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Art and the Church

CONAN E. MATHEWS

Through the various epochs of western cultural growth or change, art has served society in a variety of ways. It has been commemorative in Egypt and idealistic in Greece. For the Romans, it was propagandistic and practical; for the early Christians, it was awe inspiring and mystifying. In Europe it has bolstered pride and provoked rebellions. Families, nations, and churches have used art to entertain, to confound and deceive, to teach, inspire, and to build morale.

The various purposes for which the arts have been used are well known to artists and historians. The artist in the Mormon culture constantly faces the question of how or if his art relates to his faith, religious service, and scripture. Any member of the L.D.S. faith is particularly and peculiarly involved with this question because Mormonism is more than confession of belief. It is a way of life and affects everything the member thinks, feels, and does. It is hoped that, at least in part, some light may be shed on this question by the Fine Arts Festival being held this spring by the College of Fine Arts at Brigham Young University. This series of programs, discussions, and exhibits, under the title "Religion and the Fine Arts," is being presented for enjoyment, edification, and evaluation. Throughout the Festival several questions or concerns will be foremost. What should we be doing to make our artistic contributions and creations more significant and meaningful to the Church, to the membership, and to the world? What direction shall the form and style of our art take? To what extent should we rely upon the historical heritage or current movements of the Western world?

The historical continuity can be traced back through the past 2,400 years to the Greeks of the Golden Age. Here we find some linkage with Asiatic and Egyptian cultures, but in a more restricted history of the Christian Church it ends a hun-

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dred years or so after Christ. The early Christians sought a visual art, but they had nothing to turn to except the Greco-Roman tradition. Christ and the Church of His day got along without the visual arts as did the Jews, in the main, before Him. No heritage of architecture, painting, or sculpture of artistic or esthetic significance was made part of Judaism, and we Mormons rely heavily on the Old Testament.

The altar, the tabernacle, and the synagogue were simple and functional. Solomon seems to have attempted a departure in his temple, for we are told in I Kings that the cedar wood of the temple was carved with knots and open flowers and that certain appointments were overlaid in pure gold. This information reminds us of styles, motives and techniques prevalent in both the Asiatic and Egyptian cultures which were obviously known to Hiram, King of Tyre, who with his craftsmen came to the assistance of Solomon in designing and decorating the temple. Only recently has there come to light the fact that Hebrews did utilize, at least to some extent, pictorial illustration to accompany their written record.

Presumably, the early Christians were not aware of this heritage or, despite it, the early Christian Church borrowed from pagan Greece and Oriental and Asiatic cultures for visual symbol, pictorial concept, and decorative style. The greatest influence was Greek classical idealism. Although exotic and sensuous, Oriental decoration certainly has played a major role also. The full use of these art forms has been used without reservation by the Catholic, both Roman and Greek Orthodox, and most of the Protestant churches. The great murals by such painters as DaVinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Rubens are works of Catholics. Dürer and Rembrandt are among the Protestant artists who painted religious pictures. The Protestant painters were ordinarily not subsidized by the Church as were the Catholic painters.

The Protestant reformation dampened and discouraged, to some extent, the use of murals and particularly sculpture. The uses for which the visual arts were employed became didactic and documentary rather than inspirational or emotional.

Joseph Smith announced that these churches had only a form of godliness, lacking the authority and the fullness of the

truth. He added that truth and authority had been lost shortly after Christ's death and that a restoration had to come from those of Christ's time. He denied, at least to some degree, the heritage of everything that had happened between the time of Christ and the restoration of the true authority. Here, in spite of the fact that we seek after all things that are beautiful and of good report, we, as Latter-day Saints, are in something of a dilemma. We can and do accept the fact that the spirit of truth, the spirit of Christ, the desire to do good and to promote and strengthen virtuous attributes motivate men everywhere and at all times. We also believe that all men are the children of God and that regardless of race, creed, or nationality, great and good deeds or creations come from their minds and hands. These we accept, use, and enjoy.

