

CHRISTOPHER GILBERT MEMORIAL LECTURE

Burlington House, Piccadilly, London, 2nd December 2002

Shaker Furniture Design: Religion in Wood Revisited'

The Annual Lecture was given by Dr Scott Swank, President of Canterbury Shaker Village in New Hampshire. A leading authority on the Shakers and the design systems they developed, Dr Swank challenges some of the assumptions made by previous historians. He is making a special study of the Canterbury community, the first part of which he published in 1998 under the title *Shaker Life, Art and Architecture*. In this lecture he set out to explain the basis for his thesis and to demonstrate how his research has led him to a fresh interpretation of the furniture created by successive generations of Shakers. The main text of the lecture is published below:

"Shaker design is the tangible aesthetic expression of the Christian, communitarian Shaker movement founded in the late eighteenth century by English born Ann Lee. The radical religion of the Shakers developed and flourished, not in England, but in the American colonies of New York and Massachusetts in the 1780s. From these preaching stations, the Shaker religion spread rapidly after Mother Ann's death in 1784. Eventually, the Shakers established 18 separate communities from Maine to Kentucky. Their success was directly related to a larger evangelical religious revival known in the new United States as the Second Great Awakening.

Shaker leaders of the 1780-1815 era created a new, intentional social order within which to accomplish their revolutionary religious objectives. The new Shaker order rejected the orthodox, established system of Christian belief and practice, as well as the prevailing American social, economic and political systems of the new republic. The Shaker way required substitutions for and alternatives to the old order in belief, behaviour and material culture. The ultimate expression of the new Shaker order lay in the concept of planned communities which the Shakers called villages. This well worn term 'village' is ironic in that the Shakers enthusiastically embraced an organic, compressed social construction as radically new just at the time that most Americans of the revolutionary generation were enthusiastically embracing dispersed settlement, competitive individualism and the consumer revolution.

Shaker design, therefore, is a collective visual expression rather than a general cultural style or the aesthetic preferences of individual craftsmen or patrons. Developing in the ferment of post-revolutionary New England, Shaker design in the most general sense is a vernacular interpretation of international neoclassicism. However, the Shakers rejected many aspects of the prevailing fashion system of Anglo-American culture in favour of some original and some adaptive applications of neoclassical expression. Shaker material culture, from architecture to furniture to utilitarian wooden-

ware, responded primarily to internalized Shaker purpose rather than to traditional market forces.

Ornamentation was subordinated to form and function. Intense colour expressed collective intent and was used within the Shaker communities to signify function. Variation in form and surface treatment was permitted among Shaker communities but only within a relatively narrow range of Shaker good fit.

The resulting design system is unmistakably Shaker, within the broader context of Anglo-American neo-classical design. For a design system created to serve a religious ideology, and to express commitment to an older concept of communal order, the Shaker design system is surprisingly industrial in character. Classic Shaker design begs for replication and standardization. A premier example is Shaker peg or pin rail, turned wooden pegs projecting from a horizontal moulded strip of wood mounted high on the walls of a room interior. The Shakers did not invent peg rail, but they elevated a minor architectural feature, intended for hanging clothing, into a distinctive design feature by running it around the four walls of a space. In their use of peg rail on all four interior walls of a room, and occasionally in double or triple rows, the Shakers used replication and standardization to their advantage in creating an original design. Although initially made by Shaker craftsmen using hand tools, this and other elements of Shaker design could eventually be accomplished mechanically without diminishing their faithfulness to Shaker design.

Shaker design also expresses community ideals of order, harmony, integrity, efficiency and functionality. These principles, as commonly interpreted from a 20th century perspective, mark the Shakers as early proponents of the credo that 'form follows function', and precursors of international modernism. This interpretation has prevailed for decades, since the pioneering scholarship of Edward Deming Andrews, but it distorts the original intent of Shaker design.

In addition to form and function, the Shakers were focused on process and product. In the rejection of the prevailing social order, and the creation of a new religious system, the Shakers translated their ideas into physical forms ranging from community plans, to buildings, domestic furnishings and products for sale to the outside world. The goal of this process of transformation generally was not to produce one of a kind, original designs, but practical appropriate designs that met the Shaker tests of utility, quality, good fit and replication. 'Shaker-made' symbolized consistent, high quality workmanship of certainty which, in the unregulated 19th century, provided the Shakers with the competitive advantage of a national brand name. The name Shaker stood for a process of production infused with integrity, and could apply to a range of products, some of which were obvious bearers of Shaker-style, and some of which veer closely to their worldly counterparts. For example, the hallmark Shaker oval box

still expresses Shaker efficiency and minimalism whether made totally by hand or with the aid of machinery.

The Shaker oval box is an adaptation of a common bentwood storage container or measure. Round boxes with or without lids were fastened with a straight seam riveted with iron tacks. The Shakers improved upon the design in terms of strength and durability of such boxes by selecting superior hardwoods, quartersawing the single side piece of wood, bending that piece into an oval, and inventing an elongated finger lap joint fastened with copper tacks. The result was a distinct Shaker design and a virtually indestructible Shaker-style storage container.

Shaker furniture makers followed a similar adaptive path, transforming vernacular forms such as the ladder-back chair, into a timeless Shaker design. The signature Shaker chair pares fine hardwood stock to minimal dimensions in order to maximize strength, durability, lightness and practicality. On straight ladder-back side chairs, the Shaker chair makers embedded a replaceable wooden button, or tilter, into the feet of the rear stiles to permit the user to lean back, tilting the chair with ease and no damage to wood floors. On these same chairs, the Shakers placed an innovative new seat of woven strips of chair tape, replacing the common vernacular chair seats of splint or rush. These earlier materials became brittle with age and stained with wear. The hand-woven fabric tape of the Shakers was at once colourful, flexible, comfortable, long-lasting and easy to replace.

