



## MEDIA RELEASE

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## **Where Animals and Art Intersect**

**Susan Merrill's six seasons of animal paintings at Hancock Shaker Village**

**"Barnyard Story Time" to be conducted by Merrill on Wed., April 30 in the Poultry House Gallery**

PITTSFIELD, MA -- For six years now, Stockbridge, Massachusetts, artist Susan Merrill and Hancock Shaker Village have been partners in bringing art and animals together. Merrill has exhibited her colorful drawings and paintings of farm animals in the Village's Poultry House Gallery as an accompaniment to the Village's grand-opening event, *Baby Animals on the Shaker Farm*. The current show of Merrill's work, "Barnyard Portraits," runs through May 11. *Baby Animals* runs through May 4.

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, Merrill provides a whole new way to explore and understand the animal life around us. "This is especially valuable for children, many of whom meet a farm animal for the first time at Baby Animals on the Shaker Farm," the artist says.

On Wednesday, April 30, at 1:30 pm, Merrill will present "Barnyard Story Time," an interactive event for kids and adults, in the Poultry House Gallery at the Village, where she'll tell some funny (and some not-so-funny) stories about her experiences engaging animals as her chief subjects. Using her own barnyard portraits as a guide, Merrill will share artistic insights about the animals she's encountered over the years.

Merrill's first show of animal art at Hancock Shaker Village was in 2009. Called "All Creatures Gathered Here," its title was borrowed from a Shaker quote. The art featured baby animals and other paintings of farm life. Every year since, Merrill has produced a series of drawings and paintings that riffs on the theme of farm life and explores one aspect in greater detail. Her shows always delight their audience and are greeted with acclaim.

Some of Merrill's themes are disarming in their simplicity. The 2011 show, "The Black-and-White Barnyard," focused on animals whose black-and-white coats take color from shadow and other atmospheric circumstances. "Families, Flocks, and Herds," the show in 2012, explored how animals form into groups as they love around the barnyard, and the patterns that result.

Merrill's current exhibit, "Barnyard Portraits," features 40 works that range in size and price. While most of us don't think of animals as being able to pose for a portrait, that belies Merrill's experience. "Sometimes you can catch them in profile," she says. "Sometimes they don't stay still long enough. It's interesting exploring the limitations of portraiture."

Merrill's insights elevate the experience of Baby Animals for every visitor. The artist even left a sketchbook in the gallery of her current show, inviting visitors to draw pictures of their own favorite animals, especially children. This opportunity for personal exploration and discovery, like the chance to explore a traditional farm, is all-too-rare for children today, Merrill believes.

A farm girl herself, Merrill spent winters on her family's farm in Maryland, and summers at her family home in Stockbridge. She's no stranger to adversity, either. At age 10, she contracted polio, which she calls a blessing in disguise. A long hospital stay, followed by an even-longer recuperation, including the challenge of learning to walk again, changed her life trajectory.

"I couldn't do what other children were doing, or even go to school, so in all that "down" time, I had to figure out something else to do." So she studied the anatomy books her mother, a children's portraitist, supplied her with, and began to draw and paint.

"I was using a cane and just starting to get around again. One day I was walking up to the barn, and I fell down near the chicken house. A rooster came charging at me!" Her brother saved her before she got badly pecked, fortunately. "There's so much to learn about animals and why they do what they do," she says.

Merrill continues to expand her vision of farm animals. "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 this year and guinea hens."

She's exploring the concept of motion now. "This is an idea I got watching four beautiful white draft horses in Vermont. They wouldn't stand still. It got me thinking that some animals walk in lines, like ducks, where the mother leads and the babies line up to follow. Sheep, on the other hand, just crowd together. Depending upon the species, they group in different ways and that impacts the way we perceive them," she explains.

As long as these animals are eventually captured on canvas, that's all that matters to Susan Merrill's fans.

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*Baby Animals on the Shaker Farm* is open seven days a week at Hancock Shaker Village through May 4. Susan Merrill's exhibition of paintings, "Barnyard Portraits" continues in the Poultry House Gallery at Hancock Shaker Village through May 11.

**Upcoming Event: Wednesday, April 30, at 1:30 pm, Merrill will present "Barnyard Story Time," an interactive event for children and adults, in the Poultry House Gallery at Hancock Shaker Village. Part art lesson, part story hour, Merrill will share stories (some funny and some not-so-funny) about engaging animals as her chief subjects.**

#### **Sidebar:**

In addition to her lively and colorful animal art, Susan Merrill has written and illustrated a number of books, including **I Live in Stockbridge**, a child's history of the town of Stockbridge. Initially written by Susan Geller and illustrated and hand-lettered by Merrill in 1976, the book was updated and re-printed in 2012. Merrill wrote and illustrated the children's book, **Washday**, in 1979. It was published by Clarion Books, a division of the Seabury Press.) And Merrill wrote and illustrated the 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 living-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 has more than 20,000 authentic artifacts, 20 historic buildings in a preserved rural village setting, a rotating schedule of exhibits, programs and workshops, a working farm with heritage-breed livestock, as well as extensive gardens of heirloom vegetables, flowers and herbs. The Village offers a host of individual and group tours and workshops, a mile-long hiking trail, and both indoor and outdoor picnic areas.

The Village Harvest Café is open daily from 11 am to 4 pm. The Hancock Shaker Village Store (also online), is open daily during visitor hours and features unique gift items and locally made products.

Hancock Shaker Village is open daily, including holidays, from 10 am to 4 pm between April 12 and June 30. Hours are 10 am to 5 pm daily starting July 1 through November 2, when the Village closes for the season. Adult admission is \$18; youth admission (ages 13 to 18) is \$8, and children age 12 and under are always free. Visit our website for more information:

[www.hancockshakervillage.org](http://www.hancockshakervillage.org).