



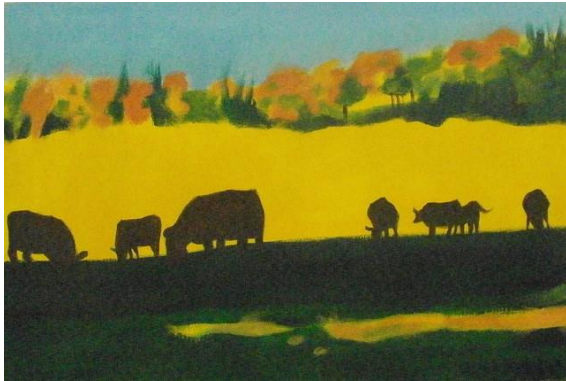
MEDIA RELEASE

For more information:

Shawn Hartley Hancock
Director of Marketing & Communications
shancock@hancockshakervillage.org
413-443-0188 x 221

For immediate release....

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Paintings from “EAT” (feeding time for barnyard animals), the new exhibit by artist Susan Merrill at Hancock Shaker Village, opening April 11

Where Art and Animals Intersect

Hancock Shaker Village celebrates seven seasons of paintings by artist Susan Merrill

PITTSFIELD, MA -- For years now, Stockbridge, Massachusetts, artist Susan Merrill and Hancock Shaker Village have been partners bringing art and animals together.

Merrill's colorful drawings and paintings of farm animals have been exhibited in the Poultry House Gallery at Hancock Shaker Village since 2009 as part of the Village's grand-opening event, **Baby Animals on the Shaker Farm**, three weeks of "proud parenting" when the public is invited in to see, pat and cuddle the farm's newborn barnyard animals.

The exhibition of Merrill's work, "EAT: feeding time for barnyard animals," opens April 11 and runs through May 24. Baby Animals on the Shaker Farm runs through May 3.

Merrill's exhibits of animal art at Hancock Shaker Village always delight their audience, beginning with her first, "All Creatures Gathered Here," whose title was borrowed from a Shaker quote. Every year since, Merrill has riffed on this theme to explore an aspect of barnyard animals in closer detail.

Like all good artists, Merrill sees something in her subjects the rest of us don't – at least not without some prodding. By exploring how farm animals move and cluster, how their fur and feathers make patterns, and the way they interact with people or eat their food, Merrill provides new ways to explore and understand the animal life around us. "This is especially valuable for children," the artist says, "many of whom meet a farm animal for the first time at Baby Animals on the Shaker Farm."

Themes of Farm life and animals

Merrill's themes are often disarmingly simple. The 2011 exhibit, "The Black-and-White Barnyard," focused on animals whose black-and-white coats take on greater complexity from shadow and other atmospheric circumstances. Others, like "Families, Flocks and Herds," in 2012, explored how animals form into groups and the patterns that result as they move around the barnyard.

Last year's show, "Barnyard Portraits," seemed impossible. "Most of us don't think of animals as being able to pose," Merrill says. "Sometimes you can catch them in profile -- other times, they don't stay still long enough."

The artist's insights elevate the experience of Baby Animals on the Shaker Farm for every visitor. Merrill actually sees her work as a vehicle for exchanging insights with her viewers, and to that end, she leaves a sketchbook in the gallery inviting visitors –especially children -- to draw pictures of their favorite animal in the barn or their favorite painting in the show. The opportunity for personal exploration and discovery, like the chance to explore a traditional farm and meet newborn barnyard animals, is all-too-rare for children today, she believes.

Last year, a boy about age 7 came into the Poultry House Gallery on a visit to Baby Animals and said to his grandfather, "Look at this horse!" The boy stood observing the painting for a while, and then he drew it in the sketchbook. He saw that the horse was turning away, and he was able to capture that in his drawing. "That's the behavior you want to see in a museum or an art gallery – you want people to stand there and really *look* at the art," Merrill says. "What this boy learned

had nothing to do with animals or Hancock Shaker Village -- he learned about angles. This was an art lesson!”

Growing up on a Farm

A farm girl herself, Merrill spent winters in Maryland on her family farm, and summers at her family home in Stockbridge, the town in the Berkshires of Massachusetts made famous by Norman Rockwell.

