

# The Mormon Masterpiece

How Joseph Smith became prophet, seer and ... conceptual artist.

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*"I have more to boast of than ever any man had. I am the only man that has ever been able to keep a whole church together since the days of Adam. A large majority of the whole have stood by me. Neither Paul, John, Peter, nor Jesus ever did it. I boast that no man ever did such a work as I."*

—Joseph Smith, *The History of the Church*

**O**n a spring day in 1820, Joseph Smith walked into the woods near his home in Palmyra, N.Y., and knelt down to pray. While on his knees within this grove of trees, he claims to have not only seen, but spoken with, God and Jesus Christ, thus beginning his controversial and remarkably ambitious creation—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This creation, like any work of art, was intended to evoke emotions, steer thinking in a specific direction and, most importantly, convince believers that what they are seeing, hearing and feeling is true and real.

Just as any painter creates a scene that can pull a person into the fantasy it reveals, or as a writer creates a story by placing fascinating characters into a captivating narrative, Smith created a church that embodied narrative, fantasy, thought and emotion. Using stories, philosophy, symbols, sculpture, mysticism and ritual, he constructed something that has grown into a worldwide interactive, organic work of art.

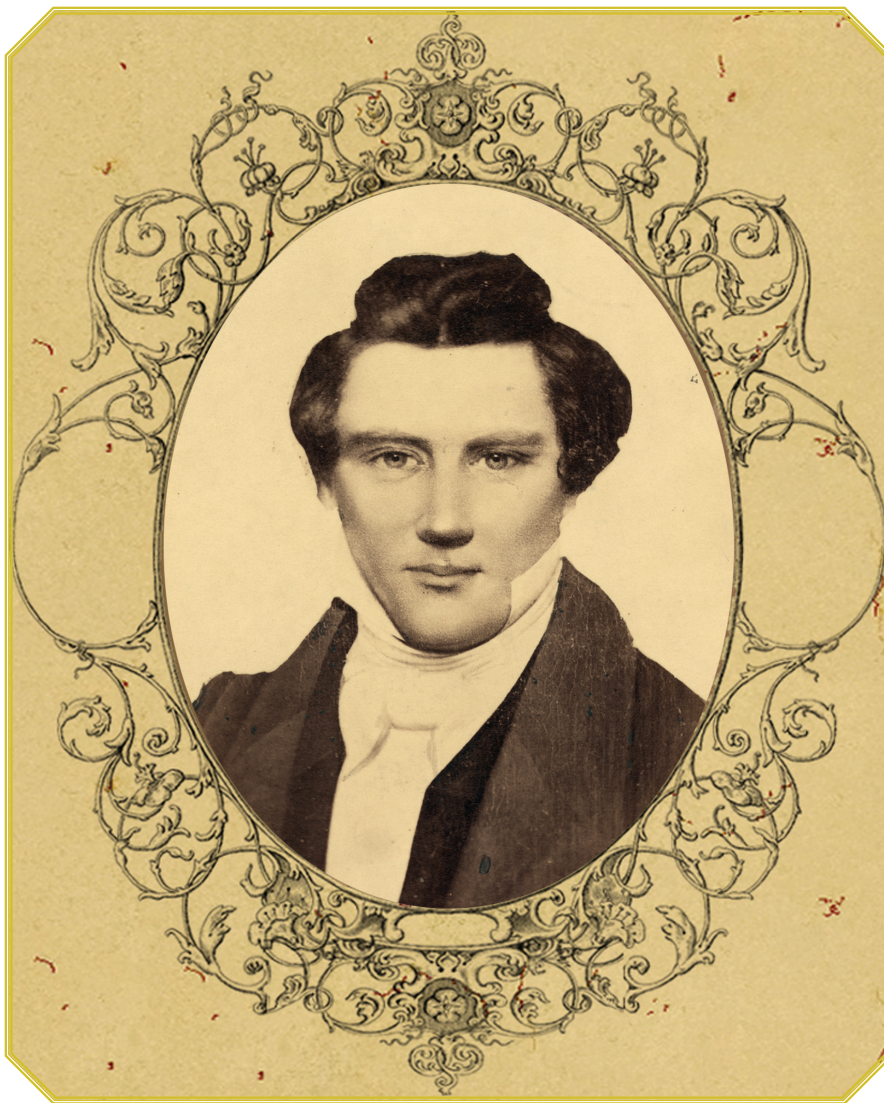
The great English poet and painter William Blake, in his epic poem "Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion," asked: "What is a church and what is a theatre? Are they two and not one? Can they exist separate?"

