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Abstract: This essay traces the development of First Vision art and how it has evolved over time, examining how an artistic symbol of the First Vision has emerged that can simultaneously enhance but also limit our understanding of the vision. I will first explore how cultural factors influence art, including First Vision art. Next, I will trace in thirty-year periods a chronological development of First Vision artistic imagery and how that imagery has created a recognizable First Vision symbol. Last, I will analyze current cultural forces that might be influencing the way the First Vision is portrayed now and possibly will be in the future.



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Visualizing the Vision

The History and Future of First Vision Art

Anthony Sweat

“Art could not be nobler than the religion that gave it life.”¹

When a teenage Joseph Smith entered the woods on his family farm to pray over his soul and inquire which church he should join, the vision that burst forth from heaven changed his life and laid a pathway for the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The First Vision is among the scenes of the Restoration most often depicted by artists. Portrayals of the First Vision were published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the *Ensign* magazine 167 times between 1971 and 2019, nearly double the representations of any Restoration theme other than depictions of pioneers.² Today in Church curriculum, if we talk about the First Vision, we nearly always have a painting to accompany it.

This abundance of institutional imagery was not always the case, however. It took about a hundred years for the restored Church to regularly use artistic imagery in its institutional publications to portray its founding events and doctrines. From 1832 until 1900, there were fewer than three dozen images dealing with Church history or doctrine published in tens of thousands of pages of Church periodicals, and the First

1. Frank Bristol, *The Ministry of Art* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1897), 54–55.

2. Compare the First Vision being shown 167 times in the *Ensign* to notable events such as the restoration of the priesthood (101 times), the Book of Mormon translation (55 times), Joseph Smith’s martyrdom/Carthage Jail (40 times), Moroni appearing or instructing Joseph or giving him the plates (33 times), and the Three or Eight Witnesses of the Book of Mormon (18 times). In contrast, artistic depictions of pioneers, Winter Quarters, and the westward migration have been shown almost 500 times.

Vision was not one of them.³ The first painting of the First Vision was not printed by the institutional Church until 1912, nearly one hundred years after the event occurred.⁴

This essay traces the development of First Vision art and how it has evolved over time, examining how an artistic *symbol* of the First Vision has emerged that can simultaneously enhance but also limit our understanding of the vision. I will first explore how cultural factors influence art, including First Vision art. Next, I will trace in thirty-year periods a chronological development of First Vision artistic imagery and how that imagery has created a recognizable First Vision symbol. Last, I will analyze current cultural forces that might be influencing the way the First Vision is portrayed now and possibly will be in the future.⁵

Art as Cultural Representation

In the quiet mountains of Ephraim, Utah, a Danish convert to the Church named Carl Christian Anton (C. C. A.) Christensen worked away in his studio behind the old Ephraim Roller Mill on a series of twenty-three religious paintings. His images, each ten feet wide and about seven feet tall, represented prominent moments of Latter-day Saint history. Stitched together into a single canvas scroll about 175 feet long, each new scene could be slowly unveiled to an audience by assistants operating a crank, accompanied by a prewritten narration. Between 1878 and 1888, Christensen's "Mormon Panorama" toured across the Western United States with wide acclaim.⁶ Why? Christensen's images were born of and spoke to cultural crosscurrents. When Christensen's panorama

3. My research assistant Dylan Barton and I have compiled every image dealing with Church history or doctrine published by the Church in *The Evening and the Morning Star*, *Messenger and Advocate*, *Elders' Journal*, *Times and Seasons*, *Millennial Star*, *Gospel Reflector*, *Nauvoo Neighbor*, *Gospel Light*, *The Prophet*, *The New-York Messenger*, *People's Organ*, *Young Woman's Journal*, *Improvement Era*, *Mutual Improvement Messenger*, *Juvenile Instructor* [renamed *The Instructor* in 1930], *The Children's Friend*, and *Relief Society Magazine*.

4. William A. Morton, *From Plowboy to Prophet: Being a Short History of Joseph Smith for Children* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1912), facing page 8.

5. Special thanks to my research assistant Calvin Burke for his help in gathering sources and images for this entire article. His insights and scholarly acumen were invaluable.

6. Paul L. Anderson and Richard Jensen, "C. C. A. Christensen and the Mormon Panorama," *News of the Church*, *Ensign* 9 (June 1979): 80; see also Jane Dillenberger, "Mormonism and American Religious Art," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaic-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 187–200.

paintings were created, pressures were again mounting on the Saints, who had been driven to the Rocky Mountains. The transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869, had ended Utah's relative isolation. Utah's practice of polygamy was under attack by new laws from the United States federal government. Brigham Young—the longtime Church President who brought the Church west—had died in 1877, and his successor, John Taylor, was forced into hiding for refusing to comply with polygamy legislation. A new generation of Latter-day Saint children and converts who never personally knew Joseph Smith needed to understand, learn, and embrace their sacred history. Under these cultural forces, Christensen picked up his paintbrush and went to work, producing canvases that reflected a people born by restored revelation and persecuted because of it. The first image in the panorama? Christensen's narration begins, "This scene represents the first vision of Joseph Smith, the prophet."⁷ Audiences loved it. Joseph's story was their story.

Christensen's story illustrates what art critic Kerry Freedman explains: art is a "form of social production," and "visual culture creates, as well as reflects, personal and social freedoms."⁸ Societal values act like tectonic plates upon artists, creating pressures that collide in creative minds and give rise to their masterpieces. However, this relationship between art and society is often symbiotic. One contemporary author asked, "Does the artist help create the cultural moment they are in, or are they only a reflection of their cultural milieu?" and then answered her own question with an example of an artist who "is both a reflection of our culture and creating culture."⁹ C. C. A. Christensen was producing art reflecting his social values, but his art also contributed to new culture. When Christensen was painting *The Vision*, a young musician on a sales call for D. O. Calder's Music Palace came to Ephraim and was invited to Christensen's studio. The musician's name was George Manwaring. Manwaring's son recalls that Christensen "took him into his studio and showed him *The Vision* which he had just finished. It was a painting of the Father and Son appearing to Joseph Smith in the sacred grove in answer to prayer. It made such an impression on the mind of George Manwaring, then

7. Lectures as Written by C. C. A. Christensen, Scene One, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, box 8608, A 1 a no. 2440.

8. Kerry Freedman, *Teaching Visual Culture: Curriculum, Aesthetics, and the Social Life of Art* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), xii.

9. Carrie Brumer, "How Do the Arts Reflect Our Culture?" Artist Strong, blog, <http://www.artiststrong.com/how-do-the-arts-reflect-our-culture/>.

about 24 years of age, that he was inspired to compose the song.”¹⁰ That song was “Joseph Smith’s First Prayer,” today sung by millions the world over.¹¹ As scholar James Allen writes, “It was thus four decades after the organization of the Church that the vision found its way into artistic media, but it was largely through these media that it eventually found its way into the hearts and minds of the Saints.”¹² The monuments created by artists affected by cultural values also serve as new guideposts to look toward and as peaks upon which to stand and see new vistas.

Cultural Factors Influenced First Vision Art

What, then, were some of the cultural factors that may have influenced the lack of First Vision art in the early Church for members to look toward and stand their faith upon? One influence may have been that early Americans largely eschewed religious art,¹³ and Joseph Smith himself was not known to connect visual art with religious instruction or worship. The Kirtland Temple (the only worship building completed in Joseph’s lifetime) was devoid of religious paintings, stained glass art, or sculpture. As Terryl Givens has noted, Joseph Smith was born into a culture of “domestic arts, such as simple portraits, stenciled furniture, and both wall and floor painting,” but “none of [Joseph’s] actions or writings suggest that he paid any notice to an effete art like painting.”¹⁴ The only known reference Joseph Smith ever made to religious art was when Benjamin West’s *Death on a Pale Horse*, depicting the four horsemen of the apocalypse from Revelation 6:8, was exhibited in his reading room, just two weeks before Joseph was martyred.¹⁵

10. John H. Manwaring and George Ernest Manwaring, *Brief History of the Life of George Manwaring*, retrieved from <https://familysearch.org/patron/v2/TH-300-44301-24-30/dist.pdf?ctx=ArtCtxPublic>.

11. This hymn is also titled “Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning.” *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 26.

12. James B. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision of Mormon Religious Thought,” in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 2012), 227–60.

13. Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 40.

14. Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 180.

15. “Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 4, 1 March–22 June 1844,” 157, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-4-1-march-22-june-1844/159>.

The lack of religious art may have been due to the Church's financial constraints (because art is generally considered a luxury, supported and afforded usually by those who are more wealthy), and the simple fact that the Church lacked trained artists in its New York, Kirtland, and Missouri periods. It was not until the Church settled in Nauvoo that the first painters emerged.

These explanations, however, do not sufficiently answer why artistic First Vision imagery did not appear in the Church for most of the nineteenth century, since compositions could have been produced by lesser artists from 1830 to 1850 and by gifted artists such as Dan Weggeland and others who emerged in the 1850s to 1900, including the Paris art missionaries.¹⁶ The single most salient cultural reason is that the First Vision simply was not emphasized by the early Restored Church as a focal point for its historical or theological narrative. Despite the First Vision's doctrinal prominence today in Latter-day Saint history, it has been documented by historians that the First Vision was not well known or circulated among early general Church membership.¹⁷ The early narrative for the initiation of the Restoration was usually the visitation of Moroni to Joseph Smith and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, not Joseph's personal prayer in the grove. Most Saints gathered to the Church in Ohio, Missouri, Kirtland, and Utah without hearing about the story of a fourteen-year-old boy who went to the woods and saw God and Jesus in a vision. Other than an obscure reference to the First Vision in D&C 20:5 in April 1830, the First Vision was not published anywhere in the 1830s. James Allen writes, "Only in 1838 did Joseph Smith prepare an account of it for official publication; not until 1840 did any account appear in print; and not for another half century was it publicly discussed with great regularity or used for the wide variety of purposes to which it lends itself today."¹⁸ Although Joseph Smith told the vision to some in the 1830s, Steven Harper writes that "he did so

16. John Hafen, Lorus Pratt, John B. Fairbanks, Edwin Evans, and Herman Haag were sent by the Church on a mission to study and learn art at L'Académie Julian in Paris in 1890, returning to complete the murals in the Salt Lake Temple in 1893. Giles H. Florence Jr., "Harvesting the Light: The 1890 Paris Art Mission," *Ensign* 18 (October 1988): 34–41; Rachel Cope, "'With God's Assistance I Will Someday Be an Artist': John B. Fairbanks's Account of the Paris Art Mission," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 3 (2011): 133–59; Linda Jones Gibbs, *Harvesting the Light: The Paris Art Mission and the Beginning of Utah Impressionism* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987).

17. James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (1966): 29–46; reprinted in *Exploring the First Vision*, 283–306.

18. James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Mormon Religious Thought," in *Exploring the First Vision*, 227–60.

privately among small groups of followers.”¹⁹ Joseph had the vision documented in his 1832 history and again in 1835, but these two accounts did not see the light of day until the mid-twentieth century, packed away in a trunk by Willard Richards and forgotten for nearly a hundred years.²⁰ It would not be until influential apostle Orson Pratt began emphasizing the First Vision in print and discourse that Church members began to use it as a doctrinal Restoration narrative, particularly in the 1860s and 1870s.²¹

In 1880, the Pearl of Great Price was canonized, including excerpts from Joseph Smith’s history, which included his 1838–39 First Vision narrative. The Pearl of Great Price placed an account of the First Vision in the hands of the Saints, who were ready to read, quote, analyze, and apply it as scripture. At roughly the same time the Church canonized parts of its official history, the United States waged literal and ideological war against the Latter-day Saints, largely over their practice of plural marriage, attacking through an army in the 1850s and federal legislation in the 1860s, ’70s, and ’80s.

When the Church formally abandoned the practice of plural marriage at the turn of the century, it also abandoned part of its identity. Scholar Kathleen Flake writes that at this time President Joseph F. Smith (1901–1918) engaged in “re-placing memory” for the Church, acquiring sacred sites such as the Smith family farm in Palmyra-Manchester to solidify Latter-day Saint collective memory and to reestablish its founding stories. Flake writes, “The Latter-day Saints felt the need for ‘places of memory’ at the very time when they felt at risk of a breach with their past. . . . In the First Vision, Joseph F. Smith had found a marker of Latter-day Saint identity whose pedigree was as great as—and would be made greater than—that of plural marriage for the twentieth-century Latter-day Saints. . . . New emphasis on the First Vision maintained a sense of religious difference . . . from social action to theological

19. Steven Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 51.

20. Harper, *First Vision*, 66.

21. “After Joseph Smith, Orson Pratt made the most significant and substantial choices about how the vision would be remembered and rendered meaningful. This role can hardly be overstated.” Harper, *First Vision*, 75. See Orson Pratt’s sermons: “Mormonism,” *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 12:352–62 (February 24, 1869); “The Fulfillment of Prophecy—The Early History of the Church—The Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Discourses*, 14:137–47 (March 19, 1871); “Review of God’s Dealings with the Prophet Joseph—Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon—Gathering, Etc.,” *Journal of Discourses*, 15:178–91 (September 22, 1872); “Joseph Smith’s First Visions,” *Journal of Discourses*, 17:278–88 (September 20, 1874).

