

## **“We Seek After These Things” An introduction to a study of the arts**

As you begin your formal education at Brigham Young University Idaho there are probably many questions running through your mind concerning the classes you take. It's probably easy to understand why many of the “Foundations” classes are required. Writing is important to people in every walk of life. We will use quantitative reasoning in many settings from the kitchen to the business ledger. The US Constitution and the tradition of rule of law have had a tremendous influence on nations well beyond the borders of the United States. In our technology driven world we are bombarded with science and pseudo-science- we really need to be able to tell them apart. As travel and communication have become easier, an understanding of other cultures can make us better equipped to deal with the people we meet in business, in church or on the street. But why the arts? Why would the Church Board of Education mandate that sacred tithing funds be used to offer classes for every BYUI student in the *fine arts*? Many of the answers to this question are found in the scriptures.

In Doctrine and Covenants Section 88 we read: *78 Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand;*

*79 Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms—*

*80 That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you.*



It's obviously very easy to recognize things in those verses about science, history, government, etc.- **where's the art?**

Consider this statement from 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar John Ruskin: *Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three the only trustworthy one is the last.*

This helps to explain a part of the issue- it allows us to explore “the perplexities of nations,” but the need for us to study the arts goes beyond this.

In an interview, President Gordon B. Hinckley said that the humanities, "gives an aspect of living that is essential. You need technology. You need the professions. You need all of those things, but we need the heart also, and the humanities speak to the heart, men's aspirations for the good and the beautiful." -**LDS Church News**

**March 19, 2005**

Part of our core belief as Latter-day Saints is found in the 13<sup>th</sup> Article of Faith: *If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.*

The study of the arts leads us to the pursuit (aka seeking after) of the virtuous, lovely, good report and praiseworthy. Good report from whom? Praiseworthy- who praises it? These are important questions that we ought to be able to answer as students and as Latter-day Saints.



**Elder and Sister Bruce and Marie Hafen**

Marie Hafen, wife of former President of Ricks College (now BYU Idaho) and later member of the 1<sup>st</sup> quorum of the 70 Bruce Hafen, tells this story:

**A friend I will call Marilyn is enjoying a far richer life today than would have been the case if the world of books and beauty had not opened her eyes and her mind. Marilyn grew up in a small town where the most important things in her friends' lives were being popular and being seen with handsome, athletic guys. She dated a young man who was a natural leader, but at the time he had no serious aspirations for his life. Then Marilyn went with her family to pick up her brother at the close of his mission.**

**For the first time in her life, Marilyn opened her eyes to the size and wonder and richness of the world: She visited great art galleries and historic cathedrals; she saw the remnants of aristocracy and the grimness of urban poverty; she sang hymns in a foreign tongue; she saw mountains and oceans she never knew existed.**

**When she returned, her hometown was not the same. Looking at everything with new eyes, she realized that she was far from ready to make serious commitments to her immature boyfriend. From that time on, her thirst for learning took her far beyond the days when the city limits of her hometown had been the limits of her aspirations.**

**Now Marilyn's continuing curiosity and broad vision of life enhance her well-developed religious faith. Her life is more full, her service to others is more meaningful, and her children share her insights—all because she reached beyond the boundaries of a teenage mind to touch the broader boundaries of an educated mind. Marie C. Hafen, "Celebrating Womanhood," *Ensign*, June 1992**

This Foundations course is designed to start you on much the same path- to move you beyond your present boundaries and open your mind, heart and spirit to the world of artistic creation.

Consider the following statements:

No one can feast his or her eyes on the art of Michelangelo and not see the hand of God. Michelangelo himself knew it, as he expressed in this statement: "The true work of art is but a shadow

of the divine perfection.” **M. Russell Ballard, “Filling the World with Goodness and Truth,”** *Ensign*, Jul 1996

We seek that which is praiseworthy, lovely, virtuous, and of good report, and we salute Beethoven, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and Michelangelo. **Ezra Taft Benson, “Jesus Christ—Gifts and Expectations,”** *New Era*, May 1975

In the first place, some wise being organized my system, and gave me my capacity, put into my heart and brain something that delights, charms, and fills me with rapture at the sound of sweet music. *I* did not put it there; it was some other being. As one of the modern writers has said, “Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.” It has been proved that sweet music will actually tame the most malicious and venomous beasts, even when they have been stirred up to violent wrath, and make them docile and harmless as lambs. Who gave the lower animals a love for those sweet sounds, which with magic power fill the air with harmony, and cheer and comfort the hearts of men, and so wonderfully affect the brute creation? It was the Lord, our heavenly Father, who gave the capacity to enjoy these sounds, and which *we* ought to do in His name, and to His glory. But the greater portion of the sectarian world consider it sacrilege to give way to any such pleasure as even to listen to sweet music, much more to dance to its delightful strains. This is another short sermon. **Brigham Young, Delivered in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, April 9, 1852**

