

# VISUAL CHEER: IMAGING UTOPIA

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(Paris, Charles V)

No natural eye could behold the brightness, no human tongue describe the beauty and glory of the place, nor pen paint and set forth the glory and power of God that I saw.

In these terms of “brightness”, “beauty”, “glory”, and “power” Shaker Elder William Deming decried what he himself deemed indescribable – a vision he had experienced on the 24th of January 1843. Sought out by the spirit of former Elder Jonathan Southwick through the medium of a heavenly messenger, Deming was invited to visit Southwick in the celestial sphere. Following the messenger from his earthly community to the heavenly kingdom over an arduous route which tested his faith at every turning, Deming was taken on a tour of a large and spacious Temple “...wonderful to behold” and allowed to witness the service in company of Brother Southwick. After learning that “the time had not yet come ...to live there” Deming was accompanied back to his bed on earth by the angelic messenger.<sup>1</sup>

Deming’s written account of his visionary experience was not unique. Many such texts witnessed spiritual encounters within the antebellum Shaker world, and many asserted the difficulty, if not the impossibility of representing the visions. Yet, in the year that Deming wrote his account, a series of pens had set to work painting the visionary world, endeavoring to portray through material images the tangible reality of the spiritual world.

These images proliferated in the Shaker Community for approximately fifteen to twenty years, accompanying a period of great religious fervor known as “the New Era”, or “Mother’s Work,” or simply the “Revival.” A graphic iconography of this turbulent period, this outpouring of drawings was without precedent in the American communal experience. Its presence in Shaker life may seem puzzling, considering the ostensible hostility of the United Brethren to artistic creation. Given the denial of aesthetic expression, how did imagery come to serve Shaker society? More generally, what was the relationship between beauty and that society?

This study explores image as representation of ideology within the Shaker community in antebellum America and suggests that beauty was intrinsic to the Shaker world as an expression of the living presence of the Millennium.

Officially known as the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, the Shakers are probably the oldest utopian community in the United States. The movement’s early origins have been traced to the influence of both Quakers and French Camisard refugees in early eighteenth-century England, but it took shape in

1. William Deming’s Vision, Ms.n° 765, The Joseph Downs Collection, Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum Library, Winterthur, Del.

the 1740s in the industrializing Midlands at the same time as Wesleyan Methodism.<sup>2</sup> In 1774 a small group led by Ann Lee, its most charismatic figure, migrated to the American colonies. After the Revolution, the movement gathered support and spread across New England. By the 1830s, the Shaker faith spread from Maine to Indiana, numbering over five thousand Believers.<sup>3</sup>

The founding phase of the American Shakers was based on celibacy, repentance, or confession of sins, and spirit possession.<sup>4</sup> Charisma dominated Shaker ideology in this first period, but after the death of Ann Lee and her brother William in 1784, a phase of community organization began. Communal ownership of property became an essential tenet of the faith in this second period. The Community of New Lebanon became the head ministry and elaborated a system based on a leadership of four – two men, two women. This quadernal structure remained intact throughout Shaker history, and the pattern of four was repeated at all levels of community organization. Shaker society was divided into families, with anywhere from thirty to a hundred members. Each family was presided over by four spiritual leaders (elders) and four temporal leaders (deacons). The importance of the quadernity as the basis of community authority is reflected in the frequent use of the square in Shaker art forms.

By the early decades of the nineteenth century, conscious of the growing distance separating them from the founders, Church leaders began to formalize their theological tenets in writing. From this third period comes the deification of Ann Lee, or “Mother Ann” as she was known to the community.

Believing that the second coming of Christ had occurred in the person of Ann Lee, Shakers developed the notion of a dual Godhead, of celestial parents, with a feminine deity, “Holy Wisdom”, on a par with “God the Father.” From this moment on they reasoned that they were already in the presence of the Millennial Era. New Lebanon, the head of the Shaker church, became the city of Zion, the New Jerusalem.

