

## Increasing Beauty in Zion: A Countercultural Idea

by Paul Monson

An address given to the Alliance of Mormon Artists  
at the Spring 2018 Fine Art and Faith Symposium, Thursday, March 29, 2018

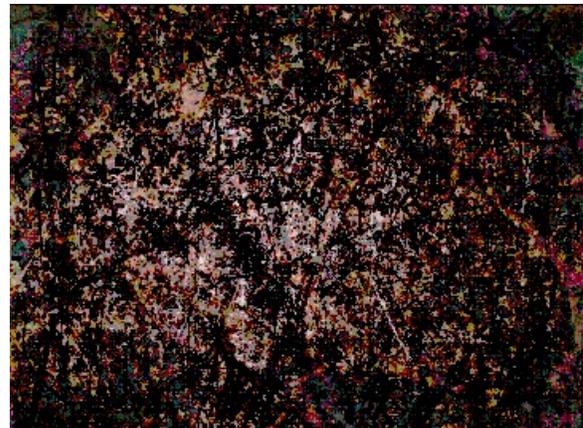
Good morning. I'm grateful to be here. I express my thanks to Herman du Toit and to all of you. My comments and views are my own, not positions of the church. In my off hours, in between the responsibilities of temple designer, father, and husband, I run a non-profit chapter of the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art.



The ICAA is the largest national non-profit promoting the classical tradition in architecture and the allied arts. Here in Utah our website is [Classicistutah.org](http://Classicistutah.org) where you can find a calendar of all our events. We post beautiful and useful things regularly to social media @ classicist Utah. We teach classes in Junior High through Universities and host lectures, tours, and events for the public to reflect on and learn from the past to create a more beautiful future.

My remarks today center around that word beauty – what it meant in the past and what it means today. I've titled this talk: Increasing Beauty in Zion: A Countercultural Idea. I'll only be able to poke at the surface a little bit, but – What is beauty, and why is it a countercultural idea? I'll start with a story.

When I was in college I visited the national gallery of art in DC with some friends. I don't remember what painting we were looking at specifically but probably something like this Jackson Pollock from 1950.



A friend was confused by this kind of art and so I found myself repeating to him the things I had been taught about art in high school and college. "This is important because it challenged the definition of what art is," I explained, not totally convinced that it was true but sure that my teachers would be proud.

A couple funny things about this painting, incidentally. When you add an image in powerpoint now, the image recognition software gives you a suggested written description of it, which can be kind of interesting. For this image, the suggested title was "close-up of a hill." Maybe Pollock

could have used that software to make his painting titles a little more expressive. I also discovered that you can buy a kit at home depot to create your own Jackson Pollock on your countertops. Very popular for those who want the look of granite for half the cost.



Sorry, I don't mean to make light of modern art too much.

Growing up, *beauty* was a word that was forbidden in my education and I imagine in many of yours as well. The only thing you could say about beauty was the cliché that *it's in the eye of the beholder*.

*It's a cultural thing, an individual thing. Entirely subjective and a matter of taste. Beauty as an ideal seems quaint to us today. It seems fake or forced. Real art is about concepts. It's about the artistic genius. It should reflect real life, and life isn't beautiful. It's full of weird stuff, or mundane stuff... like an unmade bed.*

Here is Tracey Emin's exhibit from the Tate Museum in 1998 titled "My Bed."



Or the now infamous urinal, which the provocateur Marcel Duchamp exhibited in 1917 with the title "Fountain" and in many ways started this mess we're in today in the art world.



*Life is disturbing, life is suffering and misery – and art should be honest about it, not sugarcoat it with beauty.* I took this view with me – packed it in my UHaul – to graduate school to study architecture at Notre Dame and found myself a little skeptical, a little defensive, when on the first or second day a professor said to us...

“Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder. It is an objective truth and the purpose of beauty is to bring us back into the presence of the sacred.”



