



ARCHANGEL GABRIEL WEATHER-
VANE
Artist unknown
United States
c. 1840
Painted sheet metal
35 × 32½ × 1¼"
Museum of American Folk Art, gift
of Mrs. Adele Earnest,
1963.01.01



ANNIAL DREAMS

Vision and Prophecy in American Folk Art



By Gerard C. Wertkin

ery early in my life, my mother observed that I would live to see the millennium. She spoke those words to me more than fifty years ago at a birthday party or other family event, but they remain fixed in my memory to this day, perhaps because I detected a hint of awe and wonderment in her voice. The very idea of a year 2000 seemed strange and remote to my youthful imagination.



FATHER TIME
Artist unknown
Mohawk Valley,
New York
c. 1910
Carved and polychromed wood,
metal, and hair
52½ × 13½ × 14½"
Museum of American
Folk Art, gift of Mrs.
John H. Heminway,
1964.02.01



If I became aware of the approach of the millennium as a six- or seven-year-old child, it was only much later, some thirty years ago, as a visitor to the Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in New Gloucester, Maine, that I began to consider the significance of millennial ideas in American thought. As a student of Shaker life and art, I was almost inevitably led to do so. Millennial references are commonplace in Shaker literature, folk narrative, drawings, and songs, and one of the names that the Shakers have in fact traditionally used to refer to their religious community is the Millennial Church.

There is a deeply rooted millennial heritage in American history and culture that is by no means unique to the Shakers. In simple terms, it is based on an understanding of history as the unfolding of a divine plan, the culmination of which will be the triumph of good over evil. Although it is grounded in biblical prophecy, this legacy has manifested itself in secular as well as sacred settings from the first strivings for American independence through the era of the Civil War and even beyond.

The American Revolution was seen as a harbinger of the millennium. "The conviction that history was drawing to its glorious conclusion, when the world would be transformed into a paradise for the righteous, predisposed large numbers of American Protestants to throw themselves behind the revolutionary cause,"

observed Ruth H. Bloch in a provocative study of millennial themes in early American thought, "with a fervency that is otherwise hard to explain."¹ A song from the first published Shaker hymnal, *Millennial Praises*, captures the popular sentiment that the War of Independence was divinely ordained:

Rights of conscience in
these days,
Now demand our solemn
praise;
Here we see what God
has done,
By his servant
Washington,
Who with wisdom was
endow'd
By an angel, through the
cloud,
And led forth, in
Wisdom's plan,
To secure the rights of
man.²

Millennial ideas fueled abolitionism in the nineteenth century and the struggle for civil rights in the twentieth. Throughout American history, social reformers and utopian socialists have sought to create ideal communities under millennial banners. Thomas Paine captured the urgency and optimistic spirit that characterized early American millennial thought: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. . . the birthday of a new world is at hand."

Detail of GRAVESTONE OF MR. HENRY ROBY

Carved by an unidentified Boston carver
Copp's Hill Burying Ground
Boston, Massachusetts
1807

Slate
30" high
Photographed by Daniel Farber,
1979

Photo, Museum of American Folk Art, gift of Daniel and Jessie Lie Farber, LR 1987.02.50

A CHRONOLOGICAL CHART OF THE VISIONS OF DANIEL AND JOHN

Published by J.V. Himes, B.W. Thayer & Co., Lithography
Boston, Massachusetts
c. 1842

Ink and watercolor on linen
50 x 34"

Private collection

Surprisingly, however, there has been little acknowledgment of this diverse heritage in the public discourse of the late 1990s.

Although the new millennium will not begin until January 1, 2001, the more immediate advent of 2000 has sparked a heightened sense of millennial anticipation. Time is a powerful idea; it measures our days and regulates our comings and goings. It is not surprising that a striking change in the calendar should arrest our attention, especially when that change is accompanied by fears of technological breakdown and environmental collapse. In this context, a consideration of America's millennial heritage seems especially appropriate. Because folk artists so often have been keen observers and eloquent recorders of American life, their work offers a remarkably rich and varied visual resource for an examination of these ideas.

