

Through Whittier-Colored Glasses; or, Art is like Broccoli

by Chuck Fager, FQA Clerk

IT CAN BE AN UNCOMFORTABLE ENTERPRISE to look back, especially at your own history. Who among us can be entirely proud of all that we've been, or where our special group has been? Or even our faith community?

Such thoughts have dogged me ever since I stumbled across the article, [A Friendly Conference on Art](#), in an issue of the *Friends Intelligencer* from 1915.

At one level, this was a real find, the record of what was perhaps the first such gathering among Friends, certainly in the eastern US. But at another level, the piece raises questions which may have been new to Friendly readers then, but ought not to be so for us now.

The piece is largely a kind of hymn of praise, especially to the recent liberation of the Society from the bonds of enforced grey uniformity. This is understandable enough, and I unite with that sentiment. But what was it, as recounted here, that Friends had been freed for?

Consider, in response, this passage: "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 or the Cubists."

Ah yes, "extravagance." What a carefully chosen euphemism. Which is to say, Quakerism was being freed to embrace a thoroughly bourgeois, not to say Philistine sensibility, one that was safe from all the sharp edges of an emerging modernity.

This attitude is made clearer a few paragraphs farther, when the writer asserts that "...the 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."

Ah—of course, how could we not have noticed: art is like broccoli—it's *good* for you!

How lovely. How elevated. How pre-World War I naive.

Of course, such late Romantic twaddle is just what we would expect from a group meeting at the Whittier Guest House, cozy on the spreading veranda of the Genteel Tradition the old Quaker bard embodied to his fingertips; Friends are in many respects the last holdouts of this tradition, even now.

There's truth in this proposition, of course; some art is good for you. But in the same month as this group gathered so genteelly in the fair New England summer, the armies of Europe were mobilizing to destroy

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #21, Spring 2001

each other, and with them the sensibility that could view the world through such Whittier-colored glasses.

In a century of war, the worst ever, what were we to expect of art? One wonders: if the Friends who opened the door to art in such a modulated and gingerly fashion in 1915 were upset by the Futurists and the Cubists, what must they have made of the screaming visual and existential cacophony of the Surrealists who soon came tumbling behind them in the wake of war and revolution? And of course the writers of the next generation too. Whittier disappeared in the dust raised by Hemingway, Joyce and a host of others, and his star has not yet risen again. (I say this sadly, for I am devoted to the old man, frequent mawkish notwithstanding; yet I understand his fate too.)

What, for that matter, would they make of the world of art today? Would a visit to any of the major contemporary museums in, say, New York or even Philadelphia, leave them still convinced that art is bound to be uplifting? And what would they make of our mass media, where some of the finest creative minds of our time are hard at work using art to persuade us, for instance, to drink vodka?

In point of fact, while I was thrilled to uncover this article, once read it left me with distinctly ambivalent feelings. The report scorns the early Friends' revulsion against the use of arts in Fox's time to promote idolatry, mindless luxury and consumption, not to mention political oppression. But I must admit, partisan of the arts that I am, it is these older warnings that echo in my mind more often than not, especially when I open a slick magazine, or turn on the television. And they usually ring truer than the ingenuous optimism of the Whittier House gathering.

We live in a world saturated with the arts; but they are arts which have been all but absorbed into the machine of consumption and manipulation that surrounds us all. Much of this art, no matter how brilliantly done, is not good for us, especially not for the spirit.

My own hunger is for Quaker art and artists who face this very mixed reality squarely, and then challenge and subvert it with their creativity and their spirit. Sometimes this challenge is will not be easy to see, but it is there nonetheless.

I have seen it happen, so I am not pessimistic. One feature of the best new art in my experience, is that it is truly new—I don't see it coming; and thus it can be a revelation, though not always a pleasant one. Like the Futurists, or the Cubists, in their moment.

The hazards of the outlook of 1915 are still with us, I believe, and I look forward to seeing Quaker artists articulate and engage them, and overcome them too.

[A Friendly Conference on Art](#) by Arthur Edwin Bye (1915)

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

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #21, Spring 2001

This page added September 2002