

The Gospel Vision of the Arts

By President Spencer W. Kimball



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In our world, there have risen brilliant stars in drama, music, literature, sculpture, painting, science, and all the graces. 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.

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. ...” (Sermon, September 20, 1857; see *The Messenger*, July 1953.)

With regard to masters, surely there must be many Wagners (Richard Wagner, 1813–83) in the Church, approaching him or yet to come in the tomorrows—young people with a love of art, talent supreme, and eagerness to create. I hope we may produce men greater than this German composer, Wagner, but less eccentric, more spiritual.

Who of us has not sat spellbound with *Aida*, *Il Trovatore*, or other of the masterpieces of Verdi (1813–1900)? Can there never be another Verdi or his superiors? Could we not find and develop a Bach (1685–1750)—to whom music, especially organ and choral music, owes almost as much as a religion does to its founder, say some musicians.

Is there anyone who has not been stirred by the rich melodic voice of Enrico Caruso (1873–1921), Italian-born operatic tenor? Surely there have been few voices which have inspired so many. Considered to be the greatest voice of his century by many, year after year he was the chief attraction at the Metropolitan Opera.

Would someone say that they produce singers best in Italy, in Germany, in Poland, or Sweden? Remember we draw our members from all of these places. The gospel attracts many and stirs their blood with the messages of the ages, and they sing songs of accomplishment, eternal marriage, exaltation.

Then there was Patti—Adeline Maria Patti—who was scintillating in her accomplishments and her greatness. She is known as an Italian Singer though she was born in Madrid (1843–1919). Not only did Patti have a pure clear-toned voice, but she had a wide range which was excelled only by her personal grace and charm, her pure style, her loveliness. Surely we can produce many Pattis in the tomorrows.

We also remember the celebrated Jenny Lind, the Swedish singer (1820–87), with such tone faculty, such musical memory, such supremacy, and with such unprecedented triumphs. Do you think there are no more voices like Jenny Lind's? Our day, our time, our people, our generation, should produce such, as we catch the total vision of our potential and dream dreams and see visions of the future.

Brigham Young said, "Every accomplishment, every polished grace, every useful attainment in mathematics, music, and in all sciences and art belong to the Saints."

Many of us can still remember the enchanting Mme. Schumann-Heink, the Bohemian-Austrian, later American lady (1861–1963—died at Hollywood), who was by many regarded as the greatest contralto of her time and a noble character also. She had sons in World War I on both sides, and lost one in the American army and one in the German army.

As I have traveled throughout the Church, many times I have been entranced with sweet and lovely voices. I believe that deep in the throats of these faithful Saints of today and tomorrow are superior qualities which, superbly trained, can equal or surpass these known great singers.

Members of the Church should be peers or superiors to any others in natural ability, extended training, plus the Holy Spirit which should bring them light and truth. With hundreds of "men of God" and their associates so blessed, we have the base for an increasingly efficient and worthy corps of talent.

One great artist was asked which of all his productions was the greatest. His prompt answer was, "The next."

If we strive for perfection—the best and greatest—and are never satisfied with mediocrity, we can excel. In the field of both composition and performance, why cannot someone write a greater oratorio than Handel's *Messiah*? The best has not yet been composed nor produced. They can use the coming of Christ to the Nephites as the material for a greater masterpiece. Our artists tomorrow may write and sing of Christ's spectacular return to the American earth in power and great glory, and his establishment of the kingdom of God on the earth in our own dispensation. No Handel nor other composer of the past or present or future could ever do justice to this great event. How could one ever portray in words and music the glories of the coming of the Father and the Son and the restoration of the doctrines and the priesthood and the keys unless he were an inspired Latter-day Saint, schooled in the history and doctrines and revelations and with rich musical ability and background and training?

George Bernard Shaw, the Irish dramatist and critic (1856–1950), summed up an approach to life: "Other people," he said, "see things and say, 'WHY?' But I dream things that never were—and I say, 'WHY NOT?'" We need people who can dream of things that never were, and ask, "WHY NOT?"

Dom Jae gave us this:

“Blessed is the man with new worlds to conquer. For him the future beams with promise. He never attains ultimate success, is never satisfied, is ever on the way to better things. Ahead of him there is always another dream castle glittering in the sun—and what fun it is to build foundations under it!”