I have in my home a reasonably good sound system. I do not use it frequently, but now and again, I sit quietly in the semidarkness and listen for an hour or so to music that has endured through the centuries because of its remarkable qualities. I listened the other evening to Beethoven’s Concerto for the Violin and marveled that such a thing could come of the mind of a man. The composer, I suppose, was very much like the rest of us. I do not know how tall he was or how broad he was or how much he weighed. I assume that he got hungry, felt pain, and had most of the problems that we all have, and maybe some that we do not have. But out of the genius of that mind came a tremendous blending to create rare and magnificent masterpieces of music.

**Gordon B. Hinckley “I Believe”** *Ensign* August 1992

Who was this Michelangelo? Who was Beethoven? Rembrandt? How can we enjoy music in the spirit that Brother Brigham meant? How may *I* better seek after these things?

In our world we are bombarded with information, much of it in the form of music and visual images. How can we sort through them? What are these enduring “remarkable qualities” that President Hinckley mentions? This is the essence of our Foundations Culture experience.

In the 123<sup>rd</sup> section of the Doctrine and Covenants verse 12 we read: For there are many yet on the earth among all sects, parties, and denominations, who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, and who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it—

While this verse directly applies to the teachings of the restored Gospel, it also has a great deal of merit when considering the virtuous, lovely, good report, and praiseworthy. We would have more of it in our lives if we knew “where to find it.” This course is designed to help you do several things. One of them is to help you be more able to “find it” by exploring those enduring works that President Hinckley mentioned. Another is to give you the tools to effectively analyze works of music, visual art, cinema, etc. to better enable you to fill your life with these things, to make your life richer and more blessed.

Our approach to the exploration of the arts will begin with analysis of various art forms in terms of their elements and organization. The fact that some art forms are all around us doesn't guarantee our immediately (or perhaps even easily) understanding them. If I found myself suddenly transported to Turkey I wouldn't automatically be fluent in speaking Turkish. There would be some words I might recognize. I might be able to understand a little bit of conversation from observing context (these people in the Mosque are probably worshipping), but the key to learning the language would be in learning the "rules." What does a specific set of sounds symbolize? Are there gestures I might normally use which would be inappropriate here? If I make the effort and learn the language I will certainly gain a greater understanding and appreciation of my surroundings. Learning about the arts is a similar process. We will explore the arts in terms of what they're made of- **Medium**, and their other elements. We'll explore how works of art are **organized**. After this exploration we'll then achieve greater understanding of the arts in terms of their **historical and stylistic context**. The arts did not get produced in a vacuum. There were issues of time and place that had enormous impact on how paintings and buildings looked or songs were sung. We will focus in the age known as the **Renaissance** and continue forward to the dawn of the **modernism**. Along the way we'll learn the characteristics of style, composition, and context that have explain how western art has "endured through the centuries because of its remarkable qualities." (Hinckley)

## **Two ways of reaction to the arts: The Heart and the Mind**

In ancient Greece philosophers were struck by the dual nature of humans. On one hand we can be very rational, analytical, thoughtful creatures. At other times people can be so ruled by their emotions that rationality seems to be wholly cast aside. The Greeks described both aspects of the human condition by ascribing them to two of their deities, **Apollo** and **Dionysus**. Apollo was the god of truth, lyric poetry, and the sun. He represented the rational, logical aspects of humanity. Dionysus, by contrast was the god of wine and fertility. He ran around with satyrs (half-man half goat creatures- another duality). He represented the emotional, irrational nature of human beings. Throughout the centuries people have sought to explain and discuss this duality. It has been loosely referred to as classical (Apollo) and romantic (Dionysus), as intellectual and emotional, and as the head and the heart. For our purposes we will continually make reference to the Apollo and Dionysus dichotomy.

As humans we are a bundle of contradictions. That's why we simultaneously want to get good grades but don't want to study very hard. We want to be married in the temple, but find ourselves attracted to the "bad" boys or girls. We pray for purity and then watch *The Family Guy*. We all have ideals that we ardently believe in but don't live up to, and often the ideals themselves are contradictory—we want to have a successful career and be a model parent, all at the same time. The ancient Greeks embraced these contradictions and expressed them in the worship of a god or goddess that best embodied a particular emotion or viewpoint.

