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The New York LDS Historian

A Portrait of Latter-day Saint Art

By Glen Nelson

The history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in New York City is a story of conversion, development, and stabilization. In that sense, it is a familiar story of Church growth—like thousands of others in America—in which a Mormon pioneer arrives, settles and develops a community. A less well-known chapter in Church history relates how some pioneers made a reverse trek: they came from the west to seek specialized tutelage in New York City, and armed with training they received here, returned to edify the entire Church. This is particularly evident in the realm of visual arts.[1]

The Tragedy of Winter Quarters, Nebraska, 1933.
Avard T. Fairbanks (1897-1987) Cast bronze, 36" x 25" x 25"

From its earliest days, the Church has enjoyed an abundance of artists. An unusually high number of artists congregated in early Utah. Historians have noted the patronage of Brigham Young, the stability of the population, and the number of Old World immigrants as possible explanations.[2] In 1886, Utah historian Edward W. Tullidge explained the abundance of painters as a result of social expectation: "early taste and love for pictures in the community was far in advance of that in surrounding territories and greater than the newness of the country would seem to promise."[3]

Church leaders and artists of the day wanted the crowning achievement of their growth to be symbolized by a magnificent, luxurious edifice—the Salt Lake Temple. Inside the temple, there were to be grand and extravagant leaded stained glass windows from Tiffany and Company in New York. All of the materials were to be of the highest quality, with an eye for craftsmanship and

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attention to detail of exceptional accomplishment. Yet the Church and its artists faced a significant challenge. Although the artisans of the day were dedicated, passionate and loyal, their skills were not at the level of refinement to which the Church aspired toward the end of the 19th century.

Beginning in 1890, dozens of LDS artists developed their talents away from home, soaking up the art of Old Masters and the techniques of the Avant-garde in the large cities of the world. The cosmopolitan training of these artists immediately altered how the Church depicted itself visually, how it positioned itself regarding the fine things of the world, how it celebrated and commemorated its achievements, and especially, how it embellished its places of worship. To master the skills necessary for this transformation in the late 19th century, Paris was, initially, the ideal training ground. Yet many LDS artists would soon venture to one of the western world's newest artistic capitals—New York City.

The Artist-Missionaries — 1890-1917

On June 3, 1890, three young men were set apart as missionaries in Salt Lake City, Utah. At a time when hundreds of missionaries for the Church left on missions overseas, the departure of three more elders would be a rather unremarkable event—except that these three young men received callings, not to preach the gospel to the French, but to study painting at the Academie Julian in Paris.[4]

By 1890, Church leaders felt that skilled artists had an important role in the building of the kingdom. They also realized that in order to decorate the Salt Lake Temple as they wished, artists needed to be sent away to study with the world's best available teachers. The three pioneering artists sent to France in the summer of 1890 were John Hafen, Lorus Pratt, and John B. Fairbanks, and they arrived in Paris on July 24, 1890—a holiday celebrated in their home state of Utah as Pioneer Day.[5]

In Paris, Hafen felt the burden keenly to soak up a rich education and to do it quickly: "There is a Herculean task before me which if I accomplish in so short of time allotted for me to stay here, it will be through the miraculous power of God."[6]

The lessons the artist-missionaries learned in Paris—either by training or by association—were the teachings of the Avant-garde. The Utah painters brought home with them the radical ideas of Impressionism: the technique of loosely worked brush stokes and tilted perspectives that caused outrage and the ostracism of their creators including Monet, Cezanne, and Degas. In the face of such artistic revolution, the artist-missionaries often interpreted their training through a religious lens.

"Much depends upon character in obtaining excellence in art," Hafen wrote from Paris. "Good art is also much dependent on truth. A man or woman who has wrong ideas of his or her individuality, of religion, of God, of duty, cannot become a great artist, be they ever so gifted."[7]

Upon their return, the missionaries were immediately engaged in Utah to begin a series of large-scale murals for the Salt Lake Temple. Meanwhile, Springville, Utah native Cyrus E. Dallin, who had also studied in France, was commissioned to create the sculpture of Angel Moroni to stand atop the temple.

