NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title

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Reference *FARMS Review of Books* 10/2 (1998): 62–66.

ISSN 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Abstract Review of *The Book of Mormon Paintings of Minerva Teichert* (1997), by John W. Welch and Doris R. Dant.

John W. Welch and Doris R. Dant. *The Book of Mormon Paintings of Minerva Teichert.* Salt Lake City: BYU Studies and Bookcraft, 1997. 168 pp., with appendix. $39.95.

Reviewed by Edgar C. Snow Jr.

"Minerva Mania" has struck Mormonism, and not a minute too soon. In the last ten years, and especially in the last twelve months, we have richly sampled the life and work of Mormon artist Minerva Teichert from exhibitions at the Museum of Church History and the BYU Museum of Art, a BYU video, a one-woman theatrical performance, a biography, a collection of her letters, and *The Book of Mormon Paintings of Minerva Teichert,* the subject of this book review.

It is fitting that I should write this review since a couple of months ago I wondered on AML-List (a Listserv) why someone had not already published a version of the Book of Mormon illustrated by Teichert's paintings. On hearing from Marny Parkin on AML-List that the print had yet to dry on a forthcoming BYU Studies/Bookcraft volume reproducing those paintings, I suggested it was not possible that the volume could do her paintings justice. I must now correct myself and say that a standard-sized Book of Mormon illustrated by Teichert's works would not do the mural-sized paintings justice, and the BYU Studies/Bookcraft volume superbly demonstrates that her paintings, unlike Arnold Friberg's, rise above the level of illustration and are enduring works of art, deserving not only the virtually unanimous critical and popular acclaim she has recently received, but also this luscious volume from BYU Studies and Bookcraft.

By now I suspect nearly everyone knows the story of Teichert's Book of Mormon paintings, how she studied art in Chicago and New York under noted masters, how during the 1940s and 1950s she pursued her dream to tell the Book of Mormon

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A version of this review appeared on AML-List.

story in over forty murals painted on canvas tacked to the wall of her small living room. She even had to use inverted binoculars to view the murals from a distance for a proper perspective. She pursued this dream without being commissioned, unlike murals she rendered on other themes. The only client she served was the Spirit, unless you count her arrangement with Brigham Young University to pay for tuition for her children and other students with these paintings. As a result, BYU now owns most of these works, a few others being held by the church and in private collections.

A couple of years ago, Carol Lynn Pearson asked "Could Feminism Have Saved the Nephites?"[1] After having read *The Book of Mormon Paintings of Minerva Teichert,* I would now respond to Pearson's question, "I don't know, but I think Minerva Teichert could have." Teichert's visual midrash on the Book of Mormon transforms a text often preoccupied with armed conflict into the kinder, gentler story found between the lines of the Book of Mormon, and this from a woman's point of view in peaceful, yet vibrant colors, as if Edgar Degas had painted a ballet based on the Book of Mormon story.

Of course, Friberg's depictions of Book of Mormon events, which have appeared in the Book of Mormon for a couple of generations, will inevitably be compared to Teichert's work. After closely examining *The Book of Mormon Paintings of Minerva Teichert* and reading the graceful commentary by Welch and Dant (and an essay by Marian Eastwood Wardle, one of Teichert's granddaughters), I suggest that Teichert and Friberg created different versions of Book of Mormon gospels: Friberg, as if Matthew or Mark, focused on the mighty acts and miracles of the heroic Nephites. Whereas Teichert, as if Luke or John, focused on women, children, and themes of the heart. Few would doubt that we have been influenced in our reading of the Book of Mormon text in the last thirty years by the sheer ubiquity of the Friberg illustrations. If the only available Book of Mormon text for the next thirty years featured Teichert illustrations (in an over-sized, coffee-table edition, of course), or if Minerva Mania continued

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1 See Carol Lynn Pearson, "Could Feminism Have Saved the Nephites?" *Sunstone* (March 1996): 32–40; reviewed by Kevin and Shauna Christensen in this issue, pages 9–51.

unabated, wouldn't her paintings change the way we view the Book of Mormon text as well? Wouldn't we be drawn toward the subtleties of the text, perhaps to its literary beauty, the stories of its handful of women and children, rather than to the familiar war stories, Captain Moroni, the two thousand stripling warriors, or a "soloflexed" Nephi? Since this is supposed to be a review of the book, allow me to focus on a few examples of Teichert's different vision of the world of the Nephites and Lamanites.

