Figure 1. Final painting: Mary Whitmer and Moroni, Earliest of the June 1829 Witnesses, Love’s Labors Blessed, by Robert T. Pack (2017), oil on copper ACM panel, 32” × 26”.
Mary Whitmer and Moroni
Experiences of an Artist in Creating a Historical Painting

Robert T. Pack

In June 1829, the Peter Whitmer family welcomed Joseph and Emma Smith and Oliver Cowdery to board at their home in Fayette, New York. They had been brought up from Pennsylvania so that Joseph and Oliver could continue the translation and dictation of the Book of Mormon from the golden plates without persecution. The Whitmer family was then living in a small rural log home bursting at the seams with their large family. These three new visitors placed an additional burden upon the mother, Mary Whitmer, who was responsible for their care. Shortly after their arrival, a “strange person” visited her in her garden, showed her a bundle of plates, after which he told her to be patient and faithful in bearing her burdens a little longer—promising that she should be blessed. I will first relate the details of this story as told by Mary Whitmer to her family members over the years, and then share my experiences in creating a historical painting documenting the event.

In August 2017, Kirk Magleby of Book of Mormon Central commissioned me to paint a picture of the moment Mary Whitmer witnessed the golden plates at the Whitmer farm in Fayette, New York, in 1829. He offered to send me to New York and Pennsylvania to document places and circumstances associated with the story. The painting would eventually be unveiled at the FAIRMormon conference in 2018 in honor of the literary achievements of Lynne Hilton Wilson. This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create a historical painting gave me virtually all the resources available that an artist could conceivably want. The result is a painting entitled Mary Whitmer and Moroni, Earliest of the June 1829 Witnesses, Love’s Labors Blessed, featured on the cover of BYU Studies Quarterly 57, no. 4 (fig. 1).
A Compelling Story

Besides Joseph Smith, twelve people viewed the golden plates directly: the Three Witnesses, the Eight Witnesses, and Mary Musselman Whitmer. Of these twelve, five were Mary’s sons and two were her sons-in-law. Others were men of the Smith family and Martin Harris. As far as we know, Mary was the first person besides Joseph and was the only woman to see the plates. She was also one of only five people who were shown the plates by Moroni (Joseph and the Three Witnesses being the others).

Our knowledge of Mary Whitmer’s experience comes mainly from an interview with her son David, recorded forty-nine years following the event. In 1878, Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith were called on a history fact-finding mission to Church historical sites in the Midwest and New England. On their way, they visited Richmond, Missouri, to interview David. By that time, he had been separated from the Church for many years. Joseph F. Smith described David as “a good-sized man, 73 years of age last January, and well preserved. . . . He has a large head and a very pleasant manly countenance that one would readily perceive to be an index to a conscientious, honest heart.” David told the story of what happened during the first week of June 1829:

Joseph sent for me (D. W.) to come to Harmony to get him and Oliver and bring them to my father’s house. I did not know what to do, I was pressed with my work. I had some 20 acres to plow, so I concluded I would finish plowing and then go, I got up one morning to go to work as usual, and on going to the field, found between 5 and 7 acres of my ground had been plowed during the night.

I don’t know who did it; but it was done just as I would have done it myself, and the plow was left standing in the furrow.

This enabled me to start sooner. . . . When I was returning to Fayette with Joseph and Oliver all of us riding in the wagon, Oliver and I on an oldfashioned wooden spring seat and Joseph behind us, while traveling along in a clear open place, a very pleasant, nice-looking old

1. Others, including Emma Smith, Lucy Mack Smith, and Katharine Smith, saw the plates indirectly, with the plates wrapped in cloth, for instance.
man suddenly appeared by the side of our wagon who saluted us with, “good morning, it is very warm,” at the same time wiping his face or forehead with his hand. We returned the salutation, and by a sign from Joseph I invited him to ride if he was going our way. But he said very pleasantly, “No, I am going to Cumorah.” This name was something new to me, I did not know what Cumorah meant. We all gazed at him and at each other, and as I looked round enquiringly of Joseph the old man instantly disappeared, so that I did not see him again.

