Graven Images, Amish Aesthetics, And The "Affirmative Lie"

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"Can I take your picture?" The answer was obvious, but it was a plumb opportunity to observe how the question would be received. Mr. Yoder merely replied, displaying a typical posture—of humility—practiced among the Amish (head slightly bowed but cocked sideways to maintain eye contact): "... we wouldn't appreciate that." There was nothing angry in his voice, denouncing the "worldliness" of the question, but a soft, rehearsed, and purposeful tone. Perhaps this was due to the warm association with the author over several years, as a customer for his family's walnut pies, chickens, and vegetables. But given that the potential encroachment of my request was "of this world"—from which the Amish are dutifully "separate"—his reply was something of a relief. Whatever other issues the query represented, it involved potentially engraving an image of an Amish man who believes he is created in the image of God.\(^1\) Photography itself is not just another Amish basket and shadows with reaching hand.


\(^2\)For the purposes of this essay: "god" will refer to a generic concept; "God" will refer to the Hebrew entity; and GOD will refer to the author's understanding of the human imperative.
remind us of the presence of the “English” (among which islands of Amish culture—an essentially Swiss import—float), it is the means of reproducing and thus reducing something sacred, and it is a matter of particular religious apprehension. To make a photographic copy of the “flesh” that is created in God’s image is to create a spiritually descending trajectory, to widen a distance.3

**Amish Aesthetics**

Perhaps the idea of “Amish aesthetics” is something of an oxynoron. In Western Culture there remains a lingering, reflexive division between high and low arts: the former being the grand paintings and sculptures one associates with museums, churches, and palaces, and the latter being folk-art items that fluidly transmigrate the definition of practical and decorative. Unlike most other adherents to the Biblical prohibition against “graven images,” the Amish, as a culture, have developed no apparent use for “art”—in the “high” sense. Within all three of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, vastly differing sub-cultures have nevertheless created both high and low art, plying expressive possibilities in keeping with their re-interpretations of the stricture against depicting God, and by extension the human body as “created” in His image. Despite divergent histories, they have listed toward remarkably similar possibilities at one time or another, including geometric patterning, incorporation of nature motifs, the development of calligraphy,4 illustrated texts, and, among those that rationalize some degree of representation, symbolism. Related to art, the Amish are associated with producing folk, or “low-art” craftwork for sale. However they have developed an aesthetic and peculiar art form, involving a lateral manifestation outside of a “low” or “high” expression that is a very integral and protracted visualization of identity and profound meaning.

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3 Interview by the author with Mr. Andrew Yoder, Hwy 11B Potsdam, New York, September 2011.

“Low Art”

Among the womanly arts, there are Amish quilts and garments—which patterns are something of a default—because they derive from styles that were fairly universal in rural North America, at least century ago. Indeed, Amish quilts represent "the model of [the] Northern regional form." There is also the much sought after Amish furniture, which the men design and hew as "plain" (their word) and is received by the outside world as "minimal." In any discussion of aesthetics and design, "minimal" in the Western vernacular has become synonymous with "well-designed," having "unified elements," and an "economy" of selected features—with non-essential elements omitted. In terms of traditional "arts" this seems to be the farthest extent that the Amish will allow

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6 The market for "Amish furniture" and "Amish quality" has spawned an additional niche for pieces in the marketplace that are arguably neither. For an excellent overview of how the "graven nature" of replication leads to commodification of art, see chapter 5 of: John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: Penguin Group, 1972).

7 The evolution of "Amish Design" in wood has evolved to omit unessential decoration, and the guiding principle of "plainness" has allowed for unpopular designs to be selected against in favor of designs that sell well.
themselves to venture into the realm of fine-art design. The types of aprons sold to the non-Amish tend to use the same geometric, pieced-together arrangements as used in their quilts, and these geometric-design options risk no offence of gravening a representational image. The fabric used tends toward un-patterned colored cloth, while what the Amish wear themselves is patently dark blue or black, and generally without decoration (except for a minimum of thin ruffles, rims, seams, or puckers).