TABLE 1. “First Vision” references by decade, normalized in words per million, taken from <https://www.lds-general-conference.org>

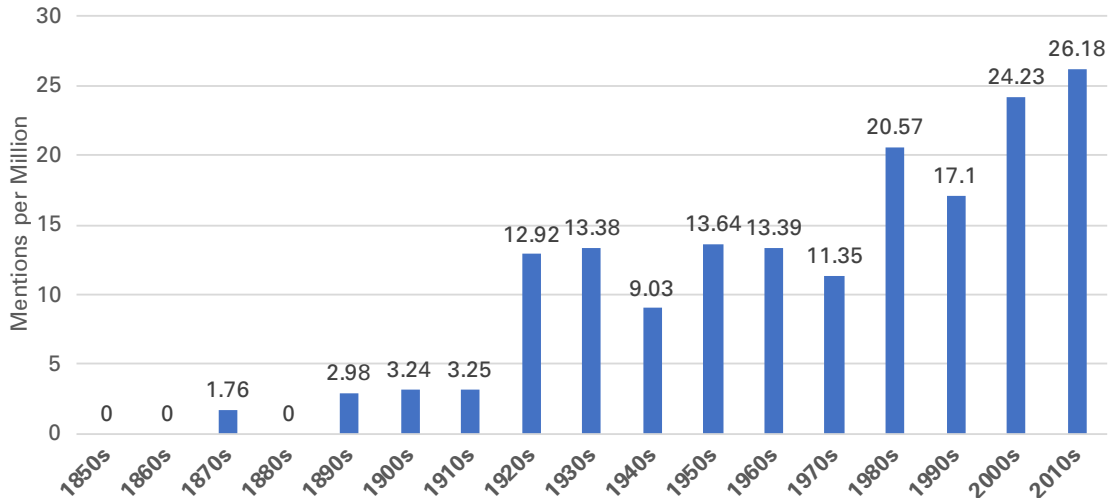
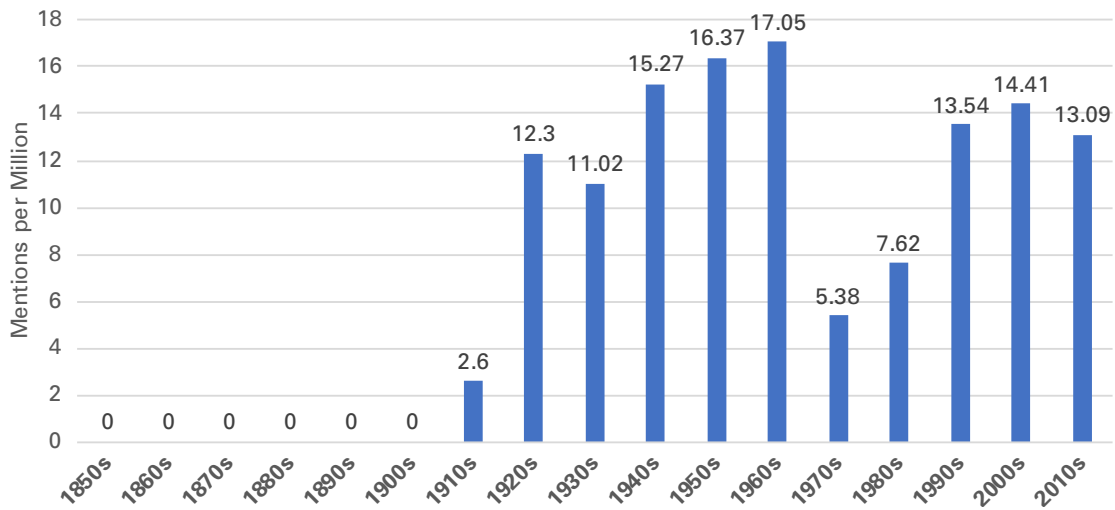


TABLE 2. “Sacred Grove” references by decade, normalized in words per million, taken from <https://www.lds-general-conference.org>



belief.”²² From the mid-1800s through the early 1900s, the First Vision moved from relatively little-known history to Restoration 101 for the Saints. It summarized unique Latter-day Saint doctrine in one sacred story: There was an apostasy, divine authority was lost, new revelation was needed, God spoke to Joseph initiating the Restoration of truth, the heavens are now open, God speaks to a prophet, his authorized Church is back, and God will speak to you about its truth as he did to Joseph. To see this increased narrative emphasis, tables 1 and 2 show the rise of

22. Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 115, 118, 120.

references to the “First Vision” and the “Sacred Grove” in general conference talks by decade.

As the First Vision solidified as a basis of the Saints’ self-representation, its rising importance was echoed in artistic expression.

The First Known First Vision Image

The first person to visually depict and publish an artistic image representing Joseph Smith’s First Vision was likely Thomas Brown Holmes (T. B. H.) Stenhouse in 1873.²³ Although Stenhouse had been “twenty-five years a Mormon elder” and a pioneering missionary for the Church in Italy, he was now pioneering a new work against the Church in Utah: his book, *The Rocky Mountain Saints*, published in New York in 1873.²⁴ Stenhouse and his wife had grown critical of the Church’s teachings on plural marriage and of the combination of Brigham Young’s ecclesiastical, economic, and political influence, “a Theocracy which practices polygamy” in Stenhouse’s words.²⁵ The subtitle of Stenhouse’s book provides one reason why his book was pioneering: *A Full and Complete History of the Mormons, from the First Vision of Joseph Smith to the Last Courtship of Brigham Young*. The book’s many illustrations include a captivating image of the First Vision by an unidentified artist (fig. 1).²⁶

23. I am not the first to make this claim. Richard G. Oman wrote of the Stenhouse image, “This is probably the first depiction of the First Vision.” Richard G. Oman, “‘Ye Shall See the Heavens Open’: Portrayal of the Divine and the Angelic in Latter-day Saint Art,” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995–96): 114.

24. T. B. H. Stenhouse, *Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York: D. Appleton, 1873), title page.

25. Stenhouse, *Saints*, iii.

26. In the original publication of this article, I noted that “there is no named signed on the First Vision illustration In Stenhouse’s book,” listing the fourteen illustrations of the seventy-nine images in the book with attributable names. Based on an analysis of the different artist’s styles represented in those images, I concluded that “if any of the illustrators whose names appear in illustrations for *Rocky Mountain Saints* are responsible for the First Vision image, I would very tentatively lean toward J. Hoey.” After the print version of this *BYU Studies Quarterly* article came out, however, I was informed that a later edition of *Rocky Mountain Saints*, printed in London by Ward, Lock, and Tyler, had a signature affixed to the First Vision image, that of “J. Hoey” in the bottom left-hand corner. It appears that the signature was added sometime after the initial printing of *Rocky Mountain Saints*, perhaps for this London edition. It is unclear why the signature is absent in the original book but clearly appears in the later edition. For now, however, it is notable to be able to affix the creation of this image to Joseph Hoey. Hoey was a lithographer, designer, and engraver in the latter part of the nineteenth century who worked in New York City. It is unclear whether Hoey’s First Vision image is an engraving (on



FIGURE 1. Engraving of the First Vision, in T. B. H. Stenhouse, *Rocky Mountain Saints*, facing page 1.

A black-and-white engraving with a sense of motion, it shows the Father flying in front of the Son, each with an upraised hand and with rays of light beaming downward from them toward a very boyish, curly haired, and seemingly frightened Joseph Smith in a dense wood. This first visualization of the First Vision is markedly different from the artistic symbol of the First Vision that developed a hundred years later.

The Damaged C. C. A. Christensen First Vision Painting

The next known artistic depiction of the First Vision was C. C. A. Christensen's painting, created about 1878, as discussed earlier. After a successful touring run, Christensen's panorama paintings were eventually rolled up and put away, forgotten and lost for a time. The panorama was remembered in the mid-twentieth century by a group of Church Educational System employees working on a Church film.²⁷ The murals are housed today at Brigham Young University's Museum of Art, but unfortunately Christensen's first painting in the series, *The Vision*, is nowhere to be found today. In researching what may have happened to it, I made contact with Alec Andrus,²⁸ whose father, James Andrus, was chair of the art department at Brigham Young University and was involved in BYU's analyzing and acquiring of the Christensen Mormon Panorama canvases.²⁹ Alec Andrus recalls Christensen's panoramas being brought to his home. The paintings smelled of mildew and were unrolled to air out and have the damage assessed. Alec recalled that Christensen's First Vision painting was present and part of the large scroll he saw as a child. Acknowledging the faulty nature of memory, Alec Andrus remembered:

metal) or a lithograph (on stone) or a woodcut. I consulted an art dealer who specializes in engraving prints from this time period; after viewing a digital version of the First Vision image, he said, "My guess would be a wood engraving," but could not be confident without seeing it in person. Email to author, September 28, 2019.

27. Boyd K. Packer, "The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord," BYU devotional, February 1, 1976.

28. Alec Andrus approached me after a research presentation I made on Latter-day Saint art at Brigham Young University's Education Week in August 2019.

29. James Andrus "joined the faculty of Brigham Young University Art Department in 1940, designed the Printmaking curriculum, and served for many years as Department Chairman." He retired in 1972 and died in 1993. See "Death: James Roman Andrus," *Deseret News*, June 26, 1993, <https://www.deseret.com/1993/6/26/19053175/death-james-roman-andrus>.

My reaction, through the filter of 65+ years later, was that Brother Christensen's painting of the first vision was different than my mental image of the event and I asked dad why. The presentation of the Father and Jesus was not at all what I envisioned. He told me about the use of the display as the Christensen brothers carried it through the LDS communities. . . . I think that may have been the first painting or illustration of the first vision that I had seen and it was not nearly as grand or ethereal as I thought it should be.³⁰

What became of the panel of the First Vision? Andrus concludes, "I think the first panel was damaged by mildew and mold and I think that was the first vision panel or it may have just been that the first vision panel that was outside the way the scroll was rolled up in the box and therefore more exposed to the elements. Dad said the collection was in a shed or outbuilding and not well sheltered."³¹

Thus, based on this recollection, it seems that Christensen's *The Vision* may have been present when the scroll was rediscovered but due to damage was likely unrepairable. It is unknown whether this image was discarded in the trash or whether it was separated from the other intact canvases housed at BYU yet remains preserved somewhere today.

Stained Glass in Temples and Chapels

Perhaps the earliest depiction of the First Vision produced by the institutional Church was a stained glass image. In 1892, the Church began completing the interior of the Salt Lake Temple. They contracted some of the stained glass work with Tiffany Glass & Decorating Company in New York, including one window to be placed in the Holy of Holies. "The subject is the first vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith," wrote Joseph Don Carlos Young to Tiffany.³² Young gave a highly detailed description of the event of the First Vision, including clear demands for what he wanted it to look like: "A boy in the 15th year of his age clad in the ordinary garb of a farmer's son kneeling in the attitude of prayer. . . . The facial expression should also be modestly turned upward." Young then took some expressive license not found in the historical First Vision

30. Alec Andrus, "Memories of CCA Christensen's Mormon Panorama." Spelling and grammar as in the original. Prepared for and sent via email to the author, September 7, 2019. Transcript in possession of the author.

31. Andrus, "Memories of CCA Christensen's Mormon Panorama."

32. Joseph Don Carlos Young to Tiffany & Co., September 20, 1892, Joseph Don Carlos Young Letterpress Copybook, 160-71, Church History Library; reproduced in Oman, "Heavens Open," 116-18.