J. F. S. [Joseph F. Smith] – Did you notice his appearance?

D. W. [David Whitmer] – I should think I did, he was, I should think, about 5 feet 8 or 9 inches tall and heavy set, about such a man as James Vancleave there, but heavier, his face was as large, he was dressed in a suit of brown woolen clothes, his hair and beard were white like Brother Pratt’s, but his beard was not so heavy. I also remember that he had on his back a sort of knapsack with something in, shaped like a book. It was the messenger who had the plates, who had taken them from Joseph just prior to our starting from Harmony. Soon after our arrival home, I saw something which led me to the belief that the plates were placed or concealed in my father’s barn. I frankly asked Joseph if my supposition was right, and he told me it was. Sometime after this, my mother was going to milk the cows, when she was met out near the yard by the same old man (judging by her description of him) who said to her, “You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tried because of the increase of your toil, it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened?” Thereupon he showed her the plates. My father and mother had a large family of their own, the addition to it therefore of Joseph, his wife Emma and Oliver very greatly increased the toil and anxiety of my mother. And although she had never complained she had sometimes felt that her labor was too much, or at least she was perhaps beginning to feel so. This circumstance, however, completely removed all such feelings, and nerved her up for her increased responsibilities.

5. James Vancleave, a newspaperman from Chicago, was among several people present during the interview at David’s request.

6. “Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith,” 2. Citations of this 1878 newspaper article have created three oft-repeated errors. The report was printed on November 27, 1878, not November 16. The newspaper states that Moroni said to Mary Whitmer, “You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tried because of the increase of your toil, it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened?” “Tried” has been incorrectly reported as “tired,” and the question mark has been omitted.
Further accounts of Moroni’s interaction with Mary Whitmer are given by her grandson John C. Whitmer (son of John Whitmer) and adopted granddaughter Elvira P. Mills (daughter of Christian Whitmer by marriage). John reports that he was told by Grandmother Whitmer that the encounter happened in the evening, on Mary’s way to milk the cows and that Moroni was “carrying something on his back that looked like a knapsack.” He then untied the knapsack and showed her the plates by turning the leaves of the plates over, leaf after leaf, showing her the engravings upon them. Elvira reports that Grandmother Whitmer told her the event happened at daybreak and she had two full buckets of milk in her hands. The description of the man is the same as David’s: “a short, heavy-set, gray-haired man carrying a package.” Otherwise, the three accounts are substantially the same.

**Recreating the Moment**

Kirk Magleby and John (Jack) Welch met with me at the beginning of this project to discuss how to recreate the moment. We agreed that viewers needed to feel a ponderous presence of the plates in the painting, echoed by Mary’s expression of interest. Mary’s face would be mostly visible, but not Moroni’s face; he would be turned sideways, looking back or upward. The painting would be centered on the two individuals, with the backdrop playing a secondary role. The following considerations came from this central goal.

Mother Whitmer and Moroni were the only ones present. The visit happened somewhere between the Whitmer house and barn. It was either early or late in the day, when the sun would have been near the horizon. Cows were present; a field nearby would have been newly plowed with nothing growing yet; plants and flowers in the yard would be those present in early June. The look of the clothing, barn, house, and other objects would be consistent with the Whitmers’ cultural background and local norms for that time period.

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What did Mary look like? There are no known photographs of her. I searched for likenesses and descriptions of Mary’s children. A photo of her daughter Catherine exists, but its quality is so poor it is unusable. The only image of Elizabeth Ann is a painting of her when she was in her twenties. The best photographs of her sons are of David and John (figs. 2, 3). Their faces exhibit intense deep-set eyes, seamed cheeks, a high forehead, a somewhat long nose, and thin lips.

We found a model for Mary Whitmer whose visage is similar to the photographs (fig. 4). The model and her husband emigrated from Russia in 2016 and now live in the Salt Lake Valley. Interestingly, the model has had life experiences similar to those of Mary Whitmer.
They were among the early Church members in St. Petersburg, and their home was frequently used as an overnight accommodation for Russian Church members traveling to the Stockholm and Helsinki temples, and her work as a hostess was often difficult. While working on this project, she expressed a heartfelt empathy for how Mary Whitmer would have felt. We shot dozens of photos and selected one as reference for the painting that captured her with an expression of fatigue, wonderment, and awe while gazing at the plates.

