Mormon kitsch borrows extensively from American culture, yet it teaches us to remain socially and theologically distinct. This is perhaps most evident in how our mass-produced art teaches traditional gender roles. To be Mormon, it would seem, is to be particularly masculine or feminine.

STRIPPING WARRIORS

By Jana K. Riess

OBERT KIRBY, SALT LAKE TRIBUNE HUMOR columnnist, once wrote about finding a new "Mormon" product in his local discount store: beer mugs and shot glasses emblazoned with images of the Salt Lake Temple. The irony, of course, is that a distinctively Mormon image was being used to sell items that no temple-going Mormon should use. Kirby's is an extreme example, yet it illustrates an important transformation in Mormon material culture of the 1980s and 1990s. Latter-day Saints are now inundated with mass-produced and cleverly marketed images, scripture paraphernalia, clothing, and toys—many of these not always in step with declared Mormon values. Such "kitsch" is emblematic of larger social changes within the Mormon community, and it offers a useful lens for examining how United States Mormons in the late twentieth century perceive their cultural position.

"Kitsch" is a problematic term. It evokes prejudices about "low" art being overly sentimental or even maudlin. Because kitsch is generally inexpensive, highbrows routinely ignore it, or denounce it as an art form unfit only for the sophisticated ("not mainstream") of society. But such elitest and perfunctory class stereotypes should give critics of kitsch pause. Although kitsch is mass-produced, it is not necessarily "inferior art," and it is worthy of study because it reflects how ordinary Latter-day Saints express their religious selves. Kitsch also reflects the class and gender prejudices of its owners. Historian Colleen McDannell has observed that to many people, kitsch represents "stereotypical feminine qualities: sentimentality, superficiality, intimacy." Perhaps the association of kitsch with the feminine has precluded it from serious scholarly attention. This essay does not evaluate the aesthetics of Mormon objects, nor does it speculate about the taste of their buyers. My purpose is not to denigrate or celebrate Mormon kitsch, but to contextualize it historically and culturally. Why do Mormons embrace kitsch? How can material objects confer a sense of Mormon identity? How important are objects in defining Mormon practice and spirituality? And finally, what do some of these objects tell us about Mormon values and culture?

COMING OF AGE

SINCE the 1970s, Mormon kitsch has changed dramatically, appropriating various trends in mainstream popular culture, especially as presented in television, movies, and the Internet. Mormon kitsch has evolved from homemade bandelos and bracelets a quarter century ago to sophisticated (and more expensive) mass-produced objects that are aggressively advertised and sold in Mormon specialty stores. As Mormons have moved out of Utah's Wasatch Front and into other geographic regions—as well as into the upper middle class—Mormon kitsch has become more worldlywise. Less than a quarter of Mormons now live in the Intermountain West, and U.S. Mormons have "achieved an average socioeconomic status that...compares favorably to that of Episcopalians and Presbyterians." Mormons have become acculturated to a greater degree than ever, but this apparent ease with U.S. society has been accompanied by a simultaneous attempt by LDS leaders to re-emphasize what is recognizably Mormon. In postwar Mormonism, cultural rapprochement has
gone hand in hand with a theological and social retrenchment.

Meanwhile, the objects used and sacralized by Mormons have retained their didactic function. Much of the recent marketing geared toward children, teenagers, and young adults continues to inculcate Mormon religious and cultural values. However, the means of this inculcation are new and demonstrate Mormonism's apparent comfort with popular symbols and cultural vehicles. Also, Mormon kitsch increasingly emphasizes gender differences: discrete values are touted as "religious" for boys and girls. Objects impart gender expectations along with religious and behavioral codes. Mormon kitsch confirms that while Mormonism is willing to borrow images and slogans from popular culture, it does not accept some of the perceived values of that culture—including commensurate roles for girls.

In the 1990s, LDS material culture has stepped confidently into the "mainstream" of U.S. popular culture. Increasingly, mass-produced objects directed toward Mormons borrow ideas, images, and slogans from popular media. An early product was a T-shirt that adapted the distinctive graphic design from the hit television series Northern Exposure, proclaiming that the wearer was engaging in "Mormon Exposure." Not only did the shirt demonstrate its model's Mormon identity, thus "exposing" religion for a public audience, it also suggested that the wearer knew one of the most popular TV shows—yet the program, which at various points featured an unmarried couple cohabiting, a young single woman's sexual affairs, and the existential angst of an ex-con deejay, diverged from core Mormon values.

