Edward Hicks: The Peaceable Kingdom

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Edward Hicks (April 4, 1780 – August 23, 1849). Painter of The Peaceable Kingdom.

An American folk painter as well as a noted minister of the Society of Friends, Edward Hicks became, through his paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom, perhaps even more than through his preaching, one of the most influential spokespersons the Quaker tradition has ever known.
In doing the research for this paper, I discovered that both his life and his work as a painter were, without question, indelibly shaped by the aftermath of the Revolutionary War.

Born in his grandfather’s mansion at Attleboro in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in 1780 - just four years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the young Edward was soon snatched from the life of luxury into which he had been born. For six generations his family, loyal to the British throne, had held a position of wealth and social prominence. Following the defeat of the British, however, all of their privilege disappeared and his father, Isaac, a well known “Loyalist” and his grandfather, Gilbert, chief justice of Bucks County, were forced into hiding. As you can imagine, it was a dangerous time for British sympathizers in general but more specifically for a family as openly vocal as Edward’s had been.

Tragically, Edward’s mother died when he was only 18 months old. His father, unable to care for his new son, the youngest of five, made arrangements for one of his wife’s closest friends, Elizabeth Twining to take over the care of young Edward. Elizabeth was a devout Quaker and although Edward’s parents were Anglican, she endeavored to bring up her new charge in the Quaker faith. While he loved to sit at her knee and hear her read stories to him from the bible, that seemed to be the extent of his interest in her Quaker principals.

Early on it was determined, much to his father’s disappointment, that unlike his older brother who was already a practicing physician, the young Edward was totally unsuited for a scholarly pursuit. Fearing for his son’s future, Isaac sent him off at the young, tender age of 13 to learn a trade from coach makers, William and Henry Tomlinson.
While Edward was with them, the Tomlinsons paid little if any attention to Edward's coming or going. Away from Elizabeth Twining's moral care, the young, impressionable Edward soon fell in with some unsavory companions. What followed was like a repeat of the Prodigal Son story, a story that Edward must have been only too familiar with.

Working all day and carousing all night, he soon fell into ill health. At a critical point, Edward decided to give up his way of living and return “home” to the Twinning farm and the more austere life he had known there.

In the Spring of 1803, he was accepted with open arms into the Friends fellowship. Soon after, he married Sarah Worstall whose family were Quakers of long standing. He and Sarah had been friends from childhood ... and as Edward put it she was “the one enduring love of his youth.”

With a wife as well as himself to support, he put into practice the trade he had learned from the Tomlinsons. He started by painting simple sign boards as well as decorating carriages.

Judging from Edward’s account books, in 1811 his career as a sign painter took a big jump as he began to paint more and more elaborate sign boards.
One work, commissioned by the local library, took the form of a wooden placard adorned with the face of Benjamin Franklin in its center.

Another work was the sign board he painted for the Red Lion Inn, we see the first of the lions that will take center stage in Hicks’ paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom.

One of the most entertaining of his sign boards is the one he painted for Jacob Christ who owned and operated a hat shop in one of the nearby villages. This joyful jumble of hats gives us a rare view into the lighter side of Hicks’ personality.
With Sarah Hick’s painted chest, he provides us a sample of the highly decorative work that he was capable of. This chest appears to have been painted for his wife, Sarah.

As time went on he added easel painting to his repertoire. Some of these paintings had patriotic themes such as Washington Crossing the Delaware. As was common practice at the time, Hicks took his inspiration from a painting by Thomas Sully on the same subject.

Sully’s painting, now hangs in one of the American Art galleries in the Museum of Fine Arts. Having been given the wrong measurements, Sully’s work ended up being too large for the place for which it was originally painted.

It is in this painting that the symbolism which became an important element in Hicks’ future paintings emerged. To Sully’s scene, he has added a moon seen penetrating the gathering storm clouds, like the cosmic eye of God, overseeing events.
Hicks painted a number of other patriotic events like the signing of the Declaration of Independence and Penn’s Treaty with the Indians.

In this 1847 version of *Penn's Treaty with the Indians*, it is easy to see that his painting was closely based on an earlier painting by Benjamin West.

This scene, an important one to Hicks was to show up again and again in his paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom.

