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THE INWARD AND THE OUTWARD EYE:
QUAKER ATTITUDES TO VISUAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The standard account of Quaker dispositions to visual culture is a story of initial proscription and subsequent relaxation. It implies a view of art as a constant state and of Quakerly attitudes shifting around it. This paper offers an alternative interpretation: Christian art is recognized as an inherently contemplative activity. However, with the Renaissance it comes to be regarded more for its outward effect than for its capacity for interior experience. Attention is drawn to the virtuosity of the artist and to surfaces more than to meanings. Until the twentieth century Quaker values were largely preserved by the regulation of behaviour. The recovery of the spiritual capacity of art in Quaker faith and practice is evident in, and owes much to, a number of practising artists including Edward Hicks in Philadelphia and Joseph Edward Southall in Birmingham.

KEYWORDS

Art, aesthetics, visual culture, craft, Southall.

INTRODUCTION

Shri Swamin Narayand Mandir is a modern Hindu temple in north London. Blocks of stone from various European quarries were exported to India and crafted there before coming to Neasden to be assembled. The internal features, the figures of deities or *murti*, were likewise fashioned with love and skill by craft workers in India. In the course of research I visited the mandir and asked the names of the artists and architects. The reply put me in my place: 'They are all devotees. They do it in the names of god, not for their own reputation' (Homan 2006: 165). It was the answer I was most predisposed to respect. For my own part I did not want to know their names but I was writing a book about art in which the omission of these details would have been conspicuous. My book and I were

embedded in the Western cultural tradition that since the Renaissance has set a premium on the name of the artist and the quality of the product.

This was not always so. The great medieval cathedrals of Europe have in most cases come down to us without the names of their architects. Still less do we know the names of those who constructed the noble parish churches. Abbé Suger, who was responsible for what is regarded as the first of the great Gothic edifices of northern Europe, St Denys near Paris, wisely counselled *Significata magis significante placent* (That which is signified pleases more than that which signifies) (Suger 1140). A correspondent to the *British Friend* in November 1846 expressed the same caution by asking of a performance of Haydn's *Creation* whether there was not more adoration of the creature than of the Creator.

The detachment of the artist from the product was in later centuries to characterize the construction of early Quaker meeting houses, even a century after the celebration of Christopher Wren and others had brought the profession or architecture into prominence.

VISUAL CULTURE AS CONTEMPLATION

To the extent that the construction of buildings was a devotion and figurative art was perceived as prayer, it was not appropriate to claim a reputation for it. Before the time of Duccio (c. 1255–1319) and Cimabue (b. 1240) few painters were widely known by name. Alongside the Renaissance painters whom Giorgio Vasari (1568) portrays as celebrities, Fra Angelico (c. 1400–45) is distinguished for his piety. Before painting a Crucifixion scene, we are told, the poor monk would fast and pray and the tears would roll down his cheeks as the act of painting brought him close to the Passion of Christ. Moreover, his images were not for sale but for the cell walls of his fellow monks at the convent of S. Marco in Florence: they were offered not as decorations but as disturbances.

These examples witness to a character of Christian art in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that was to yield to commercial exploitation and intellectual interest. In this period it was scarcely to be thought of as art so much as a visual vocabulary addressing the spirits of the faithful. Many practitioners were to remain anonymous. They served the Church, and art had not yet emerged as an independent profession. Their work was not for display or ornamentation but it had a place in the contemplative and liturgical life of the faithful. The process of creativity was itself a devotional act. Had this character of visual culture endured it would have settled more easily in the collective life of later generations of Puritans, Quakers and Shakers whose principles dictated a taste for the plain and simple.

