

**Figure 1.** Bruce Hixson Smith, *The Prodigal Son*. Triptych, oil on canvas, 51" x 59", 1984. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

# Visual Narratives from the Life of Christ

*The new series of images by LDS artist Bruce Hixson Smith represents a painstaking search to reconcile the physical medium of paint with the transcendent truths of Christ's story.*

Linda Jones Gibbs

Bruce Hixson Smith speaks in a careful, almost cautious manner, attempting to find just the right words to express his thoughts. He constructs his art with the same caution, intent upon finding just the right visual form for the underlying concept. Formally trained at both Brigham Young University and the University of Utah, Smith has been a professor of art at BYU since 1978. A native of Utah, he has lived most of his life in the state. However, his mission to the East Coast afforded him the opportunity to visit many major art museums. He also taught for three years at a junior college in New Mexico prior to joining the faculty at Brigham Young University.

Smith is perhaps best known for his exquisite still lifes containing floating drapery and clearly rendered fruits, plants, and jars alongside similar objects that are only vaguely suggested. These visually tantalizing paintings are metaphors for certain temporal and spiritual aspects of life. Wishing to create art with a more specifically religious content, Smith has recently produced a series of seven paintings depicting events from the life of Christ. Six of these paintings, *Deposition*, *Raising the Daughter of Jairus*, *Jesus in the Home of Simon the Pharisee*, *Taken in Adultery*, *Dispensation of Virtue*, and *Reconciliation of Thomas*, are reproduced either on the cover of this issue or in this article. The seventh painting, *The Raising of Lazarus*, is currently in progress.



**Figure 2.** Bruce Hixson Smith, *Jacob and Leah*. Oil on canvas, 71" x 64.5", 1990. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

This new series had its genesis in two previous paintings, *The Prodigal Son* and *Jacob and Leah*. Both paintings refer to a particular biblical episode and therefore depart from the general reference to spiritual concepts found in the earlier still lifes. However, like the still lifes, the two works continue to function more as metaphors than descriptive narration. In the triptych *The Prodigal Son*, the only direct references to the story are the swineherd and the fatted calf depicted in the center and right panels respectively (see fig. 1). In *Jacob and Leah*, the two protagonists are clearly contemporary individuals. The work concerns itself primarily with the universal theme of male-female relationships rather than with the specific story of the ancient couple to whom the title refers (see fig. 2).

In his new series, Smith has gone a step further toward direct narration by depicting specific stories from the New Testament. Ironically, while his subject matter has become more precise, his method has become more abstract. Unlike *The Prodigal Son* and *Jacob and Leah*, the new works do not contain any clearly painted images. All forms are semidissolved, appearing to be in flux between the material and immaterial worlds. Here, style rather than imagery becomes a metaphor for the life of Christ—a divine presence in a mortal realm. For Smith, such a contemporary approach to this particular subject matter is appropriate because it creates greater mystical and spiritual potential. Ambiguous forms reveal themselves slowly, not unlike spiritual truths that yield themselves over time and as a result of concentrated effort.

When he is painting, Smith is not always aware of the identities of his ambiguous forms. He allows character and personality to emerge unconsciously as he works. Identities sometimes suggest themselves later. The figure to the left of Christ in the home of Simon appears evil, Smith recently mused. He surmised that the man who appears to be shrinking or withdrawing on the far right side of *Taken in Adultery* could be the woman's lover.

Although strongly rooted in biblical narrative, Smith's new paintings borrow only a little of Renaissance pictorial tradition from which the subjects derive. The halos, for example, are a time-honored Christian symbol of divinity. Also, the frame for



**Figure 3.** Bruce Hixson Smith, *Reconciliation of Thomas*. Oil on panel, 48" x 42", 1993. Courtesy Department of Art, Brigham Young University.

