

# The Spirit Drawings Of Hannah Cohoon: Window On The Shakers and Their Folk Art

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THE SHAKERS SAID that they did not allow or approve of art; yet one of the major legacies of their early nineteenth-century revival period was a small, but engaging, collection of drawings.<sup>1</sup> Between 1830 and 1860, visionaries of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing produced a series of drawings which document a unique moment in Shaker history—unique not only because of the spirit manifestations which assured the abiding presence of the Heavenly Parents for the Shaker communities, but because of the artistic venture itself.<sup>2</sup> While

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1. The Shakers are a perfectionistic, communal society founded by English immigrants in the 1780's. They were led by Mother Ann Lee, who embodied for the Shakers who knew her and for her later followers, a witness to Christ's second coming in the female. The resulting communities were celibate and highly structured, but they were also known for their charismatic dancing and singing. They have long been valued in decorative arts and material culture fields for their architecture, furniture, and crafts. The writings by and about the Shakers is extensive. For a general introduction, see Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers: A Search for the Perfect Society* (New York: Dover, 1953). For more recent studies, see (1) Daniel Patterson, *The Shaker Spiritual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), (2) Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), and (3) Diane Sasson, *The Shaker Spiritual Narrative* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983). Two Shaker sources are essential in the study of the Era of Manifestations: (1) Isaac N. Youngs, *A Concise View of the Church of God and of Christ, on Earth...*, New Lebanon, 1856. Manuscript collection, The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum; (2) Henry Blinn, *The Manifestation of Spiritualism among the Shakers, 1837-1847* (East Canterbury, N.H., 1889).

2. There are two primary sources for the study of Shaker Art. Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere: A Study in Shaker Religious Art* (Charlottesville: Published for The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum by The University Press of Virginia, 1969), and Daniel W. Patterson, *Gift Draining and Gift Song: A Study of Two Forms of Shaker Inspiration* (Sabbathday Lake, ME.: The United Society of Shakers, 1983). Patterson

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the art had limited influence and effect on Shaker history in the past century, it is a most helpful avenue into Shaker studies today, leading the viewer through an intricate network of analysis which itself replicates the Shaker message. The steps in the prescribed dance of Shaker scholarship also exemplify a number of the methodological problems and possibilities under current discussion by students of folk art.<sup>3</sup>

Hannah Cohoon is the best known of the Shaker artists—best known because of the popularity of her four extant drawings and because she was one of the first Shaker artists to be studied individually.<sup>4</sup> Her work has been appropriated as the popular symbol for several Shaker communities and museums and is the Shaker art most likely to be represented in discussions and exhibitions of folk art. Cohoon's drawings combine singular examples of literal images with descriptions of the visionary experiences which prompted the images. Other Shaker art also includes descriptive labels, legends, or messages, but Cohoon's seem to be the most self-explanatory, telling its own stories and utilizing comparatively simple designs of trees, apples, and arbors. Because of her work's very obvious charm and its apparent accessibility, Cohoon's drawings provide an opportunity to explore questions about simplicity, individuality, and community identity which folk art theorists are currently discussing and which, in turn, help to elucidate Shaker art. Furthermore, attention to

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has compiled a checklist of all the drawings, arranged according to his identification of the artists. This work will stand as the essential source on Shaker art for many years. See also June Sprigg, *The Gift of Inspiration: Shaker and American Folk Art, 1803-1880* (New York: Hirschl and Adler Galleries, 1979), and David Sellin, "Shaker Inspirational Drawings," *Philadelphia Museum Bulletin*, Vol. LVII, no. 273 (Spring 1962), pp. 93-99.

3. Current writings on folk art are both exciting and numerous. For an overview of the issues, see the collection of essays edited by Ian Quimby and Scott Swank in *Perspectives on American Folk Art* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980); Simon J. Bronner, "Investigating Identity and Expression in Folk Art," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 65-83; and John M. Vlach, "American Folk Art: Questions and Quandries," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 15, no. 4 (Winter 1980), pp. 345-355. In 1942, Constance Rourke had already discussed the Shakers as an identifiable folk group. There is a note of irony here because Rourke was interested in indigenous American art as well as in folk cultures, but she did not have access to information concerning Shaker art at this time. See *The Roots of American Culture and Other Essays*, edited and with a preface by Van Wyck Brooks (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942.)

