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Lehi's Vision of the Tree of Life: A Cross-Cultural Perspective in Contemporary Latter-day Saint Art

Richard G. Oman

"The values that drench art with power."¹

As the Church has expanded geographically, LDS art has changed. The pioneer scenes and Utah landscapes that formed the vast majority of Mormon art for almost a century have become scarcer outside Mormon-colonized western U.S.A.; artists have less interest in subjects with which they have little personal contact. At the same time, the scriptures have become more prominent in LDS art because the standard works are a universal point of departure for Latter-day Saints.

For example, the Book of Mormon invites each reader to respond to Lehi's vision of the tree of life.² This vision, a metaphor for the plan of salvation, is about such themes as faith, choice, commitment, religious persecution, apostasy, and great spiritual reward for those who endure to the end. So powerful are the symbols in this vision that it serves as the theme for several recent works of art from the United States and abroad. This article shows how the differences in the artists' cultural background actually enlarge our understanding of this ancient vision. In addition, an analysis of eight of these pieces can provide some insights into the current state of Latter-day Saint art.

Analysis of our art tradition brings us to the question, "What is Mormon art?" What is the Mormon component to the question? Some may equate Mormon art with Utah art. However, since fewer than one out of five Latter-day Saints is currently living in Utah, most contemporary LDS artists are not Utahns. Over two-thirds of all new growth in the Church occurs outside the U.S.A., so in less than twenty years, the majority of Latter-day Saints will not even be

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citizens of the United States. Mormon art could be identified as simply art made by Mormons, but such a definition would be so broad it would render the definition almost useless.

What about aesthetic style as a unifying category of Mormon art? The Church has about nine million members in scores of nations and even more cultures. Many of these nations and cultures have distinctive artistic styles which are usually reflected in the work of their native LDS artists. As the Church continues to expand, the aesthetic frameworks of LDS artists will become even more varied. Amid such aesthetic diversity, where is the unity in what we call Mormon art?

It seems we are left with theme as a useful unifying element in defining Mormon art. In 1990 the Museum of Church History and Art sponsored an art competition open to all LDS artists. There was an incredible variety of aesthetic styles and mediums represented. Yet, the resulting exhibition was cohesive. Shared beliefs, commitments, and religious experiences visually expressed through LDS themes provided unity. Many visitors could identify with the art even when it was in a totally unfamiliar style and medium.

Mormons often talk about creating a "style of our own." Perhaps that "style" is one of intellectual and spiritual unity rather than one of aesthetic, geographical, or cultural unity.

To create a thematic "style of our own," we may have to break ranks with contemporary art critics about what is most significant in defining an art tradition. There is broad historical precedent for this approach. The vast sweep of the history of world art is the history of religious art. Some of the most profound art seeks the face of God. Many art historians and museum curators have obscured this reality by projecting the Western present on the past and on other cultures. Yet one has only to think of Egyptian, Byzantine, Islamic, and Gothic art, Oriental and African sculpture, and the work of individual artists, for example, Rembrandt's etchings, to see the religious imperative in art.

The faith and religious motivations that called much of the world's greatest art into existence have often been either ignored or reduced to footnotes. Too often, the history of world art is seen by scholars as primarily the history of style and technique. This approach has relegated art to the margins (albeit aesthetic margins) of human existence.

Though much of contemporary western civilization has lost that religious imperative in its art, LDS artists need not follow like lemmings. I wonder how many Latter-day Saint artists realize the strength that the gospel gives to the foundation of their artistic tradition. It does
not isolate them. It puts them in touch with intentions that called much of the world’s greatest art into existence.

Why do any of these points matter? As the Church expands internationally and cross-culturally, we will have less and less personal access to the hearts and minds of our fellow Latter-day Saints. Great distances and linguistic differences are real barriers. Using writing as one way of overcoming those barriers helps a little, for the written words in the Church are usually generated at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. However, very few messages come back from the Saints in distant places; when a common discipleship loses the immediacy of contact, it is reduced to an abstraction.

The visual arts are one of the easiest ways to communicate across the vast geographical and cultural barriers that separate us from our fellow Latter-day Saints. True, we need to learn something about other cultures to fully understand this visual communication, but doing so is much easier than becoming proficient in dozens of spoken languages and amassing the financial resources to visit fellow Saints personally in their distant homes. I hope that the art illustrated in this article will help bond us together as a people and reinforce our religious commitments, while it also delights the eye.
Johan Helge Benthin, *The Iron Rod.*
(Courtesy of the Museum of Church History and Art.)
The Iron Rod, Johan Helge Benthin (1936–), Germany/Denmark. Oil on Canvas, 27" x 31", 1989, Donated by the Artist to the Museum of Church History and Art.

The Iron Rod demands more of the viewer than most of the works of art in this issue of BYU Studies because the viewer must become involved in the painting’s creation. Johan Helge Benthin creates the viewer’s opportunity for co-creation in three ways: first, by leaving out key visual elements of the story; second, by the way he lays the paint on the canvas; and third, through simplifying visual details. Benthin involves the viewer in the painting’s creation to help the viewer take stock of his own spiritual state.