Whoa. That was a new idea for me and started a long journey of introspection and study to figure out how there can be such radically different ideas about beauty, and where exactly I fall in that philosophical debate. My training in the arts said that originality was paramount, that I needed to find my own voice apart from anyone else, and that the past really had nothing to do with me. But I started to feel the past reaching out for me. I was confronted, awestruck even at times with the power and pull of tradition, of beauty, like a ghost. I began to study the rigorous language of classical architecture – from ancient Greece and Rome, through the Renaissance and the neo-classicism of the 19th century.

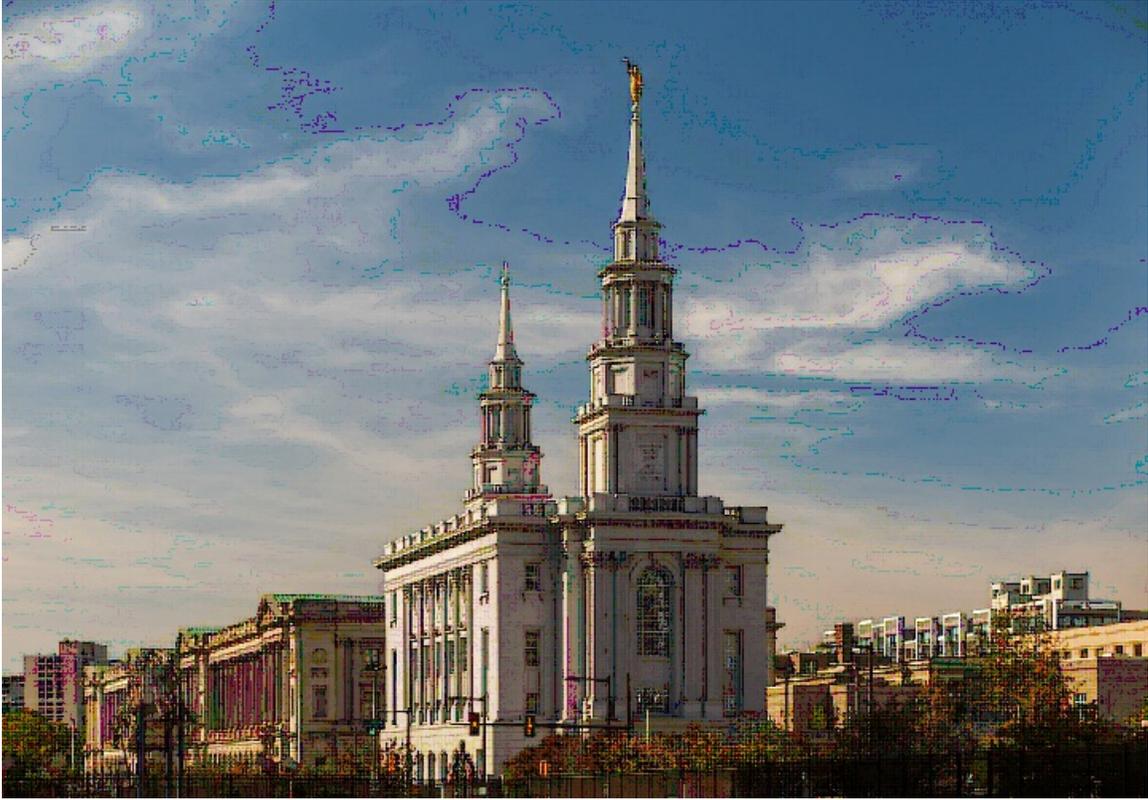
The most difficult to swallow for me trained as modernist was the idea that this could still be done legitimately today. I had learned that history was a story of progress, each artistic style fitting into its chronological category, each a part of the zeitgeist of its time, and all marching up to the inevitable climax of modernism.

I had never been taught in art history class that a building like the Washington National Cathedral was completed during my lifetime. That contemporary architecture could look like this. This was taboo. Not of our time.