4. We have four extant drawings by Hannah Cohoon: (1) The Tree of Light or Blazing Tree, Oct. 9th 1845; (2) The Tree of Life. July 3rd to Oct. 1st 1854; (3) A Bower of Mulberry Trees. Sept. 13th 1854; (4) Basket of Apples. June 29th 1856. For texts and color reproductions, see Andrews, *Visions*. Biographical information on Cohoon may be found in Ruth Wolfe, "Hannah Cohoon: 1788-1864," in Jean Lipman and Tom Armstrong, eds. *American Folk Painters of Three Centuries* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1980), pp. 59-65. For additional information and discussion see also Patterson, *Gift Drawing*, pp. 47-50, and Sprigg, pp. 29-33.

Hannah Cohoon and the Shakers illustrates the need for an interdisciplinary approach to folk art which includes thoughtful study of the originating folk context.

In the story of his first encounter with Shaker art, Edward Andrews insisted on telling of the caution with which Sister Alice Smith disclosed her carefully preserved collection: " 'My showing it to you was a test/ she afterward declared. 'If you had shown any evidence of levity in your response, I was prepared to keep it as mine alone. I would have known that 'the world' could not understand.' " <sup>5</sup> Even in the 1930's with a long-time friend of the society, the Shaker woman was reticent and guarded. Sister Alice knew what others sometimes forget too quickly—that the art belonged within a very special context, an environment so distinct that it was completely separated from the "world."

In the case of the Shakers, the division is more radical than with some other folk groups who have been assimilated by circumstance, intention, or even the erosion of history. The Shakers had many diverse exchanges with the world, but they formulated their identity in opposition to the world and to its principles. They were a separatist society, which for long stretches of its early history did not even proselytize, and although their later history has included a number of imaginative ventures with the world (from spiritualism to washing machines and peace movements), they stand as a challenge to the world to change its thinking. The truth which the Shakers have held is too precious to modify even for the continuance for the community.

Present-day Shakers, like their predecessors, are a church; they are a community of freely committed adults who have deliberately separated from the rest of the world. They are Shakers because of choice, not because of birth, race, geography, or language. As such, they form a special category of folk group. And because their history, although lasting over two hundred years, is still a brief one, they exhibit a potentially greater cohesion of belief and practice than many other groups. Hannah Cohoon's art was addressed to this separatist and separating community. The rest of us—whether historian, theologian, art critic, or folklorist—are the "world's people"; we are the ones who can assume nothing, who need instruction even on the most elementary level when we stand before Shaker art.

The most famous of the drawings is the boldly colored red and green fruit tree which, in a museum or embossed on note paper, looks very much like an appliqued quilt image—but which Cohoon identified as the Tree of Life growing in the Spirit Land. Her curious designation alerts the viewer that this bold tree which might appear on anyone's bed quilt

5. Andrews, *Visions*, p. 3.

would, most certainly, never appear on Hannah Cohoon's quilt.<sup>6</sup> The disjuncture between an uninitiated viewer's perception of the image and the artist's intention here is vast; nor is the quandary solved, as one might hope, by turning to the text provided by Cohoon. She supplied a number of additional, and surprising, bits of information about the drawing; she included the source of its name, the date—and hour—of the vision and of its later completion, and even explained the use of checks and crosses in the execution of the work. Yet such apparently precise information is misleading because it yields little data about the larger Shaker context; an outsider would learn very little about the Shakers, Mother Ann, or Hannah Cohoon from the drawing. In point of fact, the drawing was addressed to a community of believers, not to the "world's people," and both the simple image and the complex text challenge the arrogance of a viewer who would expect an easy comprehension of this piece of folk art.

Hannah Cohoon's painting creates an almost astonishing tension between what was assumed to be known and what becomes almost inexplicable, between the apparently simple and the suddenly complex. The gap is bewildering and shocking. The study of folk art is currently at work in this chasm between the art which looks simple and the complicated communities which fostered its creation. The project is not just one of building historical bridges, however, because there is often overwhelming silence at either end; that is, not only are many of the works of art silent about their origin, intention, or use, but the originating communities are also often lost in history or, more likely, lacking a written history. One might mention here not only the problem of assessing a New England weather vane, but the relatively more important project of recovering and understanding the arts of American Indians or of Afro-Americans.

