



The makers with no name

In the first of a new series, Simon Frost begins exploring what makes makers great, starting with the Shakers ▶

Frank Kehren
PHOTOGRAPHY

A beautifully sparse dining room at Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky – now a visitor attraction. Note the peg rail that surrounds the room. Photograph courtesy of Frank Kehren

The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, a small offshoot of English Quakers, left Manchester for New York City in 1774, led by the group's prophet, Mother Ann Lee. They became known as the Shaking Quakers – soon shortened to Shakers – owing to their distinctive 'shaking' movements during worship.

At their height in the mid-19th century, there were more than 6,000 Shakers living in 18 largely self-sufficient communities across America. Today, in the village of Sabbathday Lake, Maine, live Sister June Carpenter and Brother Arnold Hadd; the last two remaining Shakers.

The Shakers were celibate, and so relied on recruiting new members to preserve their way of life across generations; often by taking in orphaned children, or offering refuge to unskilled or poorly educated adults with few prospects among what the Shakers called 'The World's People'.

In the second half of the 19th century, orphanages increasingly began to favour families over institutions when housing children in their care. And after the Civil War, the shift to a more prosperous industrialised society meant that citizens could now find employment in one of the many factories popping up throughout the country. A strictly celibate puritan sect could not compete with the promise of the modern world, and over the following years, Shaker numbers inevitably declined.



The Shakers loved nothing more than repetition and order in their living quarters – as can be seen in this handsome room of drawers. The flat broom seen hanging in the foreground was a famous Shaker invention. Photograph courtesy of Frank Kehren

But while their way of life gradually ceased to exist, their simple, beautiful utilitarian furniture would go on to inspire virtually every movement that followed, from Mid-century modern to Bauhaus and minimalism; and every maker from Gustav Stickley to George Nakashima.

Hands to work & hearts to God

Mother Ann Lee instructed her followers to put their 'Hands to work and hearts to God'. The Shakers approached every aspect of daily life as a form of worship, striving for perfection



This advert from a Shaker chair catalogue produced by the Mount Lebanon Shakers shows ladder-back chairs available with or without arms and rockers. And what a bargain... Photograph courtesy of Simon Frost

in everything they made. As such, all of their crafts were as pure, honest and as simply but well-made as possible.

What did that mean for their furniture? First of all, it was the complete abandonment of anything that might be considered ornament. You'll struggle to find elaborate carvings, inlays or even veneers in Shaker furniture – such extravagances were deemed sinful in their 'deception'.

Despite the availability of fashionable imported timbers, the Shakers used wood grown locally to each village; typically maple, cherry, pine, or walnut. Elder Giles Avery (1815–1890) – resident of the largest Shaker village, Mount Lebanon, New York – described 'dressing [...] furniture of pine or white wood with the veneering of bay wood, mahogany or rose wood' as 'adultery', no less.

Cleanliness is next to godliness

Shaker villages represented heaven on earth; and Mother Ann asserted 'There is no dirt in

heaven'. As typhus and cholera tore through vermin-infested cities, visitors to Shaker villages were invariably struck by the immaculate cleanliness the communities upheld.

As well as its aesthetically clean design – simple, elegant symmetry and uniformity – Shaker furniture was actually designed to keep the household clean. Complex, ornate mouldings were entirely absent, unnecessary decoration being deemed boastful, and therefore sinful – but even modest mouldings were left out where possible, as they could collect dust.

But cleanliness and orderliness informed how they designed their homes and furniture in a more significant way. With as many as 30 believers (as they referred to themselves) living in a single home, even this most materially austere community had to organise their few possessions fastidiously to keep their homes pristine. Shaker furniture was therefore designed to be hung on peg rails that lined the walls in almost every room.

Round wooden pegs were placed at regular 6in intervals along rails to hang everything from chairs to clothing, cupboards to clocks. Most of a room's contents was designed to be hung on its walls, minimising clutter on surfaces and making it easy to sweep floors and keep everything sparse, neat and tidy.

The regular spacing of the pegs informed the dimensions of the pieces to be hung on them, the back slats and leg stretchers of most chairs,



The Shaker trestle table design is light, elegant and simple, as seen in this watercolour by Anne Ger. Photograph courtesy of National Gallery of Art, USA



The influence Shakers had on minimal design can be seen in these benches. Photograph courtesy of Dylan Steinberg

for example, would have been around 13in long, allowing for each chair to be hung either upside down from the stretchers or upright by the back, held snugly in place by two pegs – a third directly in the centre.

Simple, clean design

Shaker furniture is known for pleasing proportionality paired with simple, symmetrical and repetitive design, but the Shakers were innovative, too. Take, for example, the distinctive ladder-back chairs that exemplify Shaker design. They were beautifully simple – evenly spaced slats topped into two rounded back posts, which were topped with simple acorn or egg-shaped finials – just about the only element of the chair that could be considered embellished. The seat would be woven of cane, rush, wood splint, or fabric tape, and the two rounded fore legs would mirror the back post legs, with leg stretchers front-to-back and left-to-right – typically two at the front and at both sides, and one at the back.

They were repetitive and uniform – the back slats were evenly spaced, usually with three slats for a side chair, or just one for the lower dining chairs, which could be slid underneath the table. But the Shakers weren't afraid to innovate. Attached to the back posts of Shaker side chairs were tilting feet, with a ball and socket joint that allowed the chair to be rocked back on the back legs while the back feet remained flat on the floor.

Another iconic innovation, the Shaker version of the trestle table, raised the medial stretcher from close to the floor to directly underneath the top. It created more leg room, did away with a potentially dirt-gathering surface, but also made the table incredibly elegant and light in appearance.

It is this elegance, lightness, and lack of artifice where the beauty of Shaker furniture lies. More than the sum of its parts, it is the kind of simple, clean design that looks so easy until you try to design it yourself. The American theologian Thomas Merton put it best, when he wrote that 'The peculiar grace of a shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it'.

Communalism was central to Shaker culture,



Shaker boxes – a perennial favourite, replicated by countless makers. Photograph courtesy of Rebecca Gale

and this is reflected in the lack of variation in the furniture produced by many different craftsmen. While a Shaker piece can be identified as the product of a particular village by the shape of its finials or other subtle markers, the many makers of Shaker furniture were not individual designers as such – they were forbidden from proudly marking their work with their name, and uniform rules for making were circulated through the church's publications.

To support their communities, the Shakers sold some pieces of furniture to the outside world, and they built an effective brand around their name and distinctive style – they were prohibited from selling anything that would not be admissible for their own use and didn't pander

to the vices found elsewhere. They had no issue with the use of power tools to make this work more efficient, employing steam-powered lathes, mortisers, and even an early version of the circular saw invented by Shaker woman, Tabitha Babbitt.

With its timeless, graceful utility, Shaker furniture has never been out of fashion for long and has inspired makers and movements ever since, and explicitly 'Shaker-style' furniture is perhaps more popular than ever. By stripping the design of furniture down to its most essential elements, creating work that served as testament to their devotion, the Shakers created the blueprint for honest, high-quality modern furniture design. ✕



The exquisite clean lines of Shaker-style furniture never go out of date – the Shaker influence on this modern kitchen by Philip Clay Designs Ltd is unmistakable. Photograph courtesy of Philip Clay Designs Ltd