

# History of the Mesa Arizona Temple

In 1920, LDS Church President Heber J. Grant announced plans to construct a temple in the city of Mesa, Arizona. This temple would be an oasis in the desert – a sanctuary – for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints living outside historically LDS communities. Instead of asking church members to move to Utah to be near temples at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, church leaders started taking the temples to the people. Construction of a temple in Mesa, Arizona complemented temples being built in Laie, Hawaii and Cardston, Alberta, Canada.

Architects Ramm Hansen and Don Carlos Young were selected to design the Mesa Temple following a design competition. Their neo classical temple with its strong horizontal elements and buff colored terra cotta was a strong departure from older LDS temples made of stone and topped with steeples. The neo classical design of the building exterior continued throughout the interior of the building. A focal point of the temple interior were large murals painted by prominent LDS artists J. Leo Fairbanks, Lee Greene Richards, Fritzof Weberg, A.B. Wright, and LeConte Stewart. The temple baptismal font, one of the most important symbolic elements in any LDS temple, was designed by Torliel Knaphus. Architects Young and Hansen also designed a formal landscape with reflecting pools and trees that complemented the temple design. The lushness of the landscape created a strong contrast to the desert around the temple.

The idea of taking the temple to the people was reinforced in decorative elements on the temple exterior. A decorative frieze at the top corners of the building depicting the nations of the earth was designed by artist A.B. Wright. Seen on these panels are Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, Mexicans, pioneers traveling to the western United States, southern Europeans, central Europeans, Scandinavians, and people from the British Isles.

Following several years of construction, President Heber J. Grant dedicated the temple in 1927. The temple was immediately put into full service for the most sacred religious rituals of the LDS Church including marriages and proxy baptisms.

The Mesa Temple sponsored a major change in LDS temple worship when, in 1945, the first temple ceremonies were conducted in Spanish in any temple of the church. Temple workers learned Spanish for the change. Church members from Mexico and throughout the southwest United States traveled to the temple to participate in temple work for the first time in their native language. Jose Gracia and his wife Emma traveled from Monterrey, Mexico to be sealed in a temple. Jose later said, “We have not come here on a pleasure trip. We have come to perform a work for ourselves and our fathers. The promises made to our fathers are being fulfilled in us. Perhaps some of us have made sacrifices but those that have we made are not in vain. We are joyous in having made them.”<sup>i</sup> Today, LDS temple ceremonies are conducted in dozens of languages around the world.

The Mesa Temple has had a number of renovations since its completion in 1927. Exterior courtyards were enclosed in the 1950s. A visitors’ center to the north of the temple was

constructed in 1958 and expanded in 1981. The largest modifications occurred with construction of a new addition to the south in the 1970s. A pageant with its roots in an Easter sunrise service in 1938 as well as Christmas light displays draws thousands of visitors to the temple every year.

Now, after 91 years of service in the Mesa community, this beloved temple is again in need of some repairs. The Church plans to preserve and repair original features of the temple including the gardens and water features on the outside and murals and the baptismal font on the inside, while improving the building's function and efficiency for the next generation. At the end of the project the church will invite the public to visit the temple during an open house to see all that has been done to care for this important landmark in Mesa.

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<sup>i</sup> Henry A. Smith, "200 Lamanites Gather In History-Making Conference, Temple Sessions," *The Church News*, November 10, 1945, p. 8.