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Wise or Foolish: Women in Mormon Biblical Narrative Art

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Abstract: Images that are seen as officially endorsed by the LDS Church can affect the way members interpret scriptural stories or historical Church events. For example, LDS artwork often portrays biblical women as simplified, didactic figures. With particular focus on depictions of Mary and Martha, this essay examines the limited instances of groups of women in common LDS biblical narrative art to highlight the challenges and implications of how art is created for and viewed by general LDS audiences and to reveal how these canonized portrayals of biblical women have largely adhered to traditional Christian interpretations and artistic styles rather than to a uniquely Mormon understanding of scriptural stories. While most institutional images of Mary and Martha adhere to only one interpretation of the story and largely follow the early Christian tradition of seeing Mary as passive and heroic and Martha as active and foolish, Minerva Teichert's painting of the sisters leaves the meaning open for interpretation and incorporates distinctive and particularly Mormon ideas about agency, personal study, the balance between faith and works, and the primacy of scripture.

Wise or Foolish

Women in Mormon Biblical Narrative Art

Jennifer Champoux

Visual imagery is an inescapable element of religion. Even those groups that generally avoid figural imagery, such as those in Judaism and Islam, have visual objects with religious significance.[1] In fact, as David Morgan, professor of religious studies and art history at Duke University, has argued, it is often the religions that avoid figurative imagery that end up with the richest material culture.[2] To some extent, this is true for Mormonism. Although Mormons believe art can beautify a space, visual art is not tied to actual ritual practice. Chapels, for example, where the sacrament ordinance is performed, are built with plain walls and simple lines and typically have no paintings or sculptures. Yet, outside chapels, Mormons enjoy a vast culture of art, which includes traditional visual arts, texts, music, finely constructed temples, clothing, historical sites, and even personal devotional objects. For Mormons, these material items facilitate personal introspection, help mediate with the divine, and bring the believer closer to God.

In part because visual culture is inescapable, it not only accompanies religious practice in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but also has the power to shape belief, influencing the way Mormons tell scriptural stories and understand doctrinal lessons. As Herman du

1. David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 117; David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 54.

2. Morgan, *Sacred Gaze*, 64.

Toit, former head of museum research at Brigham Young University's Museum of Art has written, "Art has the capacity to create new meaning in the mind of the viewer, often by nondiscursive means."[3] This is especially true of images widespread in LDS culture of scriptural or historical figures. These images are frequently created in a style of detailed realism and, from the viewpoint of a typical Mormon gaze, are considered inspired and even historically accurate.[4] For example, Noel A. Carmack has explained how LDS images of Christ became homogenized in the twentieth century and argued that the realistic style preferred by the Church is the result of its "literal approach to the scriptures, along with a belief in the historicity of Jesus' life and ministry."[5] In other words, a literal interpretation of the scriptures has led to literal interpretations of religious art and vice versa. Laura Allred Hurtado, curator at the Church History Museum, also spoke to this LDS preference for realism when she explained that a New Testament film by the Church visually recreated the scene depicted in Carl Bloch's painting *Christ Healing the Sick at Bethesda* (1882–83), which is widespread in Mormon visual culture, because using an already familiar image of Christ lent authenticity to the film.[6] Further demonstrating the power of images on LDS belief, BYU professor Anthony Sweat described an experiment he conducts with students, which reveals that they overwhelmingly visualize the Book of Mormon character Abinadi as looking and acting exactly as he does in Arnold Friberg's painting *Abinadi before King Noah* (c. 1952–55), which is the most common depiction of Abinadi in Church materials,

3. Herman du Toit, "Preface," in *Art and Spirituality: The Visual Culture of Christian Faith,* ed. Herman du Toit and Doris R. Dant (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2008), xii.

4. For purposes of this paper, "institutional" narrative art, or art that is considered widespread in the LDS Church, will be defined as images commissioned by the Church, owned by the Church History Museum, appearing in the LDS Media Library (including the Gospel Art Kit), sold as reproductions on the LDS.org store, and/or sold as reproductions at the Church History Museum store. The images from these sources are ones most commonly encountered today in Church-produced scriptures, manuals, printed materials, websites, and buildings (including meetinghouses, temples, visitors' centers, and the Salt Lake City Conference Center).

5. Noel A. Carmack, "Images of Christ in Latter-day Saint Visual Culture, 1900–1999," *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 66.

