

Woodson Art Museum

in your classroom

Hands to Work and Hearts to God: Shaker Stories in Decorative Arts

Winter 2012 - 2013



Rocking Chair, Mt. Lebanon, NY, ca. 1850, Andrews Collection, Hancock Shaker Village. Photo by Michael Fredericks.

Woodson Art Museum

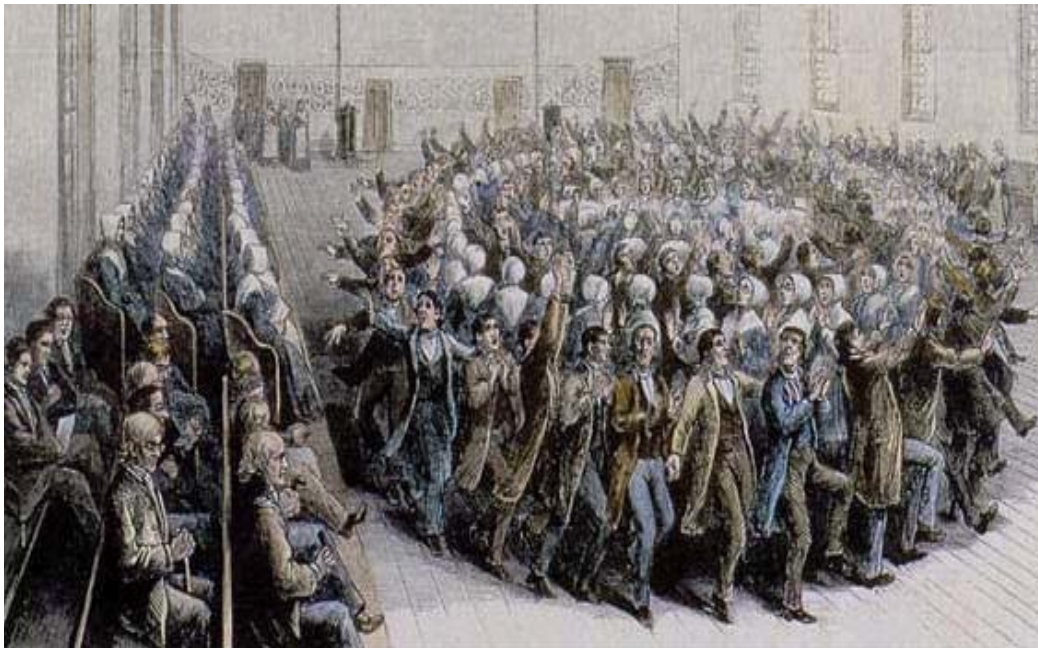
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Introduction

This winter two complementary exhibitions, *Gather Up the Fragments: The Andrews Shaker Collection* and *Simply Steel: Furniture in the Shaker Tradition*, are on view November 17 through January 20. These exhibitions present both traditional Shaker decorative arts and contemporary works they inspire. *Gather Up the Fragments* is the premier private collection of Shaker material culture with over 200 objects ranging from large pieces of furniture to fibers arts and hand tools. Door County artist Jim Rose, featured in *Simply Steel*, works in metal to create Shaker-inspired furniture with a twenty-first-century aesthetic.

Who Are the Shakers?

“The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing” were given their more common name by outsiders, or “the world’s people.” They were deemed “Shakers” or “Shaking Quakers” due to their lively worships filled with fervent dancing and song, which caught the attention and captured the imagination of many outsiders looking in. In reality Shakers only practiced their more flamboyant style of dance in their first ten years, after which more choreographed and ritualized dance steps were used to accompany original hymns and prayer. Shakers believed song and dance were vehicles for the divine spirit to live closely among them.



During the Shakers dancing worship, men marched in one direction in a large circle that encompassed a circle of women marching in the opposite direction.

Shakerism was founded by Ann Lee, known by Shakers as “Mother Ann,” whose visions of God led her to preach the gospel of a new form of Christianity amongst a small group of believers. Ann Lee was an illiterate English factory worker who, forced into marriage at a young age, lost all three children she bore. Ann and eight followers emigrated to America in 1774, fleeing persecution in England and in search of freedom to worship in the colonies. Mother Ann was said to possess the spiritual powers of a prophet: direct communication with the divine spirit, healing hands, and visions of the future. Mother Ann’s presence in contemporary Shaker life and legend remains strong as she is remembered through proverb and practice of daily routine.

