel, "Use of 'Crucifixion' by Church Leaders," 49–80.

magazines, based on our survey research it appears that Church members tend to attach more atoning efficacy to Gethsemane than Calvary. As indicated by our BYU sample, there also seems to be an aversion in Latter-day Saint visual culture to images that are graphic, violent, or sad in relation to Christ's death. Admittedly, the results we have shared are tentative and preliminary. More robust survey techniques could be employed to learn more about the connections between Church members' perceptions of artwork and their view of Christ's Atonement. It may be that preferences for artwork are influencing perceptions about the relative importance of atoning acts and perhaps perceptions about the importance of atoning acts in turn drive preferences for artwork.

Just as art can reflect cultural values, it can also help to change culture. The didactic and visual power of art can embed itself in the minds of learners, sometimes more powerfully than written or spoken language. If art's ability to catalyze cultural acceptance is significant, then an important opportunity exists to better inculcate in the minds of Latter-day Saints the atoning significance of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. Increased visual depictions of the cross or Crucifixion by Latter-day Saint artists, support from patrons of Latter-day Saint religious art and leaders of families who hang religious art in their home, and an increase in available Church-approved artwork of Christ's Crucifixion in the *Church Facilities Artwork Catalog* would likely result in a greater appreciation for Christ's Crucifixion in Latter-day Saint discourse and teaching. An increased visibility of Crucifixion images may also help Latter-day Saints better connect Christ's redemptive sacrifice for sin to both events, rather than only to Gethsemane.

Perceived meanings of Crucifixion imagery do not change the doctrinal importance of Christ's Crucifixion. Some may view the cross as a symbol of death to be avoided, but symbols are multifaceted—they invite layers of meaning. For many Christians, Crucifixion imagery represents Christ's ultimate triumph or his love or is an image of suffering that can comfort us in pain. As Elliott Wise, an assistant professor of art history and curatorial studies at Brigham Young University, shared,

Far from being bothered or uncomfortable by images of Christ on the cross, I am profoundly moved and inspired by those depictions. The representation of his agony and blood is not disrespectful—far from it! There is no better way of communicating his descent below all things. The crucifixion proclaims that he was broken and lifted up for his people that they might 'look on him whom they pierced' and 'look

unto [him] in every thought . . . behold[ing] the wounds that pierced [his] side, and also the prints of the nails in [his] hands and feet.' For me, looking upon the crucified Christ focuses on much more than just his death. The cross manifests the depths of his eternal, living love, love that we are to emulate.⁴²

Feelings about the symbol are separate from the doctrinal reality that Jesus Christ was, in his own words, "crucified for the sins of the world" (D&C 35:2). It is true that Church leaders have emphasized that we should focus on the living Christ,⁴³ and certainly it is the living Christ that we worship. At the same time, we also worship a *loving Christ*. The scriptures repeatedly teach that both Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ manifested their love for us through the Savior's death. The Savior himself defined his Crucifixion as his greatest act of love, declaring, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13; see also John 10:17; Rom. 5:8; 1 Jn. 3:16; 4:9–10; 2 Ne. 26:24; Ether 12:33). Acknowledging and teaching that Christ's Crucifixion is an act of *love* may help members who avoid Crucifixion artwork find greater spiritual strength in such images.

While our survey data indicate that some Latter-day Saints do not prefer to look at images of the death of Christ, the scriptures repeatedly invite us to reflect upon the Savior's Crucifixion. Mormon wrote to his son Moroni, "May Christ lift thee up, and *may his sufferings and death . . . rest in your mind forever*" (Moro. 9:25, emphasis added). Similarly, Jacob wrote, "We would to God that we could persuade all men [to] . . . believe in Christ, and *view his death*, and suffer his cross" (Jacob 1:8, emphasis added). Commenting on this passage, scholar Deidre Green wrote, "The operative definition of the word *view* during Joseph Smith's time was 'to survey intellectually; to examine with the mental eye; to consider the subject in all its aspects.' Additionally, a sense from the Latin root is that of reaching or extending toward the object one views. Jacob desires for everyone to contemplate thoroughly the multifaceted death of Christ in a way that requires each person to reach or extend toward it."⁴⁴

42. Elliott Wise, interview with John Hilton III, December 17, 2019.

43. For example, see Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Symbol of Christ," *Ensign* 5, no. 4 (April 1975): 92–94; Gerrit W. Gong, "Hosanna and Hallelujah—the Living Jesus Christ: The Heart of Restoration and Easter," *Ensign* 50, no. 5 (May 2020): 52–55.

44. Deidre Green, *Jacob: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 22.

In a modern revelation, Jesus Christ himself commanded, “Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not. *Behold* [meaning ‘fix your eyes upon’⁴⁵] *the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet*” (D&C 6:36–37, emphasis added). It may be that more fully embracing artistic images of the crucified Christ will help Latter-day Saints follow these scriptural invitations.

John Hilton III is Associate Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. His interest in researching the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ began while teaching at the BYU Jerusalem Center, particularly by spending time in locations associated with the Savior’s death. Although John has published more than seventy-five peer-reviewed articles on a variety of important subjects, he says that no other research he has been involved with has influenced him more than Christ’s Crucifixion.

