

# Creating Zion Art

## A New Direction for Mormon Art

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*“Therefore, verily, thus saith the Lord, let Zion rejoice,  
for this is Zion—the pure in heart; therefore, let Zion rejoice”  
(D&C 97:21).*

**F**or several decades, the questions, “What is Mormon Art?” and “Is there a Mormon aesthetic?” have been highly discussed and debated in Mormon artistic circles. These questions and the ideas revolving around them, spawned from the Mormon Festival of the Arts founded in 1969 at Brigham Young University (BYU) as well as the publication of a book titled, *Mormon Arts, Volume One* (1972). This paper will give context to the origination of these questions by briefly discussing the Mormon Festival of the Arts and the book, *Mormon Arts*. It will then address the two questions above and will argue, as Robert Paxton argued in his opening address at the 2006 Mormon Arts Festival Winter Retreat, that Mormon Art is really Zion Art. By looking at specific works of art, this paper will show that spiritual truths are best conveyed through symbols, but that there is no *universal* visual language that can evoke a spiritual experience, and thus there is no Mormon aesthetic. I will finish by arguing that regardless of a universal Mormon aesthetic, the Mormon artist has a duty to try to convey Zion in order to uplift and elevate the viewer.

In 1967, a group of BYU students and faculty members “met on Sunday evenings to discuss art and Mormon belief” (Wheelwright). They felt that works of visual art expressing Mormon culture were not being encouraged enough within the Church. The performing arts - music, drama, dance - have historically received stronger support from the Church and its leaders.

James Haseltine, Mormon author and art historian, suggests that this is because the “performing arts are essentially group arts. And the solidarity of the group, of the gathered people, is essential to Mormonism” (Haseltine, 19). Since visual arts, such as painting and sculpture, are essentially individual arts, they have received less active encouragement within the church and thus the idea for the Mormon Festival of Arts originated. It was spawned also by an address given in 1967 by Spencer W. Kimball, then an Apostle of the Church, who later became the president and prophet. He delivered the annual faculty lecture of the year and his address was later published in the Church’s *Ensign* Magazine, titled “The Gospel Vision of the Arts.” He stated:

*“We are proud of the artistic heritage that the Church has brought to us from its earliest beginnings, but the full 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. They must be faithful, inspired, active Church members to give life and feeling and true perspective to a subject so worthy.”*

The address became a mantra for many Mormon artists. The first festival was presented in 1969 featuring an art exhibition of paintings, sculptures, and photographs by Mormon artists. In 1970 and 1971, the

festival expanded to include many events involving visiting artists, original compositions, literary works, and ballet. The festival continued to expand and change over the years and “has become a focal point for many LDS artists in all media, and has represented an institutional endorsement of new directions in LDS art” (Myer). The festival created an outpouring of art forms on religious themes and many symposia that discussed how Mormon beliefs and practices affect and inspire artists.

An outgrowth of the annual Mormon Festival of the Arts at BYU was the publication of a book by Lorin F. Wheelwright and Lael J. Woodbury titled, *Mormon Arts, Volume One*. Published in 1972, the book contains reproductions of paintings, illustrations and photographs as well as examples of prose, poetry, and drama of Mormon writers. The back of the book contains a companion phonodisc with selections from the audible arts presented at the festivals. But the book is more than simply a collection of sights and sounds. A series of essays discuss and raise provocative issues regarding the arts and the LDS Church. Some of the questions raised in the book are, “What should we be doing to make our artistic contributions and creations more significant and meaningful to the church, to the membership, and to the world? What direction shall the form and style of our art take? To what extent should we rely upon the historical heritage or current movements of the Western world?” (Mathews). Will Mormon theology, history, and values give rise to a recognizably distinct artistic expression? Is there a Mormon art?

Peter Myer, artist and professor at BYU, and

his wife Marie, suggest that the idea of “Mormon Art” as presented in the book and the “thesis that there is some cohesive quality that separates art by Mormons from the rest of the world of art needs to be re-examined” (Myer). What is Mormon art? Is it art created by Mormons, whether or not it is religious in nature, or is it art that is specifically Mormon in content? When one speaks of Mormon art, they usually speak of art that is Mormon in content and that falls into a traditionally conservative and didactic Mormon aesthetic such as John Scott’s Painting, *Jesus Teaching in the Western Hemisphere* (which, interestingly enough, was painted the same year as the Mormon Festival of the Arts in 1969).

