



*Moroni's Visit to Joseph Smith*

## MORMONISM AND AMERICAN RELIGIOUS ART

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lder Boyd K. Packer in an address "The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord," given at BYU February 1, 1976) told how, as chairman of a group responsible for producing a filmstrip on Church history, he discovered that one of the group knew of a large roll of canvases painted by one of his progenitors, C.C.A. Christensen (1831-1912). Elder Packer's committee sent a truck down to Sanpete County to recover the paintings, and when the massive roll of canvases was opened out, the Mormon story was visible from the *Giving of the Golden Leaves to Joseph Smith*, to the *Arrival in the Great Salt Lake Basin* when Brigham Young declared "This is the place."

In the 1890s, C.C.A. Christensen had used his own paintings to accompany a lecture on Church history when he traveled through the settlements telling the Mormon story. As each episode was recounted, the corresponding painting would be unrolled and displayed by lamplight. Thus C.C.A. had done for his generation of Mormons what Elder Packer's committee of seminary men intended to do for their own generation. Whether or not the Christensen paintings were used for the filmstrip is not recounted by Elder Packer. But it is certain that the discovery of the Christensen paintings meant for the outside world the discovery of Mormon art. The paintings were exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970, reproduced in color in *Art in America*, a significant nationally known periodical. And seven of the paintings were included in a large travelling exhibition in 1972, "The Hand and the Spirit: Religious Art in America 1700-1900."

The twenty-two paintings, done on heavy linen, each 8'x10' were originally sewn together so they could be turned by a crank, and the audience thus viewed the paintings, episode by episode, as the artist told their story. When the roll of paintings was recovered the individual paintings were separated, conserved and

framed. It was in this form that they have been seen subsequently.

The painting of *Moroni's Visit to Joseph Smith* has a poetry of conception which gives the event depicted a kind of verity. The artist has distanced us from the miraculous encounter. The steeply sloping hillside and diagonal trees provide a charming woodland setting, which is cursorily—even naively—represented. But not at all naive is the artist's placing of the angel Moroni, deep within this setting, his body entirely and quietly vertical—the only vertical form in the entire painting. A nimbus surrounds his body, as he holds the book with the golden pages before Joseph Smith. Joseph, dressed, in all propriety, in a frock coat and gray trousers, has fallen on one knee before the angel Moroni. An interesting iconographic detail is the fully bearded angel. The absence of angel's wings is not unusual iconographically but the beard is an unusual attribute. And it underlines the inevitable parallelism between this event and the Biblical event of Moses receiving the tablets of the Law.