Anthony R. Sweat is Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. He received a BFA in painting and drawing before earning his MEd and PhD in curriculum and instruction. As a religious educator and practicing religious artist, he has researched and published articles on the role of art in Latter-day Saint religious education, such as the First Vision and Book of Mormon translation. This article on Latter-day Saint uses and perceptions of images of the Lord’s Crucifixion reflects his continued interest in this fascinating field.

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45. American Dictionary of the English Language, s.v. “behold,” accessed March 17, 2021, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/behold>.

Appendix

Images of Christ's Crucifixion in the *Millennial Star*, *Improvement Era*, and *Ensign*, Organized by Magazine, Frequency, and Date

Artist	Magazine Issue
Jan Styka	<i>Star</i> , April 1957, 112–13
Sheila Cuthbert	<i>Star</i> , April 1968, 22
Johann von Kdeler-Wiliandi	<i>Era</i> , March 1958, 158
Sidney E. King	<i>Era</i> , April 1964, 280
Carl Heinrich Bloch	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1984, 7
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 1984, 5
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1987, 11
	<i>Ensign</i> , January 1988, 42
	<i>Ensign</i> , January 1991, 48
	<i>Ensign</i> , January 1994, 43
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1994, 36
	<i>Ensign</i> , February 1995, 9
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1997, 9
	<i>Ensign</i> , January 1998, 18
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1998, 2
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1998, 3
	<i>Ensign</i> , October 1998, 7
	<i>Ensign</i> , January 1999, 26
	<i>Ensign</i> , September 1999, 26
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2000, 15
	<i>Ensign</i> , June 2002, 24
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 2002, 4
	<i>Ensign</i> , January 2003, 42
	<i>Ensign</i> , February 2003, 35
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2003, 28
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2004, 54
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2004, 58
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 2006, 26
	<i>Ensign</i> , September 2009, 32
	<i>Ensign</i> , February 2010, 54
	<i>Ensign</i> , March 2011, 49
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 2011, 50
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 2011, 53
	<i>Ensign</i> , February 2019, 38

Harry Anderson	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1971, 41
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1974, 42
	<i>Ensign</i> , August 1974, 51
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1975, 17
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 1979, 11
	<i>Ensign</i> , June 1981, 15
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1982, 2
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1983, 47
	<i>Ensign</i> , June 1984, 72
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1986, 11
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 1988, 11
	<i>Ensign</i> , August 1990, 32
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 1991, 23
	<i>Ensign</i> , May 1994, 85
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1995, 52
	<i>Ensign</i> , March 1996, 5
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1997, 18
	<i>Ensign</i> , March 1998, 6
	<i>Ensign</i> , September 1998, 56–57
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 2000, 4
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 2003, 8
	<i>Ensign</i> , July 2007, 7
	<i>Ensign</i> , August 2012, 2
	<i>Ensign</i> , August 2012, 48
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 2013, 22
Gustave Doré	<i>Ensign</i> , December 1979, 11
	<i>Ensign</i> , September 1980, 28
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 1982, 52
	<i>Ensign</i> , May 1991, 89
	<i>Ensign</i> , May 1998, 74
	<i>Ensign</i> , June 2003, 32
	<i>Ensign</i> , January 2011, 80
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2015, 36
James Jacques Joseph Tissot	<i>Ensign</i> , September 1974, 5
	<i>Ensign</i> , May 1987, 81
	<i>Ensign</i> , May 1988, 77
	<i>Ensign</i> , January 1990, 26
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1994, 37

	<i>Ensign</i> , December 2001, 21
	<i>Ensign</i> , September 2002, 4
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2013, 35
Unknown Artist (all same image)	<i>Ensign</i> , January 1991, 12
	<i>Ensign</i> , June 2001, 19
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2004, 47
	<i>Ensign</i> , September 2008, 9
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2009, 59
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2015, 39
Wilson Ong	<i>Ensign</i> , April 1990, 7
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 1999, 11
	<i>Ensign</i> , February 2017, 1
	<i>Ensign</i> , February 2017, 7
J. Kirk Richards	<i>Ensign</i> , July 2011, 26
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2017, 23
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2020, 35
Greg Olsen	<i>Ensign</i> , March 1991, 81
	<i>Ensign</i> , January 1992, 48
Robert T. Barrett	<i>Ensign</i> , January 1995, 46
Balage Balogh	<i>Ensign</i> , March 2016, 42
Bernando Cavallino	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2018, 38
Heinrich Hofmann	<i>Ensign</i> , July 1990, 21
Liz Lemon Swindle	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2014, 56
Rembrandt Van Rijn	<i>Ensign</i> , March 2016, 24
Scott Snow	<i>Ensign</i> , June 2003, 33
David Wilson	<i>Ensign</i> , August 2006, 44
All Others (Unidentified Artists, Each Image Different)	<i>Ensign</i> , July 1975, 20
	<i>Ensign</i> , February 1990, 23
	<i>Ensign</i> , February 1992, 9
	<i>Ensign</i> , April 2005, 17
	<i>Ensign</i> , December 2016, 65
	<i>Ensign</i> , January 2019, 5