FIGURE 2. Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company, stained glass window in the Holy of Holies room in the Salt Lake Temple, 1892. Photo by C. R. Savage Co., 1911, Salt Lake Temple Photographs, Church History Library.

accounts when it came to depicting the Father and Son, requesting “robes of exquisite whiteness, reaching to the ankles, and the arms were covered. . . . The feet were also covered with a sort of shoe. . . . The hair was of snowy whiteness and worn more after the early oriental style. . . . The faces of both these Celestial Beings were adorned with full grown Beards, also, of pure white color. . . . The countenance of the one indicated that He was older than the other. . . . The Son being on the right

hand of the Father.”³³ He then emphatically underlined that “both were without wings.” Although it is unclear where Young received some of this direction, this description set a standard for First Vision art that many future renderings followed. Young asked that Tiffany’s artists send a sketch to be approved, which suggests that Tiffany’s artists composed the scene (fig. 2).³⁴

This stained glass window in the Salt Lake Temple serves as a pivot point in Latter-day Saint depictions of the First Vision. Not only was it likely the first depiction commissioned by the institutional Church, but by being placed in its holiest place in the temple the window is evidence of the rising centrality of the First Vision in Latter-day Saint theology. The Tiffany First Vision window also set a pattern that other stained glass images later reproduced and followed. In the early 1900s, stained glass representations of the First Vision were created for a few Latter-day Saint chapels in places such as Salt Lake City, Brigham City, and Los Angeles.³⁵

In 1907, the Salt Lake Seventeenth Ward placed a large replica of the Tiffany stained glass window in their chapel, encased in a much grander and ornate window with diamond-shaped sides. The painted portion of the glass was done in Belgium, and the window was designed and constructed by Harry Kimball and the Bennett Paint and Glass Company of Salt Lake City (fig. 3).³⁶

In 1908, the Salt Lake Second Ward also placed a replica of the Tiffany First Vision stained glass in a gothic-style arch window with a wonderful decorative background. The vision scene was painted by the LaCross Glass Company of Indiana, and the window was again designed and constructed by Harry Kimball and Bennett Paint and Glass Company (fig. 4).³⁷ That same year, 1908, the Liberty Ward in Salt Lake City also installed a stained glass inset of the First Vision in a large gothic window in their chapel. The creator of this window is unidentified. The inset is a small window (25” wide by 47” tall) and is based on but is somewhat different than the previous Tiffany copies. Joseph is again clad in dark clothing in the lower right, but now his hands are pressed together in prayer; the Father and Son are more directly above him, wearing unique,

33. Oman, “Ye Shall See the Heavens Open,” 117–18.

34. Oman, “Ye Shall See the Heavens Open,” 118.

35. Stained glass windows made by Tiffany and other companies were popular in churches throughout the United States during this era.

36. Joyce Athay Janetski, “A History, Analysis, and Registry of Mormon Architectural Art Glass” (master’s thesis, University of Utah, 1981), 170.

37. Janetski, “Art Glass,” 114.

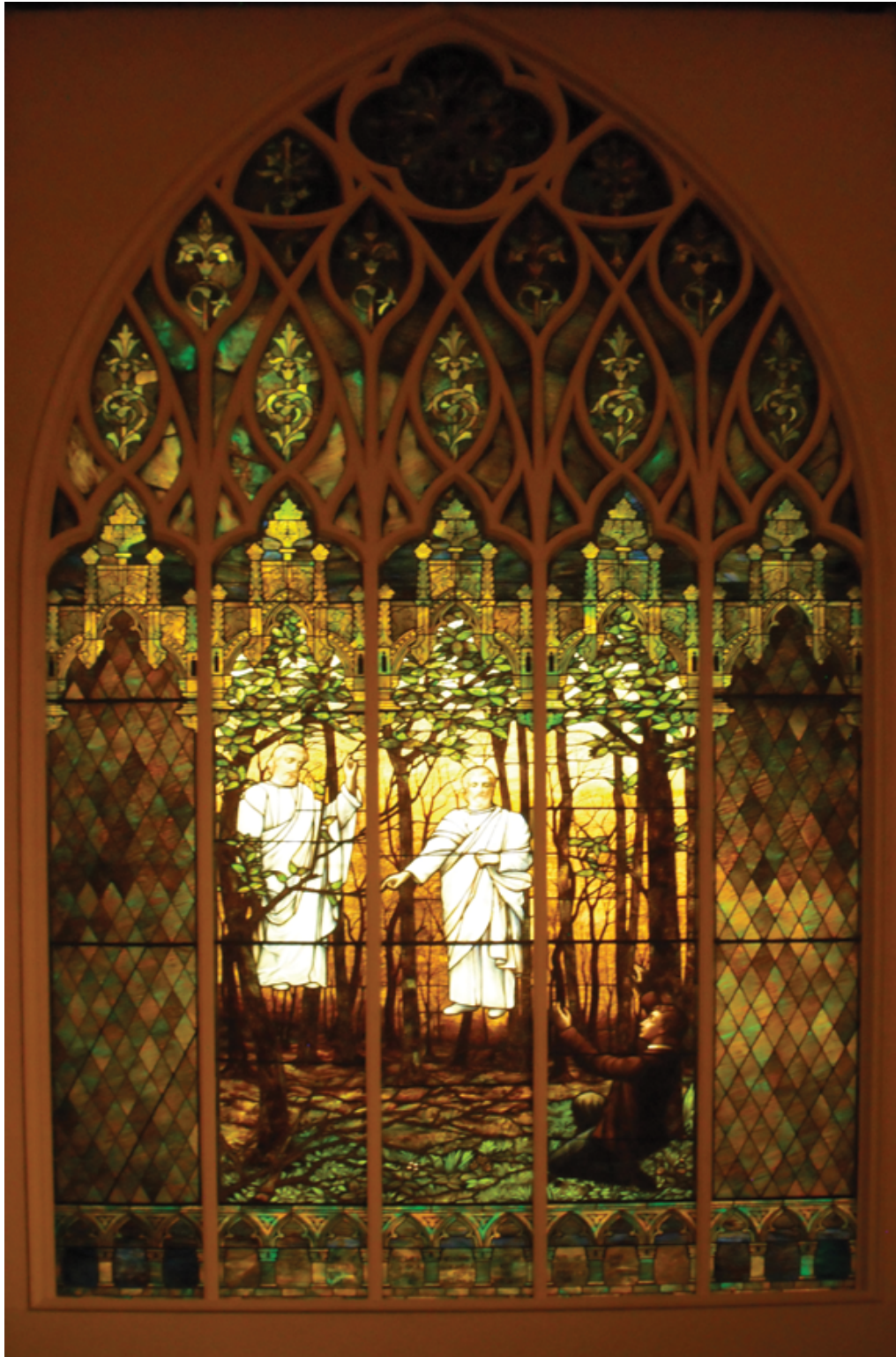


FIGURE 3. Harry Kimball and Bennett Paint and Glass Company, stained glass window, Salt Lake Seventeenth Ward building, 1907. Photo by Bridger Talbot.

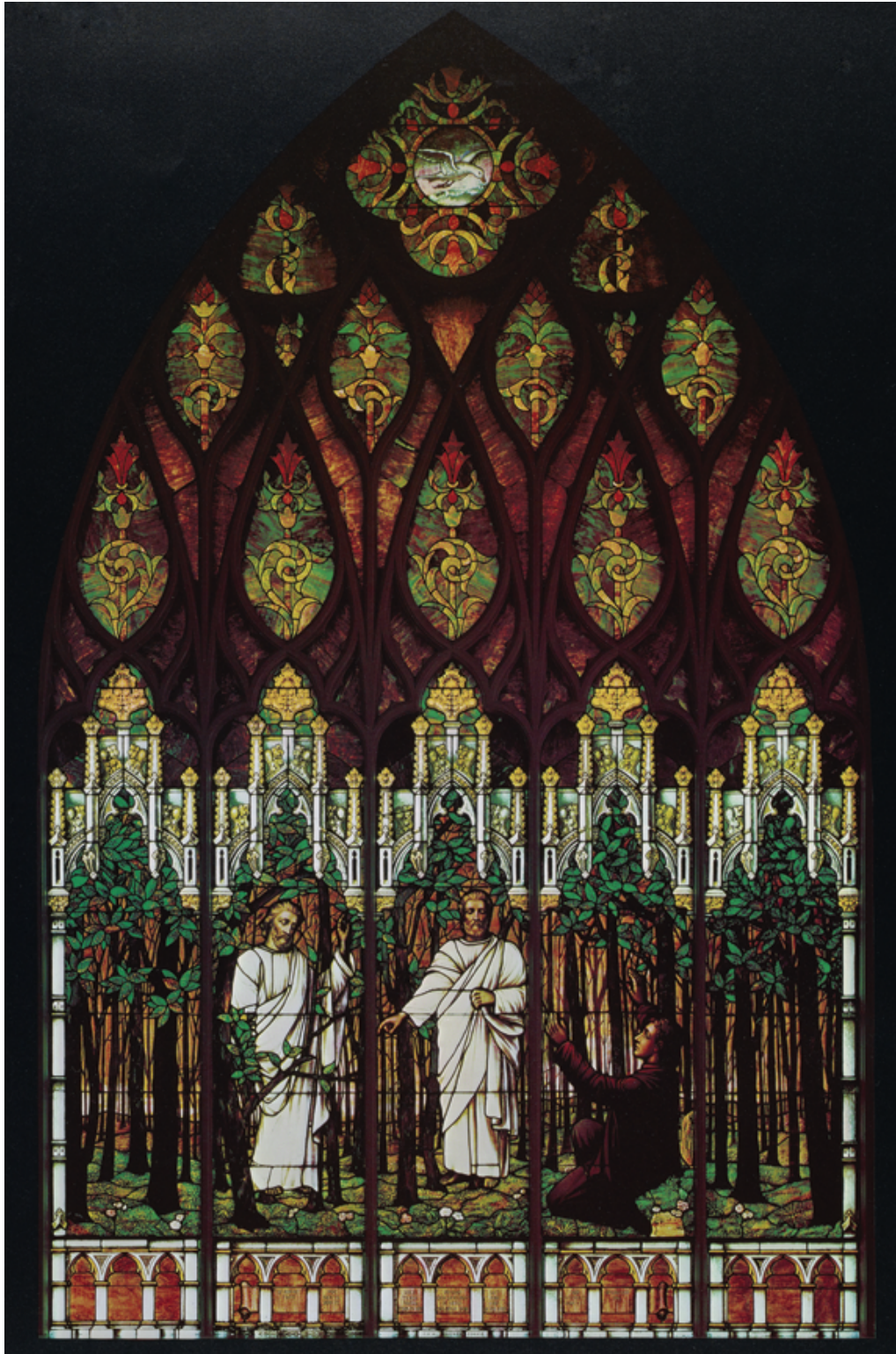


FIGURE 4. LaCross Glass Company, Harry Kimball, and Bennett Paint and Glass Company, stained glass window, Salt Lake Second Ward building, 1908. Courtesy Church History Library.



FIGURE 5. Creator unknown, stained glass window, Liberty (Salt Lake City) Ward building, 1908. Photo by Bridger Talbot.

complexly folded robing; this time the Son has his left hand down and open, and his right hand up. Symbolic rays from heaven also shoot down behind God and Jesus (fig. 5).

In 1911, the Brigham City Third Ward purchased a large 12' × 8' First Vision stained glass window for their building, created by Henry



FIGURE 6. Henry Kimball, Fred Brown, and Bennett Paint and Glass Company, 1911, stained glass window, Brigham City (Utah) Third Ward building, 1911. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Kimball, Fred Brown, and the Bennett Paint and Glass Company. It was hauled up from Salt Lake City to Brigham City in the freezing cold by men holding onto the glass in a truck with no windshield.³⁸ In this window, Joseph is again in a dark brown overcoat, with God pointing to Jesus, who has his hands upraised, but Joseph is now in the bottom left, the Father and Son are turned at a three-quarter angle, light clouds

38. Janetski, "Art Glass," 55.



FIGURE 7. Creator unknown, stained glass window, Los Angeles Adams Ward building, 1915. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

surround them, and the entire feel of the stained glass is softer. It is marvelously hand painted, whoever did so (fig. 6).³⁹

In 1915 in California, the Los Angeles Adams Ward commissioned a much larger version of the Salt Lake Liberty Ward's composition. This window now resides in the Church History Museum in Salt Lake City (fig. 7). In 1930, the San Bernardino Ward placed a First Vision stained glass in their chapel. This image also follows a typical pattern established in prior windows: Joseph again is in the lower right, both arms raised as in the Tiffany window, clad in dark clothing (with a green shawl); the Father's face is nearly an identical copy of the face in the Los Angeles Adams Ward image. But the overall composition is at a unique angle, and Jesus is standing with both arms open in a very receptive manner.

39. Although companies like Bennett Paint and Glass usually cut the glass and constructed the window, "painting on glass not only required a kiln, but demanded advanced skills, neither which Bennetts, nor any enterprise nor individual in the state, possessed." It seems unknown who did the actual art glass painting of this marvelous First Vision scene. Janetski, "Art Glass," 53.

