Storytellers: Scandinavian's Art Told of Restoration

J. Michael Hunter
Brigham Young University - Provo, mike_hunter@byu.edu

Original Publication Citation
Danquart Anton Weggeland, an artist, joined the Church in his native Norway in 1854, where he met C.C.A. Christensen, another artist who was there on a mission for the Church.

Portrait of President Brigham Young, above, and "Handcart Pioneers," right, were painted by Danquart Weggeland, whose works focused on the Restoration.

Missionary work in Scandinavia began 150 years ago with the arrival of the first missionaries in Denmark on June 14, 1850. In keeping with the observance of the sesquicentennial of the Scandinavian Mission this year, the Church News presents this article about two prominent Latter-day Saint artists from earlier days in that part of the world. Carl Christian Anton Christensen (1831-1912) from Denmark and Danquart Anton Weggeland (1827-1918) from Norway were, more than anything else, master storytellers. They saw the sweep of Latter-day Saint epic terms. painting scenes that documented the historical events of the Church and its colonization of the West. "History will preserve much," Christensen wrote, "but art alone can make the narration of the suffering of the Saints comprehensible for the following generations."

Christensen and Weggeland met on the southern coast of Norway in 1854. Christensen was serving a mission for the Church, and Weggeland was investigating the Church. Weggeland was baptized soon after this meeting, and the two artists became lifelong friends. Christensen immigrated to Utah in 1857, and Weggeland followed in 1862.

Although painting was uppermost in the thoughts and desires of these two friends, they found little time to do much painting. They saw the means of Løfthe-ses-San

BY J. MICHAEL HUNTER
Church News contributor

Scandinavians' art told of Restoration

CHRISTIANSTED, ST. THOMAS--Missionaries in St. Thomas on the Virgin Islands painted this picture, titled "Departure of Lehi and His Family from Jerusalem." The picture is part of the Spring 1999 exhibition, "The Meeting of the Worlds: The Art of the Church in the Caribbean, 1839-1989." The exhibit, which explores the role of art in the history of the Church in the Caribbean, opened at the American Folk Art Museum in New York in February and will travel to the San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, California, through April 25.

C.C.A. Christensen's works covered topics from the Book of Mormon, such as "Departure of Lehi and His Family from Jerusalem," above, and Church history, such as "Handcart Pioneers," right.
Scandinavians' art told of Restoration

Continued from page 9

of it as they worked at anything to provide the necessities of life in frontier Utah. Christensen laid brick, burned charcoal, worked as a hod carrier and farmed. One artist of the time recorded in his journal that people "as a general thing like pictures and admire them, but they have no money to spend for them." Weggeland wrote, "Occasionally I could dispose of a painting or give a lesson in return for a pair of hand-knitted socks or a basket of onions or other vegetables from the garden." Yet these tenacious artists persisted, getting art commissions when and where they could.

In the 1870s, Dimick Huntington, LDS Indian interpreter and missionary, commissioned Christensen and Weggeland to paint a series of paintings depicting the scenes from the Bible and the Book of Mormon. The scenes began with the Garden of Eden and ended with Moroni delivering the gold plates to Joseph Smith. The paintings were sewn together in a scroll and unrolled on rollers. They functioned as a visual aid for Huntington to use while preaching to the Indians. Christensen and Weggeland collaborated on many paintings and panoramas. The two friends were often commissioned to paint murals in Church buildings.

Inspired by his earlier narrative paintings, Christensen undertook a series of 6' by 10 foot paintings in the late 1870s. Each of the 23 scenes depicting early Church history were sewn onto a backing to be exhibited as a scroll on rollers. Christensen made a frame on which to hang the scroll of paintings and then took his show on the road, exhibiting his "Mormon Panoramas" to large audiences in Utah, Idaho, Arizona and Wyoming. A deeply religious man, Christensen believed he could teach the masses about the Restoration through his art. Christensen often had the audience sing hymns to go with the art.

"One of my desires in painting the panorama," Christensen wrote, "was to preserve the legacy and heritage of the early LDS Church. Every evening as the panorama unfolded, the audience became almost spellbound. For many of those present, it was not just a story. It was an integral part of their lives."

Christensen and Weggeland were folk artists. Their work had a primitive quality and the figures were stiff, but their paintings had a marvellous directness that expressed their testimony and faith. As Richard G. Oman, a curator at the Museum of Church History and Art, said of Christensen's work, "There's a sense of honesty that comes from the very primitive nature of his paintings that would be lost with a more sophisticated painting."

