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Images available upon request

Hancock Shaker Village Receives NEH Grant to Assess Condition of 19th Century Gift Drawings

Pittsfield, Mass.— Hancock Shaker Village received a National Endowment for the Humanities Preservation Assistance Grant for \$6,000, the maximum award, to have its 25 historic Shaker Gift Drawings assessed by a paper specialist at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. The paper medium of these visionary images is particularly fragile. The museum seeks a conservator's formal physical examination and recommendations. From those findings, the museum will create a plan for long-term care of the collection. Additional outside funds will be needed to implement the specialist's recommendations and plan (e.g. for repairs of tears or stabilization of an image).

"The iconic Shaker Gift Drawings are of intense interest to curators and scholars nationwide," said Hancock Shaker Village President Linda Steigleder. "It is imperative that the museum preserve them so that that these special Shaker-made expressions can be made available for study and for enjoyment by future generations." "Focused grants like this one are essential to institutions like Hancock," added the museum's curator, Lesley Herzberg. "They provide the documentary evidence we need to properly care for and make use of our collection. These drawings are extremely rare and unique, and the conservation assessment allows us to be good stewards of these works of art."

Hancock Shaker Village owns 25 of the 200 Gift Drawings known to exist in private and public collections. These pieces represent the spectrum of works created by the Shaker "instruments" or individuals who received and recorded the message from the spirits. The Hancock collection represents the work of seven such instruments; those individuals lived in Hancock, MA and in Mount Lebanon, NY. All of the works are on paper. Most images are rendered in ink and watercolor or pen and ink. The designs range from floral to spiritual motifs. The messages from the spirits were interpreted through these creative motifs, as well as through prose and poetry. The earliest drawings, pre-1843, are known as "sacred sheets" and are composed of cryptic characters and designs called "spirit writing."

The Gift Drawings are products of the Era of Manifestations, a period of spiritual revival in the Shaker world between 1837 and the late 1860s. In addition to the drawings, Shakers wrote thousands of songs during this period that became part of the Shaker hymnal and were shared between the Shaker communities. Hundreds of these songs are sung by the Shakers living today in Sabbathday Lake, Maine. The Gift Drawings, on the other hand, were generally kept in the village of their origin. They were considered literal translations of spiritual experiences and typically were intended for one specific Believer.

Shakers of the 19th century did not ordinarily display art, photographs, or maps on their walls. The Gift Drawings were private and intimate and evoked Shaker beliefs. They were part of the Material World, so once the recipient of the message passed away, the meaning of the drawing was lost—it was just a piece of paper. Many of these works were lost since the Shakers considered the value of Gift Drawings to be no more or less than that of an ordinary object.

The Gift Drawings are often included in special exhibitions; one organized by Hancock Shaker Village, *Gather Up the Fragments: The Andrews Shaker Collection*, is now traveling in the United States. It is currently on view at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin, and it will be shown this fall at Fruitlands Museum, Harvard, Massachusetts.

About Hancock Shaker Village

An outdoor history museum and educational resource open mid-April through October, HSV is situated on a picturesque expanse of farm, field, and woodland in Pittsfield, Mass. The museum affords visitors authentic experiences in 20 historic buildings, heirloom medicinal and vegetable gardens, and with 22,000 examples of Shaker furniture, crafts, tools, and more. This National Historic Landmark depicts daily life at the Shakers' City of Peace through its 220 years. Partake of guided tours, craft and cooking demonstrations, lectures, workshops, hikes on interpreted trails, and a Discovery Room with hand-on activities for children. Stop by for lunch at the Village Harvest Café. Find gifts and souvenirs in the Village Store. An interactive Village audio tour is available in English, French, Italian, and German. Additionally HSV offers an executive every-other weekend Master of Science in Design & Historic Preservation program in collaboration with UMASS Amherst; see www.umass.edu/preservation for more information about degree and elective coursework and opportunities. For more information, see www.hancockshakervillage.org.

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Photo caption: *The Tree of Life*, Hannah Cohoon, 1854, Andrews Collection at Hancock Shaker Village