As the description of their quandary might imply, folk art theorists have had to work in two different directions at once. They have sought to recover the status of art for all human-made objects and at the same time have tried to develop an appreciation for the historical, social, religious, or folk contexts in which all art objects are fabricated. The work of Kenneth L. Ames is exemplary in this light. In his book, *Beyond Necessity*, a catalogue discussion of the folk art exhibition at the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum in 1977, Ames isolated and attacked a number of myths which often surround and denigrate the folk artist—

6. To be sure, there was yet some variety of bed covering in the Shaker retiring rooms, as the Millennial Laws of 1845 indicate: "Bedsteads should be painted green,—Comfortables should be of a modest color, not checked, striped or flowered. Blankets or Comfortables for out side spreads, should be blue and white, but not checked or striped; other kinds now in use may be worn out." Laws, Sect. X, no. 2 in Andrews, *People*, pp. 270-271.

ideas that the artist is a paradigm of individuality, happily and accidentally creating art in a poor and illiterate state.<sup>7</sup> Within these myths, the artist and the art were most commonly seen as primitive, and the resulting folk designation worked to undermine the seriousness of the artist's work, skill, and intention, no less than the respectability of the originating group, society, or folk. Most recently, for instance, Eugene Metcalf has argued that because folk art definitions are so confused by appeals to romanticism and so subject to political manipulations of elitism and racism, it is no longer productive to classify work by Black artists under this rubric.<sup>8</sup>

Among others who agree with Ames and Metcalf on the unsuitability of old assumptions about folk art are Ilona Szombati-Fabian and Johannes Fabian who dismantle even the positivist argument that folk painting should at least be allowed to speak for itself, allowed to be "charming, touching, naively powerful, or perhaps just cute." Of this approach they write:

When applied systematically, these terms signal a far-reaching rejection of the problematic, critical, and often disturbing intents of folk art. Such language implies that folk art is "to be seen, not heard," one more way in which the folk is assimilated to childhood. We all know that, at one time or another, folk and primitive art has been presented as speechless (devoid of any complex, discursive messages in need of interpretation); as nonproblematic (not fraught with the kind of tensions and drama we associate with creativity in the high arts); as timeless (expressive either of totally unique individual visions or of archetypal, mythical images); and, alas, as artless (untouched by the formal aesthetic problems which must be confronted by the producers and critics of high art). Cumulatively, all these negative labels add up to the stereotype of positivity.<sup>9</sup>

Such a rehabilitation of the folk and their art carries several important elements in its wake, not the least being a broad definition of art—one which would include all humanly constructed objects.<sup>10</sup> Art, then, is less a distinction between fine art and folk art, and more a reflection of intentions of design and order which are as likely to appear in quilts as in cathedrals. Furthermore, Ames and the Fabians and Michael Owen

7. Kenneth Ames, *Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).

8. Eugene W. Metcalf, "Black Art, Folk Art, and Social Control," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 18, no. 4 (Winter 1983), pp. 271-289. Metcalf does not, however, offer structures for classifying or identifying Black art and does not address the biblical or oral traditions which unite Black artists across great divides and which may still constitute them as a folk group.

9. Johannes Fabian and Ilona Szombati-Fabian, "Folk Art from an Anthropological Perspective," in Quimby and Swank, pp. 247-292.

10. Michael Owen Jones, *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker* (Berkeley: University of California, 1975) and "L. A. Add-ons and Re-dos: Renovation in Folk Art and Architectural Design," in Quimby and Swank, pp. 325-363.

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Jones, for instance, are willing, even eager, to suspend established criteria for judging art in favor of a rediscovery of the process by which any artist chooses and shapes, intends and fabricates the ideas and images at his or her disposal.<sup>11</sup> By the same token, folk art is distinguished by reference not to style, but to folk, or group, identity. A folk artist, then, is any artist who speaks to or from or for a group, and it is conceivable that that folk could be the so-called academy as well as any ethnic or religious community.

While it may not be possible to depoliticize the analysis of art entirely, folk art theorists hope they have cleared the ground well enough to study the artists and their communities without most of the prejudices of primitivism, racism, or elitism which have prevented a careful viewing of the art in the past. The broadening of definitions should allow one to address the more narrow limits of a particular artist and her community with greater precision and openness.

There are two lingering hurdles to the study of Shaker art as folk art. From the Shaker perspective, art was hardly countenanced as either an occupation or an avocation—or, as the often quoted Millennial Laws of 1845 stated, even as a decoration. "No maps, Charts, and no pictures or paintings, shall ever be hung up in your dwelling rooms...."<sup>12</sup> Daniel Patterson has claimed that "art" may even be an inappropriate term for the drawings since Shaker records never speak of art; he suggests that they are better identified by their function in the era of manifestation as gifts, gifts to the artists from Shakers now in heaven or gifts to other members of the church communities.<sup>13</sup> Yet neither the Shaker reticence nor the specialized ritual of gifts can erase the fact that the drawings were visually constructed images in shape and color which also function as art; if they are to be seen as art, however, they must also, and always, be seen as Shaker art.

