

RICHARD LYMAN BUSHMAN

DIVINE CREATIVITY:

TO SEE THE WORLD ANEW

THE CENTER

FOR LATTER-DAY SAINT ARTS



The Center for Latter-day Saint Arts exists at the intersection of cultural relevance and divine creativity. We believe that God is the ultimate creator and that art is the common language of our human experience. We draw from a diverse spectrum of Latter-day Saint creators to connect with a worldwide audience—artistically, intellectually and spiritually.

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Cover Art:

Abigale Palmer
American, born 1989
Your Way's Better, 2025
linocut print with painted
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Photograph courtesy of the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts

DIVINE CREATIVITY: TO SEE THE WORLD ANEW

By Richard Lyman Bushman

It is a pleasure to join with you across thousands of miles, to take part in the latest production of the Center for Latter-day Saints Arts, which now has been in operation for nearly nine years. Glen Nelson and I began thinking about a Center in 2016. Glen had been organizing Mormon art events for many years under the heading of the Mormon Artists Group (MAG) and knew more about Latter-day Saints artists of all kinds than anyone on the planet. We decided to expand the scope of MAG, changing the name to Mormon Arts Center (MAC) soon to be renamed again as Center for Latter-day Saint Arts. That first year, we were joined by Allyson Chard, Jenna and Jeffery Holt, and Brad Pelo, with others to follow.

Eight years later in the fall of 2024, I resigned as chairman of the Board to be replaced by Stanley Hainsworth, with Mykal Urbina running the show as Executive Director and Glen as Director of Special Projects. From a tiny organization operating mainly in New York City with a few activities each year, the Center has blossomed into global organization with a variety of programs, well known among LDS artists around the world as their advocate and friend.

I have learned a lot in these past eight years—about organization, about LDS art, and about myself. Happily, the Center has given me the opportunity to reflect a little on this experience. So let me bring up some images that will help convey what I want to say.



Photograph courtesy of the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts

ART AND THE MISSION OF THE CENTER FOR LATTER-DAY SAINT ARTS

I want to begin with the Center's mission statement. It is a surprisingly challenging task for an organization to decide exactly what it is trying to accomplish. We made many attempts but had to go back again and again to state our purpose more precisely. When Stanley Hainsworth joined the Center, he sensed at once that we were not there yet. As a person who had spent his career helping organizations with branding, he was uniquely qualified to step in. He and Mykal set aside a couple of days to work through the issues and came up with our current statement: The Center for Latter-day Saint Arts exists at the intersection of cultural relevance and divine creativity. We believe that God is the ultimate creator and that art is the common language of our human experience.

The statement has become commonplace now but at the time it took my breath away. It was so overtly religious. We were associating our little organization with the ultimate Creator! Linking our art and His? That was bold, even presumptuous.

But there it was, and we all loved it. We all believed that our work was in some way divine.

In the years since, I have come to realize how much beauty figures in God's creations. God did not just make the earth and its heavens. He saw that they were glorious and beautiful. Art was baked right into the universe.

It is a rare soul who comes to a high spot on a mountain trail overlooking a vista who does not sense the magnificence of creation. We are overwhelmed by what we see—exalted, humbled, and thrilled. He not only made the earth beautiful he made us able to appreciate it. It is in our natures, to be moved by its beauty.

The great mountain profiles against the sky, the majestic trees, the bulging, overbearing rocks, the melodious streams bouncing down a slope. It's gorgeous; we love it.

TEMPLES

The premium on beauty carries over to temples. From the beginning, ancient Israel was commanded to beautify their temple. They were to collect precious stones and vibrant woods to make the structure as magnificent as possible. The mandate carries over to our modern temples.

I was once asked what was the first work of art produced by Latter-day Saints. My answer was the first temples. Both Kirtland and Nauvoo are beautiful structures, comely and balanced. Architects admire them to this day. And think of those Nauvoo saints laboring on the temple with guns at their heads, in danger of being driven out, yet spending their last hours beautifying the temple.

The first endowments were given in a brick store. Almost any space could serve—a barn a house—but any space would not do. The spaces had to be beautified—as magnificent as we could make them.

Potent sculpture—suns, moons, and stars—adorn the outside of the temple to honor the ceremonies conducted inside. The Saints spent those last dangerous days in Nauvoo laboring on the temple because they were determined that beauty in the building should uphold the beauty of the service.

