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Remembering Gus Kermes

By Sandra A. Soule

Long time Shaker Seminar participant and artist Constantine J. Kermes, affectionately known to his countless friends as “Gus,” passed away on May 19, 2009, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Many of his fellow Seminar attendees remember Gus constantly painting when visiting Shaker sites. He painted Shaker village views, their buildings and workspaces, and the people who had populated them. Even when listening to Seminar presentations, Gus was busily sketching Shaker images with an ease that captivated many, including myself. As often happens to those sharing an interest in Shakerism, we became good friends. Through the years my appreciation for Gus’s artwork grew, as it did for his positive outlook on life and generosity. In this issue of the *Quarterly* featuring Seminar papers, it is only fitting to remember Gus and how he contributed to the interpretation of the Shaker experience through the enduring images he created with his remarkable talent.

While an art student at Carnegie Institute of Technology (now known as Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh in the 1940s, Gus started studying the Shakers. He admired their spirit of simplicity and their innovativeness in design. About the same time he became interested in the writings of Henry David Thoreau, which he quoted often throughout his life. The concept of simplicity found among the Shakers and in Thoreau became a recurrent theme and goal for Gus’s life’s work.

First visiting the villages of Mount Lebanon and Hancock in 1946 while both were still occupied by the Shakers, Gus completed college research assignments by sketching and painting what he observed. Fond memories of those scenes and of the remaining Shakers in residence, and Hancock brother Ricardo Belden’s positive response to his paintings, were treasured by Gus and shared with other Shaker enthusiasts. Sometimes Gus would not part with a work that held a special place in his heart, and thus it remained in his personal collection and close at hand. Such was the case with his painting of the Mount Lebanon North Family’s great stone barn which he completed after his initial encounter with the Shakers.

His earliest Shaker village visits had a profound impact on the subject matter and direction Gus pursued in his art. Excursions to other Shaker communities followed and enriched his vision and interpretation of how the Shakers' beliefs shaped their lives.

In 1947 another religious group captured Gus's attention—the Amish of Lancaster County, who eventually became his neighbors. The daily rhythm of their lives, their seasonal activities, and the beauty of their well-kept farms provided limitless subject matter for his art. Images of the Amish were displayed alongside those of the Shakers in his “American Saints” exhibition at the Jacques Seligmann Gallery in 1950. Some of Gus's early Shaker images graced the announcement for that event, the first of his ten solo exhibitions at this prestigious New York City gallery which represented his work for more than thirty years. For Gus, one of the highlights of that first exhibition was Eleanor Roosevelt's complimentary review of his work in an article titled “Shakers on Canvas,” published in her syndicated newspaper column in which she also reminisced about meeting two Shakers at Mount Lebanon. Just as Mrs. Roosevelt had recognized his work, so did Gus honor her many years later by creating a painting featuring a quotation attributed to her. He adapted that design for his 2005 Christmas card complete with her inspiring words: “Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a Gift – that's why they call it the Present.”

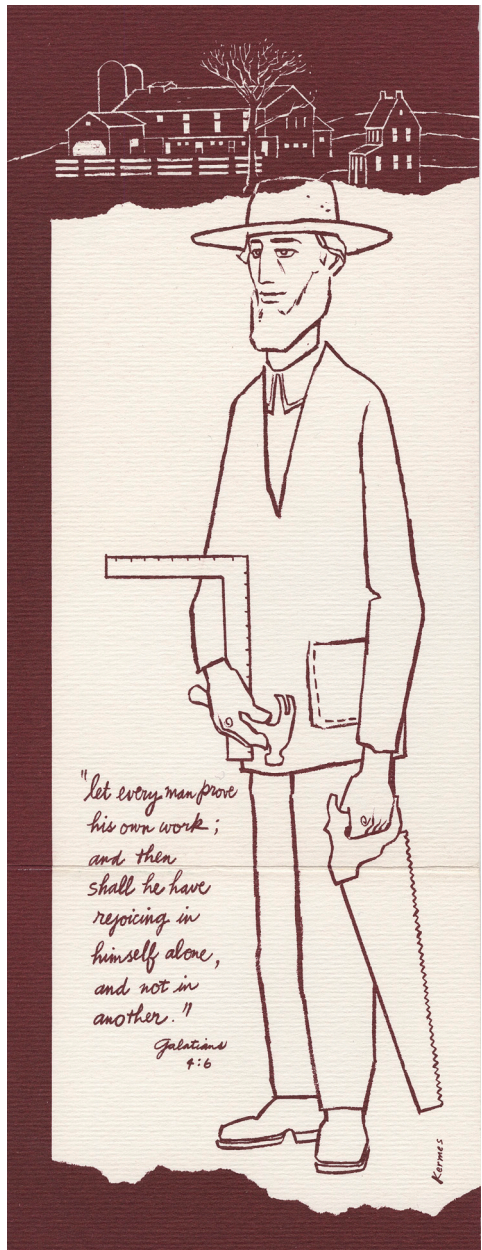
Gus explained that the elongated figures in his work were part of his “personal visual language” that had been influenced by the Byzantine iconography associated with his Greek ancestry. His observations were filtered through that symbolic imagery as he interpreted American folk traditions and religious groups. Gus developed what he referred to as “Amer-Icons,” reflecting his understanding of Shaker and Amish lives.¹