If a Mormon artist creates art that is not particularly Mormon in content, how then are we to know that it was created by a Mormon artist? The religious denomination of the artist is irrelevant to whether or not an artist’s work is good or commercially viable. Art will never be recognized because someone wants their religious affiliation to become more prominent. It will only be recognized if it is good art. Faith can still play a role in that art, but the art has to be transformative and influential or it just doesn’t merit museum-type attention. Perhaps this is why a search on the MoMA website for “Mormon” or “Latter-day Saint” only produces such results as a photograph by Ansel Adams of a Mormon temple or a brief description stating that Dorothea Lange photographed “the Mormons.” Similar results are found for “Lutheran,” “Methodist,” “Baptist,” “Presbyterian” and “Catholic”. Perhaps artists simply are not routinely identified by their religion.



*Jesus Teaching in the Western Hemisphere (Jesus Christ Visits the Americas)* by John Scott, 1969

“What is Mormon art?” is a difficult question to answer now in the 21st century with Mormonism now being a global religion. What is the culture of Mormonism? We have categories such as Roman Art, Egyptian Art, and Chinese Art, but unlike most tribes and peoples, none of Mormonism’s heritage is restricted to any ethnic group or country. Anyone can choose to adopt Mormonism’s heritage as part of their own identity. The whole world is getting less national and more global and Mormonism is one of the world’s first great post-national cultures. In *Mormon Arts, Volume One*, Wheelwright suggests that Mormon art should be based on core Mormon theology. One example he gives is found in the essay, “Is There a Mormon Art?” where he expands on the Mormon belief that man is an eternal being, created in the image of God. “This high value in man, which makes his soul sacred and priceless among all of creation, distinguishes the Mormon viewpoint from contemporary materialism,” says Wheelwright. He continues by suggesting that this belief...

*“negates the pleasure some contemporary artists take in expressing the cruelty of man to man, a sadistic pleasure in suffering, and the cesspool view of man’s excesses. Mormon artists work to express the divine in man by revealing his beauty of spirit... and by avoiding the contemporary vogue of exploiting hedonistic sex.”*

Beyond specific examples like avoiding the expression of pleasurable suffering or the exploitation of hedonistic sex, it seems that Mormon artists must derive aesthetic principles by extrapolation.

Doug Stewart and Robert Paxton, both authors and playwrights who became the festival organizers in 1997, do not believe that Mormon art means only depictions of Mormon pioneers migrating across the plains, adaptations of the Book of Mormon, or portraits of founder Joseph Smith. In 1997 Paxton said, “anything that comes from the heart and soul of a Mormon is Mormon art” (Stack). This broad definition may be contrary to many views of Mormon art, however, years later in an opening address at the 2006 Mormon Arts Festival Winter Retreat, Stewart shed some valuable light on the idea. He raised the question, “are we Mormons creating Mormon art, or [just] artists who happen to be Mormons?” He continued by offering his opinion that he prefers the first definition but with one word change – “Mormons creating Zion art.” He warned that “artists who [just] happen to be Mormons face the risk of taking too many cues from influential elements of contemporary art, and in that sense becoming imitators” (Hansen). Greg Hansen,

Mormon composer and record producer who reported on the opening address given by Stewart, commented that, “The concept of ‘Mormons creating Zion art,’ means admitting that there can be a Zion art – not just LDS subjects, but a genuine and characteristic art that actually manifests the Zion perspective, ethos and sensitivity to the universe” (Hansen).

If we are going to accept Stewart’s idea that Mormon Art should really be labeled as Zion Art, then we must first understand what Zion is, particularly from a Mormon perspective. Elder Bruce R. McConkie, an Apostle of the Church, said in an address in 1977:

*“Zion has been established many times among men. From the day of Adam to the present moment—whenever the Lord has had a people of his own; whenever there have been those who have hearkened to his voice and kept his commandments; whenever his saints have served him with full purpose of heart—there has been Zion.”*

*The Doctrine and Covenants*, a compilation of revelations given to Joseph Smith and other church leaders, reiterates and expands the definition that Zion is wherever God is served with full purpose of heart, by saying, “for this is Zion—the pure in heart; therefore, let Zion rejoice” (D&C 97:21).