Many Amish fabric crafts and furniture have commanded considerable “outsider” respect and consumer demand, using their limited range of elements in an artistic way and/or generally appealing folk style. However, like the Amish avoidance of all but a rudimentary education, the cultivation of “art for its own sake” is certainly not within the breadth of their “aesthetic.” When speaking of Amish-quilt design, the critic Robert Hughes attempted to laud it, by delegitimizing the traditional denigration inherent between the terms “folk” or “low arts” and “high” arts. He also did this being consciously aware that folk arts have been an historically female enterprise, with the “high arts” being a male privilege. He said “how absurd the once jealously guarded hierarchical distinctions between ‘folk’ and ‘high’ art can be.” The wording, however, is unfortunate, as the Amish strenuously object to “highness” in worldly pursuits, finding it sinful. When speaking of the follies of their fellow Anabaptist brethren, who leave the Amish for more liberal congregations, the Amish are apt to say that they have “gone high.” As none are high but God, when “men” aspire to “highness,” they are committing a crime akin to the builders of the

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8 With admiration, contemporary quilt makers Becky Goldsmith and Linda Jenkins approach the topic of what innovations may have occurred among the Amish if they had allowed themselves greater technological liberties, such as applique, rather than sticking rigidly to traditional stitched piecework. Becky Goldsmith and Linda Jenkins, *Amish-Inspired Quilts: Tradition with a Piece O’Cake Twist* (Concord, Calif.: C&T Publishing, 2005).


accursed Biblical Tower of Babel, who sought to draw nigh to the heavens, via earthy means, human vanity, and presumptuousness.

To the Amish the “high arts” run parallel to the abstractions of intellectual “work” and higher education. It is far from the “real” or agrarian labor that directly engages the soil of God’s creation: their mandate is as stewards of these “creations.” They believe in the highness of God’s act of creativity. Therefore this kind of farm labor sanctifies the worker by association. Urbanization is worldly and antithetical. By attempting to compliment Amish women’s work, Hughes potentially misrepresents the aspirations of the whole group, misunderstanding who, and where, the Amish aspire to be. In seeking to be “high,” one seeks to counterfeit the glory of God. That goal is, in essence, symbolic of gravening an image: the stealing or supplanting of glory that should be afforded to their God.

While a gender imbalance exists in Amish society, and potentially even in the value of Amish crafts (extended from who makes them), the aspiration to being simple “folk” is, in principle, more in keeping with their values than garnering the accolades of the self-exalted (high) art-world. In his choice of words, naturally Hughes is speaking to the non-Amish audience, when attempting to dismantle the traditional Western bias regarding high and low art.

**Meidung: Shunning the World**

The Amish have their roots in the Protestant Reformation of Europe, through the Anabaptists (the Swiss Brethren). In sixteenth-century Zurich, they stood in opposition to religious “errors” that reflected the “fallen nature” of the world, which they believed was also marring existing Christianity. In the Netherlands, a similar group arose known as the Mennonites, taking their name from Menno Simons, a former Roman Catholic priest (b. 1496). Seeking greater religious discipline, a Mennonite named Jakob Amman, in 1693-1697, went on a vigorous campaign in Switzerland and

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11 There are two possible origins for the name Amish: the followers of Amman were known as “ammansch,” later pronounced Amish, and/or perhaps the name derives from distinguishing themselves from the Mennonites—the Menists—calling themselves instead “a-Menists” or the Ominists, the Homists or the Ominists Society—later transliterated into Omish/Amish. Either way, separation in German as Meidung is a key element to who they understand themselves to be—which is expressed in their own particular genus of art.

Alsace, preaching the concept of *Meidung* or shunning as a means to ensure doctrinal purity and demonstrated conformity. Excommunicating Mennonites within his new congregations, who were not as consequent, the essential schism between Mennonites and the Amish was set in motion.

