Joseph Smith Portraits: A Search for the Prophet's Likeness

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After years of research and consideration of numerous images, Ephraim Hatch has produced a clearly written and well-illustrated book that attempts to answer the question What did Joseph Smith Jr. look like? Of the many portraits of the Prophet, only a few were created from life, and most images of Joseph derive from these early likenesses. Hatch traces the sources of the early images and establishes methods for determining which portraits may be closer to the Prophet’s actual appearance.

According to Hatch, three images are key to establishing a likeness of the Prophet: (1) the famous front-view likeness painted from life in oil (artist and date of portrait unknown) now owned by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, (2) the profile military portrait by Sutcliffe Maudsley, and (3) the mask made from the Prophet’s face after his death. The mask, with its fascinating though sketchy history, was made within a day of the martyrdom, and Hatch carefully compares most images to it, maintaining that it is “the most reliable source of information” about Joseph’s appearance (25). However, the death mask does not reveal the face in full width, and consequently some artists who have relied upon it may have rendered Joseph’s jaw area too narrow.

Hatch also gives considerable attention to the frontal portraits of Joseph. Originally he superimposed projected portrait images upon photographs of the death mask, but because this procedure blended the features and was not successful, he decided to place the mask and the portraits side by side, relating and sizing them by measuring the distance from the eyebrow to the base of the nose. He argues that this methodology is valid because “the bones in this part of the face do not change dimension after death” (28). He also provides front and side photographs of the death mask taken at different angles. By this method, the positioning of the features throughout selected examples can be analyzed. However, these photographs unintentionally reveal how proportions change depending on the angle of view. This may seem a minor point, but it affects some of Hatch’s conclusions. Another problematic consequence of using this measurement standard is that all else becomes dependent upon it.

Another methodological difficulty is that only one straight-on photographic view of the mask is used for comparison throughout the book, but the precise angle from which a given artist views and renders a frontal countenance cannot be ascertained and may shift for artistic reasons. Also,
camera lenses work differently than the artist’s eye, mind, and hand. Short-focus lenses exaggerate facial features while longer lenses reduce and flatten them. Professional portrait photographers and artists attempt to minimize distortions by moving back from the subject or by using long-focus lenses.

These factors are particularly critical when evaluating the oil portrait owned by the RLDS Church. Hatch devalues the painting’s significance because its proportions, using his method, do not compare favorably with the death mask, which appears to have been photographed with a short-focus lens. Hatch concludes that Joseph’s features are too small in the RLDS oil, but his method has resulted in comparative photographs that render the mask larger than the face in the painting. This discrepancy is reduced by using a standard based upon eye spacing, which also does not change at death, or by equalizing the sizes of the images of Joseph’s head. Another more productive approach, instead of measurement analysis, could be to visually compare the mask with the artworks and ask, Do they look alike?

The most significant images of Joseph must be those done from life by the best artists available to him. Joseph’s journals record that he sat for two men, one a “Brother Rogers.” The other was probably Sutcliffe Maudsley, who created the detailed portrait of the Prophet as Lieutenant General of the Nauvoo Legion. A later, signed and dated version of this portrait was used on a published map of Nauvoo. This and succeeding works by Maudsley are faithful to the death mask outline. Hatch fairly evaluates Maudsley’s work when he writes, “The excellent alignment of these portraits with the death mask . . . is additional proof of Sutcliffe Maudsley’s meticulous accuracy in profile drawing, even though some facial features and details within the profile outline may not be located properly” (40). Hatch also effectively sorts out the works by Maudsley and copies of his work made by others.

Maudsley was trained as a pattern duplicator, but he was apparently the best person available to create this portrait. The Prophet’s son Joseph Smith III called Maudsley’s pictures “caricatures” (3). Members of the Smith family who were in close contact with the Prophet considered the RLDS portrait to be the definitive image. Maudsley’s portraits are accurate in outline but hardly have a lifelike character. They do not show Joseph’s “ever-mild countenance, affable, beaming with intelligence and benevolence” (7). Hatch also considers Maudsley portraits of other members of the Smith family, all similar in approach. Compared with daguerreotypes and other paintings of their subjects, the Maudsley profiles appear stiff and expressionless. The companion work to Joseph’s military profile is the profile view of Emma, which is carefully labored over but not faithful to her appearance when compared to an 1845 photograph of her—the accumulation of detail in the painting does not add up to an integrated portrait.
However, the other known portrait for which the Prophet sat, the RLDS frontal oil portrait of Joseph also has its companion painting of Emma. Hatch compares this portrait with a late photograph of her, and the results of his method line up. A photograph from life is certainly better than a death mask to compare with a painted likeness by a professional artist. The photograph and the portrait of Emma are recognizably the same person even though the photograph long postdates the painting. If Emma’s oil is judged to be accurate because it compares favorably to Emma’s photograph, then one would expect Joseph’s oil to have the same level of accuracy even though there are no known photographs of him. The two portraits were painted at the same time as a pair, and it is unrealistic to suppose that one is accurate while the other is not. Hatch concedes that “perhaps it is more true to the spirit of the Prophet than to the criteria by which I have analyzed it” (77).

There is no hard evidence that Joseph Smith was ever photographed. Hatch demonstrates that all existing photographs of him are daguerreotypes of the RLDS painting or retouched images from this source. He then evaluates prints and paintings based on Maudsley profiles, including the 1845 group portrait, *Joseph Smith with His Friends*, by William Major, and the excellent profile painting attributed to Dan Weggeland. Other images were based on the RLDS frontal portrait of the Prophet, and among the finest of these is an 1885 print issued by the Chicago Lithograph Company.

Impressive likenesses of Joseph Smith were commissioned after 1900. In sculpting his life-size statue of the Prophet located on Temple Square, Mahonri Young employed information provided by both the death mask and Maudsley’s work. Hatch considers Young’s work to be one of the best statues of the Prophet, again because it is faithful to the contour of the death mask. Another portrait resulted from a 1959 Church commission to Alvin Gittens, a top portrait artist who explained, “Rather than be influenced by other paintings, I would go to whatever original sources I could find describing the Prophet, then form my own concept” (89). This attitude and his great talent produced an insightful painting that is not a dogmatic adoption of the death mask.

Hatch also considers images of Joseph by present-day artists and maintains that a sketch by Bill Whitaker is “outstanding” (105); he even uses it for the book’s dust jacket. This image is based on the RLDS portrait but is “corrected” from the death mask. Whitaker is an excellent artist, but his study falls short as do virtually all posthumous portraits because they do not have the benefit of a live subject from which to capture subtleties of expression.

Hatch concludes his study by reiterating his position that the death mask is “the best source of information” and that “the mask, along with
Maudsley’s profiles, Smith family physical traits, and written descriptions . . . provide the most reliable information available about the Prophet’s physical appearance” (107). This is correct, but it is unfortunate that Hatch dismisses the RLDS painting—the largest and arguably the best portrait of the Prophet done from life—because of a questionable method of measurement.

But the issue is broader than faces that do or do not measure up to the cold plaster of a death mask—the issue is life. Skilled, sensitive artists working with a live subject can probe and interpret to the core of the human soul. On the whole, Hatch has done a fine job of considering the historical information, tracing the pedigrees of the images, and placing all of the artwork and likenesses of Joseph in perspective. For this, his study is commendable and worth our consideration, but as he writes in his last paragraph, “We may never know the Prophet’s true likeness until we meet him face to face” (109).

1. “Brother Rogers” is believed by some scholars to have painted the frontal portrait now owned by the RLDS Church.