If the Shakers must be convinced of the presence of art in their community, the world needs to be reminded of the importance of the Shaker context; that is, the latter-day discovery of aesthetic value in the drawings, the furniture, and the architecture by the "world's people" could be read as a deliberate misappropriation of the Shaker vision.<sup>14</sup> To place Hannah Cohoon's drawings on a museum wall is a way of taming

11. Kenneth Ames, "Folk Art: The Challenge and the Promise," in Quimby and Swank, pp. 309-313.

12. Millennial Laws of 1845, Sect. X, no. 7 in Andrews, *People*, p. 272.

13. Patterson, *Gift Drawing*, pp. 3-10.

14. Henry Glassie described such empty aestheticism as a refusal to look at all objects available and as comparable to a historian deciding to choose his books by reference to their bindings alone. *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1975), p. 12.

the radical or unsettling elements in Shaker thought. From this perspective, the work is acceptable as art but not as Shaker art. If, then, the Shakers rejected art and if the collectors rejected Shakerism, we are left with an intricate knot to examine. Perhaps, however, that is just the point: the knot is not to be untied. The strands are to be identified and followed, but even with the broadest definitions of art and folk, the two elements can be separated only at incalculable cost.

A further example of the difficulty—indeed, of the undesirability—of disengaging the artist and her art from the community is the nagging question of Hannah Cohoon's individuality. One stage in the separation of folk art from the usual prejudices has been the recovery of the artist's identity from obscurity and even anonymity, a condition which usually guarantees greater respect for the artist. Ironically, this recovery used to deny the folk status of the artist since earlier definitions often assumed that folk artists were anonymous and, perhaps, therefore, unintentional artists. John Vlach has tried to defuse this notion by shifting the focus here from the unknown artist to the uninformed critic.<sup>15</sup> Fbklorists like Vlach argue that it is neither anonymity nor style, but group identification, which adequately defines folk status. The agenda, therefore, is to foster research and analysis of the artist *vis-a-vis* her community rather than on romantic impulses motivating the mythical lonely, isolated, creative soul.

As far as we know today, Hannah Cohoon was one of about fifteen women, working primarily in two communities, who produced gift drawings. That she has been identified and that biographical data has been recovered is a mark of persistent research by Ruth Wolfe, June Sprigg, and Daniel Patterson. At the same time, the assimilated information is less helpful than one would hope, and as these critics indicate, the primary conclusions which can be drawn come more from the art itself and from a study of the Shaker community than from the biographical information.

Although Wolfe and Sprigg have suggested a certain eccentricity and non-conformity on Cohoon's part, Daniel Patterson has cautioned against conclusions drawn from the sparse information and argued instead that the remarkable facts about Cohoon's drawings are their successful design and their identification with Shaker visionary material.<sup>16</sup> Patterson places the drawings in a non-artistic category: "Hannah's testimonies differ

15. Vlach, pp. 346-347. See also Tom Armstrong, "Preface," in Lipman and Armstrong, p. 8.

16. Sprigg suggested that by signing her paintings, Cohoon had "turned the spotlight on herself with a forthrightness that did not typify the Shaker ideal of placing community before self," p. 29. Wolfe argued, further, that at one point in her life at Hancock, Cohoon was apparently ranked lower than her daughter, who later left the community, and, therefore, may have been out of favor with the ministry from time to time, p. 62.

from those of other Shakers not in their contents or in the fact that she signed them, but in having paintings to supplement the verbal account of what she had seen."<sup>17</sup> It is hard to quarrel with Patterson's determination to mix the categories of art and vision where the Shakers are concerned, especially since this act serves a larger understanding of Shaker life and a recognition that the art was produced during a period of widespread visionary activity.

If questions about personality or status are elusive, several biographical details about her age and her membership in the Hancock Community are helpful. Cohoon was a mature woman working in a community where at least one other important artist was active. Cohoon's four drawings were completed when she was between fifty-seven and sixty-eight years old and had been a Shaker for at least twenty-eight years. Polly Collins, who was Cohoon's associate at Hancock, also produced a number of drawings in which trees were dominant images. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suggest some enlightened experimentation as self-conscious artists on the part of the two women.<sup>18</sup>

Added to the biographical data is the fact that three of Cohoon's drawings are relatively late as revival documents, coming between 1854 and 1856. This insight argues for the persistence of the era of manifestations, while the unity and the strength of Cohoon's designs—central images with explanatory visionary texts (or, as Patterson might prefer, visionary texts with supplementary paintings)—further underscore a maturity of artist, of art, and of the Shaker vision.

