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The Materiality of Lived Mormonism

Josh E. Probert

IN 1998 THE EDITORS OF THE *Utah Historical Quarterly* devoted the fall issue of the journal to “The Tangible Past.” Architectural historian and guest editor of the volume Thomas Carter observed the following in his introductory essay: “Despite the increased interest in material culture around the country this type of research has not made significant inroads into Utah or for that matter the West in general.”¹ Since Carter’s observation seventeen years ago, material culture has made significant inroads into Utah history and Mormon studies altogether. And today, with the ascendancy of interdisciplinarity, more and more scholars of Mormonism are including material culture in their research.

While this new literature has enriched our understandings of the Mormon past and some of it is very good, much of it views objects reductionistically as static symbols having singular meanings. And sometimes material culture is a trendy garnish on top of the “real” story. Discussions of symbolism, in particular, are often exercises in speculative semiotics that interpret religious symbols outside their historic fields of cultural production. In this brief essay, I will touch on a few ways in which scholars might think more rigorously about representation. I will also locate material culture within frameworks that go beyond it.

1. Thomas Carter, “Studies in Material Culture,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 56/4 (Fall 1998): 308.

Lived religion and material culture

Material culture is simply culture-made material. It collapses the dyad of materialism and idealism. Objects are the result of the dialectically interpenetrating negotiations that humans make, both individually and collectively, with their material environments. The study of culture-made material, then, is the study of these negotiations and the ways that people strategically engage the resources of the physical world toward their desired ends. For the scholar of Mormon studies, these negotiations encompass myriad topics, including insularity versus integration, communalism versus individualism, and Protestant versus Catholic affinities.

Lived religion—the day-to-day religious experience of nonelites—saturates the material remains of the Mormon past. The scriptural injunction to build Zion was a heavenly mandate to fashion an earthly utopia out of the physical resources available to the Mormon faithful (D&C 39:13; 101:74). Latter-day Saints constructed buildings, spun thread, harvested fields, and otherwise manipulated their physical environment in their millenarian project to establish Zion. They materialized their faith. Therefore, objects as quotidian as plows, butter churns, and adobe brick molds evidence the day-to-day experience of Mormonism as much as scriptures, sermons, and sacrament meetings do.²

2. Although many publications have touched on the topic of the materiality of building Zion, the following are especially significant: Thomas Carter, *Building Zion: The Material World of Mormon Settlement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Ronald W. Walker and Doris R. Dant, *Every Needful Thing: The Everyday Lives of Utah's Pioneers* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999). On the role of material culture and religion, see the following: Colleen McDannell, "Interpreting Things: Material Culture Studies and American Religion," *Religion* 21 (1991): 371–87; John E. Cort, "Art, Religion, and Material Culture: Some Reflections on Method," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64/3 (Autumn 1996): 613–32; Sally M. Promey and Shira Brisman, "Sensory Cultures: Material and Visual Religion Reconsidered," in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*, ed. Philip Goff (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 177–205; and David Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

Anything “lived” transpires in an embodied, material world, and humans leave material evidences of their lived experiences. The evidences of the past that historians traditionally use are material objects such as diaries, letters, newspapers, and government records. These objects contain symbols in the form of glyphs, ligatures, digits, and punctuation marks that scholars “translate” into their language. Non-language-based objects also contain historical information, although such information is rarely encoded as specifically and purposefully as writing. Objects range along a spectrum from purely functional to purely aesthetic and vary in the amount of cultural information they bear.

Like other religions, Mormonism is a solution to a particular set of cultural problems. These problems range from something as simple as needing a tool to scrape the mortar between bricks to something as complex as needing clothing that adequately performs class, taste, and ethnicity. Mormons involved in the dynamic, perpetual process of addressing these problems do so by drawing upon and deploying their interrelated mental and material resources.³ In doing so, Mormons include objects in their construction of what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*—a cultural consciousness through which people perceive their world.⁴ Because of this, the artifacts that Mormons leave behind speak to the cultural norms that Latter-day Saints inherited, inhabited, and modified. In this way, historical artifacts can be thought of as fossilized ideologies. They evidence the common sense of the past. And their

3. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). The classic treatise on objects as solutions to cultural problems is George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962). See also William L. Rathje, “In Praise of Archaeology: Le Projet du Garbage,” in *Material Culture Studies in America*, ed. Thomas J. Schlereth (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 1999), 316–24.

4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Mathieu Hilgers, “Habitus, Freedom, and Reflexivity,” *Theory and Psychology* 19/6 (December 2009): 728–55.

horizons in time and space denote the beginnings and endings of their correlative ideologies.⁵

Cultural orthodoxy

The cultural politics of Mormonism produce their own types of cultural orthodoxies. By “cultural orthodoxies” I mean the dominant cultural norms that are not inherent to Mormon scripture and doctrine but provide the material and behavioral vocabularies through which believers create and enact their religious identities. These orthodoxies often double as tacit benchmarks of doctrinal conformity. They include modes of dress, grooming, and social decorum. They also include culturally sanctioned aesthetics in architecture, literature, music, and the visual arts.⁶

Material culture does much of the work in creating, reinforcing, and resisting these cultural orthodoxies. This is because objects are social actors that, along with human actors, cocreate normativity.⁷ They do more than symbolize some belief system outside of themselves, although they do this too. Objects exude a type of nonsentient agency within a web of human-object relationships to create cultural worlds.⁸ As Bruno Latour writes, “In addition to ‘determining’ and serving as a ‘backdrop for human action,’ things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid,

5. The appearance and disappearance of objects-as-solutions in time and space can be thought of as what Raymond Williams called “structures of feeling.” Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with “New Left Review”* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 156–72; and Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), 64–88.

6. Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*.

7. Arjun Appadurai, “Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Lives of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63.

8. Andrew M. Jones and Nicole Boivin, “The Malice of Inanimate Objects: Material Agency,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, ed. Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 333–51.

and so on.”⁹ Each of these actions is readily apparent in the everyday lives of religious people. In terms of Mormon visual culture, for example, illustrations of scriptural narratives, events from church history, portraits of church leaders, photographs of temples, and embroidered quotes all do cultural work. They prompt, suggest, influence, render possible, and so on.

Depictions of God are among the most powerful type of Mormon material culture. Paintings, prints, and cinematic depictions of God the Father and Jesus Christ are complete inventions.¹⁰ Yet they establish and reinforce shared visual conventions of what the Father and Son look like. Because Mormon images of Jesus rarely, if ever, depict a first-century Jew, they evidence modern concerns far removed from those of ancient Christianity. This popular iconography reveals anxieties over gender roles, racial hegemonies, insider/outsider boundaries, Protestant/Catholic affinities, and highbrow/lowbrow forms of art. This devotional imagery also does theological work. It preaches.

Cultural orthodoxy is bound up in discourses of taste. Religious material culture helps create standards of orthodox, communal taste—a type of cultural capital tied up in discourses of class that permeates all aspects of lived Mormonism.¹¹ Objects are positioned rhetoric, and Latter-day Saints enlist them to create and reify their relationship to other church members and to non-Mormons. Mormons employ objects as placeholders of class and status within families, wards, and stakes. Clothing, automobiles, and domestic furnishings act as social lubricants within Mormon microcultures. They elicit the felt reality of who does

9. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 63–86.

10. On Mormon images of Jesus, see Noel A. Carmack, “Images of Christ in Latter-day Saint Visual Culture, 1900–1999,” *BYU Studies* 39/3 (2000): 18–76.

11. On the intersection of taste and class, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954).

and who does not belong in certain Mormon worlds, particularly the worlds outside Sunday meetings.¹²

The material culture of scripture

Books of scripture are themselves tactile objects that possess cultural information. The binding, paper, colors, formatting, and typesetting all shape reader reception. From the Book of Mormon's first leather binding at the Grandin Press to the faux leather, gold-stamped editions the church distributes by the millions today, the church has strategically packaged the Book of Mormon for religious consumption. Large heirloom editions have acted as props in the social performance of devotional piety similar to Victorian parlor Bibles. Glimmering gold bindings with ancient characters inscribed upon them have silently advocated the book's facticity as an ancient record to the reader holding it.¹³ George Reynolds's *The Story of the Book of Mormon* (1888) was the first illustrated edition of the Book of Mormon; and since then, multiple editions have contained imagery that shaped the reception of the people, places, and events described in the text.¹⁴ These and the images that have followed act as theological intercalations. They both illustrate and innovate.

12. For a discussion of objects as rhetoric, see Katherine C. Grier, "Material Culture as Rhetoric: 'Animal Artifacts' as a Case Study," in *Material Culture: The Shape of the Field*, ed. Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 65–104.

13. For an overview of Book of Mormon editions, see Richard E. Turley Jr. and William W. Slaughter, *How We Got the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011).

14. George Reynolds, *The Story of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1888). See also Noel A. Carmack, "'A Picturesque and Dramatic History': George Reynolds's *Story of the Book of Mormon*," *BYU Studies* 47/2 (2008): 115–41.

The body

The human body is a material vehicle of cultural production and the primary material object through which people experience lived religion.¹⁵ Although bodies arrive on the historical stage through biological reproduction, they soon become a kind of material culture because, like objects, self-reflecting people map meaning onto their bodies and those of others. Mormon bodies perform Mormonness. The body is the primary mechanism through which one lives religion, after all. It exerts its power upon the psychological self, and that self simultaneously exerts its power upon the body. Relatedly, lived religion is seen, felt, tasted, and smelled. And objects are integral to the facilitation of these sensory experiences. Because of this, material culturists are beginning to incorporate sensory experience into their narratives of religious pasts.¹⁶

The social lives of objects

Objects live social lives. Because of this, their uses and meanings change over time. This is most clearly evident in the way people retire objects from their role as usable market commodities and consecrate them as facilitators of nostalgia, heritage, and identity. Believers inject these objects with *numina*. The objects' new role as agents of memory lies in their connection to people, events, and places in the past with which cultural consecrators wish to identify. These emotional and spiritual meanings often eclipse the objects' original uses and meanings. These relics—whether recognized churchwide or only within a specific

15. David Morgan, "Religion and Embodiment in the Study of Material Culture," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, March 2015, <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-32>.