If the Impressionists' palate and style were vibrant and new in Paris, their techniques were at least as radical in Salt Lake. In a temple mural of the Garden of Eden, for example, Hafen creates a jungle of chartreuse, crimson, mustard yellow and mint green paint. It is applied with brash, unblended, gestural strokes. Lilies float nearby in a dazzling whirl of color, seemingly borrowed from a Monet canvas. These are paintings of religious events but re-envisioned with a modern, French spirit.

For the next twenty years, these artists and others who subsequently followed (Lee Richards, Alma Wright, Mahonri Young, and Louise Richards[8]) created murals, easel paintings, friezes, and sculptures for the temple in Salt Lake City as well as the temples of Hawaii, Alberta, and Arizona, and for local chapels and tabernacles. Today, these are some

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of the most popular images in the visual consciousness of the church.

The Legacy of New York City in LDS Art and Sculpture — 1917-1964

As significant as the artist-missionaries' work was, the next generation of LDS painters contributed even more directly in the creation of a Mormon art. John Hafen and the other artist-missionaries began teaching young painters in Utah. At a certain point, however, Hafen encouraged those with talent to study in the East, even though the financial sacrifices required were extensive. Mahonri Young, for example, worked as a portrait artist at The Salt Lake Tribune for $5 a week for four years until he could save the $400 he required to study at the Art Students League in New York for a single year.[9]

With the outbreak of war, the LDS student painters shifted their studies from Paris to New York City. Here, they rubbed shoulders with artists even more closely associated with Modernism. For Utah artists desiring exposure to a new world of art, they could not possibly have timed it better; in 1917, the infamous Armory Show brought the latest paintings from Europe to New York City and the locals were shocked. Here were works several steps beyond Impressionism. Picasso, Duchamp, Matisse and many other innovators literally stopped American painters in their tracks with Modernism. Mahonri Young was on the committee that organized the exhibition.[10]

The Mormons who studied in New York between the World Wars and witnessed this period of revolution have become the most revered of the Church's artists. Their influence over the Church, and the succeeding generations of artists whom they taught in burgeoning academies in Salt Lake and Provo, is unmistakably connected to their experiences in New York.

In fact, a stroll through Temple Square and the Museum of Church History and Art in Salt Lake City today is nothing short of a retrospective of New York influence. Imagine: the "Miracle of the Gulls" monument and the life-size sculptures of Joseph and Hyrum Smith by Mahonri Young, who studied at the Art Students League in New York and taught classes there intermittently from 1916 to 1943;[11] "The Handcart Monument" by Torlief Knaphus, a Norwegian sculptor who studied at the Art Students League upon his immigration to the United States in 1906; three monuments by Avard Fairbanks, an artistic child prodigy who was awarded a scholarship to the Art Students League at the age of fourteen, including his "Monument to the Three Witness of the Book of Mormon" and monuments depicting the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood and the centennial of the organization of the Relief Society which are on display in the Temple Square Visitors Center. Inside the temple, there are murals retouched by Mabel Frazer who studied at the Art Students League circa 1915.[12]

Snow on the Wasatch Mountains, 1929.
Louise Richards Farnsworth (1878-1969) Oil on canvas, 15" x 22"

In the Museum collection across the street from the temple, there are paintings by Louise Richards Farnsworth, Minerva Kohlhepp Teichert, Calvin Fletcher, LeConte Stewart, Lynn Fausett, and George Dibble, all of whom studied in New York City. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, these artists studied at Columbia University, the Pratt Institute, but principally at the Art Students League at the League's current home on West 57th Street.[13]

To understand the New York-induced metamorphosis of LDS art, it is necessary to grasp the influence of the Art Students League in the development of American art itself. Founded in 1875, the League was started by students who craved instruction in modern painting,

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Girl among the Hollyhocks, 1902. John Hafen (1856-1910)
Oil on canvas 36" x 41"

The Gleaners, 1890. James T. Harwood (1860-1940)
Oil on canvas, 30" x 38"

Magdelena River, 1902. John B. Fairbanks (1855-1940) Oil on canvas, 16" x 24"

the kind of education that was not available to them elsewhere. From the beginning, the League consciously associated itself with modern art. That LDS artists in Utah gravitated to such an institution, instead of a more traditional painting school, is telling as there were many painting academies throughout the country at the time.