Recent historians have seen a continual struggle within the Shaker community between its charismatic tendencies and a drive to order. This inner conflict became especially acute in the contagion of widespread millennialism in American society in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. A series of trance and visionary experiences among young Shaker girls in 1837 touched off a movement of self-interrogation and religious fervor marking the New Era, the period of “manifestations,” characterized by an outpouring of “gifts” from heaven expressed in song, dance, and visual image.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly two hundred extant “gift” images have been discovered by Edward and

2. Henri Desroches, *Les Shakers américains: d'un neo-christianisme à un presocialisme*, Paris, 1955.

3. Although it continued to recruit many converts until the Civil War, the Order also suffered from apostasies, and after 1860 its membership diminished steadily. While people from the “world” continued to join the movement, the Shaker community was essentially rural, and membership diminished as industrialization and urbanization increased. There are currently twelve members of the Community, settled in Maine. Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons*, Syracuse, N.Y., 1991, p.17, and Carol A. Kolmerten, *Women in Utopia*, 1990, p. 31.

4. Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion*, Baltimore, 1987, p.153.

5. Sally M. Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles; Vision and Image in Mid-Nineteenth Century Shakerism*, Bloomington, Ind., 1993 and Roger B. Stein, Exhibition Review. “Winslow Homer in Context,” *American Quarterly*, 42 (March 1990): 7492.

Faith Andrews, early collectors of Shaker memorabilia, and more recently by Daniel W.Patterson. All of them date from the New Era, and seem to come mainly from two Shaker communities in close proximity to each other, New Lebanon, the center of the Shaker ministry, and neighboring Hancock. Through their fanciful forms and appealing colors these drawings and water colors have become popular and are often confused as a genre of American folk art. Contemporary Believers, however, never used the term "art" in reference to this body of work, nor did they consider it a genre apart from other "gifts" of the era. Edward Andrews noted the silence of the Shaker community in regard to this subject and suggested that few Believers were aware of the drawings' existence.<sup>6</sup> More recent scholars seem to think that the works were circulated during the Church meeting or were given to particular individuals as rewards or warnings. Contemporaries categorized them under various names according to function, format or symbolic import - for example gift, "token of love," sheet, roll, message, emblem, sign, etc...<sup>7</sup>

Did this absence of recognition of the material image as a specific category of creativity signify its denial by the Shaker community? It is important to distinguish between creativity and function in order to understand the Shaker approach to the gift images and to their production in general. The role of the individual artist was of little importance to the community, since all creation was thought to be of celestial origin. Although we seek to identify the artists of Shaker maps and village views, of the gift images, of an imaginative architectural achievement, the creators themselves attributed their masterpieces to divine inspiration, to the work of the spirits. Artisans were counseled to avoid flights of fantasy in the production of furniture and everyday objects -- "to temper their creative spirits with a sense of reserve and humility" -- and to harmonize their works within the lines of utilitarian simplicity, a basic tenet of Shaker ideology.<sup>8</sup>

What mattered most for Believers was the way in which these works of art served the community. As long as images strengthened the faith they were considered useful. But before and even during the Revival, many visual elements were considered as superfluous distractions which might turn the Believer away from the true spiritual path. Several of the *Millennial Laws* (1820,1845,1860) governing Shaker society dealt with "superfluities" which could become a source of corruption. Maps were generally kept rolled up, but the Shaker conception of maps before the 1860s also disallowed hanging, since there was no directional orientation. The *Millennial Laws* warned: "no pictures or paintings set in frames, with glass before them shall ever be among you."<sup>9</sup> Ornamentations, decorations, useless "frivolities," which may have entered the community with converts from the "world," were discouraged and eliminated. Offensive or corrupting illustrations in books were torn or scratched out, and school textbooks chosen in function of their pedagogical utility rather than their visual appeal. Yet, as Robert Emlen points out:

Nowhere was it written that the Shakers were forbidden to make their own

6. Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*, Charlottesville, 1969.