Inasmuch as the Mennonites rejected “worldliness,” the Amish perceived themselves as the very distillate of that particular attribute. The former being more spiritually-interpretive in nature, with the latter embodying a “letter of the law” conservatism. The primary fluidity between these two “cousins” exists in either the moving of more conservative families and individuals toward the Amish (of which there are several sub-communities, all varying somewhat in religious interpretation, with observance culminating in the more-extreme Old Order Amish), or in the less-conservative adherents finding their place among the Mennonites (to use each at opposite ends of a scale). The Amish vary individually, regarding the Mennonites as having either some degree of worldliness (lack of discipline) and/or as being mediators between the Amish and the world, with some varying degrees of mediation accepted as necessary. Indeed, one might ask how a binary world-view (perhaps even those most vigorously enforced) can exist without them. As there is no central authority within the Amish today, small congregations ensure more interdependence and homogeneity of belief. The Amish are prone to move around to find a congregation where they fit with their, albeit limited, individual proclivities.

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12 Speaking very relatively within the confines of this Anabaptist tradition.
13 The degrees of interpretation of religious issues, although seeming very small to outsiders, can become very powerful and much disputed delineators.
The Paradoxical Commandment

The second of the Ten Commandments reads: “[T]hou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image.” When compared with some of the more universal subsequent commandments—against murder or theft, for example—this culturally-peculiar warning would seem perhaps middling in its lack of unanimous rationale. Nevertheless, it has launched spectacularly volatile sets of dramas in the history of art and religion. Some religious adherents have even justified rescinding commandment number six (the prohibition against killing), when the second commandment has been broken; hence to the minds of some, there is a projection of hierarchical importance within the numerical order. In more recent memory, this scenario has played out within in certain branches of Islam, with the controversy over a Dutch cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed in 2005\(^\text{14}\) and the fatwa issued against author Salman Rushdie in 1989;\(^\text{15}\) the former involving a graphic graven image and the second a conceptually graven image—written down. In Christian history (whether via Protestant iconoclasm or within the splitting of the Western Roman from the Eastern Orthodox Churches over representational images, symbolism, and literalism/naturalism), interpreting this commandment has both divided and unified believers within each of the three Abrahamic branches.

Given the human proclivities to art production, prohibiting graven imagery as an absolute is impossible and would seem to be an injunc-

\(^{14}\) http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4677976.stm

\(^{15}\) http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4260599.stm
tion not unlike the commandment for the “first people,” Adam and Eve, to avoid partaking of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The commandment itself, as an absolute extreme, is paradoxical, emanating from a purportedly omniscient deity, as it runs demonstrably counter to the human persistence to imagery, art, creation, information processing, problem-solving, and communication.

Predating the existence of the Ten Commandments, not long after the appearance of Homo Sapiens, someone crushed charcoal and animal marrow in two toolkits, comprised of grindstones and abalone shells, and stacked them neatly away to be unearthed 100,000 years later in 2008 in the cave of Blombos, South Africa, along the Indian Ocean. Red and yellow mineral oxides, quartz, added with water were combined to form the same basis of paint used today: (ground) pigment, binder, and flow release. Why? What did they need to express, so early on in the birth of “humanity?” For at least 100,000 years the impulse to create visual imagery, using color and value, has had meaning and purpose.

The other nine commandments are also unequivocal but somewhat less contradictory, when applied to human nature. The debate about the meaning of this second commandment is necessarily proliferate. The edict seems to try to essentially differentiate God from not-god: a type of shunning, echoing the Amish practice of Meidung. In practice it has been interpreted, according to individuals and cultures. A strict literalism forbids the expression of heavenly “things” via earthly material, but human interpretation itself is an approximation of what God supposedly intended—human conception separated from the much “superior” and unfathomable Other. This commandment takes what humans are naturally bound to do, but warns them on having the last word, image, or conception about God.

Many early Christians lived amid the idealized representational Classicism of Roman art, where graven images abounded. In addition they were, as a “body,” spread out over the Mediterranean. By what means, in addition to oral tradition, were they to propagate and/or re-inforce the Christian message without writing it down? And what of illiterate followers? Without visual imagery, readily decipherable as to meaning, how else were their stories told? As oral transfers change in-

formation, the Christian Apostle Paul took to writing letters, regarding doctrinal issues, to very different cultures. But words themselves are a potential source of graven imagery. Judaism had recognized this and thus the vowels were removed in their word for God, to keep from straying into the realm of creating a debased and abstract equivalent.

