

THE ARCHITECT'S NEWSPAPER MAY 7, 2008

# SHAKE, RATTLE, AND ROLL

**Shaker Design: Out of This World**  
 Bard Graduate Center  
 18 West 86th Street  
 Through June 15



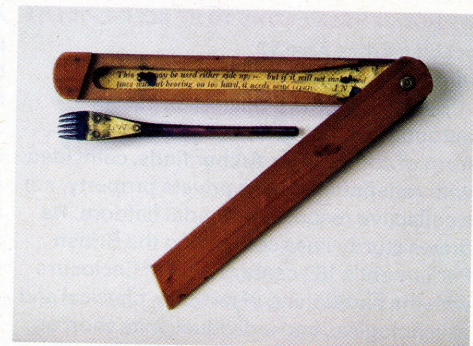
**Settee, unidentified maker, 1830.**  
**Right: Music Staff Liner, Isaac Newton Youngs, 1830.**

Design junkies sated by the ICFF's up-to-the-moment wares should catch the subway uptown to the Bard Graduate Center, where *Shaker Design: Out of This World* offers a welcome dose of timelessness. This small exhibition, organized by Bard and Vermont's

Shelburne Museum, does an admirable job of placing the famed utopian community's furniture, art, graphics, and consumer products in their historical context. It also includes many stunning objects to admire. Divided into five sections—the Shaker

World, the Spiritual World, the Fancy World, the Commercial World, and the Contemporary World—the exhibition examines the social and cultural forces that prompted Shaker response, resistance, or, as in the case of their consumer products, generated profits. The first section focuses primarily on the furniture that community members designed for themselves, with often remarkable results. The monumental Double Trustees' Desk (1850, attributed to Watervliet, New York) kept the family's records in order while conveying solemnity with its vast size; rootedness with its legless design; and the sect's philosophy of sexual equality with its mirrored compartments. The slender Side Chair with Tilters (1850, New Lebanon, New York), an iconic peg-board ready chair with tiny, pivoting metal feet on the rear legs for leaning back, shows how these designers adapted common objects to fit everyday habits. The community's more spiritual side is evoked in a selection of "gift drawings," delicate images, mostly by women, which were executed with furious intensity and religious devotion. This section also touches on the role that repetitive, ecstatic dancing played in the culture. And the Commercial World demonstrates the sect's savvy in marketing a variety of products, including textiles, furniture, famous round boxes, seeds, and other products, which made many of the communities highly prosperous by rural, nineteenth-century standards.

The orgiastic patterns of the 1820s and 1830s "Fancy" craze, a mainstream movement that rejected the austerity of neoclassicism, provide a useful counterpoint to the simplicity of the Believers' objects. Though



COURTESY BARD GRADUATE CENTER

many of these objects have whimsical, energetic decoration, their proportions and lines fall decidedly on the folk end of the spectrum, whereas the Shaker objects have the elegance of fine art. The section on the contemporary world also makes the Believers look smart: Even design luminaries as skilled as Hans Wegner, Antonio Citterio, and Joep van Lieshout for Moooi seem clunky compared to these nineteenth-century artisans.

Architecture gets short shift in the show. An informative if pedestrian video discusses Shaker building but focuses on the ascetic-looking settlement in Canterbury, New Hampshire, while omitting the almost Jeffersonian grandeur of the architecture and landscape at Pleasant Hill settlement in Kentucky. A fine catalogue from Yale University Press corrects this deficiency somewhat, but the show would have been strengthened by a fuller examination of the way in which the regimented, efficient, hygienic, and graceful existence of the Shakers extended from the point of a needle to their meticulously tuck-pointed buildings.

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