

Tales To Tell

Artist: Nathaniel Spens (1838-1916) American Fork, Utah

Title: *Deacon Jones' Experience, Deacon's Prayer* 1876

Media: oil on paper mounted on canvas

Size: 16" x 22-3/4"

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Nathaniel Spens was born June 21, 1838, in Edinburgh, Scotland, the son of copperplate printer master, James Spens, and his wife Isabella. Nathaniel was the eleventh child of thirteen and just before his fourteenth birthday, he was apprenticed to a painter and glazier. The apprenticeship lasted seven years.

When first apprenticed, young Nathaniel earned two shillings and six pence a week, which was gradually raised as his skills increased until he was earning six shillings a week for his last two years, out of which and with his family's help, (he is known to have lived at least some of the time with his sister Sarah) he had to provide for his food, lodging, and clothing.

Although not a lot of information is available about Spens' life during these years, in November of 1860 he was present at the birth of his sister Bessie's daughter in Glasgow and registered her birth with the authorities. According to the 1861 census, he was still living with his sister, and his occupation is listed as "painter." Later in 1861, Nathaniel returned to Newcastle Upon Tyne and married Jane Ann Burnhope on September 4, 1861. Jane and her parents had joined the LDS church and Nathaniel also soon became a "Mormon." They had two children, Isobell and William, before they left on "The General McClellan," one of three ships chartered by the Church to take British converts to America. The ship left Liverpool, England, in May of 1864, and arrived in New York a month later. From there, the company traveled by train to St. Joseph, Missouri, and then up the Missouri river to Wyoming, Nebraska Territory. The last stage of the journey, about 1,000 miles, was accomplished by wagon train; but just 14 days before the wagons reached the Salt Lake Valley, Nathaniel and Jane's young son Willie died.

A year later, while the family was living in American Fork, Jane also died. Needing a mother for his daughter, and presumably, the comfort of a wife for himself, Nathaniel soon married Margaret Philpot, an English spinster known as "Maggie." About 18 months later, a daughter, Elizabeth Spens, was born. However, within two short years, Maggie died, leaving Nathaniel alone again and with two young daughters. A year later

Nathaniel married Mary Campbell, who like him, was a Scots convert and immigrant. Mary not only took his daughters into her heart, but she also bore him 12 children.

Sometime in 1872, the Spens family moved to Salt Lake City, and over the next 19 years Spens' name can be found in the Salt Lake Directory with his occupation listed as "painter." The early pioneers had few luxuries and one way they decorated was by techniques such as "graining," making pine furniture look like hardwood. Nathaniel had brought a set of graining combs with him from England and was skilled in their use. He worked on the Salt Lake Temple and the Tabernacle, graining the pine benches and making the pine pillars look like marble. Some records indicate Nathaniel also did the wood graining in the baptistry of the Manti Temple.

In Salt Lake, Charles R. Savage, a successful photographer, had an art gallery that Nathaniel was able to frequent, being out of work at various times. He painted and perhaps traded the paintings for supplies; no records exist of any sales. But when Nathaniel became a citizen of the United States in 1882, he became eligible to obtain land by homesteading. The Spens moved to Mt. Pleasant, Sanpete Valley, in 1889, having bought part of a farm with the proceeds from the sale of their house and property in Salt Lake and applying for an additional 80 acres of land under the terms of the Homestead Act.

There Nathaniel trained his boys in the art of furniture building and decorating, and they all learned how to farm. The two older sons soon married and took over most of the work on the farm, leaving Nathaniel time to return to his wood graining and painting. According to Mary's sister Jen, who lived with the Spens for a year, "Nathaniel was a large man in stature and a fine looking man. He was a painter by trade and an artist. He painted two pictures for my mother and Dad and they are real art. He decorated homes most beautifully. He was very sweet and considerate of everybody."

In 1893, Charles R. Savage, the photographer and art gallery owner, took Nathaniel's best painting, *The Battle of Trafalga*, and some of his wood graining samples to Illinois where they were displayed as part of Utah's exhibit in the Chicago World's Fair.

