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My Life in Art

Richard Lyman Bushman

My father, Ted Bushman, was an artist. He worked his way through BYU in the 1920s painting signs and drawing cartoons. Before he graduated, he worked as a fashion artist in Los Angeles for a short time. After he married my mother, he made his living as a freelance artist for Salt Lake department stores, especially Auerbach's. When work dried up during the Depression, he took a position at Meier & Frank in Portland, Oregon, as a fashion artist for the store's multipage newspaper ads. Gradually, he migrated to the management side and eventually took a position with an ad agency in Portland where he handled the Pendleton Woolen Mills account. In 1950, our family moved back to Salt Lake City for Dad to work at ZCMI as head of their advertising and public relations department.

His real life in art began after he retired from ZCMI. He almost immediately took lessons and began to paint. It was as if a dam had broken. He painted continually, first oils and acrylics and then watercolors. Wherever he went, he took pictures and then painted in his studio—a few still lifes, but mostly landscapes and seascapes. He was always working on two or three canvases. We have more than a dozen of his paintings on our walls, and my brother and sister even more. Our grandchildren have Ted Bushmans too, sharing in the extensive legacy of his art. As I write, I look up at a New England fishing vessel coming out of blue mist and above it a brown-toned watercolor sketch of a Western cabin against a clouded sky. He may not have finished the cabin—it has no signature on it, which he added only when a work was complete. But I like his unfinished work as well as the signed pieces.

Dad always wanted me to take up art in some form. He gave me all the encouragement he could, but I never responded. I have yearned to sketch but am discouraged by my own fumbling efforts. Sometimes when I travel, I take a sketchbook and make a few stabs. Even when not sketching I will often stare at people on the subway and speculate on how to capture an eye or a cheekbone. Etchings fascinate me. I can examine one drawing for a quarter of an hour to figure out how the artist accomplished the work's subtle effects with a few lines.

Perhaps when I grow old—I am only eighty-eight at this writing—I will take up drawing. I can imagine myself spending a few hours each day with a pad and drawing pencil, perhaps guided by one of the excellent books on how to draw. My hand sometimes shakes a little, but that would not slow me down. I would go for broad strokes rather than fine lines. I would happily draw books on a table or the edge of a bed. To record anything with some measure of finesse can be immensely satisfying.

I certainly don't lack the inspiration to begin. On the wall above my desk, beside the two Ted Bushmans, are three sketches by my great-grandfather Frederick Schoenfeld, who taught art at a German gymnasium in the 1850s where Karl G. Maeser also taught. They married sisters, were converted together, and migrated to Utah. Frederick could not make a living teaching art in Utah in the 1860s, but his daughter, my grandmother, Hildegard Sophia Schoenfeld Lyman, inherited her father's taste and passion for art. She made her little house on L Street in the Avenues a gallery of her beautiful work, much of it in the form of furniture she finished. She was a beautiful woman who made the world around her beautiful. I adored her.

So an inclination to art came down to me from both my father's and my mother's sides. Perhaps those influences have drawn me to museums. When Claudia and I discovered that I did not want to take dancing lessons and she did not want to play tennis, we lit on museums as a middle ground where we both enjoyed ourselves. We have spent many happy hours in the Metropolitan and the other magnificent museums along Fifth Avenue in New York. We were thrilled to discover that the townhouse where the Eastern States Mission was once located is at 79th and Fifth, midway between the Metropolitan and the Frick. Too bad the price puts it out of reach for a Latter-day Saints arts center—though we dream on.

Now on the wall above my desk is a sketch by my grandson Max, who studied at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and is a painter. My granddaughter

Caroline, a superb watercolorist, has given me the hull of a fishing boat listing in the water. Two other granddaughters, Montana and Claudia, have contributed needlepoint and a strange cosmic scene. The invitation is open to all of my offspring to take a spot on the wall, companion pieces to the art of my father and great-grandfather.

Will I ever contribute to the collection? Likely not, though my life in recent years has become strangely entangled in art. The other day at a meeting of the executive committee of the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts, I announced that my vision of the Center's purpose is "to promote the creative work of Latter-day Saint artists" and then added with some passion, "that is where my heart is." The center had just completed its third two-day festival at the Italian Academy on the Columbia University campus, and we were reviewing where we stood. Like most organizations, we find we must continually review our mission. My outburst promoting the creative work of Latter-day Saint artists was my version of our purpose.

Five years ago, I would not have recognized the person who made such a declaration. I had dedicated a number of years to raising funds for a Mormon studies chair at the University of Virginia. Thanks to the generosity of two major donors, a three-million-dollar endowment was in place, and Kathleen Flake occupied the chair. Occasionally Greg Sorensen, who had played a large role in the campaign, would come to New York from Boston, and we would get together, often at Grom, a gelato shop just off Columbus Circle. We were ruminating on what had been accomplished in the field of Mormon studies when Greg posed the question, What next? Always one to look at matters from a peculiar angle, he suggested our fault might be that we think too small. To get us going, he asked, What if we had not three million but fifty million to work with? How would we employ it?

