That's Not *My* Jesus
An Artist's Personal Perspective on Images of Christ

James C. Christensen

When I was growing up, I was taught that we should not have pictures and statues of Christ in our homes or meetinghouses. Nothing was to come between us and the individual image each of us had of the Lord we worshipped. Now members of the LDS Church are expressing a need for a good image of the Savior that they can reflect upon. For artists, that shift becomes a major challenge as they work to create the desired images.

Images of the Savior: Thinking of the Same Individual and Seeing Him Differently

In struggling with the issues involved in painting Christ, I have (as have artists other than myself) come to realize that we do not actually need to have a physically accurate portrayal of Jesus Christ. For artists, the goal is to create a character in an image that we can identify with, that we can relate to. But at the same time that character should not remind us of a neighbor or some acquaintance. Christ is too personal to each of us. He must be portrayed with universal but distinct qualities.

Nowhere in the Book of Mormon, in this dispensation's revelations, or in the writings of living prophets can I find a detailed physical description of Jesus Christ. I believe that that is by design, not by accident, because in our minds each of us creates a picture of the Savior that we worship—an immortal being. We also create a visual symbol for our Father in Heaven. For many of us, that image is a grandfatherly character, giving rise to an interesting paradox: we are going to be resurrected in our prime, but we create an image of Father in Heaven as an older man with a two-foot white beard. I suppose if our Father in Heaven appeared as a very handsome thirty-year-old, we might have a harder time visually identifying him. Consequently, with both the Savior and our Father in Heaven, physical accuracy is not the artist's objective.

Our dilemma is that on the one hand we want to know Christ personally and on the other hand we do not know what he looks like. I have worked through my cycles of going through the historical record attempting to find out his ethnic nature and physical appearance. Would he be Semitic?

Would he be red haired and blue eyed? Would he be as a Davidic descendent—ruddy and fair? Where does the forked beard come from? Does he even have a beard? The questions can go on ad infinitum.

Gary Ernest Smith has done as much research on the subject of Christ's physical appearance as anybody. He examined records of the races of people living in Palestine, the physiognomy of the people.[1] Because of the second commandment, to make no graven images, Jewish converts made no portraits of Jesus. From the Roman Christian era, there is a portrait of Christ that legend attributes to Saint Luke. Around A.D. 300 people felt a need to have images of Christ, which would give more substance to the church, so the clergy provided the material. The image of the Savior largely evolved in the first five hundred years A.D., and since then, we seem to be locked into a certain image and to be concerned primarily with how long, how short, how light, how dark we make Christ's hair. That form of minutiae is where we get into the changes of popular taste.

As Mormons we believe that someone could see Christ today; Doctrine and Covenants 93:1 states, "See my face and know that I am." Yet while we believe that many people have had this experience, no one ever says, "This is what I saw. He looks more like Tom Selleck than like Richard Attenborough." No, the descriptions are always in such terms as light, gold, and shining. I think—and this is the gospel according to Christensen—that visions show Him in so much light and energy that a person simply cannot see structural detail. Such a vision must be similar to standing in a cave for a while and suddenly having someone put a floodlight in your face. You cannot see much in that light. There is also the issue of how mortals see a vision of the Lord. We have been told that a person cannot endure such a vision without the aid of the Holy Ghost (D&C 67:11–12). And Paul reminds us that "the things of God knoweth no man, except he has the Spirit of God" (JST 1 Cor. 2:11).

I think that in dreams and visions the Lord gives us images that are comfortable for us. I read once that a woman had a near-death vision of her uncle, who had drowned while fishing; he appeared in his fishing waders.[2] Does Uncle have to wear fishing waders for eternity? No, he appeared in an image that would be recognizable to his niece. Similarly, the Savior—living outside of time, existing on a different plane, being resurrected—can, I think, make his presence known to us in any way that is needed.

