



2017

Masters of Light: Coming unto Christ through Inspired Devotional Art

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel
Brigham Young University

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



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

Recommended Citation

Holzapfel, Richard Neitzel (2017) "Masters of Light: Coming unto Christ through Inspired Devotional Art," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 56 : Iss. 4 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol56/iss4/11>

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.

Herman du Toit. *Masters of Light:
Coming unto Christ through Inspired Devotional Art.*
Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2016.

Reviewed by Richard Neitzel Holzapfel

Herman du Toit is the former head of audience education and research at the BYU Museum of Art (MOA). A gifted and talented art educator, curator, critic, and author, du Toit caps his long career of considering, thinking, teaching, and writing about the power of religious art with a beautifully written and illustrated volume, *Masters of Light*.

As Richard Oman, a well-known LDS art historian, states in the foreword, “Most of us strive for a closer relationship with Christ. Among frequently used external aids are written and spoken words in inspirational talks, sermons, and books. In this book, Herman du Toit helps us better understand and use an additional source: inspired visual art” (x).

The book highlights the work of four influential nineteenth-century Protestant European artists—Bertel Thorvaldsen, Carl Bloch, Heinrich Hofmann, and Frans Schwartz—who have captured the imagination of Latter-day Saint audiences for the last half century.

However, the book is much more than the story of four artists and the devotional art they produced during their careers. Du Toit carefully crafts word pictures equally as beautiful as the art he uses to illustrate the book. The result is a theological discussion of the centrality of Jesus Christ in the lives of believers. Du Toit ties this fundamental core doctrine of the restored Church to the art the Church uses to proclaim Christ to the world.

As Oman states, chapters 1 and 2 “contain the most comprehensive compilation and analysis of scriptural and prophetic commentary on the subject of art and faith” ever published by a Latter-day Saint (x). These chapters are a real treasure written to an interested lay audience of non-art historians and scholars, thereby providing a lens to examine and experience art as a means of worship, study, and contemplation of

the reality of Christ. Du Toit's purpose is to help viewers experience a "mighty change" in their hearts, minds, and actions (5).

As du Toit discusses the work of these four artists, he weaves into his analysis stories from art encounters by MOA visitors and how the encounters converted, convinced, and convicted them. From a pool of visitors' comments, du Toit provides a moving testimony of the power of religious art in the lives of men and women, young and old.

In one sense, the book was written for those who look at religious art; however, it is also a book for those who create religious art. Du Toit has a lot to say about creating religious art today that has the power to move souls toward the Savior.

In addition to the paintings depicting Jesus Christ, du Toit also highlights Thorvaldsen's famous *Christus* statue and the twelve stunning sculptures of the Apostles Thorvaldsen made to accompany the *Christus* statue for the Church of Our Lady (Danish: *Vor Frue Kirke*), the cathedral of Copenhagen in Denmark. Three photographs of these statues are included for readers to view as they consider the thoughtful insights du Toit provides about Thorvaldsen and the statues he created in an effort to tell the story of Jesus Christ.

One of the many insights du Toit provides is found in a singular paragraph. He writes, "One of the chief characteristics of a corporeal sculpture is the profound stillness inherent in its material form. Sculptures are traditionally cast, carved, modeled, or constructed in impassive materials such as stone, marble, bronze, wood, or clay. It is the motionlessness of a static sculptural work that acts upon the viewer's sensibilities in arresting transitory thoughts and impulses that the viewer might bring to the experience. During the time that it takes the viewer to take in and apprehend the full meaning of an immobile and silent work of art, the viewer is required to be still also" (52). Such perceptiveness comes only after a lifetime of careful prayer and educated and informed thinking on the relationship of art and religion.

Chapter 3, "The Master Artists: Bertel Thorvaldsen," is a good example of what readers can expect in this book when it focuses on specific artists. Du Toit provides a brief life sketch of Thorvaldsen (43–47) and then highlights particular works—in this case, the *Christus* and the Apostles (48–58). In his descriptions of the statues under consideration, du Toit provides historical framing so readers can place the artwork in context.

In this chapter, du Toit tells the compelling story of how the *Christus* "came under the purview of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (50). Du Toit then takes time to provide stories about the statues, including the famous incident at the cathedral when President

Spencer W. Kimball commanded the Danish mission president, Johan Helge Benthin, in an uncommon firmness, “Tell everyone in Denmark that I hold the keys!” (56). The group of Church leaders had paused at the statue of Peter, who is holding a set of keys in his hands, a typical way of depicting Peter.

Du Toit, like all authors, has undoubtedly thumbed through his published volume and wished he could make a few changes. But unlike many authors, du Toit most likely does not find anything to change with his written word. However, he may have taken a deep breath and sighed when he noticed several blank pages in the book (17, 59, 81, 131, 141, 161, 171, 190, and 196). This is unfortunate. An art book should also be an art piece. This is likely a design failure. The blank spaces yearn to be filled and stand in striking contrast to the beautiful pages filled with ideas, stories, and art.

Although additional time and thought would have been required, the designers could have exploited the twenty-three paintings from the Museum of National History at Frederiksborg Castle, Hillerød, Denmark. Crammed into four pages (72–75), these paintings could have been arranged in a way to highlight them even more and possibly help with the blank pages. Unlike the MOA’s own art-book publications, Cedar Fort does not have the resources, training, and dedication to provide a well-constructed art book. The publisher deserves recognition for the decision to use high-quality paper to reproduce the paintings. Few things are more frustrating to art connoisseurs than an art book with poor-quality illustrations published on inferior paper.

In the end, du Toit has provided readers a treasure in word and art. His book provides some important skills to help readers as they visit a museum and carefully and thoughtfully examine religious art published in books and periodicals. In the end, like those who preserved the sacred teachings and insights found in the holy scriptures, Herman du Toit has preserved his lifelong training, experience, and thoughtful reflection for another generation to consider. For those who take the time to read, ponder, and look, they will see the message of Christ in new, exciting, and dynamic ways.

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel received his PhD at the University of California, Irvine, and is Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. His professional work includes studies on the New Testament and Christian and Latter-day Saint art depicting biblical stories, especially images of Christ.