"Love Story" (pp. 62–63) is a wonderful transformation of the terse account of the marriage of Ishmael's daughters to Lehi's sons into a boisterous dance number right out of an ancient Near Eastern *West Side Story,* replete with tambourines and cymbals, billowing costumes, and flirtatious smiles. As in many of Teichert's other paintings, the women steal the scene.

"Defense of a Nephite City" (pp. 122–23) displays the Nephite repulsion of a Lamanite attempt to take a city. Teichert's combat murals obscure the brutality of, say, Friberg's painting of the last Nephite battle with corpses strewn all around Moroni. In this painting Teichert, a rancher familiar with horses, creates sympathy not for the fallen Nephites or Lamanites who are nearly invisible, but for the Lamanite horses injured in the confrontation, the horses being the emphasized casualties of the campaign.

"The City of Gid" (pp. 132–33) demonstrates that, notwithstanding Fawn Brodie's cool assessment,[2] the Book of Mormon contains potential untapped humor. The story of Laman's teasing the Lamanites with some strong wine until they were feeling no pain (Alma 55:1–16) qualifies as comic relief in an otherwise no-nonsense account of warfare (unless one also counts Alma 55:30–32 as additional humor).[3] Teichert's interpretation of this story shows some suspicious but thirsty Lamanites awaiting an earnest Laman and his chuckling cohorts, accompanied by the least earnest of all beasts of burden—donkeys—bearing jars of wine, one of the donkeys flicking its ear.

"Gadianton's Band" (pp. 136–37), a story about murder and plunder, becomes an exotic and colorful carousel of horses, rid-

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2 Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet,* 2nd ed., rev. and enlarged (New York: Knopf, 1973), 62.

3 See Robert J. Matthews, *Who's Who in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 72.

den by Gadianton and his men, ascending a mountain. The shadow work seems to suggest poles on which the horses glide up and down around the mountain. Again, the horses are the focal point of the picture.

"Look to Your Children" (pp. 146–47) is the apex of the volume (as well as the Book of Mormon), depicting angelic ministrations to children during the Savior's visit at the temple. Teichert chose red, her favorite color and one she associated with heaven, as the predominant color for this mural (p. 16). While contemporary readers likely interpret 3 Nephi's discussion of angelic ministration with priesthood blessings (at least I always have), Teichert transforms this scene into a literal feast, with angels serving children the way Welch and Dant suggest Teichert performed her own "grandmotherly acts" (p. 146) of serving food and caring for grandchildren. The eye is drawn to the central angelic figure who ministers to a young girl by washing her face.

It should be noted that, notwithstanding Teichert's study of biblical and Mesoamerican cultures, her paintings might appear less than historically accurate, based on the extensive and influential research and proposed models of Nephite culture promulgated in the last fifteen years by John Sorenson (among other things, he discounts the use of horses by Lamanites and Nephites for transportation)[4] and other FARMS researchers (who discount the style of armor and weaponry painted by Teichert in favor of more exotic Mesoamerican weaponry and armor).[5] However, these perceived minor flaws in her work should not detract from appreciation of her paintings, since the murals are more important for the way they convey the emotional and communal aspects of the Nephite story.

Welch and Dant have done an excellent job of complementing Teichert's work with a balanced text containing an introduction to Teichert, her artistic themes, influences on her work, and essential statements from Teichert's own pen regarding her work and testimony. A running commentary on her paintings, with insightful interpretations that feel natural, not strained, only rarely distracts

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4 See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 295–96.

5 See Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990).

from the beauty of Teichert's paintings. In a couple of places, Welch apparently could not resist what must have been a constant temptation to add interesting Book of Mormon commentary. In discussing "Love Story," for instance, the text abruptly says, "The ram's horn on the right of the mural may indicate this is also a religiously significant occasion." And in the discussion of "Death of Amalikiah" (pp. 126–27), the text says, "Interestingly, Amalikiah was killed on the eve of the first day of the year, when symbolic reenthronements in some cultures take place." I do not disagree with these statements; I would just prefer to read them in a FARMS publication rather than be sidetracked by them in a commentary on Teichert's art.

I now conclude my review with the following directives: Buy the book; the royalties go toward the Minerva Teichert Scholarship Fund at Brigham Young University. Buy one for your ward library. Give them as gifts. Convince BYU Studies and Bookcraft to sell framed posters of the paintings. Use Teichert's pictures in Primary, Sunday School, priesthood, Relief Society, seminary, and family home evenings. Encourage others to use the paintings as book covers (this is already happening). Learn how to paint like Teichert, establish a Mormon art movement based on the renewal of her artistic vision, and continue her work.

May Teichert save us from our nearsighted visualization of the story of the Nephites.