This tension between popular culture and Mormon values also manifests itself in some of the more recent appropriations of media images. For example, the popular LDS slogan "Choose the Right" has spawned an array of merchandise reminding Mormons to make valiant moral choices. Yet this marketed "CTR" slogan flirts with some of the very dangers in U.S. culture that orthodox Mormons might otherwise avoid. One commercial line of rings and T-shirts, for example, has the "CTR" slogan, in the same typeface as the highly visible "CK" logo of Calvin Klein. Calvin Klein's advertising is often at odds with stated Mormon values such as chastity and modesty. In another example, the Nike Swoosh symbol has also prompted a Mormon imitation, except that the tapered end features the trumpet of the Angel Moroni. Even the Nike slogan of "Just Do It,"—which echoes the late LDS President Spencer W. Kimball's motto, "Do It"—has found its way onto T-shirts heralding a muscular Book of Mormon hero, Nephi. Instead of Nephi's declaration "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded" (1 Ne. 3:7), this Nephi declares, "Just Go and Do It."

Cultural friction seems strongest in the vast array of objects specifically directed to missionary experience. One T-shirt uses the HardRock Cafe logo to proclaim, "Hard Work All Day," thus juxtaposing the often unglamorous missionary life with hamburgers and rock music. Just months after 1997's summer blockbuster Men In Black monopolized the box office, T-shirts appeared with two "Men In White"—male missionaries in dapper suits and sunglasses. These missionary-directed objects reveal tensions between Mormon and popular culture, because LDS missionaries are essentially removed from popular culture during their service. They are not allowed to read newspapers, watch television, go to movies, or listen to secular music. What irony, then, to see Men In Black, a film that full-time missionaries would not be permitted to attend, appropriated to describe the missionary experience. Of course, the mission-related objects are not simply intended to appeal to current missionaries. They are to encourage younger teens, especially boys, to serve missions in the future. Such objects announce that missionary work is exciting, culturally relevant, and adventurous.
The instant success of Book of Mormon action figures surprised even long-standing observers of the Mormon market.

The popularity of Mormon toys suggests they are being used as teaching tools to help children—especially boys—in the case of action figures—identify with the Book of Mormon.

Missionary paraphernalia is sold at the many Deseret Book and other Mormon-oriented stores. A special chain of mission-oriented stores, the Missionary Emporium, has arisen, including one only a few miles from the Missionary Training Center (MTC) in Provo, Utah. Most items are aimed at missionaries themselves. Mormons can purchase official LDS tracts in many languages, and “survival guides” help potential missionaries prepare to share the LDS message in their assigned areas of the world. Yet much merchandise is not directly related to teaching the restored gospel. Family members and love interests can purchase temple wall charts to help them count off the days until their missionary’s return. (On the flip side, prefabricated “Dear John” letters are also available. Primary children can find coloring books, stickers, videos, and countless other products, not necessarily related to the missionary experience, but to the larger Church experience of the Restoration, family life, scriptures, and so on.

A best-selling line that recently appeared in Mormon bookstores are Book of Mormon action figures, introduced by Latter-day Designs in 1996. Even long-standing observers of the Mormon market were surprised at the instant success of these figures, available in vinyl, pewter, and 24k gold plate. According to Deseret Book’s retail figures, the quickest sellers are, predictably, Book of Mormon war heroes Nephi, Alma, Moroni, and Helaman. The “negative” figures, such as Laman and Lemuel, lag considerably. This discrepancy may at least partly be due to the fantasy inherent in the action figure genre. The popularity of the “righteous” figures also suggests these action figures are being used as teaching tools. They are to help LDS children, especially boys, identify with the central heroes of Mormonism’s most distinctive sacred text.

Significantly, few of the aforementioned items are actually produced by Deseret Book, whose policy has been to retail creations that smaller companies appropriate—yet these appropriations are often the swiftest sellers at Deseret Book, far outstripping items with motivational or scriptural messages. Recent popular images have adopted the logos of teen fashion arbiters Tommy Hilfiger and the Gap to try to appeal to the Mormon youth market. As one company buyer at Deseret Book put it, “Kids don’t have a problem standing up for what they believe in if it doesn’t look hokey.”

Even obvious LDS symbols such as CTR rings can be used multivocally, simultaneously reflecting their wearers’ Mormon affiliation and their stubborn individuality. One University of Utah professor tells of a female student who came into the office sporting a CTR ring—pierced through her eyebrow. CTR rings, in fact, have moved far beyond their initial purpose as a learning tool for children. They have become a stunningly popular cultural signifier for Mormons of all ages. Beginning in 1970, CTR rings were given to seven-year-old children in preparation for baptism. All one size, they were constructed of cheap, adjustable aluminum. One recipient noted that these early CTR rings were “Cracker Jack box” quality and intended to be worn only by young children. Another observed that during his teen years in the late 1970s and early 80s, he “never saw anyone wear a CTR ring except for the week they got it” as seven-year-olds. On the other hand, he added, his parents purchased a very nice Portuguese CTR ring when his younger brother left for a Portuguese-speaking mission in 1995, demonstrating the rapid evolution of the ring as a desirable young adult commodity.

