

A Quaker Art Pilgrimage

by Chuck Fager, FQA Clerk

What makes a Quaker artist?

This question was on my mind one warm morning last April as I drove to Williamsburg, Virginia to visit the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, where the largest Edward Hicks exhibit ever assembled was on display.

Just the range of the exhibit is impressive: fully half of all his extant Peaceable Kingdom paintings, arranged and analyzed chronologically from their beginnings in about 1818 to the last, on which his son had to do the final touches after Hicks's death in 1849; plus his magnificent late farm scenes, and the wonderful Noah's Ark. Did I mention the signs, his eyeglasses, and the biographical video?

Forgive my enthusiasm, but I'm a big Edward Hicks fan, and I loved every minute there. Up in the gift shop, they had the expected tote bags, posters and tee shirts but also the unexpected: very well-done plush figures of the Lion and the Leopard, complete with their striking facial expressions; yes, I spent a bundle there, and still lament the fact that the stuffed animal series evidently does not include the Lamb.

I'll leave the visual analysis of Hicks's work to others more qualified; besides the images, the fine curatorial work by Carolyn Weekley brought out how deeply this body of creativity was shaped some might say deformed by Hicks's Quakerism.

Indeed, throughout his life Hicks struggled with, and against, his irresistible urges to paint. Late in life he wrote of himself: "My constitutional nature has presented formidable obstacles to the attainment of that truly desirable character, a consistent and exemplary member of the Religious Society of Friends; one of which is an excessive fondness for painting, a trade to which I was brought up."

If he was unsparing of himself, he was equally harsh about visual arts, of which he wrote acidly that, "If the Christian world was in the real spirit of Christ, I do not believe there would be such a thing as a fine painter in Christendom." Painting pictures, he declared, "appears clearly to me to be one of those trifling, insignificant arts, which has never been of any substantial advantage to mankind." He called it "the inseparable companion of voluptuousness and pride," adding that "it has presaged the downfall of empires and kingdoms; and in my view stands now enrolled among the premonitory symptoms of the rapid decline of the American Republic."

The Peaceable Kingdom theme itself represented something of a compromise outcome of this ambivalence: it was biblical and perhaps thereby useful as a form of visual religious education. It also evidently helped him cope with the lasting trauma of the 1827 Separation. Hicks gave away most of the paintings, or used what little money they brought in to help finance his extensive travels in the ministry.

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Indeed, it was as a minister that he was known in his lifetime; thousands of people came to his memorial meeting, drawn by his renown as a preacher.

I commend this exhibit to any Friend interested in how Quakers have labored with themselves over the arts. The collection will be leaving Williamsburg shortly, headed for Philadelphia. From there it will travel, over the next two years, to Denver and San Francisco. Don't miss it!

This close exposure to Hicks's paintings came back to me several times during this past summer, while visiting Quaker artists of various sorts. At the Friends General Conference Gathering in Kalamazoo, Michigan, FQA again recreated the Lemonade Gallery, this time as an official part of the Gathering program. More than a dozen artists took part, in media ranging from quilts to photography, sculpture, beaded hangings, and various kinds of paintings and drawings. The Gallery was, I think we can say in all modesty, a substantial success, and seems on the way to becoming an annual fixture at the Gathering.

One feature at the Gallery was a set of 30 quotes about art from Quaker history, taken from Esther Mürer's larger collection. These were printed on gray card stock, and dispersed throughout the display in chronological order, beginning with George Fox. We intended them as conversation pieces, and since at least a third of them were more or less virulent denunciations of the arts amid which they were hung, the ploy seemed to work. There is much food for thought in this series, which we hope to see more widely disseminated, as a means of helping Friends come to terms with Quakerism's very mixed legacy of attitudes about the arts.

We also invited the artists to talk about their work, and several did. In these talks, Hicks's doubts were echoed in real time: I was struck by how reluctant some were to claim an artistic vocation. Take, for example, Jack Mongar of Millersville, PA, whose carved and polished wood pieces were favorites of our visitors. He repeatedly, even vehemently insisted that "I am not an artist," despite the presence of a table full of striking evidence to the contrary. Like Edward Hicks, Jack who said he was instead a retired scientist told of having difficulty being recognized for such "useless" activity, never mind accepting money for his pieces.

Nevertheless, because people kept wanting to buy them (four of the six pieces at the Gallery were sold), he finally set up a small gallery and sells the pieces but he insists that the buyers make the checks out, not to him but to a local hospice. This makes the pieces "useful," as fundraisers for a good cause. How Quaker!

Very similar attitudes cropped up at Baltimore Yearly Meeting in August, when a new Quaker artist, Jennifer Elam, discussed some of her recent paintings in an interest group. Jennifer, who was trained as a psychologist, is the author of a new Pendle Hill pamphlet, "Dancing With God," in which she describes a project that began as straight research into the relation of mystical religious experience and mental illness. However, as she was collecting and categorizing about ninety case studies, mostly of Friends, she found herself drawn to begin making a large number of brilliantly colored, often highly

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evocative paintings. She had no training as a visual artist, but was encouraged by the staff at Pendle Hill to follow her impulses.

Now Jennifer faces a series of issues she says she never expected to: people are exclaiming at the beauty and depth of her work; they want her to explain it; a few even want to buy it. What is this about? Does this make her an artist? Where is all this headed? Wonderful but daunting questions.

Finally in this summer travelogue, I want to mention a visit to a place where Quakers have their attitudes about one form of art very much in order: It's Friends Music Camp, which gathered again on the campus of Olney Friends School in Barnesville, Ohio for four weeks of intensive, dedicated music study, practice and performance. The site presents a paradox, in that Olney is creation of Conservative Friends, who have hung on longest to the ancient Quaker resistance to art. But while the camp maintains an unmistakable Quaker atmosphere—daily worship, business meetings, even committees—there's no dithering over the value of music to the spirit on the part of Director Peg Champney, her staff, or the threescore-odd campers. All concerned make it, play it, and enjoy it.

I've been visiting the camp each summer for a decade now, and earned my keep by reading stories to the campers. *My* stories, I might add; I go there to practice my writer's art. For each of the last several summers, I've made it a goal to have a new story to read, as well as the ones they call out to hear again (there is a high proportion of return campers).

This time I had a new Quaker ghost story, about a Vietnam era draft resister who is visited in prison by the wandering shade of a German Friend, who faced the Nazi draft a generation earlier, and well, maybe you can read it for yourself. I mention it here as a way of acknowledging that I, too, share some of the uncertainties that stretch from Jennifer Elam and Jack Mongar back to Edward Hicks and even earlier.

Most of my stories, whether I like it or not, have a clear pedagogical subtext; I guess I feel the same need to make them "useful," in this case as purveyors of snippets of Quaker history and struggle. Maybe that's one reason I like Edward Hicks so much I feel a kinship with him. I know it's part of what makes being in FQA so rewarding.

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