

The Masculinity of Christ
Final Paper for Mormon Cultural Studies
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What does Jesus Christ look like and why are there so many variations depicting Jesus as either being weak or masculine? David Morgan's two insightful pieces helped a great deal in answering these questions. It was revealed in David Morgan's work, *Visual Piety*, that all images of Jesus are merely imaginative constructions born out of our personal, cultural, and institutionalized realities.

Morgan (1999) states, "Popular images of Jesus offer familiar instances of a comparable evocation of meaning where textual sources provide none" (p. 1). Morgan (1999) maps out a clear historical depiction of Christ as either, "a gentile, effeminate, occasionally even homoerotic friend; others portrayed him as an ethereal, mystical ideal; and others saw in him a rugged, violent man's man" (p. 97).

In addition, it was stated in class that the reason so many of the earliest depictions of Christ showed him as being weak and gaunt were directly tied to social status. One of the things that signified an individual as being wealthy was his or her body weight, i.e. the fatter you were the richer you were. Many artists in the Old Ages were aware of this social classification, whereby they purposely depicted Jesus as frail and weak. This was done in the hopes of connecting and appealing to the lower classes that were more apt to identify and accept Jesus as one of their own. This is a classic case revealing that Christ's physicality was based more on a social economic construct rather than a factual definition.

Fast forward to the early Nineteenth Century you begin to see depictions of a friendlier, gentler, and even perhaps an erotic Jesus. This depiction of Christ sprouted from evangelicalism trying to separate themselves from the Calvinist traditional view of Jesus as being someone to be feared. Although this did not last very long, "popular American piety from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century explored different experiences of

Jesus as a male ideal” (Morgan, 1999, p. 97). Additionally, “Physical affection among male friends was socially acceptable during most of the nineteenth century, with attitudes beginning to change dramatically only in the 1890’s” (Morgan, 1999, p. 100).

This attitude shift regarding the definition of love and eroticism happened around the time of the Civil War. “Anxieties about male relationships rose following the Civil War as homosexuality became legally and medically defined as a perverse disorder and was increasingly prosecuted as a criminal act” (Morgan, 1999, p. 103). Moreover as, “concepts of homosexuality became more established... Muscular Christianity was embraced on both sides of the Atlantic” (Morgan, 1999, p. 104).

While America was experiencing significant social changes, two leading activists from Chicago, Dr. Warren Conant and Bruce Barton, were pushing the idea of a more masculine Jesus. Barton stated, “It is time from those of us who are this side of thirty-five to unite and take back our Jesus” (Morgan, 1999, p. 112). During this time period Warner Sallman painted the famous head of Christ. This has become the quintessential image of Christ that many have come to view and accept Jesus to look like. Interestingly Sallman as a kid received encouragement at an early age from one of his biblical teachers to render Jesus as more masculine and less feminine.

Conversely, it was mentioned in class that in the early 1980’s the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints commissioned the artist Del Parson to paint a facial painting of Jesus Christ which many feel it is more physically masculine than Sallman’s rendering.

Based on the discussions above I have learned that depictions of Jesus in large part can be traced back to social and cultural changes depending on one’s time and place. However, I was interested to see if this trend still exists in 2013. Specifically, I wanted to find out if my closest

acquaintances favor and gravitate towards the more masculine Jesus or the simpler, perhaps weaker Jesus. Therefore, I have chosen to interview three LDS individuals in which I had them discuss selected paintings that served as an aid in my research.

I personally selected three paintings that I believe highlight the changes that have been made over time in Jesus' masculinity. The first painting I chose for my research is of Jan Van Eyck's rendering in 1440 depicting Jesus as small and non-masculine. The other two paintings are more masculine in nature. I have already mentioned them above, one being Warner Sallman's painting in 1941 and Del Parson's version in 1983.

I broke down my interviews into three main questions with the last question having to deal with Christ's particular facial body parts. The first question I asked in the interview was: Out of the three paintings, which piece do you personally prefer and why? The second question was: Which of these paintings do you least prefer and why? The third question was: Specifically in each painting, what physical characteristics are appealing and not appealing i.e. face shape, eyes, skin, hair and dress? I will now go through each interview and describe the interviewees' thoughts and feelings regarding each painting presented to them.