Moroni is described by David Whitmer as about “5 feet 8 or 9 inches tall and heavy set, . . . his hair and beard were white like Brother Pratt’s, but his beard was not so heavy.” With no description of his facial likeness, we felt it best to turn Moroni’s face somewhat away from the viewer. The profile view somewhat obscures the model’s likeness and leaves the viewer to fill in the details. Doing so invites the viewer to be involved in the scene. Rembrandt van Rijn used this technique in painting Christ: “He would often place the eyes and the corners of the mouth in shadow, thereby forcing viewers to fill in what is in the shadow, to bring everything they know about Christ to the image. . . . Rembrandt understood that sometimes less detail is more spiritual power.” A side benefit of this approach is that it gave me more latitude in choosing a model.

The model chosen for Moroni has strong, chiseled facial features, a kindly visage, and intent eyes. He has white hair but no beard. David Whitmer said Moroni’s beard was not as heavy as Orson Pratt’s beard, and I consulted a photo of Orson Pratt taken by Charles W. Carter within a year or two the interview and painted in a thinner beard.

In order to dress Mary in appropriate clothing, we researched her cultural roots. She was born in Germany on August 27, 1778. In Pennsylvania, she married Peter Whitmer, and they had eight children.

11. The model for Moroni is actually the husband of the model for Mary and is also from Russia.
In 1829, the family included Peter Sr., age 56; Mary, age 51; Christian, age 31; Jacob, age 29; John, age 27; David, age 24 (same age as Joseph Smith Jr.); Catherine, age 22 (who had married Hiram Page four years earlier); Peter Jr., age 20; and Elizabeth Ann, age 14 (future wife of Oliver Cowdery). One child, Nancy, died in infancy. Mary at 51 years old had already outlived her life expectancy, which at that era was about 40 years. Mary’s family knew her as “Mother Whitmer.” The family had lived in Fayette Township, New York, for two decades when they extended their hospitality to Joseph Smith. The citizens of the township were principally of German extraction who had previously lived in Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania community included Mennonites, Amish, German Baptist Brethren, Lutheran, and German Reformed Church congregations. The Whitmers worshipped regularly at the early log structure of Zion’s Church, a German Reformed congregation whose site was about a mile south of the Whitmer farm. Having been born in Germany, Mary emigrated to the Lancaster area of Pennsylvania by 1797, at which time she married Peter Whitmer. The Musselman family name in this region is strongly associated with a Mennonite cultural heritage. Though Mary had these roots, apparently her heritage was not strictly Mennonite. Her manner of dress at the time may have had German influence, but the simple styles of the commoner in the eighteenth century were remarkably similar over a wide area of Europe: women wore a day cap, kerchief, apron, jacket bodice, petticoat, and long skirt. This combination was called a “short gown.”

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20. Mark L. Staker, senior researcher, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, personal communication with author.
neutral colors were common, originating from the use of readily available natural dyes such as butternut. I selected this style for Mary’s apron, jacket, and skirt. I decided to have Mary wear the kerchief tucked at the waist rather than tied in the middle; this style was considered a conservative arrangement of the kerchief. A white day cap and a straw sunbonnet is also period appropriate. Because the event occurred during the early morning or late evening, Mary would not have needed a sunbonnet, and so that item does not appear in the painting.

All we know about Moroni’s clothing was that he wore a brown woolen suit. We also know that he wiped his forehead and declared it was very warm. Given that the season was early summer, it seems likely that the suit would be relatively thin. I depicted Moroni wearing a somewhat disheveled, field-worn jacket befitting a long hike, carrying a knapsack containing golden plates weighing about sixty pounds. He is wearing square-toed shoes and a preacher’s hat that are period appropriate. I considered other popular hat styles such as a straw hat or felt top hat, but for aesthetic reasons I chose the preacher’s hat. The knapsack sitting at his feet is a sturdy leather one that could hold a sixty-pound object.