After working my way through the historical accuracy issue, I drew this conclusion: any artist who paints the Savior just needs to build an acceptable generic icon. A picture of the Savior without the beard and a different hairstyle would not be recognized as the Savior. We identify him by certain traditional traits such as shoulder-length hair and forked beard. We can

spot him even in historical paintings that are terribly anachronistic. Flemish masters would often set the Flight into Egypt in the middle of Belgium, with everybody around dressed like burghers, but the Holy Family is still readily identifiable: they have "badges" that say who they are. We rely on those badges. But they have nothing to do with what the Savior does or does not look like.

I have come back around to asking myself how I can use those badges, those symbols, to create an image of Christ that communicates something about the way I feel or that is a painting other people can identify with. It is very hard. I applaud Del Parson for taking it on, because my first reaction is, "Del, you did a great job." I know and respect Del. I think *The Lord Jesus Christ* is a successful painting. Is it my Jesus? No. But I realize that if I were to paint the Savior exactly the way that it would work for me probably two-thirds of the people who would see it would say, "Nice, Jim, but it is not my Jesus." That would happen no matter who the artist is. So artists face an interesting challenge. I once did some sketches of the Savior and showed them to my wife. She said, "I like this one and this one, but I really do not like that one." She said the Savior's face was too round and she did not like the hairdo. I asked her, "What if this sketch was a dead likeness of the man Jesus?" She said, "Well, I just don't think it is." Suddenly, I saw why we do not have a perfectly satisfying picture of what he looked like. We each invent our own image of the Savior, and artists are expected to work within all those invented images.

Many years ago, I had occasion to visit with Elder Boyd K. Packer about a painting I had done for a Deseret Book cover. It was a portrait of Jesus. We discussed various aspects of the painting for a while, and then I said, "You know, Elder Packer, when one is in the presence of one of the Twelve, with a picture like this, it's very tempting to ask, 'How close did I get?'" He smiled, shook his head for a moment, turned to me, and said, "How do you think BYU's basketball team is going to do this year?" The message was there. If, through revelation, an individual does know the Savior, it is a supremely sacred experience, much too personal for conversation.

A few years later, I had the opportunity to visit with President Kimball at his home. I had painted a portrait of him and his wife, and when I brought up the fact that I was working a picture of Christ, we were invited to come to his house with reference material and notes to discuss the painting. My wife and I sat around the kitchen table eating milk and cookies with the prophet and his wife. All the pictures of Jesus I could find were laid out on the table. Sister Kimball had opinions on several of the pictures, but the prophet said nothing. Finally I said, "Look, President, I have been around (I was very young and just thought I had been around) enough to know that we're not going to be given a detailed physical description of the Savior, but if you were going to hang a painting of the Savior in your office,

Courtesy James C. Christensen.

Fig. 1. James C. Christensen (1942–), *The Woman Taken in Adultery*. Acrylic, 18" x 24". A picture can evoke an image of the Savior even when he is not actually in the scene. In *The Woman Taken in Adultery* by James C. Christensen, the rock dropped by the woman's accusers, her meditative mood, and her worshipful pose call to my mind an image of the Savior nearby writing on the ground. The shredded sheet draped around the woman causes me to reflect upon the state of my own soul, tattered by its own forms of sin, and to hear the echo of his decrees: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. . . . Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:7, 11).
—Doris Dant, editor

what would you want that picture to be like?" He took off his glasses and put his face about a foot away from mine and said, "I love people; that's my gift. I truly love people. Can you see anything in my eyes that tells you that I love people? In that picture, I would like to see in the Savior's eyes that he truly loves people. It is not affected; it is not his job. He truly loves all people."

Well, that was an overwhelming challenge for me. I felt his unconditional love, and I think I understood what he said. But to translate that feeling into the eyes of a painting was more than I was capable of. I threw away dozens of subsequent drawings of the Savior and did not do another Christ painting for many years. I did not want to do it until I had the image right. Years later, when I painted *Gethsemane,* I skirted the problem by painting the Savior with his head down.