A church without theater wouldn't last long. People need the fantasy, the performance and the mystery, which Smith provided in his founding of a new church—rife with rituals, stories of travel from faraway lands and theatrical acts of mystical translations that are at the core of the church's history.

With theater being a crucial aspect of religion, it's not too much of a reach to describe religion as a work of art. A religion generally is not viewed as such, and it is difficult to convince people that any religion qualifies as a work of art, but why?

In 1973, groundbreaking artist Joseph Beuys declared, "It's time to show that art means the power of creativity, and it's time to define art in a larger way, to include science and religion, too."

More than 30 years later, in 2008, conceptual artist Jonathon Keats created "The Atheon," a temple of science for rational belief, a public art project commissioned by the Judah L. Magnes Museum in downtown Berkeley, Calif. It was not only a place of worship but also a brand-new religion. Keats wanted to create something for scien-



tists and agnostics that places logic and reason on a pedestal the same way mainstream religion holds the idea of faith in God. In this project, the majority of his art was not visual—aside from the stained-glass window patterned after cosmic microwave background radiation, and the temple itself, the art was in the belief and the idea.

Keats described this project as a "thought experiment"—an experiment where the thought itself, the idea and the wonder becomes the art. His work proves that experimenting with a belief can become an art piece.

## BURIED TREASURE

Raised in a poor farming family, Joseph Smith, in his history, wrote that he was "an obscure boy ... who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintenance by his daily labor."

As a teenager, he began to see himself as the one who would prevail and bring his family out of poverty. He was determined to do this by finding buried treasure. According to *Early Mormonism & the Magic World View* and other accounts, it was quite common to see Smith throughout Palmyra using divining rods and seer stones in a pursuit to locate gold, silver and ancient artifacts. Because of his alleged mystic talent, he was often hired by neighboring farmers in their ultimately futile attempts to strike it rich.

Unfortunately, his money-digging scheme eventually landed him in trouble with the law. In March 1826, according to the 1883 *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Smith was taken to court for his "glass-looking" and found guilty of being "a disorderly person and an imposter" in the trial of the People of the State of New York v. Joseph Smith. These charges are important to his story because with his notoriety as a fraud, it was imperative that Smith be extremely creative when he established his new religion.

All religions are complex works of art, but it's almost impossible to look at the creative processes and origins of most of our world's religions since they were established so long ago. While it's not necessary to know the origin or history of a work of art to appreciate it, this knowledge does help in understanding and respecting the artist and, ultimately, the artwork.

With Mormonism, one can trace its history and look at the church's origins quite easily, as it is less than 200 years old and Joseph Smith's creative process is well-documented in his visions, liturgies, afterlife concept, the overall belief in Mormonism and even in the millions of church followers. From his first vision in the woods to his commandment of plural marriage, he was teeming with creativity.

And while his creative processes were important in founding his religion, it would be inaccurate to label Smith as a process artist. Process art implies that the process is more important than the outcome. In fact, many



process artists will completely disregard the outcome because the process itself is the finished piece. But Smith's finished piece, his enormous composition, is much too important to disregard.

## THE GOLDEN PLATES

All artists use what they are familiar with in creating their art. They use objects that interest them as well as ideas and habits that they grew up with.

In looking at Joseph Smith's past, one can achieve a better understanding of Mormonism. For instance, Smith's early use of seer stones foreshadowed his *pièce de résistance*: his translation of the golden plates.

The golden plates were a stack of gold metal pages bound by large gold rings containing ancient script that Smith allegedly found buried in a hillside near his home in Palmyra. He claims to have been shown the location of these plates by an angel named Moroni. Smith translated the plates from their native language, which Smith called Reformed Egyptian, to what has now become the Book of Mormon.

Regrettably, few people were fortunate enough to witness this inspired display that was the translation. Luckily, those who did see it—Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer—had the wisdom to document the events, so we now have written descriptions of the process.

Basically, there were two methods of translation—both employing the use and artistic display of seer stones. One description details Smith's use of the Urim and Thummim—two transparent stones set into a rim of silver, resembling spectacles—which were fastened to a breastplate. This apparatus was said to have been buried along with the golden plates specifically for their translation.