That same yearning carried over to the Utah Saints. They were long delayed in using the Salt Lake Temple for temple work because the structure they envisioned was so magnificent—really far beyond their means and technical capacity. In the meantime they performed the endowments in a modest building scarcely larger than a generous house.

But that plain structure would not do. For forty years they labored on this immense building to make it worthy of the ceremonies that took place inside.

That same beauty extended to the interiors. Art and beauty adorn temples to this day with striking architecture and beautiful gardens elevating these sacred places.

Surely the devotion to art in these buildings sets a standard for us. How can it help but mean that beauty is divine. We are meant to employ art to make our world as beautiful as possible as part of our effort to live righteous lives.

The artists and architects, craftsmen, construction workers, and gardeners who bring temples into existence and beautify them should be valued and honored. We need them to live life at its best.

Maddison Colvin

American, born 1990
Template (Utah), 2012
Graphite on paper, 40 x 24 in
Private collection
Used with permission
of the artist



CULTURAL RELEVANCE

Art serves other purposes, however, and that is suggested by two other words in the Center's mission statement: cultural relevance. Latter-day Saint arts exist at the intersection of divine creativity and cultural relevance.

What is meant by the words “cultural relevance?” Culture refers to the way we think and feel about the world. Culture is what we learn as we grow up in a certain time in history and a certain place in the world. The mission statement proposes that art exist at the juncture of the divine urge to create beauty and the everyday world we live in—the actual world of work and play, politics and economics, war and peace, courtship and marriage, striving and failure that we inhabit every day. How do we bring the impulse for beauty to bear on the struggles we have in living our lives on earth?

We all are participants in culture of course, but artists take on themselves the task of expressing what they experience at the juncture of beauty and cultural reality. We turn to them to show us what they discover in the world as they work to express themselves through sounds, words, colors, and shapes. In the entrancing depiction by **Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Harvesters (1565)**, the artist captured the mood, the atmosphere, the interplay of human effort

How do we bring the impulse for beauty to bear on the struggles we have in living our lives on earth?

with nature, the beautiful geometry of the natural world. We see the commonplace scenes of ordinary life in compelling new ways. Art helps us to see the ordinary more fully.

To clarify, let me give a few examples of art I know to explain what I am trying to say about art and cultural relevance.

Some years ago, our Relief Society President in Manhattan, Sue Hansen, gave Claudia and me one of her paintings. It hangs on the wall in our dining room. She worked with rice paper stained with tea—hence the yellow brown color.

She carved the figures in linoleum blocks—the woman and the red lines—and printed them on the paper. The picture was then coated with encaustic wax, making the surface hard and stiff. It sounds like a lot of trouble, but the mottled tint adds a mysterious quality to the scene.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder
Netherlandish, c. 1525–1569
The Harvesters, 1565
Oil on wood, 46.875 x 63.75 in
Metropolitan Museum of Art
Public domain



I have been attracted to the image because the figure of the woman intrigues me. She is quite ordinary with her plain cloth coat and hat. The coat and the hat suggest a middle-class woman perhaps from the 1950s—the kind of woman I saw a lot of at church when I was growing up. It could be my mother. She could be a Relief Society president. I think she is walking away from us—though we can't be sure—toward the red circle broken into segments and the swirls in the sky, maybe clouds or trees with more at the bottom perhaps bushes.

The woman is dressed in ordinary street garb. Her posture does not suggest anything special. If she is moving, she is walking steadily not running or showing much determination. The purse makes this an everyday moment. But what about the light—we assume it is the sun. She may be simply observing it and the clouds if that is what they are.

But there is something haunting and powerful about this figure. She may be staring at that red burst of light behind her or it may be shining on her and toward us. Either way she is exposed to or brings something luminous and strong.

I am persuaded I am on the right track because Hansen herself says this is a piece “about the spiritual power of women.” I cannot describe the nature of that power or go much beyond what I have said. I don't know what this woman will do. I just sense a radiance and a quiet force, disguised in this ordinary person. She may be an angel, or a person of immense will and purpose. I don't know all that is there; I only know that looking at Hansen's painting, I feel her force.

