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Torleif Knaphus, Sculptor Saint

By William G. Hartley



William G. Hartley, "Torleif Knaphus, Sculptor Saint," *Ensign*, Jul 1980, 11

Banquet guests applauded. The tall, strong Norwegian with jet black, wavy hair walked proudly back to his table. He had just won the second-place javelin-throwing award for all of Western Norway. Yet that night the athlete, Torleif Knaphus, would announce to friends that he was abruptly quitting sports to "spend all my strength and physical courage for art." He was nineteen years old.

Torleif was born 14 December 1881 in Vats, Stavanger, Norway, and grew up amid "beautiful mountains and many lakes." Like his Viking ancestors, he loved physical activity. Farm work made him muscular, and as a schoolboy he "fought every boy in school which did not run—and every gate on the roadway I jumped over, instead of walking through." As a teenager he loved long-distance swims in the cold blue lakes nearby. He joined the local track club, regularly taking honors in swimming and high jumping, and in throwing the discus, hammer, and shot.

But art skills came to him early in life, too. At age five, while caring for sheep high in the hills, he passed the time by carving birds and human heads out of wood. Later his mother gave him a bound book with blank pages so he could sketch Norway's nature. He later recalled that he found "great joy in expressing myself even then in those elementary drawings." [1](#)

At age fourteen Torleif took out an apprenticeship in a paint and decorating shop in Haugesund, a job his father helped him find. But the urge to go to sea overcame him. So, like his Viking forbears, he sailed the northern seas between Norway and Iceland on Norwegian fishing boats. Seafaring, strangely enough, convinced him to become an artist. The reds and golds of ocean sunrises and sunsets, the magnificent midnight sun, the shimmering pastels of the northern lights, the stark white arctic ice, and other beauties awed him:

"Art was driven into my soul by the beautiful summer nights I spent as a sailor on the Arctic Ocean. When our little vessel was tossed around by giant blue-green waves under the most dramatic sky in the great Atlantic zone, I decided firmly to be an artist." [2](#)

He gave up the hazards of sea life, partly because of his mother's pleadings. Back home he completed his apprenticeship in "decoration painting," earning his master's slip which entitled him to be bonded and open his own shop. But Torleif the artist, like Torleif the athlete, sought to excel. Finding he needed advanced training, the day after the sports awards banquet he boarded a ship for Oslo (then called Christiania), Norway's capital.

At Oslo his young life took two crucial turns. Although he was accepted for study under Harriet Backer at her famous art school, he also attended the Royal Art School where he learned sculpturing from Lars Utne and decided to make it his life's work.

The second and more important turning point came one night when a roommate pinned him and his other roomie to the floor, "demanding us to buy tickets to a concert." All three enjoyed a Latter-day Saint production, which introduced Torleif to Mormonism. The trio went to other LDS meetings, and Torleif recalled, "It was easy for me to see and understand that this was the only true Church of God." Within three months he requested baptism. One cold February day in 1902, he said, "We walked on the 2-inch ice, crossed the terrain covered with snow, slid down over the snow and ice to the three feet thick broken up ice and then on the broken up ice I undressed and was baptized." [3](#) From that chilly moment his commitment to the restored gospel never wavered.

For three years the sculptor-to-be studied at Oslo. His talent earned him a prestigious scholarship to study in Rome, but love for the gospel forced him to forsake it, and instead he emigrated to Utah to be among the

Saints, despite protests from his Protestant family.

Settling in Salt Lake City in 1906, the Norwegian newcomer became an eager member of the Church Scandinavian group. Despite poor English he picked up small art jobs. He did some painting in the Tabernacle and Salt Lake Temple, and he published an illustration in the *Juvenile Instructor*. The city's Scandinavian weekly, the *Bibuken*, noted in 1909 that Torleif was sculpturing busts of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. That year he met and courted Emilia Helena Christensen—"Millie"—and they were married in the Salt Lake Temple.

Soon they moved to Utah's Scandinavian center, Sanpete County, where, at the town of Central, Torleif and his brother Andrew set up a house painting company. (Andrew was the only other member of the Knaphus family to join the Church.) But in 1912 Andrew's mission call broke up the company, and Torleif, realizing he needed more training to succeed as a sculptor, decided to accompany Andrew to Europe.

For a full year he studied in Paris at the Julian Academy, working under some of the world's greatest sculptors. There he decided to specialize in sculpturing monuments. Then, before going home, he spent six months in New York studying at the Art Students' League. When he returned to Utah he planned to devote his painting and sculpturing talents to the Church.

During his first year back he was hired by the Church to work on the Hawaiian Temple (constructed 1915–19). For half a year he did interior work and helped Avard Fairbanks sculpture the twelve oxen supporting the basement baptismal font. His children vividly remember him bringing home his pay: a sack of twenty-dollar gold pieces. These earnings enabled the growing Knaphus family to buy a modest Salt Lake City home.⁴

Soon another new temple, this one at Cardston, Alberta (constructed 1913–23), required his skills. There he carefully crafted the model for the baptismal oxen. In later years he judged this to be his all-time favorite font creation. Then, when temple exterior work began, he returned to Cardston and sculptured a large bas relief (sculptured scene slightly raised from background), "Christ the Fountainhead." It depicts the Savior and the Samaritan woman at the well, a scene mirrored in a reflecting pool at its base.⁵ (The pool was later removed.)



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A bas-relief from the Cardston Temple of the Savior and the woman at the well.

For the Arizona Temple, dedicated in 1927, Torleif produced two impressive sculptures. The twelve terra cotta (baked clay) oxen beneath the baptismal font are his creation. So too are the eight detailed friezes (long, narrow, horizontal panels) forming an ornamental band around the tops of the north and south outside walls.

To make the friezes, Torleif formed plaster-of-paris models from sketches drawn by artist A. B. Wright. A California firm, using the models, cast the friezes in terra cotta. The figures, detailed and remarkably true to life, depict the gathering of Israel to the Rocky Mountains. Portrayed are French and Italian peasants, some in climbing togs after descending the Alps; a wife pleading with her husband to join her; people in Holland preparing to board ship; an Englishman, some Welsh and Irish, and a Scotsman arriving in America; various people in their national dress crossing the plains; and Mexicans, Spanish-Americans, Indians, and Polynesians traveling to Zion. Means of transport depicted include a handcart, canoe, ship, donkey, and horse.⁶

During his lifetime Torleif's skilled hands touched and beautified many temples. He fashioned the oxen and font for the Idaho Falls Temple (dedicated 1945), crafted busts of Church presidents and other interior decorations for the Salt Lake Temple, did touch-up painting inside the Hawaii Temple, helped M. F. Malin do sculpture work for the Los Angeles Temple and grounds, and helped with the Oakland Temple baptismal font.

Torleif's best known statue is the Handcart Monument, now one of Mormonism's most recognized symbols. When the Daughters of the Handcart Pioneers commissioned him to memorialize the heroic handcart trek, Torleif intricately detailed a five-inch-high scale model out of clay, from which he copied the three-foot-high bronze monument. It features a rickety cart with much worn wheels. From one side sags a ragged quilt, and underneath hangs a kettle. On a seat sits a small girl. Pulling the cart is a man, bearded and inured to hardship.

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