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“There cannot be any more Bible!”: Nineteenth-Century Visual Art and the Production of Memory in *The Book of Mormon*

*Jessica Slayton*

*The Book of Mormon,* told by a variety of narrators over a period of hundreds of years, is deeply concerned with remembrance and the written production of memory. As each narrator grows old and finishes his time recording the events of his people, he hands down the plates to a son or other trusted, younger male companion to continue writing the history and preserving the memories of their people. In this paper, I’d like to argue that nineteenth-century visual art becomes a continuation of the concern for and production of memory so present in *The Book of Mormon* itself. The book’s proclamation of itself as Bible—“And because my words shall hiss forth—many of the Gentiles shall say: A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible”¹—establishes its reliance on its own participation in the production of memory and highlights its own limited ability (given its status as a completed text) to continue the process of memory generation. I will first examine how *The Book of Mormon* presents the recording of memory and then turn to C. C. A. Christensen as a case study on how visual art entered the Mormon religious sphere in the nineteenth century as a way of re-recording the stories.

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¹ 2 Nephi 29:3.
1. In theory, barring illness or injury, memory is a universal property. As Catherine Belsey states: "We remember the past not simply as it was, but as it is or, more precisely, as it will turn out to have been, in consequence of our remembering it. Anamnesis takes place in the present: it does not simply recover, but re-creates." Anamnesis, the remembrance of things passed, is so much a part of human cultural history that the human role in it is often forgotten altogether, despite the fact that it is the present role that ultimately defines it. As she explains, remembrance is not the past as it has since been chronicled. It is not static, and it is certainly not something able to be completed. Remembrance relies instead on the present interpretation of the past in order to be memory rather than history—therefore, remembrance is not simply something that is done, or something that is had, but rather something that is created.

"Memory" and "remembrance" are different entities. Jacques Le Goff frames Aristotle's take on the two as the standard differentiating definitions: "Aristotle distinguishes between memory proper, mneme, the simple power of preserving the past, and reminiscence [remembrance], anamnesis, the voluntary recall of the past." One engages in anamnesis and produces mneme. But these concepts are inextricably related: in order to produce memory and thus preserve the past, one must voluntarily activate his or her past recollections. However, the past is preserved in a multitude of ways including oral repetition, written records, or images. Furthermore, anyone who engages in the preservation of the past can be referred to as the mnemon, who "allows us to

2. Catherine Belsey, Literature, Literary History, and Cultural Memory (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2005), 4.

3. Remembrance plays a significant role in cultural creation, as much of what provokes members of any given culture to record history in various mediums. By taking up the challenge of remembering one's past, or the past of one's people, the subjective creator records reflections of this past through the lens of his or her own time and experience. Joseph Smith's "re-inscription" of The Book of Mormon participates in this process.

observe the advent in the law of a social function of memory. The mnemon is a person who maintains the memory of the past for the purpose of making juridical decisions. The act of maintaining memory in an oral, written, or visual way directly brings the mnemon into the mneme itself.

Le Goff explores the purpose of written memory in *History and Memory* and brings us into image-based production. To differentiate itself from history, memory invokes subjectivity based on the cultural preferences of the mnemon, or archivist. The archivist writes so that information that is deemed worth preserving and recollecting will be available regardless of space and time. The process of record-keeping is always contingent, however, because the mnemon chooses what is worth preserving. The chosen memories therefore become tangible and reproducible. The archive moves from what Ricoeur and Bergson term “pure memory” through the passage to memory-image, at the same time as it moves from Le Goff’s auditory to visual domain, which makes it possible to edit memories and experience them in a new way, distinct from fleeting oral recollection.

Memory, before it is articulated through speaking, writing, or picture-making, has not yet become associated with the mental image that will come to represent it. Thus, even when a memory is recalled through verbal or literary expression, the memory itself—and therefore what the spoken or the written evokes or describes—will be an image. This image is called the memory-image, which refers to the tangible experience that a given individual or culture has with a memory or has when they participate in remembrance of a given moment. As Ricoeur puts it: “It is also then in the work of recollection that this operation of putting the pure memory into images can be grasped.