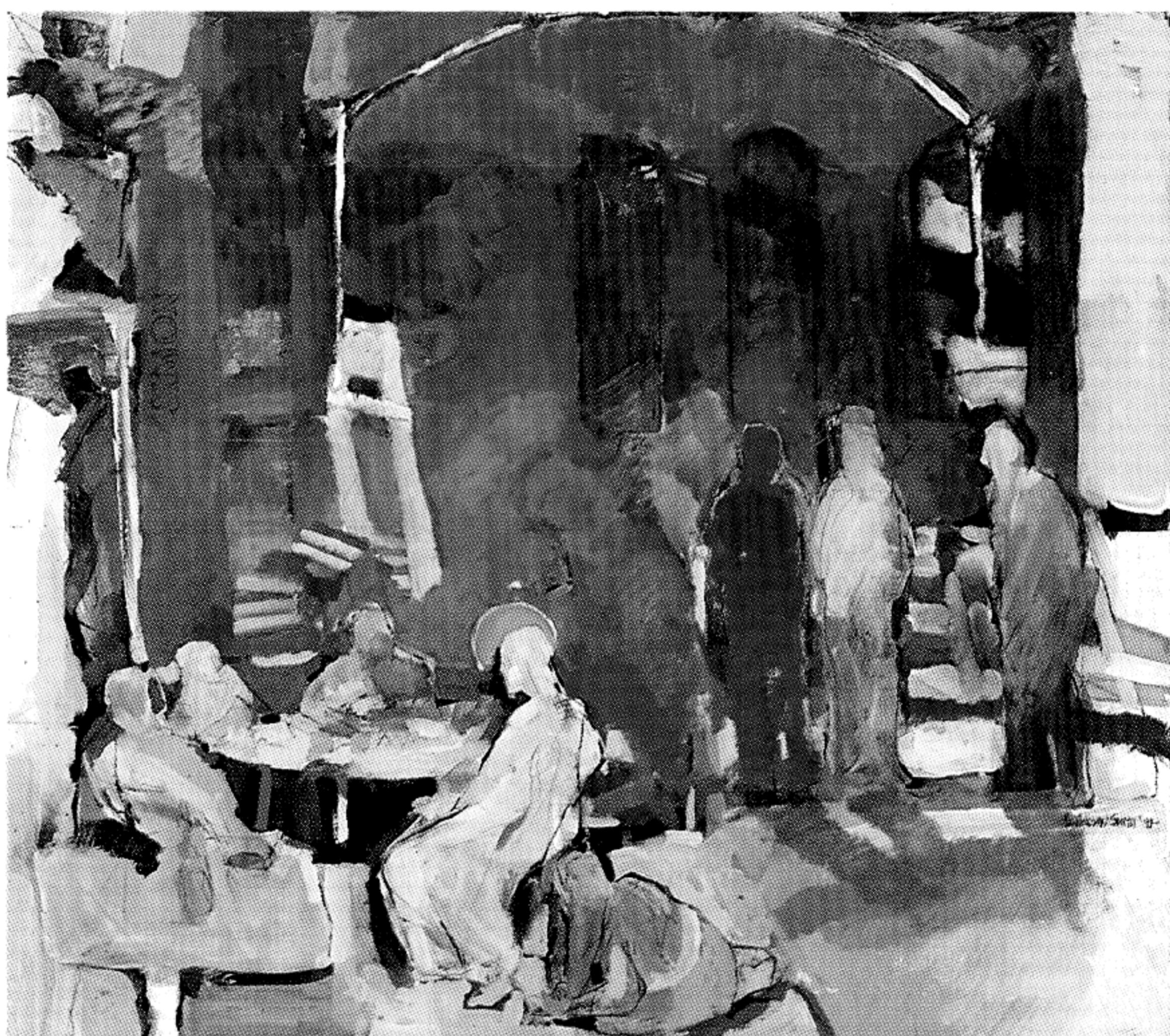
*Reconciliation of Thomas* (see fig. 3) is constructed like an altar, thus inviting comparisons to the painted altar pieces of the early Renaissance intended as objects of devotion. Many Renaissance artists painted biblical episodes staged within detailed architecture of their own locale in order to assist the viewer in relating to the event. Smith, however, removes such vestiges of time and place in his biblical depictions, concentrating instead on the spiritual phenomenon at hand, thus universalizing the message of Christian ideals inherent in them.