16. See, for example, David Walker, "Transporting Mormonism: Railroads and Religious Sensation in the American West," in *Sensational Religion*, ed. Sally M. Promey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

family—create new pasts that can powerfully structure the lived experience of the present.¹⁷

Religious objects possess semiotic valence, and some possess more than others. This symbolic value is not to be downplayed. But objects do more than symbolize or represent a priori ideas. They actively participate in the social construction of reality. In fact, they destabilize the autonomy of social actors by participating in that process themselves. Objects cocreate the cultural worlds in which phenomena such as prayer, revelation, and priesthood become possible. The boundaries between Mormon and non-Mormon worlds are porous and at times nonexistent, making it necessary to properly contextualize objects both inside and outside Mormon discourse in order to fully understand them. Otherwise, Mormon exceptionalism becomes the default lens of analysis—a lens that provides a skewed and incomplete understanding of the roles and meanings of historical objects.

The following three examples illustrate some of the many possible ways that scholars might think about Mormon material culture. The first two consider the way objects act as media. The third considers the role objects play in creating sacred space. The recently published history and images of the brown seer stone used by Joseph Smith raise questions about the power of earthly objects to generate heavenly revelation.¹⁸ According to contemporary accounts, the stone was not wholly passive in the translation process. It acted on Smith. Its alluring shape and color compelled him to remove it from the ground. And without it, Martin Harris relates, Smith could not translate. The seer stone, the

17. Rachel P. Maines and James J. Glynn, “Numinous Objects,” *Public Historian* 15/1 (Winter 1993): 8–25. An example of this process in Mormon history is in Jennifer Reeder, “Eliza R. Snow and the Prophet’s Gold Watch: Time Keeper as Relic,” *Journal of Mormon History* 31/1 (Spring 2005): 119–41.

18. Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 1: Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1–Alma 35*, facsimile edition, part 1 of vol. 3 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2015), xix–xxii; and Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer,” *Ensign*, October 2015, 49–55.

nearby golden plates, and the paper and ink used by the scribes formed a constellation of objects that intersected with Smith's revelatory prowess to cocreate the text of the Book of Mormon. The stone was a rock, an object removed from all human behavior in the ground that, once brought into human contact, acted as a mediator.¹⁹

Relatedly, almost all Latter-day Saints worldwide today experience lived Mormonism through some form of digital media. Computer screens, television screens, and handheld devices mediate between message makers and members. In addition to official church content, nonofficial social media groups, blogs, and chat rooms have proliferated in the past ten years. And on a smaller scale, members experience church membership through phone calls, text messages, websites, and social media. In short, Mormonism has become more mediated than ever. Scholars might look to material culture in media studies to better understand the way digital technologies are changing the lived experience of Mormonism.²⁰ Are these objects facilitating the construction of a new, virtual city of Zion? What is the role these devices play in adapting today's sound-bite culture to Mormon devotion? And how is the messenger also the message?

As mentioned earlier, aesthetic objects are among the many material arbiters of religious experience. While LDS meetinghouses are purposely designed to be unadorned and utilitarian—at least those in recent history—the construction and furnishing of temples is meant to be just the opposite. Temples are highly aestheticized. They are filled with

19. John Durham Peters has recently argued that all objects act as media, including those from the natural world. "Media theory," he writes, "is about environments and infrastructures as much as about messages and content." John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 4.

20. See, for example, Heidi Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religious Practice Online and Offline in a Networked Society," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80/1 (2012): 64–93; Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan, *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010).

custom-made furniture, stained glass windows, floral arrangements, and original paintings. These furnishings shape the felt experience of temple ritual. The built environment of temples constructs the feeling of eternal progression by equating the presence of God with ideologies of Western taste.

Yet taste is a moving target. The interior decor of a temple may elicit a sense of the sacred for one generation but have trouble doing so for the next. Because of this, the redecoration of temples remains a perpetual process. A celestial room, for example, is a snapshot in time of the negotiations between producers and consumers regarding taste concomitant with spiritual experience. Seeing the architecture and interior decor of a temple as only a backdrop for temple rituals overlooks the power that built environments exert. And because the creation of sacred space is culturally contingent, scholars must be careful not to essentialize objects in the same way they are careful not to essentialize people.

In conclusion, everyday objects like cell phones and temple interiors are especially valuable evidences of lived religion. Because people take their built environments largely for granted, they rarely record the details of things like the materials, methods, and ideologies of building a fence around a cow pasture or the warp-and-weft construction of a piece of damask fabric used in a mourning dress. Yet objects as simple as fencing and fabric were integral to the lived experience of the Mormon past just as merit badges and tithing envelopes are today. The study of these material documents augments and complements existing narratives while also offering up its own. As Thomas Carter reminds us from seventeen years ago, “Although their message is not explicit, such documents—however mute they first appear—nevertheless have an important story to tell.”²¹

21. Carter, “Studies in Material Culture,” 307.

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