The Father and Son also have reds and golds in their divine clothing. This window resides today in the Redlands California Temple.⁴⁰

Each of these early stained glass windows follows a similar composition based on the Tiffany window: a boy kneeling, three-quarter turned to show the side of his face, in dark brown or black coat and clothing; the Father and Son standing next to each other, usually front-facing the viewer; the Son at the right hand of the Father, wearing white robes. These images were seen and stared at during weekly Church services by an entire generation of early twentieth-century Saints.⁴¹

It is notable that about a hundred years after the original First Vision stained glass was produced by Tiffany for the Salt Lake Temple, the Church again commissioned a stained glass window of the First Vision, for the Palmyra New York Temple.⁴² The Church hired stained glass artist Tom Holdman and his Holdman Studios to produce all the stained glass windows for the building, including a large 5' × 8' stained glass of the First Vision that patrons see upon entering the building. The Holdman Studios First Vision follows patterns similar to those of the early Tiffany and Bennett windows. Tom Holdman said that the Church's Temple Art committee gave him specific instructions and feedback on compositional sketches for the window. Holdman remembers their directions about the Father and Son: "We would like them to be the same height, and that they look really close to each other, but you can tell one is older than the other," repeating nearly verbatim the instruction given by Joseph Don Carlos Young to Tiffany Glass & Decorating Company. When I asked Tom Holdman about his inspiration for the composition and whether he looked to any earlier First Vision imagery, he said he referenced "the one in the Holy of Holies. I also went to that chapel by the Conference Center," likely the Salt Lake Seventeenth Ward

40. Credit to Bridger Talbot for posting at his blog, *Historic LDS Architecture*, some excellent insights, which I have relied upon in parts of this summary. See "Latter-day Stained Glass: Part 2—First Vision Stained Glass Depictions," *Historic LDS Architecture*, February 12, 2017, <http://ldspioneerarchitecture.blogspot.com/2017/02/latter-day-stained-glass-part-2-first.html>.

41. Likely there are other chapels built in the 1900s not included herein that also included stained glass renditions of the First Vision. For example, Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf spoke of his memory of "a stained-glass window that beautified the front part of the chapel [in the Zwickau, Germany, chapel]. The stained glass portrayed the First Vision, with Joseph Smith kneeling in the Sacred Grove, looking up toward heaven and into a pillar of light." Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Fruits of the First Vision," *Ensign* 35 (May 2005), 37. The location of this particular window is unknown.

42. "Sacred Grove, Sacred Light," *Ensign* 31, no. 4 (April 2002): 8–11.

on 142 West 200 North. He said, “I really did . . . analyze those before I went to the temple to get my own inspiration and interpretation.”⁴³ Thus, the early stained glass images of the First Vision laid a foundation for artistic interpretation of the First Vision that influenced subsequent artists from the nineteenth century through today.

First Artistic First Vision Images Published by the Church

Around the same time as the proliferation of stained glass windows of the First Vision in turn-of-the-century Latter-day Saint chapels, the first known artistic image of the event to be published by the institutional Church appeared. The year was 1912, nearly one hundred years since the First Vision had occurred. William A. Morton wrote and published a book for the Deseret Sunday School Union called *From Plowboy to Prophet: Being a Short History of Joseph Smith for Children*. The 130-page book included eighteen illustrations by the artist Lewis A. Ramsey. The inside sheet is a portrait of the prophet Joseph Smith done in 1910, and the remainder of the book includes illustrations such as Moroni visiting Joseph, Joseph and Oliver receiving the priesthood, the witnesses of the gold plates, and even lesser-known events such as Joseph stopping a runaway coach and his healing of Elijah Fordham. Most interesting for this article, opposite page 8 of the text is the first known image of the First Vision published by the Church (fig. 8).

Ramsey was born in 1875 and came to Utah with his family in 1887. He was trained by the celebrated artist John Hafen and studied at the Art Institute in Chicago and in Paris before returning to Utah to practice and teach art. He worked on commissions from the Church, including painting murals in the Laie Hawaii Temple.⁴⁴ Ramsey’s illustration of the First Vision is a simple black-and-white reprint of what appears to be a pastel drawing.

The Rise of First Vision Art in Official Church Periodicals

Although the Church had published a myriad of monthly publications since as early as 1832’s *The Evening and the Morning Star*, it was relatively slow to use imagery to accompany the printed word. As mentioned,

43. Tom Holdman, interview by the author, September 9, 2019, transcript in possession of the author.

44. “Lewis A. Ramsey,” Utah Artists Project, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://www.lib.utah.edu/collections/utah-artists/UAP-Lewis-Ramsey.php>.



Joseph Praying in the Grove.

FIGURE 8. Lewis A. Ramsey, illustration for *From Plowboy to Prophet: Being a Short History of Joseph Smith for Children*, by William A. Morton, 1912, facing page 8.

in the nineteenth century the institutional Church printed only a few dozen images dealing with Church history or doctrine in tens of thousands of pages of Church periodicals. Early Church history or doctrinal images are the Book of Abraham facsimiles, profiles of Thomas Sharp and Joseph Smith, the Kinderhook plates, and a diagram of the kingdom of God by Orson Hyde. Overall, artistic imagery was basically non-existent for decades. For example, the *Improvement Era* (1897–1970) is voluminous, with thousands of pages in print, but offers very little visual art. Almost all imagery is photography of people and places. Church publications embraced photography before visual art like painting and drawing⁴⁵ and began to circulate George Edward Anderson’s classic 1907 photo of the Sacred Grove with a boy standing in the lower right corner among the tall trees—a powerful image.⁴⁶

Compared to how frequently and adeptly national periodicals (such as *Harper’s Weekly*) used art during this time to illustrate its pages and engage its readers, Church publications like the *Millennial Star* or the *Improvement Era* needed a lot of improvement when it came to unleashing the communicative power of visual art. As a case in point, the April 1920 edition of the *Improvement Era* was dedicated to the one-hundredth anniversary of the First Vision. It contains three photographs of the Sacred Grove and the land around it, photographs of other places in Joseph Smith’s life, a painting of the Hill Cumorah, a drawing of Joseph Smith as an adult, poetry, a cantata, and many articles praising the Prophet in its 112 pages, but no First Vision artwork appears.

The first artistic rendering of the First Vision to appear in a Church periodical came one hundred years after the organization of the Church, when the *Instructor* printed a photograph of the Tiffany stained glass in the Salt Lake Temple Holy of Holies in December 1931.⁴⁷ A few years later, in 1933, the *Improvement Era* published an article on the Church’s participation at the World’s Fair in Chicago and featured a photo of part of the display including a small image of J. Leo Fairbanks’s

45. Early photographs of the Sacred Grove published by the Church include *Improvement Era* 15, no. 3 (January 1912): 240; and *Improvement Era* 20, no. 7 (May 1917): 570.

46. The Church published Anderson’s photo multiple times, beginning in 1909 with John Henry Evans’s *Birth of Mormonism in Picture: Scenes and Incidents in Early Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1909), 35, and repeatedly in the *Improvement Era*, such as in vol. 23, no. 7 (May 1920): 638. The photo also appears in *Millennial Star* 92, no. 14 (April 3, 1930): 214.

47. *Instructor* 66, no. 12 (December 1931): 750.



FIGURE 9. J. Leo Fairbanks, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, photo of stained glass, *Millennial Star* 100, no. 7 (February 17, 1938): 99.

his more famous sculptor brother, Avard. Together with Avard, J. Leo worked on the Hawaii Temple, creating four sculpture reliefs of 130 life-sized figures. J. Leo also illustrated various Church manuals and book covers and experimented with stained glass, including this stained glass window of the First Vision.⁵²

stained glass of the First Vision.⁴⁸ This 6' × 4' stained glass was designed by J. Leo Fairbanks and made by the Drehobl Brothers Art Glass in Chicago.⁴⁹ It was created with a companion window of Elijah holding a key in front of the Salt Lake Temple and was later installed in the Salt Lake Temple lobby.⁵⁰ In February 1938, the *Millennial Star* printed a slightly larger version of this same image (fig. 9).⁵¹ J. Leo Fairbanks was the son of one of the Paris missionary artists, John B. Fairbanks, who worked on murals in Utah temples. J. Leo Fairbanks was a masterful, well-rounded artist who painted and sculpted, although he became somewhat eclipsed in history by

48. "The Church Century of Progress Display," *Improvement Era* 36, no. 14 (December 1933): 34.

49. Janetski, "Art Glass," 257.

50. J. Leo Fairbanks's First Vision window and his Elijah window were installed in the north lobby of the Salt Lake Temple in 1979 after being rediscovered in storage. Joyce Athay Janetski, "Stained Glass Windows: A Latter-day Saint Legacy," *Ensign* 11, no. 1 (January 1981): 34–41. See also Janetski, "Art Glass," 257.

51. *Millennial Star* 100, no. 7 (February 17, 1938): 99.

52. Tom Alder, "The Life and Art of J. Leo Fairbanks," *15 Bytes: Artists of Utah Ezine* (April 2009): 5, <http://www.artistsofutah.org/15bytes/09apr/page5.html>.



FIGURE 10. J. Leo Fairbanks, painting of First Vision, *Millennial Star*, May 14, 1942, cover.

The Expansion of First Vision Art (1920–1950)

The 1920s, '30s, and '40s were a turning point for the First Vision in the Church, both pedagogically and artistically. The one-hundredth anniversary of the First Vision was recognized in many talks in the April 1920 general conference, and the vision was discussed more often in succeeding conferences than it had been before. In 1938, President J. Reuben Clark told Church Educational System employees that not only was a belief in Joseph Smith's prophetic mission necessary, but also that "in all its reality, the First Vision" was a foundational theology for the Church, and any teacher who did not believe in it "has [no] place in the Church school system."⁵³

Another cultural factor that pressed upon how the Saints viewed the First Vision in these decades was the 1945 publication of Fawn Brodie's psychobiography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*. In the book, Brodie claims that the First Vision was a later invention by Joseph Smith in 1838, "some half-remembered dream" or "sheer invention," casting doubt by claiming that nobody knew of the vision prior to 1838.⁵⁴ Church leaders and scholars came to the public defense of Joseph Smith and the First Vision.⁵⁵

As the First Vision enlarged in doctrinal and historical importance in the eyes of Church leaders, teachers, and critics, Church magazines increased their visual publishing of artistic imagery related to it. The cover of the February 5, 1942, *Millennial Star* for the British Saints showed the Tiffany stained glass image from the Salt Lake Temple.⁵⁶ A few months later, the cover of the May 14, 1942, *Millennial Star* featured a copy of a First Vision oil painting by J. Leo Fairbanks (fig. 10).⁵⁷ Discussing the cover painting, the *Millennial Star* calls the First Vision "one of the most outstanding events in the history of mankind. As a matter of fact, it stands alone in religious history." It then states in all caps how the First Vision teaches central doctrine of the Restoration: "GOD IS A PERSON; CHRIST IS OUR REDEEMER."⁵⁸

53. J. Reuben Clark, "The Charted Course of the Church in Education," address to seminary and institute of religion leaders, Brigham Young University summer school, Aspen Grove, Utah, August 8, 1938, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/32709_eng.pdf?lang=eng.

54. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, The Mormon Prophet*, 2d ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1945, reprint 1995), 25.

55. Harper, *First Vision*, 189–93, 251.

56. *Millennial Star* 104, no. 6 (February 5, 1942): cover.

57. *Millennial Star* 104, no. 20 (May 14, 1942): cover. Thanks to Jonathan Fairbanks and Theresa Fairbanks Harris for their review of this information.

58. *Millennial Star* 104, no. 20 (May 14, 1942): 308.



FIGURE 11. J. Leo Fairbanks, *First Vision*, compositional painting (year unknown). © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

At an unknown date, J. Leo Fairbanks also created a compositional sketch of the First Vision intended for a building mural. Following patterns established in his other two images, Fairbank's oil-on-board image clothes Joseph in a white shirt and dark pants (fig. 11). This clothing was atypical of prior First Vision imagery, which put Joseph in a dark, heavy overcoat, but (as will be discussed later) Fairbanks's clothing for Joseph later became a standard part of the First Vision symbol recognized today. In June 1957, the *Millennial Star* again showed an artistic image of the First Vision, a photograph of a sculpture by Fairbanks's brother, Avard Fairbanks, accompanied by the text from Joseph Smith—History 2:10–17 (fig. 12).⁵⁹ Slowly, artistic images of the First Vision began to be produced and published more consistently in Church publications between 1920 and 1950.

During this period, mural painter Minerva Teichert also undertook depicting the First Vision. Born in 1888, Teichert came of age as an artist just as the First Vision was being established as a foundational Latter-day Saint narrative. Teichert studied art in Chicago and New York, where her mentor, Robert Henri, recognized her brilliance and encouraged her to paint the “great Mormon story.”⁶⁰ In her paintings, Teichert embraced her mentor's admonition to “love reality, but abhor photographic representation.”⁶¹ Her canvases are stylized, loose, colorful, abstracted reality, and painted with thinned-down oil paint (almost at times approaching a watercolor-like wash), and often include hand-painted decorative borders. Her work

59. *Millennial Star* 119, no. 6 (June 1957): back cover.