More recently, within the last couple of years, I said to Elder Packer, "I need to be painting for the Church. What shall I do?" He looked me in the eye, stuck his finger close to my face, and said, "Paint the Savior." I told him the whole President Kimball story and complained, "It's too hard!" He said, "No, it's not. You have the training, the artistic talent, and the sensitivity. You can do it." So I agreed I would—how many hints does a person need? As members of the Church, we always pray, "Lord, tell me what you want me to do." So when the President of the Twelve points his finger at you and says, "Do this!" you do not go home and whine in your prayers, "I need a little better direction."

Since then I have felt the need to again attempt to portray Christ. Probably I will never do a head shot to be hung in the family room. Rather, I want to find moments that reverberate beyond that instant—moments in his life or moments in which he is involved but not physically present: Mary just after the Annunciation or the woman taken in adultery, contemplating what has happened to her and trying to pull her life together (fig. 1). Such times give us something to reflect upon.

I often contemplate what mental image I have of the Savior. When I think about the closeness of his presence during prayers, I am as often as not looking at the smoke detector in the ceiling of my room. I could not give you a police artist–sketch version of what I think he might look like, but I do not doubt that I would recognize him. I know that when I see him I will know who he is.

Gethsemane

Some years ago, I felt drawn to paint the Savior in Gethsemane. Typical paintings of the Atonement look too serene, too much like evening prayer. They are very unsatisfactory for me. On the other hand, I am not a subscriber to crucifixes with bleeding knees and thorns and scrapes and lashes—I do not think we need that. But for me there was no satisfactory painting describing or even alluding to what we believe the Savior experienced in the Garden.

I considered painting the Savior in the most extreme agony. Collapsed, face down, hands in the dirt. Were he to lift up his head, his face would be covered with dust and sweat. But I have not painted that image because he is still our God. It would be unseemly to depict him in an undignified way—even if that image might be historically or pictorially accurate.

So I looked for a balance: showing the agony and passion and yet being careful to not portray Christ in an undignified, disrespectful way. I found a clue in Luke 22:43: "And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him." That passage resonated with me. I considered the idea of the angel strengthening him by giving him a blessing. In subsequent

reading, I found that Elder Bruce R. McConkie suggested that the angel could be Adam.[3] In a beautiful symmetry, the two gardens come together. Both beings are present in both gardens. Adam helped bring about the Fall; Jesus saves us from it: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22).

In *Gethsemane* I hoped to capture Christ's burden and agony in a way that people could see and feel to some degree (see the cover of this issue). The light comes across his back, so we see these broad shoulders being pressed down with the weight of our sins. His face is in shadow. His hair is wet from sweat or blood and is messy, not coifed. He has sunk to his knees, not arranged himself in a formal manner of prayer. I have tried to capture a meaningful gesture, but it was not an accident that I picked a moment where his hands go to his face. In a sense, with so much of the Savior's face hidden, the viewers can create and identify with "their" Jesus.