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5. Le Goff, *History and Memory*, 63; Le Goff quotes Louis Gernet.
in its origin. We can speak of this operation only as a movement from the virtual to the actual, or again as the condensation of a cloud or as the materialization of an ethereal phenomenon. The memory, understood but untouched, becomes something that can be handled, contested, and manipulated when translated into the memory-image. The manifestation of the memory-image can be thought of as a text. Spoken, written, or painted texts with inscribed memory-images are then built upon by new representations of the same memory-images, which alter the present understanding of the memory-image. Therefore, the text looks toward the future by inscribing contemporary cultural norms of re-inscription into the original memory-image. *The Book of Mormon* is a text inscribed with a multitude of memory-images, and the many narrators of the various books are certainly *mnemon*-type figures.

Nephi and his father receive visions from God, and it becomes his—and all of the successive narrators—duty to write his experiences down. Smith also receives notice from above, in the form of Moroni, that the decoding and translation of the plates are his divine duty. Thus, Nephi and Smith are both presented as self-conscious *mnemon* figures. Smith's original contribution to the text, “The Testimony of Three Witnesses,” states that “we through the grace of God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ have seen the plates which contain this record, which is a record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites, his brethren, and also the people of Jared, which came from the tower of which hath been spoken.” Here, Smith invokes the power of God and Christ to authorize his compilation, stating that the book is a record of the people of Nephi and therefore contains the memories of the people. This move is reminiscent of Nephi’s first words in the book itself:


10. It thus participates in “collective memory.” Ricoeur summarizes Maurice Halbwach's work, stating that one actually derives first-person singular memories from the memories of the collective—while, of course, individuals each have their own sets of personal memories, those memories are framed, influenced, and derived from the larger collective memory (Ricoeur, Blamey, and Pellauer, 120).
I Nephi having been born of goodly parents. . . . Yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days. Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians. And I know that the record which I make to be true. And I make it with mine own hand, and I make it according to my knowledge. (1 Nephi 1:1–3)

Both Nephi and Smith establish themselves as divine mnemons here. They task themselves with archiving the narrative of this culture, having been inspired or chosen by God. Smith does not narrate an archive of his own people, but rather re-inscribes the past in his own time.

Although Smith’s status as mnemon subtly frames The Book of Mormon, its primary narrator’s role as a builder of history is apparent from the start. Nephi does not simply ask for the reader to be aware of the past, but demonstrates the role of human intervention in the past\(^\text{11}\) and how this intervention forms both collective identity and memory. Nephi provides an example of the kind of present intervention that distinguishes memory from history when he writes: “And now I, Nephi, cannot say more; the Spirit stoppeth mine utterance, and I am left to mourn because of the unbelief, and the wickedness, and the ignorance, and the stiffneckedness of men.”\(^\text{12}\) Here, the record becomes imperfect, and the memory becomes specifically Nephi’s, rather than that of his collective people. Furthermore, he steps out of the narrative to explicitly point out that there has been an omission with this information, and thus that there is something future readers will never be able to know or remember, given how the text is positioned.

\[^\text{11}\] Nephi picks and chooses what events are worth remembering, and this act is fundamental to the idea of a Covenant of people of God. Steven L. Olsen, “Memory and Identity in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22/2 (2013): 40–51.

