

# What does a Latter-day Saint renaissance look like? *by Robert Hall*

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*Is it a Mormon renaissance or just a renaissance?*

As a writer, poet, musician, and designer, I am an ardent participant and observer of the arts. Over the years, I've thought over what the arts have and will mean for the Church, for saints, and for nations. I'm no stranger to the speculation among our members for "what's in store," both pertaining directly to the arts, and what the arts can do for the Church. I'm familiar with the vision laid out by prophets, scholars, patriots, and poets alike, for the hope of a future renaissance, the likes of which the world has never seen. This has always been my fascination, and I seem to hear echoes of the same sentiment scattered throughout the Church—especially among us artists. The collective voice speaks to a great and noble calling to become watchers on the towers, proclaiming to the world the good news of the gospel through the technology and medium of the arts.

I am a believer.

But why have we not yet been successful, at least in part, in bringing about a successful renaissance? I've thought of some solutions to the two fundamental errors I see with artistic endeavors among Church members, but first, I think it's important to assert that God alone is the veritable source of all good things and that nothing so lofty or grand as a renaissance could be achieved without bringing God directly to the forefront.

*Still, why such elevated language as "renaissance" and the like?*



We've heard the quotes before. But let's reflect upon a little concentrated collection.

Perhaps the most oft-cited talk is Spencer W. Kimball's First Presidency Message in the July 1977 issue of the *Ensign*, titled "The Gospel Vision of the Arts," adapted from a speech given at BYU about ten years prior. President Kimball said, "For long years I have had a vision of members of the Church greatly increasing their already strong positions of excellence till the eyes of all the world will be upon us." This is riveting enough, but then he goes on to an even bolder declaration from years past:

President John Taylor so prophesied, as he emphasized his words with this directive: "You mark my words, and write them down and see if they do not come to pass. You will see the day that Zion will be far ahead of the outside world in everything pertaining to learning of every kind as we are today

in regard to religious matters. God expects Zion to become the praise and glory of the whole earth, so that kings hearing of her fame will come and gaze upon her glory.”

This is an interesting promise, and, admittedly, has become a mantra for my own and others’ efforts in the Church and the arts. For added perspective, here are words from the hand of U.S. President John Adams, who viewed the blessed landscape of a future America:

*I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain. (Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 12 May 1780.)*

We get the sense that even America’s founders had some inclination toward a prosperous future, blessed by the arts. This perspective deepens when we couple the blessings of American promise with the blessings of a Restoration. Richard Bushman offers:

*In Joseph [Smith’s] own day, the Hudson River painters were men of acknowledged belief who struggled to capture divinity in their paintings. They pointed toward God, for example, not by bringing the perspective lines together in their landscapes but by focusing on a bright point that leads through the picture into infinite space beyond. The sincerity of this art is surely a recommendation for art in the service of religion... For Joseph Smith, the key word was... “glory.” (“Would Joseph Smith attend the New York Stake Arts Festival?”, Silent Notes Taken: Personal Essays.)*

(Now get ready; I’m running multiple scriptures together here, chaining them together for effect.)

*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace... that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with*

*the voice together shall they sing (Isaiah 52:7–8)... For Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness (D&C 82:14)... If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things (Articles of Faith 13)... For they shall be as the stones of a crown, lifted up as an ensign upon his land (Zechariah 9:16)... And righteousness will I send down out of heaven; and truth will I send forth out of the earth, to bear testimony of mine Only Begotten; his resurrection from the dead... and righteousness and truth will I cause to sweep the earth as with a flood, to gather out mine elect from the four quarters of the earth, unto a place which I shall prepare...and it shall be called Zion (Moses 7:62)... And from thence shall the gospel roll forth... as the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth (D&C 65:2)... Out of the wilderness of darkness, and shine forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners (D&C 109:73)... Zion shall flourish, and the glory of the Lord shall be upon her; And she shall be an ensign unto the people (D&C 64:41–42).*

Any one of these scriptures evokes a grand panorama, but taken together, there is an even greater sense of the truly awe-inspiring. We stand at the gate as a Restoration and, essentially, a renaissance rolls forth. As has been iterated in our own time by prophets:

*Today we have a modern equivalent of the printing press in the Internet and all that it means. The Internet allows everyone to be a publisher, to have their voice heard, and it is revolutionizing society. (Elder Ballard, in a speech given at BYU–Hawaii on December 15, 2007.)*

*We call upon all members, those in the arts and those seeking to appreciate the message of good art, to expand their vision of what can be done. If we are going to fill the world with goodness and truth, then we must be worthy to receive inspiration so we can bless the lives of our Heavenly Father’s children. (Elder Ballard, “Filling the World with*

*Goodness and Truth,* Ensign, Jul 1996.)