6. Laura Allred Hurtado, "Abstractions, Shadows, and Images of Christ," *Juvenile Instructor* (blog), September 18, 2013, http://juvenileinstructor.org/abstractions-shadows-and-images-of-christ/.

including some copies of the Book of Mormon.[7] Sweat clarifies that neither the artists nor the Church are necessarily trying to privilege their own interpretation through art, but visual art does face certain limitations and tensions in its ability to communicate both ideas and historical fact.[8] For example, Barry Laga addresses the complicated relationship in Mormonism between the realistic style of its institutional visual art and the theological belief in individual, unseen spiritual revelation, arguing that highly realistic portrayals of human encounters with the divine "shape our perception and define the experience itself," sometimes privileging external sensory, rational experience over intangible, spiritual knowledge.[9]

Images that are seen as officially endorsed by the LDS Church can affect the way members interpret scriptural stories or historical Church events, sometimes even constraining Church members' understanding, especially in cases of stories that have multiple valid interpretations. LDS depictions of biblical women, for example, often portray them as simplified, didactic figures. This essay examines the limited instances of groups of women portrayed in common LDS biblical narrative art to highlight the challenges and implications of how art is created for and viewed by general LDS audiences and to reveal how these canonized portrayals of biblical women have largely adhered to traditional Christian interpretations and artistic styles rather than to a uniquely Mormon understanding of scriptural stories.

To begin, it is useful to consider the ways in which men and women are portrayed in the narrative art of the Church. There are, for instance, many groups, large and small, of biblical men: *Moses Calls Aaron to the Ministry* (1967) by Harry Anderson, *Jacob Blessing His Sons (Jacob Blessing Joseph)* (1967) by Harry Anderson, *Jesus Washing the Apostles' Feet (Jesus Washing the Feet of the Apostles)* (c. 1983) by Del Parson, and *In Remembrance of Me* (1997) by Walter Rane, to name a few. Even images

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7. Quoted in Kimberly Winston, "Mormon 'Gospel Art': Kitsch or Classic?" *Religion News Service,* March 17, 2016, http://religionnews.com/2016/03/17/mormons-kitsch-art-classic/.

8. Anthony Sweat, "By the Gift and Power of Art," in *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon,* ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 237.

9. Barry Laga, "Making the Absent Visible: The Real, Ideal, and the Abstract in Mormon Art," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40 (Summer 2007): 51–52, 61–63.

of the Sermon on the Mount feature mostly men, with a few women scattered among them. Although Jesus often stands separate from the other figures in these images, the men almost universally appear united as a group, without any clear division between them. In contrast, the few women who do appear in institutional LDS biblical narrative art—apart from Eve and Mary (mother of Jesus), who are both typically shown in family groups—are solitary and heroic figures: for example, *Rebekah at the Well* (1995) by Michael Deas, *Hannah Presenting Her Son Samuel to Eli* (date unknown) by Robert T. Barrett, *Esther (Queen Esther)* (1939) by Minerva Teichert, and *Living Water (Christ and the Samaritan Woman)* (2001) by Simon Dewey.

The only two cases in which we see groups of biblical women in LDS art are depictions of (1) the parable of the ten virgins and (2) Christ's visit to Mary and Martha. Through the use of symbolic and formal elements, standard Mormon depictions of these two scenes sharply divide the women into two types, reducing both stories to a dialectic of wise, heroic women versus lost, distracted women. The images of Mary and Martha, in particular, follow a standard pre-Mormon Christian interpretation that prioritizes the passive reception of wisdom—symbolized by Mary sitting with Christ—over other, more active tasks or approaches—symbolized by Martha bustling about the kitchen. There are, however, certain intriguing exceptions to these patterns in nonofficial LDS art, particularly Minerva Teichert's *Christ in the Home of Mary and Martha* (1935). Works such as these, as well as the interpretations proffered by various Church leaders, indicate there are multiple ways to interpret the story of Jesus in the home of Mary and Martha and illustrate some of the challenges in creating and reading LDS narrative art.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

In the LDS Media Library, the only depiction of Christ's parable of the ten virgins is Walter Rane's *Five of Them Were Wise* (1999; fig. 1). This painting was part of a series of religious works commissioned by the Church, and the Church History Museum, in Salt Lake City, owns it.[10] The scriptural passage that inspired this painting is fairly straightforward, and its exegesis by LDS leaders is consistent. The story is found in Matthew 25:

10. The painting has been widely disseminated through LDS Media Library and sales on LDS.org and in Church History Museum stores.

Figure 1. Walter Rane, *Five of Them Were Wise*, 1999, oil on panel, 30″ × 52″. Courtesy of Church History Museum, Salt Lake City. In this painting, the women are separated into two groups by a central void. The five wise virgins are bathed in light and form a strong pyramidal shape, while the five foolish virgins are in shadow and lack organization.

> Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh. (Matthew 25:1–13)

In Mormon discourse, this parable is most often explained in terms of spiritual preparation, with an emphasis on being in a state of constant readiness to meet the Lord. For example, in 2012, Apostle David A.

Bednar expounded on the wise and foolish virgins, emphasizing the concepts of "consistent obedience," "diligent study and pondering," and the "individual responsibility to keep our lamp of testimony burning and to obtain an ample supply of the oil of conversion."[11]

The caption on the original painting, currently located in the LDS Conference Center, also conforms to this understanding. Written by Church History Museum curators, the caption reads, "The Parable of the Ten Virgins is about those who have already accepted the invitation to follow the bridegroom—Christ. To have accepted the invitation is not enough; they must be in a constant state of preparation and readiness. Walter Rane has painted a classic representation of the substance of the scriptural passage. (Matthew 25)."