Christensen and Weggeland were more interested in the story than in the artistic techniques. They avoided empty landscapes, painting instead common people caught up in the human drama of the Restoration. Their Scandinavian heritage gave them a profound respect for the nobility of the common man.

Ironically, Christensen and Weggeland did not experience most of the historical events they painted. They immigrated after the Saints were settled in Utah. They relied on first-hand accounts for their background. As he traveled with his "Mormon Panorama," Christensen found that older people could add to his knowledge with their comments. He would revise his paintings accordingly.

Christensen and Weggeland did, however, live the experiences of European Mormons who came to the United States on Church-sponsored ships and crossed the plains in immigrant companies. Their most famous paintings depict these immigrant experiences.

In his painting of "The Handcart Company," Christensen shows the immigrants fording a small stream on the prairie. A woman in the foreground gathers buffalo chips to start a fire. This is not only Christensen's most famous work connected with LDS history, but is perhaps the most famous work connected with LDS history. Christensen and his wife spent their honeymoon crossing the plains in a handcart company in 1857.

In his painting "Handcart Pioneers," Weggeland shows the immigrants descending a hill. The European composition of the immigrants is illustrated through their clothes. The pioneers are participating in a variety of activities drawn from different times of day, such as gathering wood, cooking and marching. The American flag carried in the distance illustrates their enthusiasm for their new homeland.

Weggeland crossed the plains in such a company in 1862. In the sesquicentennial year of the Scandinavian Saints, members of the Church can appreciate the artistic and spiritual gifts of these two talented artists as part of the Church's Scandinavian heritage.

J. Michael Hunter is a reference librarian at the Church Historical Department.

Sources:
Elder L. H. Kimball, Apostle, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1964).
LDS History. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1998).
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1994.
Michael Hunter is a reference librarian at the Church Historical Department.

Model train is monument to Scout's persistence

Continued from page 5

"Our family did not know anything about toy trains," she admitted. But Samuel was tenacious, and soon his Eagle project was under way.

Raising money for the train track and village became a community effort. Samuel's fellow ward members supported a project fund-raiser, buying pizza and pies. The youth spent a combined activity night delivering the goodies. A good friend and ward member, Bob Bennett, offered his expertise as a professional set designer and hours of his time helping Samuel build the village. As at all times, Samuel had the full support of his family while working on the project.

Samuel made sure the village — which includes a winding track cutting through two mountain tunnels, a waterfall and a chapel — was marked with a few personal touches. Look closely and you can spot a pair of missionaries chatting with a villager.

"One of the missionaries is a figure of my brother Jonathan, who is serving a mission in Denmark," Samuel said.

After an estimated 900 combined hours spent fund-raising and village building, the train was ready to be moved from Samuel's American Fork home to the hospital.

Primary Children's Medical Center unveiled the village during its annual "Pennies By The Frenz" appreciation dinner. Samuel, in Scout uniform, spoke at the banquet.

Shortly after placing the village in Dr. Jackson's office, Saazle learned his first lesson in train troubles. The continually-running engine sometimes had trouble making it to the hill into one of the mountain tunnels.

"The little engine that could sometimes couldn't," Sister Barnes said. Sister Barnes went to a hobby shop in Utah County searching for a remedy. While explaining the problem to an employee, another toy train aficionado at the store offered his expertise. The man, Ted York, suggested they start over and build another village with a few track modifications.

Brother York and Samuel quickly finished the new village. The winding train now operates flawlessly in Dr. Jackson's office.

Samuel still hopes his original village — which currently sits in his basement — will eventually find a home in another pedestrian's waiting room.

That sort of optimism typifies Samuel, said Sister Barnes, adding, "Samuel's great faith is an example to many people."

Samuel's illness is now in remission. Samuel received the coveted Eagle Scout award on Dec. 16, 1999. It was presented to him by his friend, President Thomas S. Monson.

He developed a friendship with President Monson, first counselor in the First Presidency, during the dedication of the Mount Timpanogos Utah Temple, which is a short walk from Samuel's home. Prior to the temple groundbreaking, Samuel wrote to President Monson and asked how he, as a youth, could help with the new temple like pioneer children helped build early temples.

President Monson directed some of his dedication remarks to Samuel, and asked the boy to stand by him at the podium. Samuel even offered a few comments about his thankfulness for the new temple.

Since then, Samuel has performed baptisms for the dead at the Mount Timpanogos Temple almost every Friday. When he doesn't go, the baptistry workers call to ask if all is well.

"They are my temple family," Samuel said.