

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

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Introducing the Types & Shadows Archive: excerpts from past Quaker writings on the arts

What is the function of art in religious education?

The image educates where reason never reaches. With the desperation of our need, we must un-inhibit and learn to use the language of the spirit.

by Dorothea Blom

Excerpts from a paper originally published by the Religious Education Committee of Friends General Conference. [undated -- given to the Philadelphia YM Library in 1977]

Both secular and religious training still emphasize the factual, literal side of life. They labor on the assumption that you train the intellect and the memory. If you pour in enough facts of the kind you think important, you "educate" a person. Much religious education gets bogged down in reducing Biblical material and concepts of God and the spirit to mere facts. Great effort goes into either trying to establish literal understanding or in rationalizing or explaining away what can't be "believed."

Whether "liberal" or "conservative," religious education often suffers the same malaise, the malaise of culture itself. The approach in the last few generations has bred many atheists. What is more, it has alienated many deeply religious and creative people from religious institutions. Albert Einstein insisted that pure science, art and religion all come from the same source. Paul Tillich says the new religious feeling of recent generations has tended to come outside of religious institutions, much of it in the best of modern art.

In most of history the major function of art has been to serve religion. Instinctively (when instinct is not discredited), humankind recognized art as a powerful educator of the depth and breadth of man, that measure in him "where words come from." The image educates where reason never reaches. With the desperation of our need, we must un-inhibit and learn to use the language of the spirit. . . .

When Quakers rejected the arts in the 17th century, they swept aside much that was shallow and frivolous. Even religious art was mere illustration, confined to a portrayal of measurable objects in measurable space. Quakerism acted upon the same wisdom as the Hebrews three thousand

years before, when these spiritual ancestors of ours rejected the figurative arts. On either side of them, in Egypt and Assyria, they saw the figurative arts serving decadence and glorifying ruler worship. For a hundred years now, modern art movements have rejected the community standard of art--lthough not art itself. They have struggled valiantly for more adequate visual languages, often failing, sometimes succeeding.

Quakerism's traditional disassociation with art puts it in a favored position for reclaiming art for religious purposes. Quakers, generally, have not equated the spirit and the Divine with sentimental and thin-blooded art. Quakerism is based on the assumption that the Divine may be known first-hand. Two most persistent symbols of religious reality, "the inner light" and "that of God in every man", stress the depths of man where new life comes through. Friends in London in the 1920s pioneered in giving several pages of their new *Faith and Practice* to the function of art in the religious life. Yet those pages never suggested bringing art into the Meeting for Worship. Quakerism has the advantage of never having been saddled with choice of art of one person or one generation, and we should keep this advantage. It gives far more freedom to grow with and in art.

Our greatest problem in incorporating art in our First Day Schools is one we share with the culture in general, religious and secular. Few teachers have a vital and growing relation to art. Art is like music: it asks much exposure and much open-ness, a gradual building of sensibility, a deepening trust of responses. Again, the very nature of Quakerism is favorable to this condition. Disadvantage can be transformed into adventure. .Quakers do not idolize authority. Quakers, more readily than many others, can be honest with children on the matter.

The teacher can say in effect:

"Our society specialized in building all sorts of wonderful things as well as some dangerous ones; while doing it we forgot a great deal about ourselves. We came to think that things that we can measure and weigh were more real than our feelings and our atti tudes about one another and our attitudes about the world.

"Now we need to re-discover these very important parts of life we forgot. Art has generally been the teacher in these matters, and we are going to explore what art can do. We need to because it will help us to know how best to use all the things we have inven ted. It will help us to like ourselves better, and therefore to like other people better. It will help us discover how alive life is. It will teach us how to love life better.

"You see, we discover that God isn't only long ago in Bible times or what other people talk about. We know God is speaking to us all the time in a sign language of the world He made, awakening new life in us with His language. I have to learn with you, because most people today, even adults, have to become like children and learn from the beginning."

In the teacher's favor is the human endowment for communication with art. The challenge lies in un-inhibiting what already exists. This profound longing deep within a person, this yearning to find a connection with life from one's depths: art is a link for making this connection.