60. Jan Underwood Pinborough, “Minerva Kohlhepp Teichert: With a Bold Brush,” *Ensign* 19, no. 4 (April 1989): 38.

61. Peter B. Gardner, “Painting the Mormon Story,” *BYU Magazine* (Winter 2008), 29.



FIGURE 12. Avard Fairbanks, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, sculpture in marble, detail, photo in *Millennial Star*, June 1957, 197. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



FIGURE 13. Minerva Teichert, *First Vision*, ca. 1930. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

found success in the Intermountain West during the 1930s and 1940s, being hung in schools and churches and civic buildings. It was during this time that Teichert painted at least two known depictions of the First Vision, one circa 1930 (fig. 13), which now hangs in the Brigham City Temple, and another in 1934. Her 1934 painting (fig. 14) was hung in the Montpelier,

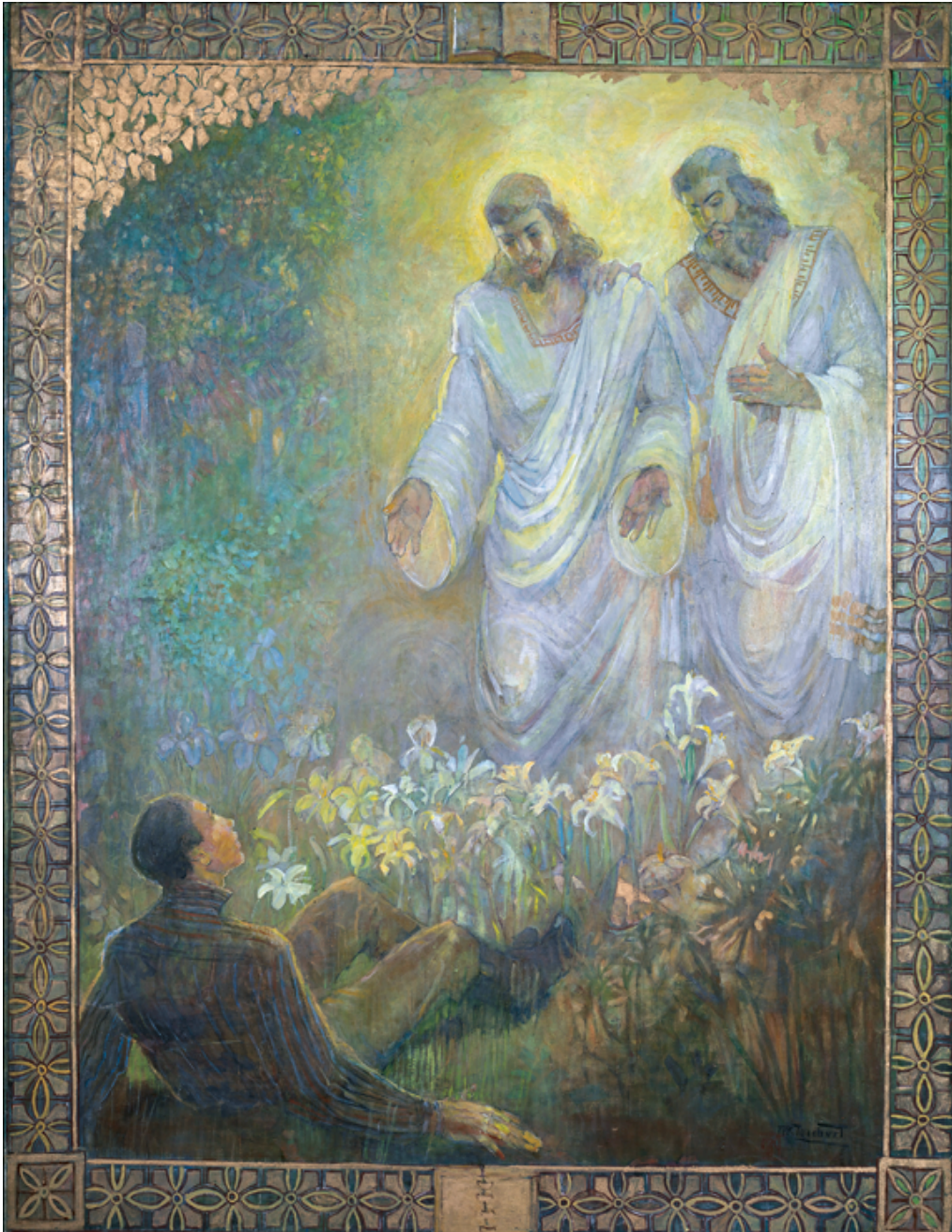


FIGURE 14. Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), *The First Vision*, 1934, oil on canvas, 102" × 78". Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

Idaho, Stake Tabernacle, being donated by Teichert as tithing in kind.⁶² The image is striking and reflects Teichert's independence of style as an artist, breaking from patterns established in the First Vision stained glass

62. "Minerva Teichert: Pageants in Paint," exhibition label, July 26, 2007, to May 26, 2008, Brigham Young University Museum of Art. Sent to the author by Ashlee Whitaker of the BYU Museum of Art.

at the turn of the century and also from J. Leo Fairbanks's look and feel. The Father has his right hand gently placed on the Son's shoulder, who stands open armed and accepting, the marks of the Crucifixion in his palms. They have distinct, non-Euro-American features. Their hair and beards are brown. There are symbolic white lilies in full bloom on the floor of the grove with other blue and purple flowers, and vibrant colors abound. Bright yellow emanates from behind the glorified figures. Joseph, wearing a brown striped shirt, is sprawled on his back, sitting up slightly, his dark hair capping his surprised look. In the hand-painted border, the Book of Mormon golden plates are depicted at the bottom center, and on the top center is the published Book of Mormon. This is a First Vision painting unique from its predecessors in content and style and is simply magnificent in execution and effect.

The Standard of First Vision Art (1950–1980)

The 1950s and '60s produced a period of artistic renditions that have stood as symbols for the Church ever since, creating a visual artistic canon hitherto unmatched in the Restoration. During these decades more than any others, the institutional Church looked to visual artists to tell their story jointly with the published word. Rejecting popular postmodern and pop-art trends of the time, the Church relied heavily upon illustrators whose realistic artwork could be easily interpreted and used didactically. In the 1950s, Arnold Friberg (whom fellow illustrator Norman Rockwell called the "Phidias [Greek sculptor of the Parthenon] of religious art"⁶³) created perhaps the best-known scriptural images in the history of the Church—his twelve Book of Mormon paintings, which were subsequently reproduced millions of times in missionary copies of the Book of Mormon. Friberg also created an image of the First Vision in 1962. Considering Friberg's masterful ability to dramatize, this painting is surprisingly subdued and peaceful for such a grand event. The style, pose, forest greenery, and overall feel of the painting evoke an illustrative, almost fictional scene, punctuated with Joseph on one knee, hands clasped, and head bowed in humble submission, wearing a bold red shirt.⁶⁴ Friberg later used his compositional

63. Mark Eddington, "Arnold Friberg: Portrait of the Artist," *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 2, 2006, https://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/faith/ci_3663657.

64. Arnold Friberg, *The Prayer in the Grove*, in the collection at "First Vision," <https://www.josephsmith.net/exhibit/js-the-first-vision?lang=eng#mv6>.



FIGURE 15. Kenneth Riley, *The First Vision*, ca. 1965. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

sketches of Joseph bowing in prayer as the basis for George Washington's pose in his famous painting *Prayer at Valley Forge*.⁶⁵

Recently, another Friberg First Vision image has also emerged, completed around 1953 or 1954.⁶⁶ This image never saw the light of day, literally.

65. See Court Mann, "Rare Arnold Friberg Sketches Come to Springville Museum of Art in New Exhibit," *Daily Herald*, February 18, 2017, https://www.heraldextra.com/entertainment/arts-and-theater/visual/rare-arnold-friberg-sketches-come-to-springville-museum-of-art/article_0044e729-523c-550b-84a5-67cab026575f.html. The caption for photo 3 in that article (a First Vision compositional sketch) says, "Arnold Friberg's most famous painting, 'The Prayer at Valley Forge,' was based off sketches he had done of Joseph Smith."

66. As dated by the Springville Art Museum on their label for the Friberg Studio wall exhibit, based on when his studio was built. Emily Larsen, email to author, January 3, 2020.



FIGURE 16. John Scott, *First Vision* [Joseph Smith Praying in the Grove], 1970. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

It was drawn on the walls of Friberg's studio in Holladay, Utah. The entire plywood wall was removed and has been subsequently displayed, such as at the Springville Museum of Art in 2017. The 8' × 16' chunk of wall containing this image weighs more than 600 pounds.⁶⁷ It is a compositional black-and-white pencil sketch without a lot of detail that creates an ethereal, mystical feel—the ghostlike images of the Father and Son sketched in white charcoal creating the sensation of a glorious vision. I find this sketch mesmerizing. Friberg's 1962 *First Vision* painting, however, was not used by the institutional Church, never appearing in the *Improvement Era* or the *Ensign*.

During this time, the Church looked to two non-Latter-day Saints to create its most-often-used *First Vision* images.

In the 1960s, the Church hired a network of illustrators outside the faith to create much of its standard artistic imagery—namely Harry Anderson, Tom Lovell, Kenneth Riley, and John Scott. Anderson painted the Church's classic biblical scenes still used in churches and temples worldwide, and Lovell made Book of Mormon scenes such as Moroni burying the plates and appearing to Joseph Smith in his bedroom. Among Kenneth Riley's first commissions for the Church was *The First Vision*, circa 1965 (fig. 15). During this time, fellow illustrator John Scott created classic panoramic images such as Jesus teaching in the western hemisphere, the Last Judgment, and in 1970 his own rendition of the

67. Mann, "Friberg Sketches."

First Vision (fig. 16).⁶⁸ The Church turning to non-Latter-day Saints to give expression to their most iconic images of the time is reminiscent of Tiffany being hired to create artwork for the Church's holy space.

It is notable that both images produced by Riley and Scott during this time period follow a similar pattern: A boy in a white shirt and brown pants in a grove of trees in the full leaves of summer reaches openly upward toward rays of light from heaven. However, in a departure from earlier First Vision imagery, in Scott's and Riley's commissioned images the Father and Son are not directly depicted. Why? Although the reasons are unknown and it may merely be artistic preference, it is possible that emphasis from Church President David O. McKay (1951–1970) could have influenced these commissioned compositions. McKay “wanted church-sanctioned art to avoid literal, physical depictions of God and Christ,”⁶⁹ apparently because, according to Arnold Friberg's recollection, President McKay felt “the finite cannot conceive of the infinite.”⁷⁰

Other First Vision images also appeared in print from the Church during these decades. In November 1961, the *Instructor* showed a flannel-board story of Joseph “kneeling in prayer as he asks our Heavenly Father his questions” (fig. 17).⁷¹ In April 1962, an inelegant black-and-white drawing of the First Vision appeared in the *Millennial Star* with no identifier of who created the image other than “an artist's impression of the first vision—in a grove close to Joseph Smith's home.”⁷² The image,



FIGURE 17. Artist unknown, flannel board image, *The Instructor*, November 1961, 378. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

68. Robert T. Barrett and Susan Easton Black, “Setting a Standard in LDS Art: Four Illustrators of the Mid-Twentieth Century,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 24–80.

69. Mann, “Friberg Sketches.”

70. Arnold Friberg, interview by Gregory A. Prince, November 16, 2000, at Friberg's Salt Lake City studio. Transcript used with permission.

71. *Juvenile Instructor* 96, no. 11 (November 1961): insert between pages 378 and 379, 380.

72. *Millennial Star* 124, no. 4 (April 1962): 77.



FIGURE 18. Artist uncertain, possibly Sidney King, diorama, from *Millennial Star* 126, no. 8 (August 1964): 281.

however, matches a portion of a 1965 panorama painting, “Scenes from Biblical and Mormon History” by Dorothy Handley, almost as though it was a preliminary study for the panorama.⁷³ Another First Vision depiction appeared in the *Millennial Star* in August 1964, an issue reporting on the Mormon Pavilion at the World’s Fair, which showed a diorama depicting the First Vision with a half-sized mannequin figure of Joseph Smith and a background of the grove painted behind it, perhaps by artist Sidney King (fig. 18).⁷⁴ Jerry Thompson’s 1970 illustration of Joseph looking up into the heavens (again, avoiding depicting Deity) was published in the *Improvement Era* accompanying James Allen’s groundbreaking article “Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?”⁷⁵ Ted Henninger’s 1975 image re-introduced direct depictions of the Father and the Son, white robed and bearded,

73. Dorothy P. Handley, *Scenes from Biblical and Mormon History*, 1965, acrylic, in *Artistic Interpretations of the First Vision*, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/exhibit/first-vision-art?lang=eng#mv30>.

74. *Millennial Star* 126, no. 8 (August 1964): 281.

75. Jerry Thompson, illustration of the First Vision, *Improvement Era* 73, no. 4 (April 1970): 4.



FIGURE 19. Ted Henninger, *First Vision*, oil on canvas, 1975. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Jesus with open arms, floating directly above Joseph’s upheld right hand in a zoomed-back, green-leaved grove. This image was first published in the January 1976 *Ensign* (fig. 19).⁷⁶

In 1979, Gary Smith painted the *First Vision*, an image often reproduced in later years by Church magazines (fig. 20). One notable aspect of Smith’s image is an axe stuck in the stump in the lower left corner of the composition, consistent with Joseph Smith’s 1843 interview with David Nye White, in which Joseph said he “went to the stump where I had stuck my axe when I had quit work, and I kneeled down, and prayed.”⁷⁷ I interviewed Gary Smith about this detail, interested in how and why he consciously chose to include it, since his was likely the first artistic representation of the *First Vision* to do so, reflecting broadening knowledge of various *First Vision* accounts (such as were emphasized and published in the 1970 *Improvement Era*). Smith told me, “Yes, the [various *First*

76. *Ensign* 6, no. 1 (January 1976): 18. This image would be published again in the *Ensign* in January 1985, July 1989, January 1997, July 2002, and on the front cover of the February 2012 *Ensign*.