Whether meaning or meaninglessness, whatever emerges as important—in the mesh of human concern—finds its way into art, irrespective of how art is defined concurrent to any given age—speaking within a post-Modern hind-sighted, multi-cultural definition of art. Within these parameters, the human occupation with higher powers in virtually every culture floats to the surface. The business of God is always being redefined, perhaps even as much in the realm of atheism, as some atheists define their beliefs in relation to religious or spiritual believers. The human magnetism to art and issues of higher powers are similarly internal and subjective pursuits, orbiting around meaning. There are those who are neither interested in art nor “God,” but they live in a world where they cannot entirely ignore the artistic- or God-obsessions of others. Whatever the effect of Modernism upon the question of God’s existence, humanity has evolved to seek meaning amid mystery, ignorance, and limitation. Whatever else god(s) might be, it is also a default repository for human ignorance, longing, wonder, hope, and coveted empowerment, whether that god is plural, jealously-singular, or non-existent. Perhaps the most useful definition of “God” is one that explicates the human reaction to the very concept of God.

Fighting with God Over the Stylus?

What does it mean to take an idea and to manifest it or put it outside of yourself—make it heard, seen, touchable, tangible? What does it mean to translate or recast an experience? Some experiences, it can be translated into speech, writing, or drawing simultaneously. If not, they

17 Philosophically, both agnostics and atheists have been on the forefront historically of differentiating god(s) from not-god(s) via rational processes—of identifying the cultural and social contextualization and projections within the human pre-occupation with God, while religionists and believers have generally plied the faith-based or mystical approaches to a similar endeavor.

18 “Spoken” here also refers to singing, making expressive sound; “written” also to dancing and physical expression; “drawn” here takes the meaning of all forms of 2-D and 3-D visual artistic creation.
can be transferred or recast to memory and then later translated into speech, writing, or drawing; either way the product becomes an externalized symbol and/or memory trigger. The product or symbol is not the experience itself, but sometimes, through symbols one can engage or re-visit meaning. So what is gained by manifesting experience emotion and ideas, and what is lost? In recasting and translating of our experiences into symbols, we project our own ideas, apprehensions, expectations, and contexts onto the concept of GOD, an equivalent of making or adjusting “God/god” in our “own image.”

In cognition, we approach some topics abstractly and some concretely, and at other times we move back and forth. The word abstract has come to refer to the things that we cannot physically grasp, but another useful definition of the word derives from the realm of depicting things in fine art, wherein it means, what is selected, speaking to the artist’s authorship. In a post-structuralist sense, whoever comes along further abstracts content, by selecting according to their issues (whether conscious, semi-conscious, or unconscious), and by doing so, they re-author the image. And literally pertaining to any image of any god, people re-authorize their own conception(s) of god in relation to any “graven image.”19 In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger elucidates

19 For, against, or laterally.
the concepts of Walter Benjamin’s famous essay: “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” regarding the ways that modern, mass replication of existing imagery further abstracts and distances a viewer from meaning, by removing the viewer from the context of looking at an original piece of art in situ.\textsuperscript{20} Berger asks the seminal question: to whom does the meaning of the art of the past properly belong? Similarly one can ask: to whom does the definition of God belong, once it belongs? How is it changed once it belongs to something other than “God?”

To speak in the vernacular, the Abrahamic and/or Amish God is “jealous”: “mono-theism” is interchangeable with “jealous,” as is “orthodoxy”—or in the case of the Amish term \textit{Ordnung}\textsuperscript{21} or correctness. In order to worship “The One True God,” one has to eschew other gods or incorrect definitions of this One God. But how is knowledge of an “unfathomable” god disseminated or policed? The history of political factionalization and the horrors perpetrated upon unbelievers, the unorthodox, and dissenters is the stuff of humanity’s most appalling horror stories. The God of Abraham was touted to be jealous in ensuring devotion to correct knowledge, devotion to, and/or experience of Himself. In this, the God of Abraham becomes a metaphor of the ultimate degree of non-relativistic truth, but degrees of relativistic truth is the very stuff of human competition and history. Ironically the concept of monotheism seems bound to set adherents within itself apart, as they differ and/or squabble about the very definition of the One God they all claim to be worshipping.