Shaker case furniture, whether built into room interiors, or freestanding, also exhibits the Shaker design principles. Stressing pure geometry, Shaker case furniture achieves freshness through the creative application and interplay of bilateral symmetry, asymmetry, graduated movement, surface minimalism and intense colour. Built-in storage-cupboards and freestanding cases of drawers are as integral to Shaker interior design as peg rail. Always crafted primarily to serve a practical purpose, ie clothing storage, Shaker storage units elevated their function to an art form.

The Shaker industrial mentality insisted upon processes and tools that led to control and precision in their workmanship. This ethic opened the door for repeated technological innovation and ongoing refinement. Universal Shaker designs, in ladder-back chairs and oval boxes, were standardized over time and took on a distinct Shaker style when compared to similar products of their time. However, village by village refinements led to variations which gave each community and region distinctive features which are providing for significant revisionism in the study of Shaker material culture.

Edward Deming Andrews published the first popular article on Shaker furniture in August, 1928 in the *Magazine Antiques*, placing the Shakers within the newly emerging phenomenon of American folk art. Shaker design was indigenous for Andrews but, more importantly, Shaker design was a precursor to

modernism. The search for modernism's roots was a passion of the late 1920s in New York City, and among prominent American collectors, some of whom collected Matisse and European modern artists; others such as Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Henry Francis du Pont focused on American folk art and American furniture. Edward Deming Andrews collected Shaker art, and in the late 1930s began organizing exhibitions and publishing the results of his documentary and artifactual research.

Andrews' pioneering book, *Shaker Furniture*, was published in 1937. Five Shaker communities existed at Alfred, Maine; Sabbathday Lake, Maine; Canterbury, New Hampshire; Hancock, Massachusetts and Mt. Lebanon, New York. By 1966 and the book's second edition, only Canterbury and Sabbathday Lake remained but Andrews had contributed greatly to the development of the Shakers as American folk heroes. The refinement of his thinking was apparent in the book's title which now read *Religion in Wood*.

Central to Andrews' thesis is the idea that Shaker furniture was designed in heaven. The patterns were transmitted from God to the Shakers through direct revelation. In Andrews' view, the Shakers rejected all design which emphasized ornament over the 'values inherent in the form'. The form, and its wood, was left to naturally express the harmony and 'serene happiness' which Shaker religion imparted. In Andrews' paradigm, Shaker heavenly design emanated from God to the Shaker Central Ministry (and its cabinetmakers, turners and chair makers) at New Lebanon, and then to the other Shaker communities. The chief vehicle for ensuring uniformity was a written code called the Millennial Laws. He acknowledged that some minor variations in style were tolerated. Essentially, however, Andrews refused to allow regionalism to enter his design equation, and he did not acknowledge that worldly design might sneak through the Shaker defence system.

In the beginning then, Edward Deming Andrews created Shaker design in an American Arts and Crafts image. Since 1966, nearly all scholarship on Shaker furniture has been revisionist in two principal ways. First, furniture historians such as John Kirk have demonstrated that Shaker furniture design was influenced by the prevailing design system of its time and place. Kirk has pushed the pendulum so far that at one time he simply declared Shaker design to be completely derivative and lacking in interest. In his 1999 book *The Shaker World*, Kirk retracted this harsh judgment and praises the Shakers for original and very modern contributions to world furniture design. Second, furniture scholars such as Jean Burks and Tim Rieman, in their compendium, *The Complete Book of Shaker Furniture*, have accentuated the distinctive characteristics of the furniture of each Shaker community, down-playing the influence of the much ignored Millennial Laws and emphasizing the regional factors of materials and local craft practices. Burks, in particular, also gives full acceptance to the evolution of the Shaker aesthetic into

the Victorian era. For Andrews, Shaker Victorian was an embarrassment, for to him it could not have happened unless God had sent a new design revelation or the Shakers had abandoned divine design principles.

My own perspective is at once historical and anthropological. I accept that the Shakers, early in their history, truly believed they received new design principles from God through their leaders at the Mount, and in fact implemented some highly original design concepts in community planning, architecture, furniture and worship. I also accept that they were people of a particular time and an interesting mix of places, which very much influenced, but did not determine their design principles. In order to add to the growing body of research on the Shakers, I have chosen to excavate the minds and expressive material culture of the one community that has the most evidence intact. That community is Canterbury, which never suffered from the cataclysmic closings suffered by all other Shaker Villages except the remaining one at Sabbathday Lake. The first phase of my research was published in 1998 in *Shaker Life, Art and Architecture*."

Dr Swank illustrated his lecture with slides of some of the furniture at Canterbury shown in the context of the Shakers' religious beliefs, their way of life and the buildings which formed the village. An intensive programme of building conservation has been achieved over recent years, and work has begun on the restoration of the interiors and the furniture. Canterbury is a remarkably intact environment having passed directly from the last Shaker inhabitants to the Trust and is therefore a rich resource for the detailed research of the kind which is simply not possible at other Shaker sites. Dr Swank's work is already throwing new light on the subject and we look forward to the publication of his next phase of research. We are most grateful to Dr Swank and for his lecture and much enjoyed his company during his visit to England.

David Dewing



Fig. 10 Dr. Swank