

“Claiming Power in Polygamy: Augusta Joyce Crocheron’s Representative Women of Deseret”

- 1 In 1883, Augusta Joyce Crocheron, a Salt Lake City artist, writer, and poet, published *Representative Women of Deseret*, a ca. 31” x 20” lithograph with applied photographic portraits (Fig. 1). The lithograph was accompanied by a book of biographical sketches.¹ Through image and text, Crocheron celebrated her accomplished female peers in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, popularly known as Mormons, employing “Deseret,” the Latter-day Saints’ original name for their western settlement, to refer to a Mormon homeland. The book has been an important source for historians, yet the lithograph—among the most frequently-reproduced artworks by a nineteenth-century Mormon woman—has received only limited attention. Created at a moment when Latter-day Saints faced enormous public pressure to end the practice of polygamy, *Representative Women of Deseret* heralded the qualifications, accomplishments, and agency of Mormon women, countering prevailing stereotypes that rendered them as pitiable, deluded, or corrupted. While Crocheron defended polygamy to those outside the faith, she also addressed insiders, promoting the power of women within a patriarchal organization.

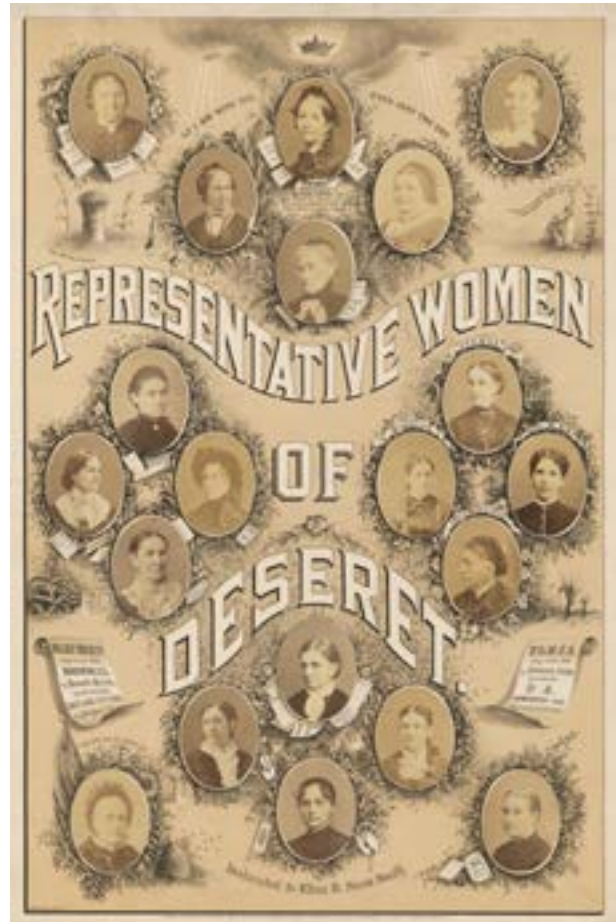


Fig. 1 Augusta Joyce Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret*, 1883, lithograph with applied photographs, 31 5/16” x 20 7/8” (79.53 x 53 cm). Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

- 2 Crocheron hoped to convince the opponents of polygamy that “this people are in earnest and in the right, and that God is with them.”² Yet representing polygamy in a positive light posed a daunting challenge. For approximately fifty years, Latter-day Saints had openly practiced a polygynous social structure they called “plural marriage.” Introduced in secret by the church’s founder, Joseph Smith, it became public knowledge after Latter-day Saints, led by Brigham Young, fled to the Great Basin.³ Federal legislators responded with a series of increasingly punitive anti-polygamy laws until Latter-day

Saints relented and began curtailing the practice in 1890. Crocheron published her lithograph near the height of the crisis in the 1880s, when more than a thousand Mormon men were convicted of polygamy-related offenses and many Latter-day Saint leaders went into hiding to avoid arrest.⁴ Outside Utah, the public looked on with repulsed fascination. Numerous prints, periodicals, and illustrated books portrayed polygamous Mormon wives as deluded victims, lecherous hags, or obstreperous usurpers of their husbands' masculinity.⁵ Latter-day Saint artists, however, seldom countered with positive representations of polygamy, to avoid creating fodder for mocking detractors or evidence that could be used in criminal proceedings.⁶

- 3 Crocheron's strategy was to tacitly represent plural marriage by depicting its positive effects as evinced in the portraits of its female practitioners. To reveal that "our women are not from the dregs of civilization, led and controlled by stronger minds," she relied on the established vocabulary of women's suffrage portraits, an arena that she knew well as an active participant in the national suffrage movement.⁷ She was directly inspired by an 1870 pro-suffrage lithograph by L. Schamer titled *Representative Women*, depicting portraits of seven prominent suffrage advocates (Fig. 2).⁸ Crocheron followed Schamer in abandoning the traditional format of women shown demurely at their husbands' side and instead represented them with bold individual portraits—dignified, consequential women whose accomplishments merited respect.