7. Daniel W.Patterson, *Gift Drawing and Gift Song*, Sabbathday Lake, Maine, 1983, p.5.

8. Robert P.Emlen, *Shaker Village Views*, Hanover, N.H., 1987, p. 11.

9. Patterson, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

drawings. Indeed, like the rest of their material creation, the Shakers' drawings were considered appropriate in the community as long as they served its needs.<sup>10</sup>

Art at the service of the community provided a certain rationale for the outpouring of images appearing in the mid 1840s. Visual representation of the spiritual world gave Believers what they considered as tangible evidence of the existence of first generation leaders, and the Ministry encouraged and guided the production of images with a view to converting the young and reenforcing the faith of confirmed members of the Church. Spiritual messages and visionary experiences were received and interpreted through the mediation of "instruments" and distributed in the form of communal and personal gifts at the meetings. These messages could be joyful in tone – celebrations of the steadfast virtues of a Believer – but they could also be exhortations and warnings, signs of individual or communal strife. Whatever their character, heavenly messages and gifts were always related to the religious and moral life of the United Brethren. In this respect the material image of the New Era reenforced the political authority of the Ministry, just as it aimed at maintaining the social cohesion of the Shaker community at large.

The first visual presents from the celestial sphere were in form of verbal communications, and recipients had to be spiritually ready to comprehend their meaning. The messages were highly imaged and filled with allusions to items and materials which were prohibited in daily life. For example, in 1842 the Hancock community received a "little Book " from "Holy Mother Wisdom" describing the beautiful clothing to be worn at the Shaker feast: coats and gowns of "heavenly brightness, of 12 different colors" which "do shine exceedingly, these are emblems of holiness, virtue, and purity".<sup>11</sup> The heavenly nature of (the imaginary) garments, accompanied by divine assurance of the virtues they bestowed upon receivers, made these forbidden "luxuries" acceptable and even normative to the Shaker community.

Not all messages contained such jubilant tones. In the same year a message from Mother Lucy, (a second generation leader associated with the organization of the Shaker community), "read by the Angel Dana" to the Watervliet community, while sending the gift of a holy plate as a token of grace for admission to the heavenly sphere, admonished female members of the community against looking in mirrors too much with the idea of attracting the attention of the Brothers.<sup>12</sup> This particular message, not without humor, suggests a certain degree of relaxation in the comportment of Shakers, and an apparent nonchalance toward regulations against possessing mirrors!

The visual imaging of this utopian community soon evolved from verbal to script manifestations in the form of letters, little certificates, similar to school merit rewards, then to leaf and heart shapes covered over with written messages. The materials used were those for writing letters, and sometimes the gifts were distributed in sealed envelopes. Dark colored inks on pastel papers gradually superceded a plainer, cryptic style, and by the early 1840s decorated borders and calligraphy were in use.

10. Emlen, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

11. Ms. n° 771, Downs Collection, *op.cit.*

12. Ms. n° 805, *Ibid.*

The hesitation to resort to pictorial images and the classification of eventual gift drawings as works "in the line of writing" seems proof of the basic ambiguity of pictorialization in the Shaker world. Visual imagery challenged the values of a community whose ideology stressed the force of the word. It created a tension among the spiritual leaders of the community, tension which was resolved only when the leaders themselves adopted visual imagery to their own services, using it to reenforce community values and their own authority within the sect.<sup>13</sup>

The dilemma of the gift drawings did not present itself for other visual representations. As Emlen points out, village views, depicting Shaker communities across the Northeast in the same period, did not seem to present a challenge to Shaker orthodoxy. "No spiritual value was assigned to the drawings" (maps and views)

no public benefit was expected to derive from them outside it...Unencumbered by Shaker dogma, the drawings were not filtered through the constant reevaluation that underlay the creation of other forms of the Shakers' material culture.<sup>14</sup>

By the mid 1840s the "writings" had developed into drawings and paintings in watercolor. All of the extant pictorial images were created in the period between 1845 and 1859, after which production seems to have come to an end. With the exception of works attributed to Hannah Cohoon, the drawings are designed with multiple emblems, descriptive labels and messages giving them an "all-over" effect similar to the *fraktur* drawings of earlier German settlers. This may be attributable to the visit and conversion of a number of Pennsylvanians in the late 1820s, about thirty of whom settled in the New England communities of the United Brethren.<sup>15</sup>

The drawings were often the work of individuals, but sometimes several people cooperated in the execution of a collective work. The latter practice would have been in keeping with Shaker ways, but not with the manner in which visions were usually experienced, unless we assume that trances were shared. This was sometimes the case in the Shaker meeting, and was the way the Revival got started. The movement began with the least powerful elements of Shaker society – female adolescents. While spontaneous visions continued throughout all of the Order for a time, the challenge of the individual to the collectivity, posed in a flagrant manner when a vision criticized the Ministry, moved Church leaders to direct these charismatic experiences in a way that would reenforce the authority of the community. The Ministry maintained control by widening the Shaker hierarchy to include the creating "instruments" as mediators between the spiritual and the temporal world. Therefore, gift messages and images, while often made by and addressed to individuals, had a collective utility in binding makers and recipients to the community.

