

The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation

By John W. Welch and Jeannie Welch;

Artwork by Jorge Cocco Satangelo

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Reviewed by Micah Christensen



The Parables of Jesus (c. 2018), Jorge Cocco Santangelo (b. 1936, Argentina)

It has been just over fifty years since then Elder Spencer W. Kimball gave his address titled “The Gospel Vision of the Arts,”¹ raising the possibility of having a “Michelangelo” of the Restoration. Ever since,

1. See Spencer W. Kimball, “The Gospel Vision of the Arts,” *Ensign* 7 (July 1977): 2–5, which was adapted from Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity” (speech, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, September 12, 1967), https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball_education-eternity/, reprinted in

many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been looking for their version of a Sistine Chapel. Yet, what if the highest expression of Church art is not a monumental fresco or statue but, instead, an intimate combination of sacred text and art—a Book of Hours for the Restoration? This radical concept is tested in a new book combining an exegesis of Christ’s parables by John and Jeannie Welch and purpose-made artwork by Jorge Cocco Santangelo.

The religious scholar John W. Welch is well known to BYU Studies readers and the Church at large. Through many published works and his discovery of chiasmus—an ancient poetic structure found in prophetic writings—Welch has consistently deepened Latter-day Saints’ understanding of scripture. In *The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation*, Welch and his wife, Jeannie, map their own personal experiences and scriptural insights onto Christ’s parables. These are paired with works made for the book by the artist Jorge Cocco Santangelo.

Jorge Cocco Santangelo is lesser known to members of the Church but well celebrated in his own sphere. Cocco Santangelo was born in Argentina, where he achieved national recognition for his art. He moved to Buenos Aires in the 1960s, to Spain in 1976, and to Mexico City in 1983. In all these places, he established a career and considerable reputation through exhibitions and contests. Throughout this fifty-plus-year career, with more than thirty one-man shows, Cocco’s work has been mostly abstract. It was not until the mid-2000s, while in his seventies, that Cocco began publicly exhibiting religious paintings.

The collaboration between Cocco Santangelo and the Welches fits squarely into a tradition of popular publishing that took off at the end of the nineteenth century. Artists like Gustave Doré (French, 1832–83), James Tissot (French, 1836–1902), and Heinrich Hofmann (German, 1824–1911) had their works reproduced millions of times in Bibles, books of prayer, and scriptural commentaries during a time marked by the emergence of religious revivalism, literacy, and mass-printing technology. As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we are still beneficiaries of the glut of images created during that time. In our first publications with visuals—the *Young Woman’s Journal* (1889–1929), *Improvement Era* (1897–1970), *Juvenile Instructor* (1901–29), and *Children’s Friend* (1902–70)—we used black-and-white photogravures by Hofmann and illustrations by Carl Bloch (Danish, 1834–90),



The Woman at the Well (2017), Jorge Cocco Santangelo

first taken from mass-publication sources before we eventually found our way to reproducing the original oils.

Like these nineteenth-century artists, Cocco Santangelo is tackling subjects that have been depicted over hundreds of years by thousands of artists. The likelihood that even the most talented artist could offer a completely new approach and lexicon is unlikely. And, for the most part, Cocco Santangelo sticks to well-established, familiar scenes.

The woman at the well is one of the most oft-depicted subjects in the Latter-day Saint artist community—though the depictions are often borrowed from other religious traditions. Cocco’s version is immediately recognizable to anyone even vaguely familiar with the subject. Christ is on the left of a well, surrounded in blue light, and a woman is walking toward him out of dark wood and holding an empty water vessel. What makes Cocco’s approach unique is the breaking of the work into lines and geometric shapes, a style he refers to as “sacrocubism.”