Or this, a new town in England called Poundbury, designed for human-scale walkability, patterned after the way towns were built for centuries rather than modern automobile-centric suburban sprawl.





Or this, the Philadelphia Temple, which I recently had the blessing of working on with other designers at the church and at FFKR and Perkins & Will Architects. A building like this, a new classical building today, makes a lot of cultural elites uncomfortable. Critics didn't really know what to do with it. Ironically, the Philadelphia Enquirer called it the most radical building the city had seen in half a century, although the design intent was precisely the opposite. It wasn't intended to be radical, but beautiful, in a classical sense. What do I mean by that? We need to wrestle with that word beauty a bit.

Beauty is an ancient concept. It's also a gospel concept. The word beauty appears 59 times in the scriptures, 50 of those in the Old Testament. Not all references speak of beauty in a positive light. Some have a warning tone.





Psalms 31:30 "Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain"  
 Cautions against a counterfeit of beauty, pride and vanity, are common in scripture. While not using the word beauty directly, many Book of Mormon verses address the same idea.

Alma 5:53

“... yea, can ye be puffed up in the pride of your hearts; yea, will ye still persist in the wearing of costly apparel and setting your hearts upon the vain things of the world, upon your riches?”

As a designer of temples, which are expensive buildings, I take this caution very seriously. How do you achieve beauty without vanity?

What is the right balance between creating beautiful temples and saving sacred tithing funds? One scripture that I have pondered often is D&C 124:26-27. In Nauvoo in 1841, the saints were poor and struggling, yet what do we find in the Lord's instructions to Joseph Smith and William Weeks for His temple?



“And send ye swift messengers, yea, chosen messengers, and say unto them: Come ye, with all your gold, and your silver, and your precious stones, and with all your antiquities; and with all who have a knowledge of antiquities...and build a house to my name, for the Most High to dwell therein” (D&C 124:26-27).

Bring gold and silver, precious stones, copper, brass, wood, and all your precious things of the earth. In their poverty, the Lord asked for the very best materials they could bring, assembled by people who had studied antiquity, the best of the past. The saints in Nauvoo had to find a balance of course; they couldn't build the Palace of Versailles, nor would that be appropriate, but they also did not build a simple log cabin and say, good enough.

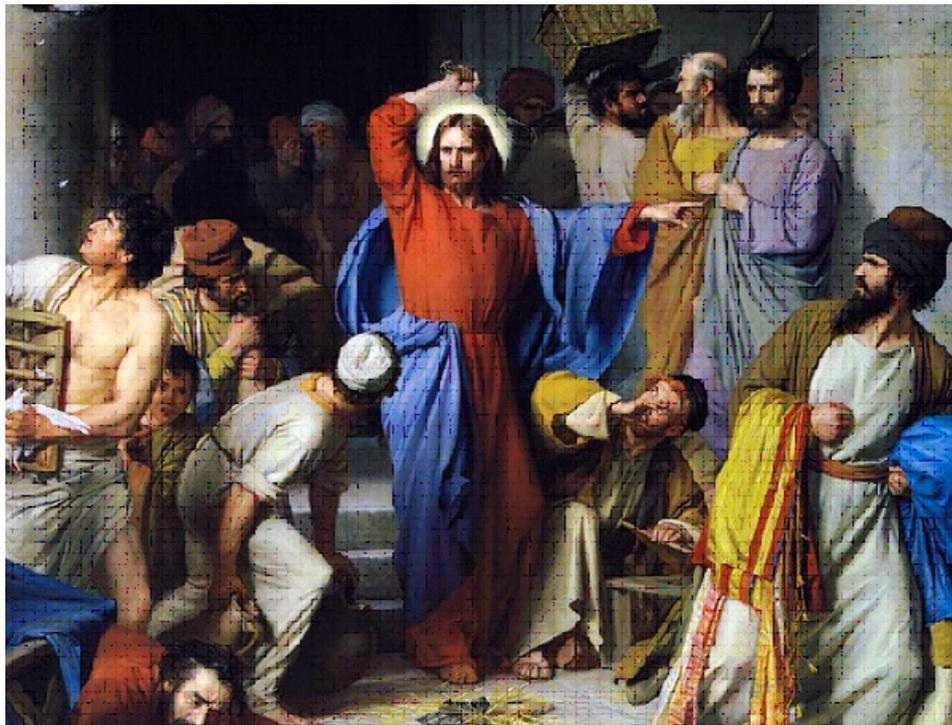
Ancient scripture regarding temples, whether in the old world or the Americas, was similar. It involved sacrifice and the finest materials available.