While the iron rod is the most obvious element in the painting, Benthin does not show anyone grasping it. The missing participants are the viewers themselves. The way Benthin layered the paint, creating the stripe of the iron rod last, emphasizes the viewers’ role in the painting’s creation. The iron rod looks like it was created with a felt tip pen. Its strong crisp form contrasts with the soft, impressionistic impasto of the rest of the painting. This placement and treatment of the rod pushes it off the surface of the painting and presents the rod to the viewers, inviting them to grasp it. In this way, Benthin asks the viewers to put themselves into the painting and then to question their own personal commitment to living the gospel.

The visual strength of the iron rod almost overwhelms the very soft, expressionistic figure of light, glowing in the background. This figure represents a loving Savior who stands ready to embrace all who complete the journey back to his presence. The Savior’s symbolic but abstract depiction leaves the viewers free to project their own feelings about the Lord into the painting. Benthin’s use of light takes on a metaphorical value, figuratively passing through the eye into the soul, illuminating our own spiritual relationship with the Lord.

The Iron Rod expresses Benthin’s artistic and religious philosophy of art. The following quotes from the artist’s own writings illuminate his approach:

Art for me is a process of identifying feelings.
I want to help the viewer co-create with me by exploring the painting more with his emotions than with his intellect.
I can show the path . . . but the decision to walk the path is ultimately his.
By experiencing art . . . [the viewer] is forced to look at his concept of what he is.
Helping others to extend their horizons as human beings is what the artist in me demands.

It is in striving to reach out to others and in helping them know more about themselves while I am learning about myself that I find the ultimate justification for all my artistic activities.

Benthin's philosophy of art helps explain why there is such an economy of detail in his paintings and why light and composition play such important roles.

The artist is intensely, yet quietly, religious. He was a convert to the Church and became, as a young man, the first president of the Copenhagen Stake. He has lived in South America, the United States, North Africa, and Italy, and currently lives in the small village of Bad Vilbel, near Frankfurt, Germany.

Benthin is largely self-taught, although he received some training from his father and grandfather, who were professional artists in Denmark. He continued his art studies with Oscar Falcon, Ulla Hako Weinert, and Ottavio Giacomazzi. Benthin works in sculpture, ceramics, lithography, and painting, and has taught art at the Arco Art School. In Europe, where he exhibits widely, he is known in the secular-art world for the religious content of his art; many of his works' themes are drawn from the Bible. This painting is one of fifteen religious works of art by Benthin in the collection of the Museum of Church History and Art.
Joseph Smith and the Tree of Life, Juan M. Escobedo (1946–), Mexico/Nevada. Oil on Board, 27 1/2" x 47 1/2", 1987, Museum of Church History and Art.

The joyful Joseph Smith and the Tree of Life likens the journey towards the tree of life to an exuberant Mexican festival parade. The Mexican quality of the painting’s message is reinforced by the use of the vibrant and colorful styles of traditional Mexican folk art. A symbolic allegory, the painting has two major themes: the personal odyssey of a new convert, and the role of the prophetic tradition in this dispensation. An image of the tree of life from the Book of Mormon runs through the painting, unifying the two themes.

Artistically, Escobedo expresses himself through primitive regionalistic Mexican folk art that reaches back to his own cultural roots. Folk art differs stylistically from much of the twentieth century fine art tradition in three key ways: its use of color, form, and detail. Like most folk art, Mexican folk art is bright and colorful, making extensive use of primary colors. In modern American culture, where we are engulfed in an artificial, machine-made environment, these bright colors may seem garish. But within a traditional culture where much of the environment is organic and handmade, such color is seen as strong, bold, and self-confident. Escobedo has followed this tradition—the setting’s swirling, brilliantly colored forms bring the cosmos, nature, and the history of the Church into the festival parade.

In folk cultures where much is shared, artists frequently work with simplified forms in a kind of visual shorthand. Folk artists avoid atmospheric perspective and emphasize linear decorative elements. They carefully spell out the surface of the picture plane. Folk-art images release ideas in the minds of the viewers which carry the message to the heart. The closest literary parallels to the difference between folk art and twentieth-century fine art are the simplicity of Christ’s parables compared to the elaborateness of a Victorian novel.

This painting is full of people. Community plays an important part in folk cultures. People do not struggle or celebrate in isolation—they do these things with others. Thus this painting has a large social dimension with pilgrims, prophets, an angel, a swirling vortex of others around the tree, even a gesture toward the viewer to come and join the procession. All these elements point to the importance of a religious community of Saints to help us work towards our salvation. How different this concept is from the very personal
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odyssey we see expressed in the Western fine-art tradition through such works as Johan Benthin's.

As a convert to the Church, Escobedo shows the role of the tree of life from a convert's point of view. A Mexican peasant woman represents the convert. In the middle left of the painting are dark clouds that represent the sins of this world. The figure of a woman emerges from the maelstrom covered with a rebozo, a traditional scarf the artist remembers seeing peasant women of Mexico wearing when he was a little boy. The rebozo seems to have the heaviness of a burden that the desperate woman would leave behind if she could. She appears to be plunging into clear waters emanating from the tree of life, which symbolize the waters of baptism. A branch of the tree of life begins to wrap around her from above, representing the comforting support of her new faith.