Nathaniel continued to live on the farm and paint and grain woods until he died in 1916, having been in poor health for some time due to a sore leg that had never healed. Five years later his wife Mary died as the result of gangrene. They were both buried in the Mt. Pleasant cemetery.

Nathaniel Spens was a self-taught painter and many of his paintings are copies from popular magazines, chromos, and the like. His painting, *Deacon Jones' Experience*, was painted in 1876 and is based on a painting by American artist Archibald Willard (1836-1918) also entitled "Deacon Jones' Experience." John Lyon, an LDS hymn writer and poet, inspired perhaps by the same chromo [colored lithograph] of Willard's painting, which was displayed in the photographer Charles Savage's window, wrote a humorous poem entitled "Family Prayer." The poem tells the story of a family kneeling for prayer, who get interrupted by a cat and dog fight. The moment depicted in Spens' painting is

when the cat jumps to safety on Deacon Jones' back and the two sons begin to lose their sense of devotion and holy feelings.

Family Prayer

by John Lyon

'Tis sometimes hard to be devout at prayer,
For devils then will lead our minds astray
By some injected thought, or outward snare,
And turn the currents of our thoughts away
From holy things, in spite of all our care,
So artful are they, watching night and day,
To work our ruin, by some hidden guise,
Which, when found out, we heartily despise.

This story's of a countryman's devotion,
While praying with his wife and two small sons,
Who of a dog and cat had little notion,
Were winking by the fireside without hoise,
When all at once, by some infernal motion,
Snap growled at Puss, and gave her such a noise,
When she hissed, spitting, jumped from the attack
And fastened claw-deep on the farmer's back.

The boys laughed loud to see at pray'r such fun'
While father groaned, and swore an oath or two;

The cat kept scratching where she'd safety won
Above the reach of Snap, who growled, and grew
More furious barking as at Puss he run,
Till all the family were in a stew,
Nor could continue longer in their devotion
With such unholy feelings and commotion.

"O Lord!" he cried, in accents quite emphatic-
Rather more serious than his praying mood-
But which he'd often done, stung with rheumatic;
His wife, as every loving woman should,
Roared out, "Confound that dog!" in tones erratic,

"And that singed cat that's always in a feud";
And rising from the knees in holy ire
Caught Snap and threw him plump into the fire.

The husband, sorry for his poor burnt dog,
Threw Puss in fury at his angry wife;
And she, to be revenged, commenced to flog
Her little boys, for laughing at the strife-
"Who were," she said, "like father, the old rogue,
Who never did a square thing in his life."
So on they went, a town's talk and their sport,
Until they parted at the probate court.

Such is a picture I have seen of late,
Suggesting quarrels of a family kind,
That led to greater, and a sadder fate,
To say and do things in our passion blind
Which, when with other, meaner acts combined,
Led on to folly, in an angry state,
To sober thought, and helpless do fail
To calmly act, as we would read this tale.

The poem has been anthologized in Richard A. Craecroft and Neal E. Lambert's *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974) 167. Used by permission of the authors

The poem also is printed in T. Edgar Lyon, Jr.'s *John Lyon: The Life of a Pioneer Poet* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989) 299-300.

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING (History, Aesthetics, Criticism)

What is happening in this picture? What happened before this scene took place? Is everybody's mood the same? What are the individual characters thinking and feeling? What will happen next? What will happen when the prayer is finished? What makes this painting unique?

What style is this painting? How might the painting be different if the artist had had more training? This painting is a copy of a work by another artist, does that make it "art"? Why or why not?

What makes this painting "good" or "not good"? How is the painting valuable? Who is the painting most valuable to? Why? Where does this painting belong?

ACTIVITIES

Art

Objective: The students will understand the narrative qualities of artworks through researching theirs and another culture's narrative art forms.

After viewing the artwork, *Deacon Jones' Experience, Deacon's Prayer*, have the students briefly give a narration that explains what is happening within the artwork. Explain to the students that art is often a means to communicate ideas or concepts and can illustrate a story. To demonstrate art's story telling or narrative qualities, have the students locate artworks that have visual meanings (For example, Native American pottery and rugs, Chinese landscape ink washes (read from right to left), African ceremonial masks). Assign the students to research another culture's art forms and then decide which works communicate ideas. Encourage them to compare and contrast their messages or narrative qualities with art forms from their own culture.