Opportunities to share his artistic vision with the public thrilled Gus. When exhibiting at the New York State Museum in Albany, he met William Lassiter, who eventually became the museum's senior curator of history and art. Lassiter asked Gus to illustrate his 1959 publication, *Shaker Recipes for Cooks and Homemakers*. When acknowledging Gus's contributions to his book, Lassiter described him as “one of America's most promising young artists.”² Clearly pleased with the illustrations for his first book, Lassiter asked Gus to illustrate his second book, *Shaker Architecture*, which was published in 1966 and included twelve Kermes drawings.

Many students of Shakerism can readily call to mind some of Gus's unique images. Undoubtedly one of his most familiar works is “Shaker

Harmony,” an oil painting that he reproduced and made available in limited edition prints. In 1980 Flo Morse selected this image of a Shaker sister for her publication *The Shakers and the World's People*.³ When discussing the impact of contemporary artists on the Shaker image, Stephen J. Stein printed and interpreted “Shaker Harmony” in his book *The Shaker Experience in America*, published in 1992. Stein commented that “Constantine Kermes’s Shakers stand tall and straight, the embodiment of righteousness and spiritual rigor.”⁴ Delighted with this recognition, Gus quoted Stein’s comments and reproduced “Shaker Harmony” in his own book, *Work in Progress*, which was published in 2008.⁵ Important to note is that Gus preferred not to refer to his book, which documents the last sixty years of his work, as a retrospective, which to him implied a sense of completion. Instead, the concept of progress more fittingly described what was taking place in his life as he continued to actively paint and enjoy his creations.

Gus established many ties to others who were interested in Shaker studies. He authored



Kermes’ stylized interpretation of the well-known image of Brother Charles Greaves.

articles in *The Shaker Messenger* where his distinctive Shaker images graced the covers of four issues between 1980 and 1995.⁶ In 1988 Gus designed the logo of the Berkshire Shaker Seminar, as it was known when sponsored by Berkshire Community College and directed by Gustave Nelson from 1985 to 1999. That logo appeared on songbooks, stationary, posters, tote bags, coffee mugs and other items for seminar participants over the years. Nelson remembers how Gus Kermes generously provided graphic support for Seminar programs.⁷ Hancock Shaker Village invited Gus to mount a solo exhibition in their 1910 barn gallery in the summer of 1989. Another exhibit took place in the stone mill at Enfield Shaker Village in New Hampshire where Gus was the artist in residence during the 1996 Berkshire Shaker Seminar.

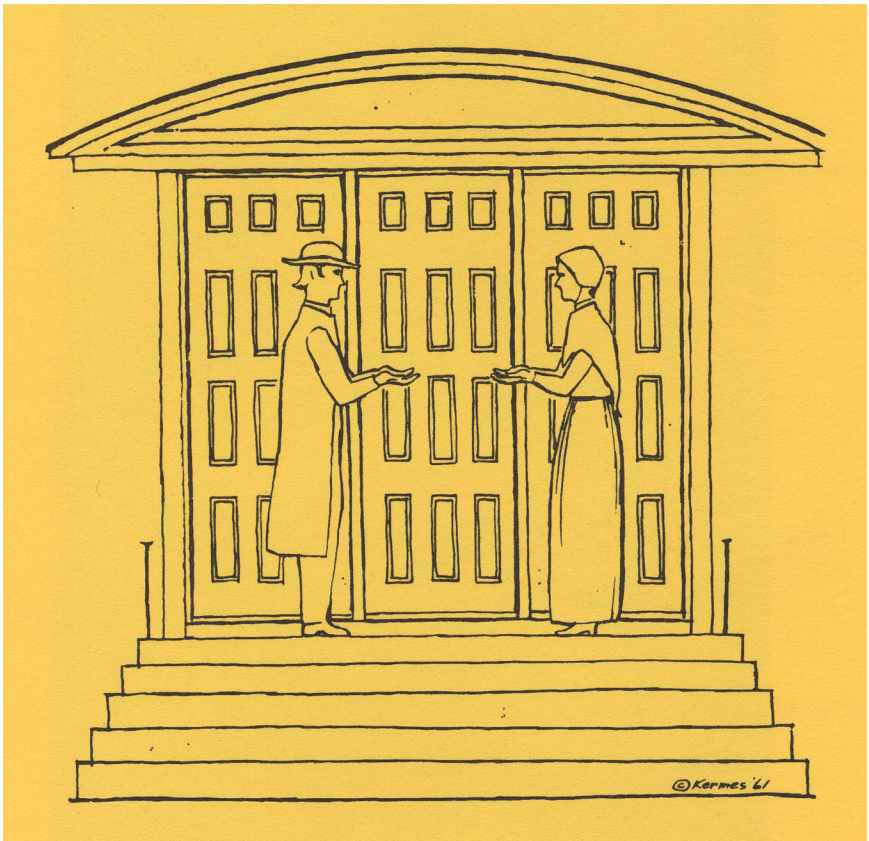
Well over two hundred exhibitions of Gus's artwork have been held at various museums and galleries throughout the United States. Response to his work was always important to Gus, and people from all walks of life appreciated and collected his paintings and prints. From his perspective as an artist, he considered his paintings "old friends" that he parted with as they made their way to new homes where he sometimes enjoyed "visiting rights." He earned professional honors from his contemporaries in the art world and won innumerable awards in competitive shows, and he created prize-winning paintings until the end of his days. In addition to his depictions of the Shakers and Amish, other exhibited works focused on the Greek islands, Pueblo potters, and Spanish American Santo painters.