The figure that emerges and firmly grasps the iron rod has left her crushing burden behind. Another figure, dressed in a festive costume of bright colors, points down the straight and narrow path. Looking back, she beckons others outside the picture to share the purification that has occurred in her life. Joseph Smith, as the first partaker of the fruit of life in this dispensation, leads her down the path.

In the lower right, a woman is beginning to leave the path. Her heavy burden of sin has returned, but even the plant world reaches out to help her. Golden twined branches of the tree of life keep her from falling off the path. Woven into the branches are the names of all the prophets of this dispensation from Brigham Young, shown in profile, to Ezra Taft Benson. This weaving represents the role of modern prophets in guiding us toward the tree of life. An angel dressed in blue delivers the words of the prophets and points the woman toward Joseph Smith and the iron rod. The cosmos spins above the angel's arm—worlds without end signifying the eternal extension of the Lord's plan of salvation. Surrounding the base of the tree and the large, white fruit are rainbows of figures representing the multitudes of this world that are drawn toward the tree of life.

This painting successfully meshes artistic form, intellectual content, humble faith, and great joy. The exuberance of the forms and colors make a joyous celebration of the gospel. The unaffected and primitive style of this painting reinforces the honesty of Juan Escobedo's personal testimony. Included is a very insightful symbolic expression of how modern prophets and revelation fit into this ancient Book of Mormon allegory. First exhibited in the first Church-
wide international art competition at the Museum of Church History and Art, *Joseph Smith and the Tree of Life* was awarded a purchase prize and became part of the Church collection.

Juan M. Escobedo was born the fifth child in a family of ten children in San Luis Potosi, Mexico. When he was fourteen, his family emigrated to the United States, where his father found employment as a migrant farm worker. In McAllen, Texas, the family met LDS missionaries and joined the Church. In 1968, Escobedo, then a student at BYU, was drafted into the U.S. Army. He is presently working as an art teacher at the Nevada Girls’ Training Center in Caliente, Nevada.
Lebi's Vision of the Tree of Life, Victor Enrique de la Torre (1929-), Ecuador/Venezuela. Wood, 34" diameter, Museum of Church History and Art.

Lebi's Vision of the Tree of Life reflects the meeting of three great cultures: traditional rural with strong ancient Native American roots, the more recent cosmopolitan urban, and the newly adopted faith of Mormonism. It is an honest artistic expression of a faithful Latter-day Saint artist, Victor de la Torre.

The main growth of the Church in Latin America is in large urban areas, where much of the growth has resulted from a massive migration from the rural countryside. Thus many of the Church members in Latin America are a cultural mixture of the rural traditional and the urban modern. Torre is such a man. His use of wood as a medium reflects the long tradition of folk artists sculpting in materials that are readily available and relatively easy to carve with inexpensive tools. Art in folk cultures is also frequently an embellishment of utilitarian objects—in this case a coffee-table top. Artistic skills are usually taught through apprenticeships rather than formal education. Torre first learned wood carving through two such apprenticeships.

The images on this bas-relief reflect Torre’s roots in the rural highlands of Ecuador and the large city of Caracas. The canyon with the filthy stream resembles the heavily eroded arroyos that are cut by rushing torrents in the Andean highlands of his native Ecuador. The border of the panel contains some elements based on pre-Columbian pottery, textiles, and metalwork from the Andes. The large and spacious buildings have some pre-Columbian details along the facia. But the most interesting aspect of the buildings is how much they resemble the vast blocks of modern apartment buildings that fill the large cities of Latin America. Here, Torre seems to be referring to the impact of urbanization and wealth on the previously simple folk of Caracas.

In addition to his folk roots, Torre also has a more sophisticated, urban side. His use of perspective, most noticeable in the depiction of the apartment blocks, shows formal art training. The very skillfully carved, sensual, curvilinear treatment of the clouds of darkness seem almost Oriental. This influence reveals some of his broader university training and represents a real stylistic and technical departure from the more traditional geometric figures that make up much of the border. However, although Torre’s university training definitely influences his work, he does not let formal aesthetics overwhelm the
Victor Enrique de la Torre, *Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life.*  
(Courtesy of the Museum of Church History and Art.)
folk tradition in which he was raised. He strongly identifies with this folk-art tradition: "In my lifetime I have created many things because I enjoyed doing works of folk art."\textsuperscript{13}

Torre was born in Puellaro, a small rural province in Ecuador. As a young boy, he apprenticed to a carpenter where he learned to make furniture. At age sixteen, he apprenticed to a wood-carver. This wooden bas-relief, originally designed to be the top of a coffee table, reflects the influence of these two early apprenticeships. The family lived with the children's great grandparents because they didn't have a father. As Torre grew older, he had to work very hard to support his brothers and sisters. Eventually, he was able to enter the university in Quito, where he studied sculpting, carving, and painting. In 1969 he became a member of the Church and also launched his art career. After several years of successful exhibitions in Quito, he and his family decided to move to the larger, more affluent and cosmopolitan city of Caracas, Venezuela, where he still lives. There he continues to work full time as an artist and also enjoys playing the guitar and mandolin.\textsuperscript{15}