As the Lord established his church again on the earth in our day, he gave this instruction to Joseph Smith, extending the idea of beauty beyond just temples. "For Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness; her borders must be enlarged; her stakes must be strengthened; yea, verily I say unto you, Zion must arise and put on her beautiful garments" (D&C 82:14).

It is easy to understand that Zion must increase in holiness. We often skip over beauty and go straight there. But that is really just half the idea here. Zion, this new spiritual and physical community, is not complete without beauty. And how beautiful should Zion be?

Brigham Young set the bar pretty high. "We want all the Latter-day Saints to understand how to build up Zion. The City of Zion, in beauty and magnificence, will outstrip anything that is now known upon the earth."

How do we reconcile this idea with the scriptural injunctions against vanity? Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple to make it clear where our hearts should be, yet He was often found in the temple, teaching in the most beautiful building in the city.



Isaiah chastised his people for their materialism, for forgetting the widows and grinding the faces of the poor, yet he also spoke of Zion as being beautiful and glorious.

At what point does the beauty of the box overshadow appreciating the pearl inside?

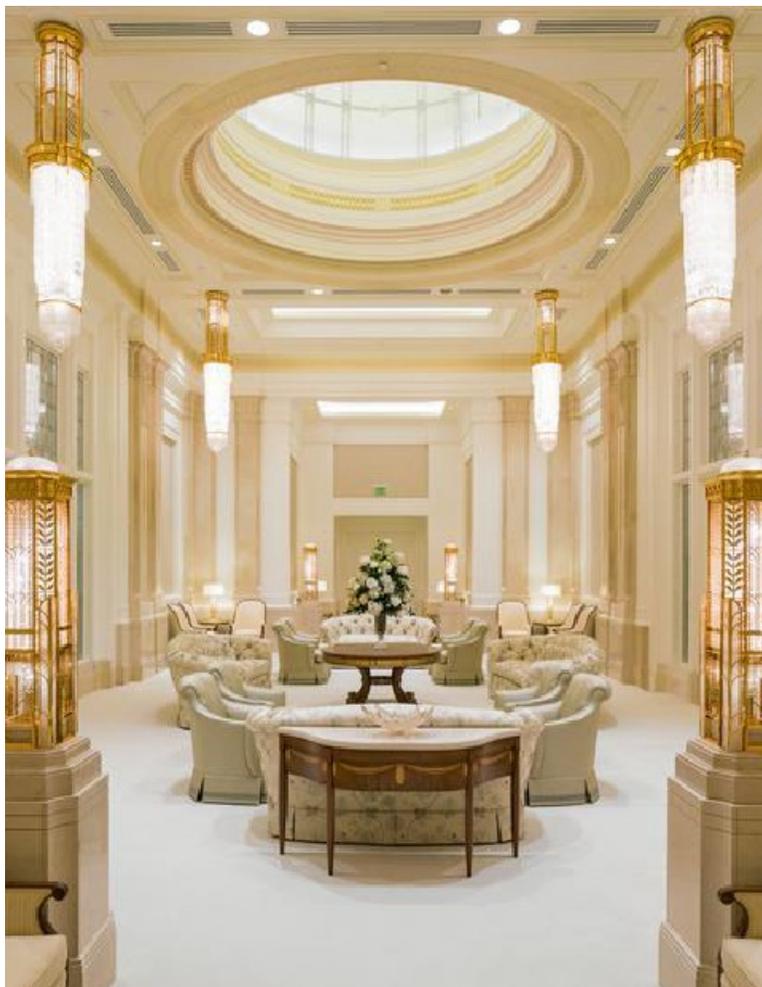
Colonists to the United States often erred on the side of plainness and simplicity in an effort to not distract from the word of God.



