

PAINTING THE TEMPLE

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Editor's note: Leon spoke with Scott Samuelson on 5 February 2008.

Scott: Leon, we admire your murals in the Rexburg Temple, especially as they portray scenery of the region. Painting murals in a temple must be an unusual experience. Was the painting a spiritual experience for you?

Leon: Yes, I had some very special and tender moments. One of the primary purposes of all art is communication. That communication exists on three basic levels: mental, emotional, and spiritual, or in other words, head, heart, and soul. For visual art, the easiest level of communication is mental, what an object is supposed to represent—a tree, a man, a woman, a house— that can be communicated in a quick, simplified manner.

Emotional communication is considerably harder as it requires that the viewers respond to the art from their hearts. Different than a mental response which would be, “It looks like...,” emotional art necessitates that the viewer responds with “That feels like...” Emotional art needs to be far more refined, regardless of the style. It also requires that the artist have some feelings within himself, through personal experiences, about whatever he is creating an image of *before* he begins. Without those feelings he can never hope to stir the heart of another.

Spiritual communication is by far the most difficult as it requires that the first two levels be well established and then after that the Spirit must touch the *soul* of the viewer. An artist may on his own have had experiences that allow him to bring personal feelings to the art, independent of the Spirit, so as to touch the heart of the viewer. Spiritual art, however, requires painting with the assistance of the Spirit. The truth exists, however, that no matter how hard we try or how we live we cannot demand that the Spirit be there; it chooses when, where, and how to come to us, and we must be patient and grateful when it comes.

Scott: How did that idea find expression for you in the temple murals? Did you find yourself living at a higher spiritual

plane because you knew you were trying to communicate spiritual truth in your art?

Leon: Yes, I attended the temple once each week as best as I could. I worked on improving my habits of studio cleanliness. By custom I'm not a real tidy person. For example, there are usually stacks of reference material all over my studio that I haven't filed yet from the last painting. I needed to do my part on inviting the Spirit. When doing the portrait of President Hinckley, for example, I went into my studio at home and cleaned it from top to bottom. I even took all my paintings down and vacuumed the walls behind them. I oiled the wooden wainscot with lemon oil and did everything I could think of to make it clean. Our print office secretary came in and seeing how clean the studio was said, "Wow! You really respect President Hinckley," I said, "Yes, but I respect the Holy Ghost more, and I need his help. In order for the Spirit to be here and help me, I have to do my best to create an environment that welcomes him."

It was the same thing with the temple mural site. The nature of painting is untidy. Sometimes I would stop and take half a day to clean up. (It's a big place and the murals are huge.) I cleaned everything spic-and-span, swept up the dead flies, and even vacuumed all the little cracks in the cement, spending several hours just to get it clean. After I was finished it always felt good again. I consciously tried to create an environment that would invite the Spirit to be there.

I have also learned that music can be extremely effective in inviting the Spirit or driving it out. I was therefore very selective in the CDs that I listened to. Actually there were only two and even then the volume was low so as not to demand my attention.

I had to contend with the fallen nature of man also, the tendency of self-sufficiency. I have learned this lesson before, and, unfortunately, it seems that I had to learn it again. My own nature, perhaps the adversary, would periodically say to me, "Say, you're pretty good." My heart would then invite pride. The next thing I knew, I was on my own. I remember painting the portrait of President Hinckley and when I sometimes would have the thought, "Wow, this is looking pretty good!" with the very next brush stroke the Spirit was gone and I was unable to paint effectively. I would have to

stop and ask for forgiveness and then start over. But with the temple murals it wasn't just a brush stroke; sometimes it seemed like I was on my own for a week. It was awful!

Scott: So doing the temple murals was an exercise in humility and learning to live close to the Spirit?

Leon: Yes, I worked on that. When I was not painting, at home or anywhere else, I tried to be a better person. I tried to do as President Hinckley said to, "just be a little better." I tried to be more patient, less critical, to refrain from allowing arrogant thoughts.

Scott: Did you feel called to do these paintings? Was painting the temple murals a calling?

Leon: "Calling" isn't the exact word I would use, but when the announcement was made, I felt something inside, though different from, "Ah, that will be me." It was deeper than that and much more personal. The announcement of the Rexburg Temple was made in December 2003. Just a few weeks later I happened to be visiting with one of the people on the temple art committee, and he said, "You know, you should send in a proposal to do the Rexburg murals." I said, "I'm interested."