There are some interesting similarities between Torre and Escobedo, another Latin American LDS artist. Both came from very traditional rural backgrounds. Both received art training in universities. Both live far from their original rural homes and both consciously choose to create much of their artwork using folk art elements that come from the traditional rural areas of their ancestral homes. The fact that traditional roots are continuing to nourish these artists says much for the tenacity of traditional folk culture even in the face of urbanization, cosmopolitan modernism, academia, and wealth.
The Rod and the Veil, Franz Johansen (1928–), Utah. Bronze, 85" x 99", 1975, Museum of Church History and Art.15

The Rod and the Veil is a sculpture about the coming together of heaven and earth and the yearning of mankind for things of the spirit. Franz Johansen encourages viewers to bring their own interpretations to the sculpture, but, in an interview, he did share some of the spiritual impressions that he had during the creation of this piece.16

Johansen received his first inspiration for this piece from the story of the brother of Jared having faith sufficient to see the finger of the Lord and later his full presence. While contemplating the brother of Jared's theophany, Johansen thought about Joseph Smith's heavenly visions. Joseph Smith's youthful experiences then expanded in the mind of the artist to the more generalized yearning of youth seeking spiritual things. The boy in the sculpture stretches to his limit trying to get hold of the iron rod but cannot quite get it firmly in his grasp.

The heavenly personage reaches through the veil to touch the youth. This incomplete physical action represents seeking the spiritual—an artistic technique that dates back to the seventeenth century. The viewer must, by imagination, continue the boy's and the heavenly being's reaching until they touch. This interaction emotionally engages the viewer in the creation of the sculpture and especially in the spiritual yearning of the youth. We identify with the youth, for we, like him, are all children before the Lord. And as with the boy in the sculpture, when we reach out to the Lord with all our might, he reaches out to us.

We can find multiple layers of interpretation in the Heavenly Personage. Johansen wanted this figure to represent the entire heavenly side of the communication. To do this he had to keep the interpretation wide enough to encompass the whole. His ideas included Jehovah, God the Father, Christ, and angels when he created this figure. Even the personage's pose combines interpretive ideas. He not only reaches through the veil, he also stretches out both arms as though on a cross.

While an essay can contain many different aspects of an idea and many different actions, a sculpture with only two figures and minimal visual context is inherently limited in the complexity of the ideas it can communicate. Johansen has superbly used multilayered symbolism and partially completed action in this piece to unleash the
spiritual in the viewer and enlarge the scope of this powerful communication. The layers and tangents of interpretation are his attempt to help the viewer seek and remember the richness and variety of mankind’s spiritual quest.

So how should you interpret this piece? This work of art needs to be understood intuitively and impressionistically rather than through a strict linear analysis—the artist invites you to arrive at your own interpretation. Johansen shared all of the interpretations of the previous paragraphs with me, but he wanted the ambiguity to remain so that completing the action in the sculpture requires the viewer to ponder his or her own feelings about reaching out for spiritual things. In addition, the ambiguity, in encouraging the viewer to choose an interpretation, creates an imperative for personal choice, commitment, and action. The viewer cannot be passive.

Johansen served on the art faculty at Brigham Young University for thirty-three years before he took an early retirement to work full time on his own art. He studied art at Brigham Young University, the Academie de Chamauier in Paris, and the California School of Arts and Crafts. The abstract expressionism of his work reflects this academic training. A certified skin diver, Johansen studied the visual forms of underwater marine life at the Maine Institute of the University of Miami. This study’s influence is reflected in the floating weightlessness of the figures in many of his works of art. The proficient sculpting of his figure’s anatomy, learned through his art study in France, have earned Johansen respect for his mastery of the European classical tradition.

Johansen’s major works have been monumental sculptural pieces, most of which have a rather complex iconographic dimension. They include a massive bas-relief of the history of the Church on the facade of the Museum of Church History and Art. He created a large sculpture for the John Wesley Powell Museum in Green River, Utah. One of his most recent pieces is a large bronze bas-relief for the new Joseph Smith Building at BYU. In that piece the artist attempted to show how the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith affect a young family. One of his largest single figures is a twenty-two foot high replica of the Emmy Award that stands in front of the Emmy corporate headquarters in Los Angeles.
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Lebi's Dream, Steven L. Neal (1953–), Pendleton, Oregon. Oil on Board, 48" x 96", 1984–87, on loan to the Museum of Church History and Art from the artist.

This painting incorporates a romantic view of nature, dramatic lighting, world history, and the personal experiences of the artist to give visual form to Lehi's dream. Neal starts us at the beginning of the story by drawing our eye into the depth of the scene. He does this with light and dramatic mountains similar to Bierstadt's paintings of Yosemite and the dramatic forms of Sung Dynasty Chinese landscapes. Light is also used to sanctify the tree of life with a brilliant white/yellow light coming down from heaven. This light is contrasted with the dull reddish glow of hell that comes up from below the great and spacious building. The metaphor of light, so often used in the scriptures, is used to direct our vision and show us the glory of the Lord.