Hannah Cohoon's affirmation of community involvement in the purpose and product of her painting is just the point which folk art historians have been working to establish. As the analysis of folk art has proceeded, a methodological division between behaviorism and structuralism has developed. While the critics are never so vociferous in identifying with schools as to forget the mutual goal of recovering stature and dignity for the folk artist, these distinctions are instructive. The structuralists tend to concentrate on the images which give insight into the originating communities, while the behaviorists would stress the intentions of the artists and their interaction with their societies. The structuralists read the artifacts as semiotic signs indicative of the belief systems of the artist's community or group, an approach which is especially tempting in studying a religious community. The balance of

17. Patterson, *Gift Drawing*, p. 49.

18. Susan Markham, Curator of Education at Hancock, and Diane Sasson have each remarked to me that they see Polly Collins' hand in the small trees and the banquet table of the Bower of Mulberry Trees. Such collaboration was not uncommon in Shaker art. See Patterson, pp. 16-19. Wolfe observes further that a comparison of the two tree paintings suggests that Cohoon "might have done a whole series, since destroyed," p. 62.



Cohoon's tree, its strength, its primary colors, its integration of word and image function, then, as signs of communal harmony and simplicity. The design reflects what Henry Glassie calls the artist's "geometric repertoire" and instructs the viewers in the structure of the community.<sup>19</sup>

Both Hannah Cohoon and her sister artist at Hancock incorporated trees in their drawings. Trees were common biblical and mythical images in the literary tradition of the Shakers.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the oral tradition, however, lies the structural symbol of the organic, living tree growing to ripeness, balancing individuality and communal endeavors. To render a Shaker vision in tree form is to develop what Glassie would call a shorthand, or abstract, metaphor for the community.<sup>21</sup> Cohoon and Collins did not fail in a childish attempt to depict a natural tree; rather, as Kenneth Ames suggests, they "monitored" reality by practicing techniques of abstraction, dematerialization, and transformation.<sup>22</sup> In this light, the simplicity of the Shaker trees is a deliberate, disciplined simplicity wrought through hard work and communal cooperation. The gift to be simple which the church sang about in its most famous song was a gift which the artists also learned to express in their drawings.

Note must be taken of a kind of danger which resides in structuralism, however, since it is likely to belittle the social context in favor of a symbolic abstraction and to result in a new and more subtle artistic hierarchy based on the transparency or opaqueness of the artist's iconography—a transparency or opaqueness which may actually reflect

19. Glassie, *Folk Housing*, p. 19. For a comparison of Shaker architectural style with that of other religious communities, see Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1976). As Glassie further observes, in non-elitist and in non-literate societies especially, artifacts must be employed as historical texts, indicative both of persistent cultural patterns and of contextual changes, but his larger lesson made through his study of architectural forms is that both artifacts—houses, art, wheelbarrows—and literary texts are manifestations of human thought. See his *Folk Housing*, pp. 12, 160. See also Jules David Prown, "Style as Evidence," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1980).

20. Trees were common in both Shaker writing and drawing. Theological works consistently appeal to common refrains that the church is like a tree with branches, or that a tree is known by its fruits, or that the tree is an image of the resurrection. See [Benjamin Seth Young], *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing...* (Lebanon, Ohio: Press of John McClean, [1808?]). This work was published in a number of editions until 1856. Of additional interest there is a seventeenth-century work which apparently had lasting influence and broad popular appeal over several centuries. Ralph Austen, *A Treatise of Fruit-Trees* which was published together with his *The Spiritual Use of an Orchard*, reprinted in *The English Landscape Garden*, edited by John Dixon Hunt (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982). First published in 1653, the last section was published again in 1847.

21. Henry Glassie, "Folk Art," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. by Richard Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1972), p. 258.

22. Ames, *Beyond Necessity*, p. 47.

the critic's vision rather than the artist's ability or intention.<sup>23</sup> Glassie clearly cautions against a simplistic structuralism, arguing primarily for a technique which would make careful distinctions between the geometric repertoire and the contexts which the artist both reflects and engenders.