Zion is not simply a place, but also a quality of being, that is, pure in heart. This quality is also described in the Church’s Thirteenth Article of Faith: “... If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.” Mormons around the world strive to seek after these things and create this purity of heart in their own communities, families, and individual lives. Creating Zion is seen as part of God’s plan for his children. For Mormons, the creative act is essentially a spiritual act, whether creating Zion, a sonata, a painting, a child or a world. “In its purest form, the act of creation is not only a commission from the Father, but an act of partnership with Him.” (Myer). Within this act of partnership, Mormon artists constantly face the question of how, or if, their art expresses their faith and the Zion they are trying to create. They feel they have a responsibility to create art that will reflect the unique spirit of their religious beliefs.

In *The Doctrine and Covenants*, God says, “For my soul delighteth in the *song* of the heart; yea, the *song* of the righteous is a *prayer* unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads. Wherefore, lift up thy heart and rejoice...” (D&C 25:12-13, italics added). This passage occurs in connection with the instruction to Emma Smith (Joseph

Smith's wife) to make a collection of hymns, however there is no indication that the Lord's endorsement is limited to hymn singing. The sincere expression of feelings through dance, or by painting, acting, writing, playing an instrument, or designing a pleasing structure of worship, may also please God and give the artist equal blessings as he who sings a "song of the heart." *The Doctrine and Covenants* also states "For Zion must increase in beauty and in holiness;..." (D&C 82:14). The idea here is that the arts can be an embodiment of beauty and can have a profound spiritual value as if to suggest that it "might function parallel to the increasing of holiness in Zion. If the '[*painting*]' of the heart encourages holiness and leads towards increasing the beauty of Zion, it is no wonder that the Lord says, "It delighteth... my soul" (Bradshaw).

In other words, to create Zion means to create a more holy or spiritual life or environment, for which Zion Art would help one do. A synonym for 'holy' is 'sacred' and Webster's New World College dictionary defines 'sacred' as, "consecrated to or belonging to divinity or a deity; holy; regarded with the respect or reverence accorded holy things; venerated; hallowed" (Agnes). In the broadest sense, one might think of the sacred as anything that comes from God and anything that is offered to God. This property of sacred or holy can be ascribed to people, object, time, and place. That same dictionary defines 'spiritual' as, "of the spirit or the soul as distinguished from the body or material matters; characterized by the ascendancy of the spirit; showing much refinement of thought and feeling." Creating Zion art is a new direction in thinking about Mormon art. And as Hansen argued, it means that there must be an "art that actually manifests the Zion perspective, ethos and sensitivity." Now with this understanding of Zion and the Mormon artist, we will delve deeper into Zion art by asking, what makes art sacred or spiritual? How is the sacred or spiritual manifest in material form? Is the art object itself sacred, or is it simply a bridge to transport a spiritual experience? Is there some universal visual recipe for creating Zion art?

The spiritual and the sacred demand an inwardness that seems contrary to the clear outward material of fine art. They demand self reflection, meditation, focus on the inner spirit, putting off the natural man, and denouncing materialism, whereas today's art seems to say, 'look at me, glorify the object, and enjoy the sensuous.' However, there is a deep connection between the spiritual and matter. John Durham Peters, a Mormon and an associate Professor at the University of Iowa, commented on a scripture saying, "The marriage of matter and spirit

is the order of the eternities: 'spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy; And when separated, man cannot receive a fulness of joy' (D&C 93:33-34)" (Peters, 47). Both Peters and the scripture he quoted, I believe, are referring to that which God created—the earth, animals, and human life itself. In Mormon theology, "God created all things... spiritually, before they were [created] naturally" (Smith, Moses 3:5). Literally speaking, every life form and particle of the earth consists also of spirit. With the existence of this magnificent truth, it is also important to say, along with Peters, that, "we hardly have any inkling of the philosophical and practical consequences of the materiality of spirit and the spirituality of matter" (Peters, 47). The question arises though, if all particles of earth also consist of some spiritual matter unseen to the human eye or by any machine known to man, then are we to believe that man-made objects, created from the reappropriation of matter, also have literal spirits? Such a question seems absurd and a thorough discussion of the topic is not pertinent for this essay. It is only presented in order to ask whether there is something spiritually inherent in a work of art that makes it 'sacred' or 'spiritual' or is it simply the viewer or artist who projects the sacred upon it?

