

Who Are the Plain People in the Art of P. Buckley Moss?

Who are the Plain People? Where did they originate and where do they live today? Why do they live as they do? What is the place of the Plain People in the art of P. Buckley Moss?



The Good Life, 2002, Giclee on canvas; an example of Pat's use of the Plain People with their elongated bodies and simple clothing.

Almost everybody who knows the work of Pat Moss knows that the Amish and Mennonite peoples, the “Plain People” as they are commonly called, have been among her favorite subjects for years. Her stylized versions of these people appear in many of Moss’ most popular paintings and prints where their elongated bodies dressed in distinctively simple clothing practically have become her trademark. And while many people can identify the Plain People as “those old-fashioned, religious folk with their quaint looks and buggies, who live without electricity and plumbing..” very few people who don’t actually live among them have a clear idea as to their real identity and history.

In her art, Pat Moss uses highly personalized representations of the Amish and the Mennonites primarily for their archetypal value. These images are not meant to be accurate depictions either of a people, a lifestyle, or a style of dress. Moss is interested in the Plain people because of what they represent. For her, the Amish and the Mennonites are living saints, similar to her Catholic saints of old, whose lives had the power to inspire and to regenerate others. They became for her symbols with a strong iconographic meaning. They were a very special people whose lifestyle and appearance had evolved over centuries due, at least in part, to their survival despite almost universal persecution, their faith in God, their belief in a unique Christian community, and their insistence on a distinctively different style of dress and life.



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Historically, both the Amish and the Mennonites are part of a religious tradition that goes back to what is called the “Radical Reformation” of the mid-16th century. Originally called Anabaptists by their enemies, because they chose to re-baptize previously baptized Christians, these people sought to recapture the life of the earliest Christian communities. They especially emulated their religious ancestors’ disassociation from the State and, most emphatically, from the State’s religion. While this action placed them at odds with their Roman Catholic and Lutheran neighbors, they also alienated other Reformation Protestants by encouraging what were called “works” of mercy and charity, by baptizing only “consenting” and “understanding” adults, and by preaching theological tolerance and religious freedom.

P. Buckley Moss first became acquainted with the Amish and the Mennonites when she moved to Waynesboro, Virginia. Both groups had communities near her new Shenandoah Valley home and their buggies were common sights on nearby roads. Soon she began to meet these Plain People at local auctions. There she had an opportunity to talk to them and to observe their ways. As she wrote in her autobiography: “that afternoon [at an auction] I sat with a group of Mennonites and so started an association that has lasted for nearly twenty-five years and that has had a profound effect on my life and philosophy.”



Cozy Quilt, 1987, Offset Print.

Over the years, the presence of the Plain People in Moss’ art has become one of the principle means which she uses to communicate some of her most important ideas. These people, for Moss, represent the good life, the full life, and the life well-lived in harmony with nature and in peace with all creation. Through her art and her genius, she has developed a way to depict a very serious religious movement in a universally appealing and friendly manner. In Moss’ works the Plain People are seen to celebrate their own existence in such simple delights as skating, sledding, picking apples, riding horses, etc. For Pat Moss, these people and their old ways are memorable icons of strength and beauty. Moss has become a messenger and her art is



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the message. Her Plain People are one of the many, though one of the most important, subtle instruments of that message.



Sharing Work and Fellowship, 2004, Offset Print; one of Pat's poplar prints showing a typical barn raising among the Plain People in which whole communities gathered to help "raise" or build their barns.

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P. Buckley Moss is an American and Virginia artist, whose art expresses her interest in strong family values and cultural heritage in her own distinctive style, giving us a collection of art that is filled with a lifetime of experiences. She is known as America's most celebrated living artist. She currently lives in Radford, Virginia and travels around the country to attend shows with galleries and meet her collectors and sign her work for them.



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