The behaviorists, such as Simon Bronner and Michael Owen Jones, claim that the artistic object is often more event than object, and they are interested in recovering the artist's intentions in the creative process as a means of establishing the serious and deliberate activity of those artists formerly denigrated as primitive or inarticulate.<sup>24</sup> In a most helpful essay, Bronner has suggested that, where possible, the critic should interview the artist in order to avoid the sins of making false interpretations about the artist or the work. Bronner offers, by way of example, the study of a woman identified as Anna Block who painted in an Old Order Mennonite community. Bronner concluded that Anna Block's art was the means by which she negotiated her individual abilities in relation to the traditions of the larger community. Even as her art may have displayed little variation to the uninitiated eye, Bronner found Anna Block to be balancing a number of tensions between her preferences, her clients' wishes, her religious sensibility, and her own training. Anna Block did not speak in the critical language of art historians, but she was aware of the levels of demands, and the sometimes minute variations which she developed were actually sophisticated modifications to accommodate either her art market or her community's faith.

Brenner's conclusions stress the practice of doing art and the processes by which an individual responds to a tradition. Definitions of folk and art and folk art, in his view, must remain elusive "while we generate

23. Jules David Prown's highly suggestive and helpful essay on material culture leans in this direction when he ranks objects according to their symbolic over their utilitarian function. Prown is not unaware of the problem, however, and his efforts were directed to establishing ordering principles in a challenging and sometimes chaotic field. "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 17, no. 7 (Spring 1982), pp. 1-19.

24. Simon Bronner, John Vlach, and Michael Owen Jones have written about artists whom they have visited with and interviewed in an effort to comprehend how the artist views him or herself as an artist. Jones asserts that concentration on the human behavior common to people who attempt to do things well avoids that which is impossible anyway, namely defining art. Working without posited definitions allows "the investigator to continue to examine matters of interest to students of art with less likelihood of imposing unnecessary restraints or of misrepresenting the behavior." "L. A. Add-ons," pp. 356-357. Also working toward behavioristic concerns, but from a more general folkloristic direction are Alan Dundes, "Texture, Text, and Context," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 28, no. 4 (December 1964), pp. 251-265, and Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," in *Towards New Perspectives in Folklore*, Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman, eds. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1979), pp. 3-15.

hypotheses which address the dynamic, complex reflections of fundamental mental concepts in the act of creation."<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the limitations in this approach suggest that its application is often either impossible or undesirable. The very puzzle of most folk art rests in the fact that its creator is both dead and unknown, and while the artistic spirit may be willing, the flesh is unavailable for interview. Beyond this obvious situation, however, lies a challenge to the viability of the art work itself; at its worst, the behaviorist model suggests that words are more important than the drawing. But no artist, folk or otherwise, would want to be cast in the situation where the art depended on their own or some other interpreter's verbal explication. In the case of the folk artist, it is potentially as condescending to assert that the artist needs an interpreter—the literate academic critic—as it is to view the work as too primitive for words.

Such a broad criticism, however, cannot hide the fact that Hannah Cohoon does speak directly about her work and that without her text, we would know little of her intentions, little of the context of her art. The Shaker artists are thoroughly protestant in their apparent mistrust of images alone, and Cohoon, like her sister artists, diligently controls the response to and the interpretation of her drawings.<sup>26</sup> In the Bower of Mulberry Trees, the text is beautifully integrated into the overall design, underscoring her aesthetic sensibility and her claim to artistic legitimacy, but she is still first and foremost a Shaker and only secondly an artist. To the extent that the text is informative about intention and interpretation, Cohoon can be usefully read by the behaviorists. In turn, their focus underlines the fact that Cohoon's work must be read as more intentional than accidental, more complicated than simple, more sophisticated than primitive.

The historical and critical disagreements, then, are most refreshing when they prompt the critic to examine Hannah Cohoon's own claims about her paintings. In the text for the Tree of Life, she states:

City of Peace Monday July, 3, 1854. I received a draft of a beautiful Tree pencil'd on a large sheet of white paper bearing ripe fruit. I saw it plainly; it looked very singular and curious to me. I have since learned that this tree grows in the Spirit Land. Afterwards the spirit shew'd me plainly the branches, leaves and fruit, painted or drawn upon paper. The leaves were check'd or cross'd and the same

25. Bronner, p. 83.

26. Don Yoder, *Pennsylvania-German Fmktur and Color Drawings*, (Lancaster, PA.: Landis Valley Associates, 1969), p. [5]. Anita Schorsch and Martin Greif suggest that "Art and decoration in tune with moral and spiritual instruction found admission even in Puritan homes. As long as art was not created entirely for its own sake, the Western religious mind could avoid feeling tainted by idolatry," *The Morning Stars Sang: The Bible in Popular and Folk Art* (New York: Universe Books, 1978), p. 17.