In theory, if there were to be a last word on the nature of the Biblical God, the second commandment suggests that it would lie with the first author, in a world where, by its nature, everyone re-authors experience to their own understanding. As the Hebrew God “surpasses understanding” and is “unfathomable” any person claiming to genuinely experience God, will re-author and recast and translate Him into his or her own vernacular. If the experience of this second “author” is passed onto a third, the last would further re-author the experience and so on. This is the nature of a generational trajectory


\textsuperscript{21} In German, \textit{Ordnung} means “sound, right, in order, straight, agreed.” In the Amish world, \textit{Ordnung} is a noun, meaning the Amish set of rules.
away from the original that is inherently understood by the Amish in the arena of work. They choose (in a Platonic parallel) to work directly with God’s creations (nature) on a daily basis (farming) to further their devotion and experience of God, rather than to work among the creations of men.

The second of the Ten Commandments attempts to jealously guard which “image” of God paradoxically and inevitably arises, differentiating one legitimate image from other (counterfeit) interpretations that are possible. This speaks to a degree of cultural and religious isolationism, to preserve an orthodoxy of thought. Warning against the physical counterfeits of God has the function of differentiating tribes of people according to who worships what. This reinforces the first commandment, which is to allow no other god (conceptual image), but the monotheistic God of the Hebrews. This commandment has also had the effect of demanding unquestioning obedience to a decree that runs counter to human nature, and hence provides an opportunity to defy one’s own fallen-ness. The second commandment thus also serves as a metaphor for the physical counterfeit of one’s flesh, conceptualizing God “incorrectly.”

Whatever the graven manifestation “in stone,” visual imagery, or writing, it must first be graven in human conception. When philosophy professor Jacob Needleman asked famed Japanese Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki: “[w]hat is the self? The answer was “[w]ho is asking the question?” The very same answer is applicable to the question of “what or who is GOD.” The answer is literally within “who is asking” and is by extension graven in flesh, supplanting God with one’s idea of God. Whatever the second commandment means, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have navigated interpreting this “absolute” with the utmost proliferations of rules, allowances, reforms, and manifestations, and we know of these things, ironically, because someone wrote them down.

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22 Referring to the Platonic depreciating of eternal and physical, see author’s note #34, also see Alfred Ernest Garvie, *The Ritschlian Theology, Critical and Constructive: an Exposition and an Estimate* (London: T. & T. Clark, Year: 1899), 134.

The Amish “Affirmative Lie”

To understand Amish aesthetics one must look at art in a very un-traditional, post-Modern, and ironically globalized way. Ironic, as the Amish have little use for multiculturalism as a meta-narrative. As we have passed the point, in Western culture, of describing art as “anything you can get away with,”24 the Amish do not seem to want to “get away with” anything— in fact, it is quite the opposite. They strenuously resist expanding the boundaries of their aesthetics, antithetical to modernist impulses, and instead they reinforce the ramparts of a very integral, meaningful, and essential aesthetic: imbedded in how they appear. The combination of Amish clothing and soul becomes a type of art (although perhaps not entirely as he had envisioned), as described by Swiss theologian Hans Küng in his book, Art and the Question of Meaning, wherein art provides a meaningful answer, becoming a kind of, or at least manifestation of, religion.

24 Also sprach Andy Warhol.

25 To acknowledge the aspect of commerce that Warhol would have undoubtedly included in his statement: while some Amish depend on selling crafts and goods to outsiders, and they may stick to designs that sell, there is very little room for innovating or changing the essential character of their wares to increase sales. In principle commerce must not impinge upon or compromise their essential identity.
How the Amish appear speaks to a kind of external manifestation or performance of religious devotion. How the Amish appear as walking symbols speaks to who they were, are, aspire to be, and, not least, their distinction from the non-Amish. These are symbols, "which, despite all difficulties and opposition [or in the case of the Amish facilitated by opposition], can remind us human beings of the great heritage of the past, the future still to be won, and the meaning, value, and dignity of our life here and now."26 "The English" have become an essential foil in Amish religious expression; indeed if "the English" did not exist, the Amish would have to invent them. That all non-Amish are "the English" by default is, relatively speaking, not an unusual conclusion, given that Amish life has evolved and ultimately survived primarily in English North America after its essentially Swiss birth. To analyze the melting pot or cultural mosaic of the "others" around them, would be entirely impractical and unnecessary within their binary social definitions. Indeed any identity as "Swiss" or European, is part of only a general reference they make to the past.