77. “Interview, 21 August 1843, extract,” [3], Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/interview-21-august-1843-extract/1>.



FIGURE 20. Gary Ernest Smith, *First Vision*, 1979. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Vision] sources were all important. In fact, I thought the axe was a very important part of that because it shows he was familiar with the area. He went to the place he was most familiar with. He didn't walk through the brush and say, 'Oh this is a pretty spot.' But he went to a place he was familiar."⁷⁸ Other than that detail, Smith's image follows a growing pattern: Joseph on his back or knees in a white shirt and brown pants, his arm upraised like in Friberg's 1960 sketch, Riley's 1965 painting, and

⁷⁸ Gary Smith, interview with the author, August 9, 2019. Transcript in possession of the author.

Henninger's 1975 painting. The Father motions to the Son, who is at the right hand of God, his arms open, in a green summer woodland.

These patterns that were becoming normalized for First Vision imagery were occurring simultaneously with another cultural factor that may have influenced the pattern of First Vision art from 1950 to 1980. In 1960, "the modern era of correlation officially began," says scholar Michael Goodman, going into effect with "fully correlated curricula" in 1967.⁷⁹ Although Church correlation took on a much broader task than curriculum, one purpose of correlation was to standardize the Church's message in its printed materials under the direction of the priesthood across formerly independent auxiliaries and organizations. It should not be surprising that, in these decades of standardization, a standard of First Vision imagery also began to emerge, largely established by commissioned, institutionally approved, and Church-reproduced images.

The Explosion of a First Vision Symbol (1980–2020)

From 1980 to 2020, four artists' depictions of the First Vision have accounted for about half of the published *Ensign* images of the First Vision: Greg Olsen's (1988 and circa 1996) images of the First Vision have been published 24 times, Gary Kapp's (2000) paintings 21 times, Walter Rane's series of five First Vision images (circa 2005)⁸⁰ 18 times, and Del Parson's (1987) image 15 times. Since 2010, Rane's images account for about one out of every three First Vision paintings printed in the *Ensign*.

Parson's 1987 image has achieved the status of visual canon, being included as the First Vision painting in the Gospel Art Kit, reproduced innumerable times and placed in various Church buildings worldwide.⁸¹ Brilliantly, the viewer is placed behind Joseph Smith and roughly at his eye level, looking up with Joseph at God and Jesus. The Father and Son are identical in appearance, in white robes with grey hair and beards, the Father motioning to the Son at his right, who has his left hand extended.

79. Michael A. Goodman, "Correlation: The Turning Point (1960s)," in *Salt Lake City: The Place Which God Prepared*, ed. Scott C. Esplin and Kenneth L. Alford (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 263, 276.

80. In 2004, Walter Rane painted *If Any of You Lack Wisdom*, which appeared on the cover of the January 2005 *Ensign*. That year (2004) he also painted *The Desires of My Heart* (fig. 25), which the Church later purchased. Circa 2005, he painted three other unique First Vision scenes using the same model, which have also been used by the Church.

81. See Del Parson, *The First Vision*, Church History—Gospel Art Kit, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media-library/images/the-first-vision-82823?lang=eng>.



FIGURE 21. Del Parson, *The First Vision*, 1987. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Joseph follows the increasingly normalized pattern, in his white shirt and brown pants with his arm raised (fig. 21).

Greg Olsen's 1988 painting has also become a classic, reproduced countless times.⁸² This image omits the Father and Son as 1950s and '60s images did, but a soft light (which Olsen is a master at) descends from heaven. Joseph, in white and brown costume, is on his knees, right hand upraised to block the light. Between the popularity of Parson's 1987 image and Olsen's 1988, this look and pose have become cemented as the visual symbol of

Joseph Smith's prayer in the grove.

Space will not allow me to elaborate much on each of the following images, and this list is by no means comprehensive, but the following images exemplify the explosion of First Vision art in this time period and the established accepted expression of the event.

George Handrahan's 1989 piece features not the vision itself but the direct aftermath of the event that changes the course of his life, with Joseph walking calmly on a path out of the green grove back to his home (fig. 22). Conversely, Jerry Harston's 1995 illustration depicts Joseph standing upright as he enters the green leafed grove, prior to offering up his prayer.⁸³

William Lee Hill's painting (year unknown) is unique in its pastel portrayal of the event, focused only on the boy Joseph's face, a purplish light cutting diagonally across the composition (fig. 23). Similar to Hill's composition, Liz Lemon Swindle's circa 1998⁸⁴ image zooms in only on

82. Greg K. Olsen, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, 1988, is part of the Gospel Media Library, at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media-library/images/joseph-smiths-first-vision-olsen-186873?lang=eng>.

83. Jerry Harston, *Joseph Smith Entering the Sacred Grove*, illustrated several articles, including Carlos E. Asay, "Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning!" *Ensign* 25, no. 4 (April 1995): 48.

84. Liz Lemon Swindle, *The First Vision*, in several printings, including *New Era* 35, no. 5 (May 2005): cover.



FIGURE 22. George W. Handrahan, *After the First Vision*, 1989. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Joseph, lying on his back amidst green leaves and a few purple flowers, left arm half raised to block the light.

Leon Parson's 1999 painting⁸⁵ takes the opposite approach of Swindle's and Hill's, pulling the viewer further back from the scene, looking through trees from a distance as Joseph sits on the ground and speaks to

85. Leon Parson, *Joseph, This Is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!* was used to illustrate Ronald O. Barney, "The First Vision: Searching for the Truth," *Ensign* 35, no. 1 (January 2005): 18.



FIGURE 23. William Lee Hill, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, year unknown. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



FIGURE 24. Glen S. Hopkinson, *First Vision*, oil on canvas, © Glen S. Hopkinson, 2005.



FIGURE 25. Walter Rane, "The Desires of My Heart," oil on panel, 2004. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

two heavenly beings. Prominent in the left foreground is a white tail deer looking at the event while its fawn looks directly at the viewer.

Gary Kapp's 2000 painting is one of the most oft-reproduced images in the *Ensign*, with Joseph profiled sitting on the viewer's left, his arm upraised, the Father and Son on the right hand side in a column of light.⁸⁶ Realistic and representational in style, it is a prototype First Vision scene.

Glen Hopkinson's 2002 image is highlighted by a bright burst in the middle of the scene, rays shooting through the leaves of the trees, with Joseph leaning back in awe and wonder. The viewer sees no divine beings, just an exploding flash of light (fig. 24).

Walter Rane's 2004 *The Desires of My Heart* is also one of the most oft-reproduced images in modern institutional Church publications (fig. 25). Vertically columnar in shape, Rane's image frames a kneeling Joseph, hands on his knees, between two trees in an early spring, barren brown grove. A few spots of green suggest leaves ready to burst, symbolizing the impending Restoration. Soft light emits from the top left corner, but no visuals of Deity are seen. Joseph's clothes look well-worn and homely, his ruddy face looking upward with an innocent, sublime expression. Of this image, Rane said he "wanted to emphasize the youthfulness of Joseph. Not having him shield his eyes from the light I felt worked to show that there were no barriers to separate him from The Father and Son."⁸⁷

Simon Dewey's 2005 image also captures an innocent looking Joseph, kneeling and looking upward toward beaming light, omitting the Father and Son from the scene. Tightly painted in his signature style, Dewey's composition is horizontal, drawing your eye left to right from Joseph to the light and then down toward yellow flowers and Joseph's overcoat and hat piled against a tree (fig. 26).

Michael Bedard's 2008 painting is composed columnarly, and almost divided in two.⁸⁸ On the right Joseph kneels, looking upward from barren trees ready to blossom, and the left half is a white column of light with the Father and Son standing side by side, one being with outstretched

86. Gary Kapp, *Joseph Smith's Desperate Plea for Deliverance*, 2000, for example in Barney, "The First Vision: Searching for the Truth," 17.

87. Walter Rane, private email to author, used with permission.

88. Michael Bedard, *The First Vision of the Restoration*, oil on canvas, 2008, posted in the collection at "Artistic Interpretations of the First Vision."



FIGURE 26. Simon Dewey, *Let Him Ask in Faith*, © Simon Dewey 2020. Permission Altus Fine Art.

arms. The viewer is pulled back and floats slightly above the ground, looking downward to Joseph.

A quick visual review of these images (22–26) reveals that by this time period a standardized Joseph Smith’s First Vision look and pose is established: a boy in a white shirt and brown pants on his knees or back usually with one hand uplifted to heaven, as a bright, soft-white light sits above him, often with two floating bearded beings in white clothing surrounded by a green grove. While this symbol may not be historically accurate (as will be discussed in a later section), this has become the common look most artists have employed since 1950. Compare this to the first depiction in Stenhouse’s 1873 book, with rays of light coming from the Father and Son as they fly through the air, appearing non-simultaneously to a noticeably young, curly-haired Joseph with arms open and in dark clothing.

Developing a recognizable religious visual symbol is often necessary and almost inevitable over time, as it can communicate quickly, clearly, consistently, and intimately with viewers. A man with a long white beard, a staff, and a red robe with black and white stripes is Moses. A bearded man in a robe holding a set of keys represents Peter. John the Beloved is historically depicted as beardless and younger. Nephi wears a headband. Abinadi is shirtless and old. A man with high cheekbones and shoulder-length brown hair parted down the middle with a

forked beard and a robe over one shoulder is Jesus. Joseph Smith wears a white shirt and brown pants, kneeling or reclining on the ground among the trees, lifting one hand to heaven toward the light.⁸⁹ Joseph's costume and pose have been replicated in multiple Church films as well, enhancing the symbol through video, such as in the early 1976 *The First Vision* and 2005 *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration* (revised in 2011). These symbols aren't necessarily based on history or scripture, but they survive and thrive through the natural selection of artistic adoption and reproduction. The symbol has become so ubiquitous that even popular media deploys it, such as Latter-day Saint musician Brandon Flowers in his music video for "Only the Young," where on his knees he lifts his right hand to block a flood of light from above as angelic dancers descend and ascend.⁹⁰ Even pejorative cartoons such as *South Park* show Joseph Smith in a white shirt and brown pants with his hand uplifted to block a heavenly light in the grove.⁹¹

From Symbol to Abstraction

When a symbol has become commonly accepted and understood for a culture, the symbol allows for artistic abstraction, or the distortion away from realistic representation. In 2010, Jeff Pugh painted a powerful abstracted image of the First Vision that plays on the accepted symbol, omitting common realistic details of typical First Vision paintings and reducing the image down to basic geometric shapes and blocks of color. The Father and Son are simple palette-knife featureless forms of white. Joseph sits on a flat green plane, the rest of the bottom third of the painting a dark mass suggesting that, as Pugh said, "[Joseph] was going to be crushed, like he was alone. . . . And that had to be as dark as I possibly could get, and what happens is that on top of that darkness, it makes the brightness of the Father and the Son just explode" (fig. 27).⁹²

89. In fact, Joseph Smith wearing a white shirt is not just in First Vision art, but in most art depicting the Prophet in all events of his life. In 205 Church history images published in the *Ensign* from 1971 to 2000, there is not a single image of Joseph Smith in which he is not wearing a white shirt.

90. Brandon Flowers, "Brandon Flowers—Only the Young (Official Video)," BrandonFlowersMusic.com, uploaded October 12, 2010, YouTube video, 3:07, <https://youtu.be/uBENjCPS8LI>.

91. *South Park*, season 7, episode 12, "All about Mormons," directed and written by Trey Parker, aired November 19, 2003, on Comedy Central.

92. Jeffery Robert Pugh, "Jeffery Robert Pugh, Early Spring, 1820," video, 2:48, Church Media Library, March 8, 2012.



FIGURE 27. Jeffery R. Pugh, *Early Spring 1820*, oil on canvas, 2010. © Jeffery R. Pugh.



FIGURE 28. J. Kirk Richards, *The First Vision*, oil on panel, 2016. Courtesy J. Kirk Richards.



FIGURE 29. Mike Card, *Upon This Rock*, mixed media on panel, 2003. © Mike Card.