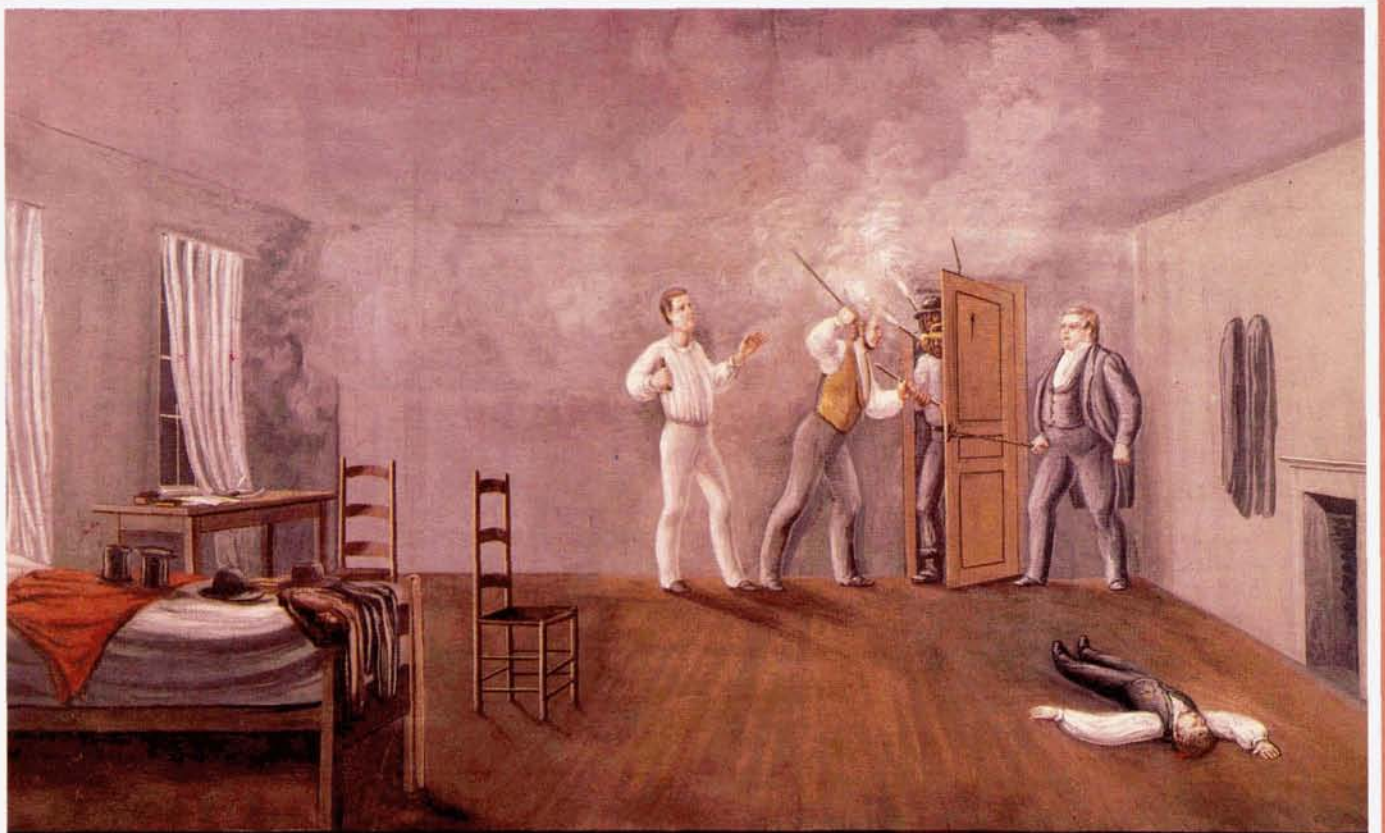


*Mobbing of Joseph Smith*

As one studies the painting of the *Mobbing of Joseph Smith*, it is obvious that Christensen did not have the ability to represent the human body in movement with any sense of accuracy and organic unity. Yet the awkwardness of the individual figures is offset by Christensen's instinct for effectively grouping the figures, thus conveying the sense of impending violence. Contrasted with the procession of evil-doers is the setting of nature: the full moon glimpsed through a rift in the clouds illumines the clearing, a few barren trees and the distant darkened dwellings.

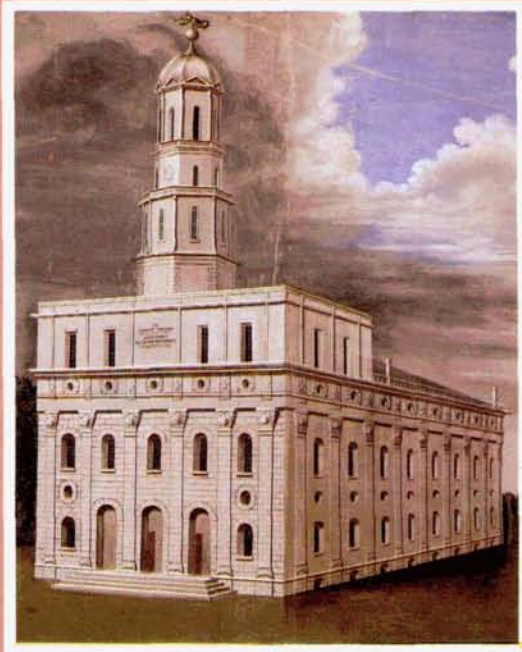
JANE DILLENBERGER, professor of theology and the arts at the Graduate Theological Union, is curator of the Elihu Vedder collection at the National Collection of Fine Arts, and has worked for museums in Chicago, Boston, Newark, San Francisco and Berkeley. She was the originator and curator of two religious art exhibits which toured the country recently: "The Hand and the Spirit" (1972-73) and "Perceptions of the Spirit" (1977-78). She is author of *Style and Content in Christian Art* and other books. Her *Sunstone* article was originally presented as a paper at the BYU Symposium described in this issue. Photos courtesy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints





**THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS IS THE SEED OF THE CHURCH**

*Martyrdom of Joseph Smith*



*Nauvoo Temple*

Despite the faulty draftsmanship of the figures, the picture of the *Martyrdom of Joseph Smith* is the most powerful single painting in the group. Joseph Smith dressed entirely in white, as befits the hero, the martyr, and the Saint, is at the center of the composition, deep in the space of the echoing empty room. The narrow range of color kept within grays, browns, blacks, except for a red coat on the narrow bed, all accentuate the whiteness of the martyr. Beneath the scene in bold letters on a black background, is the stark declaration, "The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of the Church."

The painting of the *Nauvoo Temple* is extraordinarily effective. By placing the structure on barren ground without bush or tree, enclosure or sidewalk, the great temple seems an apparition rather than a structure built by human hands. No person, no dog, no carriage or cart inhabits the surrounding quiet space.

The Mormons had begun the famous Nauvoo temple in 1841. It measured 128 feet east and west, 88 feet north and south and 60 feet above the ground level to the eaves. The spire rose an additional 98.5 feet. Native gray limestone from local quarries was used for the walls. For more than five years the Mormons labored, and at its completion, the temple was the largest and most widely known structure north of St. Louis and west of Cincinnati.

The artist, C.C.A. Christensen, and his young Norwegian wife sailed to the U.S. in 1857. They made their way to the Mormon colony in Iowa City where



they bought a hickory handcart and set out to walk with a newly formed company to the valley of the Great Salt Lake. Thus the artist himself had experienced many of the situations which he represented. All of Christensen's paintings which show the movements of large groups within a setting of nature have both a poetry, and a veracity which make them particularly effective.

With his imagination on fire and the compelling need to tell his story, the Mormon story, Christensen's earnest awkwardness gives a kind of authenticity to the story. We value his veracity and find a charm in the poetic details and settings. As a group, the paintings tell the story adequately and at times movingly. Some of the individual panels are sufficiently strong to be in and of themselves works of art—the *Martyrdom of Joseph Smith*, and the panels of the *Temple at Nauvoo*, and *The Burning of the Temple*. Evaluated from the perspective of the history of American art, they are an interesting historical cycle done by an artist who has had some training and some exposure to the art of the past.

Though Christensen achieved naive effects, he is not what we call, for lack of a better word, a naive artist. A naive artist is one who is not only self-taught, but one who is 'invincibly ignorant,' or, we might say, blissfully ignorant, of the art of the past and of such studies as anatomy and perspective. His or her own way of seeing reality is paramount. However strange their visions may appear to us, most 'naive' artists are convinced of the literal realism of their imagined worlds. In the little masterpiece of naive art called *Meditation by the Seashore*, we see a single figure looking out upon great waves, the ocean and a distant ship. The proportions of his figure are odd, and the waves a decorative pattern. The shore and cliffs are from dreams, not reality. But this artist would be completely disinterested, and rightly so, in the study of anatomy and nature, which the professional artist must master. The naive artist paints as *he* sees, as *he* images, and he sees differently from most of us, and certainly differently from the professional artist.

A professional artist like Christensen's contemporary Thomas Eakins not only spent years in the study of anatomy and dissection, but he taught anatomy to medical students at Jefferson Hospital in Philadelphia. Care-

ful perspectival studies for his paintings of boating scenes or interior scenes exist. These studies lie behind the representation of persons, places and things in his paintings, giving them an authentic, and penetrating realism.

