

## 'Tis a Gift To Be Complex

Shakers, members of the religious sect established in America in the 1770s, lived and worked in villages set apart from their rural neighbors for more than 200 years. They farmed, worshiped and strove to lead lives that were, in their words, "plain and simple." At least that's the conventional wisdom.

"Shaker Design: Out of This World," a show at the Bard Graduate Center in Manhattan (through June 15), explores such assumptions.

"This exhibition is designed to shock people visually and intellectually and challenge preconceptions about Shaker design after 1820," said Jean M. Burks, the senior curator at the Shelburne Museum in Vermont, who organized the show.

Interestingly, not all the designs displayed are Shaker. One gallery has 20th-century Scandinavian and American furniture inspired by Shaker design. Another is decorated with stenciled walls, colorful 19th-century textiles, Mochaware and fanciful pieces of faux-grained furniture that are contemporary, but antithetical to Shaker design.

In the show's first gallery the floor is painted a startling chrome yellow. On it sit masterpieces of 19th-century furniture from Shaker communities in Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and New York. One piece of furniture is apple green, another is yellow, a third is lipstick red.

"People are used to Shaker forms, but not Shaker colors," Ms. Burks said. "They tend to think of classic Shaker design as stripped-down brown wood."

A small stand from about 1830 has two push-pull drawers — that is, drawers that can be opened from the front or back. This would enable two Shaker sisters sewing on opposite sides easy access to the same drawers.

A handsome miniature cupboard with 10 drawers under it hangs from a peg rail.

"It is important to remember Shaker design is not static," Ms. Burks said. "This is a case that has been shrunk."

Near it is an enormous double trustees' desk designed for use by two Shaker elders sitting side by side. It has storage compartments on top and drawers below.

"Shaker trustees were the ones who related to the outside world," Ms. Burks said. "They



BARD GRADUATE CENTER

A Shaker blanket box from around 1830 is in "Shaker Design" at the Bard Graduate Center.

Most Shaker villages produced commercial items to earn money for necessities like sugar and cloth. One gallery is set up like a shop to show the wide range of Shaker-produced goods, which include seed packets (a Shaker invention), brushes, wooden pails, tools, clothing, small silk-lined baskets and foodstuffs (jams, honey, canned fruit).

"Intellectually we don't think of the Shakers as commercial people, but they were very entrepreneurial," Ms. Burks said.

Although they did not embrace veneers or faux-grained furniture for their own use — they made everything in solid wood — they were happy to sell the public ebonized chairs when lacquer became a craze.

Another gallery is devoted to the Shakers' religious rituals, sacred music, choreographed church dances and written communications about the Next World (heaven).

"Between 1820 and 1860, when the Shakers were the most isolated, the women produced incredibly complicated spirit drawings," Ms. Burks said. "They clearly knew samplers and quilts from the outside world, because you see the same ideas and motifs in their representations of the heavenly sphere above and the earthly sphere below." The drawings include images of doves of peace, baskets of fruit, flowering trees, hearts and verses composed in accomplished calligraphy.

"The Shakers were not as simple as people think," Ms. Burks

## Color Explosion

Four-color printing, an 18th-century invention, is a complicated process. In the 1720s a German engraver, Jakob Christoffel Le Blon, discovered he could make a printed color reproduction of a painting using only three colors of ink along with black.

"Painting can represent all visible objects with three colors: red, yellow and blue; for all other colors can be composed of these three, which I call primitive," he wrote in "Coloritto or the Harmony of Colouring in Painting," a book on display in the show.

It took Le Blon years to perfect his multiplate printing process, but then it was quickly copied by the French, who started mass production of prints after works by some of France's greatest talents: Watteau, Boucher, Greuze and Fragonard.

The Yale University Art Gallery displays Le Blon's "progress proofs" in the exhibition "Colorful Impressions: The Printmaking Revolution in 18th-Century France" (in New Haven through May 4).

Le Blon's print of a self-portrait by Anthony van Dyck opens the show. Many of the 100 or so images are presented in multiple impressions for purposes of study. One can compare different versions of one print to see what happens when a color is lost, for example. (Apparently yellow was the first color to fade when a print was exposed to sunlight.)

invented engraving and etching methods used in France and names masters who perfected the techniques, like Janinet, Des-courtis and Bonnet.

They could make prints that looked like red chalk drawings, pastels or watercolors.

"Replicating drawings so they actually looked like drawings was a brand new idea in the 18th century," said Margaret Morgan Grasselli, curator of old master drawings at the National Gallery of Art, who organized the show. (It was first seen in Washington.)

Prints in the 18th century were popular and affordable. The quickly expanding color-print market allowed the middle class to buy the same kinds of portraits, landscapes and genre scenes that the rich did.

The availability of French 18th-century prints is still part of their allure for collectors, but not many are very valuable.

"Prints are not rare," Ms. Grasselli said. "You can find them anywhere, but not in good condition."

The fine examples at Yale, two thirds from the National Gallery and the rest on loan from the private collection of a Yale alumnus, Ivan E. Phillips, are exceptions. An illustrated catalog accompanies the exhibition. Dealers specializing in the finest of such prints include Emanuel von Bae- yer of London, who was selling a fine Janinet "Toilette de Venus" (after Boucher) last week for \$43,000 at the European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht, the Nether-