Smith also used a second method of translation: a single brown, egg-shaped seer stone that he found while digging a well.

Joseph Smith's own description of the translation is simple: "Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim, I translated the record by the gift and power of God." Cowdery, Smith's scribe, summed it up similarly and applied some of the exact wording.

David Whitmer's account of the translation in his church-affirming 1887 pamphlet "An Address to All Believers in Christ" is more dramatic: "Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the dark-

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ness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English word to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear."

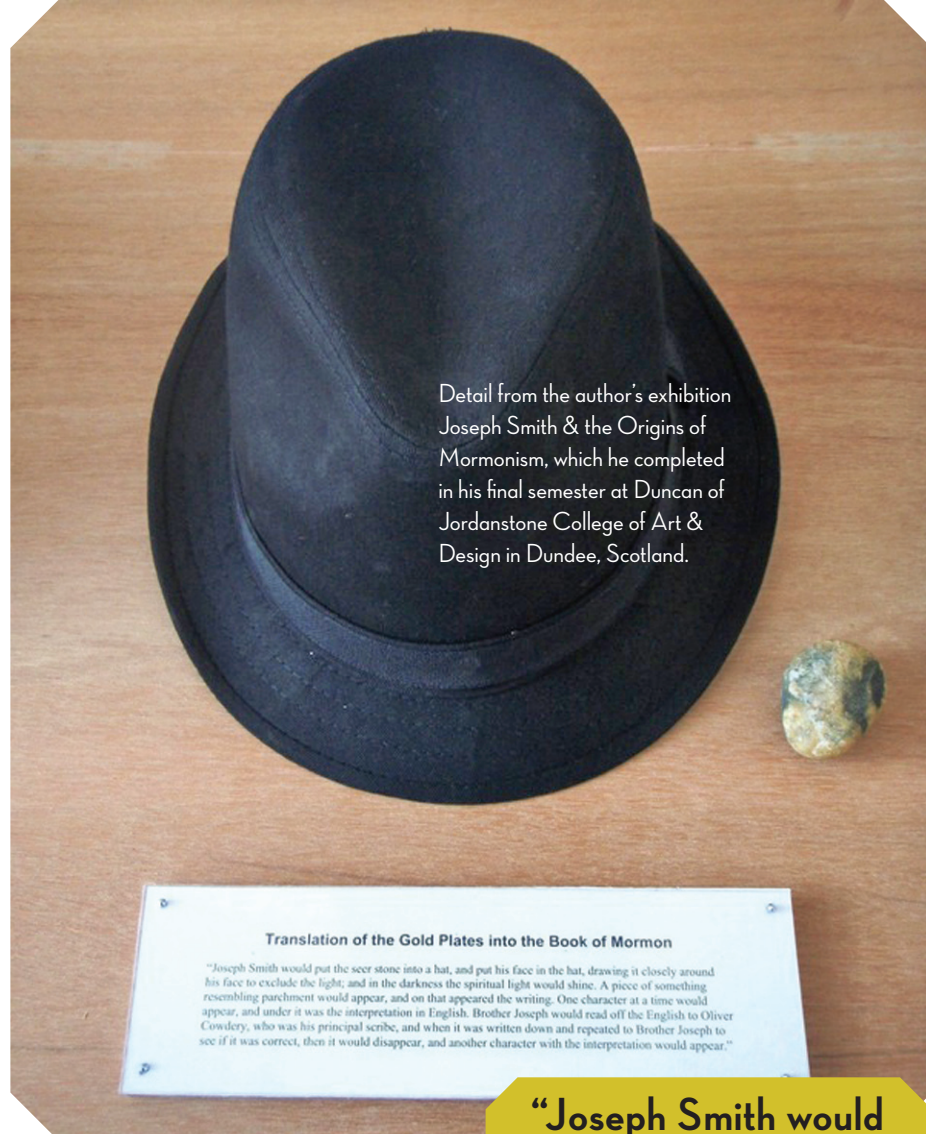
Whatever method of translation was used, this must have been quite a performance. The anticipation, excitement and belief in something so divinely guided must have made for inspiring and theatrical deciphering sessions.