When Latter-day Saints see these commonly accepted symbols, even abstracted, it communicates the First Vision. J. Kirk Richards does so similarly, abstracting the Vision with accepted symbols to basic colors and shapes. Faces are not painted in his 2015 First Vision image, yet our minds see the Father and Son through two figures in white, side by side,

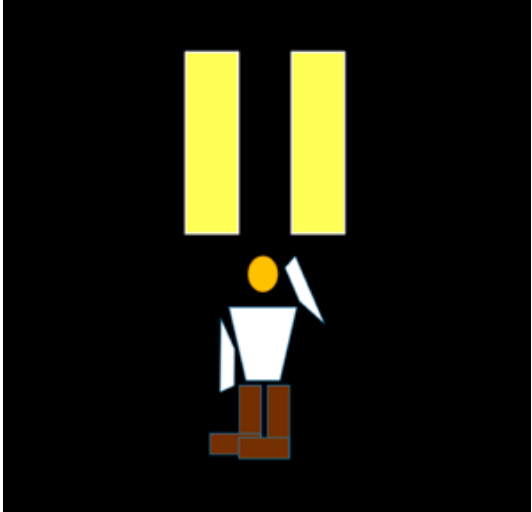


FIGURE 30. Anthony Sweat, *First Vision Symbol*, computer graphic, 2018.

floating in a blue sky, one motioning to the other on his right, the underpainting's light amber suggesting trees or foliage. The boy isn't wearing the customary costume of a white shirt and brown pants, nor is he on his knees with his hands uplifted. Instead he sits pensively with his arms wrapped around his legs. But the heavenly forms and positioning of the figures alone tells a Latter-day Saint to see the First Vision in it (fig. 29).

To show the communicative ability of this established First Vision symbol for Latter-day Saints, I created a geometric abstraction on my computer and showed it to random students sitting in the hallways of the Joseph Smith Building at Brigham Young University (fig. 30). Without providing them any context, I asked, "What do you see in this image?" Within a few seconds, each identified it as an image of the First Vision. Here is my conversation with a student named Emily:

Anthony Sweat: What do you see in this image?

Emily: It reminds me of the First Vision.

AS: Why does it remind you of the First Vision?

Emily: [*Pauses for a few seconds*] Because we always see in pictures of the First Vision Joseph Smith kneeling with his hand to his face and two bright images, or two personages I guess, in the picture.

93. J. Kirk Richards, *First Vision*, 2015, oil on panel, <http://art.jkirkrichards.com/viewer/?item=FirstVision413670466>.

one motioning to the other on his right, floating above a kneeling boy in a white shirt and brown pants, with sienna-brown vertical lines suggesting trees in a grove.⁹³ Richards avoids detail, but we don't need it by now. His 2016 First Vision painting follows the same pattern, brilliantly reducing the composition, shapes, poses, and colors to communicate the understood message (fig. 28). Michael J. Card's 2003 painting simplifies the First Vision down to two generic light forms,

AS: Anything else?

Emily: I guess the pants. We always see him in a white shirt and brown pants too.

Another student, Jacob, responded this way:

AS: Tell me what you see in this image.

Jacob: That's Joseph Smith and two personages of light.

AS: Now, why do you say that's Joseph Smith?

Jacob: Um, to be honest, brown pants. . . . Definitely the brown pants. And the arm [*lifts his hand as if blocking a light from above*]. That's why.

Ben Crowder's 2019 image, used on the cover of this issue,⁹⁴ is a potent example of reducing the symbol of the First Vision to geometric shapes. Because the shapes suggest a kneeling pose, a column of light, with appropriately colored brown and green shapes, most Latter-day Saints can interpret the image as Joseph's vision in the grove. Such abstraction would likely not communicate the event to someone outside of Latter-day Saint visual culture.

Thus, as artists today continue to create new images of the First Vision, they can rely upon readily understood and accepted symbols of the First Vision to communicate their views of the event.

Reinterpreting First Vision Symbols

One problem with relying upon accepted artistic symbols of an event, however, is that over time symbols can overshadow sources. Visual imagery has such a powerful effect upon the mind that some learners, even unconsciously, begin to use the accepted imagery based in symbols as the historical and doctrinal reality of the event, which can simultaneously enhance yet also limit understanding. Elise Petersen and Steven Harper have called this phenomenon "source amnesia," writing, "When the Saints rely too heavily on visual or cinematic arts as the catalysts of their memory, the problem of source amnesia can be compounded. . . . It is common to hear Latter-day Saints talk about, even testify of, elements of the vision that are suggested by artistic or cinematic representations."⁹⁵

94. Ben Crowder, *Let Him Ask of God*, 2019, digital.

95. Elise Petersen and Steven C. Harper, "Forming a Collective Memory of the First Vision," in *An Eye of Faith: Essays in Honor of Richard O. Cowan*, ed. Kenneth L.

For example, although it is an appropriate expression and a commonly accepted artistic First Vision symbol to place the Son at the right hand of the Father, none of the existing historical accounts of the First Vision specify that detail. It seems to stem from Don Carlos Young's directions to Tiffany to position "the Son being on the right hand of the Father,"⁹⁶ which visual symbol has subsequently been repeatedly adopted. As another example, a beautiful symbol has been established to commonly depict the column of light in soft or luminous white. However, some contemporary First Vision sources also use the word "fire" to describe the column.⁹⁷ Orson Pratt's 1840 version said that Joseph feared the grove would be consumed in flames.⁹⁸ What if the "pillar of flame,"⁹⁹ to use Joseph's 1835 description, were more firelike and yellow?

Also, there may be visual omissions our commonly accepted and perpetuated First Vision symbols have overlooked. In Joseph's 1835 account of the heavenly vision, he concludes by saying, "I saw many angels in this vision."¹⁰⁰ This rich detail has largely been historically absent in our standard First Vision iconography. Interestingly, perhaps one of the earliest artistic depictions of the First Vision suggests this artistically overlooked element of "many angels" in the First Vision. In the Celestial Room of the Salt Lake Temple, a large statue was placed on a pedestal. It appears to be an artist's concept version of a potential large public monument to Joseph Smith, and the sculpture is beautifully executed. Joseph

Alford and Richard E. Bennett (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 15.

96. Joseph Don Carlos Young to Tiffany & Co.; Oman, "Ye Shall See the Heavens Open," 118.

97. Joseph's 1835 account describes, "A pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon me." "Journal, 1835-1836," 24, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25>. Alexander Neibaur's 1844 journal account says Joseph "saw a fire towards heaven came near & nearer." "Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract," [23], Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/alexander-neibaur-journal-24-may-1844-extract/1>.

98. "He expected to have seen the leaves and boughs of the trees consumed." "Appendix: Orson Pratt, *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*, 1840," 5, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-orson-pratt-an-interesting-account-of-several-remarkable-visions-1840/5>.

99. "Journal, 1835-1836," 24.

100. "Conversations with Robert Matthews, 9-11 November 1835," 24, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/conversations-with-robert-matthews-9-11-november-1835/3>.



FIGURE 31. Statue in Salt Lake Temple by unknown artist, photo by Ralph Savage, 1911. Church History Library.



FIGURE 32. Detail of statue in Salt Lake Temple by unknown artist, photo by Ralph Savage, 1911.

and Hyrum stand grasping a column underneath cherubic angels and a woman holding a torch. The artist is unknown,¹⁰¹ and sadly the statue is unaccounted for today, the pedestal base having been located but not the sculpture that was once set upon it.¹⁰² Our knowledge of it comes from photographs taken in 1911 by Ralph Savage of C. R. Savage Company (fig. 31). At the base of the statue is a sculpture of the First Vision, among the earliest (if not the earliest) First Vision sculptures executed. Situated below Joseph and Hyrum is a scene of the young boy Joseph Smith, hands clasped together in prayer, with the Father and Son appearing to him on billowing clouds (interestingly, the Son is to the left of the Father). And what is behind the Father and Son? Four angels seated on clouds (fig. 32).

As one who repeatedly teaches about the historical accounts of the First Vision in my role as a religion professor in Church history and doctrine, and also as a practicing artist with a bachelor's degree in fine art in painting and drawing, in 2018 I painted a First Vision scene that attempts to bring together into one cohesive picture a harmony of the nine contemporary First Vision historical accounts, including some of the aspects previously discussed that are not typically depicted in First Vision imagery (fig. 33). In my painting, you see bright yellow fire blazing out from heaven, wrapped around the figures in dramatic fashion, as Joseph's 1832 and 1835 accounts use the word *fire*.¹⁰³ The pose of the Father is meant to suggest that the Father has just finished speaking to Joseph and has now turned to the side, opening up Joseph's view to the Savior, who is descending down from heaven, attempting to represent their nonsimultaneous appearance. Joseph's 1835 account describes one divine

101. In my opinion, the only Latter-day Saint monument artist at the time who was gifted enough to create this sculpture, and whose style somewhat matches, is Cyrus Dalin. Or, it could have been created by someone outside of the Church.

102. Credit to Seth Soha and my BYU colleague Alonzo Gaskill for alerting me to this statue. They tracked down the sculpture base as part of their research for the statue of the woman at the veil in the Salt Lake Temple. See Alonzo L. Gaskill and Seth G. Soha, "The Woman at the Veil: The History and Symbolic Merit of One of the Salt Lake Temple's Most Unique Symbols," in *An Eye of Faith*, 91–111.

103. "A pillar of fire light above the brightness of the sun," in "History, circa Summer 1832," 3, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>. "A pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon my <me>. . . a personage appeared in the midst, of this pillar of flame which was spread all around." "Journal, 1835–1836," 24.



FIGURE 33. Anthony Sweat, *The First Visions*, oil on board, 2018. © Anthony Sweat.

being appearing followed shortly by another,¹⁰⁴ and David Nye White's 1843 account reports Joseph saying, "Directly I saw a light, and then a glorious personage in the light, *and then another personage*, and the first personage said to the second, 'Behold my beloved Son, hear him.'"¹⁰⁵

In a departure from one historical account, I purposely painted the skin color of the Father and Son more bronzed, rather than Euro white that we see in most other Christian/Latter-day Saint imagery, to appeal more broadly to people of color across the world.¹⁰⁶ As mentioned, in

104. Joseph's 1835 account says, "A personage appeared in the midst, of this pillar of flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed, *another personage soon appeared* like unto the first, he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee." "Journal, 1835–1836," 24, emphasis added. Alexander Neibaur's account agrees: "Saw a personage in the fire light complexion blue eyes a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders his right arm bear *after a while a other person came to the side of the first.*" "Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract," [23], emphasis added.

105. "Interview, 21 August 1843, extract," [3], Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/interview-21-august-1843-extract/1>, emphasis added.

106. Alexander Neibaur says Joseph described Deity as "light complexion." "Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract," [23].

Joseph's 1835 account he says, "I saw many angels in this vision."¹⁰⁷ The event may have been far more expansive in scope than we often depict it. Depicted above the Father and Son is a gathering of many types of heavenly angels—female and male and of all races, to signify the global impact of the First Vision—divinely assembled to witness and testify.

Joseph is kneeling on the ground, wearing a light brown overshirt, purple vest, and blue pants to set him apart from the white clothing of the Father and Son and the brown earth tones of the foreground. In the bottom right corner of the painting, there's an axe in a stump, a detail mentioned in David Nye White's 1843 account.¹⁰⁸ In the bottom left corner, Satan is painted fleeing, a flat pillar of darkness being pushed away from Joseph by the vertical pillar of flame. Satan's pose is an homage to Carl Bloch's *Jesus Casting Out Satan*. Last, like in paintings done by Walter Rane in the early 2000s, in my image the grove is depicted without much foliage, instead of being full leafy green. Although we don't know the month and day of the First Vision, the browns and trees suggest an early-spring grove getting ready to burst out of winter's dark slumber, a fitting metaphor for the fruits of the First Vision itself.¹⁰⁹

It is evident that my image is both a reflection of current cultural values and is symbiotically meant to influence cultural norms by painting some aspects of the First Vision often omitted or not previously shown. It is merely one more way to look at it. My modern access to the nine contemporary accounts through the Joseph Smith Papers website,¹¹⁰ and my repeated analysis of them in my role as a religion professor, culturally influence how I see, interpret, and paint the event. While I draw heavily on the known historical accounts, I do not mean to imply that this is how it should or must be done. Visual art is about personal expression, communicating to viewers without words through line, balance, contrast, color, texture, shape, rhythm, and other principles and

107. "Conversations with Robert Matthews, 9–11 November 1835," 24.

108. "Interview, 21 August 1843, extract," [3], Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/interview-21-august-1843-extract/1>.

109. Some have attempted to put the date at the end of March. See John C. Lefgren and John P. Pratt, "Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning: Sun 26 Mar 1820?" reprinted from *Meridian Magazine* (9 Oct 2002), <http://johnpratt.com/items/docs/lds/meridian/2002/vision.html>.

