

PATTERN FROM THE MOUNT BY DR. SCOTT T. SWANK

Lecture and visit to the American Museum, Claverton Manor, Bath, 30th November 2002

The Shakers established numerous Christian communal societies in the newly formed United States of America from the 1780s through the early nineteenth century. The most important of these communities was the one at Mount Lebanon, New York State. From here, the Shaker Central Ministry directed the affairs of the rapidly growing Shaker movement through the appointment of leaders at the new communities, regular communication in writing and through reciprocal visits of Shaker Elders and Eldresses. Control was always incomplete, and history reveals that over time the various Shaker societies exercised varying degrees of autonomy from the Central Ministry.

Pattern From The Mount demonstrated that from the 1780s the Shaker leaders at the Mount (Mt. Lebanon) intended to establish tangible and symbolic patterns which would govern the behaviour and beliefs of the Shakers in the newly formed communities. In this effort, they were much more successful in the eastern societies (New England and New York) than they were in the western societies (Ohio and Kentucky). Even in New England, the patterns took hold more completely in New Hampshire (NH) and Massachusetts than in Maine.

This lecture explored four patterns of Shaker intent which are evident in the material culture of Canterbury Shaker Village in Canterbury, NH.

Canterbury Shaker Village was called to order by the Central Ministry in 1792, making it the seventh Shaker community. One year later a second NH community was called to order in Enfield. Canterbury was located in central NH near the source of the Merrimack River. Enfield lay 50 miles to the north and west in the upper Connecticut River Valley. The four patterns were;

1) The Architectural Template which was best represented by the Shaker Meeting House, a three dimensional symbol of radical Shaker Christianity; 2) The Community Plan, which organized communal buildings and landscape in order to represent Shaker beliefs and provide a physical stage on which to carry out the Shakers' millennial ambitions; 3) The Colour Code, which in early generations was refined to telegraph through architectural finishes and furniture finishes, and the functional organization of the celibate, communitarian Shaker society; 4) The Furniture Design Template, which governed the Shaker response to external markets and fashion systems and provided the Shakers with material forms for domestic life and work which were integrated into their larger belief system.

Although the Shakers were strongly influenced by the social and economic context of American life from the outset and over time, this lecture highlighted the imaginative ways the Shakers rejected many prevailing social institutions and selectively embraced others to create a fresh and progressive religious movement.

TOUR OF THE MUSEUM

The American Museum was opened in 1961 by an American, Dallas Pratt and a British born American John Judkyn. Their purpose was to demonstrate the wealth and quality of American furniture and interior design. Today Claverton Manor, built in 1820, is set out in a series of period rooms ranging from the late seventeenth to the nineteenth century. For the Christmas period the rooms have been rearranged as they might have been during each period for the festive season. Each has been decorated to show the development of the Christmas tradition in America.

The first room depicts a Puritan New England home in the 1690s. There are no decorations, as Christmas would not have been celebrated at this time. Instead the householders were busy making preparations for the winter season, storing food, including drying apple rings by the fire, spinning and making candles and soap. The furniture showed close similarities with English furniture. Oak still predominated and much was painted or stained black, white, red, yellow and green. All the furniture in the museum is authentic and closely provenanced. In this room much of the furniture came from Massachusetts and Connecticut.

The Lee and Borning Room, 1730, has original panelling from a house in New Hampshire; many of the other rooms at Claverton are also constructed from original panelling. Here a little lighter approach to the season could be seen, with sprigs of box in the windows. There are two rooms, one a living room, the other a bedroom with a truckle bed under the main bed; these were common in the period.

Through a corridor displaying an interesting group of American pewter is the Perley Parlour of 1774, home to Captain Perley of Boston. Mahogany was by this time more commonly used than oak and the furniture generally has a more distinctive American character.

The next room houses the Museum's famous quilt collection and other textiles, a magnet for needleworkers. Numerous quilts hang from purpose made racks, which you can look through.

On the ground floor is the late 18th century Deming Parlour, from Colchester Connecticut. Much of the furniture is of Chippendale style in cherry wood. The Deer Park Parlour, a Baltimore home of the same period, favours the Hepplewhite and Sheraton styles. Distinctive features of the furniture include corkscrew finials (referred to as 'blaze' finials in the eighteenth century) on many of the bureaux and bookcases; and 'block' carved fronts on desks and sideboards.

The Shaker room, dated 1840, had the typical wooden hook boards all around the walls with chairs and a mirror and candleholder hanging from them. The blue paint on the woodwork had been mentioned in the morning and some of the pieces of furniture Dr Swank had talked about were represented, including a sewing table, and tailoring bench. There were also examples of

ladder-back chairs and the distinctive oval boxes.

There was a small display about Elder Robert M. Wagan, chairmaker (1833 -1883). Chairmaking became a significant occupation for the Shaker communities after Independence, with designs that reflected the principles of 'usefulness, simplicity, strength and proportion'. A trade label illustrating a ladder-back chair with the words 'Shaker's Mt. Lebanon NY' was included in the display. There was also a catalogue showing samples of all the webbing design they made for use on a variety of chairs including rocking chairs.

A room illustrating the style preferred by the Pennsylvania Germans followed on from the Shaker room but was very different. This religious community had a very exuberant approach to decorating their homes. All the furniture was elaborately painted. Their Christmas decorations were equally ornate and the tree was decorated with 'scherenschnitte' meaning 'paper cutting'.

In the vast basement of the building there were some displays showing a cabin on a whaler's ship and a pioneer's and gold rush camp. There was also some beautiful native beadwork. One of the last sections in the basement was a series of doll's house miniature rooms including an apothecary's shop and an antique shop. The last of these was a complete New England, Colonial house of 1720 furnished throughout.

The last room setting in the museum is a New Mexican house of 1850. This was interesting in that the furniture looked almost sixteenth century. There was a cupboard set into the wall with a door made of turned spindles. Also a cupboard called a 'Trasteros' that looked like an aumbry with pierced doors. There were a number of coffers that looked, from a distance to be framed and panelled; however the framework was applied in a similar manner to some of the early clamped-front chests.

Last but by no means least is the 18th century Conkey's Tavern. This room was lavishly decorated with greenery and maize and tobacco wreaths. Mrs Conkey offered everyone freshly made cookies and cakes. All around the room are examples of American 'Windsor' chairs; all comb backs but of many different designs often with simulated bamboo legs and spindles.

Alison Lee

The web address for the Canterbury Shaker Village near Concord in New Hampshire is www.shakers.org

Useful publications

Perspectives on American Furniture edited by Gerald W. R. Ward and published by Winterthur, this book contains an essay by Dr. Swank.

Arts of the Pennsylvania Germans by Dr Swank

Shaker Life, Art and Architecture: Hands to Work and Hearts to God. This is Dr. Swank's latest book and he has kindly donated a copy to the Society.