Karsten Harries, a philosopher and professor at Yale University claimed that "constitutive of the sacred, is the inseparable unity of spirit and matter." Speaking of the sacred manifest in material form, he said, "the sacred breaks into the horizontality of the mundane and establishes a vertical that unites heaven and earth. The divine logos descends into the visible. Meaning is incarnated in matter. Matter becomes the bearer of divinity. That gives objects we experience as sacred their special aura" (Harries, 15). Here Harries describes a sort of portal between heaven and earth which allows the divine to descend on the physical object. In answering the previous question with Harries' statement, art would not be inherently sacred, but would become such as the divine descends upon it. In considering if art has the potential to become sacred by its possession of the divine, it is necessary to understand what the 'divine' is that Harries mentions, and how and why it can 'descend'. I will address this by looking at Rudolf Otto's, *The Idea of the Holy* and Mormon Christian Theology.

Otto's central claim is that "religion is not exclusively contained and exhaustively comprised in any series of 'rational' assertions" (Otto, 4). There are different aspects of religious faith which he categorizes into rational and non-rational. He begins his argument by discussing 'the holy' and suggesting that "we generally take 'holy' as meaning 'completely

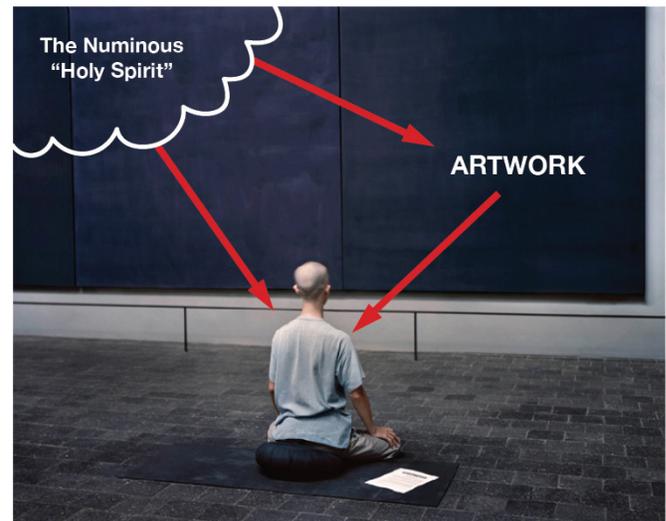
good” (Otto, 5). This for him is inadequate and thus he appeals to the term ‘numinous’, a term he uses for that which is above and beyond mere goodness and stripped of any moral factor, ‘moment’ or ‘rational’ aspect. For Otto, the human encounter with the numinous is a unique mental state that “cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes ‘of the spirit’ must be awakened” (Otto, 7). In other words, the numinous must be experienced.

According to Mormon theology, an experience with the numinous would be a spiritual experience with the Holy Ghost. In Mormonism, the trinity—God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost—are three distinctly separate beings. A passage in modern Mormon scripture states, “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us. A man may receive the Holy Ghost, and it may descend upon him and not tarry with him” (D&C 130: 22-23). Here we learn that the Holy Ghost can descend on us, dwell within us, and then leave. Despite the differences in trinitarian theology, the Mormon view is indeed quite interesting to consider in regards to this topic and several questions arise because of it. First of all, what does this numinous experience of having the Holy Ghost with us feel like and why does it occur?

An unknown clergyman reported an experience with the Holy Ghost saying that it was “like a great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards and almost bursting with its own emotion” (James, 70). Boyd Packer, an artist and Apostle in the Mormon Church said, “the voice of the spirit is described in the scriptures as being neither ‘loud’ nor ‘harsh’. It is ‘not a voice of thunder, neither ... voice of a great tumultuous noise,’ but rather ‘a still small voice of perfect mildness, as if it had been a whisper,’ and it can ‘pierce even to the very soul’ and ‘cause [the heart] to burn’ (3 Ne. 11:3; Hel. 5:30; D&C 85:6-7). Occasionally it will press just firmly enough for us to pay heed” (Packer). These statements seem to describe an emotional experience of the heart and soul, yet Otto described an “encounter with the numinous [as] a unique mental state”. Otto is not entirely wrong. A modern Mormon scripture found in the book of the Doctrine and Covenants records Jesus Christ speaking to one Oliver Cowdery as saying, “I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost” (D&C 8:2). Here we see that the Holy Ghost is not just a feeling of the heart,

but also something of the mind.