Edward Hicks, *Penn's Treaty with the Indians*, 1847, National Gallery of Art

Edward Hicks, *Penn's Treaty with the Indians* based on a painting by Benjamin West, private collection

Benjamin West's, *Penn's Treaty with the Indians*, 1771, Pennsylvania State Museum
As a Quaker, Hicks' artistic profession was on the edge of acceptable vocations. It was deemed all right for him to put his talents to use on wagons, signs and other utilitarian jobs, but to become too ornamental was forbidden among the Friends.

In order to quiet the criticism he was receiving from his community and his own Quaker convictions, he decided to give up his painting business turning instead to a more acceptable way to earn a living - farming.

It was a disastrous decision. He was ill equipped, either by training or experience, to become a farmer. To complicate things further, unable to come up with the whole down payment to purchase farm land, he borrowed the balance of the money from what he later described as a “usurer.” Instead of taking responsibility for this decision, he complained that “the cruel moth of usury” had eaten his “outward garment” till he had turned into a “naked bankrupt.” He further claimed that it would only have been proper charity for the lender to have given him the loan without interest. This was only the first of the financial decisions that would leave him deep in debt the rest of his life.

In the wake of the farming disaster, Edward sought the advice of a trusted friend who told him, “Thee has the source of independence within thyself, in thy peculiar talent for painting. Keep to it, within the bounds of innocence and usefulness, and thee can always be comfortable.” That advice was still fresh in his mind, when in 1816, Hicks saw something that lead him to a way to effect a compromise between his religious beliefs and his need not only to make money but to express himself visually.

What he saw was this engraving by British artist, Richard Westall, in which Westall illustrated a passage from Isaiah. (Isaiah 11:6) The passage reads, “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lay down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together: and a little child shall lead them.”

Richard Westall, The Peaceable Kingdom of the Branch, 1800-1815, from a drawing of an engraving. Westall, British, did popular biblical illustrations in English bibles and tracts.
Much as he had done with West’s painting of Penn’s Treaty with the Indians, and Sully’s painting of Washington Crossing the Delaware, Hicks used Westall’s engraving as a model for his own paintings of the same subject. Between 1816 until his death in 1849, Hicks is known to have painted somewhere between 60 and 100 paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom.

Here in Hicks’ painting, we see a child playing safely with the wild animals who appear tame and utterly harmless.

When I first started looking at these paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom, I imagined the painter to be a calm, quiet, unassuming man who simply sought to share with others his vision of a peaceful world.

What I found was that nothing could be further from the truth! He was a man often at war with himself and with his fellow congregants.

Not infrequently he would be moved to speak at one of the meetings with his voice gradually rising in pitch and fervor in condemnation of someone or something he deemed in error. When he himself was criticized, he would denounce his critic with such unbridled venom that after departure from the meeting, he was plunged into suicidal despair.

Several times he actually left his own community to worship in a neighboring community. He always returned.

Alice Ford in her biography of Hicks writes, “Edward’s return to the fold found him as uncommonly dogmatical a disputant” as ever, assuming a righteous and intolerant authority and disliking all who answered or disagreed with him.”
Upon closer examination, Edward’s paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom between 1816 and his death in 1848 can be seen to chart, through the symbology contained within the paintings, the course of his inner life during those years. Filled early on with the dream of peaceful coexistence between all, his hopes were gradually shattered as he came, at the end, to see what an impossible dream it was.

The earliest paintings (1816-1828) are the most peaceful.

Edward Hicks, The Peaceable Kingdom, 1820-25, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center

Edward Hicks, The Peaceable Kingdom of the Branch, 1826-30, Reynolds House Museum of Art, Winston-Salem, NC

Edward Hicks, Th Peaceable Kingdom, 1833-34, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center
Most of these early works are surrounded by a printed border, usually referred to as the “Border Peaceable Kingdoms.” His experience as a sign painter equipped him to do the lettering around these paintings, which usually read:

The wolf shall with the lambkin dwell in peace,
His grim carnivorous nature then shall cease;
The leopard with the harmless kid lay down,
and not one savage beast be seen to frown;
The lion and the calf shall forward move,
A little child shall lead them in love.
When MAN is moved and led by sov’reign grace,
To seek that state of everlasting PEACE.