\[^\text{12}\] 2 Nephi 32:7.
Additionally, Mormon utilizes strategies of forgetting, which raises the question of self-conscious narrative unreliability. The text's introduction states: "An account written by the hand of Mormon upon plates taken from the plates of Nephi. Wherefore it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites... the interpretation thereof by the gift of God." The book acknowledges Mormon's abridgments and thus demonstrates a kind of self-awareness. Moroni also confesses abridgment—"Now I, Moroni, after having made an end of abridging the account of the people of Jared, I had supposed not to have written more, but I have not as yet perished; and I make not myself known to the Lamanites lest they should destroy me"—but it cannot be known how much Moroni may have abridged a previous abridgment or translation. What's important here is that it is exactly this acknowledgment of abridgment itself that draws the reader's attention to the fact that this is an edited memory. This move reflects the privilege of the *mnemon* and highlights the gaps in the reader's memory that will never be able to be filled. Furthermore, the text claims to have come from God himself, through Moroni and the visions of the narrators—the omissions are thus implied to have been made at God's request. Those who earnestly follow and record God's actions over the course of *The Book of Mormon* are denied the right to write down and remember all of the events in their own lives and the lives of their people. This failure causes them to fall into iniquity every few years, due to their inability to remember the whole truth. These gaps also prevent Smith and the nineteenth-century readers of the book from knowing the whole truth of their own religion, making their "memories" of the Nephites incomplete. The complete record of the Nephite memories is reserved for God alone.

Aside from being concerned with remembrance by way of recording, *The Book of Mormon* also concerns itself with memory by

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13. Ricoeur explains that one can always recount differently, shifting emphases and recasting in different lights (Ricoeur, Blamey, and Pellauer, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 448).

14. Mormon, Title page.

demonstrating the cyclical nature that accompanies remembering and forgetting. In Helaman 13:12–14, for example, Samuel the Lamanite prophesies the destruction of all those who will not repent and return to their righteous ways. He says:

Yea, woe unto this great city of Zarahemla!
For behold, it is because of those who are righteous that it is saved.
Yea, woe unto this great city!
For I perceive, saith the Lord, that there are many,
Yea, even the more part of this great city,
that will harden their hearts against me, saith the Lord.
But blessed are they who will repent,
for them will I spare.
But behold, if it were not for the righteous who are in this great city,
behold, I would cause that fire should come down out of heaven and destroy it.
But behold, it is for the righteous' sake that it is spared. 16

Here, Samuel situates himself within a cycle. He prophesies an event that has both already occurred and also has not yet come to pass. He “remembers” something because the Nephites have once again fallen into iniquity, demonstrating the way in which things that have happened once will come again. The cyclical nature of remembrance and forgetting allows for a sort of spiritual renewal that could not occur without the act of forgetting to clear the space for the return through remembrance.

2.

In a culture so concerned with the tangible creation of collective cultural memory, and in which their recovered and re-inscribed memories of the Nephites were determined by completed text, how could followers continue “doing God's work” when there was no more writing left to do? I argue that visual art and culture pick up where writing leaves off.

It took many years for visual art to become a part of the Mormon tradition. In 1890, John Hafen, Lorus Pratt, and John Fairbanks departed Utah for Paris on a mission from the Church, during which their two goals were to study painting and to serve as missionaries. This mission marked the first time that the Church would sponsor training in the visual arts and signaled a shift from textual storytelling in *The Book of Mormon* as the *only* vehicle to an era in which visual art could also participate in the production of religious memory. Hafen, originally from Switzerland, explains the *intention* behind Mormon art, stating that his “philosophy of art centered on a conviction that aesthetic expression is a vehicle through which God’s message may be portrayed.” He called this conviction “truth in art.” In this effort he credited God, acknowledging Him as both the source and the inspiration in all good art. Visual art became another way in which *The Book of Mormon*, as a text containing visions given by God, could be conveyed to the public.

The artists saw themselves and their purpose in terms that were similar to the ways in which the narrators of *The Book of Mormon* understood their project: they saw themselves as “doing God’s work” by contributing to the record of their faith. In their painting, they resemble Nephi, as his divine purpose dictates that he chronicle his experience as *mnemon*. The artists then become a way of remembering Nephi’s and Smith’s work—they re-enact a memory and re-create the memory-image through art. In an 1892 paper, C. C. A. Christensen, a Danish American Mormon, writes that human *artistic* skill can “be both useful and necessary in order to obtain temporal and eternal bliss, in connection with our intellectual development in other areas.” In this understanding, painting becomes a way of divine creation for Latter-day Saint artists in the same way that writing was for their predecessors.

