



10-1-1973

***Mormon Arts* Volume I. Lorin F. Wheelwright and Lael J. Woodbury, eds.**

Richard G. Oman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Oman, Richard G. (1973) "*Mormon Arts* Volume I. Lorin F. Wheelwright and Lael J. Woodbury, eds.," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 13 : Iss. 4 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol13/iss4/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

A second review of *Mormon Arts*, Volume I.

(Reviewed by Richard G. Oman. Mr. Oman graduated from Brigham Young University in 1970. He is presently a graduate student in the history of art at the University of Washington in Seattle.)

Since 1969 Brigham Young University has held a Mormon Festival of Arts each spring. This book is basically an outgrowth and an expression of these festivals and thus many of the strengths and weaknesses of the book are reflections of strengths and weaknesses of the Festival. The book is lavishly illustrated with over 120 photographs and illustrations (45 in color) of art mainly from the festival. Because of the large size of the pages (13" x 13") many of the plates are quite large—some even covering two pages. A long-playing phonograph record containing music, drama, and dramatic reading accompanies the volume.

The first 43 pages contain several long essays by Dean Lorin Wheelwright. These essays examine such topics as "Is There a Mormon Art?" "The Artistic Goals of Brigham Young University," and the interrelationships of divine revelation, science, and aesthetics. Dr. Wheelwright's basic point is that content, not form, should be the first concern of the Mormon artist. Sections on drama, music, photography, literature, and dance follow the extended introduction to *Mormon Art*. An essay on the Kirtland Temple is included, as well as a short article on David Hyrum Smith, poet-musician son of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and early leader in the Reorganized Church. The text ends with a short report on a symposium held during the Festival on Mormon architecture, design, and the environment. Most of the critical and analytical writing is done by Drs. Wheelwright and Woodbury. At the end of the book appear the schedules of the first three Festivals and biographical listings of all persons whose art work or essays are included in the book. The accompanying record is correlated with the book.

My immediate response to this book is enthusiastic. No matter what level of artistic sophistication the reader has, he will find something of interest in *Mormon Arts*. This speaks well for the pedagogical skills of the editors and the universality of the subject. The writers on music, drama, and visual art each plead with the reader to extend himself and take in a greater variety of new aesthetic experiences. Appropriately, a wide range of works is reproduced. The relationships drawn between art, theology, and life are quite provocative. This reviewer tends to basically agree with Dr. Wheelwright and others that Mormon Art should have a deep concern with content as well as form and that it should be basically supportive of Mormon values.

However, I do have some reservations about the book. Though the title is *Mormon Arts*, there are little more than two pages devoted to poetry and literature. Perhaps this reflects logistical problems between different colleges of the university, since literature is not included in the College of Fine Arts and Communications. We are not told.

Though the authors plead for greater acceptance of different aesthetic viewpoints (Lorin Wheelwright even reminds us that the Church is now multi-national and multi-cultural), the only non-western art in the book is a photograph of a Toltec sculpture. Dr. Wheelwright reveals his own Western, post-Renaissance aesthetic value system when he begins to link theology, science, and aesthetics. For example, he explains that the numbers two and three are the basic numerical units in art, but this is simply not true of many non-Western cultures. This points out the difficulty of trying to establish a single aesthetic broad enough to fit a broad spectrum of artistic styles.

Drs. Woodbury and Wheelwright both put great emphasis on Mormon art being optimistic, buoyant, and problem-solving. I think there are Mormon artists who would feel uncomfortable with this prescription. There is much great art which does not soothe, answer or relax. Art often raises disturbing questions and lets the audience struggle with the solutions. A constant demand for optimism and clear solutions can lead to art that is smug and insipid.

A final problem is a seeming overemphasis on the subject of the art and an underemphasis on the work itself. None of

the reproductions of the visual arts are accompanied with references to dimensions or media. This omission may not affect the viewer's appreciation of the subject, but it certainly may impair his ability to understand the work of art itself. Less than fifteen per cent of the article on the Kirtland Temple deals with the structure itself; there are no accompanying photographic details. A poem by Alice Morrey Bailey and a painting by Floyd E. Breinholt are juxtaposed with no comment on either one. Why? The subject of both is the Tetons. This emphasis on subject matter ignores whether the works of art are compatible, and forces one to be the comment on the other.

Since *Mormon Arts* is optimistically labeled Volume I, it is hoped that the kinds of problems just discussed can be dealt with in future volumes. Volume I is certainly overdue.

The preface states that this book ". . . justifies its existence if it stirs the appetite of the reader for continued experience with and enjoyment of Mormon arts." I for one feel stirred.