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"What Think Ye of Christ?"
An Art Historian's Perspective

Richard G. Oman

In "Images of Christ," Noel Carmack has performed a real service on several fronts. In my response, I would like to suggest some modifications to his comments and, more importantly, discuss some features that I believe a great painting of Christ must have if it is to produce a spiritual change in the lives of its viewers.

The Long Tradition of Realism in Religious Art

In discussions of contemporary religious art, one of the problems that can occur involves couching the issue only in the present and recent past. For example, I am skeptical of Noel Carmack's idea that realism in religious art is a late nineteenth-century phenomenon chosen to reinforce a literal view of scriptures. By ignoring the broad context of Western religious art, Carmack misses the centuries of a realistic tradition beginning with the vast corpus of the entire Renaissance, especially the northern German Renaissance and the Flemish Renaissance (much less the Baroque). Rubens (1577–1640) and Poussin (1594–1665) paid keen attention to a body's underlying muscular structure. In a Dürer (1471–1528) painting, you can determine the specific kind of grass he depicts, and you can ascertain which kind of fir tree a figure is leaning against.

While there has been some mysticism in religious art, the vast sweep of religious art in Western civilization for five hundred years has not been particularly mystical. Thus during that time, most images of Christ have been quite realistic. For mysticism, you would have to look at the Byzantine period, which begins almost a thousand years before the Renaissance, or at the twentieth century, when nonrealistic religious art became more pervasive than at earlier times. So the idea of highly realistic art is neither a modern nor a nineteenth-century creation.

The Disenfranchisement of Realistic Narrative

Most twentieth-century art criticism is rather hostile toward realism. The emphasis has been on abstract expressionism and its various cousins. In the history of art, almost invariably one style battles against another
style and attempts to disenfranchise it. For example, the Renaissance invented the word _Gothic_ for Gothic art. That happened to be the competing art form that the Renaissance was battling, so the proponents of the Renaissance gave it a pejorative term to disenfranchise it. They were reviving Greco-Roman antiquity, and they had to justify why it needed to be revived. Their response was that it had been beaten down. And who did it? All those nasty Goths. The worst possible term that you could apply to something was _Gothic_.

In the twentieth century, _Bourgeois_ was one of the words used to disenfranchise realism because European intellectuals saw things bourgeois as coming from a degenerate culture. Words like _kitsch_ and _illustration_—“That is not real art; it is illustration”—also disenfranchise realism. What is illustration? It tells stories with images that are readily understandable. But if you throw out storytelling by disenfranchising it, logically you must throw out much of the Renaissance.

**LDS Fondness for Classically Trained Artists**

Carmack points out the efforts made by Doyle Green, a managing editor of the _Improvement Era_, to bring Bloch to the attention of the Latter-day Saints. It might be useful to delineate in more detail why Green might have been drawn to Bloch. There are some issues at work here other than those mentioned by Carmack. One is that Bloch was a classically trained artist. He did not adopt the principles of abstraction that started to creep in during the latter part of the nineteenth century with some of the more “mystical” religious painters such as Munch (1863–1944)—a fellow Scandinavian—and Ensor (1860–1949). Bloch’s composition utilized many features from the Italian Renaissance and borrowed the treatment of light and shadow from the Baroque period. Additionally, as a Protestant, Bloch did not bring to his art a lot of the Catholic iconographic features. Because he was a classical artist, which carried a lot of prestige within the LDS Church, and in his paintings he did not incorporate halos and wings, Latter-day Saints could feel comfortable with his work.

It is not coincidental that the Christus plays such a prominent role in Mormon representations of Christ. Once again, the artist is a Scandinavian. Once again he is somebody who is strongly trained in the classical tradition. However, although Latter-day Saints have had immense respect for the Renaissance, there has always been a rearguard reaction of “the Catholics are doing this sort of thing.” With the works of these two Scandinavians, Mormons could have all the benefits of the Renaissance without the Catholic influence. So they flocked to these works.
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LDS Impressionism: Are Mormons Really in Lockstep with Protestant Realism?