Rane's placement of figures, use of formal elements, and realistic style all work together to reinforce the consensus interpretation of wise versus foolish. The entire group of ten virgins creates an implied triangle, yet if we look closer, the subgrouping of wise virgins creates another, tighter triangle, giving it visual and symbolic strength, while the subgrouping of foolish virgins is in disarray, symbolizing their waywardness from the righteous path. The lines of outstretched hands and crouching figures, with a small central void separating the two groups, keeps the viewer's eye moving circularly around the image and across each figure, making it a dynamic and active scene. Each woman is responsible for her own oil (spiritual strength), and those with lighted lamps must move on or be left behind by the bridegroom (Christ). The foolish virgins are shown in a panic as they realize that, as Bednar said, "no last-minute flurry of preparation is possible."[12] Some beg their wise sisters for help they cannot give. One falls dejectedly to the ground. Another wanders off alone in a futile search.

A prominent feature of this painting is the contrast between light and dark. The five wise virgins are bathed in light from their oil lamps. The symbolism of wisdom here is clear. A lighted candle has long symbolized illumination, especially of the mind or spirit, and often represents faith in art.[13] The women with lit lamps had presumably worked righteously to prepare, collecting their oil, for the coming of the bridegroom,

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11. David A. Bednar, "Converted unto the Lord," *Ensign* 42 (November 2012): 109.

12. Bednar, "Converted unto the Lord," 109.

13. James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art,* 2d ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2008), 59.

an interpretation that is even more pronounced when considering some European traditions in which a candle or lantern symbolizes not only wisdom but also the diligent study and effort put forth to acquire wisdom.[14] The five foolish virgins, on the other hand, are in shadow, beneath a dark sky with an ominous cloud.

The interpretation of this parable in both standard LDS teaching and this particular painting, then, is that the five wise virgins were good and faithful and the five foolish virgins made wrong choices. Fair enough. But what happens when artists use similar formal elements and a realistic style to give the same Mormon audience a visual interpretation of a scriptural story whose meaning is not as obviously straightforward and does not share the same consensus of meaning? The simplistic dichotomy of wise and foolish, for instance, also appears in visual portrayals of the story of Mary and Martha, largely because they feature similar formal elements. Supporting this interpretation, Mary and Martha have long been portrayed in non-Mormon Christian art and literature as being in competition with each other, with Mary emerging as the more righteous woman. However, a closer examination of the Mary and Martha story, its application by Church leaders, and its depictions in Mormon art reveals that such an interpretation—the interpretation seemingly favored in institutional LDS art—is only one of the many possible ways to read the text.

Traditional Mormon Portrayals of Jesus at the Home of Mary and Martha

Jesus's visit to Mary and Martha is recorded as an actual, historical event by the biblical evangelist Luke, which makes it fundamentally different from the parable of the ten virgins, which is, by definition, a fictitious, moralistic story. Mary and Martha, on the other hand, are real, complex people seen in a particular time and place.[15] Let's begin with Luke 10:

> Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him,

14. A popular 1627 Dutch grammar book labels undisciplined students as "lanterns without light." Wayne Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 122.

15. We might also keep in mind that Luke was not present at this scene and cobbled together this narrative about sixty years after the fact.

> and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:38–42)

Ancient and medieval philosophers from Aristotle to Aquinas associated the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative or spiritual life) with a quiet, pure stillness focused on God or the universe. They saw it as the opposite of the less-desirable *vita activa* (active or temporal life), a mode of activity, noise, and worldly passion.[16] Martha (*vita activa*) as foil to Mary (*vita contemplativa*) is replete in Western religious literature and art. The figure of Martha in art is, in fact, described as "the personification of the busy housekeeper, the active type, in contrast to her contemplative sister, Mary of Bethany."[17] Augustine in 400 CE famously described three kinds of life in *The City of God*: "The first, without being slothful, is still a life of leisure passed in the consideration of truth or the quest for it; the second is busily engaged in the world's affairs; the third is a balanced combination of the other two."[18] Augustine influenced hundreds of years of Christian thinking that cast Mary as the more contemplative and therefore superior sister. In *The Trinity*, he described the glorious end of man in which Christ "will bring believers to the direct contemplation of God, in which all good actions have their end, and there is everlasting rest. . . . A sort of picture of what this joy will be like was sketched by Mary sitting at the Lord's feet, intent upon his words; at rest."[19]

An illustrative example of the traditional portrayal of Luke 10 is Johannes Vermeer's *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1654–56).[20]

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16. For an overview of the development of the terms *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa,* see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7–21.

17. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects,* 207.

18. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 847.

19. Augustine, *The Trinity,* ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 83. Augustine's intriguing use of words such as "picture" and "sketched" to talk about the written story of Mary is a reminder of the dynamic relationship between word and image in religious visual culture.

20. The original painting is at the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh. Image available at https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/5539/christ-house-martha-and-mary.

