Mormon Women and Art

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Mormon Women and Art

Some of the earliest artistic depictions of Latter-day saint women appear in mid to late 19th century satirical illustrations. Mormon women were commonly portrayed as oppressed by their male counterparts and pawns in Brigham Young’s sexual and political exploits. As argued by scholars Davis Bitton and Gary L. Bunker in *The Mormon Graphic Image, 1834-1914*, early anti-Mormon cartoons regularly featured women as battered, destitute, subservient, uncivilized, uneducated, homely, and lascivious.¹ In 1872, these women sought to respond to popular stereotyping by publishing *The Woman’s Exponent*—the first periodical written and published by Mormon women. A concluding essay described their agenda:

They [Mormon women] have been grossly misrepresented through the press, by active enemies who permit no opportunity to pass of maligning and slandering them; and with but limited opportunity of appealing to the intelligence and candor of their fellow countrymen and countrywomen in reply. Who are so well able to speak for the women of Utah as the women of Utah themselves? “It is better to represent ourselves than to be misrepresented by others!” For these reasons, and that women may help each other by the diffusion of knowledge and information possessed by many and suitable to all, the publication of WOMAN’S EXONENT, a journal owned by, controlled by and edited by Utah ladies, has been commenced.²

The paper would highlight Mormon women’s theological, political, and domestic interests. It would also feature their accomplishments. Regularly included were biographies about and columns written by women doctors, nurses, midwives, writers, poets, teachers, activists, philanthropists, and religious and political leaders. While in the *Woman’s Exponent*, such

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² “Women’s Exponent. A Utah Ladies’ Journal,” *Woman’s Exponent* (Salt lake City, Utah), June 1, 1872, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 8
representations of women were conjured in word rather than image, the late 19th and early 20th century also brought with it the church’s first prominent women artists. Among them were Alice Merrill Horne, who was influential in passing the art bill of 1899 and Mary Teasdel, Rose W. Hartwell, Harriet R. Harwood, and Myra L. Sawyer who were the first Utah women to attend art school in Paris. Their work, though diverse in style, medium, and subject, offered the world a new image of Mormon women as educated and refined. Among their work, paintings such as Teasdel’s *Mother and Child* and Rose Hartwell’s *Nursery Corner* also challenged popular caricatures of Mormon women as overwhelmed by their polygamous offspring and therefore incapable of executing their motherly duties by depicting the more intimate moments shared between mother and child—an infant nestled into her mother’s chest, a baby being rocked to sleep in her cradle. Through their words and their work, the sisters of the church made tremendous strides for the Latter-day Saint people, through offering a new image of Mormon women.

Following in their footsteps, and perhaps one of the most notable Mormon female artists of 20th century, was Minerva Teichert who received numerous accolades throughout her career. She was the first woman to paint on the walls of an LDS temple. Teichert’s emphasis on women, specifically women of the Bible and nineteenth-century pioneer women, likewise brought visibility to women through highlighting their central role in Christ’s church, ancient and restored.

Over the past decade, similar efforts have been made to highlight the lives of Latter-day Saint women. Men, too, have played a role in giving room to women’s experiences. In my opinion, Brain Kershisnik, whose work highlights the everyday, as well as the more intimate and supernatural experiences of Mormon women, is an artist that deserves special attention. But the initiative to create such art has been more expressly led, and not surprisingly, by women within and tied to the LDS Church. For example, Caitlin Connolly, whose artwork has, over the past several years, garnered increasing attention, explained that she is “driven by a curiosity of femininity... [and] explores the visual and conceptual contradictions of softness and strength in a variety of mediums and

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themes.”⁴ Other examples include, the Girls Who Choose God children’s illustration series, the website seekingheavenlymother.com which explores the feminine divine through multiple mediums, including art, the book Illuminating Ladies: A Coloring Book of Mormon Women, and this to name only a popular few. It is an endemic movement that has richly enhanced Mormon women’s visibility and provided texture and variety to popular perceptions of Mormon women—in and outside of their religion.

While Latter-day Saint art has great cultural significance for understanding Mormon culture, it has garnered less attention from scholars in Mormon Studies. This online exhibit includes the work of four Mormon artists, a term that I use to encompass artists who either self-define as Mormon or use Mormonism as a central subject in their work. Collectively, this exhibit explores the contours of women’s experience in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. From the book of Mormon to the church’s polygamous past to the more intimate and contemporary expression of faith, these four artists creatively offer voice to the historically peripheral and traditionally misunderstood women of Mormonism.

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Kelly McAfee is a resource and 2nd grade general studies teacher in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. She lives in Kirtland where she volunteers at the Kirtland Temple giving tours. In her free time, she enjoys studying Mormon history and creating art. In 2008, she discovered that she was a descendant of Fanny Alger, who is believed to be Joseph Smith’s first plural wife. As she began to read the literature on plural marriage, McAfee recalled “my heart was pierced with sadness. To ease my pain and to honor these amazing women of polygamy I began painting a portrait of each one as I read her story.”
Fanny Alger, watercolor pencil on paper
MORMON WOMEN AND ART

Eliza and Emily Partridge, acrylic on recycled doll. Handmade costumes.

Emma Smith, acrylic on recycled doll. Handmade costume.
Leslie Peterson who discovered her passion for painting in 2011 is best known for her award winning portraits entitled “The Forgot Wives of Joseph Smith.” Peterson refers to her work as a celebration of Latter-day Saint’s renewed interest in the lives and stories of early Mormon women.
Sister in Zion, watercolor on paper
**Beth Jane Smailes Taylor** is an artist and mother of three boys. She studied art at Brigham young University and in Florence Italy where she gained her appreciation for classic and folk art. She is involved in many community art events where she loves to connect with her local art community. Taylor explained that she “loves to incorporate Mormon women as well as her Mormon roots into her paintings because it inspires her and others to celebrate their religion in their own creative way.”
A Beautiful Mind, watercolor on paper
Everywoman, watercolor on paper
Michele Burks is a lifelong midwesterner and mother of three with a bachelors degree in illustration from Brigham Young University, Idaho. Burks described her “Woman of Faith” series, from which her submissions are torn, as a “personla passion project.” Burks is also the author and illustrator of two published novels entitled I Pearl Tail and Spliit Tail. She is also the illustrator on the newly installed series “the Mer-Prince Adventures” by J. B. Spector. Burk explained that the women she has depicted “faced incredible trials of faith in their lives and stood up at times where it seemed like the whole world was against them.”
Emma Hale Smith, gouache ink on paper
Mothers, gouache ink on paper