

Reflections on the BYU Museum of Art's Religious Exhibitions

Alliance of Mormon Artists Symposium
March 27, 2018

Dawn Pheysey

During the October 2017 General Conference, Elder Ronald A. Rasband gave a talk titled, “By Divine Design,” in which he explained: “Significant events unfold in the gospel and in the Church that further the kingdom of God on earth.”¹ He quoted Elder Neal A. Maxwell: “[God] does not do things by ‘coincidence’ but by divine design.”²

The Lord can and will direct our paths to further His work on earth. For over 23 years, I had the opportunity to curate multiple and varied exhibitions at Brigham Young University Museum of Art. But the religious exhibitions were by far the most rewarding. Miracles occurred as we mounted these exhibitions that testified of Christ. Prior to the first major religious exhibition, *Beholding Salvation*, we miraculously acquired Carl Bloch’s large altarpiece, *Christ Healing the Sick at Bethesda*.



Beholding Salvation – entrance to the exhibition

Other divinely choreographed phenomena followed—The *Head of Christ* by the Circle of Rembrandt had been tucked away under a bed still in its crate, just as it had arrived from Christie’s Auction House eight years earlier. At the suggestion of her home teacher, the owner donated it to the museum. By divine design, a failed attempt to acquire *The Prodigal’s Return* by Sir Edward John Poynter at auction in London

¹ Ronald A. Rasband, “By Divine Design,” *Ensign*, November 2017, 55.

² Neal A. Maxwell, “Brim with Joy” (Brigham Young University devotional, Jan. 23, 1996), 2, speeches.byu.edu.

resulted in a fortuitous opportunity a year later to purchase this same painting at a price lower than the Museum was originally prepared to pay.



Carl Bloch, *Healing at the Pool of Bethesda*, oil on canvas



Head of Christ, Circle of Rembrandt

By divine design, the spectacular *Crucifixion: A Triptych* by Bernard Sleigh narrowly escaped destruction after it had been deemed outdated during a refurbishment of London's Holloway Prison in the 1960s. Determined to rescue the painting, a female warden bought it for a small sum, took it home and stored it for over forty years until it was purchased by an art dealer, restored, and sold to the museum. By divine design, a life-size, 15th-century wood carving of the *Dead Christ* that was originally part of an Entombment Group arrived unannounced on our loading dock on a Monday morning.



Dead Christ, from 15th Century Entombment Group

These are but a few of the many acquisitions that came to us by divine design for the *Beholding Salvation* exhibition. Not only was the Lord's hand manifest in the acquisition of significant artworks, but the Lord's hand was in the designing and presentation of this exhibition. The placement of artworks was powerfully accomplished when it seemed impossible to accommodate some of the larger paintings. A misunderstanding with a local quarry manager about the placement of the water feature that would serve as a metaphor for Christ as the source of "living water" turned an initial disaster into a compelling solution that spoke even more powerfully of His divinity.

Another exhibition was *Metaphorically Speaking: Contemporary Religious Art*. Generous donors provided the funds for us to acquire some significant non-narrative paintings. These works used symbolism and metaphors to represent religious truths that encouraged us as viewers to embed these principles and truths into our very souls. Although Brian Kershisnik's *Cat Gift* is a very small painting (6" x 7-3/4"), it presents an opportunity to wrestle with a much larger concept. It challenges the viewer to rethink his/her relationship with God. In the painting, the man, on all fours, offers a tender morsel to the cat who turns his head and looks the other way. The Savior offers us the gift of the Atonement, repentance and eternal life, but how often do we turn away and ignore the priceless gift and the Giver. The bare-footed figure in the background reminds us that this is hallowed ground.



Brian Kershisnik, *Cat Gift*

Another small exhibition, *Types and Shadows*, incorporated parables, similes, metaphors, allegories and signs to represent religious truths. One of the paintings exhibited was Ron Richmond's *Exchange No. 8*, which incorporates cloths that become metaphors for the sacrifice laid down by the Savior, an upright chair that refers to the mercy seat and the judgement seat, the overturned chair that refers to the humility of the penitent, the color red referring to His sacrifice and the color white referring to purity. The painting calls to mind the scripture from Isaiah 1:18, which says "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."



Types and Shadows – entrance to the exhibition



Ron Richmond, *Exchange No. 8*

In 2010, *The Master's Hand* exhibition, introduced our audiences to the history, genre, and altar paintings of the Danish artist, Carl Bloch. Many were familiar with his 23 paintings on the life of Christ in Denmark's Frederiksborg Castle, but fewer were familiar with his name. Bloch's extensive study at the Danish Royal Academy of Fine Arts and travels to the great art centers of Italy, informed his images of the Savior as a compassionate and majestic Christ. By divine design, five of the eight churches in Denmark and Sweden allowed us to borrow their altar paintings by Bloch. What would

have prompted them to let us borrow the focal point of their church, the painting that parishioners knelt before as they took communion? It could only have been by divine design.