A disregard for prevailing taste and fashion and the innocence of commercial value likewise marked the evolution of an aesthetic in the appearance of early English meeting houses. In due time the design of Quaker meeting houses was to be advised by a collection of practical considerations (Alexander 1820) and there emerged a notion of correct style and a Quaker brand with the appointment in the twentieth century of a professional architect who pronounced and practised

widely in his day (Lidbetter 1946, 1961). The earliest meeting houses, affectionately documented and illustrated by Kenneth Southall (1974), were invariably local and vernacular in manner, built of locally available materials; they were rather more in harmony with their physical environment than were their users at the social level. The survival of such examples as Brigflatts (1675), Ifield (1676), Colthouse (1688) and Jorddans (1688) attests to the promptings of inner virtues such as integrity, honesty and worthiness rather than outward considerations such as scale, innovation and comparison with alternatives. The characterization of early meeting houses as 'quaint' or 'charming' tells us not of the intention of those who designed them but of the extent to which their complexion has been superseded. Come-to-Good meeting house (1710) in Cornwall, for example, has lost its one-time neighbours and is nowadays conspicuously picturesque.

The externals of religious expression on which the eye settles prompt appreciative descriptions such as 'charming', 'modest' and 'dignified'. At one level, this vocabulary betrays a limited understanding on the part of observers, but when it connects with the rationale of meeting house design it becomes a witness. So Robert Sefton writes of meeting houses in New England,

Simple wood frame, shingled exterior, covered porch at one side, residential in scale, it is unassuming, quaint, passive. It seems to express so well the simple, non-authoritarian, introspective faith of the Friends. The interior is furnished only with the barest wooden pews. There is no altar, no pulpit, no choir, no music, no cushions, nothing worldly to distract them from a *vis-à-vis* connection with God (1972: 206-207).

With some recent exceptions the Quaker meeting house is not contrived as a contribution to the development of architecture but as an agreeable space for worship. While the designs of other religious traditions are centred around their respective liturgical practices such as ritual or audience or amplification, the meeting demands a place for the resting of the spirit. Colours and comforts are decided with appropriate but not absolute restraint. It is worth observing that similar needs and aesthetic principles have weighed heavily in other visual cultures: the principles dictated by St Bernard of Clairvaux in 1125 for the design of Cistercian abbeys were exclusive of any ornament that might distract the soul during devotion or incur an expense that could be put to a better use.

THE COLLECTOR AND THE CONNOISSEUR

The habits of acquisition and collection, even the imposition of the category of 'art', remove works from the devotional contexts from which they came or for which they were intended. The innocence of self-regard and the relative absence of commercial motive that marked the period before fifteenth century did not survive the Italian renaissance. In Florence the Medici family were active talent spotters and patrons and thus leaders of fashion. The treasures of the liturgy began to be commissioned as domestic ornaments. It is now reckoned that Fra Filippo Lippi's *Annunciation* (1448-50), which is set in a shallow semi-circular frame and

now hangs in the National Gallery in London, was commissioned, possibly by the Medici family, as a bedhead (Turner 1990).

The shift from painting as spiritual exercise to the celebration of the artist and the plunder of the product reaches a peak with the publication of Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* in 1568. Vasari's admiration for the painters of the Italian renaissance borders on sycophancy. He relates family history and waxes lyrical on the virtuosity of his subjects, their method, their brushwork, their relationships and the esteem in which he wants them to be held.

A penchant for acquisition, possession, collection and display burgeoned among the richer classes in the sixteenth century. The effect of relocation in palaces and museums was often to redefine pictured prayers as material assets. Not only aristocratic families but also nation states celebrated works by elite artists in their newly established national galleries: the Uffizi in Florence, the Prado in Madrid, the Louvre in Paris and the Royal Academy in London made fine art accessible to the public but by the same measure removed much of it from its intended function and set it up to be stared at and admired.