The League's list of instructors and students is singular among American schools. It includes the A-list of the nation's artists: William Merritt Chase, Thomas Eakins, Childe Hassam, John Sloan, Winslow Homer, Paul Manship, Stuart Davis, Georgia O'Keeffe, Rockwell Kent, Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh, Norman Rockwell, Jackson Pollack, Hans Hoffmann, Mark Rothko, Louise Nevelson, Barnett Newman, Roy Lichtenstein, Philip Guston, Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Robert Rauchenberg, Alice Neel, Milton Avery, John Marin, James Rosenquist, Isabel Bishop,

Ben Shahn, Robert Henri, David Smith, Alexander Calder, among many, many other artists.[14] The reach of the League pervades every fine arts museum in the country to this day and although many Latter-day Saints may not realize it, this modernist training irrevocably shaped LDS art as well.

The Mormon artists who came to New York in the early twentieth century soaked up the atmosphere of modern art at the League, as well as through publications that showed the latest works from abroad, and at the few emerging art galleries of New York that had begun to show contemporary works. There were no museums yet collecting modern art in New York. The Museum of Modern Art was not founded until 1929, The Whitney until 1931, and the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (later renamed after its principal benefactor, Solomon Guggenheim) started in 1940. Yet, the western artists congregated with other progressive artists and together investigated the emerging climate of the new. For the most part, LDS artists in New York City embraced new techniques and returned home, eager to translate modernity to the Mormon experience.

LDS Meetinghouse, Clearfield, Utah, 1935. LeConte Stewart (1891-1990) Oil on canvas 18" x 24" *Museum of Church History and Art © by Intellectual Reserve, Inc.*

Jordan River Landscape, Salt Lake Valley, 1901. Lorus Pratt(1855-1923) Oil on canvas 28" x 51"
Museum of Church History and Art © by Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Once back in the west, the Church put these artists to work. Although only the first few were set apart as art student missionaries, the majority of the artists who studied in New York received commissions for public buildings, memorials, church houses, temples and Church art collections. If one keeps in mind their New York training, one can see the works of these early 20th century LDS artists in a new context. In a LeConte Stewart painting of Utah farms, the viewer senses the psychological loneliness of Edward Hopper. The Angel Moroni of Cyrus E. Dallin would feel stylistically welcome in Rockefeller Center. Expressionist Wasatch landscapes of Louise Richards Farnsworth echo the daring color choices of modern German masters. A Minerva Teichert pioneer woman is attired in a dress whose complex pattern is worthy of a Matisse portrait, with a faint exoti-

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cism of a Gaugin Tahitian beauty. The watercolor sketches of Temple Square by George Dibble reveal an embrace of Cubism and a vibrant love of color reminiscent of the American modernist John Marin.[15]

What New York City offered was exposure to work that could not be had otherwise. As technology emerged that allowed for color reproductions of paintings, regional museums, and quality art instruction at the university level, painters had less need to journey eastward. But in the early 20th century, there was no substitute for first-hand exposure. Mahonri Young wrote of his ten years of study in New York, Paris and again in New York: "The last two years abroad were the most valuable. During them, something of the ten years of struggle and study began to take form and fairly definite conclusions were reached . . . . How clearly I remembered a saying of [artist, John Singer] Sargent's that one needed ten years of study. In the impatience of youth how ridiculous that seemed; years were so long and contained such infinite possibilities. I remembered Salt Lake too, and our doctor, Harry B. Niles saying, 'Study until you are forty, and you'll know more than anybody in the world.' "[16]

Handcart Pioneers, abt 1940. Minerva K. Teichert (1888-1976)
Oil on canvas 68" x 51"
Museum of Church History and Art © by Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

