

## The Artists Who Painted the Nauvoo Murals

by Duane Carling



Abundant Wildlife on Mural in Garden Room (Click to enlarge)

"I had never been to Nauvoo, and neither had most of the other artists in our vehicle. As we came up the river road, about 9:30 at night, we rounded the last bend and looked up at where we thought the temple should be. All of the interior lights were on for the workers working late, none of the exterior lights were on, and here was this glowing building against the night sky. No one said a word. The driver stopped the car and we all got out to look. It was the most moving experience."

Robert Marshall, professor of visual arts at BYU describes his first visit to the Nauvoo Temple where he and 5 other prominent LDS artists painted the first murals the LDS Church has installed in a temple since L.A. in 1956. Marshall, along with Frank Magelby (professor emeritus at BYU); Gary Smith, Alpine-based artist better known for his sculptures; Jim Christensen of Provo, best known for his fanciful depictions of imaginary scenes; and Doug Fryer and Cris Young also very well known artists all collaborated on the Nauvoo murals.



Beautiful Mural in Garden Room (Click to enlarge)

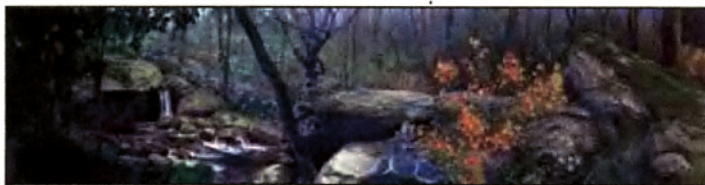
Shortly after the Nauvoo reconstruction was announced in April of 1999, the interior designers in the temple construction department. decided to revive the practice of putting murals in the the world room, the celestial room, and the garden rooms. They contacted Frank Magelby, who had retired from BYU in 1999, and has been on a "painting mission" for the Church doing pictures to hang in temples all over the world.

When he was asked if he would do the murals for Nauvoo, he responded that the job was way too big for one artist, and selected the other 5, most of whom had worked with him on Church film projects at the BYU film studio. "I could have gotten good artists from Vermont, where I live in the summer", said Magelby, "and all of the men I chose were very busy doing other work. Certainly there are other qualified artists in the Church, but I felt this was a team that could work together and do a job we could all be proud of." Everyone who was asked accepted, and cleared their schedules to complete the murals in the short time allowed.



Creation Room (Click to enlarge)

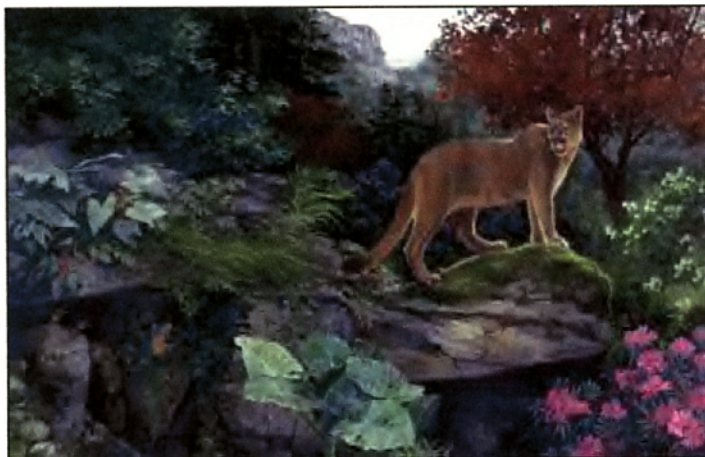
Vern Swanson, the curator at the Springville Art Museum who is also a BYU art graduate and began his career at the Smithsonian said, "In my opinion these are the best murals ever done by the Church. Brigham Young sent the most talented people of his day to Europe to study under the masters there and return to paint for the Salt Lake and other temples, and certainly there is other great work within the Church. But this are the 'A' team as far as I am concerned, and likely never to be equaled."



Beautiful Mural in Creation Room (Click to enlarge)

When the team first assembled, they were given very little direction (to which Mabelby attributes the success of the project). Shown the blueprints of the building, and the size of the rooms, they realized they would need a very large space in which to complete the paintings. Painting them in Nauvoo was out, since the building was still a hole in the ground. Someone suggested the BYU Film Studio, with its large sound stages, good lighting, and secure location. The studio was glad to cooperate, and built scale models of the rooms with the proposed paintings in them for approval by the temple department. After the plan was accepted, the studio sent lighting engineers to Nauvoo in order to duplicate the light on the sound stage to be used for the paintings. As Magelby commented "Everything about this project went smoothly. Everyone cooperated, and indeed was thrilled to be a part of it." The artists chose which rooms to be involved in. Since Christensen does intricate and flamboyant work, he chose the garden room, along with Cris Young. Magelby does very realistic work, and Smith's paintings tend to be more hard-edged, so they chose the world room. Marshall and Young chose the creation room, which they felt more fit their style.





Mural Detail in Garden Room (Click to enlarge)

How do you get 6 well known artists with very different styles to blend into one mural? "Since the Hudson River school of painting was at its height about mid 1800, and it was known for its misty interpretations of landscapes, we all decided to emulate that school in our own styles," said Robert Marshall, "and I think it worked out well." As it turned out, each room had a door way or a window that roughly divided it in half, so the 2 artists each took a side. "We also critiqued each other's work, in a constructive and friendly way, said Marshall. "That's an ugly duck' would bring a laugh and a constructive suggestion. We're all seasoned enough with immense respect for each other's work to allow such comments."



Mural in World Room (Click to enlarge)

Magelby and Smith decided to paint the world room as the world the early Saints would have know. They toured New England, starting at Joseph Smith's birthplace in Vermont, then to Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and finally to the Wasatch Front. They even got access to some old paintings from the RLDS Church.

Since the seasons started after Adam left the garden, they started the mural with spring in Vermont, and ended with winter in the Wasatch. To show the contrast with the garden room, where there is an idylic feeling, they put predators, thistles and storms in the scenes.



Detail of Meadow in Mural of World Room (Click to enlarge)

Marshall and Young toured Vermont and the East coast as inspiration for the more lush scenes and dramatic skies in the creation room. The hard rock coasts of New England suggested the shores of a newly-formed world. Christensen and Young went to Florida to study the lush gardens there.

Each of the artists described the Nauvoo mural paintings as a "once in a life time experience." The common feeling was that "nothing will ever come along again as significant as the Nauvoo Temple."