An antipathetic response to this shift of meaning and use has not been confined to early Friends. In the twentieth century England's foremost Roman Catholic artist and commentator, Eric Gill, frequently complained that music and art have ceased to be enjoyed except by spectators. The commercial appropriation of the visual culture of a religious group is particularly apparent in respect of the crafts of the American Shakers, in which the creedal statement 'Tis the gift to be simple' of simplicity is axiomatic. In its original and normative manner and before the declaration of a code of 'Millennial Laws' in 1821, Shaker furniture was regarded as the outward expression of the inner life. It was without ornament, frivolity or any excess to purpose. It is contended that the grace and pleasing proportion of the product emanate from the harmony that ideally exists between the craftworker and material (Johnson 1969: 6). These are the visual effects which account for the appeal of Shaker designs in a world that has not generally shared the values and discipline of the community they were made to serve. That boxes, cabinets and small objects now sell for thousands of dollars in Shaker auctions, that the name Shaker is predicated to bathrooms and gazeboes and that the style was adopted by the English firm Habitat attest to an abiding market and even to a yearning to buy into a system of values without making a commitment of lifestyle.

If the Medici only borrowed art from the sacred domain, it was in due course called upon to celebrate its patrons with refined images of themselves. The practice of portraiture was to become anathema to Quakers because of the implication of vanity and self-aggrandisement. In the early sixteenth century Henry VIII had sent Hans Holbein round the courts of Europe to paint portraits of eligible brides and had himself sat or stood to be flattered by the artist's brush. His successors on the throne were wont to commission portrait painters like Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck to celebrate their potency and grandeur. After the execution of Charles I, an extravagant collector of art, some images were thrown in the Thames while others were sold to abroad clear his debts. Famously, Oliver

Cromwell posed for Samuel Cooper but only on the understanding that the portrait would be unflattering and that Cromwell would not pay a farthing if it did not show warts and all (Graham-Dixon 1996: 71-76).

THE REGULATION OF SIMPLICITY

The attitudes of Quakers to the arts were not initially expressed in the absolute terms with which they came to be enforced. George Fox, for example, disapproved of chanting in the ecclesiastical manner but of musical utterances that were led by the spirit he advised 'singing prayes to God as David did, we own' (Fox and Hubberthorn 1653: 22). The American Quaker Ruth Anna Lindley adhered to her beloved music against the prevailing view and 'could not give it up until it was absolutely required'. And Elizabeth Fry's husband Joseph, whose musical appetite was not satisfied at home, would disguise himself in the costume of the world and make surreptitious visits to the opera (Whitney 1937; Nicholson 1968: 35-36).

The regulation of the behaviour of a religious group has at least two functions. It is an example to observers. Thus in Quaker practice peculiarities of dress and language were calculated to convey regard for the plain and simple. At the same time, a discipline of outward behaviour was expected to engender a simple spirit within.

The theory was not always borne out in the practice. Peculiarities became curiosities without necessarily drawing spectators to explore their rationale. And the outward sign could become an alternative to the inward habit. Thus Margaret Fell famously remarked that the wearing of drab Quaker dress was a 'silly poor gospel': such an outward expression may have been counter-productive in terms of the regard of the world but, still more, the adjustment of surface of the person could not control the interior life. The apostle Peter had taken the same view in counselling against extravagant dress and the braiding of hair and advised, 'let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price' (1 Pet. 4:3).

In the early 1690s Joseph Pile of Cork and his cousin Samuel Randall were appointed to inspect homes for 'gospel order': they began by purging their own:

As to our own clothing we had but little to alter, having both of us been pretty plain in our garb, yet some things we did change to greater simplicity. But my dear cousin, being naturally of a very exact and nice fancy, had things in a more curious order as regards household furniture than I had. Our fine veneered and garnished cases of drawers, tables, stands, cabinets, escritaires, &c, were put away or exchanged for decent plain ones of solid wood without sumptuous garnishing or ornamental work; our wainscots and woodwork we had painted of one plain colour... Our curtains, with valences, deeply fringed that we thought too fine, we put away or cut off; our large looking-glasses with decorated frames we sold or made them into smaller ones (Braithwaite 1919: 507).