## SYMBOLS & MYSTERY

In the early 1840s, Smith introduced the use of symbols. Although these symbols are not obvious to outsiders, they are attached to the church's most sacred temple rituals and even undergarments worn by faithful members.

Smith was initiated into the Masonic Order in 1842, as he mentions in *The History of the Church*. This had an obvious influence on his work soon after. On May 4, 1842, just two months after his initiation into Freemasonry, Smith introduced the Endowment Ceremony. The Endowment Ceremony is a secret ceremony performed inside the Mormon Temple and is a compulsory rite of passage into the highest kingdom of heaven, the Celestial Kingdom.

According to *The Changing World of Mormonism*, this ceremony, at its introduction, was virtually identical to the Freemasons' initiation ceremony, mimicking the handshakes, the use of tokens, vows of secrecy and penalties.



Detail from the author's exhibition *Joseph Smith & the Origins of Mormonism*, which he completed in his final semester at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design in Dundee, Scotland.

### Translation of the Gold Plates into the Book of Mormon

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The ceremony has changed multiple times since then, but many of the symbols and rituals remain. The symbols used on Mormon undergarments are rudimentary Masonic symbols—simplified versions of the square, the compass and the rule are stitched into specific locations on the clothing serving as reminders of one's faith. These symbols are not meant to be seen in public because of their secret and sacred meanings, and the garments themselves are said to protect the bodies of the Mormon faithful throughout their lives on Earth.

Smith was wise to introduce concealment and mystery into his religion, as secrets always lead to excitement. People yearn to know what is being kept from them, which causes more excitement as church members come of age to serve missions or get married in the temple, thus becoming eligible for the temple ceremonies.

The art world is no stranger to mystery—art creates mystery in all its forms. Artists love creating an unknown, letting a painting pose questions that will most likely go unanswered. British figurative painter Francis Bacon once claimed, "The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery."

When speaking of Smith's artistic talents, one must not overlook his inspired translations of Egyptian scrolls in the Book of Abraham. First published in 1842 in the *Times & Seasons* newspaper, in Nauvoo, Ill., The Book of Abraham has since become

part of the Pearl of Great Price, one of the Mormon holy scriptures. The Book of Abraham is Smith's interpretation of ancient Egyptian papyri that, according to *The History of the Church*, Smith purchased from a traveling mummy exhibition in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835.

Smith declared that he could translate the scrolls and claimed that they were ancient writings of Abraham, father of Islam, Judaism and Christianity—written by Abraham's own hand while he was in Egypt. Smith also attempted to re-draw missing parts of ancient hieroglyphic scenes found on the scrolls, which Egyptologists now recognize as standard Egyptian funeral scenes, not historic illustrations of Abraham's struggles in Egypt.

Brigham Young University professor and Mormon scholar Hugh Nibley worked on translating the scrolls and, while agreeing that the scrolls have nothing to do with Abraham, defended the Book of Abraham





LDS symbols as interpreted by the author in his work *Joseph Smith & the Origins of Mormonism*

as a work of “real substance.” Smith’s work, Nibley argues, was never an actual translation but rather revelation from God that pierced the true meaning of the scrolls, no matter what translations might reveal.

Nibley’s description of Smith’s work adds to his role as an artistic visionary: “The most singular contributions in every field of human endeavor have been made by persons who outraged the establishment by transcending the current rules; the productions of genius, to say nothing of divine revelation, are necessarily unconventional in method and offensive to the scholar.”

The translating Smith undertook was an imaginative attempt to change history. This is a brilliant idea, and it was not the only time he did this. Also found in the Pearl of Great Price is the Book of Moses, wherein Smith rewrote parts of Moses’ life story, therefore changing this pivotal character’s story from the way it was originally described in the Bible.

Controversial artist duo Jake and Dinos Chapman commonly do something similar: They purchase famous artists’ paintings and drawings and add something of their own onto them. Most, if not all, of these works appreciate in value after the Chapman brothers’ alteration. These artistic adaptations are seen by some as an improvement and, by others, as simply

vandalism.

Whichever stance is taken, it cannot be denied that reworking someone else’s art is a bold act of vanity. Smith rewrote the character of another author’s book, which can be seen as a better or a corrupted version of the original.