According to the dictionary definition, a millennium, in the most general meaning of the term, is any span of one thousand years. It was in this sense, of course, that my mother referred to the millennium so many years ago. Although she surely anticipated great change in the second half of the twentieth century and the

period beyond, she was speaking only of the calendar. But the term carries other, more specific and powerful meanings: a long-awaited period of peace, harmony, and justice; a messianic age; and the end of time itself.

The concept of the coming of the Messiah and the messianic age is to be found throughout the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, but the fixing of the thousand-year period derives from the final book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation (also known as the Apocalypse), and especially from chapter 20, verses 1-3, of that collection of the strange but beautiful visions of John of Patmos:

And I saw an angel come down from Heaven . . . [a]nd he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, . . . that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled.

According to the divine plan outlined in Revelation, Christ is to come again and establish the kingdom



of God on earth, after which the Last Judgment is to occur. While secularists and religious liberals have understood this divine plan metaphorically, it remains a cardinal principle of orthodox Christian belief. There have been differences among Christians, however, in the interpretation of this complicated end-time scenario, some ("premillennialists") holding that the millennium will begin only after Christ's Second Coming, with others ("postmillennialists") believing that Christ will return after the thousand-year period. Postmillennialists emphasize the necessity of human aspiration and effort to the attainment of the kingdom of God, and are often supporters of progressive measures for social and economic reform. Premillennialists, on the other hand, expect the kingdom of God to come in a great cataclysm, and may interpret natural disasters or social upheaval as portents of the millennium.

It should be noted that these two interpretive approaches are not mutually exclusive in every respect, nor do they represent the only ways in which the millennium may be understood. During the course of American history, both approaches, and variations of them, have been important, but it is the overarching theme of the millennium itself that has captured the popular imagination. Indeed, Ruth Alden Doan has observed that through the Puritan fathers, millennial thought "became the foundation of cultural orthodoxy in America. . . . The tying of divine providence and its consum-

BIBLE QUILT

Harriet Powers
Athens, Georgia
1895-1898

Dyed and printed cotton fabrics pieced and appliquéd on cotton
69 x 105"

Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston, M. and M. Karolik
Collection



MILLENNIAL DREAMS



Vision and Prophecy in American Folk Art

On view at the
**Museum of
American
Folk Art**
November 13,
1999–May 14,
2000

The Museum of American Folk Art is proud to present “Millennial Dreams: Vision and Prophecy in American Folk Art,” an exhibition organized by the Museum’s director, Gerard C. Wertkin. Throughout American history, folk artists have given expression to vision and prophecy, often in relation to the long-awaited millennium. The exhibition traces this powerful tradition—in both its spiritual and secular manifestations—through seventy-five carefully selected, often unexpected objects from the Museum’s permanent holdings, public institutions, and private collections, including many that are rarely exhibited.

While some American prophets and artists have looked to the skies for signs of apocalypse and have included messages such as “Repent

now before it is too late” in their writings and art, others have created diverse and exuberant visions of the New Jerusalem and a heaven on earth. Through works as diverse as Shaker spirit drawings, illustrated Adventist charts, a Chicano festival banner, New Mexican santos, and twentieth-century visionary paintings, this exhibition will shed new light on the centrality of millennial thought in American culture. As the year 2000 approaches, “Millennial Dreams” provides an unprecedented opportunity to examine the nation’s significant—and often unacknowledged—millennial heritage as reflected in three centuries of American folk art.

Gerard C. Wertkin, who has been with the Museum for nearly twenty years and has served as director since

1991, is the author of *The Four Seasons of Shaker Life: An Intimate Portrait of the Community at Sabbathday Lake, Maine*. Dr. Randall Balmar, the Ann Whitney Olin Professor of American Religion and the chair of the department of religion at Barnard College, serves as exhibition consultant.