Fig. 2 L. Schamer, *Representative Women*, 1870, lithograph, 16 1/16" x 12 5/16" (40.8 x 31.2 cm). Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

- 4 While Crocheron was inspired by the national suffrage movement, her focus was not on gaining suffrage for Utah women—they had already achieved it in 1870—but on keeping it. The 1882 Edmunds Act had stripped the right to vote from women in polygamous marriages, and the 1887 Edmunds-Tucker Act would disenfranchise all Utah women.⁹ Always in an uneasy relationship with their non-Mormon peers in the suffrage movement, Latter-day Saint women faced a double hurdle in having to argue for their self-determination as women while defending their marriage system.¹⁰ To give her argument extra weight, Crocheron added numerous symbolic elements to the lithograph. Eliza R. Snow Smith, a celebrated writer and long-time president of the church's women's organization, the Relief Society, is positioned at the center top among miniature representations of her best-known publications. Emmeline Wells (immediately below the word "Deseret") is flanked by copies of the newspaper she edited, *Woman's Exponent*, along with pens declaring her skill as a writer and references to her leadership in the Central Grain Committee and Deseret Hospital Association. A guitar and piano next to Zina Y. Williams reflect her celebrity as a musician; ribbons above the portraits of other women identify the organizations that they led, and so on, for nearly all the women in the portrait. Other textual and visual elements extend these accolades to the entire community of Mormon women, proclaiming their devotion as mothers (in the woman beseeching divine help for her children near the top right), healers (in the text "I was sick and ye visited me," quoting Matthew 25:36), and industrious workers (symbolized by the beehive near the bottom left). Crocheron added foliage and flowers to the portrait frames, hinting that despite their professional achievements, these women still exemplified proper femininity as imagined by Americans of the era.
- 5 Crocheron carefully tuned the image to appeal to both Mormon and non-Mormon viewers. At the top, for example, a radiant crown in a bank of clouds signals divine presence while a pair of hands casts rays of light on the subjects below. These emblems are symbols of divine benediction in a broader Christian visual culture, but to Latter-day Saints, the rays of light might reference revelation as the basis of Joseph Smith's Restoration, while the crown could allude to the potential to "inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities . . ." in the post-mortal exaltation Latter-day Saints hoped to achieve, including through fulfilling the "new and everlasting covenant" of plural marriage (Doctrine and Covenants 132:19). The texts that Crocheron employed are similarly bivalent. The inscription at the top, for example, "Lo I am with you, even unto the end," would read to non-Mormon Christians as a slightly paraphrased version of Jesus's commission to his disciples concluding the Gospel of Matthew, but Latter-day Saints would recognize the specific phrasing from the Doctrine and Covenants, where it appears twice as an affirmation of divine support and a promise of eventual triumph to the first generation of Latter-day Saints experiencing persecution (100:12 and 105:41), an encouragement to face then-current trials with similar equanimity.
- 6 While Crocheron hoped to influence outsiders, she simultaneously targeted an important audience *within* Mormonism: the church's male leadership. In an explicitly patriarchal society where only men were ordained to the priesthood and thus eligible for ecclesiastical office, women had to advocate for their own agency.¹¹ Crocheron's project celebrated women's accomplishments and leadership in the church's female-directed

organizations for adult women, young women, and children, without positioning them beneath—or even referencing—the ordained priesthood leaders to whom they were theoretically subordinate. The only men the print names are the church’s beloved (and deceased) early leaders; banners on either side of the word “Deseret” remind viewers that Joseph Smith and Brigham Young had established the female-led organizations. Rather than paying homage to the church’s then-current leadership, Crocheron asserted Latter-day Saint female leaders’ independent authority as a mandate of the faith’s two most revered early leaders, claiming an unimpeachable sanction for self-governance. Other elements within the lithograph reinforce the importance of female leadership within the church, as in the sheaf of wheat above the text “The Lord will provide,” referencing the Relief Society’s grain storage program (led by Wells), a significant exercise of financial and organizational authority which had been sanctioned by top leadership despite complaints from local male leaders.¹²

- 7 Despite its confident depiction of Mormon women’s agency as an accomplished fact, *Representative Women of Deseret* represented an aspirational ideal more than lived reality. The banner on the left describing the Relief Society’s founding hints at a more complicated and less self-determined narrative: the society’s reorganization was necessary because it had previously been repudiated by Brigham Young and his allies in response to the society’s founding leader, Emma Smith’s (Joseph’s widow and the society’s founding president), denunciation of polygamy.¹³ Scholars have interpreted the period between Smith’s death in 1844 and Crocheron’s work in 1883, when polygamy was being configured as a formally regulated social system, as a time of declension, rather than expansion of rights and opportunities for Mormon women. Even in supporting the Relief Society’s re-establishment and mobilizing its members in support of women’s suffrage, Brigham Young was working more to advance the church’s position in its ongoing political conflicts than to meaningfully redirect social or spiritual power toward Latter-day Saint women.¹⁴ *Representative Women of Deseret*’s promotion of women as autonomous leaders within Mormonism is in tension with the lived experience of the subjects it depicts, who navigated the complexities inherent in building and exercising agency within a patriarchal system that granted and disciplined power to further its own ends.¹⁵
- 8 In addition, notwithstanding the title, the lithograph is hardly representative of the diversity of nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint women. Crocheron limited her selection to women in relatively elite circumstances, many of whom were members of the most prominent families in Utah Territory. They were exactly the sort of women who stood to benefit the most from plural marriage: with opportunities for education, ample financial resources, and a wide support network among their female Latter-day Saint peers, they were able to take full advantage of the opportunities that polygamy afforded its most fortunate practitioners—in, for example, pursuing education and careers while relying on other wives to manage the household and tend to children.¹⁶ The numerous impoverished women who entered polygamous marriages as a means of survival are not represented at all.¹⁷ The lithograph also fails to represent women of color. Despite their absence from the image, these women were not unknown to the women in the print. Elvira Barney, for example, published an interview with Jane Elizabeth Manning James, one of the most prominent African American Latter-day Saints in the late-