While instruments played an important role in the Revival through their representation of visions, this did not prevent an occasional apostasy from among

13. Sally Promeay argues that the tension created by the dialectical challenge of the image to Shaker ideology was an essential source of the power of gift drawings and suggests that as dogma ceded to admit the social utility of these drawings they lost their intrinsic power. Promeay, *op.cit.*

14. Emlen, *op.cit.*, p. 5

15. Promeay, *op.cit.*, footnote 143, p. 262.

their ranks.<sup>16</sup> Promeey refers to a message calling upon every Shaker to be an instrument at some point in time.<sup>17</sup> This would have supposed that all Believers shared the capacity for charismatic experiences, which was not the case. Not all Believers could feel or adhere to the fiery enthusiasm of the visionaries. Some adult apostasy was due to this very problem. After an initial period of selecting young adults from the “gathering orders,” the Ministry chose instruments among people who were close to the time of signing the Shaker covenant, with a preference to those who had entered the order as children with their families.<sup>18</sup> They were almost exclusively female, some taught in Shaker schools, but it is difficult to draw a composite profile due to a general lack of information about them.<sup>19</sup> In spite of Daniel Patterson’s discovery of the identity of several image-makers, many did not sign their works, perhaps because Shaker attitudes towards personal manifestations of creativity were negative. Recent scholarship supports anonymity: “This art found meaning in a communal history and a communal context, and not by association with individual genius”.<sup>20</sup>

The sources for gift drawings were numerous. As might be expected the Bible was a major inspiration for the visual imagination, particularly the Old Testament and the Book of Revelations. World history and American history were another, and school books furnished visual or written illustrations of past heroes and events. Nature, too, provided inspiration, especially Shaker landscapes which were frequently admired by contemporary observers, even before the appearance of flower gardens (still considered “frivolities” during the New Era).<sup>21</sup> Needlework – especially quilts, samplers and embroidery, but also the motifs and designs of knitting and weaving, formed part of the basic education of nineteenth-century children in and out of the Shaker community, as did penmanship and drawing or draftsmanship. Young women entering the Order would have brought a knowledge of painting in watercolor, part of female instruction in contemporary American society.<sup>22</sup>

The content of the drawings are complex and sometimes occult. Natural and biblical references abound and frequently combine in symbolic significance, as in tree images, the sign of union and harmony in Shaker ideology. Trees bestowing heavenly fruits assured the Believer of celestial benevolence, but could also recall the cornucopia of abundance, popular theme of theorem paintings and samplers in the larger American culture. Apertures of many sorts were also common: doors, windows, arbors, gates inviting the viewer to cross the pictorial threshold into another world, into an alternative space – that of the future? Gift drawings often contained time pieces, bits of clocks without specific hours, or a confusion of clocks indicating a variety of hours deliberate jumbling, perhaps, by “instruments” to suggest but not

16. Patterson, *op. cit.* pp. 84-85, 92.

17. Promeey, *op. cit.*, footnote 16, p. 229.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

19. Patterson, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-56.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 49. See also Roger Stein, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

21. Dolores Hayden quotes Horace Greeley’s admiration for Shaker lawns, *Seven American Utopias*, Cambridge, Mass., 1976, p. 43.

22. Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women’s Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930*, Chicago, 1991; Daniel Patterson insists on the importance of penmanship in shaping the instrument’s graphic abilities especially since as early as the 1820s “Shakers were manufacturing silver-nibbed pens.” *op. cit.*, p. 18.

to specify the imminence of the last Judgment. For Believers gift images had the power to shorten distances, to juggle time. The Millennial Era was now, but for Believers the future they were preparing was perhaps not a thousand years off.