Of the three kinds of art and artists described, it is only the professional artist who is the maker of high art, who is technically equipped to communicate the inner being which animates the lineaments of the face and figure of a woman or man. Thomas Eakins, like Rembrandt, could depict a man or woman lost in thought, revealing the inner workings of their spirit.

Another kind of art flourished in the nineteenth century—the kind of popular prints which Currier and Ives published. Produced for mass distribution, these prints varied in quality from vigorous pictures of important events or picturesque places to sentimental and slick prints on subjects ranging from hearth and home to pious prints for Protestant and Catholic devotions. The latter were not art, and one hopes the theologian would agree they were not religious. Their twentieth century counterparts are the illustrations in the Bibles and in much of the church school literature given to Catholic and Protestant children. Also in this category of paintings for the masses are many of those to be seen in the Mormon visitor centers.

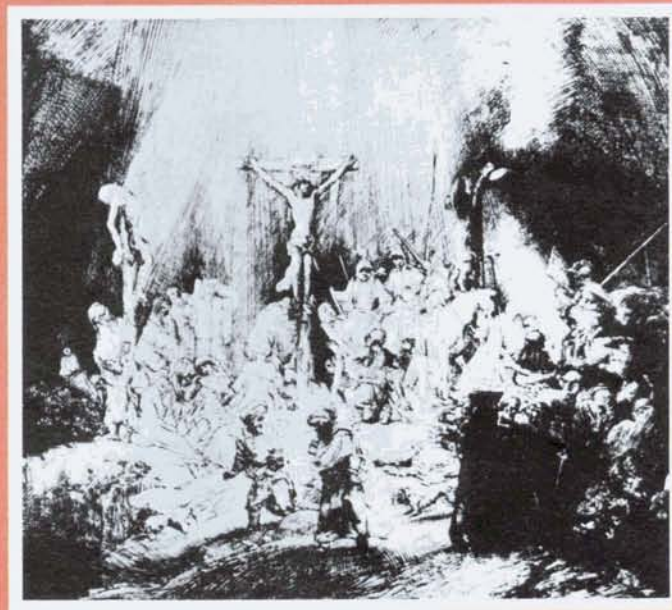
If we contrast Rembrandt's etchings of Biblical subjects with the illustrative art of the visitor centers, we are at once aware of the power and profundity of Rembrandt's recreation of the *Crucifixion* event. The tragedy in human terms is eloquently depicted; the frail and vulnerable Christ hangs upon the cross, his body set against a glowing sky. The group below are all individuals, yet each is caught within the demonic surge of the tragedy which each contributes to, or witnesses to, by intent or default. Nonetheless, the shower of light



*Meditation by the Seashore*  
(Anon.)



*The Thinker* (Eakins)



*Crucifixion* (Rembrandt)



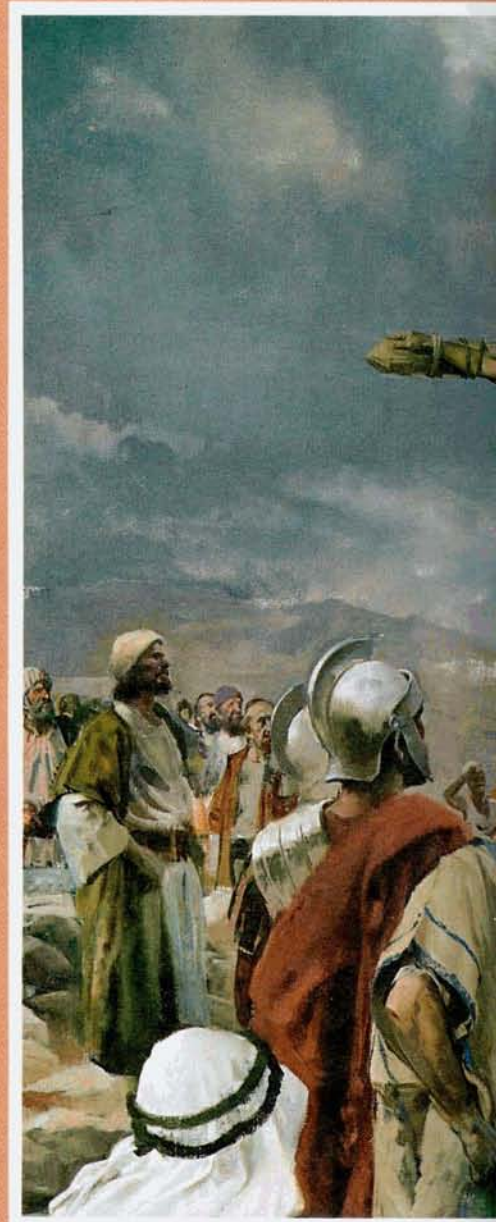
and the invincible posture of the frail Christ upon the high cross show the Christ to be indeed the Son of God and the event encompassed within the embrace of the heavenly Father. By contrast the visitor center's painting seems like a still from a movie, with extras dressed and posed, and acting as directed. In style and content it is perilously close to the social realist art of Russia and China, an art developed to communicate political doctrine, but one which validates the political stance with religious allusion and iconography.