Other cultures find beauty in the austere and simple as well. Few do it as well as the Japanese.

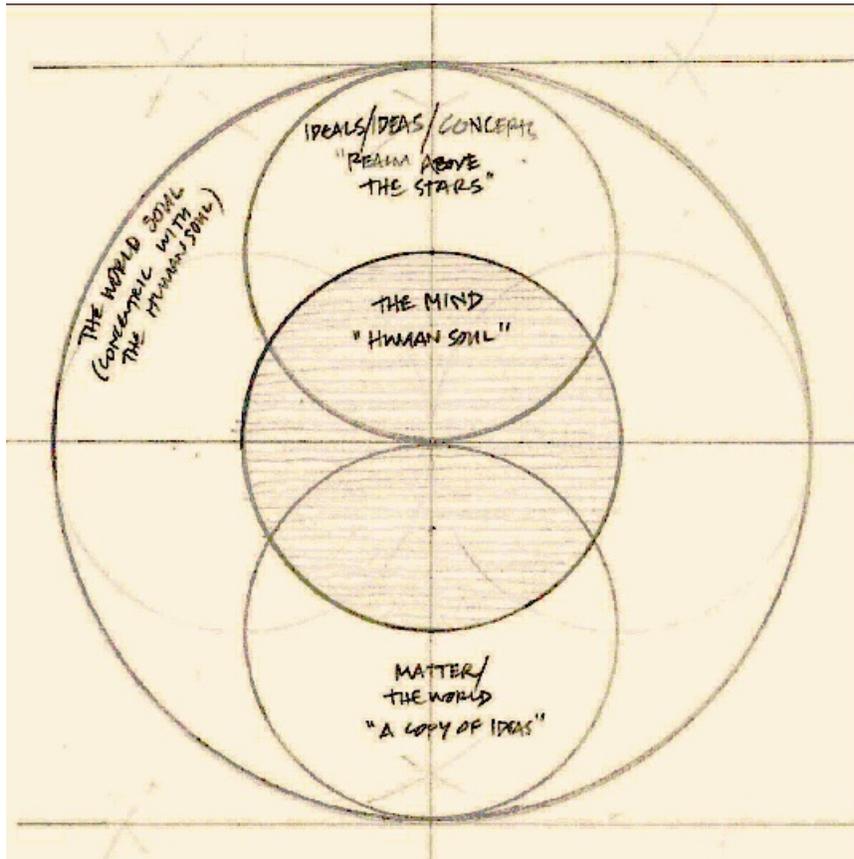


Too much? Or is this an appropriate interpretation of giving the very best to God. It's a debate that has persisted in many cultures, including Christianity, where it is often characterized in Protestant vs. Catholic terms.



Mormons tend to fall somewhere in between, trying to hit the mean. Which of course is unsatisfying to people on either extreme. One friend of ours is critical of temples for being too ornate. “Why can't the Celestial Room just be like an open garden or field?” she asked. Another friend remarked that she finds many temples too plain. Beautiful things – lighting, art glass, furniture – aren't a distraction for her but a metaphor, a reminder of what heaven might be like.

This is how the Greeks thought about beauty – or at least some of them.



This earth – this material world – is a copy of a higher realm, where ideals and virtues exist in their perfection. The mind or the soul is able to bridge the two. How so?