colors you see here. I entreated Mother Ann to tell me the name of this tree: which she did Oct. 1st 4th hour P.M. by moving the hand of a medium to write twice over Your Tree is the Tree of Life. Seen and painted by, Hannah Cohoon.<sup>27</sup>

At first it would seem that Cohoon does not offer a particularly helpful window on the creative process. Her comments on the Tree of Life are predominately declarative and passive. "I received a draft of a beautiful Tree . . . . I saw it plainly," she wrote. In a second stage, she received the form, colors, and the "check'd and cross'd" design of the leaves, but again these details were given to her by the spirit. She does entreat Mother Ann for information about the tree's designation, but this response is once more dictated to an apparently passive artist.

It is tempting to claim that in her passivity Cohoon is practicing a form of self-delusion; bound to a community which discouraged art, she must have taken recourse in visions to justify her own latent and repressed artistic impulses. A more appropriate response than psychological reductionism, however, would be to allow more credit to Cohoon's account and to see therein not a repressed artist, but one who is reasonably integrated into her society—one which, as we have seen, values visionary activity. The sixty-six year old woman has combined quilt and vision, world and Shaker, earth and heaven in the single tree. This drawing is successful less because it is art than because it is true to the Shaker vision of a new world growing out of this world. Or, perhaps, it is more accurate now to say that her work is art because it has successfully transformed a common worldly image into a Shaker icon.

Hannah Cohoon cannot separate the artistic process from the theological process; she began with a vision and a pencil draft. The composition began and ended with a vision, although the entire drawing took at least nine months (from October to July) and there were several artistic problems to be solved along the way, including shape, color, and detail. Cohoon herself seems well aware that the tree is unusual when she describes the vision as "very singular and curious." Perhaps she is anticipating the community's response both to the fact and to the form of the painting as she explains the crosses and checks and as she asserts its place in the theology and practice of the society; still, she is not overly apologetic, nor does she need but several brief sentences to present her work. Her final statement, however passively framed, rings as a declaration of faith and as a confirmation—"twice over"—of the work: "Your Tree is the Tree of Life."

Hannah Cohoon's own sense of awe at the image and its unexpected components are reminiscent of the Fabians' comment about pictures of African animals which foreigners tend to call charming and quaint, but

27. Andrews, *Visions*, p. 70.

which carry messages of power and danger to the artists and their local patrons.<sup>28</sup> In the same vein, although from the opposite direction, Ames cites James Agee's fear that the pictures and the essay in *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men* would be identified as "art" and thus rob the subjects of their integrity and dignity.<sup>29</sup> The difficulty and the challenge in folk art, as in any art, is to learn to see power and danger and dignity. The Shaker model suggests the need for multiple steps. To follow Hannah Cohoon's steps through the Tree of Life is to move from simplicity to complexity and back to a newly earned simplicity which is, in a fundamental sense, awe-full. Thus, without claiming fully to understand Cohoon's endeavor, it is yet possible to suggest that she is at home with her art and her community and that she has both the technical and the theoretical control necessary to speak for and to the community.

If, in the hands of folk art theorists, both structuralism and behaviorism are utilized as tools intended to uncover the context of the artifact and its creation, then perhaps one does not have to choose arbitrarily or even cautiously between them. Hannah Cohoon and her purposes are more important than quarrels over methodologies, each of which may be quite useful in the study of the Shakers. The behaviorist approach enriches our understanding of Cohoon as an intentional artist, while the structuralist approach prevents any denigration of her simplicity. While most Shaker art is so obviously addressed to the community, Cohoon's work seems almost universal in its images. Yet, because she appears so accessible she is a good example of the need to utilize every methodological device available to help the uninitiated viewer understand her work.

Finally, to make explicit what has been implicit in this discussion, folk art theory calls for additional attention to social, historical, ethnic, or religious information.<sup>30</sup> Methodological techniques prepare the way for the individual object, artist, or community to speak as clearly as possible. If, as Ames has argued, folk art opens the door to pluralism and diversity by helping to legitimate a variety of artistic expressions, then the task is to study and listen to those communities.<sup>31</sup> Thus, we can see

28. Fabian and Szombati-Fabian, p. 289.

29. Ames, *Beyond Necessity*, p. 54.

30. Work on folk art and religion has recently gained momentum. At the first level are two works which are helpful, especially in identifying potential categories for further discussion. In addition to Schorsch and Greif, see C. Kurt Dewhurst, Betty MacDowell, and Marsha MacDowell, *Religious Folk Art in America: Reflections of Faith* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1983), and Don Yoder, "Symposium on Folk Religion," *Western Folklore*, 33, No. 1 (January 1974).