*Christ Preaching* is the subject of another etching by Rembrandt, but it is more commonly known as *The Hundred Guilder Print* for the price paid for one of the first prints—a price considered very high in Rembrandt's own day. It is essentially the same subject that I have seen in three different paintings in Salt Lake City. Yet those paintings are very near to colored photos enlarged to wall size. The intention of the artist of the visitor center's paintings was to make the event seem illusionistically real. By contrast, great art is concerned with the appearance of reality only to transform it. Rembrandt *suggests, evokes* the divinity of Christ by his manipulation of the lights and darks about the Christ; his slightly off-center figure seems to radiate light, yet the deepest velvety blacks frame him. Deep shadows fall at the lower right, and light touches the arm and hand of a sick woman, a doughty old man listening, with his back to us at the left—and a thoughtful brooding face in the crowd above. Much is suggested; nothing is delineated realistically. The biblical paintings for so-called educational and instructive purposes become within a generation dated and irrelevant, whereas art such as that of Rembrandt is timeless, and rewards continuing and attentive viewing "time without end."

*Christ Preaching (Rembrandt)*



*Crucifixion (Salt Lake Visitors Center)*



*Christ Appears in the Upper Room (Salt Lake Visitors Center)*







*Mormon art, Christian art, religious art* are all problematical terms. Any prefacing, limiting term before the word *art* creates problems. T.S. Eliot pointed out that to determine whether a poem or a painting is a work of art can only be done by the standards and disciplines of that particular branch of art. But to determine whether or not it is a religious poem or a religious painting, one must bring other standards to bear. Herein lies the problem.

Most art historians agree that there is good art and bad art, but not that there is Mormon art, women's art, black art, etc. This conviction is not a matter of fine argument and distinctions, but conclusions drawn from the evidence. Michelangelo worked almost exclusively for the Popes, yet his art could never be confined by the label Roman Catholic Art. Rembrandt's biblical subjects, which come out of a Protestant culture, are as moving to Catholics as to Protestants. Christensen's significant paintings are as expressive to me as they are to Mormons. Indeed, I believe that I, and the historians of

American art, value them more highly than do the Mormon people for whom they were made.

Protestant and Roman Catholic art used for educational purposes is no better than the Mormon art now in the visitor centers. But Protestants and Catholics alike have floundered in their educational efforts whereas Mormonism has a highly developed and effective educational system which brings much emphasis on the visual image. With such a cohesive educational network encompassing family, church and temple, the opportunity for educating the eye and the spirit through great art and for teaching the great truths through the great masters is limitless. Rembrandt and Michelangelo are as much a part of Mormon history as Christensen's paintings.

I would appeal to the Mormons to initiate a new "cleansing of the temple"—to remove the illustrative, shallow, socialist-realist religious art, and await the coming of the artists who are equal to your epic history and your grand vision.