110. For links to documents of all nine of the contemporary First Vision accounts, see "Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Deity," Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>.

elements of design. Being 100 percent historically accurate is usually an unattainable, and at times even an undesirable, artistic ideal.¹¹¹

Why certain aspects of the First Vision are depicted and perpetuated, I cannot say, nor do I judge. It may be that some artists are simply unaware of various elements discussed in the other noncanonized accounts of the First Vision. Or maybe they are aware of them and consciously choose not to depict them, such as omitting the adversarial attack (which most paintings do not show) to focus more on Joseph's vision of the Father and Son. It may be that artists reduce the vision to its core elements (boy, praying, Father and Son, grove). It may be that artists simply want to rely on the known and accepted symbols to communicate their message. It may be that there is a sort of artistic "biasing" or "priming" taking place that colors or limits how the visual is imagined—where once an image is seen, it can't be unseen, and it is replicated both consciously and subconsciously. Whatever the potential explanation, I do believe there is room for rich expansion and continued exploration outside the mold of standardized First Vision art perpetuated in the last one hundred years.

The Future of First Vision Art

So, what will be the future direction of First Vision art in the next one hundred or two hundred years? If the past two centuries are any indicator, it will likely take shifts and turns in emphasis, substance, and style. Cultural priorities and pressures will act upon future First Vision art to push it in new directions, just as they have in the past. As the Church continues to spread and becomes more global, it is likely that First Vision art will reflect that increased diversity. Artistic symbols are

111. As I've written before, art and history are intertwined entities who need one another, yet their connection more often creates difficult knots instead of well-tied bows that serve both art and history. These knots often result because the aims of history and the aims of art are not aligned, often pulling in entirely different directions. History wants facts; art wants meaning. History wants to validate sources; art wants to evoke emotion. History is more substance; art is more style. History wants accuracy; art wants aesthetics. The two disciplines often love, yet hate, one another as they strive to serve their different masters. See Anthony Sweat, "The Role of Art in Teaching Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine," *Religious Educator* 16, no. 3 (2015), 41–57. I do, however, believe that in narrative, representative religious art dealing with the transmission of history and doctrine, "key elements must be depicted" as art historian Richard Oman has said. Oman, "Ye Shall See the Heavens Open," 119.



FIGURE 34. Joni Susanto, *The First Vision*, batik, cotton textile, 1990. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

often incorporated into and are reflective of the culture where they are produced and the people of that culture. Thus, we see Asian and African and Polynesian and Mexican nativity depictions of Jesus. In the future, we will also likely see similar international artistic interpretations of the symbols of the First Vision. Many such have already appeared in the last few decades. Joni Susanto's expressive 1990 batik cotton textile of the First Vision image reflects marvelous Indonesian aesthetics (fig. 34). Emile Wilson's 1992 batik textile employs standard First Vision symbols, but Joseph, the Father, and the Son are each brown skinned, speaking from and to where the image was produced in Sierra Leone (fig. 35).

Although the majority of the corpus thus far has been created by males, as contemporary modern cultures continue to call for and provide better gender equity in all aspects of society, it may be that more future First Vision art will be produced by women, resulting in different views and expressions of the Vision. Or it may be that First Vision



FIGURE 35. Emile Wilson, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, batik, textile, 1992. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

art will depict more women in the grove, either representing Joseph, angels, or Deity.¹¹² Doctrinal emphases and new revelations may influence this female aspect in the grove. For example, although teachings on Heavenly Mother trace to the early Restoration, there has been a notable emphasis in recent years by the institutional Church on teachings that have to do with “heavenly parents.” The 1995 statement “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” emphasizes that we are children of “heavenly parents.”¹¹³ The Church recently released a Gospel Topics Essay on “Mother in Heaven.”¹¹⁴ There have been 120 total references in general conference to “heavenly parents” since 1851, but more than half of them (64) have been given since 2010.¹¹⁵ The 2019 revised Young Women Theme changed the old phrase “We are daughters of our Heavenly Father” to “I am a beloved daughter of heavenly parents.”¹¹⁶ As doctrinal emphasis in the Church centers more on male and female eternal parents, it is likely our art will reflect that emphasis. Fantasy illustrator Galen Dara created some unique and intriguing images of the First Vision for a 2011 *Sunstone* article.¹¹⁷ In one of the images, angels fly around a barren grove, entering and exiting the panel. Joseph kneels with his left hand blocking the light as he looks up at not two, but *three* divine beings (fig. 36). They are featureless, white forms, haloed each with a nimbus, and it is impossible to determine who is who. Does the third glorified being in the grove represent our Heavenly Mother, or perhaps the Holy Ghost? The painting is open to “flexible interpretation,”

112. Remember, art needs to speak to its viewer using common symbols. Although Joseph is obviously male, depictions of a female Joseph that speak to women would be an apt artistic expression. A student of mine at Brigham Young University produced a marvelously choreographed dance film, where the angels were female and the lead dancer representing Joseph was a female, wearing a white shirt and brown pants, of course.

113. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng>.

114. “Mother in Heaven,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/mother-in-heaven?lang=eng>.

115. Search “heavenly parents” on LDS General Conference Corpus, <https://www.lds-general-conference.org/>.

116. Church News Staff, “Read the New Young Women Theme,” *Church News*, October 5, 2019, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2019-10-05/general-conference-october-2019-lds-mormon-young-women-theme-163132>.

117. Stephen C. Taysom, “Approaching the First Vision Saga,” *Sunstone*, October 17, 2011 <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/approaching-the-first-vision-saga/>.



FIGURE 36. Galen Dara, untitled illustration, mixed media, circa 2011. Courtesy Galen Dara.

Galen Dara told me, but that “a reference to Heavenly Mother is a very apt translation.”¹¹⁸ Recently, another female artist, Alice Pritchett, created a unique gilded linoleum print of the First Vision that includes a concourse of male and female angels, and even some animals (horses and dogs). Directly above the Father and the Son is a female figure with a large halo. Alice said she created this image seeking to explore such questions as, “Who fought off the devils who tried to stop [Joseph]?” and, “What was Heavenly Mother’s role during the event?” (fig. 37).¹¹⁹ Although none of the historical accounts specifically mention Mother in Heaven, doctrinal emphases can cause historical reinterpretation, and prophetic revelations can always add additional understanding.

118. Galen Dara, private email to author, used with permission. See Galen Dara’s website at www.galendara.com.

119. Alice Abrams Pritchett, caption to *The Veil o’er the Earth Is Beginning to Burst*, used in Truman G. Madsen, “Fire from Heaven: The First Vision and Its Aftermath,” *BYU Magazine* (Spring 2020): 30.



FIGURE 37. Alice Pritchett, *The Veil o'er the Earth Is Beginning to Burst*, original linoleum block print, 2020. Courtesy Alice Pritchett.

Speaking of history, we are at a pivotal point regarding how Church history is being approached by the institutional Church. Efforts like the new narrative Church history *Saints*, the Church's Gospel Topics Essays, the Joseph Smith Papers Project, and new Church Educational System courses such as Foundations of the Restoration are reflective of a transparent and open cultural approach to Church history. The Church and its members are becoming increasingly aware of and open to historical/doctrinal/policy nuances and alternatives that may have been closed off in the past, which opens possibilities for alternative expressions in art

that may have been unacceptable to previous generations. Artist Gary Smith, who has and continues to produce many different paintings of the First Vision, said to me about First Vision art, “If you go too far afield on anything [in a painting], if you go too far outside of what is accepted, then they [the Church or its members] are less likely to use it.”¹²⁰ In Church culture, we often associate what is *faithful* with what is *familiar*. As increased familiarity with various historical sources and doctrinal emphases shift, what was once heresy can become associated with orthodoxy and therefore with acceptability (even in art) in Church culture.¹²¹ Understanding the symbiotic nature of art as a reflection of culture but also as a driving factor in changing culture, Gary Smith countered that “the only way we get beyond just acceptability to the truth of things is to [paint] it and then be able to back it up. And then after a few of those paintings have been displayed out there and kind of accepted, that then becomes more of the norm, particularly for the next generation.”¹²²

As the Church moves to the next generation of members who are increasingly familiar with our sacred history but also familiar with certain difficulties, nuances, sticking points, and controversies, we may be moving out of a past culture of certainty and into a broader epistemological humility, embracing ambiguity and better acknowledging the limits of what is and is not known.¹²³ Notice these various elements of

120. Gary Smith, interview with author.

121. “An element that is one generation’s heresy becomes another’s orthodoxy, and vice versa, even in religions of revelation.” Fenella Cannell, “Mormonism and Anthropology: On Ways of Knowing,” *Mormon Studies Review* 4 (2017): 14.

122. Gary Smith, interview with author.

123. For example, the revised 2013 heading for Official Declaration 2 says of the reasons why Brigham Young restricted Black Africans from priesthood that “Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice.” “Official Declaration 2,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, September 30, 1978, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/od/2?lang=eng>. The Gospel Topics Essay on plural marriage states clearly, “Many details about the early practice of plural marriage are unknown.” “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>. Numerous Church leaders in general conference settings have discussed how while we have exalting truth, we don’t have the answers to some questions. For examples, see Quentin L. Cook, “The Songs They Could Not Sing,” General Conference, October 2011; Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” General Conference, April 2013; Rihna Mak, “I Don’t Know All the Answers, But I Know Enough,” *Ensign* 48, no. 9 (September 2018, digital only); Chakell Wardleigh, “We Don’t

knowledge, history, humility, and ambiguity coming together in J. Kirk Richards's recent painting of the First Vision (2020) (fig. 38).¹²⁴ Set in atypical cool blue undertones, Joseph prays with hands clasped. Behind him high in the air come the Father and Son, surrounded by a concourse of angels flanking either side, reflecting the knowledge of the 1835 "many angels" historical account. Looking closely, one sees a white line extending from Joseph's head to God and Jesus, surrounding them. Kirk Richards told me:

[This First Vision painting] has this bubble, like a thought bubble, like an umbilicus. The idea behind that was to say, because Joseph himself said he wasn't sure what it [the grove experience] was, in so many words, and that's kind of what the idea behind that is. What is this, is he out of body, is it a visitation, a vision, what is it? I am less interested in exactly what it was, than I am in carving out a space for different people to see [the First Vision] as different things."¹²⁵

To conclude, United States politician and president John Adams once directed the famous artist John Trumbull that in painting history, "Truth, Nature, Fact, should be your sole guide. Let not our Posterity be deluded by fictions under pretence of poetical or graphical Licenses."¹²⁶ If the last two hundred years are any guide to the future two hundred years, it is likely that truth, nature, and fact will not be our sole guide in how, why, where, or when the vision is depicted. Culture factors and doctrinal emphases will play a major role. If Joseph Smith and the First Vision remain a central focal point of our doctrinal and historical narrative, which seems highly likely given its emphasis in this bicentennial year, then First Vision art will continue to propagate that foundational story,

Always Know "Why," *New Era* 49, no. 2 (February 2019). See also chapters in devotional books such as Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, "Productive Ambiguity," in *Faith Is Not Blind* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018); Anthony Sweat, "Embracing Ambiguity," in *Seekers Wanted* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019).

124. Kirk Richards's impressive work will soon permanently reside as a featured exhibit in the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University. The Maxwell Institute's new home in BYU's West View Building, currently under construction, is slated for completion in 2020. Campus visitors thereafter will be able to view the piece in the Maxwell Institute's main lobby.

125. Kirk Richards, interview with the author, October 19, 2019. Transcript in possession of the author.

126. John Adams, "From John Adams to John Trumbull, 18 March 1817," Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6730>.



FIGURE 38. J. Kirk Richards, *The First Vision*, oil on panel, 2020. Courtesy J. Kirk Richards.

as it began to do in earnest in the 1900s.¹²⁷ If, however, the focus and telling of our historical narrative and doctrinal message shifts, artistic emphasis will likely equally shift. This would not be to say that the First Vision did not happen or wasn't important, only to say that priorities

127. President Russell M. Nelson announced to the Church in the October 2019 general conference that “2020 will be designated as a bicentennial year” to “prepare for a unique [April 2020] conference that will commemorate the very foundations of the restored gospel” because of the First Vision. He urged, “You may wish to begin your preparation by reading afresh Joseph Smith’s account of the First Vision as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price.” Russell M. Nelson, “Closing Remarks,” General Conference, October 2019.

change, just as the Church from the 1830s to the 1870s had a different focus on which to rally energy and message, largely ignoring the First Vision. We do not paint the angel Raphael or Gabriel conferring priesthood to Joseph Smith very often (see D&C 128:21), do we? That does not mean it did not happen, just that it is not emphasized. Were the significance of the angel Raphael or Gabriel better known or consistently taught, paintings of those angels would probably proliferate, like numerous images of John the Baptist conferring the priesthood, or paintings of the First Vision did throughout the 1900s. Who is to say what cultural and revelatory factors may press upon the Church—and thus upon the artists who tell its story and sound its visual message—in the tricentennial year of 2120, or quadricentennial year of 2220? Depending which revelatory tectonic plates shift, the First Vision may visually recede and crumble into the oceans of the past or be thrust even higher up on the mountaintop of importance. Only time will tell, and undoubtedly there will be a visual record to tell it.

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