

Minerva Teichert: Pageants in Paint.

BYU Museum of Art Exhibit, July 27, 2007 to May 26, 2008

Reviewed by Richard G. Oman

Minerva Teichert's life reads like a cross between pioneer mother, Horatio Alger, Relief Society president, Annie Oakley, theologian, historian, social commentator, civic activist, student, and feminist. As such, it is not hard to figure out why she has become almost iconic as a human being, a woman, and a role model among the Mormon people. She is one-stop shopping for the Mormon Wonder Woman.

But what about her art? Over the last thirty years, her work has become increasingly familiar to her Mormon audience through Church publications, exhibitions at the Museum of Church History and Art and the BYU Museum of Art, as well as through film and a series of books.

Marian Wardle, the curator of BYU's exhibition (and granddaughter of the artist), laid out a framework in a 2007–2008 exhibit that helps us better see and understand Teichert's art. Like her art, this framework is a combination of formal aesthetics and didactic communication.

Wardle's basic thesis is that Teichert's artistic framework revolves around two organizing elements: pageants and murals. These in turn are broken down to help visitors understand how the artist uses gestures and poses, tableaux, processions, and dance and music in the creation of these pageant-like murals. Each of these components is carefully explained through images and text. The Teichert exhibit helped visitors understand the philosophical and aesthetic relationships between a Teichert mural and, for instance, the Hill Cumorah Pageant. Her murals become frozen pageants. The linkage is fascinating.

Murals are created to go on walls, usually large walls. In fact, they are designed to become part of the wall. Artists create this effect in two ways: first, a mural's depth of field is usually shallow, more like a procession across a stage, or a carefully posed group; and second, a mural often becomes part of the wall by avoiding the use of traditional frames. This is why Teichert often uses painted borders instead of frames.

Generally, most murals are quite large. They are usually designed for grand, public spaces. Teichert, however, uses mural techniques even for much smaller paintings that would never be “real” murals. So what was driving her toward this passion for murals? As a student of Teichert’s work for over thirty years, I think the answer lies in her passion to communicate and entertain. She used to say, “When the story is told, the picture is finished.” Another phrase she used was, “I paint so that those who run may read.” She really wanted her art to quickly and clearly connect with the public. Even her visually striking painted borders play an interpretive and clarifying role. For example, in one mural she depicts Indian women preserving food while the border depicts squirrels putting away nuts for the winter.

Why does Teichert’s art matter to us today? One of the roles of history is to give us perspective on our own time. There are strong contemporary strains that say art should be private not public, obscure rather than clear, tragic rather than celebratory. The public as a whole is not seen as a legitimate audience. When and if artists are public about their messages, they should play the role of society’s critic rather than champion traditional values and history. Artists are encouraged to follow these paths if they want to be seen as the creators of “serious art.” Teichert’s art shows us an alternative way of thinking about art. She also shows us that clarity, celebration, and sometimes even downright didacticism need not compromise quality and significance.

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