In order to reconfirm Shaker identity with its own past and to affirm the validity of the Shaker way, heroes from American history were introduced in the images: Christopher Columbus was placed next to Mother Ann in *An Emblem of the Heavenly Sphere* (1854), and his discovery of America interpreted as a divinely guided precursor to the founding of New Zion. George Washington, and other “fathers” sent messages from the celestial kingdom. Gift drawings conflated past, present and future, and associated moral heroes of different epochs as authentic converts to the Shaker vision, probably with the intention of reinforcing Believers in their own faith. The Shaker version of history, moreover, as presented in spiritual and material images, took into account the injustices of colonial and republican America and attempted to “correct” some of its evils. This is apparent in Shaker reception of visionary messages from American Indians. In 1842, for example, a spiritual message revealed that William Penn, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and other compatriots had asked Mother Ann to put an end to their guilt and past Indian grievances by inviting the natives to “share the blessing of her gospel”.<sup>23</sup> These messages were portrayed to Believers in elaborate coded script in the same year. Although no visual reference to slavery seems to have been discovered in the images of the New Era, Shaker ideology condemned it as “the greatest moral sin...any people can commit”.<sup>24</sup>

In combining historical and prophetic imagery, the drawings not only drew on Shaker religious sources, but unconsciously reflected the inspirational currents of millennialism and of the messianic destiny of America already evident in contemporary landscape painting. In their mixture of celebration and exhortation, they were forerunners of the New England plain painter Erastus Salisbury Fields, whose astonishing *Historical Monument to the American Republic*, (1867) closely resembled the visionary spirit of the images of the Shaker Revival – simultaneously traditional and eschatological.<sup>25</sup>

Three elements are determinant in the style of many of the gift images: color, line and form, all of which were governed to some extent by the *Millennial Laws*. These codes established the colors and hues to be applied to the exterior of buildings, in interior decoration, in furnishings, clothing and craftware. White was reserved for the meeting house; communal residence buildings were yellow or a clear shade, barns a deep red, work-shops and other functional structures were browns or greys. Buildings facing the road were to be of light hues, those in the back should be dark, if painted at all. The result was a sort of community color-coding by which one could immediately recognize working quarters, living quarters, and the center of worship.<sup>26</sup>

In theory, the *Millennial Laws* had nothing to do with the pictorial works of the Shakers. The gift images were the result of visionary experiences, and instruments

23. Promey, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

24. *Ibid.*, footnote, 99, p. 258.

25. I have adopted the term “plain painter” from John Michael Vlach who eschews the term “folk artist” as a misnomer for Fields and many others. *Plain Painters: Making Sense of American Folk Art*, Washington, 1988.

26. Emlen, *op.cit.*, pp. 10-11 and Dolores Hayden, *op.cit.*, chapter 4.

claimed to have "received" the model of their representation during the vision itself. Hannah Cohoon "claimed that a heavenly person had shown her an image which she was to draw..."<sup>27</sup> One might conclude that the image-makers also had a heavenly freedom to execute the vision as they liked. However, their own visual choices were shaped to a great extent by the surrounding community, and if their images were to have credibility they had to conform to the expectations of their peers. Hence, the gift drawings contained stylistic elements reflecting the canons of Shaker taste. The *Millennial Laws* suggested "modest color" in clothing, which instruments echoed in the frequent use of pastel shades. On the other hand, a vibrant yellow depicted the golden streets of *The Holy City*. The use of red ink was forbidden by the *Laws*, but image-makers used it lavishly, not only realistically in portraying flowers and fruit, but imaginatively in the dresses of angels. In their use of colors, instruments seem to have exercised a certain free-play while acknowledging community standards and expectations.