How is an Amish person the same as a 1960's San Francisco Hippy or a 1970's-1980's London Punk? They are not. However, who they are is an essential part of the costume. How they are seen reinforces who they are visually to their community, to outsiders, and to themselves. The feel of the fabrics the Amish use and the textures of their uncut beards and hair is a tactile, incarnate reminder of their commitments, heritage, and faith. In more ways than one, the Amish have skipped the Modern period altogether, ignoring any hunger to pull back the curtain on human limitations, arriving in a post-Modern world, wherein a discussion of their appearance as performance art can more appreciably undertaken by the non-Amish. Unlike the Hippy or Punk who relies upon performing their identity via their mode of dress, to the Amish, fashion is irrelevant for "fashion's sake," as it obfuscates the purpose of modestly covering and protecting the body, both physically and spiritually. In the words of the Mennonites: "[d]ress only for warm and for cold; all else is frivolous display."27 But the Amish clearly dress for more than this.

The Amish goal of plainness is another intrinsic oxymoron, another paradox. Both the Amish and the Mennonites are “plain people” in the way they project their identities via their appearance. However, the word “plain” clearly does not mean the same thing for the Amish as is does for Mennonites—on an Anabaptist scale. In their mode of dress the Old Order Amish tend to be more visibly distinctive from mainstream society, having resisted the “progressive” innovations in general technology and garment construction that some Mennonites have allowed (hook and eye fasteners to name but one). Religious children perceive these visual differentiations readily, in a study comparing Amish with other Christians and Jews, it was determined that:

... young children develop understandings of complexities in the structure of ... religion. Within the realm of the nonmoral [sic] religious rules children were able to discriminate among alterability by religious authorities, generalizability to other religions, and contingency by what is considered to be the ultimate authority.28

There is something of an “ultimate authority” in the visual differentiation of “us verses them.” While ”plain” in the sense of generally omitting decoration and elaborate design innovations is surely an apt description for both the Amish and the Mennonites, plain also means without dramatic effect. The more either of these groups differ from the mainstream, in their mode of dress, the more dramatic they appear—clearly the Amish are more visually different, being in a type of theatrical contrast with the mainstream. To quote William Crowley:

[d]uring the fourth period [of Amish settlement history: 1899-WWII] the Amish began to stand out more markedly from their neighbors than was previously the case. Their clothing, general plainness, and religious belief had previously made them distinctive. Now their farming techniques and their means of transportation—the horse and buggy—began to be regarded as “old-fashioned.” In earlier times Amish farmers had often been known for advanced methods and agricultural innovations... . The Amish farmer’s role in the countryside had undergone a two-century devolution, and he had come to be considered

backward. This refusal to change ways carried over to other arenas such as education, and new problems began to confront Amish existence. Amish distinctiveness had markedly increased during the first four-and-one-half decades of the twentieth century.²⁹

Amish orthodoxy regards the Mennonites as more compromising, therefore true “separation from the world” demands more “plainness:” via un-patterned, and dark colors etc. Hence there are more options among the Mennonites as to the range of external acquisition of colored cloth, as well as of shoes and of clothing, and it is less formalistic. Looking different is a symbol, and . . .

...custom and conformity to traditional ways of doing things determine the symbol. The symbols of our progressive civilization are derived from speculation, from formal and rational procedures, from scientific pursuits, from economic competition, and from the sign of material rationality. In Amish society the symbols are products of intimate human association . . . and not the result of rational processes. This is well illustrated in the style of dress of the Amish in that a whole complex of dressing becomes formalistic and symbolic of a total way of life.³⁰

In a parallel to the business suits of the 1960’s Western mainstream, there is less variation among the styles used by Mennonite men than among the styles and fabrics used by Mennonite women, who can diverge relatively widely in their fashions. To the extent that this reflects a comparative conservatism among the men and a relative interpretive leeway among the women, in a staunchly patriarchal society wherein the men have the ultimate authority, is indeed a curious stereotypical coincidence. Amish women and men have more uniformity in their assigned, gender-templated costuming than exists between the Mennonite genders.

