

Henri-Robert Bresil's *Alma Baptizing in the Waters of Mormon*

Richard G. Oman

The exuberant painting on this issue's cover, *Alma Baptizing in the Waters of Mormon*, is by one of the earliest Latter-day Saint Haitian converts, Henri-Robert Bresil.¹ Colorful and dynamic paintings such as those by Bresil have become Haiti's most acclaimed cultural expression as well as one of the most widely recognized styles of contemporary art. Haitian art is a mixture of folk art and early modern European art as practiced by artists like Henri Rousseau. Landscapes, cityscapes, and genre subjects of Haiti are the favored themes. In Haitian painting, detail is subordinated to bold brush strokes, resulting in highly stylized forms. Emphasis is on rhythm and energy. Because atmospheric perspective is ignored, objects in the distance have the same crisp outlines as objects in the foreground. The picture plane is flattened, heightening the decorative effect of the surface. The joyous vitality of this art shows the resilience of the Haitian people to decades of crushing poverty and political oppression.

The artist was born in 1952 in the northern Haitian city of Gonaïves. In 1973 Bresil moved to the capital, Port-au-Prince, and began his career in art.² Recognition came in 1981, when he won the Ispan-Unesco prize of honor at the Museum of Haitian Art at St. Pierre's College. Since then, he has exhibited in the top galleries in Haiti as well as galleries in Puerto Rico, the United States, France, Italy, and Switzerland. His work has been lauded in such publications as the *New York Times* and the *Miami Herald*. Bresil is best known for his dynamic, rhythmical landscapes of which this painting is a fine example. He is also a poet and jazz singer.³

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This 1988 work draws upon the Book of Mormon account, which states that the Waters of Mormon were “on the borders of the land” with a “fountain of pure water” and a “thicket” (Mosiah 18:4–5). Bresil has placed these features in a lush, tropical, Caribbean-like paradise. Paintings like this piece by Henri-Robert Bresil remind Latter-day Saints that shared faith, rather than national origin or ethnicity, bonds them together as a people.

NOTES

¹ Personal communication with Rosalie King, wife of Haitian Mission President, David King. See also a note in the Artists File, Museum of Church History and Art, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. The history of the Church in Haiti begins in 1977 with the baptism of Alexandre Mourra, a Haitian of Lebanese/Palestinian extraction. In July 1978, about a month after the revelation on blacks and the priesthood (see D&C Official Declaration—2), Mourra asked the Ft. Lauderdale Mission to send missionaries to baptize some new converts. Among those baptized were five Presbyterian ministers. A short time later, Alexander Paul, the Haitian consul general to the Bahamas, contacted Church headquarters in Salt Lake City, requesting missionaries for Haiti. In the spring of 1980, the first permanent missionaries were sent to Haiti from the Ft. Lauderdale Mission. Today there are over five thousand members of the Church in Haiti, a Haitian mission, and about eighteen native Haitian missionaries (personal communication with Richard Millet, Church Missionary Department, October 1, 1992). Over two-thirds of all new LDS converts now come from Haiti and other developing nations; see *1991–1992 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1990).

² The Franciscus Family Foundation, *Haiti, Voodoo Kingdom to Modern Riviera* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: The Franciscus Family Foundation, 1980), 100.

³ Gerald Bloncourt, *La Peinture Haitienne*, a clipping in the Artists File, Museum of Church History and Art, Salt Lake City.