That is one example of what I take cultural relevance to mean. The artist makes something in human experience beautiful, or intriguing, something that moves us to see the world in a new way. Sue's painting moves me to think twice about the women I see dressed in ordinary garb walking toward—or away—from a light. Who knows what powers they possess? They may be simple and plain but also



Sue Hansen

American, born 1964

From the series:

Encaustic Collage, c. 2012

Encaustic collage, 20 x 10 in

Collection of Richard

and Claudia Bushman

Used with permission

complicated and mysterious. As Hansen portrays them, they must be heeded.

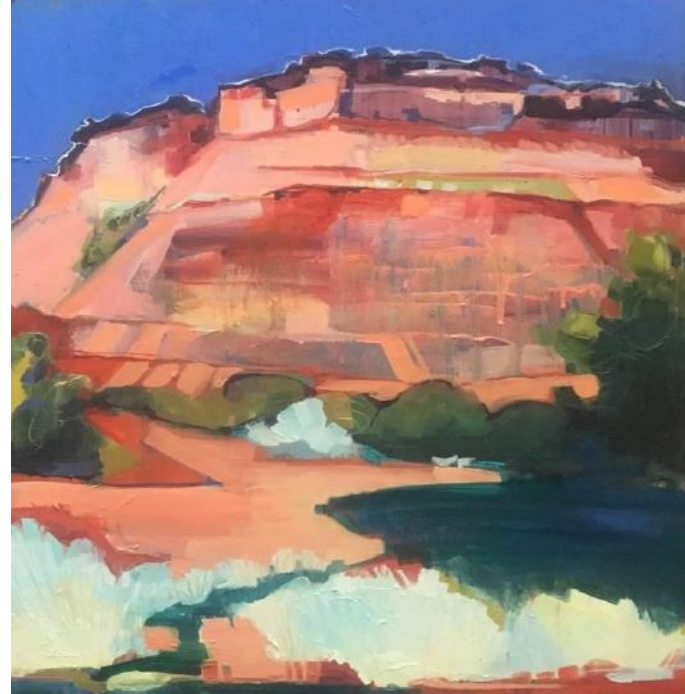
Hansen's woman in the light we readily see as culturally relevant because the artist deals with a contemporary cultural issue, something much debated in our day—the role of women.

But cultural relevance does not necessarily mean controversial cultural issues. Artists are often attracted to simple, everyday life as in still lifes. We don't debate still lifes; we simply observe them.

What in these non-controversial portrayals makes them “culturally relevant” as the Center's mission statement requires? What is their interest? I think the answer is that they help us to experience the world in new ways. The artist sees things we don't and tries to convey this elaborated view of things through colors, shape, sound, and words. Artists are teachers or reporters on life.



Abigale Palmer
American, born 1989
Good Vibes, 2022
Oil on panel, 6 x 6 in
Private collection
Used with permission
of the artist



Abigale Palmer
American, born 1989
X Marks the Spot, 2019
Oil on panel, 24 x 24 in
Collection of Mitch Palmer
Used with permission
of the artist

SEEING THE WORLD IN NEW WAYS

I have an example of this kind of cultural relevance in the work of Abigale Palmer. Raised in Provo, Utah, Palmer studied art at BYU, took a nursing degree at the University of Utah, married, and had children. Pressed by her responsibilities, she gave up painting for a time but went back to it knowing she would be a better mother if she found time for her art.

I used to see her work in the art area of the BYU bookstore. I saw mainly maternal scenes and temples. Her parents sent us a calendar with one of her mother-child pictures for each month. She had a strong sense of the beauty in motherhood in her psychologically astute portrayals of children and family life.

I learned later looking through her web page that she painted lots of simple things—food for example. She explained that in investing things with strong colors she wanted to bring out the joy of ordinary life. And it is true, these things dance and

sing. She turns an apple into a throbbing object that almost jumps off the page at you. It is beautiful and a little scary.

Somewhere along the line, Palmer turned to landscapes, especially mountains. I could not help but think how she saw the Wasatch mountains every morning as she came out of her family's house on fifth east in Provo. They were culturally relevant to her simply because they were so present.

Her landscapes have a place in an honored traditions in the history of art. In the Renaissance, painters first depicted scenery as a backdrop to pictures of something else—holy figures or aristocrats who paid the painters to portray them—or Christ in Piero Della Francesca's *The Baptism of Christ* (c. 1437–1445).

In time, the landscape became a subject in its own right, valued for itself, with its own conventions for portraying nature.