CTR rings were first hawked for profit by vendors working part-time out of their vans in the early 1980s. By 1985, the BYU
bookstore was selling a permanent, non-adjustable version, and by the late 1980s, Deseret Book had begun to market them in different materials and colors. They are currently available in forty languages and represent a favorite gift item for foreign-area missionaries. Their popularity extends to young parents and empty-nesters. To cater to this older market, CTR rings have become available in various permutations of sterling silver and gold costing up to $500. In 1996, Ring Masters Inc. made Inc. magazine's list of the five hundred fastest-growing companies in America. Nearly half of its $2.5 million annual sales was due to CTR rings.

Among teenagers, part of the wider appeal of the CTR rings in the late 1990s may be their cultural resonance with the "chastity rings" sometimes worn by young evangelicals. Although the CTR logo offers a general encouragement to moral behavior, many Mormons link it specifically to sexual virtue. A Utah doctor, for example, reportedly professed dismay that so many of the young women who came to his office for teenage pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases were wearing CTR rings. Whether they guarantee sexual purity or not, CTR rings offer Mormons an instantly recognizable symbol of cultural and religious identification.

So Mormon kitsch's appropriations from popular culture are both selective and carefully aimed at specific audiences. To a certain degree at least, reworking popular logos and symbols with a Mormon twist creates the indirect but persistent message that Mormonism has "arrived." Any group that has power to borrow, and subtly change, symbols from the larger culture is powerful. To do so is subversive. When Mormons take a Nike symbol and slap an Angel Moroni on it, they are declaring a kind of ownership of that symbol.

MORMON KITSCH AND THE INCULCATION OF GENDER VALUES

Sexualized bodies are very common.

While the foregoing arguments show Mormonism's delicate engagement with U.S. cultural symbols, the presence of Mormon kitsch does not mean Mormons are in a headlong drive toward cultural assimilation. Nor is such borrowing anything new. From Scouting to many of our hymns to our businessmen's attire, since its beginning, Mormonism has been able to creatively and selectively borrow from its larger culture and maintain its separate identity. As a sectarian religious movement, Mormonism must carefully maintain boundary distinctions so that it retains its identity and does not become engulfed by the cultural values that surround it. Tangible objects can help to preserve this cultural distinctiveness in the face of threatened assimilation. The aim of many of these objects, especially those geared toward youth, is to inculcate LDS religious and behavioral values. Although some objects seem curiously in harmony with the norms of U.S. culture, they also contain elements that declare the socially and theologically acceptable boundaries for Mormons. Such lines of cultural demarcation often crystallize around the issue of gender.

Two Church-produced posters, one directed to young women and the other to young men, exemplify how Mormon mass-produced images help make concrete the expectations of masculine and feminine behavior. The girls' poster depicts three white dresses hanging in a blue and white bedroom. A framed baby's blessing gown hangs on the rear wall. From the bedpost, a young girl's baptismal dress offers a reminder of covenants made. The culmination of this ritual development is...
Gender conservatism is not exclusive to Mormons. What is unique to Mormonism is the insistence that gender roles are eternal, just as human spirits are eternal.

Set in a bedroom, the girls’ poster shows three dresses, representing infant blessing, baptism, and temple marriage, and emphasizes domesticity. The boys’ poster, set in an office, prominently includes keys and scouting awards, emphasizing public religious authority.

Gender conservatism is not exclusive to Mormons. What is unique to Mormonism is the insistence that gender roles are eternal, just as human spirits are eternal.
In contrast to the intimate female bedroom, the male library/office contains little personalization. The site is ambiguous; the library could be in a home or business building. The immaculate neatness of the study, the marginalization of the sports paraphernalia, and the expansiveness of the chair behind the desk all suggest this is a man's room, not a boy's. The male poster emphasizes achievement, action, and worldly success, associations reinforced by the conquest-oriented language of the poem on the poster's reverse side. At "war" with Satan, the boy pledges to fight with Christ's "sword" and remain "brave and strong."16 The two posters also hint that standards for sexual chastity, while normative for both boys and girls, are more commonly impressed upon girls in LDS material culture. The poem on the reverse of the girls' poster emphasizes:

Just as mud would stain my dress,
Sin would stain my soul.
The key is to repent or bleach,
For whiteness is my goal.17