So within a few weeks after the announcement for the temple in Rexburg, my name was "on the list" to be invited when the time came for proposals. A year after with placing a few voicemails and emails I heard nothing in reply. When spring came I was informed from Salt Lake that, "We will need a proposal by the end of summer." So in 2005, I started taking photos and preparing concepts of what it could be, but never hearing back, I gave up and never sent anything in. I wondered, being full-time faculty, how could I do it even if I were given the opportunity? All fall and winter, whenever I thought about it, I would just tell myself or my wife, Kathy, "Well, they must have gotten somebody else."

Then on January 9, 2006, a call came from the designer for the Rexburg Temple. He asked me if I would be interested in submitting a proposal. I said, "I'd love to." "Okay," he answered, "You have until January 31, when it must be here at the Church Office Building by 11:00 a.m." That was just 19 working days! There were three other artists who were also competing.

One of the interesting things is that with all that preparation, all those photos I'd taken, I didn't use any of them. I didn't because the paintings took their own direction. Halfway through preparing the proposal I learned that there would be two rooms instead of one. My original idea had been to make it a panorama around Rexburg as if you were sitting in the temple on the Rexburg hill looking all around you; to the west would be the Menan Buttes, and looking north, the Ashton foothills and maybe the Teton River and Henry's Fork, to the east I would have the Tetons, and to the south would be the South Fork. I had thought that I would paint cottonwoods on the south wall, pines and aspens on the north wall, the butte and desert on the west wall, and then the Tetons on the east." That's how I had envisioned it. The research that I had done for the panorama was in place, but in January I started thinking, "That's not the whole temple district. It's called the Rexburg temple district, because it is in Rexburg, but it goes all the way to the Montana border and clear into Jackson, Wyoming, which is in the Driggs Idaho Stake." The south instruction room, the river bottom room, as it ended up, has places represented from the South Fork of the Snake River, and Henry's Fork, and some of the Fall River up in Chester. It has parts from the Teton River; it has sloughs and canals and ditch banks and even some of my own backyard. The panorama became the whole Rexburg *temple district*. So for people from all over, it will feel familiar. Part of the familiarity is the spirit of the temple, but part of it is that the painting is actually from the entire temple district in all four directions.

Scott: What about the other room, the mountain room?

Leon: A lot of people say, "Is that such-and-such a place?" Usually I just smile with a twinkle in my eye and don't give an answer. Similar to the other room in using places from all over, there's a spring of water, some sagebrush and rocks from the Teton Pass and some hills from the far south of the temple district. There are pine boughs from here on the BYU-Idaho campus. There are places from Canyon Creek and Swan Valley. Again, the room represents the temple district, not just one specific spot, although I did my best to make it look as though it is.

Scott: What guidance did you receive from the designers and temple committee? How strict were the parameters?

- Leon: I was told specifically not to do people like in the Idaho Falls Temple. After that the only guideline was to avoid winter and fall and make it regional. The mountain room started out as early summer but by the time I finished, it had turned almost into fall. Actually, the whole theme of the temple, color and all, is fall; so I am glad that I listened to the Spirit.
- Scott: Had you ever painted that big before? I think you had done some repair work on the paintings in the Idaho Falls Temple.
- Leon: I had worked in the Idaho Falls Temple for the past seven years on virtually all of the murals in each of the instruction rooms. There the task was to refresh the paintings, particularly the damages that tend to occur. In the creation room, I coordinated light and perspective on the front wall from one side of the room to the other. That was accomplished by repeating the light in the clouds. I matched the horizon lines from the right to the left so that now the wall works as a whole. The spring of water on the bottom left was fun to add. That's as "big" of a painting as I had done to that point.
- Scott: How did you get that assignment?
- Leon: It was actually volunteer work. I noticed a scratch on one of the walls and assumed that perhaps it had been done while being cleaned. I wrote the temple president a letter that went something like: "President Nelson, I noticed there was a scratch in this particular instruction room," and that "I would be happy to come in and repair it." Later I received a call from the temple engineer, "Sure, come and fix it." And so eight years later I'm still periodically "fixing" the murals there. That has been a wonderful opportunity, a kind of unique training to get used to the large scale and comfortable in working on a mural for the temple, and to get over the obstacle of never having done it before. It could have been terrifying, even debilitating, to take my brush and paint right on the wall in the temple with oil paint. But I had already been doing it for years.
- Scott: Was it hard to start? What did you learn artistically from doing this project?
- Leon: From the beginning I went into it feeling it could be done but also knowing why. I felt buoyed up by the Spirit and recognized

it. Acknowledging where the strength was coming from I was able to start without the expected fear and trepidation that one would normally have.