The hair styles among Amish men are also generally more consistent in shape than among Mennonite men, who just generally aim for short hair. This lends itself to the overview that Mennonites aim for a plainness in principle, while the Amish aim for a replicated and established prototype—a template. The straight blunt hair cut of the Amish, at the ear or jaw line, visually mimics and reinforces the horizontal brim of their allowable hat styles, creating a dramatic contrast to the vertical/
diagonal of their untrimmed beards. In other words, either on purpose or by default it is dramatically sculptural. The plainness of the Amish “tunic,” uncluttered by buttons and other features creates a mode of dress, that reads as a unified matrix or pedestal for the distinctiveness of the shaped-head “prototype.” Among adult Amish women, the hair is a non-visual issue, excluding perhaps the roots at the forehead, however they are tucked behind the uniformity of a black or white bonnet (depending on where the women are on display). The space defined by their capes, dresses, blouses, and skirts is necessarily more divided to reflect the function of fitting the female form. Female clothing reads as more variable within the overall matrix of the dark body-cover unit. That their hair is not displayed, but the mens’ are partially visible (citing Biblical tradition), makes for a difference in relative dramatic effect between the genders, inasmuch as there is more contrast of texture (fabric to skin and hair) among the men. As men’s beards lengthen as they age, the textural contrast becomes even more apparent. As per the contrasts of color (dark fabric to light skin and varying hair color), the older a man gets the more he also heightens in value contrast\textsuperscript{31}—as his hair greys. In short, because of these textural and light/dark contrasts the evolved or default style of an Amish man is distinctly more visually dramatic in presence than a woman’s. It should be noted that when Amish women generally wear a black bonnet in public, the amount of dramatic light-and-dark contrast, and presence, decreases. With the absence of displayed hair (leaving only the face exposed, which is sometimes shaded by a large brim, the black bonnet unifies with the dark matrix clothing. However, when wearing a white bonnet at home, the amount of dramatic presence increases with the white bonnet unifying the relatively light unit head in contrast to the dark matrix clothing.\textsuperscript{32}

Universally, uniforms evolve toward the dramatic, if not in intrinsic attention to design than in differentiating the uniformed from the un-uniformed. The latter certainly applies to the Amish, regarding differentiation or shunning. Uniforms use “visual symbolism in maintaining psychological boundaries. Symbolism provides a basis for action in

\textsuperscript{31} In aesthetics, light and dark contrasts are contrasts of “value.”

\textsuperscript{32} Regarding the “value” contrasts: neither a direct parallel is being made nor potentially disputed here—relative to the non-aesthetic or worth (value) of the genders themselves. In Hebraic Biblical tradition, however women have been historically subordinate to men.
meeting the future, it assures both group unity and longevity." On the other hand, Mennonite plainness is conspicuous in its lack of attention to cultivating one look. The Mennonites are also disinterested in fashion for religious reasons, except as a vehicle to be pleasant, plain, and modest, which is a slightly wider interpretative and celebratory principle—if only in relation to the Amish. Mennonite "fashions" are symbolic of their internal religious devotion, but not fastidiously so. The more strictly obedient Amish are similarly disinterested in the worldly vanity and potential "high-ness" of fashion. But they are interested in costumes, as a fastidious replication of an undiverging visual-templated signifier, denoting the signified concept of their disciplined devotion and separation from worldliness, which becomes the sign: a piece of performance art—a walking sculpture or daily demonstration of religious theatre.