Peoples and cultures from around the world are represented by both the great and spacious building and the various people who have reached the tree of life. Elements in the great and spacious building are taken from specific buildings in China, Egypt, pre-Columbian America, India, medieval France, and modern America. Next to the tree of life are two Japanese people in traditional costume. In the background, on the far left, is an aged Japanese woman in a red costume. These are portraits of Neal's favorite missionary companion, and his companion's wife and mother. In the center are a mother and two daughters from Africa. Neal's point is clear: God is no respecter of specific cultures.

In the lower left corner is the sleeping Lehi near a soft cloud that encircles the outer edge of the painting. This part of the scene reminds us that the painting is about an ancient dream, but Neal also brings the story into the present through the lives of his family and friends. In doing so, he is following Nephi's admonition to "liken all scriptures unto us" (1 Ne. 19:23).

The artist is strongly influenced in this painting by two artistic sources: the art of the great nineteenth-century American romanticist Albert Bierstadt and the Oriental art he saw on his mission to Japan. The vast scale of the painting, its minute detail, the use of dramatic lighting, and the use of the landscape as a moral metaphor all point to Bierstadt. The form of the mountains in the background and the graceful shape of the tree of life both point to Oriental influences.
Steven L. Neal, *Lehi's Dream*. (Courtesy of the Museum of Church History and Art.)
This painting was four years in the making. Neal originally created it as a gift to his young daughter. She was to hang it in her bedroom as an inspiration to live the Gospel. This is one reason for its strong didacticism. The picture was also to serve as a reminder of her parents’ love for her. In the center foreground, the artist has painted his daughter, his wife, and himself.\textsuperscript{25} However, shortly after the painting was completed, it was shown in the exhibit of the first Church-wide international art competition in 1988, where it was easily the most popular work of art in the exhibition. It has hung in the Museum ever since.

The technical virtuosity and richness of detail contribute to the painting’s easy popularity. But the artist is actually a practicing plastic surgeon specializing in head, neck, and facial plastic surgery. Though he is largely self-taught as an artist, his interest in plastic surgery developed because of his long-time involvement with painting.\textsuperscript{26}

While Neal’s painting has been immensely popular with the public, some critics have found this painting very problematic. Can something this popular be good? In addition, its tight detail, dramatic use of light, overt didacticism, and unabashed romanticism are out of step with late twentieth-century academic art which emphasizes abstractions, restraint, loose technique, and little narrative content.

One argument raised by the critics is that an artist must paint in the style of his own time. This argument implies that all artists are painting in the same style at any given time. The startling array of artistic styles in this article alone should belie that idea. Even within a single geographical area, many artistic styles coexist. For example, in Renaissance Florence, Lorenzo Monaco was painting in a late Gothic style that was very out of step with the developments of the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{27} Yet art historians today acknowledge him as a master. During the Italian Renaissance, Florentine sculptors were doing their best to copy the Greek and Roman sculptors who had been dead for many hundreds of years.\textsuperscript{28} Some critics would argue that an artist going back to an earlier style is simply creating a pastiche, but they would have to write off some of the greatest artistic masterpieces of Western civilization. Being enchanted enough with the art of the past to want to emulate it is a time-honored tradition in the world of art. Neal’s borrowing from the past is not an aberration if our view of art history is long enough.

Oddly, when a modern Western artist borrows artistic ideas from a non-Western source, critics see this as an act of cultural power and creativity. A good example is the contemporary adulation of
Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, which drew heavily on forms from African Senufo masks that Picasso saw at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Yet when a Western artist of our time borrows from his own historical tradition, his act is seen as a sad sign of inferiority. This double standard is logically and historically inconsistent.

Why does this issue matter? Because we are an increasingly culturally diverse Church. We need to bridge the cultural, social, educational, and economic stratification of our world in order to embrace our fellow Saints wherever we find them. We need to open our hearts and minds to broader aesthetic expressions of faithful Latter-day Saints abroad and at home if we are to hear their voices. We need to be careful when we make arguments based on quality versus kitsch that we are not rejecting styles simply because they are different from our own.
Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life, Robert Yellowhair (1937-), Snowflake, Arizona. Oil on Canvas, 30” x 48”, 1992, Museum of Church History and Art.

Recognition of the sacred presence in the physical environment and the importance of the family, clan, and tribe are two key elements of Native American culture. Another is the relationship between time and spiritual truth. In Native American cultures, the mythical past, the historical past, and the present can coexist. The conceptual limits of empirical time and space do not dominate their thinking because the goal is not an empirical cataloging of data. Instead, the goal is to understand the spiritual foundations of existence. Spiritual truth is experiential and symbolic, rather than logically dependent. Robert Yellowhair, a Navajo convert to the Church, brings these frameworks to the creation of this painting: “This is what it [Lehi’s vision] would look like to the Lamanite people.”

Yellowhair’s father was a Navajo medicine man from the Zuni clan. He was also a member of the Hopi snake clan and learned many of the traditional spiritual songs of the Apache. Through his knowledge and participation in the ritual songs and stories of other tribes, his father sought personally to bring peace between hostile tribes. Robert Yellowhair picked up much of his father’s pan-Indian attitudes and then added an overarching belief in unity that comes form the Book of Mormon. These ideas are expressed in Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life.