According to scripture and Christian theology, the Holy Ghost has many purposes. To comfort, to teach, to bring things to remembrance (*see John 14:26*), and to testify (*see John 15:26*). In relation to art, the Holy Ghost teaches and testifies of truth and goodness, purity and righteousness. This does not mean though, that every viewer of a good and truthful work of art will experience the numinous. There is a prevalent Mormon teaching that was well conveyed by Jeffrey Holland, an Apostle of the church with a PhD in American Studies from Yale University. Addressing the general body of the church at a world-wide broadcast in April 2011, he stated, “If we teach by the Spirit and you listen by the Spirit, some one of us will touch on your circumstance, sending a personal prophetic epistle just to you” (Holland). What does it mean to ‘teach by the spirit’ and to ‘listen by the spirit’ and how does this apply to Mormon artists and viewers of art?



Galatians 5:22-23 in the New Testament says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance”. Later in Ephesians 5:9 it says, “For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth”. What is the fruit of the artist? If an architect creates a building or an artist creates a painting or a photograph with pure intention, conveying goodness and truth, then according to Christian theology, the fruits of the Spirit would have to be in that thing. If the artwork conveyed truth, then isn’t it the job of the Holy Ghost to teach and testify of that truth? The artist therefore would be ‘teaching by the Spirit’. And in order to ‘listen by the Spirit’ and have an encounter with the numinous, Otto suggests that you must ‘awaken’ it. Throughout canonized scripture, we read that one must ‘ponder’, ‘seek’, and ‘listen’ and say, in



a manner and expression, like Samuel of ancient times, 'Speak [Lord], for thy servant heareth' (1 Sam. 3:10).

As Heidegger asks in "The Origin of the Work of Art", "Works are made available for public and private art appreciation. Official agencies assume the care and maintenance of work. Connoisseurs and critics busy themselves with them. Art dealers supply the market. Art historical study makes the works the objects of a science. Yet in all this busy activity, do we encounter the work itself?" (Heidegger, 39). Another way to ask this question is, are we, as the viewer of the art, 'listening by the spirit'? Are we pondering and considering what the artwork has to say to us or are we simply glancing at it for purely aesthetic entertainment?

Art is a form of communication devoid of language. It exists purely as line, shape, color, form, and texture. The combination of these elements create images and objects, whether abstract or figurative. Rudolf Otto said that, "all language, in so far as it consists of words, purports to convey ideas or concepts;—that is what language means;—and the more clearly and unequivocally it does so, the better the language. And hence expositions of religious truth in language inevitably tend to stress the rational attributes of God" (Otto, 2). Since official language of words stresses the rational, and art is devoid language, logically, art must therefore appeal to the irrational; the moments when it is simply futile to attempt to

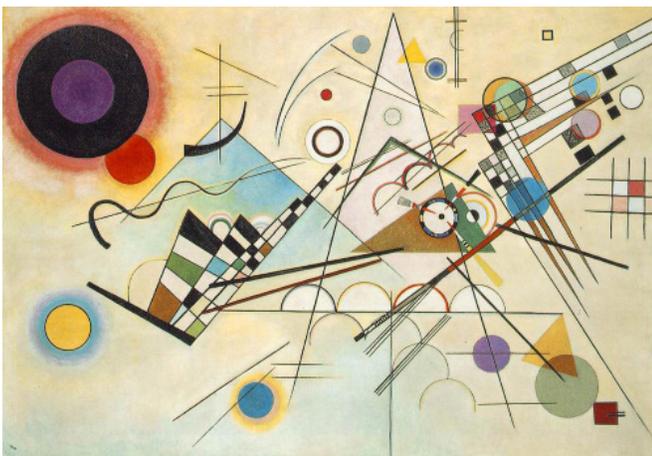
explain that which is unexplainable, when logic and reason cannot yield adequate understanding. This is not suggesting here that art contains the answers to the unexplainable in life, but is suggesting that art, and even architecture, by their very nature, like music or dance, can speak to the human spirit in a way that words cannot. It is because of this ability that art has, that causes the sacred to need art.