In these paintings, Smith places no stress on the imitation of three-dimensional reality through precise perspective. In *Raising the Daughter of Jairus* (see fig. 4), *Jesus in the Home of Simon the Pharisee* (see fig. 5), and *Taken in Adultery*, the narrative again takes place within a significant area of undefined space. In contrast, *Deposition*, *Dispensation of Virtue*, and *Reconciliation of Thomas* contain figures pushed to the forefront, filling the picture plane. In *Deposition*, abstract qualities exist not only in undefined space, but also in forceful diagonal, vertical, and horizontal lines. Strong, downward thrusts create a rhythmic design as well as add expressive qualities by accentuating the physical weight of Christ's body in the arms of his loved ones as well as the psychological burden they experienced upon his death (see back cover). Sharp diagonal forms in the background of *Reconciliation of Thomas* resemble a cross. Smith relishes the fact that figures and background merge, creating a total environment—a pleasing notion both artistically and conceptually. He concerns himself with eternal perspective, so to speak, rather than finite space.

While void of traditional perspective, space is ordered and structured here as it is in Renaissance art. In *Taken in Adultery*, the friezelike arrangement of figures along the foreground with vaulted space above harks back to many High Renaissance compositions. In place of the meticulous perspective one might find in a work by Raphael, for example, the elevated space above the narrative in Smith's painting alludes to dimensions and depth but contains an obscure mass of arches. The ambiguous placement of these remnants of ancient architecture sets up a hall-of-mirrors effect in which one loses any sense of spatial logistics (see front cover). The portions of black-and-white checkered floor in *Raising*



**Figure 4.** Bruce Hixson Smith, *Raising the Daughter of Jairus*. Oil on panel, 34" x 37", 1992. Courtesy Department of Art, Brigham Young University.



**Figure 5.** Bruce Hixson Smith, *Jesus in the Home of Simon the Pharisee*. Oil on panel, 34" x 37", 1992. Courtesy Department of Art, Brigham Young University.



**Figure 6.** Bruce Hixson Smith, *Dispensation of Virtue*. Oil on panel, 29" x 26", 1993. Courtesy Department of Art, Brigham Young University.

*the Daughter of Jairus* (see fig. 4) and *Taken in Adultery* derive from interiors found in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. These stark patterns enliven the pictorial space, the ordered squares contrasting with the fluidity of the surrounding abstraction. Like the turning staircase that leads into oblivion in *Jesus in the Home of Simon the Pharisee* (see fig. 5), these patterns give us something concrete to focus on momentarily. However, in the juxtaposed areas of undefined space, we are quickly forced to give up our “grounding” in reality.

*Dispensation of Virtue* is an interpretation of an episode in Mark 5 in which an infirm woman approaches Christ from behind. She believes that by touching his garment she will be healed. Jesus, surrounded by a crowd, is making his way to the home of Jairus whose daughter lies ill. We are shown the tender moment when Jesus responds to the anonymous touch: “And Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him, turned him about in the press, and said, Who touched my clothes?” (Mark 5:30). The impact of Smith’s representation of the event lies in his depiction of the hands. The woman’s hesitancy is captured in her elegantly poised hand which barely touches Christ’s shoulder. The hands of Jesus are likewise gracefully postured as he resists those who encourage him to proceed. Yet another hand from a background figure reaches out to stop the woman’s advances. So successful is Smith in rendering the hands as a vehicle for expression that one does not mind that facial features are blurred (see fig. 6).

Hands also play a significant role in *Taken in Adultery*, the well-known episode from John 8 in which an adulterous woman is about to be stoned. Jesus appears to be summoning up every ounce of energy in the woman’s defense. His hands, strongly delineated, grip the arms of the chair as he prepares to rise and chastise the woman’s accusers. The hands of the faceless antagonists grope at the woman, who is dressed symbolically in scarlet red.