Lehi’s family collectively symbolizes several different tribes in a great pan-Indian gathering. The dramatic figure offering the fruit is Lehi, who also represents a messenger from God. Lehi is identified as a messenger from God “because he has red-tailed-hawk feathers in his hair.” If he had been God himself, “he would have eagle feathers instead.” As Lehi holds out the fruit like a glowing, heavenly gift, he wears the clothing of a Hopi priest: “The robe goes over the left shoulder when they pray. The design is still the ancient design. They are dressed all in white and they are the ones that believe that there is a tree of life. The reason that they wear a feather [in their hair] is that the birds have been blessed already. That’s why they fly.”

Facing Lehi are three figures. On the right is Sam, the peace-maker of the family. Yellowhair shows him holding a peace pipe and wrapped in a blanket. Shoshoni chief Washakie, one of the great Western peace-making chiefs of the nineteenth century, is the model for this figure. The blanket represents the peaceful and mutually
Robert Yellowhair, Lehi's Vision of the Tree of Life. (Courtesy of the Museum of Church History and Art.)
beneficial trading relationship between Native Americans and the settlers. In the middle, Lehi’s wife, Sariah, depicted as the Crow Mother of the Zunis. Most tribes claim Mother Earth as their first mother. But the Zuni tribe is different. They claim Crow Mother was their first mother. Yellowhair comes from the Zuni clan of the Navajos, so he claims Crow Mother as part of his own tradition. She is wearing the white wedding robes of Zuni women. She carries a basket because she is responsible for feeding her family. To the left is a figure representing Nephi. He is depicted as Quainapaker, the visionary Comanche chief. He wears a buffalo robe because buffalo are sacred to the tribes from the Great Plains. Attached to his waist is a “canteen representing baptism.”

Behind these three figures are two figures representing Laman and Lemuel. They are part of the family, but they are standing in the background because they are not committed to living the gospel. Yellowhair meant these two figures to represent the Apache and Sioux people because they were great warriors. The crooked staff held by one of the figures represents the “cane of life” used by the Pawnee tribe. The artist has placed twelve marks on it to represent the twelve tribes that will come together in the last days. In Navajo tradition, there were messengers sent in the four cardinal directions looking for other people. This story of seeking and gathering is symbolically linked to the marks on this staff.

The visual center of this painting is the tree of life. Explaining why he choose a pinion pine to represent the tree of life, Yellowhair says, “We searched for the tree which is the most to all three persons: the birds, the human being, and the animals that travel on the earth.” The tree and the pine cones have been sanctified with white light. Part of the local flora of the Southwest has become the vehicle of the Lord.

Next to the tree of life is a stone box with gold plates in it. On the plates is written “Diyin Baahani” which means “the story of God” in Navajo. Yellowhair comments, “We used to have a [Lamanite] branch in Snowflake and one of the prophets back about more than twenty years ago said that the Lamanites will blossom like a rose. I was going to put a rose bush right there on the other side of the rock where the gold plates are. Then I was going to put all kinds of pots representing the twelve tribes in there. Like starting with the Anasazi and then bring it back up and put it in there. But it wasn’t in the vision so I just left it out. But I left space for it.”

The sacredness of the land is also an important part of this
painting. The artist said that the first things he put in the painting were the San Francisco peaks that you can see just to the left of the tower. These mountains let us know that this is sacred space where spiritual things can happen. For the Navajo, these peaks mark the western boundary of their land that tradition says was given to them by the “holy people.”33 For the Hopi, these mountains represent the dwelling place of their “holy people,” the kachinas.34

The great and spacious building is a composite of Native American architecture of the Southwest and the Great Plains. We see elements from Mesa Verde and Pueblo ruins, Navajo hogans, teepees, and the large stone tower on the south rim of the Grand Canyon that is of general Native American design but built for tourists. The river represents not only the filthy river in the vision, but also an ancient Navajo story where a river separated two conflicting groups of the Navajo people.

Yellowhair grew up in the Indian Wells area of the Navajo reservation. The artist is largely self-taught. When he was a young boy, his father took him to the local trading post. To amuse himself while he waited for his father, he began drawing pictures about Navajo life with colored rocks on the side of a rusty barn. When his father returned, Robert had covered the barn as high as he could reach and was standing on the back of his horse to reach higher. He has been drawing and painting the stories of his people ever since.35

Many years ago, he moved to the LDS town of Snowflake, Arizona, where he worked for a time as a barber. A Mr. Bushman would come into his barbershop for a haircut and then tell Yellowhair about the Book of Mormon. Sometimes Bushman would come in a couple of times a week. Yellowhair suspects the extra visit was just to tell him more stories from the Book of Mormon. Eventually, the artist and his entire family became members of the Church. Yellowhair now works full time as a professional artist.

Robin Luch Griego has always seen her stained-glass window, Vision of the Tree of Life, as a visual feast. For her it captures the dream-like state of the world but also sends a forward-looking and profound message. Her graphic-design background is particularly useful for a stained glass artist because the medium is inherently flat, bold, and structured, all qualities of graphic design.