Because of this natural ability, art can be a bridge or stimulus in which to experience the Holy Ghost or 'fruits of the Spirit'. It is not entirely clear, but it seems that Harries truly believes that a divine spirit literally resides in a work, making it sacred so that "the emphasis is not on the subject, [the viewer], but on the object" (Harries, 24). He states that, "Spirit is experienced as dwelling in matter. The invisible and the visible here coincide" (Harries, 24). Though while analyzing a counter point, he wrote that, "at its highest, sacred [art] is somewhat like a bridge that transports us into an inner spiritual realm that allows us to enter some inner subjective space. As we cross that bridge everything material, and with it [art], is transcended as the solitary subject discovers within him or herself 'the awesome and timeless space of the holy' or the 'numinous.' [Art] is understood here as occasioning an experience of the numinous. So understood, it would seem, the numinous does not really reside in the [art], but in the subject" (Harries, 15). These statements by

Harries could perhaps show the difference between 'sacred art' and 'spiritual art' in that 'spiritual art' is a bridge to bring the Holy Ghost to the viewer, whereas with 'sacred art' the Holy Ghost remains in the object.

In summation, despite whether or not there is a literal materiality of spirit inherent in all matter, what is important is that when an artist, and in this case a Mormon artist, creates a work of art with pure intention, purity of heart, putting his whole soul into that thing, fully trying to convey truth and goodness and virtue, he or she is allowing the divine presence of the Holy Ghost to use that thing as a bridge in order to enter into the viewer and thus is creating Zion Art. And when the viewer encounters that work with an open heart and a desire to learn and communicate, it is then that the magic of the numinous can occur. Be it a simple mild peacefulness or a profound emotional orchestra, when this occurs, that work of art has just become spiritual. But what does it mean for an artist to convey truth and goodness in his work? What is truth in this case? Are there colors, shapes, or forms that are more truthful than others?

In order to answer these questions, let us consider the writings and work of Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) in relation to other works of art. Kandinsky was a leader of abstraction that spawned an art movement that has shaken everything the art world made for thousands of years before it, to its very core. He believed that only true art free from external form can relate to the world, or even more, help the world progress to a truly spiritual realm. In his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky expresses his disgust for the broad acceptance of, and reverence towards, materialistic art, art whose sole aim is the reproduction of objects, and art for art's sake. He argues that lines, shapes, and colors can be symbolic tools to convey the spiritual and impact the human



*Composition VIII* by Wassily Kandinsky, 1923

soul. "Colour awakens a corresponding physical sensation, which undoubtedly works upon the soul," he says. It is true that a warm red can be associated with the warmth and comfort or danger of a fire and a deep cool red can be associated with blood, but each color brings different thoughts and feelings to each individual making it nearly impossible to communicate a very distinct and clear message via pictorial art in the way messages are conveyed in literary art. Though colors do carry with them emotional power and perhaps that is the message, a message of joy, sadness, fear, or comfort. To give an example of how Kandinsky writes about color, he says that "white... is a symbol of a world from which all colour as a definite attribute has disappeared. This world is too far above us for its harmony to touch our souls. White is taken as symbolizing joy and spotless purity." (Kandinsky, 39)

So what are we to make of this? Kandinsky calls for the abandonment of the recognizable materialism that academic art of his time heralded as high and that is so often associated with "Mormon Art". He wants artists to use the power and symbolism of form and color to change the spirituality of society. This is a huge vision and undertaking, which many artists of today either neglect, don't believe in, or have yet to realize. However, does pure form and color, devoid of figurative representation, really act as symbols to allow the numinous to occur? Boyd Packer talks about how to convey spiritual truths in his book, *The Holy Temple*. "Spiritual truths are sometimes very difficult to teach. The most conclusive certification of man's intelligence is his ability to recreate in symbolic form the world in which he lives. In teaching the [spiritual], we do not re-create the material world around us; we deal with the intangible world within us. It is far easier to re-create the visible, tangible world around us in alphabetical symbols than to re-create the spiritual ideals and have them understood. And yet it can be done, and it can be done most effectively by using symbols" (Packer, 40).