Sacrocubism is obviously related to the well-known cubist movement, whose heyday lasted only about ten years, from 1907 to 1918. When cubism was first introduced by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, it was a radical attempt to push the limits of what is visible on a two-dimensional surface. (Although the style is now more than one hundred years old, it



The Forgiven but Unforgiving Servant (2017), Jorge Cocco Santangelo

still feels radical.) Art historians distinguish synthetic cubism, which is abstract to the point of rendering a subject unrecognizable, from analytic cubism, which breaks recognizable figures into shapes and colors. Cocco's work fits squarely—pun intended—into the analytic tradition.

Using this style, Cocco is able to exert more control on viewers, drawing their eyes with overt lines that are carefully calculated in most narrative paintings and communicated through glances, gestures, and other design elements. Cocco's approach also appeals to Latter-day Saint affinities for symbolic geometry—squares, plumb lines, and vectors that relate to sacred rites.

This approach works particularly well for his composition of *The Forgiven but Unforgiving Servant*, a story seldom represented in visual art. From left to right, we first see the master forgive the debts of his servant, only to then see that same servant deal harshly with his subordinate. These figures and actions are emphasized through the use of gesture and lines that lead us through the narrative.

While the style of these paintings is effective and intriguing, what is perhaps most interesting about these works is their use as illustrations



The House upon the Rock (2017), Jorge Cocco Santangelo

for the accompanying commentary. For several years, I was my ward's Primary chorister, always on the lookout for new and compelling imagery to help teach a story and gain short attention spans. I challenge any member of the Church who attended Primary to look at *The House upon the Rock* and not hear the familiar Primary melody and act out the hand motions. And this goes to my larger point: Latter-day Saints consume fine art as illustrations.

Whereas the ordinances of other religions are accompanied by imagery—altarpieces, rich carvings, and colorful textiles—that become a focal point for votive offerings, communions, and prayers, as Latter-day Saints, we do not use art for sacral purposes. For the Brigham Young University Museum of Art's 2013 exhibition *Sacred Gifts*, the museum went to extraordinary efforts to recreate the original settings of paintings by Carl Bloch, a Lutheran. Visitors were often surprised to see that works they had previously seen only as manual-sized illustrations were actually life sized, surrounded by altars and candles.

In our ordinances, words, not images, are the focus. We repeat words with great accuracy. In most meetinghouses, there are more chalkboards

than paintings. (As I write this, I am in my own stake center, built in 2015. The pulpit for the speaker is central, and the only altar is pressed against the right wall. The only decorative pieces are two niches at the back of the chapel, populated with silk flowers in baluster vases.) The most sacred spaces of our most sacred buildings—celestial rooms—deliberately depict no images at all. In this sense Latter-day Saints are iconoclastic. We deliberately remove images from our most sacred spaces. We make an exception for images, however, when they support text.

This is not the first time John W. Welch has ventured into the art world. His book *The Book of Mormon Paintings of Minerva Teichert*, coauthored with Doris Dant, was arguably responsible for the reassessment of a once-forgotten master who is now relatively well known in the Church.² This development, long after Teichert's death, is a significant insight into the fact that Latter-day Saints consume fine art as illustration.

Teichert, who studied at the prestigious Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Students' League of New York, was among the most accomplished and prolific artists in Church history. Despite having created more than three hundred large-scale paintings on the Book of Mormon—arguably the most ambitious Latter-day Saint painter to date—Teichert died without the Church at large accepting her oeuvre. Though the vast majority of Minerva Teichert's monumental paintings were meant to be seen as original works in physical space, it was not until the works were seen as illustrations that they were reappraised.

We can fight against this tendency in our people, or we can learn to embrace it. In the case of *The Parables of Jesus*, we see a sincere and remarkable collaboration of three figures who have worked years to hone their respective arsenals. Like Teichert, Cocco Santangelo's work will be seen as reproductions, but this time by design.

Micah Christensen received his PhD in the history of art from University College London and his master's in fine and decorative art from Sotheby's Institute in London. He is a cofounder of the Zion Art Society (zionartsociety.org) and host of the Zion Art podcast.

2. John W. Welch and Doris Dant, *The Book of Mormon Paintings of Minerva Teichert* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1997).