About fifteen years ago, at a time when most people would rest on past accomplishments, Gus became what he described as more spontaneous. He expanded his repertoire by exploring a myriad of subjects and experimenting with new techniques and colors. Abstract landscapes and seascapes, as well as tree imagery and a wide range of individuals in meditative and expressive poses, took center stage in his painting. From that body of work came the paintings displayed in "I Hear America Singing," Gus's solo exhibition at the Lancaster Museum of Art in 2002. When he was invited back to do an exhibit opening in April 2009, he returned with "I Hear America Singing II," presenting some of his most recent work and a sampling of his classics. Gus attended that exhibition's opening reception and later a gallery talk about his work by the museum's director, which he found quite flattering. He passed away in May before the show closed.

Other professional and personal accomplishments filled Gus's eighty-five years. He was employed as an industrial designer for thirty years by the

New Holland Machine Company where he improved the styling of farm equipment. As a result of his work in that industry, he held twenty-four design patents and received other national honors. With his beloved wife Bess he raised twin daughters who also became artists and married artists. His love for his family and pride in their achievements was ever apparent.

What became clear as I reviewed Gus's past was that he was a seeker. He unfailingly sought simplicity, creativity, and beauty in his life and work, which were so closely intertwined. As a young man, that search had led him to Taliesin East in Wisconsin, the home of Frank Lloyd Wright, where he could stay and paint as long as he helped with chores. A reminder of how strongly that experience influenced Gus was his personalized red



Entrance to the 1824 Mount Lebanon Meetinghouse.
This image was used by the Shaker Seminar.

signature block, which is reminiscent of Wright's personal symbol. When he designed his own Lancaster home, Gus integrated some architectural features often found in Wright's houses. His search had also led him to George Nakashima with whom he became acquainted in the late 1940s.

Throughout his life, Gus eagerly sought out new experiences and sources of inspiration. His spirit of excitement and joy never waned as he ventured down new paths of artistic expression and cherished the old ones. His work enables us to look at life in a way that we would never have been able to on our own. Energetic and tirelessly seeking, Gus himself became a source of inspiration for others to enjoy the fullness of life as he had done. He frequently penned thoughtful, personalized comments, whether autographing a book or signing a note. In one of his last such messages to me, he wrote, "Thank God for the Shakers."⁸ With those words, Gus appreciatively acknowledged lasting inspiration and lasting friendships.

Notes

1. Constantine Kermes, *Work in Progress: Paintings and Other Works of Constantine Kermes* (Lancaster, Pa.: Studio Publishing, 2008), 3.
2. William Lawrence Lassiter, *Shaker Recipes for Cooks and Homemakers* (New York: Greenwich Book Publishers, 1959), 11.
3. Flo Morse, *The Shakers and the World's People* (1980; repr., Hanover, N.H.: University of New England Press, 1987), 272.
4. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 426-27.
5. Kermes, *Work in Progress*, 7.
6. Constantine Kermes, "Kermes Interprets the Shakers," *The Shaker Messenger* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 11.
Constantine Kermes, "Development of a Painting and a Print," *The Shaker Messenger* 16, no. 4 (May 1995): 8. *The Shaker Messenger*, 3, no. 3 (Spring 1981); 7, no. 1 (Fall 1984); 10, no. 4 (Summer 1988); 16, no. 4 (May 1995): cover.
7. Gustave G. Nelson, e-mail message to author, May 22, 2009.
8. Constantine Kermes, message to author, October 26, 2008.