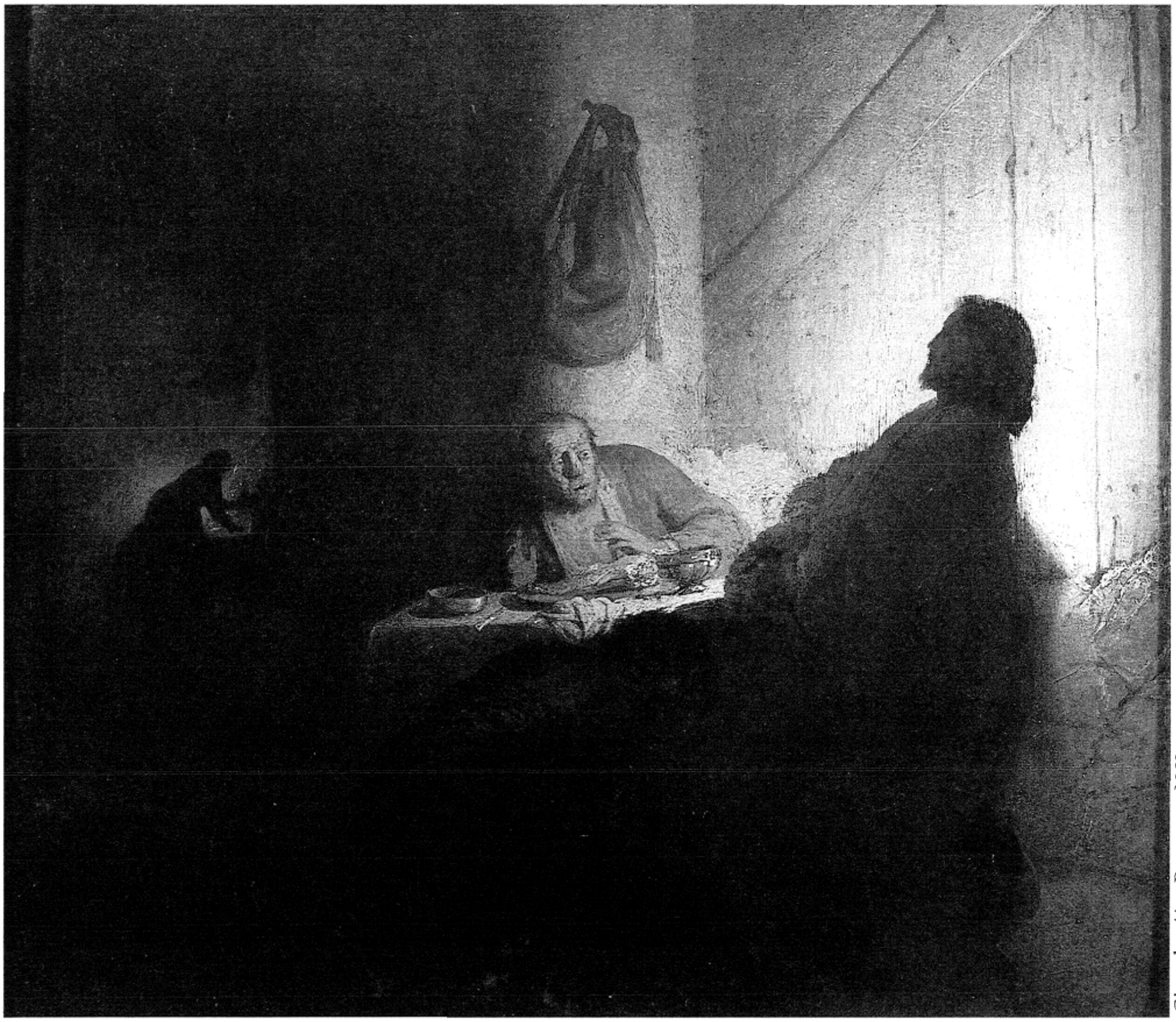
Favorite Images: Strength and Power

Some of my favorite images of Christ are the Carl Bloch paintings.[4] (See plates 2 and 3 in "Images of Christ," this issue.) They are stylized, but as a painter, I like the way he puts the images together. I like the strength of the light and dark in his pieces. The paintings have drama without becoming melodramatic. Bloch's work fills the niche better for me than any of the other popular pieces, which I have always felt are too soft. I remember seeing a lot of watercolors of Christ when I was a child; even then I did not like them. I did not know the word *insipid* then, but that is what I thought about them. They just did not have any strength.

Another of my favorite paintings of the Savior is *Supper at Emmaus* by Rembrandt (fig. 2). Rembrandt seizes the moment when the two men who are dining with him go, "Aha!"—that instant before the Savior vanishes (Luke 24:31). It is incredible timing—catching the disciples looking so startled. A light is behind the Savior, showing him with a strong profile but with no detail in that profile. Christ is there in the picture, but Rembrandt did not deal with the issue of a "true" image. There is nothing in this image of Christ about which I can say, "I don't like that very much," "His face is too thin," or, "His eyes are the wrong color." It is a powerful image.