Carl Bloch: The Master's Hand – exhibition title panel



The Master's Hand – exhibition installation view



Sankt Nikolai Kirke – interior with *Christ and the Young Child* altarpiece

Three years later, another exhibition titled *Sacred Gifts*, featured the two well-known 19th-century painters, Carl Bloch and Heinrich Hofmann and introduced a previously unknown (to American audiences) Danish artist, Franz Schwartz. His large five-paneled altar painting of *The Mocking of Christ, Mary the Annunciate, and Mary the Elder* was a magnificent depiction of the majestic Christ as He stood before the people who called for His crucifixion. All three of these artists studied extensively at art academies in Denmark and Germany and produced many paintings that are well-known to members of the Church. Museums in Germany and New York allowed us to borrow significant paintings by Heinrich Hofmann. And again, by divine design, the churches in Denmark and Sweden and the National History Museum of Denmark that had not agreed to lend for the first Carl Bloch exhibition, now enthusiastically offered their altar paintings and eight of the smaller paintings on the life of Christ that we have all come to know and love.



Franz Schwartz, *The Mocking of Christ, Mary the Annunciate, and Mary the Elder*, installation view

Lest you think that reverential and devotional art is restricted to an academic style and treatment of subject matter, it is not. It involves a wide range of genres and approaches. Fiber artist Becky Knudsen creates hooked rugs that suggest a folk art tradition. This rug, “Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me”, was exhibited in the *Metaphorically Speaking* exhibition. It conveys a profound scriptural truth through its powerful presentation and expressive symbolism.



Becky Knudsen, *Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.*

A monochromatic landscape by David Linn—*And Then I Looked* contains two powerful metaphors for Christ—the rock and the light. The jagged rock face also becomes a symbol for the obstacles that we face in mortality and the illuminated summit represents the pinnacle of our aspirations.



David Linn, *And Then I Looked*

This represents only a few of the Mormon artists that have contributed to a divinely inspired body of works. By divine design, events, associations, and opportunities will continue to unfold in each of our lives that further God's work on earth and allow us to do our part in building the kingdom using our God-given talents and abilities.

At the Annual University Conference in 2007, a reprint of two addresses by President Spencer W. Kimball was given to the faculty and staff of the College of Fine Arts and Communications at BYU. The first address, "Education for Eternity," was originally given in 1967 and the second, "Second-Century Address" was given in 1975. The revelations concerning the destiny of the Church in all things secular and spiritual were first given by President John Taylor. He prophesied that: "You will see the day that Zion will be as far ahead of the outside world in everything pertaining to the learning of every kind as we are today in regard to religious matters."³

And in 1848 while still in Winter Quarters, Nebraska, pioneer artist Philo Dibble envisioned the day when "the finest art in the world would flow to these valleys." And magnificent works have come to our museums, for our enjoyment and our learning.

Quoting President John Taylor, President Spencer W. Kimball said: "God expects Zion to become the praise and glory of the whole earth. . . ."⁴ These prophets had so much hope and faith in the future of Zion. President Kimball spoke of the great painters and sculptors—Leonardo, Michelangelo, Thorvaldsen, Rembrandt, and Raphael and the great painters and sculptors of our day and those that would yet come. He went on to say:

"We must do more than ask the Lord for excellence. Perspiration must precede inspiration; there must be effort before there is excellence. We must do more than pray for these outcomes . . . though we must surely pray. We must take thought. We must make effort. We must be patient. We must be professional. We must be spiritual."⁵

In another address, President Kimball urged us to expand our natural abilities, receive extended training, and listen to the Holy Spirit, which brings light and truth.⁶

As Mormon artists, YOU are and will continue to be a fulfillment of these prophecies given over 140 years ago as you heed the counsel and directives that have been imparted by prophets of God. President Brigham Young said: "What is the best

³ John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855-86), 21:100, April 13, 1879, quoted by President Spencer W. Kimball in an address, "Education for Eternity," to Brigham Young University faculty and staff, 1967.

⁴ John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:47, August 4, 1878, quoted by President Spencer W. Kimball in an address, "Education for Eternity," to Brigham Young University faculty and staff, 1967.

⁵ Spencer W. Kimball, "Second-Century Address," October 10, 1975 reprinted for the Brigham Young University College of Fine Arts and Communications at the Annual University Conference, August 29, 2007, 28.

⁶ Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," September 12, 1967 reprinted for the Brigham Young University College of Fine Arts and Communications at the Annual University Conference, August 29, 2007, 14.

thing you have to devote to the Kingdom of God? It is the talents God has given you.”⁷ Your artistic talents and gifts, accompanied by the meaningful and heartfelt expressions of your testimonies of the divinity of Jesus Christ, will continue to build the kingdom of God on the earth and bless the lives of people both in and out of the Church.

⁷ Brigham Young and John A. Widstoe, *Discourses of Brigham Young: Second President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1925), 445