

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.

STRIPLING WARRIORS CHOOSE THE RIGHT

THE CULTURAL ENGAGEMENTS OF CONTEMPORARY MORMON KITSCH

By Jana K. Riess

ROBERT KIRBY, *SALT LAKE TRIBUNE* HUMOR columnist, 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.¹ 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.² But such elitist 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.”³ 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

A rapid, twenty-year evolution of kitsch.

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.”⁴ 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

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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-convict 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.⁵ 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."

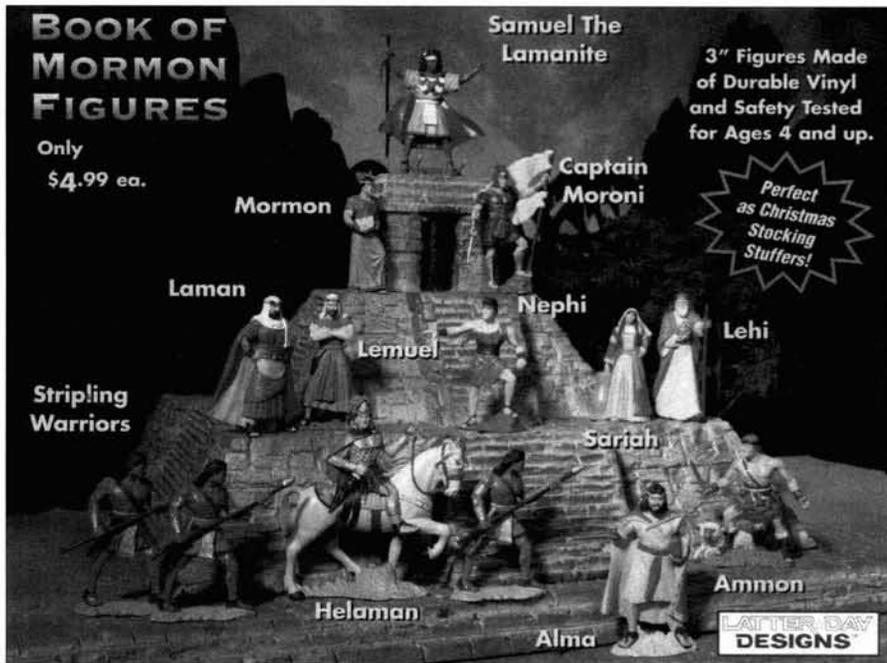
Cultural friction seems strongest in the vast array of objects specifically directed to missionary experience. One T-shirt uses



This shirt "exposes" religion to a public audience, but it also suggests that its wearer is hip to a popular TV show.

Contemporary Mormon kitsch reflects a desire to be accepted into the larger culture, but on Mormon terms.

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.⁶ 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 from popular culture. 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.”⁷

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.⁸ 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.⁹ One recipient noted that these early CTR rings were “Cracker Jack box” quality and intended to be worn only by young children.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

CTR rings were first hawked for profit by vendors working part-time out of their vans in the early 1980s. By 1985, the BYU