Nevertheless, we are a peculiar people in possession of the fullness of the Gospel and the keys of the Last Dispensation. As such, what is our responsibility as artists, musicians, and writers? As scholars and students or teachers, how far shall we go in the use of the creations of Catholic and Protestant churches? Or shall we deny the heritage of their standards and criteria, past as well as present, and create our own works without regard for the so-called Christian tradition? If we could or did disregard this religious art, to what would we turn? To whom do we look for the new or the original purpose and meaning of the fine arts? What is the relationship of the arts to our religion or our worship? Is art to teach only or to inspire also? Should it represent or symbolize? Are the universal characteristics and responses to esthetic form related in any way to the religious response and experience? Are these two areas of human experience more meaningful independent of each other, or does one enrich the other? Should it be primarily pragmatic and materialistic? This, actually, is the emphasis we tend to give art at present. It would seem right and consistent with our faith that we can study and learn from the past, that we recognize the fact that in any culture or religion there may be usable and applicable music, literature, and painting. But what shall guide our selections?

We have been eclectic in our architecture to the point that we have churches in every conceivable style and combination

thereof. Is there an architectural style somewhere in the past that belongs more completely to our theology, philosophy, religious orientation and practice? What significance and meaning does the art of Mayan and Aztec culture of Central America hold for us? We have included these motives and styles, to some extent, in our architecture.

It seems to me that we have floundered artistically and creatively, utilizing and encouraging the creation or re-creation of much mediocre, realistic, and even naturalistic art, that we have set the criteria too much in terms of expedience and practicality, making our art primarily didactic, informative, or commemorative and not enough inspirational, esthetic, or idealistic. Despite this, I personally feel that some of our writers, composers, and artists are emerging with peculiarities, originality, and vitality consistent with the innermost purposes and values of Mormonism.

We are charged as Latter-day Saints to study and search. We are motivated to educational and scholastic achievement. But should we not have found the unique, original, or peculiar inspiration of artistic creation? Our religion is not Catholic in the Greek or Roman sense. It is not Protestant in the Lutheran, Episcopal, or Presbyterian sense. Should our architecture, music, painting, and writing be mainly a continuity of the traditional standards and styles from these cultures?

It is important to note that artists, writers, or composers are plagued with a sense of responsibility no less than is the Prophet. There may be false artists as there are false prophets, but, in my humble judgment, artists sense most keenly and conscientiously the fact that what they do has far-reaching implications for the society or culture of their time. They know that the true image of a people sooner or later will be primarily determined by their works of art. The artist knows, even though the majority of any culture is not aware of this fact, that art is the reflection and record of the true and the inner spirit. Art is shallow and superficial if it emerges from a spiritual climate which is shallow and superficial. Three thousand years of history bears this out. Studies on the rise and fall of nations and institutions confirm the fact that the art, like the religion and philosophy, is close to the soul. John Milton

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said, "A work of genius is a work not to be obtained by the Invocation of Memory and her Syren Daughters, but by devout prayer to that Eternal Spirit who can enrich will all utterance and knowledge and send out his seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases."

It is my observation that the L.D.S. artist has an especially keen sense of dedication and responsibility, but with his deep-seated concern for service to his brethren and obedience to authority he is felt to be without esthetic or artistic direction or confirmation from the most meaningful and spiritual sources. His services and talents are used, but his genius and creativity are not sufficiently challenged. He is asked to illustrate, decorate, perform (not necessarily well), accompany, recite, and explain but not to create.

I do not believe the L.D.S. artist is asking for subsidization or professional status in the Church—although such is the tradition in Christianity, generally. From the days of the early Italian Renaissance and almost universally since, the musician and artist have been employed by the church. Professionalism is contrary to our concept of the sanctity of talent and creative gifts. The L.D.S. artist wants the opportunity to bear his testimony voluntarily and freely through the media in which he can best speak.