One of these conventions is illustrated in a painting by my father, an artist who did a landscape for my wife Claudia's mother. When Jean Lauper was decorating her living room, she wanted a painting that would blend with the rest of the room. She asked my father to provide the art. An obliging man, he chose to paint a scene which now hangs in our apartment over the piano.

Ted Bushman's painting follows a landscape convention called prospect and refuge. Landscapes often try to recover the scale of natural scenery in order to present its magnificence. Thus "prospect." But in some little corner, we see life on a human scale, often small in comparison to the grandeur of nature—a place of repose. In my father's painting, it is house and barn where people dwell.

In other landscape paintings, it is a worker in a field or peasants strolling along a road. In a Gainsborough work, Wooded Upland Landscape (c. 1783), it is a small figure with a pack and a dog. Surrounded by mountains and trees and roads that cover great distances, humans still find a home. The moral seems to be that nature is overwhelming, but there are little corners where humans find a place.

Ted Bushman
American, 1902–1980
Untitled, c. 1975
Watercolor, 24 x 36 in
Collection of Richard
and Claudia Bushman
Used with permission



Somehow Palmer's paintings make demands on me. I feel an obligation to honor this nature, even fear it a little—certainly to see the hand of a creator in it.

Abby Palmer has disregarded this tradition in her landscape art. She has struck out in another direction with landscapes devoid of human life so far as I have surveyed her work. The sheer grandeur and force of the scene comes through instead. The slashing swipes of paint suggest power and strength. The mountains are beautiful but no place is provided for human habitation. She senses the vigor of the mountain and helps us to see them that way ourselves.

I find her paintings electric. Like her still lifes, her landscapes use color to enliven the scene and help us to find joy—but it is another order of joy. The landscapes suggest the sublimity of nature—its threatening grandeur.

I see in them the kind of power that Van Gogh injects into his pictures of the night sky, or a face or flowers. So much movement and vitality—all of it a little ominous.

Somehow Palmer's paintings make demands on me. I feel an obligation to honor this nature, even fear it a little—certainly to see the hand of a creator in it. You can see how after absorbing my father's gentle landscape, Palmer's work moves me to see the world anew.



Installation photograph:
Dare Mighty Things, 2025
60 x 300 in
Installed in the Carolyn and
Kem Gardner Learning
and Leadership Building,
Utah State University
Courtesy of the artist

Abigale has grown as an artist since I first met her. She has steadily been seen more widely. Not just in her own website but in galleries and shows. She has won more and more awards, and recently she received a commission to prepare fifteen large works for the Carolyn and Kem Gardner Learning and Leadership Building at Utah State University. They will hang in a building with much glass exposure to the mountains that surround Logan. One of the installations is titled *Dare Mighty Things*.

I hope that as the students who study here hurry off to class they will pause to observe these works of art and think of how they relate to the mountains beyond. If they spend even a few minutes with Palmer's art, they will certainly learn to see the world anew and perhaps emerge ready to dare mighty things.

For me her work, like Sue Hansen's, is an example of art at the intersection of divine creativity and cultural relevance. Palmer's work honors the created world while helping us to understand our experience of that world. It is relevant to our culture, to our lives, to our possibilities. Her art like all the best art gives us a chance to see the world anew.

I think we live in a time when art is assuming an ever larger place in our lives. The Metropolitan Museum of Art receives 5.5 million visits a year. The Museum is a testament to the enduring importance of art in human culture.

The Met's collections demonstrate that for thousands of years all over the world, craftsmen have been beautifying tableware, tables, chairs, walls, curtains, armor, costumes, gardens, buildings. It is a witness to the deep human urge to beautify. The Center's mission statement suggests that beauty begins with God's creation, comes down through his temples, and flows out into all of human life. Art lifts us to another plane of existence; it instructs. **We see the world anew through art. God bless our artists.**

BIOGRAPHY

Richard Lyman Bushman is Gouverneur Morris Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University and author of *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (2005).

He has written on American social and cultural history including *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (1992) and *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order, 1690–1765* (1967), which received the Bancroft Prize in American History. He is co-founder and chairman emeritus of the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts.

A forthcoming biography, *Richard Lyman Bushman: A Mormon Ambassador*, written by J.B. Haws is scheduled for publication by University of Illinois Press in May, 2026.