No remnant or history of the barn at the Whitmer farm exists. We do know that it had to be suitable for dairy cows. Given the time period and relative poverty of the region, the barn was likely not painted. During the visit to New York, I photographed various barns in the Fayette area and selected one barn for the scene. This selected barn was painted red, but I opted to portray it with grey, weather-beaten wood. I researched what the milk pails would have looked like and found that they had straight sides.

I imagine that Mother Whitmer was walking through the garden area between the farmhouse and the barn when Moroni appeared. In early June, any vegetables or flowers planted in her garden would have been in beginning stages of growth, and since the fields had just been plowed and planted, they would have still appeared brown. Some species of early flowing plants were likely in full bloom at the time. I searched through several online databases that predict where and during what season different native species of New York wildflowers bloom.

considerable review, I decided to include pink Carolina wild rose bushes and blue forget-me-not flowers in the scene.

I visited the Whitmer farm in September 2017 to take reference photography. Since the event happened in the early morning or late in the day, I went during sunrise and sunset in order to capture the light and atmosphere. I documented the look of the native brush and forests at that time of day. From the dozens of photos I took, I selected elements of trees, fields, shrubs, and branches. Unfortunately, I could not visit the farm in early June, which would have been ideal, so I tried to envision how the shrubs and trees might have looked before a full summer of growth.

The golden plates carried in Moroni’s knapsack are a central part of the scene. I endeavored to portray them with the proper size, shape, weight, color, and patina. The following characteristics are based on research by Kirk B. Henrichsen.25 By the consensus of many witnesses who saw, hefted, moved, or manipulated the plates, we know that the plates were about eight inches wide, six inches long, and about six inches thick. They had three rings so that the pages could be turned over one by one; they weighed about sixty pounds; a half to about two-thirds of the plates were sealed; and the characters were small and beautifully engraved. There also exists a scholarly consensus that the plates were made from a copper-gold alloy.26 We know this alloy has the same density as that calculated from the known volume and weight of the plates.27 A testimony by William Smith, Joseph’s brother, directly states they were made of copper and gold.28 Ancient craftsmen knew how to remove the copper component of the alloy from the surface of plate through a chemical process, leaving a thin layer of pure gold on the surface. If there is any remaining copper, a rose hue appears in the gold, which could eventually tarnish, thereby dulling the sheen of gold with a greenish patina. I decided to color the plates this way in the painting.

It was important to the painting to have Moroni assume a posture that would support the sixty-pound weight of the plates. I posed the model holding a fifty-pound steel weight with a handle and photographed him (fig. 5). Then I removed the weight and had the model hold a replica set of golden plates (fig. 6). The replica plates were made of gilded brass with hand engravings.\(^{29}\)

**Proceeding with the Painting**

Once we selected models and rented or purchased clothing and props, I posed the costumed models as I wished them to appear in the painting. I took dozens of photos, trying various postures, arrangements, and angles, and settled on a few of them.

The next step was to create alternative compositions using arrangements of individual elements from various photographs. I employed computer manipulation using Photoshop software, but I also created

\(^{29}\) See James Spens, *Sacred Objects: Take Care of These Sacred Things* (CreateSpace, 2016), cover art. James Spens created and engraved the replica of the golden plates shown on the cover. He kindly loaned the replica to me for this art project.
my own thumbnail sketches. Though a lot can be done on a computer, thumbnail sketches are essential to analyzing alternative forms, tone, and color. This work must be done at the early stages in order to work out any problems before being committed to the full-scale painting. Figure 7 shows the thumbnail sketch that I finally chose as the reference for the painting. It shows Mother Whitmer and Moroni focused on the plates while sitting on the edge of a workbench. A pail of milk is set down next to the path Mary had been walking on. One can see a milk cow looking out of the barn where Mary had just milked her. I decided to depict a morning scene because of the dew-laden misty atmosphere at a time when most of the path is in shadow with dappled light. The shadowed area provides overall contrast to the misty light off in the distance to the upper right. A freshly plowed field lies in the background. An axe is leaning against the bench since this is likely where axe-sharpening and other work-related activities would have taken place. Eventually, I chose to place the knapsack where this axe was. Even though the sketch is relatively rough and approximate, when seen from a distance it still gives the same impression as the final painting. If the sketch does not look good at this stage, the final painting will never look any better.