This is perhaps best illustrated in two different religious cults that were both important in ancient Greek worship, the cults of Apollo and Dionysus. Worshipers of Apollo wrote and performed poetry and music that was logical, balanced, orderly, and clear. Apollonian music appealed more to the intellect than to the emotions. Musicians sang hymns to Apollo and accompanied them on the *lyre*, a plucked, stringed instrument like a small harp. It was ideal for meditative solitude, the perfect accompaniment to an afternoon of careful and quiet reasoning.

In contrast, Dionysus was the god of wine, and by extension, the god of unbridled emotion, of wild revelry. Worshippers of Dionysus sang and danced to music that was loud and rhythmical; instead of a single lyricist singing a quiet, simple, meditative tune, Dionysian festivals featured a full chorus chanting all the words together, dancing and acting out the drama, all accompanied by a noisy, nasal, double-reed instrument called the aulos—a not particularly beautiful instrument, but one that could be heard over the din of the Dionysiacs. The ultimate form of worship for Dionysus was the *tragedy*, a play that displayed men and women in the grip of passion, singing and acting and dancing in a great communal celebration of man's humanity. Instead of reason, tragedy was all about emotion—the emotions of the characters in the tragedy, and the emotions the audience feels as they behold it.



Dionysian reveler with aulos player (aulete)

To this day we can still perceive this division in the art we look at, the music we listen to, the books we read. Think for instance of the music you play on Sunday versus the music you play on Saturday night. One is quiet, meditative, and suited for worship. The other is party music, good for stirring up emotions and expressing desires. Which are you, an Apollonian or a Dionysiac? Most of us have some of both in us, and find an appropriate time and level for each. But some clearly prefer one over the other. You will find that as we look at the history of the arts that different time periods tended to favor Apollonian art, others Dionysian. Later in this course we will explore different ages of art and their relationship to these two attitudes.

While some art is very obviously aimed at the emotions and other art is clearly more analytical it is safe to say that both logical and emotional elements exist in all works of art. Some works of art- a Bach Fugue for example- achieve their quality largely through excellence in the structural details. Other works of art- like a Chopin Nocturne- draw on more subtle emotional elements. Both kinds of art feature structure. Both also carry emotional appeal, but in nearly every work of art one aspect- either the logical or the emotional is dominant. The greatest works- like a Bach Fugue or a Chopin Nocturne- have the capacity to move both parts of us. Our pleasure is enhanced by understanding both the emotional and intellectual elements of the works we encounter. One of the things that we'll be exploring in this course is this

contrast of Apollo and Dionysus. We'll be able to analyze the logical and emotional elements of various art forms.

## Considering Art Forms

In our exploration of the arts we'll be focusing on several art forms: **painting, sculpture, music, theatre, architecture** and **cinema**. Of course there are other art forms as well, but these six will give us adequate skills to analyze others as well. Here are some characteristics among art forms:

Certain art forms, like music or literature, could be considered "**time art**." These works of art don't really occupy physical space as much as they have a definite temporal beginning, middle and end. To fully experience Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, one must begin with the four note "da da da dum" melody of the first movement and then continue on until the final chords of the fourth movement. To experience the Book of Mormon "I Nephi having been born of goodly parents" marks the beginning and the end is Moroni's "And now I bid you farewell, I soon go to rest in the paradise of God, until my spirit and body shall again reunite, and I am brought forth triumphant through the air, to meet you before the pleasing bar of the great Jehovah, the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead. Amen" As a work of art moves along through time we might consider if there are repeating patterns or if the highs and lows of the work are temporally spaced in a what seems to us natural way.

Some forms of art (painting, sculpture, architecture) could be considered "**space art**." In other words these works occupy physical space and are experienced (received, consumed) in a spatial order- top to bottom, back to front, etc. The issue of time doesn't come into of evaluation of space art as it is with time art. From a time standpoint we can't answer these questions about a painting Where is the beginning? Middle? Where does it end? How long will it take to experience the work? Statues exist in space more than in time just as novels exist in time more than space.