In this painting, the three figures form a pyramidal shape. Martha stands at the top, in motion, as she sets down a basket of food. Christ sits beside the table and points, for Martha's benefit, to Mary. Closely paralleling Augustine's description, Mary sits on a low stool, at Jesus's feet, in a statue-like pose of attentive listening. Adhering to this visual tradition, every institutional portrayal (and most noninstitutional Mormon art) visually gives Mary prominence and shows her being quiet and still as she accepts the teachings of the Savior, while Martha is full of movement, often obscured or in the background.

Yet the scriptural passage on which these images are based is somewhat ambiguous, seemingly open to multiple interpretations. On the one hand, it might be read as a rebuke by Jesus of Martha's choice to focus on temporal serving rather than spiritual learning. The majority of LDS Church leaders have embraced this understanding. As just one example, in a 2007 general conference talk, Elder Dallin H. Oaks said, "It was praiseworthy for Martha to be 'careful and troubled about many things,' . . . but learning the gospel from the Master Teacher was more 'needful.'"[21] In the text, however, Jesus does not actually judge either woman. It was Martha who, by appealing to Jesus, judged Mary's form of discipleship as less worthy than her own.[22] Neither choice was necessarily or categorically unworthy. A few LDS Church leaders have also embraced this understanding. For example, former Relief Society General President Bonnie D. Parkin said in 2003, "On this occasion, it seems to me that Mary expressed her love by hearing His word, while Martha expressed hers by serving Him. . . . I don't believe the Lord was saying there are Marthas and there are Marys."[23]

LDS General Authority Gregory A. Schwitzer indicated that many Mormons have unfairly judged Martha's character because they have evaluated her based on only Luke 10 and not also on John 11.[24] There,

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21. Dallin H. Oaks, "Good, Better, Best," *Ensign* 37 (November 2007): 104.

22. Chieko N. Okazaki, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 115–16; Catherine Corman Parry, "'Simon, I Have Somewhat to Say unto Thee': Judgment and Condemnation in the Parables of Jesus," May 7, 1991, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, transcript, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/catherine-corman-parry_simon-somewhat-say-unto-thee-judgment-condemnation-parables-jesus/.

23. Bonnie D. Parkin, "Choosing Charity: That Good Part," *Ensign* 33 (November 2003): 104.

24. Gregory A. Schwitzer, "Developing Good Judgment and Not Judging Others," *Ensign* 40 (May 2010): 103–4.

Martha displays extraordinary faith as she declares her belief that Jesus had the power not only to have saved her brother Lazarus but also to bring him back from the dead:

> Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. . . . Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat still in the house. Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee. Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world. (John 11:5, 20–27)

Mary also demonstrated great faith in Christ and is not always described so passively in the scriptures. In a later moment in the Gospel of John, we find Martha serving dinner again, but this time Mary is anointing Jesus with oil: "Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment" (John 12:3). For some LDS leaders, such as former General Relief Society First Counselor Chieko Okazaki, this act was Mary's way of offering her own witness of Jesus's divinity, by proclaiming him the anointed, or "Christ."[25]

Generally, though, the exegesis favored by most Church leaders, as well as LDS narrative art, adheres to the traditional dichotomous interpretation that sees Martha as subordinate to Mary. For example, Rane's painting of these New Testament sisters is titled *Mary Heard His Word* (2001; fig. 2). The title itself leaves Martha out altogether and sets the viewer up for a particular interpretation.[26] Mary is front and center, facing the viewer, her face bathed in the soft light of a lamp. Here, again, Rane uses the iconography of a burning lamp to indicate the wisdom found in Mary, but not in Martha, who is turned away from the light. Mary sits in a passive, receptive pose, her chin propped on clasped hands, while Christ speaks and gesticulates. Mary is clearly the central

25. Okazaki, *What a Friend,* 123.

26. Though this painting was not commissioned, it was presented to the Church History Museum Acquisition Committee for first consideration. It is in the Church History Museum collection, sold in its store, and also sold in the LDS.org store.

Figure 2. Walter Rane, *Mary Heard His Word*, 2001, oil on panel, 30″ × 52″. Courtesy of Church History Museum. Following a traditional Christian motif, this painting emphasizes a passively receptive Mary and places her busy sister, Martha, in the background.

figure in this painting, since even Christ's face is more obscured than hers. Martha, meanwhile, hunches over her bowls and pitchers in the dark kitchen in the back corner with her face—mostly covered by her headscarf—looking away from Christ.

Rane has another version of the scene, titled *Christ in the Home of Mary and Martha* (c. early 1990s), which is also available in official Church forums.[27] In this painting, Christ looks directly out at the viewer, appearing to be in the middle of discoursing, his face and white robes lit by natural light from an unseen window. Both women look toward Christ. Mary again faces the light, her body squared with the light source and her face turned toward Christ. Mary sits perfectly still, listening quietly with a thoughtful gesture of hand to chin. Her stillness

27. It is not owned by the Church History Museum but is sold in its store and also in the LDS.org store. Image available on the online Museum Store Art Catalog, https://history.lds.org/exhibit/museum-art-catalog-topic?lang=eng#mv132.

is in contrast to both Christ, who gestures as he talks, and Martha, who appears to be in midstep with her arms full of household supplies. Martha, in fact, seems pulled in two directions. Her body is turned away from the window and from Christ, and she appears to be headed toward a doorway leading out of the room. However, she glances back over her shoulder to Christ. Martha is separated from Christ and Mary through the use of formal elements such as light and darkness and the implied circular shape created by the figures of Christ and Mary. It's clear that Mary is put forward as the wiser sister.

