

In Search of Quaker Esthetics

by Chuck Fager



Dear Friends

FQA is an exciting group to be part of. Every time we gather in our board meetings, or brainstorm projects far beyond our present capacities and budgets, I feel as if we are helping write an important new chapter in Quaker history.

After almost three centuries of being more or less against art in practically all its forms, The Religious Society of Friends has now more or less agreed, in that crabwise evolutionary way we often resolve such things, that the arts can be a vehicle for minding the Light and bearing our testimonies.

But having more or less decided that Quaker stuff can be said rightly through the arts, we are just beginning, I think, to explore the matter of (to paraphrase Margaret Fell paraphrasing Fox) "What Can We Say?" Is there some distinctively Quaker flavor or message or accent that we can identify, cultivate and celebrate?

This thought was very much with me a couple of weeks back when I visited the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Large segments of what I saw there—I think especially of the French Rococo furniture—was just so unrelievedly ugly, with lumps of the gaudy piled on top of heaps of the overdone, all to highlight the exaggerated, evidently more in an effort (so it seemed to me) to display wealth and status than to achieve any recognizably artistic purpose, that I found myself thinking of the studied plainness of most of the Quaker meeting rooms I know as not merely different, but quite handsome by contrast. Not only handsome, but expressive. Expressive of what?

This question stayed with me as we walked through other galleries. It soon became clear that mere unadornedness wasn't what it was about; else the minimalist stuff would have been more appealing; but too much of that seemed, not plain, but merely empty. And besides, we saw some Tiffany stained glass,

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #9, Spring 1998

mostly of botanical arrays or landscapes, which were very elaborate, and made originally for the wealthy, but which I found very lovely, say what I might.

Whenever I think about this there's always Edward Hicks in the back of my mind, with his Peaceable Kingdom paintings, which are at once "naive" and very accomplished, and both "simple" in theme but (to me at least) haunting and rich.

And I also think of the sculpture of Sylvia Judson Shaw, she of the well-known Mary Dyer tableau; she did many other pieces, of animals and children, some of which are breathtaking, yet there is also a simplicity to them as well....

Turning to written work, I still remember when I first heard the poet Henry Taylor read his work, just after he had received the Pulitzer Prize. I'd never heard of him, and the works he read were nonreligious, and yet the longer I listened to this stranger, the more I felt I recognized something in his work, something Quakerly; and sure enough, he was soon identified as, not only a Friend, but the clerk of Goose Creek Meeting in Virginia, and, I later learned, the fifth in a direct line of descendants to hold that same post.

I spotted his work as "Quake-ish;" yet one would never have confused Henry Taylor with Whittier.

Am I just imagining, or is there some thing, or things, which could be pointed to as features of a genuinely Quaker esthetic (or, in line with Quaker pluralism, esthetics)? It is still very early to know, or be able to guess. But I think we are on the way. FQA, in its stumbling, one-small-step-at-a-time way, is part of this exploration. That is a big part of what makes me grateful and excited to be its new Clerk.

Peace,

Chuck Fager

Graphic at top: Mary Loomis Wilson (1907-1999). Beach scene. Acrylic, ca. 1976.

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