The emigration of the founding group of Shakers was bookended by two great revivalist movements in America – the “Great Awakening,” which peaked in the 1730s and 40s followed by “The Second Great Awakening” of the 1830s. The “Second Great Awakening” was an incredible force in New England built by various disenfranchised religious sects seeking freedom to worship and a following through campaigns of idealism and threats of damnation. The zealous calls to salvation and importance of personal worship led many a flock to New England church pews and while the Shakers did travel in search of God’s chosen people, their campaign style was decidedly different. As a former Quaker, Mother Ann and her followers incorporated elements of Quakerism into their revivalist American movement with an open-arms policy of acceptance and love to all interested parties. The kindness, love, and innocence of Shakers combined with the promise of stable hearth and home was an attractive sale to many wayward colonists struggling to scratch out an existence. In the early 1800s, as Lewis and Clark explored the vast lands of the American West, New England Shaker representatives traveled on foot to Kentucky to recruit new members. Three men from the Ministry at Mt. Lebanon Shaker Village walked 1,233 miles in just under three months to Kentucky where the revivalist movement was gaining momentum. The famous Shaker village of Pleasant Hill formed and is believed to represent some of the finest Shaker architecture still standing and was occupied by some of the most productive and inventive Shakers in America.

Shaker communities in America reached their zenith in popularity during the 1840s, when over 6,000 Shakers lived in nineteen communities from New England west to Ohio and Kentucky. Today only a single active Shaker community – with just three practicing Shakers remains – at Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in Maine.

Shakers were Christian farmers, artists, inventors, architects, craftsmen, and entrepreneurs. Social, economic, and spiritual equality for all members regardless of gender, race, or age were foundations in Shaker society. The core values of the Shakers are identified as progressive by today’s standards but were seen as outliers in their time: pacifism, feminism, and basic freedoms from prejudice with an emphasis on personal worship, physical health, and hygiene. The defining social characteristic of the Shakers – celibacy – is, however, seen as outdated and controversial. Shakers did not oppose marriage or parenthood outside the confines of the community as they relied on families who joined the society and the adoption of orphaned children to ensure future generations

of Shakers. At eighteen, young adults who had been adopted into the Shaker society were given the opportunity to explore the life of “the world’s people” and make an informed decision as to whether or not they would commit fully to the Shaker way of life.

Shakers would never turn away a family or individual interested in joining the faith even if their interest came with an unsure commitment. The Shakers relied upon what can best be described as, “levels of commitment” to ensure steadfast membership and dedication to communal life rather than the lesser commitments of “winter Shakers.” Seasonal workers and laborers unprepared for the harsh winters ahead were taken in by Shakers annually, professing their commitment to Shakerism, celibacy, and communal living. Shakers knew better than to rely on the half-hearted converts to expand their society and made full membership a commitment, which required absolving private property and marriage status so as to enter simply as a brother or sister in the Shaker faith.

Shaker social structure was carefully organized with roles defined according to skill sets, gender, age, and season. Talents and knowledge from past professions in the outside world were recognized and utilized within the framework of communal living although autonomy in one’s work was discouraged. The burdens and rewards of various chores and business enterprises were shared and rotated monthly amongst all community members, encouraging well-rounded and capable parts of a great whole. Shakers lived in large group dwellings, occupants of which were deemed “families” in the community. A lead family or “Church Family” consisted of two Elders and two Eldresses who guided the community in spiritual, social, and business matters. “Families” each operated their own farm plots, livestock, and workshops and were identified by cardinal directions from the central meeting house.



Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village, New Gloucester, Maine

Brothers and sisters occupied the same dwellings though they slept on opposite sides of the building. Brothers and sisters entered buildings on opposite sides and moved throughout dwellings using separate staircases, they sat on opposite sides of the rooms

during meetings and meal times. Men and women did most activities separate from one another except for group efforts surrounding harvest season and union meetings. Careful supervision of the sexes was key in eliminating temptation and risking breaking a vow of celibacy. The sacrifice of a celibate life was embraced as a testament to their devotion to God and their work in the most simple and honest means possible.