Figure 3. Del Parson, *Christ with Mary and Martha*, 1986, oil on canvas, 30″ × 20″. Courtesy of Church History Museum. Although all three figures receive equal visual weight in this painting, Mary's position is still privileged and her quiet pose is contrasted with Martha's activity.

A depiction of Mary and Martha familiar to most Mormons is Del Parson's *Christ with Mary and Martha* (fig. 3), commissioned by the Church's Curriculum Graphics Department in 1986.[28] In this portrayal, there is more unity among the three figures, whose placement forms a pyramidal shape. The natural light entering the windows reaches each figure equally. We see each person's face, and all three appear calm. Both Mary and Martha gaze quietly at the speaking, gesturing figure of Christ, but while Mary is kneeling with clasped hands at Christ's feet, Martha is standing and mixing a bowl of food. Although both women look intently at Christ, he looks back only at Mary, so here, still, Mary is privileged.

Another version of this scene that is included in the LDS Media Library is David Lindsley's *Christ in the Home of Mary and Martha*

28. This information was supplied by Carrie Snow, manager of collections care at the Church History Museum, in an email message to the author on January 16, 2017. The painting is owned by the Church History Museum, sold in its store, sold in the LDS.org store, and included in the LDS Media Library.

Figure 4. Kathleen Peterson, *Mary and Martha with Jesus*, 2013, acrylic on panel, 24″ × 24″. Courtesy of Church History Museum. In this painting, both Mary and Martha appear to be listening to Jesus, although Martha is separated from the group and pushed to the background by a table. Mary is in a conventional passive pose.

(1994).[29] The composition is remarkably similar to Vermeer's, with its pyramidal shape and the way in which Christ reaches out to stop Martha as she bustles by, pointing with his other hand to the good example of the seated, quiet Mary at his feet. Once again, Mary is ranked above Martha in a traditional Christian visual motif.

Finally, the Church History Museum owns a 2013 painting by Kathleen Peterson, titled *Mary and Martha with Jesus* (fig. 4). Speaking of her

29. Although this work appears in the LDS Media Library, it is neither in the Church History Museum collection nor sold by the Church. Image available at https://www.lds.org/media-library/images/jesus-mary-martha-396319.

work, Peterson explained that "you can lovingly serve and listen, so I tried to make them [Mary and Martha] both equal in the way they were showing respect."[30] In her painting, both sisters appear to be listening to Jesus, although Martha's gaze is focused on her basket of food. Peterson leaves room for an interpretation that sees both women as worthy disciples. The image, however, adheres to the customary motifs of a pyramidal composition, Jesus and Mary looking at each other in the foreground, Mary sitting passively, and Martha actively placing a tray of food on the table. Moreover, Martha is physically separated from Jesus and Mary by the large table, and we only glimpse her from the shoulders up, whereas the full length of Mary's body is depicted and is weighted equally with the figure of Jesus. At least in terms of composition, Mary is still the sister viewers are meant to focus on in this painting.

The institutional portrayals of Mary and Martha thus use formal elements to generally support the reading of wise versus foolish.[31] And just as other realistic LDS narrative art has influenced the way Mormons visualize and think of the scriptural stories of Abinadi and Christ, these visual portrayals shape the way many Mormons think about the Mary and Martha story. LDS art favors a stark, dichotomous interpretation of the sisters, despite the fact that a more nuanced and ambiguous explanation of their story can be found in the biblical text and has been offered by some Church leaders.

A Counterexample

Created much earlier than the institutional art discussed thus far, Minerva Teichert's painting *Jesus at the Home of Mary and Martha* (1935; fig. 5) is not in the official canon of LDS art,[32] yet it offers a uniquely Mormon reading in its celebration of both Mary and Martha, its portrayal

30. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Exhibit Highlights Women in the Scriptures," September 24, 2014, Newsroom, https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/exhibit-highlights-women-scriptures.

31. The Church History Museum owns two more paintings of Jesus in the home of Mary and Martha, one by LeConte Stewart and one by William Henry Margetson. They are not in the LDS Media Library or typically used in Church publications, so they are essentially unknown to the general Church audience. Both follow the traditional pattern of showing Mary as quiet and seated, while Martha is standing and holding a serving tray or basket. Images provided to author by Carrie Snow, email message to author, January 25, 2018.