To the Pythagoreans, the soul makes a journey from this higher realm through the stars, forgetting its original nature as it descends into materiality. In this view, the aim of education is actually one of remembering, and the value of beauty is that it turns the attention of the soul upward from the changing, material realm, to the unchanging realm of the divine, or the Logos as they would have called it.

What we create here on earth can be said to be beautiful if it is created in the way the divine created things. “Beauty rests upon the material thing when it has been brought into unity, and... the beautiful comes into being by sharing in a formative power which comes from the divine forms” (Plotinus, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC). Beauty raises chaos to cosmos, lifts our vision. But perception of beauty then is only possible when the soul is pure. *Beauty is truth, truth beauty* as the poet John Keats famously wrote. The good, the true, and the beautiful are all sides of the same thing.

Any artistic work is merely a prelude to the real work, which must take place within one's self. “Go back into yourself and look; if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then, just as someone making a statue which has to be beautiful cuts away here, polishes there, makes one part smooth and clears another till the statue has a beautiful face, so you too must cut away excess, straighten the crooked, clear the dark and make it bright, and never stop working on your statue till the divine glory of virtue shines out on you, till you see self mastery enthroned on its holy seat” (Plotinus, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC).

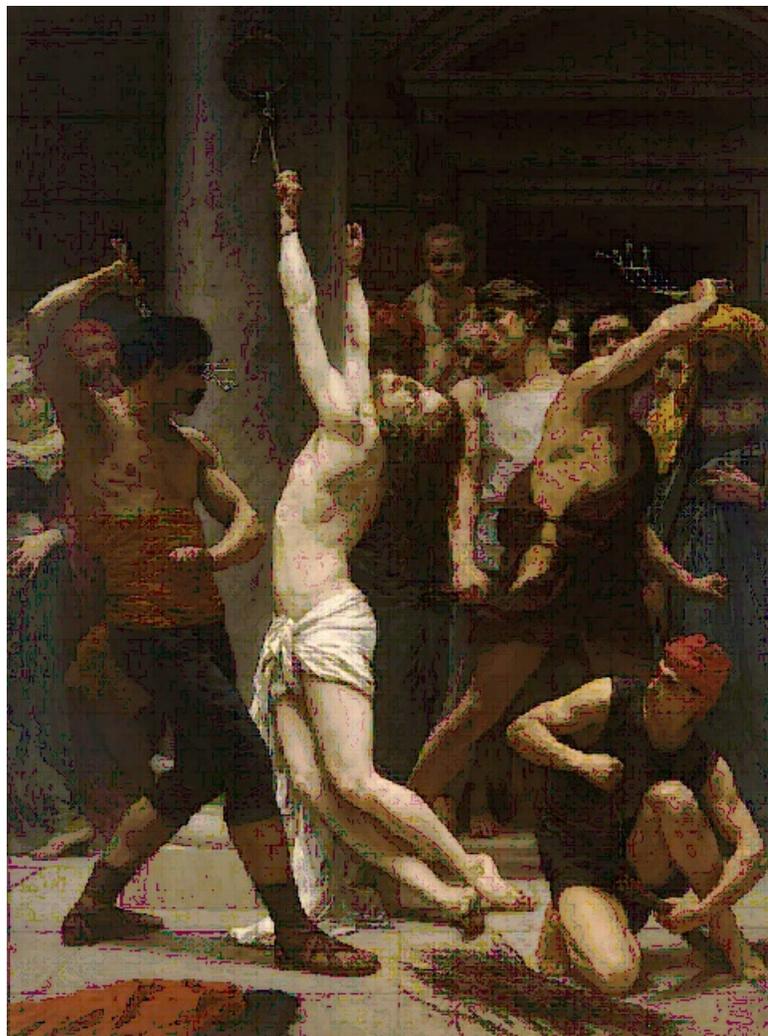
This classical concept of beauty resonated with me and what I had learned growing up at a different kind of school, one I attended on Sundays. As I measured the philosophies of men against the gospel, Classicism was exciting to me because it resolved so many cognitive dissonances I had in modernism. I couldn't wait to shout it from the rooftops and change the world. As a young architect, eager to practice these new ideas, yet still naive and inexperienced, I found myself discouraged as I fought against a world that was as skeptical of beauty as I had been previously. And not easily persuaded.