Mother Ann was reported to have cherished in her childhood visions in beautiful colors which she feared would fly out the window upon her waking.<sup>28</sup> The symbolism of colors was established by New Lebanon Elder Calvin Green to interpret their meaning in dreams. In his system, white, as would be expected, stood for cleanliness, light, purification of sins, "the highest glory of heavenly objects;" green signified increase; blue meant heaven, or peace; gold indicated "pure – rich in goodness" or "glory earned"; silver was union; "azur blue and peach glow" represented love; black meant the "destitution of all light and glory".<sup>29</sup> To what extent Shaker artists followed Green's system is not evident in their works, nor is it certain that it was known outside of the New Lebanon community unless communicated by the leading Elders. There was, however, a general understanding in the larger Shaker society that colors conveyed meanings beyond the pure beauty of their individual hues. Their signification could change according to context, but black, red and white were especially associated with prophetic messages. In its association to the blood of Christ, red indicated commitment to God as well as tribulations, sufferings, persecution. Yet it also symbolized the brightness of the sun, and of the sacred seven lamps of fire".<sup>30</sup> Whether or not these symbolic dimensions were respected depended upon the image-makers. Robert Emlen, writing of the artists of village views, suggests that Shaker religious tenets allowed them the freedom of expression essential to creation. "In a society seeking to create heaven on earth ... the idea of adhering to ... convention was irrelevant Shaker artisans were encouraged by their religious precepts to be original and creative".<sup>31</sup> Image-makers also had free rein to portray what they had seen in visions, unless limited by the dictates of the visionary experience itself.

Like contemporary plain painters, the artist Hannah Cohoon used color to give a sense of dimension in her absence of a knowledge of the technique of *chiaroscuro*. In the *Bower of Mulberry Trees* (1854) dark colors dominate the borders of the painting and the two large trees which culminate in a cross formed of intertwining leaves at the focal point of the work. A paler, almost neutral tone suggests a sense of space

27. Promey, *op.cit.*, p. 40

28. *Ibid.*, p.18

29. Quoted in Patterson, *op.cit.*, p.14.

30. *Ibid.*, footnote 29, p.14.

31. Emlen, *op.cit.*, pp.20-21.



"behind" the first trees and draws the viewer's attention to two quite small trees forming the end of the bower. Contemporaries, accustomed to the planar style of much early American painting, would have had little difficulty in comprehending the magnitude of the bower or its depth. Farther "into" the painting, and located at the center just underneath the cross of leaves, is a yellow (representing golden?) table, set for the heavenly feast. Beyond it still is a second arch-shaped form, recalling the bower of trees, but composed of a written text in black ink, executed in a pale, effaced manner.<sup>32</sup> Adding to the sense of depth is Cohoon's technique of placing small forms higher up on the pictorial plane, since objects at a distance always seem smaller than those close by.

Lines and forms were of equal importance to color in defining the stylistic and symbolical contents of gift drawings. They, too, were closely linked to Shaker ideology, to the shape of villages, and to the physical deportment of the Believers. Straight lines were considered the most pleasing from an aesthetic point of view and were thought to reflect divine order. They were paralleled with goodness; "straight behavior" was morally correct, and Shaker religious codes demanded that the faithful sit erect in the meeting and lie straight in their beds at night.<sup>33</sup> Village walkways were laid straight and at right angles. Diagonals were avoided as shortcuts, and interpreted as signs of slothfulness. Image makers applied these ideals in "Narrow Path" drawings which were used as collective rituals in the meetings. In the images, figures on either side of the lines representing the "narrow path" presented dangers or pitfalls menacing those whose faith wavered, as their steps might falter on the path. This metaphor was also reflected in the vision of Willam Deming, cited at the beginning of this paper. In his dream Deming was obliged to follow a tortuous road, only three or four inches wide, bordered by ravines and ever-changing obstacles before reaching the heavenly city.

Straight lines and right angles created squares, which symbolized the quadernal structure of Shaker leadership and the celestial quadernity of Shaker belief. Squareness "implied wholeness, stability, and authority" and was echoed in the landscape of Shaker communities. Fields and gardens were planted in squares, fences, roads and buildings aligned at right angles. The circle, too, recalled the celestial sphere. As early as 1837, in one of the first New Era manifestations "the beauty of heaven" was described as "'a perfect circle," and the "Shaker New Jerusalem was the 'round city'".<sup>34</sup>

*The Holy City* (1843), an image in the form of a map, presents a model for the New Jerusalem on earth. Constructed purely of geometric forms, an outward circle with twelve gates encompasses a large inner square, itself composed of four smaller squares engulfing three sets of symmetric circles. Biblical references to jasper walls and streets of gold are portrayed in green and yellow, pale blue rivers surround and cross the city, running like veins under a thin layer of rosy skin. The map is oriented around a central crossroad, just as the Shaker universe was oriented around the

32. The inscription referred to biblical passages in which the rustling of mulberry trees averted David of the presence of the Philistines, allusion, for Believers, to God's attentiveness to the faithful. Sally Promey argues that the miniscule letters oblige the viewer to squint in order to read the text, thus increasing the impression of dimension. *Op cit.*, pp.86-89.

