

# Reflections on the Nature of Mormon Art

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The Mormon creative artist stands in a unique, favorable position with respect to his art, his historical opportunity, aesthetic principles, and styles of expression. The challenges of this position offer exciting potential for the creation of enduring works of art worthy of the Church and of the attention of the rest of the artistic world.

These statements are presented here at the outset as summaries of past thought, as optimistic conclusions, rather than as hypotheses. I shall, therefore, use this presentation to elaborate upon them rather than prove them. Indeed, it seems rather pointless to try to prove an artistic credo. People who read credos are generally more interested in inspiration than information, and it seems more significant in a credo to suggest possibilities than to prove philosophical hypotheses.

Nevertheless, there are times when it would be helpful if we could prove our artistic ideas with irrefutable logic, especially when we are confronted by the people I call the "Carpers" and the "Moaners." The Carpers and Moaners are the people we have all seen who stand around in the halls and complain about the unbearable situation in which the artist finds himself. They come in varying ages, sizes, and descriptions and seemingly from almost every cultural level in the Church. Most frequently the complaints seem to be an excuse for the failure to create.

Carping and lamenting seem to be an inevitable concomitant to informal discussion of art in the Church. The young

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are often inclined to find faults as a means of reforming the world left them by their elders. The old, tired of the effort it takes to create, camouflage their laziness by complaining. Too many of our would-be artists have tended to be content with bemoaning the inconveniences of their position, belittling the cultural level of their fellow saints, and generally picking at the Church for not giving them more direct encouragement.

Complaining is easy. It requires little effort and not much insight. One may, for example, find some superficial justification to blame the leaders of the Church for allowing restraints on creativity to exist. I must say that I have found my own personal limitations to be much more of a problem than any restraints imposed by anyone else. Furthermore, most of the problems usually ascribed to the Mormon culture are really problems of American culture as a whole rather than our specifically Mormon milieu. To be fair to the Church authorities, moreover, we must also realize that they are of necessity preoccupied with the many details of Church administration, with the proselyting values of art and pseudo-art. We have no more grounds to blame them for these imagined restraints than we have for excusing the artist in his failure to overcome them. If I may put this more bluntly, the artist who uses his time and energy to carp and moan appears, in the very act of complaining, to be wasting time that he should spend creating the masterpieces he regrets not having time to undertake! No one argues with masterpieces! No one has condemned artistic achievement! *Art itself is the basic remedy for the ills these moaners decry.* Until one proves, through the creation of bold, masterful works of superior quality, that he *deserves* better fate than he now—I must even say—enjoys, his situation will remain lamentable; that is, he will lament it. The seeds of carping and moaning are planted shallow in every situation. They are irrigated by discontent and fertilized by idleness. They produce fruit which brings bitterness to the tongue and scowls to the countenance, fruit whose juices drug the soul by deadening the pains of frustration which come from lack of effort. But this fruit never heals the real wounds, never nourishes the artist's creative impulses, and is never a significant ingredient of any great work of art.

The conditions for creativity, moreover, are not brought about by the negative attitudes of the Carper-Moaner mental-



ity. One does not encourage creative activity by telling the creator that he has no time to create, that no one will accept what he creates, that his testimony or his membership in the Church is a hindrance to his artistic development. Rather, the creative artist is encouraged by discovering the potential that exists for his contributions to his culture. Our Mormon critics, commentators, and apologists would improve the situation much more if they would try to suggest this potential rather than bemoan the sad lot of the Mormon artist. On the other hand, the Mormon artist will be much more effective if he spends his time in the studio creating his art rather than adding his lamentations to the wailing already going on.

I recognize, of course, that by taking this time for my own complaint I have fallen into the same snare that I would have others avoid. But, if by describing the activities of the Carpers and Moaners, I can encourage one of them to return to the studio and get to work, this inconsistency will have been worth the embarrassment.

