

## Common traits of Quaker art

by Gary Sandman

*In his book **Quaker Artists** Gary Sandman shows that, the longstanding Quaker antipathy to the arts notwithstanding, there have been Quaker artists since the beginning. Here is the conclusion of his essay "A History of Quaker Art":*

And what kind of art were these Quakers making over the centuries?

Shifting from engagement to withdrawal to engagement in the different periods of Friends, Quaker art has widely varied. Outwardly, then, the art doesn't seem to share anything. It's as plain as Edward Hicks's oils and as complicated as Doris Peters' acrylics. It's as virtuous as Thomas Ellwood's poetry and as wild as Ned Rorem's diaries.

Two things only does Quaker art share.

One is that much of it examines the Friends' testimonies. In 1659, Edward Burrough wrote in his poetry about the testimony of truthful living in his envoi for *The Great Mystery of the Great Whore*; in 1837 Edward Hicks painted his testimony for peace in the "Peaceable Kingdom" series; and in 1985 Susan Stark sang a testimony to simplicity in *Rainbow People*.

The other is that artists have used the silent Meeting for Worship to go deeper within themselves. They've also noted the parallel between Quaker worship and the creative process, and this has helped them to be more aware of creativity. Time and again Friendly artists have described this. Dorothea Blom did it in *The Life Journey of a Quaker Artist*, and I know it from my own experience. And for those Friends who have not retained silent worship, Quaker commitment to the personal experience of the Spirit of God serves much the same purpose.

Beyond those two things, Quaker art is wide open. It rests in every field and takes any shape.

Friends were unclear in their testimony against art for most of their history. In the Founding Period, they were so busy trying to survive as a religious body that they didn't spend much time thinking it through. In the Quietist Period they were perhaps too comfortable to be able to look into it, either. Now, in the Modern Period, with its balance of involvement and settledness, Quakers are not only prepared to thresh through the testimony against art, but they are going forward with a testimony *for* art.

We now live in a great harvest time of Quaker art. Friends have come to understand that instead of a spiritual danger to people, art can be a spiritual harmony with God.

**Quaker Artists** (*Kishwaukee Press, 1992*) is available from FGC Bookstore for \$15 plus \$3.50 shipping.

---

*Types & Shadows* is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

This page revised July 2001