South Family Dwelling, ca. 1790 – 1820, Massachusetts

Numerous academics of religion, decorative arts, and American history have devoted their scholarship to the Shakers and their timeless sense of aesthetic and masterful craftsmanship. Famed American essayist and monk Thomas Merton identifies the simple yet commanding presence of Shaker furniture noting: “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.” Shakers are recognized most for their contributions to American architecture, craftsmanship and decorative arts, music, and dance. Eldress Mildred Barker of the Sabbathday Lake Shakers playfully laments, “I almost expect to be remembered as a chair or a table.”

Shakers believed the divine could be found within their daily labors and adherence to simple and intelligent aesthetics. The language of the Shakers reflected these core beliefs in integrity and continually striving for perfection in all endeavors. One Shaker dictum instructs: “Don't make something unless it is both made necessary and useful; but if it is both necessary and useful, don't hesitate to make it beautiful.” Despite an emphasis on beauty and elegance, ornamentation and individual recognition for work created were discouraged; craftsmen rarely signed their work – a reflection of another key Shaker value of communal property.

The humility of the Shakers is matched only by their efficiency in day-to-day life. Shakers were inventors, who designed numerous time-saving tools to aid in their cleaning and craftsmanship and to ease the circumstances of their routines. Shakers never shied away from technological advances put forth by outsiders of the community and embraced them wholeheartedly, often making their own adjustments to tailor them to their needs and maximize benefits. Examples of Shaker innovations and inventions include:

- Clothespin
- Circular saw
- Flat broom
- Water-resistant and wrinkle-resistant cloth
- Steam-powered washing machine
- Rotating oven that could bake up to sixty pies at once (pies were served daily for the brothers and sisters at lunch)
- Numerous alterations and improvements in farm machinery, woodworking, and textile production

Shaker rooms were lined with pegs, which allowed various objects – from herbs, mirrors, and cloaks, to unused furniture – to hang without taking up space in orderly rooms. Shakers would hang chairs on pegs during room cleanings so as to easily sweep floors and work productively. Mother Ann taught early Shakers that “good spirits will not live where there is dirt.”



The Shakers were avid photographers and superb documenters of their culture, which afforded scholars and those interested in Shaker history with a wealth of historic images.



Historic Shaker photograph of a spiral staircase from Pleasant Hill Shaker Village, Kentucky



Postcard of main buildings of Shaker village in Alfred, Maine, ca. 1915



Historic Shaker interior; traditional workspaces



SHAKER WOMEN AT WORK.

Multiple workstations allowed interiors to be multipurpose spaces for sisters to rotate duties and tasks while all still working together.

The Andrews Shaker Collection

“Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.”

John 6:12, King James Version



Faith and Edward Deming Andrews

Gather Up the Fragments tells the story of the first and most avid collectors of Shaker art, Faith and Edward Deming Andrews. This exhibition of more than 200 objects – Shaker furniture, textiles, household objects, manuscripts, crafts, and works on paper – is the most comprehensive collection of Shaker materials ever assembled.

This exhibition brings together artifacts from the Hancock Shaker Village Collection and private collections. Objects include several iconic Shaker Gift Drawings as well as humble household objects, textiles, baskets, kitchen implements, furniture, and rare pieces never before exhibited publicly.

From the 1920s through the 1960s, Faith and Edward Deming Andrews actively pursued Shaker objects, collecting mainly from the Shakers themselves. Their efforts resulted in numerous publications, nearly all of which were pioneering scholarly works that examined multiple facets of Shaker life and launched the field of Shaker studies.

Today, the Shaker style remains alive and vital. Contemporary artists, such as Jim Rose, continue to find inspiration in Shaker decorative arts, textiles, and paintings. Rose crafts handmade furniture using scrap-yard metals, embracing rust and worn textures. He also embellishes his surfaces with colorful patinas. These fresh and bold artworks offer contrast to the warm woodwork of the Shakers while remaining truthful to the simplicity and stateliness of Shaker designs.