We began turning over possibilities, and for a number of months, whenever he was in New York, we would meet for breakfast or gelato and pick up the conversation. We had seen the formation of three Mormon studies chairs and knew more were in the offing. Should we populate the country with similar endowments? Were they needed? Were there enough scholars to fill the positions? Greg was fascinated with biblical scholarship and speculated about a center that would try to assimilate the best in biblical criticism into a Latter-day Saint perspective. I thought of a research center where we could bring in the best scholars for a year to explore themes relating to Mormonism.

I cannot remember the moment when art entered the conversation. I had sometimes reflected on someone's comment about art providing a medium for expressing theological ideas that would falter if put into words. Should we encourage that kind of expression? Claudia and I enjoyed the plentiful supply of museums and concerts in New York. We were middling patrons, but institutional connections or personal investments were nonexistent. My father's paintings hung on our walls, and that was it. Still, I somehow felt that art was the next frontier. If we could foster artistic creation and tell the story of our people through our artists, it would be a great work. Over the past half-century, I had seen Latter-day Saint historians improve their standing in the broader world. Could our artists follow the same course?

In the back of my mind, I knew this endeavor would work because it had actually begun a dozen years earlier. Glen Nelson, who moved to New York to attend NYU and never left, had been running the Mormon Artists Group (MAG) for years. Claudia and I had already been caught up in his projects. We had both written essays for a couple of his collections, and he was the one who prompted me to write *On the Road with Joseph Smith*, which he had published in a luxury edition with a cherry case. Glen and his wife, Marcia, raised two children in a tiny one-room apartment on 57th Street near 8th Avenue because that was the only way they could afford to stay in the city. They went to the plays, the operas, the ballets and concerts, the museums. And Glen began MAG to provide opportunities for Latter-day Saint artists to show and perform their work. He got to know many of them personally by offering them a place to stay when they came to town—hanging from a hook in the closet I assume.

Glen knew the Latter-day Saint artistic community better than anyone in the world, and it was because of him that I knew an arts center would work. We met for lunch at Robert, a restaurant at the top of the Museum of Art and Design, again on Columbus Circle. Glen asked a few questions, exercising suitable professional caution, but I knew he could not resist my proposition. He is basically an enthusiast, so I knew he would leap at the idea of an arts center that would advance the cause he had been pursuing for years. Essentially, I was offering to partner with him in a work he had already undertaken.

We agreed on many things. First, that basing the center in New York gave us a great advantage because of the city's magnetic pull on artists. Second, that we were interested in the creators of art, not the performers.

Third, that we wanted to ground the work in scholarship. We knew the best way to promote art was to offer informed criticism. Unless we could situate art in its cultural setting and dive into its meaning, we could not advocate for it. We pledged ourselves to treat art seriously, not just as a pleasant pastime.

From that point on, we began to look around for allies and supporters. We did not plan systematically. Things just happened. One day in church, Claudia and I were sitting on the front row as usual, and I noticed a young woman sitting alone on the second row. After the meeting, I went up to greet her and learned she was Allyson Chard, the wife of the high council speaker. She was new to the city, having followed her husband to New York when he took a job. Having dragged my wife from place to place, I knew this could be hard. I asked if she was looking to get involved in activities in the city and if she was interested in art. She said yes; in fact, she had worked on a number of art-related projects in Salt Lake City. By then her husband, Dan, came up, but I wanted to know more about Allyson. I told her about the newly emerging arts center, and she took an interest. I asked for her email address, and before long she was sitting in our meetings. It turns out Allyson runs a huge Christmas market at This Is the Place Heritage Park each year, is extremely well connected, and is a mastermind when it comes to organization. She soon became the center's managing director and now runs the festival and many other parts of the organization.

Or to take another case, I knew we needed help with fundraising. I called Elder Gordon Smith, our then Area Seventy, to ask if he knew of anyone who might fill the bill. He mentioned that Dave Checketts had just been released as stake president. Dave and I met for breakfast shortly after, and I made a pitch. Not a moment's hesitation and Dave was telling us we should think bigger. Why not hold our art exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum? He was the one to put us in touch with some of our biggest donors.

I had not known Brad Pelo, though he lived in an adjoining ward. Glen recommended that we get together with him for lunch and make our pitch. Brad had run a number of businesses, including Bookcraft before it was sold to Deseret Book. I had not known this before he, Glen, and I had lunch together, but Brad was the one to institute the Stadium of Fire in Provo as part of the city's Fourth of July celebration. As we waited expectantly after our pitch, he told us he could write a check and send us on our way, or he could be all in. He wanted to think about

which path to take. A few days later he called to say he was all in—and he has been. His vast experience and natural wisdom have been lifesavers in one situation after another.