Artistically I learned that the huge movements of my hand were identical to little tiny ones; even though on a much larger scale, it was the same thought process in my brain, the identical stroke of wrist and coordination of eye and brain, just using a bigger brush. I remember being impressed with the thought, “This is so big, it can’t all be in focus or it will be too busy. I’ve got to keep the edges soft so it won’t be overpowering.” So I took a big, [for an oil painting] three-inch house-painting brush, and every time I painted an area while it was still wet, I went back over it softening the edges. To anyone looking at what I was doing, I am sure they would have been aghast that I was smearing it up with that big brush! In contrast to that, there were a few times when I had to leave some really hard-focused edges and saturated color to balance the soft edges and neutral colors. In one particular area I kept wanting to soften it and tone down the saturation, and then I would have the thought, “No, don’t do it; don’t touch it.” The next day I thought I had better do it while it was still wet—“Don’t touch it.” I fought the urge to adjust it for over a week. Now I look at it and realize that it needed the hard edge and strong color; it does exactly what it needs to do for the whole area. It becomes an accent of intensity, of saturated color, and also a really hard edge. My brain absolutely didn’t want it to be there, but my impression did. I’m glad I listened.

Another thing I learned, since you were asking about scale and distance, is that a mural, because of its size, will be similar to what nature does to the mountains far off in the distance. Their color appears light blue. We see no yellow in them because the light waves are too short; they just don’t come out so far. As one gets closer to the mountains, the red light becomes visible. At that point, the mountains start to look purple. Then a little closer and one begins to see yellow. When that happens, the yellow mixes with the blue and the trees become green; rocks start having brown tones until eventually we are in the mountains and one sees everything as the color it is.

What I am saying is that because the murals are so big, all subtle colors and temperatures and intensities, up close,

would look fine, but when I climbed down off the scaffold and backed away, all the subtle colors would be gone. A large mural does the exact same thing nature does when you look in the distance at a mountain—it will do that on a mural! That was totally new to me. So as I painted, I had to take that into consideration. One particular area where I had to do that was in the mountains and sky on the wall with the elk. When I would paint, I would start at the top of the canvas and paint the whole length of the canvas, left to right, before lowering the scaffold to the next level. The area that I painted first in the mountain room was the mountains and sky right above the elk. After painting it, I looked at it and thought: “Oh my goodness, they are too intense, too strong, and too red! I wanted to adjust them right then and agonized because they looked so red. The Spirit said, “Just don’t touch it; leave it alone.” That meant leaving it alone for several months, but by the time the whole wall was done, it was perfect: the right value, the right saturation, and the right temperature.

Scott: Did you ever get discouraged?

Leon: Yes. Occasionally I had long periods of discouragement. It wasn’t just one afternoon I felt bad. Sometimes it was for days, sometimes weeks.

Scott: And you painted through that?

Leon: I had to. I would just keep painting and then fix it later. There were weird, discouraging things. For example, when I put together the proposal, I went to my reference file and found an image of a whitetail deer with a fawn, but I didn’t have copyright permission for it. Later, when I was commissioned to paint the murals, I tried to get permission. There was not a name listed with the photo; it was just one I had torn out of a magazine 15 or more years ago. I tried forever to find out who the photographer was and eventually found him. He was in Kansas City, Kansas, and worked for the state Fish and Game Department. I made contact with the magazine art director, and when I told him I wanted permission for the photo for an LDS temple painting, he quit communicating with me. I left a message for the photographer to contact me. Several weeks later he sent a cheerful and positive email and mentioned; “I understand it’s for some public building.” I wrote him back and said that it was for an LDS temple. Communication stopped again, so the place where the two

deer should be remained white—for a long time. I knew I couldn't use the image without permission; how could something plagiarized be put in the temple?

I was still tweaking other areas when the project manager from Salt Lake said, "Leon, you'll never be done. Just put your brushes down and move on to the next room." He had a good point, so I moved into the mountain room. The missionaries, Elder and Sister Hollingsworth and Elder and Sister Frost, would come and joke with me about the "white cows" on the back wall; "Looks like the cows are still there." I would answer, "I know. I haven't got permission yet." That was pretty discouraging.

Eventually I was able to contact a photographer on the east coast that sent me some images of whitetail deer which solved the problem. The doe in the painting was actually a photo of a yearling fawn, but I went into Photoshop on the computer and made it look older. Now, not only is the finished mural legal, but the painting is much better because there are two fawns with the doe, not one, and their body postures are more exciting. It's just so much better. The process took a year—a full year! That's a long time to carry the discouragement and an unresolved problem around. When it was finally finished, to be sure, there was sincere gratitude and acknowledgement that the Lord had stepped in and solved the problem. I just had to be patient, even with the ribbing from the missionaries about white cows. That was one "small," extended discouragement.