There are some art forms that combine their existence in both time and space. A play exists in physical space (a stage) and yet has a clearly delineated temporal beginning middle and end. Consider for example the transformation that takes place when a work of art moves from time to space. If you read William Shakespeare's *MACBETH* (which you will this semester), you have experienced the art in time. Consider what happens when the play is staged or filmed. Act 1 Scene 1 is the beginning, but now we are also going to consider spatial elements. What kind of set is created? How do the actors move? What is the physical distance between Macbeth and the three witches? These elements allow us to deepen our understanding of this work. Other forms that are **combined art** include dance and cinema.

## Art and Subject

Many works of art are created to represent or explore a specific subject. Subject in art answers the question, "What is it about?" Literature is an art form that nearly always has a subject. Paintings and sculptures are mostly representations of subjects. Architecture is, however, an art form that does not usually depict a subject. Architecture is mostly functional. It is an art form based more on "what for?" rather than "what is it about?". Music occupies an interesting middle ground in the realm of subject. Some works of music were composed with a specific subject in mind, like Handel's *Messiah*. Others were written simply as expressions of musicality separate and apart from a given subject, like Beethoven's *Symphony #5*. Music with a subject is known as **program music**. Music without a subject is called

**absolute music.** The only really good way to determine whether or not a piece of music is program or absolute is to check the title. So subject is not a universal in the arts.

When a work of art is associated with a specific subject we can then consider it along those terms. When we understand the subject being presented it gives us an opportunity to make some personal evaluation of the work. We can ask how effectively the artist has depicted the subject. But remember that the quality of the depiction is often more important than the quality of the subject. There have been some truly awful pieces of art based on love. There have been some sensational works based on suffering. But this leads us to an important consideration in the arts, the relationship between art and nature.

## Art and Nature



Nature certainly is the source of a vast number of art subjects. But it is important for us to stop and clearly ponder the distinct differences between art and nature. The words of two French authors can lead us to some very productive thinking about art and nature. Honoré Balzac speaking of art said, “The mission is not to copy nature, but to express it.” Think how a work of art isn’t an exact copy of nature. Michelangelo’s famous Moses statue at first glance seems very life-like with its dramatic musculature and wonderful proportion- but at its heart it’s very unnatural. Moses wasn’t all one color- his hair, eyes, skin and robe were not all variations of white. The light that people saw coming from his head (Exodus 34: 29-35) wasn’t two marble horns. Moses wasn’t stuck inside a niche when he descended from Sinai either- he was capable of movement- and speech. If we want to be nit-picky we must admit that this statue is NOT realistic. And yet- the reality of what Michelangelo is exploring is profoundly accurate. More on that later.

In this context one can more easily understand the words of author André Gide: “I admit there is only one thing that is not natural: art.” And yet so often we explain to others the reason we

like a particular painting or a movie or a piece of music is “because it’s so real.” Maybe that’s not exactly what we mean. Perhaps we’re saying that the work of art has communicated something very deep in us that relates to our own reality. The art has spoken to our construction of things.

Take a moment and read this excerpt of a poem (in translation, of course) by the Italian composer Antonio Vivaldi:

Spring has come and joyfully the birds welcome it with cheerful song and the streams at the breath of zephyrs flow swiftly with sweet murmurings.

But now the sky is cloaked in black and thunder and lightning announce themselves; when they die away. The little birds turn afresh to their sweet song.

Vivaldi then used these lines of poetry as the basis of his famous violin concerto, *Spring* from his larger set of works known as the *Four Seasons*. Listen to this first movement. You'll hear how the solo violin imitates birdcalls, how lower string instruments depict a gently flowing stream. We hear the thunder and the rapid violin tones representing the lightning. People have listened pleurably to this music for close to three centuries. Hearing it in conjunction with the poetry makes it even more enjoyable ... and yet. Serious reflection ought to lead us to some interesting questions: Does any species of bird sound like that? Does a stream flow stay within the confines of a set musical key? Does the noise lightning makes resemble a rapid violin glissando? Logically we know the answer to this is an emphatic "NO" ... and yet. There is something in this artificiality (have you ever thought that we use natural and artificial as opposites?) that speaks a truth to us- an artistic truth.

### **Artistic Truth**

Pablo Picasso is reported to have said that, "art is the lie that tells the truth." Isn't this paradoxical? When you looked at Michelangelo's *Moses* did you find yourself saying "he's in really good shape for a man of 80"? Or did you think about a powerful prophet and leader? Certainly that's what Michelangelo intended. The spiritual power of Moses can be in part revealed to us through the artificiality of the sculpture.