Terms such as whiteness, purity, morality, virtue, and chastity occur interchangeably in LDS discourse about abstinence from sexuality, especially female abstinence.18 In March 1998, for example, in speaking to the Young Women of the church via satellite, First Presidency First Counselor James E. Faust opened his remarks with a plea for virtues. "Virtue has many definitions," he said, "such as moral excellence, right action and thinking, goodness of character, or chastity in women. . . . the virtue of young women should be equal to the angels." Moreover, he added, sexually permissive girls risk losing the favorable opinions of their male contemporaries: "young women should realize that young men they date will not honor and respect them if they have been involved in moral transgression."19 Here, the responsibility for chaste behavior is placed squarely upon the shoulders of young women, not their male counterparts, who stand instead as judges and accusers. LDS-purchased objects subtly echo these different emphases. Chastity is most often represented in our material culture as a female virtue. For example, a pink "chastity" bookmark is available in Deseret bookstores as a reminder to young women, but no such admonition is being marketed to LDS boys.

Although Mormon material culture explicitly encourages young women to practice chastity, it sometimes also sends a simultaneous message of sexual desirability and allure. Another available bookmark depicts Eve, whom we Mormons regard as the mother of the human race. This bookmark is one of seven that illustrate the values of the LDS Young Women program: faith, divine nature, individual worth, knowledge, choice and accountability, good works, and integrity.20 In the accompanying picture, a Nordic-looking Eve represents the value of choice and accountability because she made "the correct choice to partake of the Forbidden Fruit . . . [and] set in motion God's plan for our salvation."21 Eve's choice itself carries decidedly sexual connotations in Mormon theology, as by eating the fruit, she was responsible for introducing sexuality and childbearing. The bookmark portrays of Eve makes this association clear. She is nude, but that nudity is artfully concealed behind the lamb she is clutching to her breasts. A tiger stands at her side. Her hair is perfectly coiffed, and she sports eyeshadow, rouge, and lipstick. She is sensually alluring.

Other images portray women as sexual temptresses who lay traps for men laboring in the service of the Lord. One T-shirt displays two missionaries striding through the rain, presumably on their way to teach the gospel. To one side crouches a young woman, dressed only in lingerie, watching them intently. Her figure is extremely voluptuous, Betty Boop style. Drawn above her is a thought balloon filled with symbols of romance—hearts float up from her head as she tries to engage the eyes of the young missionaries. They, however, remain protected from her wiles by a quartet of very masculine-appearing angels, one of whom uses his cloak to shield the tartlet from view. The message beneath the image is from the

Stereotyped and sexualized "male" and "female" bodies are discernable in much contemporary Mormonism kitsch.
These sterling silver warrior pendants are advertised as being available in “a very masculine gun metal color,” while Deseret Book’s most popular T-shirt leads the viewer’s eyes in a quasi-homoerotic style not to the warriors’ whole persons but to their torsos only.

In the popular “strippling warriors” motif, Mormonism’s ideals of masculinity and motherhood both find a voice. The warriors’ strength is coupled with the mothers’ piety.

Doctrinal and Covenant: “and mine angels round about you to bear you up” (D&C 84:88). So the shirt shows a woman as a seductress who seeks to impede the Lord’s work, carried out exclusively by men. Only divine intervention can save the missionaries.

Highly stereotyped and sexualized “male” and “female” bodies are discernible in much mass-produced art of contemporary Mormonism. Generally, LDS artists tend to depict male Bible and Book of Mormon figures as extremely muscular. A decade ago, Allen Roberts, a former editor of Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought and SUNSTONE and a longtime observer of the Mormon scene, commented that LDS prints and figurines parallel Mormons’ gender expectations:

Mormons . . . give their heroes mental and spiritual qualities of extra human proportion, but must they look like Rambo or Schwarzenegger to merit our respect? In contrast, the portrayals of Mormon women (none cast heroically) range from Dolly Parton types to emaciated models in long dresses, usually in servile or submissive poses — our culture’s ambivalence over the role of Mormon women . . . clearly presented.

Such gender demarcation also extends to the portrayals of Christ. As Colleen McDannell has observed, when the LDS Church commissioned Utah artist Dale Parsons to paint the head of Christ, Church authorities stressed that the initial sketches should be “masculine” in tone.

Masculine imagery sells well in Mormon circles. Since its introduction in 1996, an extremely popular Mormon T-shirt has been the “Stripling Warriors/Mommas Boys” design created by Latter-day Specialties. The shirt features three scantily clad, brawny “strippling warriors” flexing their highly developed muscles. The caption refers to the famous Book of Mormon story of the two thousand valorous strippling warriors who accompanied the righteous Helaman into battle. These men held fast to the teachings of their mothers, “that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them” (Alma 56:47). In this T-shirt illustration, Mormonism’s ideals of masculinity and motherhood both find a voice. The warriors are courageous, strong, and true, but they only gain the victory when they follow the advice of their pious mothers. Perhaps because of this dual message, the shirt has become Deseret Book’s best-selling T-shirt. It sells in all sizes, though for a mostly male market.