As a graphic designer, Griego expresses philosophical and spiritual relationships with shapes. Curved, structured forms from Art Deco of the 1930s—forms which Griego loves—govern the sculpture’s overall design. In an apt metaphor for a glowing tree of life and light, the actual shape of the tree reflects the elegant bell-shape lampshades from the Tiffany workshops of the year 1900.

In this window, the overarching intellectual and design idea is the tree of life. The tree’s bell shape influences the rest of the window. The arched top of the window follows the shape of the tree as do the curves of the dark clouds. The pattern in the border imitates the pattern of the leaves of the tree. Thus through the details in the border, forms from the tree envelop the entire composition. To give the effect of a dreary and confused world of lost people, Griego uses gray colors. But the tree that symbolizes eternal life is done in brilliant greens expressing rejuvenation. Women are prominent in this window: “I am also struggling, so it could be me,” the artist has stated.

Technically, this window is not really stained glass. It is art glass. Handblown in France and Germany, the glass in this window has more irregularities and imperfections than does machine-made glass, causing the light to be refracted as it passes through the glass. The refracted light is what makes the glass in medieval cathedrals so dazzling. Robin connects the glass pieces together with leaded foil, as opposed to lead strips. This technique creates a varied, expressive lead line. For example, contrast the heavy lead used as the iron rod with the very fine leading of the leaves on the tree of life.

The artist grew up in a family of professional artists. Her father, mother, and sister are all practicing artists and designers. Griego studied graphic design at Brigham Young University and taught art at the Salt Lake Community Schools and the Salt Lake Art Center. She has been a member of the Utah Designer Craftsmen and exhibited in the Grand Beehive Exhibition at the Salt Lake Art Center. This exhibition later traveled to the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery. For ten years, she operated her own stained-glass business.
Kazuto Uoto created his painting *Tree of Life* within a context of Mormon faith and Japanese culture. He uses Japanese visual metaphors, experiences, and aesthetics as a way of expressing his feelings about Lehi’s vision of the tree of life. An understanding of this cultural foundation will help us see the religious ideas behind the composition, simplicity of forms, very minimal visual context, texture, and even the colors used in his painting.

The most structured ritual common in Japanese society is the *cha no yu* or “tea ceremony.” Uoto uses this ceremony as a point of cultural departure. Formulated by Rikyu, the greatest of the early Japanese tea masters, the *wabi cha* or “poverty tea” is the most austere, intimate, and influential form of this ceremony, stressing spiritual fulfillment through renunciation of material things. Within it and its setting are embodied the Japanese expressions of humility, simplicity, aesthetics, and contemplation. Every aspect of the ceremony is carefully regulated.

One approaches the very simple, and sometimes rustic, *chashitsu* or “tea hut” along a *roji* or “dewy path” through a small garden. Before entering the hut, participants ritually wash their hands and mouth in a stone basin fed with water from a bamboo pipe. The *chashitsu* is entered through a low doorway that requires one to crouch low as an expression of humility. Shoes are removed outside as a sign of respect. The ritual journey, purification, and humility have parallels with Lehi’s vision of commitment, humility, cooperation, and faith.

The room itself is very simple, austere, and almost completely empty. The host ritually prepares the tea as a symbol of humility before his guests. He uses very simple tools made of bamboo and then ladles the tea into a *chawan* or “small tea bowl.” In the *wabi cha*, a style of *chawan* called *raku* is used. It is a small, shallow fired bowl with a rough-textured, earthen-colored glaze. The guests frequently drink out of the same bowl sequentially (it is ritually washed between guests). This shared use of the *chawan* emphasizes camaraderie among the participants.

On one side of the room is a small raised alcove called a *tokonoma*. Here is placed a very simple floral arrangement. Fе-
quently it is a small branch from a flowering tree or a branch with fruit on it. Guests are expected to look at this arrangement and contemplate a peaceful oneness with nature.

As we look at Uoto's painting of the tree of life, we see many elements from the *wabi cha*. The background of the painting has a grid structure not unlike the simple screens used for walls in a tea room. The artist went to great lengths, by painting plaster over board, to create a texture and color for the painting like the rough pottery glaze of a *raku chawan*. The simplicity of the painting—no figures, no rod, no building, no stream, no mists, just a tree with glowing fruit—is presented like a floral arrangement in the *tokonoma*. The narrative part of Lehi’s vision is expressed by its association with the *wabi cha* ceremony. The viewers must bring the required knowledge with them. Uoto presents the tree of life with its glowing fruit as an object for contemplation, reverence, and inspiration. The artist does not focus on the journey, but tries to inspire us with the symbol of heavenly reward.

Born in Osaka, Uoto still lives in the same house where he was born. A convert to the Church, he served a full-time mission to the Fukuoka Japan Mission. He married Yoko Matsushita, also a returned missionary, in the Tokyo Temple and is currently the elders quorum president in his ward. Uoto studied art in Tokyo but is currently a furniture designer. He does his painting at night while his family sleeps. He has exhibited his art in Tokyo, where he has won several prizes. This painting was created for the second Church-wide international art competition, “Themes from the Scriptures,” held at the Museum of Church History and Art during the spring and summer of 1990.