One of the things that makes the history of Mormon religious art somewhat distinctive from the general direction that Carmack projects in his article is that Latter-day Saints have a strong tradition of religious art springing from impressionism. In other cultures, this style has not generated much religious art. The fact that Mormons have done so much in a style that is almost exclusively associated with secular subjects deserves a little comment. And it certainly breaks us out of the stereotype of simply being in lockstep with the tight realism of fundamentalist Protestants.

In the context of tight realism, Carmack notes that a book for children on the life of Christ includes Lewis Ramsey’s paintings of the Joseph Smith story. Ramsey is a painter who was trained primarily in impressionism; many of his works of art are highly impressionistic rather than tightly realistic, especially the paintings he did of the First Vision and of Moroni delivering the gold plates. The “O My Father” series by LDS artist John Hafen and the commissioned work of people such as J. T. Harwood (plate 1) are also impressionistic. One person whom Carmack quotes fairly extensively is J. Leo Fairbanks, who had a significant position in the formal structure of the Church itself (he was on the general board of the Sunday School). As a painter, he did a lot of work for the Church. But once again, J. Leo Fairbanks painted quite loosely and was not particularly realistic, a fact which opens the door to a reevaluation of our images of Christ. In other words, the works of LDS artists do not precisely match those of fundamentalist Protestants. LDS artwork is more complex. The works of Minerva Teichert (fig. 1) and some of the art pieces by international artists are evidence that we have not had the imperative to go down the path of a tight religious sanction as, for instance, the Greek Orthodox Church has with their icons.

The difficulty in pigeonholing the Mormon artistic experience as it relates to Christ, I think, reflects one of the strengths of the Church. The flexibility inherent within our tradition is one reason why we are able to deal with a certain amount of visual pluralism, which in turn makes internationalizing the Church an easier process. Without that level of pluralism, one would expect Mormonism to be caught in a straightjacket where it would not be able to adapt very well outside the confines of Western civilization. But the truth is that much of our recent flourishing is happening outside of Western culture.

Open-Endedness: Drawing Out Viewers’ Spirituality

One of the challenges we face in depicting Christ is going too far off the edge in either abstraction or realism. If we move toward abstraction, we have
Fig. 1. Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), Jesus at the Home of Mary and Martha. Oil on canvas, 36" x 48", 1941. Courtesy Museum of Art, Brigham Young University.

Plate 3 (below). Walter Rane (1949–), And the Child Grew. 1990, Oil on canvas, 32 1/4" x 22". Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.
the potential of sliding down the slippery slope to disembodied—God—removing him from a historical context and from the tangible, physical body that he acquired here on earth. Such attempts can become quasi-agnostic and turn God into an idea or a strange mixture of pantheism. Carmack’s point that realism has been an attempt to avoid that direction is a good one.

But realism also has its potential problems. One of those problems is that realism can focus the viewers on the trivial instead of on the transcendent. For example, if the key element in realism is tight detail, we sometimes can become seduced into thinking that if we just know exactly what the bridge of the Savior’s nose was like or whether his eyebrows were bushy or medium or thin then we will somehow know Christ better. We expect that we would somehow be able to pick him out if he were walking down the street.

What is distinctive about Christ is not his physical appearance but his spiritual power. The question then arises, How does an artist communicate spiritual power? The best-kept secret for most artists is that one of the strongest ways in art to communicate such power is to appeal to the knowledge and experiences of the viewer. Once an image has sufficient form to clearly communicate that Latter-day Saints really do believe that Christ was a historical figure, that he did come to earth, that he did have a body, that this body was real and not just some sort of metaphysical manifestation, then the challenge is to communicate the Savior’s spirituality by accessing the inherent spirituality of the viewer. The best way to do so is to let the viewer be involved in the creation of the work of art.