Quaker homes continued to be conspicuously plain into the nineteenth century. Thomas Clarkson, who as a fellow campaigner against slavery befriended and visited the homes of many Quakers, reported having seen only three pictures on their walls (1807: 292-94): an engraving of the signing of Penn's treaty with the Indians, a cross-section of a slave ship and the plan of Ackworth school. We may infer that these were selected less for ornamentation than as affirmation of Quaker principles and concerns.

The motive of plaining persisted both in the British isles and in the United States, restraining Quakers whose talents might have inclined them to pursue a profession in art and depriving them of a community of customers among their own kind.

Samuel Lucas (1805-70) regarded himself to be a born painter, saying that if he had had no hands he would have painted with his feet (Nicholson 1968: 56; Isichei 1970: 153): but the Quaker market was dry in his day so he abandoned his art and returned to the family brewery business at Hitchin.

More usually, a young person with an evident skill in art was directed to the office of an architect. Such was the destiny of Thomas Rickman (1776-1841) who was commissioned to design more buildings for the established church than any contemporary architect (Port 1961: 67).

Later, Alfred Waterhouse (1830-1905) explored his talents within the profession of architecture. Born and nurtured in a Quaker family in Liverpool, he married a Quaker Elizabeth Hodgkin of Lewes in 1858. His inclination had been to pursue a career in painting but his parents dissuaded him and he turned to architecture (Smith 1976: 102-21). Waterhouse is celebrated in the history of architecture for a manner of civic grandeur for which the Society would have had no use: it is exemplified in such designs as the Prudential Assurance Building and University College Hospital in London, Manchester's Town Hall and Assize Court, Brighton's Metropole Hotel, the former Hove Town Hall and a number of imposing churches (Smith 1976: 102-21).

THE RECOVERY OF THE INWARD EYE

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (V. i) the duke Theseus calls for an entertainment to occupy the time between supper and bed. The impresario Philostrate apologizes that the only offering is unsophisticated and naïve but the duke insists that it be performed: 'we will hear that play for never anything can be amiss when simpleness and duty tender it'. The shift of focus from virtuosity to essential integrity, though very quickly compromised by Theseus, has been enabled by a ministry in the visual arts by a number of conscientious Friends. These Friends are often unsung in a narrative that is more usually set out in terms of the changing tones of the minutes of yearly meetings or of curriculum development in Quaker schools and colleges. Among American Quakers the salient voice of Rufus Jones (1863-1948) contested the anti-aestheticism of early Quakers. Lapsansky (in Lapsansky and Verplanck 2003: 4) points to the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of

1932 which warned against the undervaluing of material culture and to the introduction in 1971 of a fine arts programme in Haverford College.

Though today widely known and valued for the sixty-one versions of his composition *The peaceable kingdom* (many of them nuanced in accordance with a particular ministry), Edward Hicks (1780–1849) was not at first accepted by fellow Quakers in Philadelphia. Hicks started out as a carriage and sign painter, later graduating to the easel. In his twenties he was admitted to the Society of Friends in Bucks County Pennsylvania where he became a valued Gospel minister. His earlier trade failed to secure him a sufficient income and he turned to ornamental painting which was renounced within the Society as ostentation. He was forced to forsake all and return temporarily to farming, declaring ‘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’ (Weekley 2003: 219).

The breakthrough for Edward Hicks was his visualizing of the utopian prophecy of Isaiah 11 in which the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’s den: the endorsement of its message was an effective approval of Hicks’ artistry.

The Quakerly disapprobation of visual culture was current in England as Joseph Edward Southall (1861–1944) began to find and establish himself as a figurative artist, but such were his determination, his standing among Friends and his reappraisal of customary taboos that it did not prevail against him. His youthful artistic tendencies were supported by a Quaker mother who in 1883 took him on study visits to Florence, Rome and Venice. But then, as for Thomas Rickman, Alfred Waterhouse and others before him, they were diverted into architectural practice. In 1878 he joined and was articled to a leading Birmingham firm of architects Martin and Chamberlain.