The strippling warriors on this shirt, and in fact on all of the masculine imagery produced by Latter-day Specialties, are missing half of their heads. In a quasi-homoerotic style, the artist leads the viewer’s eyes not to the whole person but to the torso only. The rest of the figures are cropped, dehumanizing the subjects. Even the intact body of a righteous warrior is missing the head above the mouth.

The strippling warrior image has proved to be a favorite motif for other designers as well. In December 1995, a small jewelry company, Lyon Design Studio (LDS), began marketing a line of trinkets based almost entirely on the strippling warrior image. Men can purchase sterling silver warrior rings and pendants in a “very masculine gun metal color,” according to the promotional brochure. Another ring is advertised as able to spur “missionary discussion”: “a provocative ring, begging the question, ‘What is a Stripling Warrior?’” These rings acknowledge that male buyers can feel comfortable wearing jewelry, as long as it is the color of a weapon. (To add to the “warrior” image, the pendants hang from the same type of chain as do soldiers’ dog tags.) More important, the underlying message is that masculine imagery, like the “ripling [sic] muscles” advertised, is an effective missionary tool that will help to bring others into the Church. Exaggerated manhood will be an attractive selling point for religion. Women are not neglected, however. The company also markets a keychain and pendant “just for girls,” with the message, “Waiting for my Stripling Warrior.” Objects with their emphasis on waiting reinforce ideals of feminine passivity and submissiveness. Girls are not to become strippling warriors; they are to wait for warriors to
Even the Nike slogan "Just Do It"—which echoes President Kimball’s motto, "Do it"—has found its way onto T-shirts heralding a muscular Book of Mormon hero, Nephi. The variation on the Nike slogan replaces Nephi’s declaration “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded” (1 Ne. 3:7).

Paradoxically, mass-produced kitsch can and does permit its owners to express uniqueness and individuality.

As it has evolved, Mormon material culture has reflected the beliefs, aspirations, and cultural location of Latter-day Saints. So, tracing the historical development of Mormon material culture, it is important to include the mass-produced kitsch that represents its most recent manifestation. We can identify three rough periods of postwar Mormon material culture. I’ll elaborate by focusing on youth items. The first period, stretching perhaps into the early 1970s, emphasized the homemade nature of the objects. Mormon children were encouraged to construct their own banners, bandelos, tithing banks, and other paraphernalia, often as a group project during Primary, which was held after school on a weekday. The second period, the 1970s and early 1980s, represent a transitional period; the Church manufactured many youth-directed items in Salt Lake City, then widely disseminated them at the ward level, encouraging individuals to personalize and embellish the objects. For example, Merrie Miss bracelets were popular demonstrations of girls’ achievements in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The girls would receive bare bracelets, ordered from LDS Distribution, but paste on the multicolored plastic “jewels” themselves as they achieved the goals established for their age group. Merrie Miss banners worked much the same way, with girls receiving the
them from Salt Lake and embroidering adornments themselves as they completed their objectives.

By the 1990s, the third period, LDS material culture was more often prefabricated than homemade, and produced in unprecedented quantities. Within the Church-run programs, formerly hand-crafted items were replaced by standardized, mass-produced objects. In the Young Women's organization, for example, the late 1980s saw the introduction of identical, ready-to-wear necklaces as rewards for the completion of the various stages of the Personal Progress program.

Moreover, as noted above, LDS material culture was no longer confined to those objects produced by the Church for Church use. It had spread into new areas, with individual tastes and preferences directing the market. By the late 1980s, the demand for Mormon books and paraphernalia netted approximately $35 million annually, a figure that has grown substantially in the last decade. More than half of the market share is controlled by Deseret Book, the official retail for-profit publication arm of the LDS Church. Deseret Book currently operates thirty-three stores in nine states. The company has expanded its annual offerings of new books from sixty to seventy-five in the late 1980s to over one hundred new titles in the late 1990s.

The demand for distinctively Mormon objects has also led to a 1990s explosion of small mom-and-pop companies, unaffiliated with the institutional Church, which offer games, toys, books, videos, and clip art for Mormon youth. Deseret Book has intentionally refrained from producing these "sideline items," though it provides the primary retail outlets that sell the products to LDS consumers. Apart from the retail outlets, some of these smaller or home-based businesses do an increasing amount of commerce on the Internet, dealing directly with Mormon consumers.

WHY THE BOOMING SALES OF KITSCH?

FIVE possible reasons.