Freed largely from expansion and growing pains, we can now pour many firm foundations under our dreams for the future.

And Niccolò Paganini, the Italian violinist (1782–1840)! Why cannot we discover, train, and present many Paganinis and other such great artists? And shall we not present before the musical world a pianist to excel in astonishing power of execution, depth of expression, sublimity of noble feeling, the noted Hungarian pianist and composer, Liszt (1811–1886)? We have already produced some talented artists at the piano, but I have a secret hope to live long enough to hear and see at the piano a greater performer than Paderewski, the Polish statesman, composer, and pianist (1860–1941). Surely all Paderewskis were not born in Poland in the last century; all talented people with such outstanding recreative originality, with such nervous power and such romantic appearance were not concentrated in this one body and two hands! Certainly this noted pianist with his arduous super-brilliant career was not the last of such to be born!

The Italian painter and sculptor Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), with his masterful and wonderful technique, made his portraits, figures, and designs true to life. His *Mona Lisa* is celebrated, and in it he was striving to catch the fleeting manifestations of the secret soul of his attractive and winsome subject. He seems to have given inspiration to Raphael and others of the great.

During one of our visits to Copenhagen, we were excited and inspired as we drank in the beauty of Thorvaldsen’s *Christ and the Twelve Apostles*. We wondered if anyone, anytime, could produce a greater masterpiece, and yet time may surprise the world. Can you see statues of the Lord, his prophets, and his disciples? There are many martyrs and prophets of the centuries who have never been so honored.

Michelangelo (Buonarroti—1475–1564) thought of himself only as a sculptor. He was called upon by Pope Julius II (in 1505) to build a great monument which the pope desired to have finished within his lifetime. This monument was never completed, and the controversies which arose embittered a large part of the great artist’s life. His 3,500-square-foot painting in the Sistine Chapel is said to be the most important piece of mural painting of the modern world.

To be an artist means hard work and patience and long-suffering. This artist said, “I am a poor man and of little merit, who plods along in the art, which God gave me. ... I am more exhausted than ever man was.” And when we see Michelangelo’s masterpieces of art, we feel as did Habakkuk:

“Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you.” (Hab. 1:5.)

But then we ask, “Can there never be another Michelangelo?” Ah! Yes! His *David* in Florence and his *Moses* in Rome inspire to adulation. Did all such talent run out in that early century? Could not we find an embodied talent like this, but with a soul that was free from immorality and sensuality and intolerance?

Could there be among us embryo poets and novelists like Goethe (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749–1832)? Have we explored as much as we should? Of the creator of *Faust*, Emerson said, “The old eternal genius that built the world had confided itself more to this man than to any other.” But Goethe was not the greatest nor the last. There may be many Goethes among us even today, waiting to be discovered. Inspired Saints will write great books and novels and biographies and plays.

Can we not find equal talent to those who gave us *A Man for All Seasons*, *Doctor Zhivago*, *Ben Hur*? This latter book I read when a small boy and many times I have returned to it. Critics might not agree with me, but I feel that it is a great story. *My Fair Lady* and *The Sound of Music* and such have pleased their millions, but I believe we can improve on them.

We have the great Rembrandt (1606–1669), whose style is original, founded on the work of no other artist, whose coloring is somber and reaches its highest achievement in combinations of browns and grays. There are few paintings about which so much has been written as Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch* or his self-portraits. His morals also have been subject to criticism.

And we have the Italian painter Raphael (1483–1520), generally accepted in the European world as the greatest of religious painters.

It has been said that many of the great artists were perverts or moral degenerates. In spite of their immorality they became great and celebrated artists. What could be the result if discovery were made of equal talent in men who were clean and free from the vices, and thus entitled to revelations?

We have scientists who can help harness the limitless powers and turn them to good for all humanity. There have been Pasteur (1822–1895) and Curie (1867–1934) and Albert Einstein (1879–1955), and there are the Harvey Fletchers, the Henry Eyrings, and there will be greater yet.

Then there is Shakespeare (1564–1616). Everybody quotes Shakespeare. This English poet and dramatist was prodigious in his productions. His *Hamlet* and *Othello* and *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are only preludes to the great mass of his productions. Has anyone else ever been so versatile, so talented, so remarkable in his art? And yet could the world produce only one Shakespeare?