Drawing out viewers’ spirituality is an intriguing undertaking. I find when I look at a Rembrandt painting that it continues to invite viewer involvement even after four centuries. This is how Rembrandt does it: He understood that the aspect of a person that tells the most about spirituality and emotions is the face and in the face, the eyes and the corners of the mouth. Notice that when people feel embarrassed they tend to look down or they tend to put their hand over their mouth because they feel emotionally naked and vulnerable. When Rembrandt did a portrait or when he painted Christ (fig. 2), he would often place the eyes and the corners of the mouth in shadow, thereby forcing viewers to fill in what is in the shadow, to bring everything they know about Christ to the image. But more importantly, the viewers bring everything they feel about Christ based on their personal experiences with him. Because how they feel about the subject is part of the visual creation, the viewers read what Rembrandt put there plus what they just inserted. In doing so, they are involved in creating that work.

Rembrandt understood that sometimes less detail is more spiritual power. In a somewhat different fashion, Walter Rane, a contemporary Latter-day Saint artist, applies the same principle to his own paintings of

the Savior. In *He Anointed the Eyes of the Blind Man* (plate 2), Rane eliminated extraneous details to help us focus on both the Savior’s power and the man’s great faith. When we look at Rane’s treatment of the Savior’s lower body, we realize how that simplification increases the healing’s impact on the viewer—the energy of the painting flows from the face of the Savior down through his hands to the face, torso, and hands of the blind man.
If every detail is tightly filled in by the artist, there is little space for interplay between the image and the viewers’ own spiritual experiences; the range of spiritual response is then conditioned by what can be put down with a paintbrush on a piece of canvas. Even for the best of artists, there is a limit to how far they can go with purely physical means. On the other hand, leaving the image a little open-ended, as in those small areas of the eyes and mouth, provides a place for the viewer to look at the painting and become involved. It is that connectedness with the Savior in art where the great power comes. The prophet Nephi says we should liken the scriptures unto ourselves (1 Ne. 19:23). In other words, drawing an intimate connection between our lives and the scriptures is an imperative in terms of spiritual understanding and change. Likewise, the power of an open-ended image of Christ is that it brings us to actively ask ourselves about our spiritual relationship with Christ and about the spiritual quality of our own life.

It may seem a little risky to leave a painting open-ended, but I believe that Latter-day Saints participate in an analogous activity during fast and testimony meeting. It is a very open-ended meeting; anyone can stand up and say anything he or she wants. A strange testimony may be borne occasion­ally, but generally, of all the ward meetings, this one is the spiritual highlight of a month. As Latter-day Saints, we firmly believe that the Spirit can speak through us, that we can hear the Spirit, but that we do not dictate to the Spirit. That kind of open-endedness is a little like the open-endedness of a Rembrandt painting of Christ. Reflecting upon such a painting is a way for viewers to bear their testimonies to themselves even if they do not say anything to anyone else.

**Religious Art as a Spiritual Barometer: “What Think Ye of Christ?”**

Thinking of Christ should inspire us to be better people. As President Hinckley is fond of saying, “[The gospel should] make bad men good and good men better.” Part of that process is taking spiritual stock of our own lives, asking ourselves how we are doing in following the gospel, how we are doing in keeping our covenants. By almost forcing viewers to ask those questions of themselves, a superbly painted image of the Savior that leaves some room for personal involvement can serve as a personal spiritual barometer. It becomes possible for viewers to make a spiritual declaration, to answer the powerful question that Elder Bruce R. McConkie asked over and over, “What think ye of Christ?” (Matt. 22:42).

This question is suggested in a Marcus Vincent painting of Christ and Pontius Pilate (plate 4). The two are standing high up, and Christ is being presented to the populace in Jerusalem. Standing somewhat behind Christ, Pilate has a very puzzled look. He is not sure who this man is, but he knows Jesus is no ordinary mortal. One of the brilliant choices Vincent makes in this painting is not to include the crowd. The figures of Christ and Pontius
Pilate are moved right up to the surface plane of the painting. The crowd—all who look at this painting—stand and look on. What Vincent has done is to say, “Well, what do you think of Christ? How are you going to vote? Thumbs up or thumbs down?” To the extent that this artist gives us the opportunity to be engaged in a spiritual accounting of our own lives, he has done a wonderful service to each of us.

