



PHOTO COURTESY BARD GRADUATE CENTER

The 1850 maple side chair has pewter "tilters."

## A life of simple gifts

There's something altogether modern about 18th-century Shaker furnishings

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA  
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

It won't be easy, but try to stay grounded at "Shaker Design: Out of This World," the intoxicating spring exhibit at the Bard Graduate Center.

Perfectly level-headed people are being transformed by this show. They're losing faith in their day-to-day New York grind, a life very unlike that of the celibate, prayerful, industrious, hymn-singing Shakers.

Some visitors are racing home and tossing their ugly, clumsy belongings and furniture into the nearest dumpster.

Seriously. "Shaker Design: Out of This World," makes the same case for restraint and simplicity that effective modern design makes. The difference is that Shaker furniture is old, handmade, rare and irreplaceable. At the Bard Graduate Center, a graceful West Side townhouse a block from Central Park, the show occupies the landings/front rooms of the first three floors.

### COLOR IMPORTANT

The most familiar objects, the "work furniture," occupy the bright-yellow section of the street-level floor. They were plain people, the Shakers, but they liked color and weren't attached to the look of natural wood. Nearly all of the work pieces have color — red, green and yellow.

A tall, stately 10-drawer pine chest was painted red, now faded to a glowing mahogany. This treasure only came to light 10 years ago, having been remanded to a basement in the Canterbury (N. H.) Shaker Village and apparently forgotten.

The proportions are satisfying and nearly all the lines are straight and simple. Sharp-eyed viewers will note the modest scroll contour at the baseboard, a calculated whimsy.

Such opportunities for unfettered expression weren't numerous, but they did exist. Impassioned hymn-singing



Crafted in the 1830s, during the same time Shaker pieces were being produced, this painted clock comes from "The Fancy World."

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## Something quite modern about Shaker furnishings

(their signature number is "Simple Gifts") was encouraged and services actually had choreography.

Considerable design leeway was available to the draftsmen in the community. "Gift drawings," elaborate sheets full of curlicued motifs, proverbs and mystical text, are as ornate as the furniture is austere.

Efficiency clearly mattered to these people. In addition to their beauty, sewing tables, washstands, even simple storage pieces look exactly right for their jobs.

Comfort is another matter. An upstate collector who owns several rooms of museum-quality Shaker furniture (collected 35 years ago when the getting was good) likes to say: "Yes it is all beautiful. But there's no place to sit."

### SHAKING WITH THE SPIRIT

Self-anointed visionary Ann Lee (1736-1784) founded the sect in Manchester, England. It wasn't a good time to be a spiritual firebrand in England, so the founding members emigrated to the Colonies, settling upstate near Albany, in 1774.

In the next 50 years, the Shakers (so called because they trembled with religious

fervor) established 18 villages between Maine and Kentucky; two remain active today. Shakers believed in regular confession (of sin), communal ownership, equality of the sexes and lifelong celibacy. The expansion of the flock came via evangelism, presumably.

In their prayer-and-work-centered enclaves, the Shakers raised crops and produced virtually everything they required, from clothing to herbal remedies. Select items (boxes, baskets, brooms, seed packets, herb teas, candy and preserves) were produced for sale to outsiders. The interesting thing about the merchandise section of "Shaker Design" is that the austerity maintained in the furniture isn't so evident in the commodity line.

Until you see how non-Shaker Americans furnished their lives, it's difficult to comprehend the beauty of the Shaker aesthetic. Telling comparisons are offered for inspection in the show, which was organized by the Shelburne (Vt.) Museum). It's a nice touch.

### THE FANCY WORLD

The room, furnished with furniture, floor and wall coverings and other object les-



sons from the realm the Shakers called "The Fancy World," is all a-crawl with the variegated surfaces and patterns fashionable in the 1820s and 1830s.

For a small movement that was never popular and is virtually out of business today, the Shakers have had a disproportionate influence on design.

Scandinavian design was launched by a single Shaker piece, a No. 7 Mount Lebanon armed rocker that ended up in Copenhagen in 1927, where Kaare Klint (1888-1954) misidentified it as "an American rocking chair in the Colonial style."

Of course, it became the wellspring of Danish Modern, Klint's gift to the 20th Century.

The third-floor section assembles selected 20th- and 21st-Century design pieces that have clear Shaker allegiances. Among them are a handsome flatscreen monitor; a wood stove (2007) designed by Antonio Citterio with Toan Nguyen, and American designer Roy McMakin's "Six Drawer Chest" a sly white-enameled Shaker riff.

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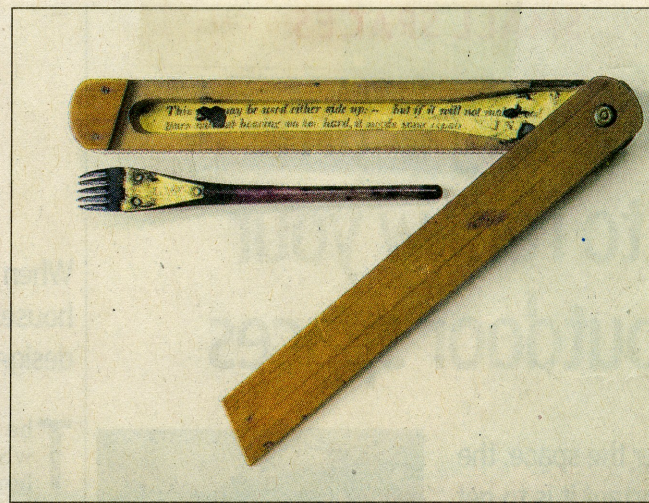


The very long, lean wooden Shaker settee is stronger than it looks.

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A "Table of Faith and Sweet-Smelling Rose Bush," gift drawing, attributed to Phebe Ann Smith (1817-1872). Roses apparently signified love and chastity.



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Isaac Newton Youngs (1793-1865) made the music staff liner upstate in Mount Lebanon.