33. *Ibid.*, p.71.

34. *Ibid.*, pP.73-75.

center at New Lebanon. At first view the map appears to be symmetric and quite static, but form and color challenge the equilibrium of the image and give a sense of movement as the viewer seeks a balance between opposing forces in the city plan. Two circles, at the top and on the right, outweigh their theoretical partners, two smaller, paler squares at the bottom and on the left. Our attention would remain on the right, attracted by the straight red paths there, were it not for the strong counterforce of a tiny vermilion circle not far from the center. The image admirably reflects the tension between celestial harmony and the disequilibrium of the temporal world, between the forces of charisma and of order in the New Era.

Dating from the same year is the image *See High Above* from a book of apocalyptic drawings received in a church meeting at New Lebanon. Painted in dazzling colors, the image is composed of a medley of forms, letters, and numbers, and of unidentifiable symbols. According to the instruments presenting the prophetic book, only God could fully comprehend the meaning of the configurations, but the drawings brought good news: imminent judgment and salvation.<sup>35</sup> *See High Above* was similar to Shaker maps of the time. One could see all the elements composing it, but in order to grasp their meaning, it was necessary to view them from every side. It had a central point, but no central focus. Although apparently much freer in form, it was comparable in this sense to the image *The Holy City*.

A later gift image, *An Emblem of the Heavenly Sphere* (1854), is an all-over composition combining all the essential stylistic elements of Shaker drawings – color, line, form with the traditional pictorial references – celestial and earthly gardens, historical and biblical personalities. It is in this drawing that Christopher Columbus figures in a key position next to Mother Ann. Forty eight figures aligned in twelve rows of four, recall the importance of the quaternity while forming the central trunk of the composition. Twelve squares with garden images flank the figures on both sides and represent heavenly fruit and virtues. At the top, an inscription offers this image as an emblem of celestial love with the promise that understanding and insight will be given to those whose faith does not fail.<sup>36</sup> Although this image is figurative, like *A Bower of Mulberry Trees*, its meaning can only be understood through Shaker symbolism, and perhaps only partly at that.

The occultism of many gift drawings limited their impact to the informed of the Shaker community, and may explain why scholars suggest that most of them remained in the hands of the Ministry. On the other hand smaller gifts of hearts, letter, and “sacred leaves” were exchanged so frequently within the community that one elder found they had become “common” and had lost the power to excite or stimulate religious fervor. Perhaps Shakers experienced a certain “aesthetic fatigue” as Promey suggests in accounting for the rather sudden discontinuation of this medium of visual expression.<sup>37</sup> It is more likely that as religious fervor diminished, the gift drawing lost its utility and, therefore, its aesthetic justification in a community which regarded images with suspicion. Clearly, as long as the images presented a charismatic force and defied simple interpretation they held sway over the community. When they became reassuring rather than provocative, the intensity of the impact diminished.

35. *Ibid.*, p.110

36. *Ibid.*, p.128.

37. *Ibid.*, p.274

Paradoxically, in a community which valued utilitarianism, beauty played a central role. Beauty sustained the basic values of harmony and order in Shaker society, and the gift drawings, denuded of any breath of artistic sensuality, left unchallenged that central pillar of Shaker ideology, celibacy. While disclaiming personal creativity, Shakers developed their own particular and durable aesthetic style. Subordinating personality to product, attributing creativity to spiritual rather than secular sources, Shakers developed a collective aestheticism with room for individual differences. Within the framework of sobriety and simplicity an apocalyptic art took shape, fashioning a celestial model for an earthly utopia. If, as Dolores Hayden suggests, "life's ultimate purpose" is "translating visual concepts into physical reality," Shaker images served the community by making the invisible visible, by bringing the future into the present.<sup>38</sup>

38. Hayden, *op.cit.*, p.100.