

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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SHAKER ARTS REVEALED

Shaker culture is one rich artistic vein uncovered in New Horizons in American Art, the exhibition which opens at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, on September 16. Shakers have been established in the United States since 1774 when the leader of this little-known religious sect, Ann Lee, migrated to these shores with her adherents. Superb craftsmen, these unworldly, ascetic, God-loving people produced handmade textiles and furniture whose simple forms and functional economy make them the first modern design in America. Until recently, however, Shaker handicrafts have been practically unknown outside their own communities. Now the Index of American Design of the Federal Art Project is uncovering just such hidden or neglected strains in America's artistic heritage; and watercolor plates from its survey of Shaker arts will be included in the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

Through upper New York State and New England, and even farther west, where the Shakers penetrated in their migrations, stand immense and stately houses. Abandoned or fallen into decay or, if inhabited, gleaming white and immaculate, these edifices are of noble and austere proportions. Three or four stories high, much larger than any family would require, larger even than the lordly Pennsylvania-German barns and houses, they are not in the New England colonial pattern which set a style for half America. Inquiry shows that they house--or once housed--Shaker colonies.

What are the Shakers? How did their unworldly existence give America a tradition of design that is only now being uncovered and appreciated? The Shakers are members of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, founded in England in 1747 by Quakers. Led by Jane and James Wardley, this new sect included Ann Lee, who brought Shakerism to America. The name by which the Shakers are popularly known came from their religious exercises.

"Sometimes," reads the Shaker Compendium, "after sitting awhile in silent meditation, they were seized with a mighty trembling, under which they would often express the indignation of God against all sin.

At other times, they were exercised with singing, shouting and leaping for joy, at the near prospect of salvation. They were often exercised with great agitation of body and limbs, shaking, running and walking the floor, with a variety of other operations and signs, swiftly passing and repassing each other, like clouds agitated with a mighty wind. These exercises, so strange in the eyes of the beholders, brought upon them the appellation of Shakers, which has been their most common name of distinction ever since."

Arriving in this country just before the Revolutionary War, the shakers settled in the woods seven miles from Albany. Here Ann Lee, called "Mother Ann" by her followers, built in the swamps of Niskeyuna (now Watervliet) a communal settlement, patterned after the communities of the primitive Christian faith. Later other communities were established at New Lebanon, New York, and in Ohio, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Maine. Like those of the Puritans in New England, the Shaker colonies were organized under church government, based on common ownership and composed largely of farmers, artisans and craftsmen.

Today five of these societies remain: at New Lebanon and Colonic (formerly Niskeyuna), Hancock, Mass., Canterbury, N. H., and Sabbath-day lake, Me. The Shakers at the latter settlement were recently joined by those from the Alfred (Me.) community. The Colonies at Enfield, N. H., Enfield, Ct., and at Shirley and Harvard, Mass., were discontinued some years ago. The others long since ceased to exist, those at Groveland, N. Y., Tyringham, Mass., Pleasant Hill and South Union, Ky., and at North Union (now a part of Cleveland), Union Village, Watervliet and Whitewater, all in Ohio.

Separation from the world and an ascetic mode of life, in which every one worked, were the basic principles of the Shaker communities. Property was held in common; and the members of a community lived as one large "family," these families sometimes numbering as many as a hundred persons. This arrangement accounts for their architecture, the stately three and four-story edifices. The rooms, often uniform in size, were spaced regularly along the halls, and were of the simplest type, with bare whitewashed walls and plain baseboards. In these interiors the Shaker furniture and textiles illustrated in the Index of American Design watercolor renderings on view at the Museum of

Modern Art in New Horizons in American Art provided the only color and warmth in an otherwise severely austere existence.

This communal life, withdrawn from the world, produced some of the most beautiful and functional handicrafts in America. Mother Ann's "testimonies" were constant pleas for continence and the sublimation of physical energies into holiness. Translated into necessities, these ideas took the form of simple and beautiful chairs, tables, cupboards, wood boxes and other useful objects which express the best modern design. In a good Shaker piece form truly follows function; and the materials used are lovely in their own right, not by virtue of added ornament or color. Thus the very characteristics of Shaker culture which emphasize asceticism, unworldliness, and purity are the source of enduring art.

This devout other-worldliness produced objects of the highest daily practicability, chiefly textiles and furniture. The Shakers went about the world in sober gray and white. Their woollens and upholsterer's plushes glow with rich color. So too with the furniture. Simple in line and mass, it is rich with the warm texture of wood worn smooth by diligent hands.

Just the names show what a rigorously functional culture was the Shakers. A tailoresses' counter, a towel rack, a sewing cabinet, a wood box, wall cupboards, trustees' desk, a mirror and rack (touch of vanity!), an infirmary three-drawer washstand, a blanket chest, a dairy counter, a wall clock, a trestle table, a weave chest, a loom board, a loom stool,---here are objects revealing more than words can of the daily existence of the Shakers. It was a life built around the crafts, around agriculture and artisanship. And the craftsmen used the materials of daily life, the native pine, maple, birch and cherry, sometimes staining the wood deeper tones, occasionally painting it to simulate ebony. From these craft products, one gets an impression of the deep and sincere sense of workmanship which characterizes the people of Shaker communities, whose watchword is: "The hands to work; the heart to God."