Question #1: Favorite painting. The first interviewee said that she preferred and identified with the Del Parson painting of Christ; her reasoning was that she is more familiar with that painting than the other two renderings. She also said that she grew up with that painting in her home. She said that she always visualizes in her mind that if she were ever to meet Jesus that's how he would look to her.

Question #2: Least favorite painting. The first interviewee said that Jan Van Eyck's was her least favorite painting because she doesn't have any real connection to the painting and she

was wasn't familiar with it. In fact, her initial reaction was that the painting scared her because Jesus' face looked sad, dark, weak and Asian.

Question #3: Physical likes and dislikes. The first interviewee said that Warner Sallman's painting was her second favorite painting because his face looked more familiar and his face looked beautiful, peaceful, and humble, but smaller than Del Parson's Face of Jesus. She liked the eyes in Warner Sallman's painting because Jesus was in the attitude of looking up at his father which shows meekness, and she said his skin had radiance and beamed with glory. Nothing in particular stood out about the hair and dress for Sallman's painting other than it looked normal to her. For the Jan Van Eyck painting, the interviewee said the face didn't look feminine to her, but did look weak, scary, and sad. She felt the eyes were thin looking and appeared Asian. She thought the skin was dark and unhealthy and the hair was very curly and looked like African hair. For the Del Parson painting she felt the face was very strong, kind – she remarked that she felt that the Jesus in Del Parson's painting loved her. She felt the eyes showed mercy and love, and the skin was full of light. She liked the overall color and thought the coloring for the whole painting also made it a good decorative piece in the home. She felt the hair was normal and looks the way it should, and she also liked Jesus in a red robe because that's how she visualizes him.

Question #1: Favorite painting. The second interviewee liked Warner Sallman's painting the most because he liked the overall glow and feel of the painting. He said that he looks handsome and if you were to take away his hair you would have a successful business man.

Question #2: Least favorite painting. The second interviewee's least favorite painting was Jan Van Eyck's painting; he felt that the painting was made to look like a medieval king in the 1600's. He also mentioned that he didn't feel that there was any spirituality to the piece.

Question #3: Physical likes and dislikes. With Warner Sallman's painting, he thought the face was very serene and indicated that Jesus isn't just relying on himself instead upon his father. He also said that Jesus looks masculine but not rugged. He liked that the eyes indicate gentleness and that there is a glow to Jesus' skin. He felt that the hair was well-kept and that the clothing looked normal and comfortable to wear. With Jan Van Eyck's painting, the second interviewee said that the face was not warm and he thought the eyebrows were too tiny and thin. He indicated that the eyes looked like they had an Oriental shape to them and that the skin looked like baby skin and even looked powdery – like he had makeup around his cheek bones. He thought that Jesus looked feminine in nature and as if he was from Turkey. He did not like the curly hair, and joked that it looked like Jesus was wearing a mumu dress. With Del Parson's painting, he said the face looks appealing but also intense and looks like a masculine alpha-male. He thought the neck looked stronger than in the other paintings, and that the eyes looked very intense. He remarked that even the skin looked manly and the hair looked too much like a helmet and was not free flowing. He felt that the painting had too much color and specifically did not like the red robe.

Question #1: Favorite painting. The third interviewee said that she liked Warner Sallman's painting the most because she grew up with that painting. She also said that the setting and the positioning of Jesus in that painting makes him special.

Question #2: Least favorite painting. The third interviewee did not like Jan Van Eyck's painting because she said it looked too Byzantine, aloof, foreign, and uncaring. She thought the painting looked more symbolic.

Question #3: Physical likes and dislikes. The third interviewee liked how the face of Del Parson's Jesus is symmetrical, strong, and has enduring qualities throughout his face. She used