This is not theatre in the artificial sense, but in a non-Western, tribal, and ceremonial sense. The body made in the image of God, as a direct sacred, generational, substrata, is clothed in the symbols of their spiritual tribe. Their clothing must have symbolic meaning to lift it from the mere ignominy of fashion. They echo contemporary philosophical concerns about what is real and meaningful, as expressed by Susan Sonntag, on another topic:

... most contemporary expressions of concern that an image-world is replacing the real one continue to echo, as Feuerbach did, the Platonic depreciation of the image: true insofar as it resembles something real, sham because it is no more than a resemblance ... to create image with mere appearance— that is to presume that the image is absolutely distinct from the object depicted—is part of that process of desacralization which separates us irrevocably from the world of sacred times and places in which an image was taken to participate in the reality of the object depicted.

So, rather than imitating the sacred, they clothe it. Their extremely distilled costumes, are based less on aesthetic innovation—as understood in an expansionist Modernist sense—than on an aesthetic, keenly tied to

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34 Italics added. Ibid., 81.
meaning. The Amish aesthetic has evolved to a "plain" reduction (less is more), suiting their social structures and paralleling the consensus to doctrinal conformity. As a principle, the Amish differentiate themselves from the world, safeguarding themselves from human innovation, spiritual distraction, and "desacralization." Their fashion, because of its uniformity, is a firmly answered question about who they are. It is a bulwark, physically and spiritually, to their hidden spirituality underneath: sacred and naked. In *The Essence of Christianity* [Ludwig Andreas] Feuerbach observes about "our era" that it "prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, appearance to being." Was this also the apprehension, well over 3000 years ago, against substituting the genuine for the "appearance," as written into the Ten Commandments? Thus is it indeed ironic, to quote noted sociologist John A. Hostetler, speaking of the Amish: "that a society which places emphasis on personal trustworthiness and religious devoutness should inadvertently center its symbols in styles of clothing."

"Theodor Adorno (and Hans Rookmaker) argued that an artwork can symbolize meaninglessness in a way that is aesthetically meaningful. This is what Ardorno calls the 'affirmative lie.' The Amish version of the "affirmative lie" comes via the meaninglessness of fashion as "art for art's sake." But fashion is, nevertheless, the vehicle for expressing identity, the very "graven image" or symbol of their core value of *Meidung*. The way the Amish appear is more than just an external obsession with internalized values, it is performance art, in the way that—historically—art addresses and speaks to meaning, whether spiritual, social, cultural, or individual. Given that the very birth and development of Amish culture has circumnavigated around conformity and shunning, their

... visual symbols especially those associated with dress, serve the group with an effective mechanism for maintaining group consciousness and for integrating the charter values of the sectarian society.

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35 Whether conscious or not.
37 John A. Hostetler was born into an Old Order Amish family and converted to the Mennonite order.
Symbolism performs the function of language. Where life is governed by signs and symbols fewer words are needed for adequate communication. . . . The symbols [of dress] distinguishes the conformist from the nonconformist. 39

At best, this performance reinforces Amish internal commitments, although it also can lose its meaning at times and devolve merely to tradition and fashion. To give the last word to Hans Küngr, a symbol:

may perhaps enable us to perceive something of what ‘involves us unconditionally,’ the still hidden, incomprehensibly great mystery in us and around us: that is the suprasensible ground of meaning of all our reality in the midst of the [graven] world of sense. 40

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40 Küng, Art and the Question of Meaning, 53-55.


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Graven Images, Amish Aesthetics, and the "Affirmative Lie"


Note: All photos by Laura Fair-Schulz. When taking photographs of Amish handiwork, there are two things present. The Amish craft and the photographer’s craft: a dual presence, representing two very different worlds blended into one image. However, as photography is, ironically something of an invisible presence to the “subject” photographed, the following images incorporate a graphic reminder of “the world” by incorporating the presence of a human feature; a shadow of the photographer’s hand. This is a graven image forbidden in Amish theology, and is a menace, a shadow indeed, or is just as a reminder of the physical world, depending on who is looking at the image.

Thanks for TAUNY (Traditional Arts of Upstate New York) of Canton, N.Y., for allowing me to take photographs on their premises.

- Laura Fair-Schulz, Adjunct Professor in the Fine Art Department of SUNY Potsdam. Her artwork focuses and obscures the notions of appearing within figurative painting and drawing processes.