**Spiritual Intimacy**

One of the challenges we all have is developing, in a visual way, an intimate, spiritual relationship with the Savior. Sometimes artists think that if they just zoom the camera in closer instead of showing Christ on a distant hillside that somehow the connection with viewers will be tighter, the intimacy more profound. Or they believe that this relationship will come if only they can have him standing full figure in the art, or maybe if they do a portrait of Christ from the waist up, or better yet if they just zoom in on the face of Christ. One of the ways that artists elicit a greater level of intimacy is not with the zoom lens but with a personal involvement between the art and viewers because then the viewers must ask themselves what they think of Christ. Ultimately that is the question of true intimacy. For example, because we know our family, answering what we think of our spouses or of our children evokes an intimacy that far transcends the intimacy a photographer might achieve with a total stranger in a studio.

Again, sometimes less is more. This principle involves more than making the face of Christ take a bigger percentage of the canvas of the painting. It requires designing areas of interpretation and entrée to leave at least some space for viewers to look at and be involved in that creation and, in the process, achieve intimacy. It is that intimacy, springing from the spiritual connectedness viewers feel with the subject of the image, that opens us up to sensing the Lord’s power.

**The Shadows of Religious Experience**

Sometimes Mormons feel uncomfortable associating darkness and shadow with the Savior. We think, “Well, Christ is about light and truth,” and indeed he is. But there is a difference between art whose intention is to sow seeds of doubt or despair and art that with some darkness communicates the profound truths of the Lord with such power that it motivates viewers to become better.

Darkness and shadows are sometimes more than metaphorical. Some of the greatest experiences in the spiritual history of the earth occurred during times of great trial and tribulation, of darkness. Christ’s most significant hour was not when he held the little children on his lap but when he
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was in the Garden of Gethsemane atoning for our sins—a time of such difficulty that he bled from every pore. Joseph Smith's sufferings in Liberty Jail resulted in some of the most profoundly moving and spiritually insightful sections in the Doctrine and Covenants. The Saints' challenges and sacrifices as they crossed the plains and settled in an incredibly inhospitable environment gave rise to some of the most inspiring experiences of Church history.

It seems to me, then, if artists focus only on bright, cheerful, well-lit, tightly detailed images of Christ, they may trivialize to an extent the richness and depth of the spiritual experiences that the Savior had in mortality and that we can have, in turn, with him. Great religious art does not always bring a sense of peace. Sometimes it causes us to be uncomfortable—and should unless we are ready to be translated—when we ask ourselves, "What think ye of Christ?" and, "How is that belief reflected in my actions?"

Shadows are the very areas of creative opportunity, the places where the artist allows us to participate in the creation of the painting (examine, for example, the cover of this issue of BYU Studies). Sometimes those places cause us to squirm. That is the nature of spiritual analysis. It is that lack of comfort, that moving out of what can sometimes be smugness, which drives us to higher levels of spiritual growth. Art that causes us to examine our own level of spirituality and calls us to a higher plane is religious art at its best.

Advice to LDS Artists

Having surveyed much of the art within the Church during my career, I want to say two things to LDS artists painting the Savior: first, develop your skills so that your ability is worthy of your subject, and second, have faith. Have faith not only in the Savior but also in your audience. Let them be involved in part of the creative process, and your work will speak with much more power. There is a reason that after four hundred years Rembrandt is still revered as one of the greatest artists that ever lived—he created works of art that take advantage of the creative and spiritual power of every viewer who looks at one of his pieces.

Richard G. Oman (omanrg@ldschurch.org) is the Senior Curator and Curator of Acquisitions at the Historical Department for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He holds a B.A. in history from Brigham Young University and a second B.A. in art history from the University of Washington and has done graduate work at the University of Washington. Two related publications that he has authored are "Sources for Mormon Visual Arts," in Mormon Americana: A Guide to Source and Collections in the United States, ed. David J. Whittaker (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1995); and Images of Faith: Art of the Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), which he coauthored with Robert O. Davis.
1. Carmack uses this term in his discussion of James Tissot's work.


4. See, for example, "Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley," *Ensign* 26 (August 1996): 60.

5. "Elder Bruce R. McConkie," in *One Hundred Nineteenth Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1948).