31. Ames, "Folk Art," p. 321. See also Vlach, p. 335. Don Yoder also called for interdisciplinary research in *American Folklife* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), p. 6.

that in her images and her text, Hannah Cohoon is both artist and theologian. If she does not address "the world's people," Cohoon does instruct the Shaker viewer on how to see her drawings. She cites vision, common experience, memory, and scripture. Her drawings are more than illustration; they are theological commentary. They are gifts to her community, extensions of the knowledge and insight already possessed by the believers. She addresses her church both in specific details and in broad visionary matters.

The small iconographic details at work in Cohoon's paintings and texts illustrate the precision of her vision and reflect her theological agenda. We have already observed the explanation for the "cross'd or check'd" leaves in the Tree of Life. Cohoon persisted in explaining such items: in the Mulberry Bower, she described the fine grass and the shiny green fruit ("the size of our largest english cherries") on the small trees; in the Blazing Tree, she identified the flames shooting out of the leaves; in the basket of apples, she commented on the ends of the stems. These bits of information work in several directions. They are comments on artistic problems which cross the boundaries of style and content. She was addressing a community with precise social organization, record-keeping procedures, millennial laws, a community where complete openness was required of believers. Each little stem and leaf was important and had a legitimate place and function. Each believer had an important role in the church and in the world to come.

On the larger theological plane, Cohoon's work affirms the promise of the Shaker dream. Eighty years prior to Cohoon's first tree of Blazing Light, James Whittaker, Mother Ann's first disciple, had a vision of the flowering of Shakerism in America. In a statement which the Shakers frequently recounted, Father James said, "... I saw a vision of America, and I saw a large tree, and every leaf thereof shone with such brightness, as made it appear like a burning torch, representing the Church of Christ, which will yet be established in this land."<sup>32</sup> Hannah Cohoon's text for the Blazing Tree echoes Father James' promise when she wrote "The bright silver color'd blaze streaming from the edges of each green leaf, resembles so many bright torches." What Father James saw in a time of persecution, Sister Hannah painted as an image of fulfillment. Her trees are alive, full of fruit, her basket brings fresh apples. Hannah Cohoon's gift to the community is an affirmation of its own promise.<sup>33</sup>

32. [Seth Y. Wells, ed.], *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Mother Ann Lee...* (Albany: Weed, Parsons, & Co., 1888), p. 52. Andrews also drew this connection, *Visions*, p. 16.

33. In her discussion of trees in the visionary literature, Sasson stated, "All Shakers, like the shining leaves or the fruit of the tree, were part of one living, growing organism rooted in Christ and Mother Ann. Metaphorically, the tree expressed the Shaker communal self-image," p. 30.

However primitive and unsophisticated the outside viewer may be, Hannah Cohoon's drawings tell of an artist who has envisioned a balanced, colorful, and abundant world. In her four works, one sees order, harmony, and the simplicity which expresses—not naivete—but clarity. Just as the basket is open to display the golden apples or the bower arches over the feast table, the viewer is invited in to a ripe and fulsome possibility. But only the believer is able to join the banquet; the outsider must admire from a distance. The blazing tree and the beautiful apples become objects of power and awe now because of their inaccessibility; like a desert mirage, they are close to our common grasp until the written messages intervene to announce our distance. Had Hannah Cohoon wished to entice the "world's people," she could have chosen no better images. Trees and apples and cakes are inviting, but Sister Hannah's invitation goes far beyond art appreciation.

Confronting the vision of Sister Hannah's Shaker world requires that the viewer make a decision beyond aesthetic approval or disapproval. One must first decide whether to learn more about the Shakers and then whether to believe with them. The self-conscious simplicity, virginity, boldness of the Shaker life and art constitutes—for them—the foolishness and weakness which God uses to confound the wise and mighty. If the balanced structure and common images of Sister Hannah Cohoon's drawings do nothing else, they contain this well-integrated message that trees are not trees, or, at the least, are more than trees. The old world is transformed, and the viewer, whether casual, appreciative, or academic, is forced to make a radical decision: the encounter with a "nice piece of Shaker folk art" also entails acceptance or rejection of a religious vision.