nineteenth century, and Eliza R. Snow Smith had helped organize Relief Society units that included Native American women as members and leaders.¹⁸ Yet Native American and African American Latter-day Saint women are entirely absent from the project, as they were excluded from the church's high-level female leadership and denied access to the ranks of the social elite. The exclusion of women of color also reinforced the lithograph's public pronouncement of Latter-day Saint social fitness at a time when critics questioned whether polygamous Mormons could truly be considered "white."¹⁹

- ⁹ *Representative Women of Deseret* documents the intersecting dynamics of religion, gender, class, and race in nineteenth-century America. By representing plural marriage obliquely, through the virtuous, accomplished lives of some of its best-known practitioners, Crocheron created one of the few visual portrayals of polygamy from a Latter-day Saint perspective that could be safely published beyond the confines of Mormonism—while arguing for the institutional power of women within the church to her Mormon viewers. Her project offered a bold argument for female agency, while its omissions reveal how women's access to empowerment was limited by social hierarchies of gender, race, and class.

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Notes

- 1 Augusta Joyce Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret, A Book of Biographical Sketches to Accompany the Picture Bearing the Same Title* (J. C. Graham & Co., 1884). The lithograph was printed by the Graphic Company of New York with blank ovals; photographs (not created by Crocheron) were applied in Salt Lake City. See “Women of Deseret,” *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City), January 30, 1884. On Crocheron, see Judith Rasmussen Dushku and Patricia Rasmussen Eaton-Gadsby, “Augusta J. Crocheron,” in *Sister Saints*, by Vicky Burgess-Olson, *Studies in Mormon History*, ed. James B. Allen, vol. 5 (Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 483–94.
- 2 Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret*, “Introductory.”
- 3 See Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Signature Books, 1989).
- 4 Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-Day Saints, 1830-1900* (Harvard University Press, 1958), 356–79.
- 5 Gary L. Bunker and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Graphic Image, 1834-1914: Cartoons, Caricatures, and Illustrations* (University of Utah Press, 1983), 123–36.
- 6 Mary Campbell, *Charles Ellis Johnson and the Erotic Mormon Image* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 120–21.
- 7 Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret*, “Introductory”; Jennifer Reeder, “Turning the Key: Understanding Mormon Women’s Material Culture,” in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Matthew Bowman and Kate Holbrook (University of Utah Press, 2016), 74.
- 8 Allison K. Lange, *Picturing Power: Images in the Women’s Suffrage Movement* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 49–51, 79–80. Schamer’s version, in turn, was an updated version of an 1857 lithograph by Leopold Grozelier. The title of all these prints ultimately derives from a lecture series by Ralph Waldo Emerson; Grozelier had produced a similar lithograph of “Representative Men” before publishing “Representative Women.”
- 9 See Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
- 10 Joan Smyth Iversen, *The Antipolygamy Controversy in U. S. Women’s Movements, 1880-1925: A Debate on the American Home* (Routledge, 1997), 31–33.
- 11 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich provides a host of examples of how they did so in *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870* (Knopf, 2017).
- 12 Jessie L. Embry, “Grain Storage: The Balance of Power Between Priesthood Authority and Relief Society Autonomy,” *Dialogue* 15, no. 4 (1982): 61.
- 13 Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Deseret Book, 1992), 62-63, 75-82, 86-87.

- 14 Peter Coviello, *Make Yourself Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 122-124.
- 15 See Catherine A. Brekus, "Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency," in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Matthew Bowman and Kate Holbrook (University of Utah Press, 2016), 15-41.
- 16 Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, "The 'Leading Sisters': A Female Hierarchy in Nineteenth Century Mormon Society," *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 26-27.
- 17 On plural marriages spurred by economic hardship, see Kathryn M. Daynes, *More Wives than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840-1910* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 119-23.
- 18 Quincy D. Newell, *Your Sister in the Gospel: The Life of Jane Manning James, a Nineteenth-Century Black Mormon* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 124, 142-43; "Visit to Sanpete," *Woman's Exponent* (Salt Lake City, UT) 9, no. 6 (1880): 44-45.
- 19 See W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford University Press, 2015).



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