That is not to say being an artist was an easy career-choice for a Latter-day Saint fifty years ago. Patronage from the Church came sporadically, and often with fierce competition between local artists.[17] It was a difficult time for the artists, as Minerva Teichert described in 1947, "I married my cowboy sweetheart, which was right. My first son was born while my husband was serving in France. I painted stage scenery to pay for his birth. I painted what I loved for the Pocatello Tabernacle—'Not Alone'—got thirty-eight dollars for it…. I helped in the hay fields. My first three little boys grew up beside a haystack…. The children must be educated, etc. I painted after they were tucked in at night. I must paint. It's a disease."[18]

A few of the artists settled in New York City rather than in the West. Mahonri Young, the last grandchild of Brigham Young, left Utah and made his entire career in the New York area, teaching at the Art Students League for nearly thirty years. His friend, painter Waldo Midgley from Utah, also remained in New York. Lynn Fausett, whose murals hang at the "This Is the Place Monument," served as the president of the Art Students League from 1933-36. Another LDS artist, Louise Farnsworth, spent the majority of her adult life in New York City although her subject matter remained the landscape of her Utah childhood.

The Church in New York City has enjoyed the presence of these graduates and other LDS artists who for over a hundred

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Seeing a Painting

By Glen Nelson

Standing in front of a painting is a communication as literal as a telephone conversation. The painter expresses ideas through his or her choices of subject, materials and techniques. In return, the viewer reacts. The reaction may be dismissive-the visual equivalent of hanging up on someone on the phone-or the connection between a viewer and painter can be deep, emo-

May I guide you through some steps of looking at a beautiful, religious painting? I am thinking of the image that hangs in the lobby in Manhattan's Stake Center. It is a reproduction of a work painted by James T. Harwood, one of the three artist-missionaries sent by the Church to study in Paris over 100 years ago. It tells the story of Jesus selecting his disciples among the fishermen. Rather than reproduce Harwood's painting here, we encourage readers to examine the brushstrokes and colors in the detailed reproduction hanging in the Stake Center lobby.

One can only imagine what it might have been like to look at this painting the day it was completed. Our modern eyes, long-since accustomed to the effects of Impressionism, look at those images and think: pretty. But to Harwood, this painting must have had additional power. It was a daring painting, even a dangerous painting choice. It was a modern painting almost surely to be shocking to the sensibilities of its audience.

In it, Jesus stands on the shore. He is dressed in a white robe and has the full attention of the men on the fishing boat behind Him. He is about to make them "fishers of men." Essentially, that is the entire story of the painting. But there is much more to see.

Begin with the Savior. His robe is simple and white, but looking closely, you will see almost no white paint employed. Instead, the robe is a dazzling array of unblended, shimmering colors. It is as if he is a prism and the light emanates from him. Even the skin is alive with color. Not merely flesh tones, note the blues and pinks and greens. The colors of the world are reflected in him.

The trademark of Impressionism (the French 1880-1920 art movement that celebrated outdoor painting with vibrant, unblended colors than emphasize the shimmering world) is its way with water and light. What better technique for the depiction of this beautiful scriptural event in the Holy Land.

Look at the water and sky. The colors! Cobalt blue, golden yellow, forest green, shocking pinks, rich grays: pure colors all applied in gestural strokes, unafraid to stand alone. The water seems to move as you look at it. The brushstrokes participate in the effect, but the juxtaposed dashes of pigment give the water its motion.

The sky is equally alive, as if the particles in the atmosphere are assigned dynamic color by Harwood and sent spinning in air. The horizon line is barely distinguishable, both water and sky are so alive. Even the sand underfoot is beautiful. It is streaked with pale blue and pink. Every color choice in the painting highlights the beauty of the world. There is nothing drab in the realm of the Savior, according to Harwood. It is a beautiful painting. Even in reproduction, the image has great power and beauty.