Jenna and Jeff Holt were on my temple shift. They seemed willing and capable and were invited to join the team. It turned out that both had extensive experience in fundraising, Jenna was a law graduate, and Jeff knew the ins and outs of business accounting. Jenna got us incorporated and obtained our tax-exempt status. Jeff set up our accounting system.

Diane Stewart was less a chance encounter than a calculated move. I had known her ever since she lived in New York and knew of her vast experience as a collector, a patron, and a gallery owner in Salt Lake. I knew we needed her advice, and she has never failed us.

So we came together higgledy-piggledy and formed a team. What held us together was a common belief in the value of art and a conviction that presenting Latter-day Saint artists more openly and frequently in a world art capital would help them and help the Church. Brad said that one of our best talking points with him was our desire to offer a place where artists with Latter-day Saint backgrounds could find a home. We knew that many had drifted away, but many still felt a connection. Glen had offered them friendship along with a place to sleep, and like a good family, the center wanted always to leave the doors open.

We then called ourselves the Mormon Arts Center, and people repeatedly asked, What do you mean by Mormon art? That question is as puzzling as what we mean by American art or African American art. It is a useful question to pursue even if it has no final answer. We have two definitions. Glen says it is any art by artists who identify as Mormon (now Latter-day Saint), whether or not the subject matter is religious. Laura Hurtado, our ally and then at the Church History Museum, defines Latter-day Saint art as art by, for, or about Latter-day Saints.

The question became more complicated when we talked to Utahns about a Mormon Arts Center. There we discovered that the term Mormon art, or Latter-day Saint art, had a different meaning than in New York. One artist who attended a salon concert in Salt Lake told us emphatically that he was Mormon, and he was an artist, but he was not a Mormon artist. We realized that Mormon art in Utah meant art prepared for Church use in temples or chapels or as devotional art to hang on the walls of our homes. In New York, Mormon art implied the

art of a people and a culture. From the city's point of view, Mormons look like a kind of ethnic group, like African Americans or Latinos. Whatever art comes from that culture is Mormon art.

Our first festival was held in Riverside Church, the big John D. Rockefeller-funded, cathedral-like Baptist church near Grant's tomb, overlooking the Hudson River. The New York chapter of the BYU Professional Society holds its annual dinner in their large South Hall. We liked the space because there was room for an art exhibit at one end and chairs for programs at the other. Nearby was a small stone chapel just perfect for a concert of string quartet music by Latter-day Saint composers. Laura, then curator of global art at the Church History Museum, curated a show of works created in the last three years called "The Immediate Present." A generous artist drove the pieces of art in a van all the way from Utah and, with a little help from the other artists, lugged them into the South Hall.

Glen had noticed that 2017 was the fiftieth anniversary of President Kimball's stirring BYU address that mentioned Mormon arts. A decade later Kimball had reformulated the talk to focus on the arts, challenging Mormon artists to rise to greater heights, to produce music and painting to match Mozart and Michelangelo. The theme of the festival became the Kimball challenge. Our lead question: How far have we come?

It was a great start. Unfortunately, my limited experience pointed my thinking in an academic direction. I thought at once of a day-long symposium with papers by the best scholars we could muster. The scholars responded and produced excellent papers that were later published as *The Kimball Challenge at Fifty: Essays from the Mormon Arts Center Festival*. (One of the essays won a prize for best criticism from the Association of Mormon Letters.) My heart was in the right place, but I learned afterward that sitting all day listening to scholarly papers was not everyone's idea of a good time, especially when some of the papers were devilishly complex.

We learned our lesson, and subsequent festivals have featured more performances and participatory activities; the 2019 festival was the best we have produced thus far. But one thing saved the day in 2017. Craig Jessop agreed to lead the audience in hymns from our history with a small ensemble of musicians and Bonnie Goodliffe, tabernacle organist, at the piano. Everyone in the audience had the music before them, and under Craig's direction, for an hour and a half we sang through hymns familiar and little known.

The final number was W. W. Phelps's "The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning." After the song, I looked over to Brent Beasley, one of our donors, who was sitting next to me and observed, "Brent, you have tear spots all over your shirt." "I know," he said. "I can't help it." That was enough to send us off hoping that we had started something grand. Perhaps my life in art has just begun.

Richard Lyman Bushman was born in Salt Lake City in 1931 and brought up in Portland, Oregon. He received his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Harvard University and taught at Brigham Young University, Boston University, and the University of Delaware. He retired as Gouverneur Morris Professor of History at Columbia University in 2001 and was visiting Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University from 2008 to 2011. He is the author of a number of books, including *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. He served as co-general editor of the Joseph Smith Papers until 2012 and in 1997 founded the Mormon Scholars Foundation, which fosters the development of young LDS scholars. He is now co-director of the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts in New York City. He and his wife, Claudia Bushman, have six children and twenty grandchildren. He has served as a bishop and stake president and currently is patriarch of the New York Young Single Adult Stake.