the adjective strong throughout this particular piece, and especially when describing his eyes. She also felt, however, that Jesus' eyes have a certain peaceful quality to them. She felt that Del Parson's Jesus has really good skin, remarking that it was tanner than the other two Jesus'. She said that she liked that his hair is wild, but she indicated that his shirt was too low, saying it had too low of a scoop and that his robe looked more like a bath robe. She felt that Jan Van Eyck's Jesus didn't have enough structure to his face. She said it was too long and oval looking, saying it reminded her of a child's painting. She went on to say that his eyes have no eyelashes or eyebrows, and was not appealing to look upon. She commented that his skin is too sallow and feminine, and that the skin looks too smooth for a man. She again indicated that his hair is too fuzzy and girly, reminding her of a girl's ringlets. She went on to say that his dress is girly because it has no layers and his robe just hangs on him, reminding her of how a dress hangs on a woman. With regards to Warner Sallman's painting, she liked it a lot and thought his face looks more Jewish, and she also liked how Jesus has a high forehead. She also liked the countenance because of the apparent visibility. She remarked that the eyes are special and approachable because they depict a scene or a production. She thought that Jesus' skin looks olive and has hints of yellow and orange coloring, even monochromatic coloring. She liked the hair and liked the waviness that reminds her of girly hair. She felt the dress was well done and felt like it was something he would use to go to work in as a carpenter.

The overall responses from the interviews aligned quite nicely with what I learned in class, specifically they preferred their personal subjective realities over any conflicting or altering ideas and favored Jesus as masculine rather than weak or feminine. Granted, this is a small sampling, but the responses do indicate that they personally gravitate towards images that are familiar in terms of cultural constructivism. I found that none of the interviewees liked Jan

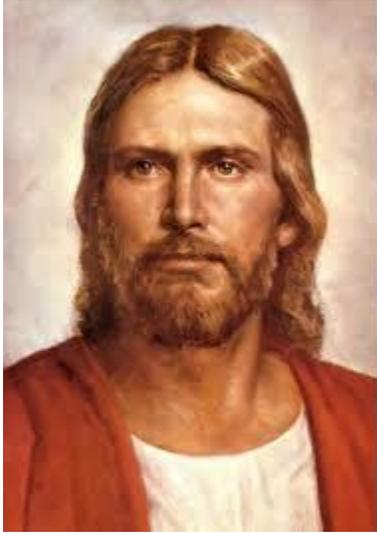
Van Eyck's rendering of Jesus. I personally believe there are three main reasons for this, and each has to do with subjective reality. The first reason was because Van Eyck's Jesus is foreign from the eyes of a Caucasian American. Secondly, it was ethnically different, and finally the painting had remnants of feminine undertones.

I was surprised that two out of three chose Warner Sallman's piece as their favorite. The masculinity of Sallman's Christ is a bit less masculine when juxtaposed next to Del Parson's painting. However, I do believe Sallman's Jesus was masculine enough, but more importantly it was more ethnically aligned with what they thought Jesus should look like. Furthermore, they connected to this painting of Sallman's because it wasn't foreign to them but rather it was very recognized by all. Each of these reasons indicates visual piety.

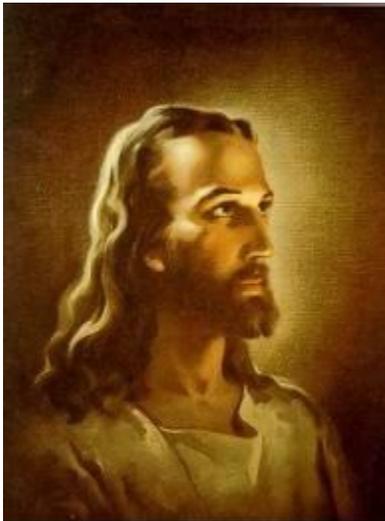
I believe that when we choose subjective archetypes we can begin to mistake images as factually accurate. Moreover some images that are appealing to our personal likings can quickly become so popularized that it can become kitsch. Therefore, I have learned that we should keep an open mind when looking at pieces of art regarding Jesus, especially when it conflicts with our personal preferences and cultural backgrounds.

Reference List

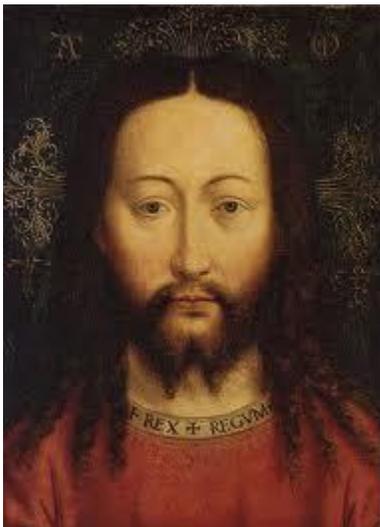
Morgan, D. (1999). *Visual Piety*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.



Painted by Del Parsons



Painted by Warner Sallman



Painted by Jan Van Eyck