Any Mormon, or Christian for that matter, should be able to agree with Packer's statement in light of Jesus's use of parables as literary symbols to convey spiritual truths. In our material world, symbols make the ineffable more easily understood. Kandinsky believes that simple colors and shapes act as a sort of visual 'parable' or metaphor to allow the viewer to encounter the numinous. Although, Frank Stella, another abstract artist (born 1936), would disagree with Kandinsky. When speaking about his work, he said:

*"I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting, the humanistic*



*Firuzabad* by Frank Stella, 1970

values that they always find on the canvas. If you pin them down, they always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen is there. It really is an object. [I am] making a thing. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all that I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without confusion.... What you see is what you see" (Harries, 9)

Harries remarked on Stella's comment saying, "On this view the painting does not in any way point beyond itself. It is neither symbol nor allegory. It does not say anything. Therefore it can be neither true nor false" (Harries, 10). Unlike Kandinsky, Stella does not choose his colors and shapes based on their spiritual properties or what they might evoke in the viewer. Symbolism does not exist for Stella—at least not in his paintings. But isn't it this quality of 'pointing beyond itself' that characterizes the religious or spiritual symbol? If so, this would rule out Stella's art as being classified as Zion art.

Let's look at one more work of art that is entirely different. The *Untitled* triptych, by contemporary Mormon artist and BYU graduate, Maddison Colvin is a far cry from the bright colorful abstract work of Kandinsky and Stella. Colvin, who is represented by Meyer Gallery of Park City, Utah, works in video, photography, painting, and sculpture. The *Untitled* triptych is a series of digital photographs of churches and cathedrals layered on top of each other at varying transparencies. These images seem to be precisely attuned to the ineffable quality of sacred spaces. The light that makes its way through the stained glass seems as transient as the light that continually redefines it. How do we compare this to Kandinsky's theory when it is clear that the color is a smudge of greys, browns, and dull unsaturated hues and that



*Untitled* by Maddison Colvin, 2014

there are no simple shapes or lines to act as symbols. Rather, the symbols here are the God-made element of light, the man-made element of sacred architecture and the vertical heavenward composition. In trying to convey the sublime, the spiritual, and the ineffable as an art photograph, Colvin relies heavily on light and architecture rather than color.

When looking at Colvin's photographs there is an incredible sense of sacredness. The fruits of the spirit—peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, or joy—can be felt. The fact that the spiritual can be felt through images external form desaturated of much color seems to be a harsh rebuttal to Kandinsky's spiritual art theory. Kandinsky is not necessarily wrong in his views, he is just not completely right. It is true that colors can "undoubtedly work upon the soul" and that lines, shapes, and colors can be visual symbols to convey the ineffable. But after looking at Colvin's work and comparing it with Kandinsky's, it is clear that there is *not* a universal visual language to communicate spiritually. For Mormon artists trying to convey a sense of the numinous, it is important to ask whether there are certain visual elements that are more truthful than others? The ancient Egyptians believed in the power of the triangle, the circle and the square. These shapes are even used symbolically in the temples of the Mormon faith. But that doesn't mean that other shapes, forms, and visual elements can't also convey the numinous. As can be seen in Colvin's photos, the use of light can also be a powerful symbol and tool.

To conclude, the Mormon Festival of the Arts and the book *Mormon Arts, Volume One*, brought into question the idea of Mormon art and Mormon aesthetics. Despite the many ideas of what Mormon art is or is not, what should be more important for Mormon artists is the new direction and idea of Zion art. More important than which visual elements are present—colors, shapes, textures, light, forms, etc—is how those

elements are being used. Are they being used to capture the Zion ethos and convey goodness and truth? Are they being used to inspire and uplift, to teach and to testify? Or are they being used just to look at, just to “make a thing”?

I argue that there is no universal Mormon aesthetic and there is no aesthetic to convey the sacred and spiritual, but rather that it is up to each Mormon artist to use the visual elements to convey the principles of Zion with sincerity and pure intention. As Dr. Merrill Bradshaw, composer and former Associate Professor at BYU, once said, “The problem - the challenge - to the mormon artist is the creation of a true synthesis of these many facets of his experience into a unified, integrated expression of his culture, his thought and his deepest, most precious possession, his testimony” (Bradshaw). When this is done, the visual elements, whether in the form of a person, a car, a tree, a circle, the color blue, or anything else, can take on meaning, become a symbol, and be used by the Holy Ghost to help the viewer experience the fruits of the spirit. Art has a natural ability to speak to the human spirit and evoke the spiritual in a way that words cannot and therefore Mormon artists have the responsibility to ‘teach by the spirit’ and then leave it up to the viewer to ‘listen by the spirit’. If we want to live in a better world, artists need to realize that even though art can be enjoyable and beautiful in its formal qualities, they cannot create art for art’s sake. To echo the words of Kandinsky, the artist “is not king of the castle but rather a servant of a noble purpose.”

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