S EVERAL reasons for this recent proliferation of Mormon kitsch can be identified, considering both the production issues alluded to in the previous paragraph (who is manufacturing and selling these items?) and consumption issues (who is buying these objects and why?). First, we must recognize that the Mormon penchant for mass-produced objects has ridden the coattails of the heady expansion of the evangelical Christian kitsch market in the 1980s. By some estimates, Christian bookstores nearly quadrupled their sales from 1980 to 1990 and currently net several billion dollars annually. Certainly, the success of the Christian market has provided a model for Mormon entrepreneurs. The LDS Bookstores Association was partly modeled after the Christian Booksellers Association, and some cross-vending occurs between them. Still far more commonly Mormon bookstores sell evangelical merchandise than vice versa, such as the LDS adoption of the WWJD necklaces ("What Would Jesus Do?"). Mormons and evangelicals have both followed the larger market trend toward promoting youth items, devoting an increasing segment of their product lines to children's and young adult merchandise. (The unprecedented recent sales of VeggieTales Bible story videos for evangelical children, for example, reflect a tremendous evangelical interest in imparting biblical knowledge and "traditional" values through entertaining and culturally relevant means.

Yet the explosion of mass-produced Mormon kitsch cannot be explained as simply an imitation of the evangelical experience. A second and significant explanation lies within the growing Mormon community itself. Obviously, LDS demographic changes have sparked at least some of this expansion in Mormon material culture. Mormonism in the United States is growing, though not as rapidly as in Africa and Latin America. In November of 1997, LDS membership passed the ten million mark, with slightly less than half of these members living in the United States. Moreover, the Mormon subculture is a youthful one, a fact that only reifies the youth-directed orientation of marketplace for religious kitsch and which raises interesting questions: Is the youth focus of Mormon kitsch because youth today have disposable income? Is it due to our agenda to indoctrinate young minds (marketing-driven)? Is it inherited from the youth-focus of official, Church-produced objects of earlier decades? Is it due to something else?

A third interpretive angle suggests that the upsurge in Mormon kitsch represents a larger historical Mormon trend toward consumption and genteel aspirations. Historian R. Laurence Moore has noted that from its earliest manifestations in U.S. life, Mormonism offered its adherents an "easier conscience about leisure than the American culture from which they were exiled."33 But what Moore and others have routinely missed is that the Mormon penchant for recreation has generally coexisted with a theologically comfortable relationship with the monetary acquisition that makes leisure possible. In other words, as a people, postwar U.S. Mormons have demonstrated a flexible, positive attitude toward having money and attaining "secular" success. Such entrepreneurialism has not ordinarily been supplemented by the cultural frugality manifested by other economically successful religious groups such as the Puritans. Although admonitions to avoid debt are common in general conference talks and Ensign articles, these warnings are almost never accompanied by characterizations of money itself as dangerous. LDS leaders routinely portray money as positive, encourage Church members to use it wisely, and emphasize the importance of tithing. This sanguine approach to money is supported by the prevalence of successful businessmen and entrepreneurs among general authorities, whom Mormons are taught to honor and emulate.

In such a subculture, where affluence is at least subtly perceived as a blessing and vigorous asceticism is virtually unknown, material objects speak of both a family's spiritual priorities and economic success. Mormons have displayed tastes and gentility using a variety of home decorations, from the hand-crafted Relief Society grapes that adorned coffee-less coffee tables in the 1960s to today's framed, parchment copies of the 1995 Proclamation on the Family. Almost all religious
groups use objects to some degree to express religious values in the home. And this use is doubly true of Mormonism, which subtly encourages the acquisition of material things and also upholds the home as a comfortable, sacred refuge.

A fourth reason for the expansion of mass-produced Mormon kitsch is the Correlation Movement. Since the 1960s, the LDS church has sought to consolidate all of its programs, auxiliaries, and activities under the priesthood-directed banner of Correlation. In practical terms, Correlation encourages that the same Relief Society lesson will be taught the same Sunday, in every Mormon ward from Tonga to Tokyo. The Church provides the necessary curriculum, and the program is intended to enhance the unity of the Mormon experience across cultures. Standardized visual experiences are an important part of this uniformity. As art historian David Morgan has shown, mass-produced images and objects can be reassuring by their ubiquity: they provide "the very means of making concrete, uniform, and universal the memories and feelings that define the individual." With the Church's rapid expansion, Mormon identity has become as much an issue of confluent objects as of unified belief. "Approved" religious art, official photographs of the First Presidency, framed copies of the Proclamation on the Family, and representations of temples are common adornments in ward meetinghouses and LDS homes. They are instantly recognizable to other Mormons, creating an important universal bond through shared representation.