The wall with swans was another problem. The proposal is probably 15 x 38 inches, and the actual wall is 10 x 27 feet. Every 2x3 inches on the color proposal is six square feet on the wall. I digitized the color proposal and printed it out, making big images of my little painting. After transferring the outlines to the whole room in red paint, I went to work with the rocks just behind the swans. Within 15 days I had completely covered that wall and thought, "Whoa! I'm going to get this done and have some time to go hunting this fall. I'll paint now and then take a vacation." Then I started painting the second wall (the back one) and got about halfway through painting. The more I painted, the more I realized that the first wall looked awful because I had just copied the sketch from the proposal. You can fake a 2x3 inch space with four or five brushstrokes and it looks good. But it's going to take a

whole lot more than a few brushstrokes to cover six square feet, let alone make it look good. Reality check! I spend another six weeks repainting the entire wall. I had given myself six weeks per wall. That was my timeframe, and for the most part stayed on schedule. But after the setback with the swan wall, I had to work a bit harder and longer.

Scott: Are you the kind of person who depends on a regular schedule? Do you go to work at the same time every day and paint for the same amount time and then stop? Or is it more like, “If the muse of painting is with me, I’m going to work three extra hours today”?

Leon: I’m *not* the type of artist who, at 2:00 a.m. wakes up and says, “I’ve just had this thought, this feeling, and I’ve got to go paint it.” I’m not even close to that. I’m the type of artist who says, “Art is work, this is my job; now get up and go to work.” Pretty much every morning I was working by 8:00, whether on the computer designing, or out photographing more images to bring back to the computer to adjust the design or work out some detail, or I was at the mural site painting, or going through my photos again. Every day I started in my studio at home, then went out and painted, then came back to the studio and worked until late at night. Usually that was about ten hours, but many times it was more. I would get physically tired of pushing paint, so I would come back home to look and think on the computer for two or three hours longer, adjusting colors and printing out reference photos, adjusting the composition, and all that—it was that kind of schedule. I didn’t stop for lunch at 12:00 and come back at 1:00 either, no way! At 11:00 or 10:30, whenever it was, I’d break out my peanut butter and honey, make a sandwich, munch potato chips and carrots, and sit in a chair to eat it, always looking at and analyzing the area I was currently working on and then get back up on the scaffold and keep painting. I ate a lot of peanut butter and carrots. I’m really tired of carrots. Actually, regarding your question, maybe I’m somewhere between the two people you described. I never thought about it until now.

Scott: What about artistic feedback? Artists sometimes need friends or colleagues to give feedback. Did you get that on the temple murals?

Leon: For anybody to come out to the site and see the murals, we had to get clearance from Salt Lake—by name. I received permission for and took my wife and children because they are my artistic sounding boards. My wife is a super-good critic. I just put her in a chair and she points and is direct with her criticism, and that's wonderful. She doesn't mince words. When I could get my brother Nolan to come out, he helped quite a bit also. I would call him up: "Nolan, have you got time to come out and give me a critique?" He would sit on a chair and think and absorb it, analyze it, and then say, "It looks to me like..." and then say something. Almost every time he pinpointed areas I was having trouble with and didn't know how to resolve. All of the critiques gave me incentive to not give up, to go ahead and fix it, but they also often suggested a way to fix it. My brother-in-law, Dale McPherson, was also very helpful.

Scott: Did people from Salt Lake come up and check it out?

Leon: Once a month the project manager from Salt Lake came. It was more of a check to make sure that I was on schedule than instructions regarding the painting. He asked, "Are you on task? Are you going to make it?" That was all. He was very complimentary and very gracious. However, there were probably about 20 people from Salt Lake, over the last year and a half, that have been through the mural site.

Scott: How will doing the temple paintings affect your future as an artist? It must be a happy chapter in your artistic career. When you're eighty years old and write the Leon Parson personal history, do you think painting the temple murals will be the peak, the pinnacle?

Leon: It has been a wonderful chapter in my life, for certain, and I've asked myself and my wife similar questions: what I will do when this is finished, what will become of me, what will I paint, what will my art look like? I have even questioned whether I will hunt anymore. But as far as the peak or pinnacle—I hope not. In and of myself, I realize, I don't paint that well; I was greatly assisted. I still have much more to learn. ☺