

Hancock Shaker V I L L A G E



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Hancock Shaker Village to present “A Promising Venture: Shaker Photographs from the WPA” featuring the work of Noel Vicentini

PITTSFIELD, Mass. – Hancock Shaker Village will present a major new exhibition titled “A Promising Venture: Shaker Photographs from the WPA” from May 26, 2012 through October, 2013, sponsored by Berkshire Money Management. The exhibition will feature the work of photographer Noel Vicentini, who was hired as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project in 1936 to document the Shaker villages in upstate New York and western Massachusetts for the newly-formed Index of American Design. The result was over 200 black-and-white photographs showcasing Shaker craft, architecture, and culture.

“The photographs of ‘A Promising Venture’ are simultaneously objective and subjective; they reveal the material culture that grew out of the unique Shaker religious movement,” said Lesley Herzberg, curator of the exhibition and Hancock Shaker Village collections manager. “The images stand on their own as works of fine art—beautiful scenes of form and design—and they reveal aspects of Shaker history and culture.”

As with other Index portfolios documenting American design, Vicentini’s photographs were originally displayed in libraries and department stores throughout the country; they helped to endear the Shaker aesthetic in the minds of American citizens. The Index of

American Design archives are housed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. This upcoming exhibition at Hancock Shaker Village marks the first time that Vicentini's Shaker work will be shown in its entirety.

A now obscure photographer, Vicentini (sometimes spelled Vincentini) is something of an enigma. He was born to a Trinidadian father and a French mother in Trinidad in 1906 and immigrated to the United States in 1924. According to the U.S. Census records of 1930, he lived as a single lodger in New York City, where his occupation was listed as "cameras" and industry as "manufacturer." He worked for the Federal Art Project as a teacher and photographer from 1935 until he enlisted in the United States Army in 1942, and became a sergeant during World War II. He died in 1963 and is buried at the Long Island National Cemetery in Farmingdale, New York.

The title of this exhibition, "A Promising Venture," is a phrase excerpted from a letter written by seminal Shaker scholar Edward Andrews in 1936. Andrews and his wife Faith were hired by the Index of American Design to supervise the Shaker Portfolio, which included watercolor renderings of Shaker objects, as well as the photographic record of Shaker sites placing the objects in context. The phrase is telling in that Andrews felt the project had promise, but hadn't yet achieved its goals. Ironically, it would never achieve Andrews' goals, as the photographs were exhibited to the public in Index shows with erroneous information and the portfolio was never published, until now.

This exhibition, and its accompanying catalogue to be published by Couper Press at Hamilton College, aims to set the historic record straight about the project. A great deal of work has been done to correctly identify Vicentini's photographs from Shaker villages in Watervliet and Mount Lebanon, New York, as well as Hancock, Massachusetts.

As part of the "New Deal" response to the Great Depression of the 1930s, the federal government established the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In addition to infrastructure improvements performed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the WPA oversaw the Federal Art Project, commissioning over one thousand artists to create

public works of art. Seizing the opportunity to celebrate truly American art forms, the Federal Art Project also set out to catalog American design, dispatching watercolorists, easel artists, and photographers throughout the country to create portfolios for the Index of American Design.

In addition to the “A Promising Venture” exhibition catalogue, Hancock Shaker Village will produce an online microsite that will feature “dig deeper” information about the portfolio and other WPA projects. There will also be related gallery talks, a family guide of the exhibition offered free for children, and photography workshops tied to the exhibition. For more information, visit www.hancockshakervillage.org.

About Hancock Shaker Village

Situated on a picturesque expanse of farm, field, and woodland in Pittsfield, Mass., Hancock Shaker Village is an outdoor living history museum and center for the study of principled living in the 21st century. The fully restored Village includes 18 historic buildings, heirloom medicinal and vegetable gardens, 22,000 examples of Shaker furniture, crafts, tools, and clothes that depict daily life at the Shakers’ City of Peace through its 220 years, as well as heritage breed farm animals and spectacular hiking trails. There are daily tours, craft and cooking demonstrations, lectures and workshops, and a variety of activities for children and families, as well as a Museum Store and Shaker-inspired cuisine at the Village Harvest Café. The Discovery Room offers hands-on opportunities for kids of all ages to try their hand at chair seat weaving, working at a loom, trying on Shaker-style clothing, or milking a life-sized replica of a cow. An interactive audio tour (free with admission) is available in English, French, Italian, and German.

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