On the other hand, the uniformity of Correlation may have also encouraged individual Mormons to express their religious faith in unprecedented—almost carnivalesque—ways. Based on the objects collected and examined for this study, Correlation has also seemed to provoke a sort of independent backlash, especially among adolescents and young adults. Mormon kitsch, purchased individually to express personal tastes, can provide a means to retain personal distinctiveness in a standardized program. Remember, the huge upsurge in Mormon kitsch is not promoted by the institutional Church but by small-scale entrepreneurs and companies that offer Mormon-related objects to suit a wide variety of tastes and clientele. Individual choice drives the market. For example, all Young Women receive the same Church-produced medallions through the Personal Progress Program, but the same adolescent girls express their Mormonism individually by selecting the style, color, and language of their CTR rings or the logos on their T-shirts that they purchase with their own money.

Paradoxically, mass-produced kitsch can and does permit its owners to express uniqueness and individuality. Finally, religious kitsch may also be thriving in Mormondom because of the relative absence of formal sacred rituals in Mormon homes. In contrast to other religions, such as Judaism, Mormonism lacks a tradition of special religious holidays, weekly Sabbath meals and rites, formulaic family prayers, or traditional cultural foods (lime Jell-O notwithstanding). More formal LDS rituals, such as infant blessings, baptisms, missionary farewells, and, of course, sacrament meetings generally take place within the sanctioned space of the ward meetinghouse, not the home. Moreover, Mormons invest an additional layer of sacralization in the very private and revered space of the temple, where the most hallowed rites of the faith (endowments and sealings) are conducted. With the clear exception of the temple garment, LDS practice rarely permits Mormons' most sacred ritual moments to spill over into the everyday spaces where they work, eat, and play.

How can material objects confer a sense of Mormon identity, and what do they tell us about Mormon values?
The absence of formal home-based rituals does not indicate that Mormon spirituality is divorced from the home. On the contrary, devotional practices such as daily private prayer and scripture study, regular family prayer, weekly family home evening, and blessings before meals all reflect Mormons’ desire to sacralize the home and uplift the individuals who inhabit it. And, as in most other religions, objects offer a way to remind their owners of their beliefs and tie them more concretely to the sacred rituals that occur outside the home. For Mormons, objects are chosen to reinforce the rituals that take place in chapel and temple: a framed Proclamation of the Family may remind parents of covenants made at their temple marriage, or a CTR ring received as a baptismal gift may spur a teen to remain accountable to baptismal promises.

Demographics, larger trends in the religious marketplace, Correlation, and the desire to sacralize the home all help to explain why mass-produced kitsch has proliferated recently in Mormondom. A broader explanation is that contemporary Mormon kitsch reflects a desire to be accepted into the larger culture, but on Mormon terms. When a subculture asserts its right to copy and subtly change images from its host culture, that subculture has arrived. This has been especially true of Mormon youth, who are consumers in their own right and have demonstrated their preferences for objects that herald both their Mormon values and their own, up-to-the-minute cultural panache. The inherent moral tensions of some of these objects, however, reveal how they simultaneously reveal young Mormons’ comfort and unease with U.S. culture.

AND THE FUTURE HOLDS?

Kitsch as an increasingly visible barometer of just how much Americanization Mormons will accept.

In 1994, sociologist Armand Mauss suggested two enduring Mormon symbols that best reflect Mormonism’s struggle to remain theologically distinct yet culturally relevant—Angel Moroni and the beehive. The angel Moroni, Mauss observed, calls to mind all that is theologically unique about Mormonism—it’s claims to latter-day revelation, and its adherence to a contemporary prophet. The beehive, however, “represents the borrowings from the outside world that have always been a part of the Mormon subculture.” These two symbols have been held in careful tension throughout Mormom history. In the twentieth century, Mauss writes, Mormonism has veered more toward the “beehive” motif of cultural assimilation. However, Mauss notes that in the last few decades, the pendulum has shifted in the other direction, once again emphasizing “the prophetic and revelatory claims of Mormonism.”

Mormon material culture demonstrates our desire to place both of these symbols in a delicate balance. If a Mormon youth is perceived as drawing too heavily from “the world” for cultural and spiritual values, objects such as Young Women’s value bookmarks and CTR T-shirts offer constant reminders that a Mormon is different, special, set apart. If, however, that youth craves acceptance into the wider culture, the very same objects can provide an alternative signification: the value bookmark hints that a latent sensuality lies concealed beneath the veneer of Mormon discourse on female chastity; the CTR T-shirt intimates the popular logo of Calvin Klein to declare its message of gospel living.

Mormon kitsch, then, reflects Mormonism’s current dilemma of cultural relevance versus social and theological distinctiveness. A recent locus for this dichotomy is these objects’ inculation of gender values; increasingly, objects declare Mormon distinctiveness by means of traditional gender roles. For material culture directed toward Mormon youth, such gender expectations are particularly pronounced.