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A Note About the Author

For nearly twenty years, Glen Nelson has lived in New York City and is an advocate of LDS artists. He holds a Master's Degree in English Literature from NYU and he is the founder and director of Mormon Artists Group. Glen recently edited the book Silent Notes Taken: Personal Essays by Mormon New Yorkers*. Currently, he is compiling* Mormoniana*, a collection of 17 prominent LDS composers' original piano works based on paintings by LDS artists.*

Seeing a Painting

Harwood was a brave soul. He was devout in his belief and never wavered from it. He was a man who knew what suffering was like (his young, first wife died and left him with children to care for at an early age. His decision to marry a much younger woman late in life was scandalous for its day). Even his choice to leave Utah and study abroad in the 1890s and repeatedly over the following decades, must have been a frightening prospect in his time. Look again at Harwood's Jesus; He is the calm center in a swirling world of beauty.

Think of those biographical facts as you look at the painting. His depiction of the Savior is based on strength and daring, but also compassion. Harwood's version of Jesus is a man who is calling his disciples fully aware of the consequences of their choices: they will be forced to leave the beautiful, shimmering world of the sea, and will in the space of a few years witness atrocities and ultimately, their own martyrdom. And yet, says the painting, there is little choice. The beauties of the world pale by comparison to the glories of God.

"Deliverance" Panel from the Seagull Monument, 1912. Mahonri M. Young (1877-1957) Cast bronze, 60" x 48"
Museum of Church History and Art © by Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

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years have come to New York seeking further training or fortunes in the world of art. The pattern of their wide-eyed immersion into the city's fine arts, study and artistic development continues to the present. These men and women are taking up the challenge issued by Elder Spencer W. Kimball in 1967: "The story of Mormonism has never yet been written nor painted nor sculpted nor spoken. It remains for inspired hearts and talented fingers yet to reveal themselves. [The artists] must be faithful, inspired, active Church members to give life and feeling and true perspective to a worthy subject."[19] In many ways, little has changed since 1890. Young, ambitious and talented students still yearn to prove themselves and to serve the Church as LDS artists.

Notes

[1] The principal repository of LDS art is the Church Museum of History and Art in Salt Lake City. For a complete survey of early LDS artists, see "The Foundation of Latter-day Saint Art, 1835-1890" by Richard G. Oman in *Images of Faith: Art of the Latter-day Saints*, 4-39.

[2] Richard G. Oman, 12-19, 36-39

[3] James L. Hasteltime, *100 Years of Utah Paintings*, 9.

[4] Robert O. Davis, "The Impact of French Training on Latter-day Saint Art, 1890-1925*" Images of Faith: Art of the Latter-day Saints*. 41. The Academie Julian was created for international students, mostly British and American. Its open enrollment policies admitted many students who would otherwise have been forbidden access to the formal French academies.

[5] Robert O. Davis, 41-44.

[6] B. F. Larsen, "The Meaning of Religion on the Life of John Hafen," Improvement Era 39 (January 1936), 6.

[7] John Hafen, "The Gospel in Art," Improvement Era 13 (December 1909), 177-78.

[8] Thomas E. Toone, *Mahonri Young: His Life and Art*, 46.

[9] Thomas E. Toone, 30.

[10] Thomas E. Toone, 103-107.

[11] Robert O. Davis, 50-53.

[12] Robert O. Davis, 41.

[13] Robert O. Davis, "Developing a Regional Latter-day Saint Art, 1925-1965" Images of Faith: Art of the Latter-day Saints, 71-111.

[14] The Art Students League of New York, 2001-2002 catalog, 127th Regular Session, 89-94.

[15] Images by these painters and many others are available online at the Museum of Church History and Art (http://www.lds.org/museum), in the volume by Richard G. Oman in *Images of Faith: Art of the Latter-day Saints*, and at the Springville Museum of Art which focuses on Utah painters. The SMA website includes hundreds of images. See http://www.sma.nebo.edu/

[16] Mahonri Young, "Notes at the Beginning," Mahonri M. Young: Retrospective Exhibition, 56.

[17] Thomas E. Toone, 159-184. The behind-the-scenes wrangling for the epic "This Is the Place Monument" is illustrative of the political and social tensions regarding large commissions of art.

[18] Minerva K. Teichert, handwritten manuscript, 1947, research files, Museum of Church History and Art.

[19] Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," address to faculty and staff, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, September 12, 1967.