I overlaid a spiral line on the sketch. This is akin to the golden spiral used by the old master artists in many of their paintings. The sketch was built around this spiral geometry in order to lead the eye to a focus. In this case, the eye is led from the bottom right corner of the painting, over to the left edge, then up and around to the visage of Moroni. From there, the eye is directed down to the plates, then up to Mary's face. The triangular arrangement of the two faces and the plates holds the eye in this area. The golden plates were painted to stand out against a dark
background to make it a focus of attention. The eye tends to be drawn to the areas on the painting with the highest contrast. Even though the sketch was black and white, the colors were planned to be relatively muted except for the golden plates. As with high contrast, this strong color draws attention to the plates, which are the ultimate focus at the center of the painting. Finally, I added flowers, arranged to provide a needed touch of color.

The next step was to transfer the sketch to a thirty-two-inch-tall by twenty-six-inch-wide panel using a graphite pencil. I chose a copper ACM panel because the metallic copper sheen provides a wonderful undertone to the painting.\(^{30}\) The copper is first sanded to provide enough tooth in the texture to accept graphite and paint. Sanding also helps the paint adhere for a long duration. I used oil paint based on linseed and walnut oil. No paint mediums, driers, or retouch varnish were used because these sometimes shorten a painting’s lifespan.\(^ {31}\) Material is an important consideration when creating historical paintings that one hopes will endure for as long as possible.

I applied the paint in thin layers, starting with an underpainting that fixes the values of lightness and dark. Fine hair brushes are used on the smooth copper so that the underlying copper sometimes shows through. This technique is particularly nice for facial features that tend to have a copper tint. Each layer typically dries within a day or two. Each subsequent layer is usually a refinement or correction of the previous one and proceeds in a variety of ways. One part of the painting might have one or two layers, while another might have a dozen. A certain amount of refinement takes place in the process. However, there is a risk of carrying a painting too far, so I wanted a certain amount of “impressionism,” particularly in the backdrop. Even with multiple layers, rarely are brush strokes obvious because of the way the paint is applied to the smooth copper surface. When viewers observe the finished painting

\(^{30}\) ACM stands for aluminum composite material. Because ACM is manufactured for outdoor signs, it is much more durable than canvas and provides a stable, long-lasting support to the paint.

Danish artist Carl Bloch has many wonderful paintings on copper. I adopted the use of copper as a result of studying his work at the Sacred Gifts exhibition, BYU Museum of Art, 2013–14. His work is in immaculate condition after almost 150 years.

\(^{31}\) Art conservators have found that varnishes, mediums, and driers used in oil paintings have caused a variety of problems with longevity and quality in old master paintings over the centuries.
at various angles to the light, they can see some of the sheen from the underlying copper. Figure 1 shows the final result of this effort.

In the end, the goal was not to draw attention to my style or technique, but to draw the viewer into the story, transporting them to another time and place. I hope viewers will perhaps feel in their souls the miracle of this moment that happened so long ago.

Finally, I thank those who played an important role in this effort, including Kirk Magleby, Jack Welch, Lynne Hilton Wilson, Mark Staker, James Spens, Larissa Vaselova, Victor Vaselov, Sonja Harris, and my wife, Lorri. Thanks also go to the several full-time missionaries I met when visiting the historical sites and visitors’ centers of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in New York and Pennsylvania in fall 2017. Their personal testimonies regarding the truth of this miraculous event inspired and propelled me forward with this work.

Robert T. Pack is a former engineering professor, Utah State University, Logan. He retired early in 2013 to take up full-time landscape and historical painting. His recent works include Emma as Scribe, which depicts Emma Smith working at the kitchen table on the translation of the Book of Mormon with her husband, Joseph; and Chiasmus, John W. Welch Meets Paul Gaechter, depicting Elder Welch as a young missionary meeting the Catholic scholar responsible for his introduction to, and discovery of, chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. Robert is married to Lorri Tondevold and has six children and two grandchildren.