As a visual artist, Christensen promoted artistic production as equal in value to that of writing: "The art of writing is nowadays recognized as an absolutely necessary element in our schools; but it has not always been so. . . . The time will also come when we realize the necessity of instruction in drawing in our schools, just as we now realize the necessity of the art of writing."\(^\text{20}\) Like *The Book of Mormon*, the view developed by Christensen here suggests that humans write in order to record what they cannot remember; it accepts writing as a nineteenth-century need, differentiating the time from before the narrators recorded their experiences. He also attempts to emphasize the importance of elevating drawing and visual art to the same standard as writing, explaining his own commitment to religious painting. Christensen painted *The Hill Cumorah*, a nineteenth-century work depicting Joseph Smith receiving the plates from Moroni in the woods. This painting explicitly interacts with the remembrance of the story of *The Book of Mormon* while also participating in the idea of visual art as divine creation, particularly given its subject matter. Thus, this painting serves to illustrate the way in which visual art came to supplement writing as a way of producing memory through texts after the official publication of *The Book of Mormon*.\(^\text{21}\)

The obvious focal point of *The Hill Cumorah* is the two figures found in the center of the work, Moroni and Joseph Smith. Moroni is shown colorless, shining a bright white light and illuminating Smith alongside him. Smith contrasts with Moroni's whiteness by wearing all black and dark gray, but the light from Moroni does begin to touch Smith's features, foreshadowing Smith's eventual role as a holy founder of the Mormon faith. His face and hands, illuminated by the light, are placed in the exact center of the painting, demonstrating that although he is not as noticeable as Moroni, he would come to play a central role in the history of the Mormon people. Moroni looks down on Smith passively, holding the golden plates almost within Smith's reach. Here,

\(^{20}\) Jensen and Christensen, "C. C. A. Christensen on Art," 410.

\(^{21}\) C. C. A. Christensen, *The Hill Cumorah*, c. 1878, tempera on canvas, 80.5 x 116" (204.5 x 294.6 cm). https://web.archive.org/web/20060621235526/http://www.textanalyse.dk/Billeder/Naivisme%20Christensen.jpg.
Moroni is literally participating in the remembrance of the material as he passes on the records—the painting serves as an external recorder as it chronicles the moment in which this transfer of memory occurs. Even though Moroni gives the ability to access the plates to Smith, it is Smith's eyes that read the plates and Smith's hands that record the translation, acts that ultimately give the Mormon people—including Hafen and Christensen—the ability to remember their long-forgotten past and fulfill the purpose of the record.

The rest of the painting exists as a frame for the figures. The feet of the two figures parallel the extreme slant of the hill, upon which Moroni appears above Smith. This slant signifies not only the difficulty of Smith's task but also more importantly the heavenly ascent that his mission partakes in. Lastly, the slant is so extreme that it is a wonder that Smith (who is kneeling) and his hat don't tumble down the side. Moroni's light paralyzes the surrounding material world, creating an awe-inspiring effect that seems to stop time and the laws of physics in
a further demonstration of his divine power. The trees around the two figures almost all slant along or against the hill, the exception being the two on either side of Moroni and Smith. These two trees, illuminated by Moroni’s light, stand nearly as straight upright as Moroni and Smith do. The trees frame them again within the frame of the actual picture: they are the lightest trees within the wood, and they contrast deeply with the darker, twisted trees around them. This contrast refers to the Mormon way as the “right” path, which, in this case, gains even the support of nature. The leaves of the trees, intricately painted, make way for Moroni’s light and reflect it back at him.