## VANITY & UNDOING

Vanity is a quality found in many artists. One of the most famously narcissistic artists was Salvador Dali, who had this to say of great artists: “The two things you need to be a great artist is 1. Be Spanish, and 2. Be named Salvador Dali.”

Smith’s vanity is evident in his self-fulfilling prophecies that he wrote for the Book of Mormon and in his translation of the Bible. According to the Book of Mormon, “plain and precious things” would be lost from the Bible; Smith then found and translated those missing portions. His translation of missing Genesis verses speak of God choosing a blessed seer to be brought forth in the latter days whose name would be Joseph.

Smith’s vanity was indeed an artistic strength, but unfortunately, it was also the single most detrimental aspect of his disposition, largely contributing to the events

leading to his death.

Smith became mayor of Nauvoo, Ill., in May 1842. In June 1844, a group of disgruntled Nauvoo residents got together to create the *Nauvoo Expositor*, a newspaper published specifically to broadcast their opinions of Mayor Smith. The residents’ main complaint was that Smith held too much power as both mayor and president of the Mormon church—to which the majority of Nauvoo’s population belonged. They further disagreed with Smith’s recent commandment of plural marriage.

After only one publication of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, Smith ordered the destruction of the printing press, causing arrest warrants to be sent to him from outside Nauvoo. This eventually caused Smith to declare martial law and mobilize the Nauvoo Legion, a city militia made up of roughly 2,500 men, led by Joseph Smith. This declaration of martial law led directly to Smith being charged for treason against the state of Illinois and caused him to be held in the Carthage Jail to await his trial.

While awaiting trial, the jail was attacked by a large mob determined to kill Smith. Even though, according to John Taylor’s account in *The History of the Church*, Smith shot three men during the gunfight using a pistol that was smuggled to him by a friend, he did not stand a chance against his attackers and was quickly shot to death. Smith has since been portrayed as a martyr.

When speaking of Smith’s death, many Mormons describe it in a very Christ-like fashion, never speaking of the gun or the Nauvoo Legion Militia. Many simply say he willingly died to protect other members of the Mormon church.

Smith himself may have had something to do with that depiction. He actually described his death before it happened—one of his many self-fulfilled prophecies. “I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer’s morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I shall die innocent, and it shall yet be said of me—he was murdered in cold blood.”

## FAITH IN THE MYSTERY

Legendary French artist Edgar Degas profoundly once said, “Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.” Art is very reliant upon the illusion that the artist creates. All artists know this, including Joseph Smith, but Degas stated it in a simple and eloquent way.

Conceptual artist Michael Craig-Martin uses the idea of illusion in an obvious way in his

1973 piece “An Oak Tree.” This work consists of a glass of water resting on a clear glass shelf that is attached to a wall. It is accompanied by a series of written questions about the artwork and their respective answers given by the artist. The Q&A goes like this:

Q. To begin with, could you describe this work?

A. Yes, of course. What I’ve done is change a glass of water into a full-grown oak tree without altering the accidents of the glass of water.

Q. The accidents?

A. Yes. The colour, feel, weight, size ...

Q. Do you mean that the glass of water is a symbol of an oak tree?

A. No. It’s not a symbol. I’ve changed the physical substance of the glass of water into that of an oak tree.

Q. It looks like a glass of water.

A. Of course it does. I didn’t change its appearance. But it’s not a glass of water, it’s an oak tree.”

Like Smith’s masterpiece, this piece perfectly describes the illusion, making not only the illusion, but also the faith in the illusion, part of the artwork.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—the religion—is a brilliant conceptual art piece. The props and sources used for its creation are more tangible than the mysticism and imagination of the final piece, but the final piece is what lives on in its members. It is a belief, an idea.

Simply stated, it is faith in the mystery. And the vast display of faith shown by Smith’s millions of followers is proof of his talent in shaping this incredibly powerful composition. In his short life, Smith was revered as prophet, seer and revelator. Others called him imposter, mayor, military leader, corrupt bank owner, even a presidential candidate. But above all, he was an artist, and an ingenious one at that. **CW**

Mike Furness is a native of Salt Lake City and an artist currently living in London. His most recent art project was based on Joseph Smith and the origins of Mormonism. He wrote this essay to accompany his work, which can be seen at [MFurness.com/joseph-smith-and-the-origins-of-mormonism.html](http://MFurness.com/joseph-smith-and-the-origins-of-mormonism.html).