As Mormon kitsch continues to proliferate, Latter-day Saints will need to examine their devotional material culture carefully as they balance the delicate parameters of the “angel” and the “beehive.” Mormons will always invest purchased objects with unspoken and unwritten feelings about their religious identity, degree of comfort with mainstream culture, class consciousness, and gender expectations. Although created by an independent marketplace, these objects reinforce the evolving standards of Mormon theology and are shaped by the beliefs of Mormon leaders and followers. Mormon kitsch will increasingly be a visible barometer of what constitutes acceptable cultural engagement for Mormons in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

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1. Robert Kirby and Pat Bagley, Sunday of the Living Dead: A Collection of Mormon Humor (Carson City, Nev.: Buckaroo Books, 1995), 99. Kirby suspected the items were produced not for Mormons but tourists.


5. Mormon kitsch does not always re-appropriate images from sources whose morals are questionable; it also has borrowed designs and representations from more generally “Christian” wellsprings. One advertisement at the Deseret Book website promises that “if you enjoy Precious Moments®, you’ll love this adorable 4” Stripling Warrior.” The figure is painted with a chubby, cherubic child’s face. He carries a CTR shield, which is almost as large as his body, and wields a white sword. Here, the distinctively Mormon image of the Stripling Warrior (see below) has been grafted on to the wildly popular, dew-eyed models for Precious Moments collectibles. In another example, 1998 saw the Liahona company release a line of T-shirts with the “Touched by an Angel” logo, borrowed from the inspirational CBS television show. In this case, however, the angel depicted was Moroni. The wearer of this T-shirt could simultaneously express an easy comfort with mainline Christian values and a stubborn Mormon theological distinctiveness.


10. lds-grads list query, interview 5.

11. lds-grads list query, interview 1.


15. The Young Women’s and Young Men’s organizations involve LDS youth between the ages of twelve and seventeen.


18. "Whiteness" is the color commonly associated with the temple; men and women are clothed from head to toe in white during all temple ordinances. Recently, a Mormon woman entrepreneur has created White Elegance, a line of clothing stores opening for business in the mid-1990s.

19. President James E. Faust, "How Near to the Angels," Young Women’s meeting, 28 Mar. 1998. Reprinted in the Ensign, (May 1998), 95. LDS leaders’ discourse about sexual abstinence is not exclusively directed to girls. A week after the President’s broadcast, President Gordon B. Hinckley delivered a talk to the Aaronic Priesthood in which he laid out expectations that boys must be "absolutely clean" before marriage. However, only a small portion of the talk discussed sexual abstinence (never using the word "chastity"), with the rest of the talk devoted to issues such as controlling anger, keeping the Word of Wisdom, and earning enough money so that the boys’ future wives could be homemakers. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Living Worthy of the Girl You Will Someday Marry,” Ensign, May 1998, 49–51.

20. Many of the objects for the Young Women program relate to these seven values, each value has a color and a flower assigned to it.


23. McDannell, 240.


25. Lyon Design Studio website, http://www.lyonde-sign.com/products.html. The message "Looking for my Stripling Warrior" is also marketed for girls. In late 1998, the company introduced a heart-shaped pendant for particularly successful girls with the message, "Found my Stripling Warrior."


27. Before the names of Primary classes were changed in the mid-1990s, a 'Merrie Miss' was an 11-year-old girl. As part of Correlation, Primary classes are now designated only by age and, where appropriate, gender. Merrie Misses are now called "11-year-old girls."


29. Bronwyn Evans, publicist, Deseret Book. Telephone interview, 3 Apr. 1998. This figure includes cloth, paperback, and audio books.


34. Scholars have previously focused their attention on Mormons' roles as economic producers, not consumers. See especially Leonard Arrington, Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958). Arrington's excellent study does not consider Mormon consumption, the other half of the economic equation (though Arrington's book concludes with the end of the nineteenth century, before Mormon consumption achieved significant historical importance). In the forty years since Arrington's history was published, no historical work has adequately treated the Mormon consumer presence. More recent studies have examined the wealth of the corporate LDS church but have not addressed patterns of wealth and consumption among individual Latter-day Saints.


36. See Morgan, 17, 134.


38. See especially McDannell, Material Christianity, 246-269.


THE DREAM YOU AWAKE FROM

"A steady stream of correspondences!"
—Theodore Roethke

The dream you wake from matters less, it seems,
than the river flowing like moon rays
through the glass. There’s no sleep now.
Suddenly you see the gnarling tree below
the grayish water, how it swells and joins,
and where the cottonmouth lurks.
Next you know exactly how to change
your cove, then an acre, then a sweep.
Who knows you sit in darkness
with cocoa steaming into smoke from sage.
Ask anything. Scan the round horizon.
By daylight you’ll see only what is here.

—LINDA SILLTOE