Proceeding now to the more difficult problem of defining some of the positive aspects of the Mormon position, I would first like to propose some bases for artistic activity, especially for art directly related to the Church by its religious nature. I have found no scriptures or doctrines which establish any basis beyond the generally accepted posture of the Church stated in the Thirteenth Article of Faith: "... If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things." Beyond this we must derive aesthetic principles by extrapolation. To begin, then, let us consider D&C 25:12-13, "For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the *song* of the righteous is a *prayer* unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads. Wherefore, lift up thy heart and rejoice . . ." (Italics mine.) While this passage occurs in connection with the direction to Emma Smith to make a collection of hymns, there is no indication that the Lord's approbation is limited to hymn singing. If the righteous may sing and please God, why should they not receive equal blessing for expressing their sincere feelings through the dance, or by painting, or by acting, writing, playing an instrument or designing a pleasing structure of worship. If this extension is not allowed, the man who can sing is to be envied, while those of us whose God-given abilities and inclinations lie in other di-

rections, equally sincere, equally righteous, can hope for the promised blessings only through a medium in which we are not at home. I take the admonition "lift up thy heart and rejoice" to be an instruction to participate in the outpouring of the human spirit to God. If following the instruction brings God's blessing, there is already a solid foundation for singing and for all other types of artistic activity.

## FUNCTION OF THE ARTS

The function of the arts in the Restored Church is suggested by Section 82, verse 14: "For Zion must increase in beauty and in holiness; . . . yea, verily I say unto you, Zion must arise and put on her beautiful garments." Significant here is the association between beauty and holiness. The idea that the arts as the embodiment of beauty can have a profound spiritual value is one most of us have instinctively recognized. The parallel between artistic expression and "bearing one's testimony" is attractive to many artists of the Church. In the statements of artists and composers of our day as well as of the past, we can find the same deep respect for artistic expression that is here suggested within the realm of Mormon thought: that is, that art flows from deep within the wellspring of human existence. The suggestion that the arts might function parallel to the increasing of holiness in Zion seems to place the artist in a more acceptable relation to the activity of the Church than does the present commonly held idea that art serves only a propaganda function. For holiness is something that is achieved not through propagandizing but through inspired effort towards perfection, which effort is both encouraged and epitomized in the masterpieces of great art. If the "song of the heart" encourages holiness and leads towards increasing the beauty of Zion, it is no wonder that the Lord says, "It delighteth . . . my soul."

This inward nature of both prayer and the arts suggests that they are both basically human in their origin, and I suspect neither God nor the Church would want to make sincerity impossible by prescribing what one should pray or sing or paint except in the most ceremonial situations. Thus we are left to decide for ourselves artistic principles that seem logical within our culture and consistent with what we individually wish to express. I would like to point out, however, that just as the



need for prayer may be motivated by the strivings of the human spirit and the precise utterance of prayer inspired by the Holy Ghost, so may art be inspired; and the Mormon artist may properly seek the inspiration of the Spirit in his creative activities.

We move now into areas where the scriptures and policies of the Church are silent, but doctrines and postures offer parallels.

One of the strong features of Mormon theology is the idea of the "dispensation," that is, the idea that history has been punctuated with repeated heavenly affirmations of basic principles of action and belief. This concept brings the Mormon artist into direct theological contact with several periods of world history not only in the developmental, evolutionary sense that the age to age chain of their thought has provided some of the roots of our system, but also in a nonevolutionary sense that affirms certain principles as unchanging and allows certain ideas to leapfrog over the various stages of cultural-historical development.

This view of history seems to me to have tremendous implications for the artist. In the first place, the acceptance by the artist of whatever influences might come from these various periods is made legitimate in a very special sense: the patriarchs and the prophets are our brethren; they are directly inspired of God. The details of their way of life and thus the cultural systems in which they lived become significant to us. In the second place, the extension of this way of thinking to historical periods not directly involved with the dispensations, and to influences from other cultures, opens up wide vistas of style and technique. I assume that the narrowly orthodox might cringe at accepting influences from the arts of the pagans and from apostate cultures. The reluctance of some people in the Church to allow the singing of anything with Latin text, or to perform masterpieces from the vast repertoire of Catholic art is well known. Nevertheless, I maintain that generally the acceptance of such influences is desirable as well as legitimate.

It would be possible to draw some parallels in style from the various dispensations: The Adamic and Diluvian eras might be thought of as representing the primitive; Moses' and Elijah's dispensations corresponding to the pastoral; the Christian paralleling the Classic; and the Mormon embodying the Roman-

tic. It is obvious that these parallels are strained, for the classicism of the Greeks was not typically Christian, nor would most Mormons artists be content to be confined to Romanticism even though the restoration of the gospel dates from the age of Romanticism. I believe, however, that the point is quite defensible that art has taken different forms in the different dispensations and that in this, the "dispensation of the fullness of times" when "all things are to be gathered together in one," influences from all of these past forms of art are legitimate and important.