Jim Rose, *Stack of Oval Boxes*, 2001, Found steel with natural rust patina, galvanized steel and found painted steel.



Jim Rose, *Stacked Bricks Quilt Cupboard*, 2008, Found steel with natural rust patina and found painted steel.

Before Your Visit

Discussion Questions

- What information can we glean from Shaker daily life, values, and style by viewing objects they created? Introduce the Shakers to your class by starting with a discussion based on observations and inferences students can make about Shakers by viewing images of their furniture and tools.



Chest, Mt. Lebanon, NY, ca. 1840. Gift of Dorothy Canning Miller Cahill, Collection of Hancock Shaker Village.



High Shop Chair, Mt. Lebanon, NY, ca. 1840. Andrews Collection, Hancock Shaker Village.



Settee, Mt. Lebanon, NY, second half of the nineteenth century. Andrews Collection, Hancock Shaker Village.



Blue/Green Oval Box, ca. 1840, Mt. Lebanon, NY, Andrews Collection, Hancock Shaker Village.

- Consider the principles of Shaker communal life like a code of ethics. Invite students to reflect on their own moral compass and the social values they see in American culture today. Anything from classroom rules to family routines (division of chores, etc . . .) can be used as entry points for students struggling to see the benefits of the heavily-structured Shaker life. There are many comparisons that can be made for students between Shaker routines and our own. Consider these sample prompts:

Example: Shakers dressed the right side of their bodies first, harnessed the right side of the horse first, and consciously began most morning chores with their right hand.

Question: Do you have morning routines? How do routines help you feel prepared for the day ahead?

Example: Shaker brothers and sisters had little interaction – they entered buildings separately (Men on the west side and women on the east), they ate separately, and worked apart all day long.

Question: Can you think of examples of how boys and girls are divided in school? (Lines, bathrooms, etc . . .) Do you think Shakers separated men and women too much?

- Song and dance were integral parts of Shaker society and the professed joys found in free and personal worship. Share these lyrics from traditional Shaker hymns and invite students to reflect upon what the lyrics tell us about the Shakers. There are other Shaker hymns and songs available online that can be explored in the classroom.



I Will Bow and Be Simple

I will bow and be simple,
I will bow and be free,
I will bow and be humble,
Yea, bow like the willow tree.
I will bow, this is the token,
I will wear the easy yoke,
I will bow and will be broken,
Yea, I'll fall upon the rock.

Simple Gifts

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gain'd,
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

Activities

- Compare these quotes with your class:

“Good design is clear thinking made visible” – Edward Tufte

“Do your work as though you had a thousand years to live and as if you were to die tomorrow.” – Shaker dictum

Consider the lasting legacy of the Shakers, which can be interpreted through their designs and innovations in furniture making and craftsmanship. Challenge students to design a piece of furniture using principles of good design and ergonomics or create an invention that would make some element of their daily lives easier. Consider examples of Shaker design and ingenuity, which can be found in the exhibitions at the Woodson Art Museum.

@ the Woodson

During your visit to the Woodson Art Museum, a docent will lead your group through the galleries offering insight and encouraging thoughtful dialogue inspired by the artworks. Students visiting the Museum will have an opportunity to create a Shaker-style gift drawing after time in the galleries. Shaker Gift Drawings incorporated images of the Tree of Life, the seasons, and symbols of daily life to document community identity and honor the connections Shakers felt to one another. Students will be prompted to consider their community and how to best represent it – examples of these drawings will be shared with students so they can draw inspiration from them (see examples that follow).



Activity Guides

Each student receives an Activity Guide to extend learning in the classroom and at home. When students leave the Museum with Activity Guide in hand they are able to share their Museum visit with friends and family outside the gallery walls, along with their newfound expertise and enthusiasm.

Woodson Art Museum Information

Please encourage your students to visit the Museum with their families and share what they've learned. Admission is ALWAYS FREE! The Museum is open 9 am – 4 pm, Tuesday – Friday, and Noon – 5 pm on Saturday and Sunday. On the first Thursday of each month the Museum stays open until 7:30 pm for Night Out @ the Woodson, featuring hands-on art for all ages. Call the Museum or visit the website for more information:

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