In his outward behaviour and against the manner of his times, Southall was to become the most conspicuous escapee from the discipline of plainness that had endured, albeit in a less rigorous manner, since the exercises of Joseph Pile in 1690s. In the 1930s the sitting room of his house at Edgbaston was encumbered with numerous paintings in gilded frames, opulent furnishings and a square piano (Crawford 1984: 69). His dress code was flamboyant: as he and his wife awaited the train in New Street station children would come near to stare and wonder. In the spirit of Margaret Fell’s admonition, Southall displayed in his outward manner and in the integrity of his art that a conscientious inward beholding was not compromised by the absence of a sober taste in outward expressions.

To his part in the rehabilitation of art in Quaker faith and practice there were three elements: he intended several of his paintings as ministries, he gravitated toward a work ethic that had more to do with craft than with art and in portraiture he was careful to avoid the taint of vanity.

The capacity of art for ministry is exemplified in Southall’s 1901/2 painting *St Dorothea and her two sisters refusing to worship the idol*. It depicts a Roman idol on a pedestal with representative figures of Roman power in attendance. Southall takes this, as a Friend might bring the story to a meeting for worship, and makes rather

more of it than the commemoration of an historic event. The idol is Mars, the god of war, and the choice of it connects with Southall's activism in the witness for peace. But still more, Dorothea's refusal coincided with Southall's opposition to the 1902 Act which included an element of taxation to support the schools of the established Church. Southall refused to pay this tax and was annually visited by bailiffs who distrained his household of goods to its value. He offered some silver spoons which had belonged to his aunt who had run a Quaker school. He then bought the spoons when they came up for auction and this arrangement went on for forty years (Massey 1945: 4). In both its immediate theme and in its sub-text the painting attests to conscience and the unconquerable will.

The message of the painting *Changing the letter* is about equality and is explained by Southall in a manuscript note. It is based on the poem 'The man born to be king' which appears within William Morris' *The Earthly Paradise*. The story is of the son of a humble woodman whom a soothsayer has said would become king. The boy grows up, surviving two attempts to destroy him, and is then sent to the governor of a distant castle bearing a sealed letter to the governor ordering that the bearer be executed. While waiting to deliver the letter he falls asleep in the garden where the governor's daughter falls in love with him. She reads the letter and substitutes it for another with instructions to proclaim him king and marry him to the daughter (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery 1980: 40).

The element of craft, which had always been more acceptable among Quakers than had art, is inherent in Southall's choice of medium. He worked not in oil but in the laborious method of tempera and it is for his role in the tempera revival that he is noted by art historians. The method involves the meticulous preparation, burnishing and sizing of a gesso surface, the binding of pigments with egg yolks and the systematic building up of layers of colour. Southall took control of the process from start to finish, even keeping his own hens to produce the eggs. And the distinctive gilded gesso frames which dignify many of his works were crafted by his wife Bessie. From Southall's meticulous record, for example, we know that there were twenty-one stages in the execution of *Changing the letter* and that these occupied 128 hours and 30 minutes (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery 1980: 41).

His depiction of human subjects contrasts with the tradition that had rendered portraiture anathema among Quakers. Barrow Cadbury, the erstwhile chairman of Cadbury Bros, in whose boardroom the portrait of him now hangs, could hardly be accused of vanity for sitting for the artist: he is shown apparently on the way to a board meeting and staring disapprovingly at the artist for interrupting him. *The artist's mother* is only partly the theme of the portrait as our attention is shared by her curious crocheted widow's cap. And the portrait of Sir Whitworth Wallis, the first curator of the Birmingham art gallery, shows him alongside his first major acquisition for the gallery: by the time Southall executed this work, the acquisition had been found to be a fake. So it is a painting about fallibility.