For communication with art helps us to see. Unless the artist in us functions readily—as it did for Jesus, St. Francis and George Fox, for instance— we actually *see* very little in life. We recognize, we identify, we evaluate: we see what we remember, usually distorting what we see to fit the pattern of memory. Ordinarily, we see with scales of habit on our eyes. Art teaches us, as Blake puts it, to see *through*, not *with* the eyes. We see from a depth within us, and therefore see the depths in things. Clive Bell said that art grasps the universal within the particular. This implies, not Pantheism, but the world as the language of God, wooing the human race, awakening that of Himself within persons.

The great artist may reject traditional concepts of God. Usually he isn't interested in concepts. He may, in effect, be like Jung when asked if he believed in God. He laughed at the question and responded: "Believe in God! I don't have to *believe* in God any more than I need to *believe* in the ground I stand on. I know it's there."

Dorothea Blom (1911-1991) was a member of Purchase MM (NYYM). She taught adult courses in art history and art appreciation at various places, including Pendle Hill, and wrote 7 Pendle Hill pamphlets on art-related subjects.

We are grateful to Dorothea Blom's daughter, Juliana Blom Bates, and the Religious Education Committee of Friends General Conference for permission to reprint excerpts from this article.

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COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

Quaker Art and the Feminine Principle

There are two main schools of thought about where Quakerism came from. Rufus Jones saw Quakerism as essentially mystical, and tried to link it to the Continental mystics. His followers see us as being closer to the Catholics than to the Protestants. Hugh Barbour challenged this view, and tried to show that Quakerism is essentially an outgrowth of English Puritanism, and basically Protestant.

This question may shed valuable light on Friends' historic antipathy to the arts. I am challenged by a quotation from art historian Kenneth Clark's survey of Western civilization. Reflecting on the Reformation's attack on Catholic religious imagery in general and the cult of the Virgin in particular, he says:

The stabilising, comprehensive religions of the world, the religions which penetrate to every part of a man's being—in Egypt, India or China—gave the female principle of creation at least as much importance as the male, and wouldn't have taken seriously a philosophy that failed to include them both.

These were all what H. G. Wells called communities of obedience. The aggressive, nomadic societies—what he called communities of will—Israel, Islam, the Protestant North—conceived of their gods as male.

It's a curious fact that the all-male religions have produced no religious imagery—in most cases have positively forbidden it. The great religious art of the world is deeply involved with the female principle.

It should be noted that H. G. Wells, writing in an age which could still believe in “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever”, regarded the community of will as superior to the community of obedience. He saw the latter as static, passively submissive to tradition-bound human authority, whereas the community of will was dynamic, intent on changing the world.

In the context of the Clark quote, Puritanism is clearly a community of will. Its God was patriarchal, it rejected religious imagery, and its ethic of works radically changed society. Quakerism arose in Puritan England, and most of its converts had been Puritans. In their preaching early Friends were certainly aggressive, and their itinerant ministry may qualify them as nomadic. They outdid the Puritans in their rejection of religious imagery.

On the other hand, Quakerism had a strong feminine bent from the beginning. Early Friends tended to speak of God in male terms, but their conception of “God, Word, and Spirit” was Protean in its fluidity. Quakerism was essentially an inward religion, stressing the primacy of inward experience over outward forms. It embraced nonviolent, nurturing ways of being, and affirmed that women could be gifted as preachers and prophets—that “in Christ there is neither male nor female”.

Here the Clark-Wells model breaks down. Quakerism was, and is, a “community of obedience”—but in a very different sense from that envisioned by Wells. We speak of Holy Obedience—not to external human authority, but to the Light, the Inward Teacher. Holy Obedience is anything but “stabilizing;” it produces a radical inner transformation as a result of which one can no longer be conformed to this world. There is a sense in which stability indicates a *failure* of Holy Obedience.

It is paradoxical that a spirituality so deeply imbued with the feminine principle as Quakerism, far from producing great religious art, not only rejected the arts in a more extreme fashion than the Puritans, but maintained the taboo much longer.

Why should this be so? Perhaps it is due in part to the very *inwardness* of Quaker spirituality; the image is that of womb-darkness, gestation, waiting.

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