

From the Quaker Arts Archive:

A Friendly Conference on Art.

by Arthur Edwin Bye.

from the *Friends Intelligencer*, September 12, 1915

Chuck Fager recently turned up this 1915 article in the Friends Intelligencer (a Hicksite precursor of Friends Journal). This forgotten event may be the first Quaker conference on the arts ever! (Read Chuck's comments in [Through Whittier-colored Glasses; or, Art is like Broccoli.](#))

During the week of Eighth month 15th-20th a Conference on Art was held at the Whittier Guest House, Hampton Falls [NH?]. It is the first time, to the knowledge of the writer, that a group of Friends has made any attempt to discuss subjects pertaining to art. That such a conference should be projected—no matter of how informal a nature—is indicative of a change in the Society of Friends.

This particular change is of a two-fold nature. First, it means that our Society is beginning to show an appreciation of the outwardly beautiful; second, it means that the interests of the members of the Society are becoming so varied and multifold that they no longer devote themselves exclusively to purely religious or social matters. The writer hopes to show that this new interest in art is just as surely an outgrowth of Quakerism, just as surely a vital concern of the Society, as any other religious or social interest can be.

To-day the housing problem, garden cities, etc., are interesting Friends. Why? Because we have learned that a life cannot develop to its fullest capacity in sordid surroundings. We have profited by the mistakes of our forefathers, in one respect at least, in that we no longer repress the natural love of the beautiful. Fortunately for the future of our Society, the present generation has been taught an appreciation for music. Vocal culture has been taught in our schools; but after two hundred years of neglect, it will take some time for us to be able to sing. Drawing has likewise been taught in our schools, but seldom has this instruction ever been carried farther than that of mere eye-training. As a people we are still as ignorant of aesthetics as our seventeenth-century ancestors.

It is one of the strange problems of psychology that the human mind should have revolted, as it did with the Puritans and the Quakers, against all emotional expression. Historically we have understood the reason to be a protest against the corruption of the seventeenth century. The early Friend saw the outward world as bad, and therefore, in order to give all his attention to the inward, spiritual life, it was considered necessary to be dead unto the world.

As a consequence of the silent worship, singing as a religious exercise, was abandoned. Hymn singing and chanting occupied the principal time of the worship of the churches. It was an outward form, producing a temporary exaltation of spirit, an emotional state, which left the worshipper in a weaker

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condition than he was before he began to sing. The effect was considered as a sort of intoxication. The early Friends, too, saw that singing was often, if not generally, accompanied by revelry when it was not religious, hence it was dangerous, especially for the youth.

Until the Reformation the church was the great patron of the arts, and the arts only flourished through her patronage. Music and painting were so closely associated with the church, and church worship, that as late as the seventeenth century, when the church was generally corrupt, or seemed so,—when even the Puritan Reform was becoming empty and spiritless—so it can be understood that the arts shared the opprobrium of the church in the eyes of the Quakers. Painting, for instance, meant altar pieces wherein were represented sacred his objects of almost absolute worship. The Quakers saw men and women kneeling before statues and gazing in rapt veneration upon religious pictures. Art, apparently, encouraged the worship of images. Artists were engaged to paint banners whereon was represented our Lady enthroned, which banners were paraded about the streets on feast days and considered holy.

Such use of art was restricted more to Roman Catholic countries, but where the Friends did not see art employed for corrupt religious practices, they saw it employed—as in England—for purposes of vanity. Portraits savored of worldly vanity. Had England, however, been an artistic country—had Englishmen been naturally artistic, as was Holland and the Dutch—the early Friends might have had more patience with the arts in general. At that time, among Protestant countries, Holland was the chief in matters of art, and there painters were employed in the painting of genre subjects—of scenes from real life, of the pleasures and griefs of the poor—subjects legitimate for art from every point of view. The best artists of England were Dutch or Flemish, as Sir Anthony Van Dyke. But these were court painters, tribute payers to vanity. So in England, there was not a real art in the seventeenth century, and the Quakers, in consequence, had a distorted view of it.

But the mistake the Quakers made,—in their zeal for a religion pure and undefiled which consisted in the visiting of the fatherless and the widows in their affliction and of keeping one's self unspotted from from the world—their mistake was in casting aside entirely, as temptations of the Evil One, all that was externally lovely in the world.

This was just as true in the following century. One may take John Woolman as an example. Consider his care, as a tailor, never to make any clothing that would serve for anything more than a modest protection from the weather. Consider his personal appearance when he arrived in England. Consider his refusal to use articles of "luxury" of any kind. The influence of such men is not forgotten to-day, and well that it is so. But while we think of John Woolman, the figure of St. Francis of Assisi rises before us—another saint of the same self-denying type.

Francis of Assisi is perhaps the most popular of all the canonized saints and his memory the most venerated by non-Romanists to-day. St. Francis' universal influence, even in his own day, was realized to be a power of great force for or against the church, and so the church wisely folded her cloak about him and took him in. St. Francis appealed and has appealed ever since to the imagination of men. His life has in every generation been the inspiration of artists.

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Why has he exerted such an influence on art? Among the many answers to this question, we may say, it was his own intense love for the beautiful, as illustrated in his sermon to the birds. He was himself a musician and a poet and an artist. He illustrates the fact this man who has been called the nearest semblance to his Master, that a man may be "perfect even as your Father is perfect," and love the beautiful world in which his Father has placed him.

But the typical—the average Quaker—has always been a successful man of business. I speak of the typical Quaker, not the Quaker at his best. He is the highly-respected merchant—and outwardly prosperous, became respected. The typical Quaker, however, should be, just as well, the man of imagination, the artist or musician.

Why? Because, the message of Quakerism is supposed to be one of the spirit. Art is of the spirit.

Quakerism has stood for simplicity. But simplicity does not mean a disregard for art. If the Friendly principle of simplicity is carried out in one's life, a knowledge of the laws of harmony and taste is needed. A consistent simplicity, whether it be of conduct or of environment, will lead one to a love for art, and art will be rightly understood to be not the pursuit of luxuries which only the leisurely can enjoy, but as a necessity to the fulfilling of the higher life which each one desires.

How is it that when a Benjamin West has arisen, he has been forced to leave the Society? Its atmosphere has stifled him. He has found himself of no use in the Society. There was no appreciation of his art. Today, happily, with the belief that God has a use for every gift he has given, we are making more use of every kind and sort of man there is.

We have been wise in cultivating simple tastes and in avoiding what is bizarre, fanciful or the passing fashion of the moment. This tradition will protect us from the extravagances of the Futurists and Cubists. On the other hand we can err in becoming commonplace, lacking in individuality, possessing no originality. But a study of art, properly conducted, reveals beauties and mysteries hitherto hidden, broadens our knowledge of humanity, creates a wider sympathy, cultivates taste, develops character, and, more than all this, develops spirituality, for true works are creations of the spirit. Through them we can learn new workings of the spirit, have revealed to us new depths, and, with an understanding and appreciation of art, we can become leaders in a new field. Quakerism, if it could, like the church with St. Francis of Assisi, fold its cloak about the workers in the cause of art, would have a sphere of influence wider than it ever had before.

It is to be hoped that the Conference on Art at the Whittier Guest House will not be the only one of its kind, but will lead to further group study in Friendly communities.

[Commentary by Chuck Fager](#)

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