The exclusion of cumber is achieved by a rather more radical strategy in the recent work of the Quaker installationist James Turrell. To the extent that he is not operating by behavioural prescriptions but is seeking a focus upon 'the Light

without', his work may be said to be rather more theological than moral. Turrell has been occupied from childhood with the relationship of the inner light and its outwardly visible correlate. In his installations he captures not so much images as effects. They have names like *Acton* and *The light inside* and his 1999 exhibition in Jerusalem was entitled *Space that sees*. Most famously he designed the Live Oak meeting house in Texas with a roof space for the observation of the sky and in 1979 acquired a dormant volcano, the Roden crater near Flagstaff, Arizona, to be adapted as a massive observatory. In his work he attempts to achieve 'a clarity that clears out the dust' and to use 'the light without [to remind] us of the Light Within' (Munn 1999; Sox 2000: 110-11). An example of his ubiquitous *Skyspace* is held in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park near Wakefield.

The conscious connection with the effect of light is a purpose in the design of some modern meeting houses, contrasting with earlier prescriptions to exclude distractions (Alexander 1820).

The effect of the connoisseurs was to seize on the beauty of visual effects while losing sight of their inherent holiness. In the work of Hicks, Southall and Turrell we witness a restored sense of the holiness of beauty.

REFLECTIONS

The typical genesis and development of religious movements that arise as alternatives or contradictions of existing forms is a course of transition from word to spirit, from prescriptions of belief and behaviour to explorations of what interior life might lead to these. So in movements as diverse as Islam in the seventh century of the Christian era and Mormonism and Christian Science in the nineteenth, the energy of the community is prompted by the introduction of a holy scripture or textbook respectively. Christian sects of the nineteenth century such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Christadelphians and Pentecostals adhere to the existing sacred text while emphasizing particular scriptures by which they are then characterized. In observing changing Quaker attitudes to visual culture we recognize that the transition has worked in reverse. Fox and Fell promoted ways of being that were subsequently diverted into ways of doing and were to be monitored not by the individual but by the society.

In sociological parlance the type of religious organization termed *sect* is most frequently characterized by the rejection of the world. It varies from the *denomination* type which exhibits detachment but falls short of rejection and from the *church* type which is inclined to affirm the practices of the world and state. In her account of Quakers in the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Isichei (1964) adduces evidence to demonstrate an evolution from sect-type to denomination-type. On the basis of the above observations of Quaker attitudes in the particular respect of visual culture, it is possible to suggest ways in which the categorization of sect was never adequate.

As has been the case in other communities of belief, attitudes to visual culture have been clustered with those toward theatre and music and have hardened and relaxed simultaneously. The Quaker aversion to the arts was in the earliest days

rather more nuanced than doctrinal, as is evident from George Fox's caveat on singing. In the twentieth century there was to come a kindred spirit in the person of the prominent Roman Catholic sculptor and writer Eric Gill, who in the twentieth century and within a very different tradition echoed the response to visual and performing arts which Puritans and Quakers demonstrated from the seventeenth:

It is not true that capitalists and industrialist don't care about beauty. No, on the contrary, they worship it, they give it special honour—honour unheard of in medieval England. They endow picture galleries and museums. They flock to the Royal Academy; they endow art schools; they worship prominent painters and sculptors and architects and poets, making some of them lords and many of them knights. No, there is no lack of honour for beauty. The evil thing is that they make it something special, something separate, not an ordinary thing to be found everywhere, but a special thing, made by special people and found only in special places (Gill 1937: 127–28).

In the 1650s, then, Fox did not lead his followers to buy into the iconoclasm that the Puritans had practised in the earlier decade. The sectarian mode of prescriptive discipline to be implemented by 'plaining' evokes the zeal of the Puritans but settles on outward and observable behaviours as the evidence of inward grace.

The story of Quaker attitudes to visual culture, therefore, is one of the loss and recovery of the subtlety of the positions adopted by Fox and Fell, whose respective concerns were with being rather than doing.

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