Beauty is attacked from all sides by different ideologies in our mainstream culture today.

- The ideology of the Ugly, which says that beauty is not honest enough, real art should shock and challenge our taboos.
- Utility – the idea that form merely follows function, that function is beauty, full stop.
- Individualism – art that expresses the vision of an individual genius is always praised above that which follows convention or tradition, no matter how skillful or beautiful.
- Relativity – a cultural relativist would say that Greek philosophy is just one point of view, and one that modern philosophers have discredited no less.
- And Modesty or the aversion to anything that could be seen as vain or worldly.

There are others, and I'm not suggesting that they are all bad. Many have legitimate points and echo other gospel truths that we must find a way to balance and reconcile. This journey to figure out what beauty in Zion really means is not easy.

But one thing of which I am certain is that real beauty demands a lot of us. It is more than sanitized subjects like pretty sunsets and Jesus holding butterflies. Beauty is an invitation to transcend the pain and suffering and ugliness – not to show reality as-is and wallow in self-disgust – but to find redemption. Perhaps it's appropriate that this talk falls on Good Friday, as we recall the ultimate example of redemption, of He alone who has the power to bring us back into unity with the divine.



I have come to see this idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder as one of six – I want to call them lies, but really they are not 100% false, but not really half-true either – so I will call them quarter-truths in art and architecture.

1. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. We've talked about number one already. This is post-modern relativism. Beauty is just a point of view. To a degree it is true that taste and preference play a role, but taken to an extreme, where does tolerance and acceptance or any opinion as equally good take us?

2. Ornament is a crime. A popular mantra of modern art and architecture, that less is always more. In some cases it is. Reducing and distilling things to their essence can reveal beauty beneath the surface, but we are also human and not just machines for efficiency. Ornament in architecture and man-made things has been shown by scientists to reduce stress and improve cognitive health in built environments. The richness and variety of the natural world suggests that ornament is not offensive to deity. As one writer said, a building without ornament is like the sky without stars.

3. No one builds/paints/sculpts like that any more. It is true that there are fewer people who can do classical or traditional art and architecture well today. Is that a reason to abandon it, or an invitation to restore something that is partially lost?

4. Great art must be innovative. Innovation, originality has been enshrined as the ultimate good. But while it is important, it's certainly not sufficient for great art.

5. History is a story of progress. History is not a story of unbroken progress. History is a mess. Some artistic styles look forward, others look back or sideways and overlap in complex ways. My own view is that architecture is more about place than about time. The so-called spirit of the age does not dictate.

6. There is no choice. Modern art and buildings must look modernist. No, we don't need to surrender to that. There is no pre-destined look for a new building, painting, or sculpture. We are free to choose.

Skepticism of beauty is the dominant cultural view, both outside and unfortunately within the church, whether due to ideas of utility, relativism, not wanting to appear Catholic, or other reasons.

So, what can be done? I return to the idea of Zion and beauty. As Elder Callister said, "Environment matters." Art matters. What kind of environment are we creating in Zion? Is it becoming more beautiful or less? What contributions will each of us make? The ending of this story is not written. We get to decide what truth we embrace and how we change ourselves and our art and architecture. "For Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness; her borders must be enlarged; her stakes must be strengthened; yea, verily I say unto you, Zion must arise and put on her beautiful garments" (D&C 82:14).

President Uchtdorf has said: "The gospel of Jesus Christ encompasses not only the truth of what was and what is but also the truth of what can and will be. It is the most practical of all truths. It teaches the way of the disciple—a path that can take ordinary, flawed mortals and transform them into glorious, immortal, and limitless beings whose divine potential is beyond our meager capacity to imagine."

Thank you