*The desire to create is one of the deepest yearnings of the human soul.... We each have an inherent wish to create something that did not exist before.... Everyone can create.... Nearly a century and a half ago, President Brigham Young spoke to the Saints of his day. "There is a great work for the Saints to do," he said. "Progress, and improve upon and make beautiful everything around you." (President Uchtdorf, "Happiness, Your Heritage," General Relief Society Meeting, October 2008.)*

*We've barely scratched the surface. (President Hinckley, First Presidency Message, "There Must Be Messengers," Ensign, October 1987.)*

Finally, I remember hearing President Faust say during a stake conference on my mission: "When the arts in the Church mature, people will flock to the Church." Whether or not I heard it correctly or just heard what I wanted to hear, I think it drives home the point succinctly. Why should those who want to fill the earth with filth and waste not be challenged? Do we want a renaissance of pollution and degradation? Can we survive as a people with continued moral decay in all the world about us? As Joseph Smith said,

*That we should waste and wear out our lives in bringing to light all the hidden things of darkness, wherein we know them; and they are truly manifest from heaven—these should then be attended to with great earnestness. (D&C 123:13–14)*

Great earnestness. We, of necessity, must mature in the arts. It's incumbent upon us precisely because God would beautify the Earth and save his children. He would have us protect all good things. In fact, He would have us survive through a great renaissance, reborn.

### ***How does a renaissance happen? OUR FIRST ERROR***

Our first problem lies in what I call a bit of narcissism. We've been handed a noble mandate, but often we're not careful. Our efforts become less effective. Our artistic efforts become so concentrated



on a "Mormon" endeavor, that something gets lost in the shuffle. It is imperative to realize that an endeavor that is branded "Mormon" is, by its very nature, exclusive. Even with important exceptions, such as the New York-based Mormon Artists Group and this magazine (which I view as a necessary appendage of increased artistic endeavor), people who are not LDS will not necessarily feel inclined to participate or keep a finger on the pulse.

It's like the difference between saying "I am Mormon," and just behaving like one. We traditionally endeavor to lead by example. So why declare so forthrightly, "This is my Mormon artistic endeavor"?

Don't get me wrong. I think there's a fundamental need and place for identity. We are Mormon, and that's important. We don't want to forget who we are.

But we also have a proclivity toward too much self-awareness, and, at times, self-aggrandizement. After all, it's what we're taught. Our missionary endeavors are exclusively about proclaiming, boldly, the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are accustomed to going into the world and proclaiming, "I am Mormon; hear me roar!" I mean, for heaven's sake, we've been doing it at the world's doors for decade upon decade. And I imagine we will continue in this fashion for important reasons.

However, it can and probably should be important to distinguish between the Church's role and our individual roles as artists and members. Perhaps there is greater need to recognize all the blessings of humanity. We are not alone. My identity, your identity, our identity as Mormons, is perhaps less critical than recognizing God's identity, your neighbor's identity, our identity as sons and daughters of the Most High. And overtly conscious "Mormon art" undermines our efforts.

### ***Our artistic endeavors need face***

Too often, we don't know how to present ourselves to the world. After all, isn't it about promoting stories of the Restoration, of stories in the Book of Mormon, and of uniquely Mormon topics? Yes, absolutely, but that excludes the essence of what an artistic movement looks like. As Walter Pater said in his studies on the great Renaissance,

*The basis of all artistic genius lies in the power of conceiving humanity in a new and striking way, of putting a happy world of its own creation in place of the meaner world of our common days.* (The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry.)

If I were to sit down and say, "Okay, I'm going to write the great Mormon novel about Joseph Smith," it's likely that I'm already failing in my attempt. If, on the other hand, I have a strong interest in just telling a good story, and I happen to be fascinated by some aspect of Joseph's humanity, I might have something going for me.

I could be struck with how to paint some scene from Lehi's life and I might go about that with some success. This is quite different from starting out with "How can I create the best Mormon representation of Lehi?"

If we could sometimes just forget the "Mormon" strain, and just tell good tales, paint good paintings, sculpt good sculptures, and compose good compositions, everything else would fall into place. If I write a screenplay from an idea that I find so compelling, and it just happens to have some Mormon character in it, well, that's terrific! But shoving a Mormon character in my film just for the sake of promoting Mormon arts?

Without getting too far into a conversation about what defines great art (O, the endless dialogue!), I still think it's important to draw this single point. If you want to communicate to many people, your job is to understand how not to isolate them.

***There is a flip side to all this awkward introspection:***  
**OUR SECOND ERROR**

In my days spent as an artist on the east and west coast, I have known people who take the reverse tack. They are embarrassed or ashamed, for one reason or another, to be counted as a Mormon artist. Sometimes there are legitimate concerns involved, especially when political or professional

reputations are at stake.

I have found that many suffer from a delusional notion that a Mormon artistic effort will never succeed, and some aren't willing to put forth an arm to help a movement along. Some are successful Mormons in professional artistic endeavors who, for one reason or another, aren't willing to give back. Some are too proud to work with other Mormons. Some are scared. Some are lazy. And some are, rightly so, disillusioned by the lack of a successful Mormon renaissance, seeing too much of the error described above.