32. The painting is not included in the LDS Media Library, the Church History Museum store, or the LDS.org store.

Figure 5. Minerva Teichert, *Jesus at the Home of Mary and Martha*, 1935, oil on canvas, 46″ × 70″. Courtesy of Brigham Young University Museum of Art, Provo, Utah. This painting offers a uniquely Mormon reading of the Mary-Martha story by giving equal visual emphasis to both sisters, celebrating active learning and choice, and highlighting written scripture.

of active learning, and its engagement with the written word. In analyzing her Book of Mormon paintings, John Welch and Doris Dant explain that Teichert "was a careful reader of the Book of Mormon text" and "captured both the indicative nuances and the full import of each story."[33] Teichert brought this same attention to the text, characters, and Mormon belief in creating her painting of the biblical Mary and Martha. However, for a Mormon audience consistently confronted with images of Mary and Martha that largely follow the pre-Mormon Christian tradition, the layers of meaning in Teichert's work are generally either overlooked or unreadable.

Teichert used formal elements and iconography to portray both Mary and Martha as wise disciples. The left side of the image, which

33. John W. Welch and Doris R. Dant, eds., *The Book of Mormon Paintings of Minerva Teichert* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 13.

features Christ and Mary, is bathed in natural light. Christ is also dressed in bright white robes while Mary is in bright red, emphasizing their two figures. On the right side, Martha is dressed in dark brown and placed more in shadow, although she does stand next to a bright fire. The three figures are given equal visual weight through a combination of placement, size, light, and color.[34] Furthermore, Christ's pointing hand guides the viewer's eye to the scriptures, then on to Mary, and then finally to Martha. There are two circular groups formed by the figures: (1) Christ and Mary, whose heads and bodies incline toward each other across the scroll, creating an implied circular shape, and (2) Christ, Mary, and Martha—Martha's head and body also incline toward the scroll, and the curving lines of the figures of Christ and Martha are repeated in the curving arch of the decorative frame painted around the image.[35] In other words, Martha is very much a part of the scene.

In *Images of Faith,* published by the Museum of Church History and Art,[36] the painting is described as follows: "In this domestic scene, Teichert captures the depth of Christ's compassion and empathy for the humble and honest. Many of Minerva Teichert's religious works feature women of the scriptures. Perhaps she felt keenly drawn to this particular domestic theme because it reflected a part of her own life—that of teaching the gospel to her family while creating her paintings in her home in Cokeville, Wyoming."[37] This description seems to recognize that Teichert's portrayal celebrates both women as an example of balancing the temporal and spiritual.

Teichert's stylistic execution is quite different from the institutional versions, which typically feature a highly realistic style, with crisp outlines, flat planes of color, tight brushstrokes, and fairly even lighting. Teichert employs a loose and sketchy style, with rough brushstrokes, hazy background details, and undefined facial features. Her beaux-arts training at

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34. Tina M. Delis, "Minerva Teichert's *Jesus at the Home of Mary and Martha*: Reimagining an Ordinary Heroine" (master's thesis, George Mason University, 2015), 21–22.

35. [Amy Wilson], "Christ with Mary and Martha," Highlands Ranch Stake Center Art, accessed April 4, 2018, http://highlandsranchstakecenterart.org/wordpress/art/minerva-teichert/christ-with-mary-and-martha-minerva-teichert/.

36. This was an earlier name for the Church History Museum.

37. Richard G. Oman and Robert O. Davis, eds., *Images of Faith: Art of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 77.

the Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Students League of New York is apparent in the stage-like setting and painted frame. Her impressionistic style calls attention to the fact that this is one artist's interpretation, not a realistic or accurate reflection of an event. On the other hand, institutional LDS images of Mary and Martha encourage a more literal interpretation with their heavy reliance on standard Christian portrayals in terms of formal elements, iconography, and realistic style.[38]

Though portrayals of Mary in LDS narrative art emphasize a passive or receptive, rather than an active, model of gaining wisdom, Teichert's Mary is a glaring exception. In this painting, Mary is not passively listening but actively reading the Hebrew text, with Christ guiding her learning rather than lecturing to her. For Teichert, apparently, "contemplative" does not mean passive or idle. In Mormon vernacular, we might understand what Mary is doing here as searching and pondering. She is actively learning the truth for herself.[39]

Similarly, Teichert may have understood the characters of Mary and Martha as symbols of the dynamic tension between faith and work in seeking spiritual wisdom. In fact, images of Christ in the home of Mary and Martha were popular during the Counter-Reformation, especially in the early seventeenth century, for just this reason. These images reflected the Catholic Church's response to the Protestant emphasis on grace through faith alone. The Catholic Church wanted to reemphasize the essential role of works alongside faith, and Mary and Martha

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38. The differences between Teichert's work and other paintings of Mary and Martha may have been intentional, but Teichert's painting may not have been well known to the artists who created the versions common in LDS culture. Although Teichert's paintings were popular at the time of their creation in the 1930s, her oeuvre started gaining critical attention only in the 1980s, generating an exhibition of her Book of Mormon paintings at the BYU Museum of Art in 1997 and then culminating in a large retrospective of her work at the BYU Museum of Art in 2007. See "Minerva Teichert: That He Who Runs May Read," Brigham Young University Museum of Art, accessed April 4, 2018, http://moa.byu.edu/past-exhibitions-archive/past-exhibitions-1997/minerva-teichert-that-he-who-runs-may-read/; and Richard G. Oman, "*Minerva Teichert: Pageants in Paint,* BYU Museum of Art Exhibit, July 27, 2007 to May 26, 2008," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 190–91.