Art

Objective: The students will construct a flip-picture book showing a figure or body part that completes a cycle of motion.

Each student will need 5-20 pieces of paper, all the same size. Stack the papers and fold them in half, then staple through all thicknesses near the fold. The students will need to make simple sketches to plan the drawings for their books. Very simple figures work the best—stick figures, an arm throwing a ball, or a mouth opening and closing. After deciding what kind of movement they are going to draw, the students will start by drawing the figure or body part on the last page. They will work from the back to the front of the book, making each figure slightly different from the last one and following the plan they sketched out earlier. The students will probably need to practice flipping the pages smoothly. Have them demonstrate their books for each other and try other students' books.

See *Tales To Tell*, the Crayola DREAM-MAKERS teacher packet page 20, for how to use flip books to show transformation, one kind of sequence.

Art

Objective: The students will demonstrate their understanding of SETTING,

CHARACTER, and EVENTS by creating an artwork that exhibits these three components.

See other art activities in this packet and refer to the Crayola packet for specific activities that focus on SETTING, CHARACTER, and EVENTS. Use an activity that focuses on setting, one on character, and one on an event. Then have students do a project that combines their knowledge of all three, such as one of those listed below:

Show the class the slide of *Deacon Jones' Experience, Deacon's Prayer* and have the students use the knowledge they gained from the three previous activities to discuss how Spens has created a sense of time and place (setting), has made the people depicted seem like individuals (character), and has portrayed an event by illustrating one moment that gives viewers clues to what was happening before and to what may happen next.

Have the students choose an EVENT to illustrate. They may depict the event in any way that seems appropriate, but the artwork must start with the decision of how the student will create a suitable SETTING for the event. The student should consider what the most important qualities and characteristics of the setting are, choose the media, and make a thumbnail sketch of the setting, perhaps jotting down notes on techniques to be used. Then the student should determine who or what the CHARACTERS are and how the characters' individuality can be conveyed visually. Again, thumbnail sketches may be helpful.

This activity is the perfect chance to use a multimedia approach, but unless that is a specific objective, allow the students to decide what media will best suit their planned artwork. Provide the students plenty of time to complete their projects. Display the finished products for the whole school to see. You may want to have a special exhibit for family and friends or schedule the activity so it will be finished just before parent-teacher conferences or another event that brings family members to school.

Variation for Younger Students or for Groups: Have the class decide on an event they want to portray (you may want to use an event from your Social Studies curriculum). Divide the event into a sequence of three to five panels and assign groups to design and produce the panels. As above, the students should use all they know about creating SETTING and portraying CHARACTERS and an EVENT. Students should be encouraged to work together to plan and to produce the artwork. Make sure each child participates. Display the finished panels in your room or in another place in the school.

Or, decide on the event and then have three groups, one each for SETTING, CHARACTER, and EVENT. The groups will work separately to make general decisions about their assigned part but will need to coordinate their designs to produce a congruent artwork.

Use any of the other activities in this packet in completing this and the previously described activity. You may find ways to involve other disciplines or to spark ideas for the artwork by looking at other activities, particularly those in the Activities for *Lizard*

Relay by Carel Brest van Kempen.

Language Arts

Objective: To identify, discuss, and write about life in the 1870s as portrayed in *Deacon Jones' Experience*.

Show the slide of the painting and lead a discussion, using the QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING. Have the students pick one of the questions and write a response. Or, have the students write a story using the characters portrayed in the painting, but putting them in a different situation.

Social Studies

Objective: To have the students explore family life in the 1800s.

Use the painting as the springboard for a discussion in social studies or history (or use another artwork which illustrates some facet of life from the appropriate period for your class). After looking at the painting, the class can discuss questions like the following: What was daily life like in the 1870s? How would the individual members of the family have spent their day? What would you miss most if you became a time traveler and had to live with this family? What would be different that you might like? What might this family do that is the same as in your family?

Other ideas for ways to tie the painting to social studies or history lessons may be found in your history or social studies textbook.