At age 10, she contracted polio, which she calls a blessing in disguise. A long hospital stay was followed by an even-longer recuperation, including the challenge of learning to walk again. “I couldn’t do what other children were doing, or even go to school, so in that “down” time, I had to figure out how to occupy myself,” Merrill says. Her mother, a children’s portraitist, kept her supplied with anatomy books, so Merrill began to draw and paint as she sat in bed for long periods. “That changed my life.”

Once up and around again, Merrill took a nasty tumble one day near the chicken house in Maryland. “I was still using a cane and I wasn’t very mobile,” she says. “A rooster came charging at me – I was lower than he was and I was in his territory! I learned important lessons about animals that day,” she says. (Fortunately, her brother saved her before she got badly pecked.)

Learning why animals do what they do, Merrill believes, helps her expand her vision for each new exhibit at Hancock Shaker Village. “The first two shows were just of the animals here at

Hancock. Then I started going to more and more farms and meeting new animals. I added horses and guinea hens last year. This year, she intended to explore the concept of animal motion, but soon realized farm animals prefer not to move much, unless forced by circumstance.

“Their favorite activity, besides resting,” she says, “is eating. And they eat in many different ways – grazing in a field, gobbling from a bin, or pecking at bugs.” That’s why the 2015 show is devoted to that favorite activity, with a nod to some of the more unusual animals Berkshire farmers are working with these days, including red pigs that Merrill found on top of a mountain in nearby New Lebanon, NY. In the fall, they were virtually camouflaged against the foliage. She explored other farms where she met alpacas, llamas, and at a wildlife rehabilitation farm, even skunks – all of whom are depicted in the new exhibit.

Baby Animals on the Shaker Farm opens April 11 at Hancock Shaker Village, along with Susan Merrill’s latest exhibition of paintings, “EAT: feeding time in the barnyard,” which continues in the Poultry House Gallery through May 24.

EVENT Meet the Artist

At 11 am on Saturday, May 2, Susan Merrill presents an interactive story hour for children and adults in the Poultry House Gallery at Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, MA. Part art lesson, part story-hour, Merrill will share funny (and not-so-funny) stories about animals, using her own barnyard paintings in the exhibit as a guide.

Sidebar:

Author and illustrator

In addition to making lively and colorful animal art, Susan Merrill has written and illustrated a number of books, including the about-to-be-released **Cool Water**, which is about the Berkshires. Her other books include **I Live in Stockbridge**, a child's history of the town. Merrill illustrated and hand-lettered the manuscript written by Susan Geller, which was first published in 1976. The book was updated and re-printed in 2012. Merrill also wrote and illustrated **Washday**, a children's book published in 1979 by Clarion Books, a division of the Seabury Press, and a young-adult novel, **Warm Morning**, in 2011. The mother of three grown children, Susan Merrill is married to the set and production designer Carl Sprague.

About Hancock Shaker Village

From 1784 until 1959, Hancock Shaker Village, known as The City of Peace, was home to hundreds of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, a close-knit community commonly called Shakers because of the whirling, quaking and "shaking" they exhibited during their religious services. Since 1960, the Village has been open to the public as a history museum preserving the Shaker legacy. While only a few Shakers are still living (and none live at Hancock), they are best-known today for their simple and elegant furniture and many ingenious inventions.

Located on 750 acres in the beautiful Berkshires of Massachusetts, Hancock Shaker Village features a museum collection of more than 20,000 authentic Shaker artifacts and 20 historic buildings in a preserved rural village setting. The Village also has a working farm with heritage-

breed livestock, and extensive gardens of heirloom vegetables, flowers and herbs. The Village offers a rotating schedule of exhibits, programs and workshops, individual and group tours, a mile-long hiking trail, and both indoor and outdoor picnic areas.

The Village Harvest Café is open every day from 11 am to 4 pm. The Hancock Shaker Village Store (also online), is open every day during visitor hours and features unique gift items, including oval boxes made at the Village, and other locally made products.

Hancock Shaker Village is open seven days a week, including holidays, from 10 am to 4 pm between April 11 and June 28. Starting June 29, hours are 10 am to 5 pm daily through the close of the season on November 1.

Adult admission is \$20 (many discounts apply), youth admission (ages 13 to 18) is \$8, and children age 12 and under are always free on family visits. Group visits (scout troops, churches, school field trips and others) are always welcome. Visit our website, hancockshakervillage.org for more information.