39. Teichert's portrayal of active learning is unique not just in the LDS figurative imagery of women, but also of men. In the LDS Media Library, there are many depictions of people being preached to, but the only painted portrayal of active learning is Dale Kilbourn's *Joseph Smith Seeks Wisdom in the Bible.*

conceptualized that duality.[40] This tension between faith and works was still an important and much-discussed question in Teichert's twentieth-century Mormonism.[41] But Teichert seems to take this a step further by depicting in both women the Mormon emphasis on agency and activity. In Luke 10:42, Jesus says that Mary "hath chosen," and Teichert captures the performative quality of Mary exercising her agency and making a choice, rather than sitting passively.[42]

Finally, in this painting, Teichert thematizes the interaction of sacred word and sacred image. Her inclusion of scriptural text is distinctive in paintings of Mary and Martha, both within the LDS tradition and the larger Christian tradition.[43] The faux-Hebrew text is emphasized by its central placement, bright color, Christ's pointing hand, and the gaze of the two women. Is Teichert encouraging the viewer to "read" her painting the way Mary reads the text? Is linking her image with the biblical text a way of asserting the historical authenticity of the scene? Is Teichert suggesting that the religious word has primacy over the visual image? Teichert likely intended a combination of these meanings. As Marian Wardle has demonstrated, Teichert's religious works invoke allusions to the religious pageants, parades, and tableaus that were popular in early twentieth-century America.[44] By staging the scene within a frame, as if it were a performance of the biblical text, as well as including actual

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40. Thomas L. Glen, "Velázquez's *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*: An Image both 'Reflected' and to Be Reflected Upon," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 136.1578–79 (July–August 2000): 23. See also June Sturrock, "Martha and Mary Re-Imagined: A. S. Byatt and Others," *Christianity and Literature* 65 (September 2016): 473–89; and Michelle P. Brown, ed., *The Lion Companion to Christian Art* (Oxford: Lion, 2008), 286–87.

41. See Bruce C. Hafen, "Grace," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:560–63.

42. I'm grateful to Jenny Webb for this insight. Webb, email message to author, July 19, 2017.

43. There are a few exceptions, such as Jacob Jordaens's *Christ at the House of Martha and Mary of Bethany* (c. 1623), in which Mary does have a small open book, presumably the Hebrew Bible, on her lap, but she does not look at it and the text is not legible. The Dutch artist Cornelis Kruseman painted Mary holding a scroll with Hebrew figures in *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (1854). In recent years, two Mormon artists, Annette Everett and Angela Johnson, each produced large bronze sculptures of Mary and Martha, each one showing Mary holding a book or scroll.

44. Marian Wardle, *Minerva Teichert: Pageants in Paint* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 2007), 94.

religious writings, Teichert adds a rich textuality to her painting. The scene itself is drawn from the New Testament, but the Hebrew scroll references the Old Testament. The sisters are simultaneously reading and performing sacred text.

Furthermore, Mary's and Martha's visual focus on the written scripture rather than on Christ himself may be an allusion to the identification of Christ as *logos,* or "the Word," in the Gospel of John (John 1:1). In this way, Teichert's Mary models the way followers of Christ in modern times can learn from him and of him, although they do not see him face to face. In fact, since neither Mary nor Martha appear to interact with Christ at all in Teichert's painting, it's possible to view the scene as a timeless portrayal of Christ's followers seeking wisdom, with the unseen Spirit of the Lord guiding them. Again, this puts an emphasis on the text and on personal scripture study, a topic that is widespread in Mormon teachings.

Mary and Martha in Contemporary Mormon Art

Mormon artists today continue to engage with the story of Mary and Martha from a variety of perspectives. For the most part, though, they continue to follow the conventional interpretation, employing neither a specifically Mormon reading nor any other substantively different interpretation of the story. For example, Jorge Cocco Santangelo uses a unique "sacrocubist" style but doesn't stray from traditional iconography and composition in his 2017 *Jesus, Martha and Mary* (fig. 6). The three figures form a triangle, around which lines, shapes, and the figures' gazes lead the viewer's eye. Mary sits at Jesus's feet in a pious pose with clasped hands. Martha prepares a meal on a table filled with kitchen tools and food. Jesus looks at Martha and, at the very center of the painting, points at himself, as if chastising Martha and directing her to look at him instead of the table.