Perhaps growing up in a backwoods forest in Indiana or Louisiana or in Oregon or Illinois, there may be some little deprived boy doing his elementary math on a wood fire shovel and borrowing books from neighbors and splitting rails, who will find his way tomorrow to the knowledge and inspiration which will send him skyrocketing to fame and honors, perhaps even to the White House, and a man to be ever after heralded for his wisdom, bravery, conscience, humanity, leadership, and to be quoted till eternity. His name might be Abraham, his mother’s name might be Nancy, and could this be written concerning him as was written of his nineteenth-century counterpart?

*Oh, well, send the women,
Send them there to Nance;
Poor little young un’
Born without a chance.*

The little Abes could have their chances and their greatest talents improved and perfected, and their notoriety spring from humble but influential beginnings in the Church.

Oh, how our world needs statesmen! And we ask again with George Bernard Shaw, "Why not?" We have the raw material, we have the facilities, we can excel in training. We have the spiritual climate. We must train statesmen, not demagogues; men of integrity, not weaklings who for a mess of pottage will sell their birthright. We must develop these precious youth to know the art of statesmanship, to know people and conditions, to know situations and problems, but men who will be trained so thoroughly in the arts of their future work and in the basic honesties and integrities and spiritual concepts that there will be no compromise of principle.

For years I have been waiting for someone to do justice in recording in song and story and painting and sculpture the story of the Restoration, the reestablishment of the kingdom of God on earth, the struggles and frustrations; the apostasies and inner revolutions and counter-revolutions of those first decades; of the exodus; of the counter-reactions; of the transitions; of the persecution days; of the miracle man, Joseph Smith, of whom we sing "Oh, what rapture filled his bosom, For he saw the living God" (*Hymns*, no. 136); and of the giant colonizer and builder, Brigham Young.

We are proud of the artistic heritage that the Church has brought to us from its earliest beginnings, but the full story of Mormonism has never yet been written nor painted nor sculpted nor spoken. It remains for inspired hearts and talented fingers *yet* to reveal themselves. They must be faithful, inspired, active Church members to give life and feeling and true perspective to a subject so worthy. Such masterpieces should run for months in every movie center, cover every part of the globe in the tongues of the people, written by great artists, purified by the best critics.

Our writers, our motion picture specialists, with the inspiration of heaven, should tomorrow be able to produce a masterpiece which would live forever. Our own talent, obsessed with dynamism from a CAUSE, could put into such a story life and heartbeats and emotions and love and pathos, drama, suffering, fear, courage; and they could put into it the great leader, the mighty modern Moses who led a people farther than from Egypt to Jericho, who knew miracles as great as the stream from the rock at Horeb, manna in the desert, giant grapes, rain when needed, battles won against great odds.

Take a Nicodemus and put Joseph Smith's spirit in him, and what do you have? Take a da Vinci or a Michelangelo or a Shakespeare and give him a total knowledge of the plan of salvation of God and personal revelation and cleanse him, and then take a look at the statues he will carve and the murals he will paint and the masterpieces he will produce. Take a Handel with his purposeful effort, his superb talent, his earnest desire to properly depict the story, and give him inward vision of the whole true story and revelation, and what a master you have!

The architect Daniel H. Burnham said:

*Make no little plans; they have no magic [there] to stir men's blood
And probably themselves will not be realized.
Make big plans; aim high and hope and work,
Remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die,
But long after we are gone,*

*Will be a living thing,
Asserting itself with ever-growing insistency.
Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things
That would stagger us.
Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty.*

We must recognize that excellence and quality are a reflection of how we feel about ourselves and about life and about God. If we don't care much about these basic things, then such not caring carries over into the work we do, and our work becomes shabby and shoddy.

Real craftsmanship, regardless of the skill involved, reflects real caring, and real caring reflects our attitude about ourselves, about our fellowmen, and about life.

[photo] Photography by Eldon Linschoten

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Gospel Vision of the Arts Scholarship, Jurors' Choice Award 2019 Recipient: Noelle Gunsay Noelle is using her scholarship to study art at Snow College, and to continue her apprenticeship with Casey Childs. Noelle hopes to hone her technical skills to better represent Gospel-themed artwork. Noelle's Instagram: @noelle_gunsay.art. #ldsartist #ldsart #mormonart #visionoftheartsscholarship #vota #artscholarship #religiousart #gospelart #inspirationalart.