This artificiality is much of what appeals to us as we look at human creation. When informed that his wife has died William Shakespeare has Macbeth say:

She should have died hereafter.  
There would have been a time for such a word.  
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time.  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

This is a rather unrealistic statement from a bereaved husband, and yet reveals the futility of a life of evil. This is a profound exploration of the human condition- something that art allows us to ponder our place in the world, the very meaning of life. The truths this unrealistic speech reveals to us are in large measure the "art" of William Shakespeare.



Professor Terryl Givens suggests that the arts are one way of gaining knowledge:

We know more than we think. And we know in more ways than we sometimes realize because different ways of knowing abound. The call of the beautiful, the vision granted by love, and the voice of conscience are merely three examples. All give us glimpses of realities not otherwise available to us. The poet and the artist anciently had something approaching a sacred status in the world. The Greeks so revered the literary arts that Sophocles was chosen to be a leader of Athens purely on the strength of his success as a playwright. The Greeks sensed that the best art does not take us away from reality into the dreamy realms of fantasy—though some may do that. On the contrary, the best art penetrates the hard shell of habit to reimmerge us in the depths of experience, “refining the sense of beauty to agony,” “making the stone more stony,” creating “anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration.” A Mozart or a Milton, like a Moses or the Psalmist, approximates a reality we sense is true, though prophets and artists alike struggle to capture in language just what it is that has been unfolded to their vision. ...

*Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows  
Like harmony in music; there is a dark  
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles  
Discordant elements, makes them cling together  
In one society. How strange, that all  
The terrors, pains, and early miseries,  
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused  
Within my mind, should e'er have borne a part,  
And that a needful part, in making up  
The calm existence that is mine when I  
Am worthy of myself!*

Like Wordsworth's poem itself, art becomes a vehicle not just for describing life but for interpreting life, revealing its hidden patterns and purposes. The quest for, and recognition of, what is beautiful—is that not a search for knowledge and understanding of the highest kind? Do we not have a sense, in the presence of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, or Michelangelo's David, or Van Gogh's Starry Night, that we have arrived at something that is neither instrument nor pastime but an end perfect in itself? Great art takes us to a place where we realize the need for another kind of language to capture the deepest realities. Watching a performance of Othello tells us more about how the worm of jealousy can be insinuated into a man's heart and destroy his marriage than any psychology textbook could. Uncle Tom's Cabin did more to inflame a society against the evils of slavery than any cost-benefit analysis of the Southern economy could. Picasso's Guernica is a more powerful indictment of the horrors of war than the most carefully compiled tables of statistics. And Charles Dickens did more to animate Christians against the evils of child exploitation and institutional brutality than any government report by experts.

Another way of saying this is to note that Albert Einstein's breakthroughs made Hiroshima possible. John Hersey's book of that title convinces us why Hiroshima must never happen again. None of this is because art merely entertains us or indulges our imagination. And it is certainly not because art takes emotion out of the picture so we can judge and act with prudent objectivity. On the contrary—the best art gives human emotion its due. In each of the examples mentioned, the artist's depiction of

human emotion, informed by moral conscience, is shown to be one of the greatest mechanisms in civilization's arsenal against the evils of this or any time.

Can any claim be more specious than to suggest that we want more objectivity, and less emotion, in guiding the course of our personal and collective lives? Emotion is not a defect in an otherwise perfect reasoning machine. Reason, unfettered from human feeling, has led to as many horrors as any crusader's zeal. What use is pity in a world devoted to maximizing efficiency and productivity? Scientific husbandry tells us to weed out the sick, the infirm, the weak. The ruthless efficiency of euthanasia initiatives and ethnic cleansing are but the programmatic application of Nietzsche's point: from any quantifiable cost-benefit analysis, the principles of animal husbandry should apply to the human race. Charles Darwin himself acknowledged that strict obedience to "hard reason" rather than sympathy for fellow humans would represent a sacrifice of "the noblest part of our nature." It is the human heart resonating with empathy, not the logical brain attuned to the mathematics of efficiency, that revolts at cruelty and inhumanity.

**The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections On the Quest for Faith**, by Terryl L. Givens, Fiona Givens Deseret Book 2014

The idea of artistic truth is closely tied to the "Ponder and Prove" step of the BYU Learning Model. It requires effort to reflect on the truths in a work of art. Some are very obvious; others might be called "hidden treasures." Think of piece of music you've heard that expresses this truth- even though the piece has artificial characteristics (it is art after all). The next time you see a movie, listen to some music, read a poem, or look at a painting take a moment and think about this relationship- physical truth and artistic truth. What do the arts tell us? How do they communicate with us?

Why should we "seek after these things"?