This suggests another direction, involving the tendency of Mormon thought to reconcile opposites so that they might exist in the same system. The "opposition in all things" mentioned by Lehi suggests that a dynamic balance of opposing elements makes free agency possible. The Mormon tends to accept empirical evidence, inductive and deductive processes, intuition and revelation as acceptable means of gaining knowledge even though some of these concepts are traditionally considered to be incompatible. In the artistic realm the mere acceptance of influences from the various epochs and styles suggested above thus becomes insufficient. The Mormon artist has the responsibility of bringing these styles into a system where their divergent, conflicting characteristics are balanced against each other in a single, dynamic, unified manner of expression. It seems to me that many Mormon artists have already begun working in this direction.

Another aspect of Mormon thought is the importance of authority. In ecclesiastical matters this authority is resident in the inspired utterances and directions of the prophet and the delegated responsibilities of his subordinates in the hierarchy of the priesthood. In artistic matters there has been a reluctance to look to the ecclesiastical authority for three reasons: (1) the leaders of the Church are, as mentioned above, primarily interested in other matters—proselyting, keeping the flock, etc.; (2) in their official capacities they are interested in the arts mainly as a tool; and of course, (3) since art is a personal expression, they are not called upon as officials to meddle in the arts any more than they would be expected to put their words in our mouths for our personal prayers. As a result, the Mormon artist has relied in artistic matters upon the authority of the great masters as their concepts have been handed down through



teachers and through their works themselves. While some may feel conscience about consorting with the masterpieces of apostate Christendom or (greater heresy!) of paganism, there is a universal quality about the great masterpieces which, transcending denominational boundaries, is properly sought by the LDS artist as a vitalizing force in his art and as an example of what is possible for him to achieve. This quality may be traced, in part, to the fact that man, seeking God, or trying to express his deepest convictions through art, seems to become less a Christian, a Jew, a Hindu, and to become more attuned to the universal qualities of our species. The operation of the spirit in giving inspired artistic utterance does not seem to be confined to any denomination or race. The great masterworks of any culture thus have a quality that cannot be denied as a legitimate influence for any artist, Mormon or non-Mormon.

#### MODERNISM A CURRENT FORCE

Conan Mathews has pointed out that the most vital force in the world of the arts at the present time is Modernism. Artists who have refused to reckon with this force have frequently found themselves second-guessing the masters of the past and reworking threadbare formulas. On the other hand, those who have tried to deal with this force imaginatively find opportunity to contribute not only to the world's store of masterpieces but also to the enthusiastic ideals of succeeding generations. Since for the Latter-day Saint of solid convictions, Mormonism exerts the same vital force both in the lives of its adherents and, prophetically at least, in the future course of history ("the stone cut out of the mountain without hands . . ."), we cannot allow it to become synonymous with artistic reaction. By exploiting this parallel between Mormonism in religion and Modernism in art, the artist has as excellent opportunity to enrich both his church and the world. It seems to me that this cross-fertilization is almost inevitable because of the "in-the-world, not-of-the-world" nature of Mormonism. I might caution, however, that the slavish following of the trends set by the avant-garde, the attempt to out-"avant" them, and the retreat into the moribund tendencies of artistic thinking already deserted by the rest of the world are all not appropriate; for all of these directions would neglect exploiting the unique advantages of Mormonism's view of history

and its synthesizing nature of thought. Moreover, I do not believe that the Mormon artist should attempt a simple eclectic combination of styles into an unintegrated stylistic hash. The problem—the challenge—to the Mormon artist is the creation of a true synthesis of these many facets of his experience into a unified, integrated expression of his culture, his thought and his deepest, most precious possession, his testimony.

These challenges cannot be met in a year; the problems cannot be solved by any one man working in isolation although one man working in isolation might conceivably make solid contributions toward this goal. Rather, the combined efforts of all artists, painters, composers, actors, writers, apologists, and historians, of the educators and the performers, as well as those who participate as actively interested observers, will be required in a unity, a synthesis no less challenging than the artistic synthesis suggested above, before the possibilities latent in our situation are fully exploited. And even then, because of the tendency of Mormon thought to bring opposition into balance in its system, new avenues should open up. The potential of the situation tempts one in his enthusiasm to issue manifestos, shout rallying cries, and form a party. Attractive as this may be to some, the artist *must* spend his energy creating the works which, in the final analysis, are the real reasons for the existence of both the artists and the systems of thought built up around them. After all, the scriptural injunction following the divine establishment of an identity between song and prayer was not to talk about singing or praying but to “lift up [the] heart and rejoice,” i.e., to express our feelings to God! Now, back to the studio!