I don't fault these individuals—I find it a waste of time and effort. I'm interested in working with people who want to work with me, not people who have a problem. Still, I think it's an important difficulty to recognize. It is part of the reason we haven't seen a successful Mormon artistic movement—at least, not yet.

There is actually a third common error, which is a combination of one and two. Some of us become so wrapped up in the Mormon artistic endeavors that we lose sight of what is good and look beyond the mark. We become not only too proud to work with others, but we believe that we alone understand what a Mormon renaissance looks like and label everyone else's Mormon efforts as wrong. We could probably think of some examples where artists just think they "know better" than the rest of us, the Church, their Mormon peers, or just the cultural ideology itself. Some are so embittered that they leave the Church with a noisy fuss in the wake. They become laws unto themselves.

Still, I truly believe there is not only a happy middle ground, but a potentially thriving and alive middle ground for us all. Returning to Pater:

*The history of art has suffered as much as any history by trenchant and absolute divisions. Pagan and Christian art are sometimes harshly opposed, and the Renaissance is represented as a fashion which set in at a definite period. That is the superficial view: the deeper view is that which preserves the identity of European culture. The two are really continuous; and there is a sense in which it may be said that the Renaissance was an uninterrupted effort of the middle age, that it was ever taking place. When the actual relics of the antique were restored to the world, in the view of the Christian ascetic it was as if*

*an ancient plague-pit had been opened. All the world took the contagion of the life of nature and of the senses. And now it was seen that the medieval spirit too had done something for the new fortunes of the antique. By hastening the decline of art, by withdrawing interest from it and yet keeping unbroken the thread of its traditions, it had suffered the human mind to repose itself, that when day came it might awake, with eyes refreshed, to those ancient, ideal forms.*

Pater's words speak for themselves, but we can glean a corollary: "that which preserves the identity of . . . culture." If there really is to be a renaissance, "a marvelous work and a wonder," if Zion must arise in all her glory, then really all that has gone before—that "fashion . . . set in at a definite period" as "an uninterrupted effort"—is only a predecessor to the greatest era of culture and art ever.

### *Can this really be true?*

It's such a fantastical notion. But it seems we're at the threshold. As the founder of this magazine, Ben Crowder, recently said, "The LDS arts world has been laying a solid foundation for decades now, and it looks like it's just about reached critical mass for an explosion of talent. The future is very, very bright." The annual LDS Film Festival just finished its eighth year. Mormon artist communities are growing in critical cities, such as New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Movements are afoot in various forms, and technological tools are becoming increasingly available to this end. Conrad Nebeker, for one, has been successfully reinforcing an active effort to support the arts in Provo (land of one million creative Mormon students) with a Facebook group titled "People in Provo who care for the arts" and a foundation to boot, the Sejo Arts Foundation.

Slowly we're starting to meet in the middle and overcome the two obstacles posed above. I think technology will be there for us as we go about doing it right. Technology is at an interesting crossroads. I've recently taken interest in something called the DiSo Project, which will likely effect another shift in the Internet, somewhat like the seismic changes we saw with so-called Web 2.0 technologies. In the next few years, we might see a corner turned in collaborative and creative online resources in ways difficult to perceive. We've seen a hint of this power

in social networking tools such as Facebook, but a ubiquitous train's a-coming. And, while I haven't entirely figured out how to articulate it, social networking will help us forget ourselves and collaborate more freely. Contrary to the breeding ground of narcissism that places like Facebook and MySpace can be, when social networking becomes coupled with creativity and the arts, a gargantuan window will open—not only for Mormon artists, but for all artists with good intent.

We must work together, Mormon and non-Mormon alike. This is key. When the Savior asked us to take the gospel to all the world, he wasn't saying "take your Mormon identity to all the world." He was asking us to make peace with mankind. Fight necessary battles. Embrace all truth. Share with men and women all the good things we can. Raise an ensign to the nations. Embrace everyone possible in the process. Live righteous lives. Share with people the love that is in your heart. Find refreshing and creative ways to build bridges. Foster an atmosphere of respite from the storm.

This is the measure of a renaissance.

As an artist and web designer, I'm inclined to catch that train early. With a couple of like-minded LDS artists, I have started an organization for people interested in good art, both Mormons and non-Mormons. Arx Poetica is beginning as a "good art" resource spanning the disciplines of artistry: music and sound, studio art, writing and literature, film, theatre, and new media. As we grow, we will become a collaborative den of artists, eventually financially supporting the efforts of true artists in each of these fields. It is not a "Mormon Renaissance" because we call it such. Rather, it will be a renaissance by the very nature of how we nurture it. For "Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom" (D&C 105:5). And certainly, Zion cannot be built alone. We need to join forces.

Like President Faust, I feel that when the arts in the Church mature, people will flock to the Church, perhaps in numbers we never imagined possible. People long for beauty and truth. Many don't know where to find it.

To echo President Kimball, "I believe that the Lord is anxious to put into our hands inventions of which we laymen have hardly a glimpse" ("When the World Will Be Converted," *Ensign*, October 1974).

Zion will be a respite from the storm, and Zion will be beautiful. ■