The exhibition catalog, “Millennial Dreams: Vision and Prophecy in American Folk Art,” will be available at the Museum of American Folk Art Book and Gift Shop, 2 Lincoln Square, Columbus Avenue at 66th Street, New York City, in November. For information, please call 212/496-2966.

The exhibition is presented with the generous support of Fireman’s Fund Insurance Company.

mation in millennial glory to the experience of the New World reinforced the power of millennial dreams always inherent in Christianity. Through trials of social, cultural, and political change, the assumptions of the peculiar place of America within the divine plan, and of the special importance of the impending millennium to the American experience, were not cast off, but deepened.”³

Paul Boyer, the author of an influential study of millennial thought in contemporary America, has observed that “through much of American history, especially until the Civil War, the conviction that God had assigned a special role to America exerted a powerful appeal. The New England Puritans in their more hopeful moods, and eighteenth-century churchmen such as [Jonathan] Edwards, envisioned that role as mainly spiritual: through prayer, piety, and evangelism, New World believers would help bring about universal revival and Christ’s millennial reign.”⁴ Just after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Timothy Dwight not only imagined that the fulfillment of millennial hopes would occur in America, but speculated that the period would begin about the year 2000!⁵ In a 1783 sermon, “The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor,” Ezra Stiles described America as the chosen nation of God, “blessed with millennial holiness, virtue, prosperity and empire.”⁶

In the spare but telling iconography of New England’s Puritan founders, the prevalence of millennial thought in American life may be seen in the choice of representations of the archangel Gabriel, trumpet in hand, to adorn weathervanes on the steeples of their churches. In the Bible, Gabriel serves as God’s messenger; he has a role in millennial prophecy as well, appearing twice to Daniel and interpreting his vision of the end-times (Dan. 8:16, 9:21). Christian tradition extends Gabriel’s role to that of herald of the Second Coming, and he is often portrayed in that role in art and literature. New England gravestone carvers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were well aware of this tradition

when they carved clarion angels on gravestones to emphasize the belief that the resurrection of the dead would occur at the time of the Last Judgment. Even when the figure of the archangel Gabriel appears in secular settings in early America—in architectural ornaments or shop signs, for example—there is little doubt that his role as a herald of future tidings has been widely recognized.

As revelatory agents, interpreters of dreams, and instruments of divine judgment, angels are given a

holding a sword and scales, the vanquished devil at his feet.

The connection between time and belief is an essential aspect of millennial thinking, the millennium itself being a time-based concept. For the Puritans and their spiritual heirs, time was an expression both of the here and now and of eternity. Thus, it is not surprising that in Puritan gravestone imagery, time and death are often linked. Father Time, a bearded, aged figure, is shown holding the traditional hourglass and scythe; he seems either

time: "But of that day and *that* hour knoweth no man. . . . Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is" (Mark 13:32–33). Despite that warning, students of biblical prophecy, serious scholars and dreamers alike, have looked to the skies for signs of apocalypse, associating unusual natural occurrences, especially phenomena of a dramatic character—comets, meteor showers, solar halos, and hailstorms—with the coming millennium. Some of the most colorful language of the Book of Revelation relates to the frightening power of nature. Folk artists have given tangible expression to these signs and portents in a wide variety of media, sometimes accompanied by urgent calls for repentance. Perhaps the most important of these representations is the great appliquéd Bible quilt made by Harriet Powers (1837–1911) of Athens, Georgia. In this compelling work of art, Powers revealingly combined symbolic illustrations of a series of Bible narratives with references to several near-legendary natural occurrences. These included the famous "Dark Day" of 1780, when the skies from eastern New York State all the way to coastal New England remained dark all day, apparently the result of forest fires and a weather inversion, fueling widespread millennial speculation.