As for a crucifixion painting, I tend to judge on the basis of the image and the moment rather than by a body of work. Velasquez's painting of the Crucifixion, with a simple, stark black background, is an incredibly evocative image. Some of Caravaggio's work is very powerful.

I tend to prefer healthy, masculine figures. I never have liked the image of Christ as the man of sorrows, the victim, the passive, effeminate man. Art went through a Gothic period, where people had to be emaciated because to celebrate the human body was blasphemous. But today we



Giraudon/Art Resource, N.Y.

FIG. 2. *Supper at Emmaus,* by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69). Paper on panel, 15 ¼" x 16 ⅜". Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André.

believe the physical body is very important, so I imagine Jesus as he grew up in the house of his father: I think he was physically in shape. He worked with his hands; he walked a lot. But more importantly, his quiet inner strength ought to be obvious in his physical likeness.

Acceptability: Determining a Course

Some of us deal constantly with an interesting compromise between doing what is acceptable and marketable and doing what is true to our own vision. Having the inevitable ego of the artist and trying to work with a committee who must consider the worldwide implications of every image can be difficult. I can paint a beardless, short-haired Christ and simply shake my fist and say, "I'm as right about the image as you are"—but not have the painting published. Or I can take up the gauntlet and work on a solution. If I totally opt out of the struggle, the committee will find someone else. But I will miss a chance to learn how to better serve the Church through my art.

My tendency has been to say, "Let me paint something. If it turns out to be something you want to use, you can have it. Anything I have is yours to use. But let me paint it, and then you decide if you want it." Some pieces that have worked for me would not be acceptable to a Church selection committee, so I do not submit them. That is all right with me. Now, I would never paint anything that I felt was beneath me or contrary to my religious feelings. But sometimes I may do a painting that is too personal or enough out of the mainstream that the Church would not use it. I am okay with that. But maybe once in a while I can paint a *Gethsemane* or something else that will cause a committee to say, "Wow! This is something we can use." This approach has worked pretty successfully for me; it allows me to be comfortable with myself and with the day-to-day administration of the Church.

Sometimes one of my pieces is a response to an epiphany—my own revelation—or my need to find answers. *Gethsemane* came out of my effort to understand the Atonement. I do not know if I understand it any better than I did before, but at least I feel that visually I have addressed some ideas that are important for me. If I can address a moment conceptually in a way that engages people, moves people, communicates something of what I am thinking, then I am willing to tackle it. But the image must say something better for me than whatever else is out there, or there is no reason for me to do it.

Conclusion

Ultimately, artists must come to terms with the limitations of mortal understanding. Our finite minds and senses do not have the ability to begin

to comprehend the eternal realm of God. Because of those limitations, the best any artist can create is a dim shadow of a glorious reality. Imagine trying to paint this description of the Savior:

> And it came to pass that Jesus blessed them as they did pray unto him; and his countenance did smile upon them, and the light of his countenance did shine upon them, and behold they were as white as the countenance and also the garments of Jesus; and behold the whiteness thereof did exceed all the whiteness, yea, even there could be nothing upon earth so white as the whiteness thereof. (3 Ne. 19:25)

Nephi specifically points out there is no earthly means to capture this scene and others like it. But that does not keep us from trying. Once in a while, we get close enough to the reality that we can spiritually touch someone. As an artist, that is the highest achievement I can aspire to.

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1. Gary Ernest Smith, "Christ's Likeness," copy in possession of BYU Studies.

2. There are many similar accounts. For one example, see Helen Hinckley Jones, "Sammie—Gift of God," *Ensign* 20 (October 1990): 65.

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah,* 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979–81), 4:125.

4. At least six of Bloch's paintings were published by the *Improvement Era* from 1957 to 1958: *The Wedding at Cana* (February 1957), *Jesus Cleansing the Temple* (March 1957), *Jesus with the Multitudes* (Sermon on the Mount; August 1957), *Healing of the Blind Man* (September 1957), *The Last Supper* (February 1958), and *Mary's Visit to Elisabeth* (cover, May 1958).