At the Church History Museum's 10th International Art Competition, in 2015, two of the featured entries depicted Mary and Martha. In Emily McPhie's *Martha and Mary* (fig. 7), the sisters are featured without Jesus, making the piece less an illustration of scriptural narrative and more a meditation on a theme. Mary is the larger of the two figures and appears closer to the viewer. She also looks directly out at the viewer, and her body is squared to the front of the picture plane. Martha's hunched body is contorted, and her gaze is sideways and unfocused. These compositional elements are consistent with traditional portrayals that privilege Mary as the sister making a more desirable choice. In fact, the exhibition

Figure 6. Jorge Cocco Santangelo, *Jesus, Mary and Martha*, 2017, oil on board, 12″ × 16″, in private collection. Courtesy of the artist. As in traditional images of this story, Mary here appears passive while Martha appears active.

Figure 7. Emily McPhie, *Martha and Mary*, 2015, oil on panel, 24″ × 42″. Courtesy of the artist. In this work, the figure of Mary is emphasized through its larger size and bold, frontal gaze.

Figure 8. Katherine Marie Ricks, *Mary and Martha*, 2014, oil on panel, 24″ × 30″, private collection. Courtesy of the artist. Each figure in this painting holds an emblem and faces away from the other, seemingly suggesting a choice between the temporal and the spiritual.

text, which was based on the artist's statement, reads, "'Martha, Martha' is Jesus's gentle reprimand in Bethany—given not because Martha is doing something wrong as she busies herself with relieving temporal thirsts but rather because the Lord desires her to choose 'that good part' (Luke 10:41–42). Mary, who is portrayed with an outstretched hand, asks the Lord to fill her with eternal truth, spiritual nourishment, peace, joy, and everlasting life. We also must choose every day, between many worthy options, the things that matter most."[45]

Mary and Martha (2014, fig. 8), Katherine Marie Ricks's entry in the museum's international art competition, is also more conceptual. Ricks portrays the women back-to-back, both standing straight with heads

45. Emily McPhie, "*Martha and Mary,*" *10th International Art Competition: Tell Me the Stories of Jesus* (Salt Lake City: Church History Museum, 2015), https://history.lds.org/exhibit/iac-2015-tell-me-the-stories-of-jesus?lang=eng#mv57.

held high and looking ahead. Martha holds a mixing bowl, symbolizing her concern with temporal service, and Mary holds a white dove, symbolizing her concern with spiritual things. The two figures are balanced in terms of color, light, and size. A formal analysis, then, suggests that Ricks leaves room for an interpretation that celebrates both women equally, without judging one as making a better choice than another. However, her written statement about this painting encourages a more conventional privileging of Mary. She wrote, "Though Martha was busy with many needful things, Mary's focus was on the MOST needful things. Her relationship with Christ was paramount. As I internalized this account, I thought of Mary and Martha less as two distinct people and more as two sides of the same person—two sides of myself—the side that reacts reflexively to urgent tasks, and the side that prioritizes the most important things. When I consider where my focus is each day, this account forces me to ask, 'Am I choosing the good part.'"[46]

Conclusions

This essay's consideration of female groups in LDS biblical narrative art raises questions about the function and influence of art in Mormonism, particularly the didactic nature of such religious art and its reception by a Mormon audience. Institutional LDS images of Mary and Martha adhere to only one interpretation of the story and largely follow the earlier Christian tradition of seeing Mary as passive and heroic and Martha as active and foolish. The typical Mormon viewer, upon seeing these institutional, highly realistic images, may take them at face value and accept their interpretation as historical and doctrinal fact. That even independent contemporary Mormon artists largely continue to use similar iconography and formal elements in scenes of Mary and Martha is a testament to this influence. Teichert's painting of the sisters, on the other hand, leaves the meaning open for interpretation and incorporates distinctive and particularly Mormon ideas about agency, personal study, the balance between faith and works, and the primacy of scripture.

Although most Mormons today study and teach from readily available scriptures and other texts produced by the Church, devotional art and, in a larger sense, all material culture in Mormonism still has the power to fundamentally alter and shape the way Mormons think about

46. Katherine Ricks, "Mary and Martha," *Katherine Ricks: An Artist's Sketchbook* (blog), April 25, 2014, http://katherinericks.blogspot.com/2014/04/mary-and-martha.html.

scripture stories and doctrinal beliefs. The portrayal of Martha as less wise than her sister Mary in LDS art is a case in point.

As Graham Howes, emeritus fellow of studies in social and political sciences at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, illustrates in *The Art of the Sacred,* factors such as the rise of Protestant iconoclasm, the mid-nineteenth-century movement toward abstraction, and postmodernism have all contributed to "a culture in which so many artists and their audiences are not interested in explicitly religious themes and there is no comprehensive religious tradition that the majority of people now inhabit and sustain."[47] Mormons today, however, are distinctive in their unifying theology, unique visual symbolism, and desire for overtly religious art. Even though such art is not directly incorporated into Mormon sacraments, the same power that religious art has to elevate the senses and express the intangible also enables it to shape belief. As such, the methods and messages of LDS art merit closer study. Further analysis of Mormon visual culture can help contextualize LDS art and the ways it contributes to Mormon belief and practice and encourage the Mormon viewing audience to have a richer and more dynamic experience with religious art.

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47. Graham Howes, *The Art of the Sacred: An Introduction to the Aesthetics of Art and Belief* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 165.