The animals in these so called “Border Peaceable Kingdoms” are sweet and mild, without any trace of tension or anxiety. The child has his arm gently and lovingly draped around the lion’s neck. William Penn, standing on the banks of the Delaware signing a peace treaty with the Lenape Indians, is shown in the background. Hicks found in William Penn the ultimate role model he was seeking in how to reach peaceful resolutions with those with whom one was at odds. Penn, also of the Quaker faith, demonstrated for Hicks in his legendary treaty with the Indians, the way to reach a peaceful resolution. Unfortunately Hick’s explosive personality left him incapable of emulating Penn’s example.

The next set of paintings is more disquieting. The peaceable kingdoms painted between between 1829 and 1832, have been referred to as “Banner Peaceable Kingdoms” because of the banner of text wrapped around the figures. Upon close examination, we can see that there are signs of disquiet beginning to show. For example, the leopard now looks considerably tenser, even uneasy. While the child still has his hand around the lion’s neck, it is more like it is grasping a handful of mane, struggling to keep the beast in place. The human figures are beginning to scatter, and there is an ominous split in the trunk of the oak tree.

This cleft was intended to represent the division that had taken place within the Society of Friends between the so called Hicksites and the Orthodox. The Hicksites, under the influence of Edward’s cousin Elias, advocated a simple, rural lifestyle and looked askance at the prosperity of
Quakers who lived in the city. In addition, the Hicksites also resisted the authority of Scripture and opposed having elders in the church.

By 1832, when he began to paint what were known as his “Middle Peaceable Kingdoms” (1832-1840), Hicks had begun to doubt whether reconciliation was possible. In response to his doubts, many of the animals take on a fierce, even sinister look. The lion is seen baring his teeth. In a sermon preached at Goose Creek, Virginia, Hicks explained his symbolism: each animal represented a different aspect of human nature. His point was that there are qualities that even the most gentle and un-aggressive of human beings have in common with the untamed beasts of the wild. “The animal, man,” he said, “possesses the nature and propensities of all other animals.”
Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 1834, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 1833-1834, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center
By the time he painted his final series of paintings, called the “Late Peaceable Kingdoms” of the 1840’s, Hicks seems to have completely abandoned his hopes for peace on earth.

Some of the animals—especially the leopards—can be seen in outright conflict. They are no longer grouped tightly together, but are dispersed across the canvas, representing the disunity that represents more and more his experience of the world and civilization as he knew it.

It was during this time that Hicks wrote of his former hope that, “I should live to see the society of Friends come together but . . . the ranting un[settled] spirit among friends together with the feebleness of my hold on life has dissipated (sic) that hope.” Hicks’ growing sense of fatigue is expressed most clearly in his last “Peaceable Kingdom,” in which the lion appears hunched over in what seems to be sheer exhaustion.

What Edward Hicks seems to be saying in these later paintings is that God’s peacable kingdom cannot be established on this earth – at least within society as Hicks knows it. His experience in what he deemed as a sinful church, gradually replaced the idealism of his youth. In old age, his idealism gave way to what he believed was a more realistic view of human nature never realizing the role he himself had played in making it a contentious gathering of “friends.”
He produced these images to the end of his life; in fact, he was preparing one for his daughter when he died.

Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 1849. Last work by Hicks, private collection

Hicks executed his last painting of the Peaceable Kingdom in 1849. It represents his final word on a theme that had governed both his life and art. Family tradition holds that he was working on this easel when he died. Although this version keeps much of the "Late Kingdom" imagery, it has many unique elements that set it apart from other versions. The focal point is now the elongated, recumbent leopard, the epitome of a being, finally at peace with the world. One would hope that through this, Hicks was also expressing the peace that can come before death and the final acceptance of what one’s life has been. This tranquility is seen in each of the painting’s thirteen animals, who peacefully mingle in the soft glow of the setting sun. Though many of the series’ familiar scenes remain - for instance, the distant Penn’s Treaty grouping - this version is distinctive in that a general exodus appears to be taking place. Also unique to the Kingdom imagery is the lone bull in the lower right corner who also appears to be exiting the scene even as Hicks himself will shortly exit the scene through death.