The fact that the two figures are depicted primarily in black and in white may be read as a reference to the distinction between the Nephites and Lamanites—Moroni, the Nephite, bathed in whiteness contrasts with the blackness of Smith, a non-Nephite. He is thus comparable to a Lamanite until converted, a figure represented in the text through blackness or darkness. This contrast also reflects a present view of the past, necessarily reconfiguring the unchangeable Lamanite nature. Mormonism’s survival as a nineteenth-century religion would rely on the religious conversion of others from various sects in a way that the Nephites and Lamanites did not require. Merrill Bradshaw describes this event in terms of “dispensation”:

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.22

The repetition of heavenly affirmations necessitates the remembrance and forgetting of these “principles of action and belief,” ultimately

allowing the art to link this present experience with the Nephites’ remembrance and forgetting of belief systems. As Smith “remembers” the past in this depiction and foreshadows his own conversion through color, he becomes a part of the past, as well as a signifier of the future. Christensen’s piece then places the artist into “direct theological contact” with both Smith’s period of history as well as the narrators’ varied historical experiences.

*The Hill Cumorah* provides an interesting example of painted reproduction of memory in part due to the way it creates a memory while also referring to what is considered a real, historical event in the Latter-day Saint community. Through this doubled relationship, the painting situates itself into the record of the *mnemon*, affirming a generally agreed-upon cultural event. As Richard Oman writes, the scene here is not a depiction of a “dream, a metaphor, or a feeling,” but rather is painted at a historically accurate location. It produces a depiction of something thought to be historically true and incorporates the hill itself as figure due to its standing as a real object and location. Conversely, Kate Flint addresses the painting not just as historical but also as a powerful evocation of memory: “What I am working towards is the suggestion that the turn in painting in the later nineteenth century away from referential realism particularly benefited the depiction of memory—not so much the object of memory, but the state of remembering itself.”

The depiction of the hill participates in the state of remembering this moment from the present, rather than as it was in that exact moment when Smith found the plates, because the hill is not the central figure in the painting. It is the memory of the specific place as a stage for a sacred occurrence that provides the power to be remembered and represented through painted record, rather than its status as a historical location.

Stylistically, *The Hill Cumorah* involves gazes, gestures, light effects, and deliberately empty spaces, all of which participate in the production of memory, and are but some of the multitude of aesthetic choices

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an artist could employ. First, Moroni's eyes do not gaze at Smith, but rather above and past him toward a space in the painting left completely empty, while Smith gazes directly at the plates. Moroni, as he fulfills his final duty, gazes beyond the reality of the moment and into the past, as he passes on his own past—his memories—to the nineteenth century. Smith, on the other hand, gazes directly onto the plates, as the memories contained within them begin to awaken within him. The main gesture here also evokes the past—Smith holds out his hands, ready to receive the plates, and Moroni holds them for one final time; thus, Smith becomes one of the narrators of old, receiving the plates to continue the act of recording as all of the narrators before him did. Finally, the empty space around the two figures brings the viewer back to the final scene of The Book of Mormon, where Moroni is alone finishing his final record, as the final Nephite. Here, this scene is re-enacted with the addition of Smith, as the memory of that moment comes alive. Memory only works when seen through the present, and thus the addition of Smith allows this painting to depict a memory rather than a history.

What Christensen desired back in 1892 has become a contemporary reality—enough skilled visual artists worked within the “picture-gallery” sphere to bring art-making to the ordinary home. As Mark Staker states, “picture-gallery art... has always been an important part of the Latter-day Saint art tradition, although for many Church members, this art has been heavily complemented with their own productions. Folk artists, as ‘ordinary folk,’ worship daily by creating things for their homes.” If ordinary people use artistic creation as a way of worshiping daily, so, too, did painters such as Christensen and Hafen. Worshipping daily means remembering daily; the religious story of the Latter-day Saint tradition first means remembering back to Smith's

25. Flint suggests that artists could also employ stylistic manipulation, lighting effects, and perhaps most interestingly, the deliberate depiction of open space. Christensen utilizes all of these techniques in The Hill Cumorah and his other religious paintings.

nineteenth-century experience, and further back to the written recordings of the first narrators.

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