Of all the efforts to calculate the time of the millennium, perhaps the strangest was that of William Miller (1782–1849), a farmer turned preacher from Low Hampton, New York, a village near the Vermont border. An intensive study of the prophecies contained in the Books of Daniel and Revelation convinced Miller that the millennium would commence in 1843 or 1844, and he gathered a substantial following in the northeast and elsewhere in the country through tent meetings and the circulation of a surprisingly large body of prophetic literature. In 1842, two of Miller's followers, Charles Fitch and Apollos Hale, prepared a chart, which was painted on linen panels, outlining the calculation of the Second Coming in graphic detail; they exhibited their work at a conference of Millerites, and it was deemed so successful that they unanimously resolved to have three hundred of the charts printed. From



TREE OF LIGHT OR BLAZING TREE

Hannah Cohoon
Hancock, Massachusetts
1845

Watercolor with graphite under-
drawing, pen and ink on paper
16 x 20 7/8"
Museum of American Folk Art,
promised anonymous gift,
P2.1997.01

significant place in prophetic writings of a millennial character, especially in the Book of Revelation with its seven trumpeting angels and other angelic figures. The archangel Michael, a great warrior, and his angelic forces cast Satan out of heaven (Rev. 12:7–9). By tradition, Michael will hold the scales of justice at the Last Judgment, weighing the good and evil in human souls. Thus, in iconographic representations of Michael in the *retablos* and *bultos* (religious folk paintings and carvings) of northern New Mexico, as well as in the folk art of other Roman Catholic traditions in the United States, he is often depicted

to be measuring the years dispassionately or contending actively against death. As Dickran and Ann Tashjian have observed, Father Time was an ambiguous figure for the Puritans: "If the passage of time were emphasized, then Father Time might well be man's adversary, hastening him to his death; but representing eternity, the figure would oppose mortal death and transport the deceased to heaven rather than leave him at the grave."⁷

The Bible itself is not specific as to when the events described in Revelation will begin. Indeed, Jesus counseled his disciples against attempting to calculate the precise

then on, Millerite preachers carried a copy of the chart with them, using it as a visual aid to help audiences understand the complex biblical chronology. Versions of the chart were published in the periodicals of the Millerite movement as well, and provided an iconographic resource for attempts by others to outline the timing of the millennium.

The critical press of the day was contemptuous of William Miller and his followers. Stories of Millerites wearing long white "ascension robes" and climbing to high places "to meet the Lord in the air" were frequently told. Although they may have been apocryphal, these tales supported the popular idea that the thousands of believers in Miller's prophetic calculations were wild-eyed fanatics, among whom many were afflicted with mental illness. Although the "Great Disappointment" that followed the failure of the Second Coming to occur as calculated left some adherents dazed and demoralized, many others were ardent participants in the reform movements of the day, including abolitionism. Out of Millerism came several Adventist denominations, which remain part of the American religious terrain to this day, including fringe groups like the Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas.

At least some of the disappointed drifted from Millerism to a religious community that believed the millennium to be in progress and the Second Coming to already have occurred. The Shakers, known more formally as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, traced their beginnings to small gatherings of believers in Lancashire, England, during the mid-eighteenth century, some of whom under Mother Ann Lee (1736–1784) came to America in 1774. Acquiring their more common name from early ecstatic worship forms, the Shakers practice celibacy and community of property.

According to Shaker belief, divine revelation is not confined to the pages of the Bible, but was an ongoing process through four successive dispensations, as God worked through history. In the words of the first published Shaker statement of belief, "The fourth dispensation or day is the second appearance of Christ, or final, or last display of God's grace to a lost

world, in which the mystery of God will be finished and a decisive work, to the final salvation, or damnation of all the children of men."⁸ Through their reading of the Books of Daniel and Revelation, the Shakers calculated the beginning of the millennium as having occurred in 1747.

From the late 1830s through the 1840s and beyond, at the very time of the Millerite excitement, the Shakers experienced a period of great spiritual intensity, when the doors of heaven appeared open to them. During this time, called by the Shakers "the Era of Mother's Work," the Believers became especially receptive to vision and prophecy, producing a body of "gift" songs and drawings among thousands of prophetic messages. The songs are soulful and affecting, the drawings among the most beautiful representations of millennial ideas in American art.

