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Lapsansky & Verplanck's "Quaker Aesthetics: Reflections on a Quaker Ethic on American Design and Consumption" - Book Review

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Lapsansky, E.J. and Verplanck, A.A. (eds) *Quaker Aesthetics: Reflections on a Quaker Ethic on American Design and Consumption*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. pp. xiv + 394, ISBN 0-8122-3692-0, Cloth, £24.50, \$35

This volume consists of a collection of eleven substantial papers; their authors are museum and gallery curators or academics in universities. Some are identified as Friends. Their enquiry is resourceful and their achievement scholarly. Papers are densely referenced, albeit by an awkward Vancouver system which obliges the reader to turn to a list of nearly seventy pages of footnotes at the end of the book. One of the by-products of this method of reference is the deprivation of a composite and organised bibliography. But the vitality of the text is sustained by the inviting nature of titles and subtitles and the profusion of visual images in the form of figures distributed within the text or colour plates organised as a central section.

In time and space, the scope of *Quaker Aesthetics* is narrower than its title. Its focus falls upon the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its observation centres upon Pennsylvania and the Delaware valley. In the collection and interpretation of evidence, however, it draws upon a wider range of activity than the visual arts. It is concerned with production and consumption and with Quaker licences and taboos affecting these. The interest that Julie Sprigg and others have cultivated in respect of the furniture and interior design of Shakers is applied to Friends in this collection of essays.

There are some intriguing similarities and contrasts when we compare what is documented of early American Quakers with the habits and products of their English counterparts. The complexion of meeting houses, using good local materials and avoiding gratuitous ornament, works out very much the same both sides of the pond. Quakers favoured a pediment or hood above the main door. In America, however, this is said to be in conscious conformity to domestic architecture: when such a portico was introduced to the English meeting house in the early nineteenth century, the motive was to distinguish it as a place of worship without taking on the Gothic style prevailing in the established church. Dianne C. Johnson examines colonial portraiture and offers a number of illustrations: but in England painting was not much practised and portraits had been condemned as a vanity, the guilt being as much on the part of the sitter as the artist. In 1807 Thomas Clarkson declared that he had never seen more than one picture in a Quaker home and had only ever observed three types (a slave ship, Penn's treaty with the Indians and the plan of the building of Ackworth school). He would have been surprised, therefore, to discover some of the images reproduced here, not least the oil painting of John Cadwallader in his fancy waistcoat; so too will the reader of Elizabeth Isichei's *Victorian Quakers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) which documents a rather narrower Quaker view of the visual arts. Nor would the early 'plainers' in England have allowed the cabriole legs of the late eighteenth century chest of drawers attributed to William Wayne of Philadelphia.

The question arises of whether a thing can be pleasing to the eye if it is not also acceptable to the conscientious mind. A miniature ivory may be crafted with

skill but we are mindful that the act of plundering the raw material has contributed to the extinction of the species that bore it. We may not particularly admire paintings of a buffaloes until we discover that, far from being recent graffiti, they were made upon the cave walls of Lascaux or Altamira some 15,000 years ago. We may even affect a distaste for coffee that is not fairly traded. These considerations put a different complexion on the matter of our judgement. They operate not as rules in a collectively negotiated code but as nagging within. In the modern phrase, we 'have a problem' with our taste in design and our habits of consumption that arises from some insight of the conditions of production. To connect these processes of aesthetic judgement and identify them in terms of a 'Quaker ethic, however, is perhaps to confuse ethics and morality. The question arises of whether it is appropriate to talk of a Quaker ethic in respect of individual behaviour.

The evolution of a system of regulations for outward behaviour to one of internalised values is a familiar pattern. Moses had it that 'thou shalt not commit adultery' and his law sufficed; but for Jesus, 'whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart'. So for Quakers the behavioural ethic of taboos upon dress and speech develop into intentions of gentleness and peaceful demeanour. Emma Jones Lapsansky's introductory chapter captures this syndrome as 'Past plainness to present simplicity'. In Quaker taste and expression, the inner light comes into play but slowly and first requires a good deal of help by visitors appointed by the meeting.

The paradox of plainness and of the ethic that applies to it are illuminated in a fascinating paper entitled 'Quakers and high chests'. This studies the case of Thomas Affleck, a maker of lavish mahogany cabinets with rococo ornamentation of which several illustrations appear. In the 1770s Affleck was 'treated with' by the monthly meeting for transgressing the 'Rules of our Discipline and Christian Testimony', having been married by a priest. Nor was he the only fine cabinetmaker to be so treated for that transgression. The conspicuous offence against the code of plainness in speech, dress and furniture, however, was not treated and Susan Garfinkel speculates on the circumstances of this omission; the patronage of wealthy Quaker merchants may have had something to do with it. More significantly, the case of Thomas Affleck represents a crisis in the eclipse of a collective Quaker ethic by an individuated morality.

Quaker Aesthetics is an intensive study that is confined both historically and geographically. It is therefore to be hoped that it may provide both a model and an inspiration for the collection of scholarly work on the same subject within the boundaries of Britain Yearly Meeting. Contributions of the kind already made to this journal by Peter Collins are indicative of the rich vein of Quaker practice awaiting the serious student.

And there is a further departure that Quaker studies might take. Quaker history has tended to rely on Quaker sources. There are, however, in this volume some compelling examples of what these days would be called media stereotypes. They are variously reverent and perceptive. They include 'Old Broadbrim', a

Quaker and the eponymous hero of some two dozen detective stories in the late nineteenth century. Broadbrim's affiliation to the Friends was recognisable not only by his hat but by the peculiarities of his speech; the association of these with sobriety, wisdom and the pursuit of justice conveyed a positive image. And in 1919 there was published in New York a dance tune that confounded the notion of Friends as the bearers of grey habits, 'All the Quakers are Shoulder Shakers'. Neither these examples nor *Moby Dick* nor *Uncle Tom's Cabin* nor Kellogg's cereal packets are deeply explored in this volume, though it prompts such work to be undertaken.

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