*Note:* The Griego and Uoto art pieces are featured on the front and back covers, respectively, of this issue.
NOTES


2 1 Ne. 8 records Lehi’s dream, and his son Nephi’s version of the same dream is in 1 Ne. 11–14. Interestingly it is Lehi’s more symbolic vision, not Nephi’s expanded interpretive version, that seems to have caught the interest of the LDS artists.

3 Over one thousand LDS artists from over forty nations participated.

4 Johan H. Benthin, “Thoughts on Art and Inspiration,” 77–82, included in Arts and Inspiration, ed. Steven P. Sondrup (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980).

5 Benthin, “Thoughts on Art and Inspiration,” 77–82.

6 Johan H. Benthin (Copenhagen: Scan Art, International Scandinavian Art) A copy can be found in LDS Artists File, Museum of Church History and Art, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Museum of Church History and Art).

7 Johan H. Benthin to the author, October 9, 1989, LDS Artists File, Museum of Church History and Art.


9 Juan M. Escobedo to the author, March 9, 1988, LDS Artists File, Museum of Church History and Art.

10 For the best discussion on the philosophical and stylistic foundations of international folk art, see Glassie, The Spirit of Folk Art.

11 Escobedo to the author.

12 Escobedo to the author.


15 This piece was originally cast in 1975 by Brigham Young University in a cold bronze fiberglass process. The sculpture owned by the Museum of Church History and Art was cast in bronze in 1987 from a mold taken from the original.


17 Johansen, interview.

18 Johansen, interview.

19 Johansen, interview.


21 Neal, conversation.

22 Pendleton Prints, Inc., a brochure by the artist for the sale of prints of his work. The artist donates all proceeds from the sale of his prints to the Church Missionary Fund.

23 Neal, conversation.

24 The great Hudson River landscape painter, Thomas Cole, had earlier set the stage for using landscape as moral metaphor with such works as his “Voyage of Life” which now hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

25 Neal, conversation.

26 Pendleton Prints brochure.

28 For example, the much lauded Greek masterpiece, Apollo Belvedere, in the Vatican is actually a Roman copy from Hadrian’s time; Becatti Giovanni, The Art of Ancient Greece and Rome (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1967), 214.


30 All of the interpretations and information in the description of Robert Yellowhair’s painting are taken from a short, unpublished oral history of Yellowhair conducted by the author on January 13, 1992. The oral history is in the LDS Artists File, Museum of Church History and Art. All quotes from the artist in this article are from this oral history. The author has attempted to pass on as directly as possible the symbolic and cultural interpretations of the artist in order to preserve as much of the artist’s feeling as possible. There may be some differences in his analysis of native American history and culture from some of the published sources. But it must be remembered that native Americans do not record their ancient religious beliefs in a form of a catechism or as a great metaphysical document like Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologica. Oral traditions of the same events or the same religious ideas are much more organic and fluid.

31 All Navajos belong to a specific clan. Clan membership is matrilineal. Therefore when women are brought into the Navajo tribe as refugees or even as the spoils of a raid, a new clan must be created for their children. The artist’s father comes from the Zuni clan of the Navajo tribe, which tells us that at some point in the past he had a Zuni grandmother who came to live with the Navajos. Thus the artist’s own ancestry was multiracial.

32 One of the best overall histories of the Shoshoni tribe is Brigham D. Madsen, The Northern Shoshoni (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1980).


34 A good introduction to kachinas is found in Harold S. Colton, Hopi Kachina Dolls (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983).

35 Robert Yellowhair, Navajo Artist, a small brochure published by the artist, LDS Artist File, Museum of Church History and Art.

36 Interviews with Robin Luch Griego by the author, November 16-17, 1992.

37 Griego, interviews.

38 Griego, interviews.

39 For “stained glass,” details are added with paint or stain, which is fused to the glass in a kiln. This is the technique used for most medieval glass. Details in “art glass” are created with small pieces of glass of different colors, a technique pioneered by Tiffany’s studios. Art glass usually has a bolder design than stained glass. Robin uses art glass in this window except for some very simple details on the faces. A good book on general history and technique is Stained Glass, by Lawrence Lee, George Seddon, and Francis Stephans (New York: Crown Publishers, 1976).

40 In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there was extensive use of “leaded glass” in L.D.S. buildings. Beginning in the 1950’s “leaded glass” went out of fashion in American architecture. Architects in the Church followed this trend by discontinuing the use of “leaded glass” in most chapels and temples. The recent use of “leaded glass” in recent temples such as Las Vegas, Toronto, San

41 With the foil technique, the edges of the glass are wrapped with a thin strip of copper foil. Hot solder is then flowed over the foil to join the pieces of glass. Another way that pieces of glass are joined in Griego’s art piece is through the use of extruded lead strips, shaped like miniature “I” beams with channels on each side for inserting the glass pieces.

42 Griego, interviews.


44 Acquisition Record Form, May 20, 1992, on file at the Museum of Church History and Art.