The Shakers were also practical community builders, with a genius for innovation and design. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they formed communities in New York, New England, Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, which were often magnets to the utopian socialists of the day, who saw in these neat, productive villages models for a radical reshaping of society. The followers of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, among other utopians, formed ideal communities throughout the United States on the conviction that a perfect society could be created in the present time. Although most such attempts ended in failure, several were successful and long-lived. As a response to the millennial impulse in American life, sectarian and secular experimental communities soon dotted the countryside. In a sense they were attempts to realize the promise of the New Jerusalem set forth in the Book of Revelation: "And I saw a new heaven and new earth. . . . And I John saw the holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven." (Rev. 21:1–2).

American folk artists have created diverse and exuberant visions of the New Jerusalem, the millennial heaven on earth. Among African American folk artists, the vision of the New Jerusalem is especially powerful. Sister Gertrude Morgan often placed



NEW JERUSALEM
Sister Gertrude Morgan
New Orleans, Louisiana
c. 1970
Acrylic and tempera on cardboard
12 x 19"
Museum of American Folk Art, gift
of Sanford Smith and Patricia
Smith, 1986.21.01

the New Jerusalem in a contemporary urban setting. James Hampton used cast-off furniture covered with foil to create an assemblage representing the throne of God as described in Revelation.

Of all the images of peace and harmony in American folk art, perhaps my favorite is that of Edward Hicks, the Peaceable Kingdom, which embodies the millennial concept of America as a paradigm of a society without war, want, or inequality. Hicks, of course, was a member of the Religious Society of Friends. As a Quaker, he was especially aware of the promise of peace. The Peaceable Kingdom was a compelling image to him precisely because it represented that promise, although peace did not always prevail in the fractious Religious Society of his time. Hicks returned to the subject time and again; more than sixty renditions of the image survive. It is telling that he illustrated not only biblical prophecy ("The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them"—Isa. 11:6) but also a semi-legendary event in American history—William Penn's treaty with the Indians—in anticipation of the harmony among peoples of different races and cultures that will come to fruition in America.

In the fringes of today's American culture, however, a premillennialist emphasis on cataclysmic destruction—perhaps either a natural response to the depredations of racism and war in the twentieth century or a fear of rapid change—has developed. The Books of Daniel and Revelation

are being read again and their prophecies are being taken seriously. In the face of these dark forebodings, it is appropriate to recall that America was founded on the promise of millennial peace. At a time of uncertainty, it may be well to remember that heritage. ★

Gerard C. Wertkin is director of the Museum of American Folk Art.

NOTES

- 1 Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xiii–xiv.
- 2 *Millennial Praises, Containing a Col-*

lection of Gospel Hymns, in Four Parts; Adapted to the Day of Christ's Second Appearing (Hancock, Mass.: Josiah Tallcott Jr., 1813), 281. This represents a change of view; as pacifists, the Shakers were initially opposed to the Revolution. A later verse recognizes that the "rights of conscience" celebrated in the hymn are not universally applied: "With all this you're not content, / Still on bondage you are bent, / Binding the poor negro too, / He must be a slave to you! / Yet of Washington you boast, / Spread his fame thro' every coast, / Bury him with great ado, / Precepts and examples too!"

- 3 Ruth Alden Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 10.

- 4 Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 23.

- 5 *Ibid.*, 73.

- 6 Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 46.

- 7 Dickran and Ann Tashjian, *Memorials for Children of Change: The Art of Early New England Stonecarving* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1974), 176.

- 8 *A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church, According to the Gospel of the Present Appearance of Christ* (Bennington, Vt.: Haswell & Russell, 1790), 12.

THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM
Edward Hicks
Pennsylvania
1846
Oil on canvas
26 × 29½"
Museum of American Folk Art,
promised anonymous gift,
PG 11.87.71