The use of hands to relay emotional impact is also evident in *Reconciliation of Thomas*, in which Jesus beckons the doubting apostle to inspect the nail prints in his palms. The hands of both Jesus and Thomas appear slightly enlarged, perhaps for emphasis, yet remain extremely expressive and poetic in their gestures.

Smith acknowledges the influence of three artists on his work: German Expressionist Max Beckman (1884–1950), abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning (1904–), and BYU emeritus professor of art Alex Daraïs (1918–). Ironically, Beckman and de Kooning are stylistically the antithesis of one another. The narrative orientation and occasional Christian themes of Beckman greatly impressed Smith, and the harsh rigid outlines in *Deposition*, for example, are highly reminiscent of Beckman's style. The series, however, also owes a debt to de Kooning, whose style is fluid and abstract. *Raising the Daughter of Jairus* and *Jesus in the Home of Simon the Pharisee*, in particular, contain de Kooning's fragmented space and free-wheeling, eloquent brush strokes.

Smith was influenced by Alex Daraïs's belief that form should not be dictated by outward appearance; rather, it should embody and reflect an individual artist's personal sensibilities. In keeping with Daraïs's philosophy, the narrative content in this New Testament series is subordinated to the formal needs of the paintings. Smith sometimes works on his paintings upside down to facilitate this release of literal reference. One result is the beautiful abstract passages of muted color, such as the warm terra-cotta, ecru, and gray in *Jesus in the Home of Simon the Pharisee*. Color is purposefully toned down so it will not dominate, or in the words of Smith, so it will not find "its own existence." Nevertheless, colors in *Reconciliation of Thomas* suggest symbolic references—the ghostly white body of the resurrected Christ and the wash of deep red at the top of the picture plane contrast with the primarily monochromatic gray color scheme. The use of typography in *Jesus in the Home of Simon*—the words "Simon" and "Pharisee" stenciled on the two columns—derives from modern art, and the letters function here as both a descriptive and aesthetic device. Distant figures also look as though they might be dressed in contemporary clothing, a fact which does not bother the artist.

As a group, the paintings represent Smith's affirmation that art can serve a belief system that is both personal and shared. In this case, that belief system is organized Christianity, an infrequent theme in twentieth-century art. When Smith was a graduate student in the late 1960s, minimalism was at its peak. (Minimalism is an

art style which celebrates the medium and eschews any representation of or allusion to reality. A minimalist painting, for example, might contain a single stripe of red on a blue background.) Even in the era of reductive art, Smith felt that a painting should both embody something substantive and exist as "art for art's sake." In the 1990s, art is again being used to support causes or ideologies. Much contemporary art, for example, unabashedly promotes or supports issues such as ecology, gay rights, feminism, and multiculturalism. Why then, Smith contends, should not art advance Christian ideals and beliefs?

Above all, Smith's paintings are a deeply felt search for truth—in the case of this series, the validity of Christ's mortal and divine missions. The artist cites Willa Cather in expressing his own philosophy: "Artistic growth is, more than it is anything else, a refining of the sense of truthfulness. The stupid believe that to be truthful is easy; only the artist, the great artist, knows how difficult it is."<sup>1</sup> Smith's loose technique and abstraction of forms might suggest to some that these works were quickly or easily executed. While intuition is important to Smith, his paintings are not the result of impulse.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, they are the results of the artist's painstaking search to reconcile the physical medium of paint with the transcendent qualities of religious life.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Willa Sibert Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 477.

<sup>2</sup> The paintings' basic compositions are deliberate constructions based upon a geometric grid influenced by Jay Hambridge's theory of "dynamic symmetry" of the early twentieth century. Hambridge (1867-1927) promoted a mathematical system of composition based on certain ratios and proportions which he believed was used by the Greeks and Egyptians and the artists in the Renaissance.