

# First-Wave Minimalism

The Shakers' down-to-earth designs elevated the craft of furniture making to new heights  
By Bridget Moriarity

THE UNITED SOCIETY OF BELIEVERS in Christ's Second Appearing—nicknamed the Shakers for their jubilant movement during worship—arrived in America in 1774. Led by Mother Ann Lee, this sect of English Quakers established themselves throughout the United States. At their peak in the mid 19th century, there were an estimated 6,000 members in 18 communities stretching from Maine to Ohio to Florida.

In their utopian experiment, the Shakers sought to re-create heaven on earth, and they believed one means to achieve this objective was through the design of their buildings and furniture. Focusing on form and proportion, these artisans added visual interest without indulging in formal decoration. "At their best, the Shakers were able to pare a piece of furniture down to its essential elements and through craftsmanship, materials, and an understanding of form create something that was a uniquely American style of furniture," says David Schorsch, an antiques dealer based in Woodbury, Connecticut.

However, it's a false notion that all Shakers were craftspeople. "Very few Shakers were actually cabinetmakers," notes Michael Graham, director of the library and museum at Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in Maine. "It's a common misconception that they produced a huge volume

of furniture and that somehow being a furniture maker was an integral part of being a Shaker." Today, authentic Shaker furniture is scarce.

The very best the market has to offer draws strong demand from longtime devotees and, just as important, continues to attract new collectors. In June 2014, the Skinner auction house in Boston sold 138 lots from the descendants of Faith and Edward Andrews, committed Shaker dealers and collectors. The top 10 lots earned far more than expected, with the best seller, a circa-1860 cupboard, fetching \$123,000 against an estimate of \$40,000 to \$60,000.

This past March the private, New York-based contemporary art dealer Philippe Ségalot partnered with François Laffanour of Galerie Downtown in Paris to introduce a collection of Shaker furniture to the crowds at the European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht. It was a first for the event, which generally favors European styles. "I didn't even know about the Shaker history at first, but I loved the simplicity and the purity of the lines and the perfection of the craftsmanship," Ségalot told *Art+Auction* shortly before his venture to broaden the market for what until now has been a largely American preoccupation.

This cherry and butternut drop-leaf table exemplifies Shaker austerity. Carrying an estimate of \$8,000 to \$12,000 in the June 2014 sale of the Andrews collection at Skinner in Boston, it earned \$24,600.

# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



## GOOD

**ARMED ROCKING CHAIR, TIGER MAPLE AND CHERRY, ENFIELD, CONNECTICUT, CA. 1820**  
**Estimated at \$7,000 to \$9,000; sold for \$6,221**  
**Skinner**  
 November 2008  
 This chair has a mellow surface with a nice color to it, but it was likely refinished, reducing its value. Though well proportioned, the chair, which is not especially unusual, lacks the verticality prized by collectors.

## BETTER

**ELDER'S ROCKING CHAIR, CHERRY OR MAPLE, HARVARD, MASSACHUSETTS, 1810-20**  
**Estimated at \$4,000 to \$7,000; sold for \$14,000**  
**Willis Henry Auctions**  
 September 2014  
 This early form is quite rare, thanks to its original dark-red painted finish and seat. It features four graduated slats, each wood-pegged into back posts, and tall, finely shaped flame finials. In addition to the wear on the seat, there is some wear on the right arm that suggests its owner was right-handed.



## BEST

**LADDERBACK ARMED ROCKING CHAIR, BIRCH, ENFIELD, NEW HAMPSHIRE, CA. 1830**  
**Currently priced at \$38,000**  
**John Keith Russell Antiques**  
 This model is a highly refined and rare form, with a high back terminating in candle-flame finials. The chair features four arched slats with scrolled arms and a caned seat standing on carved, shaped rockers. It retains its original brown stain and surface varnish.



## A TRIO OF TYPES

There are three periods of Shaker furniture production: primitive, classic, and Victorian. "By far the pieces that bring the most money are the best designed, most original, and best documented examples from the so-called classic period, from about 1830 to 1850," says Graham. Primitive ranged roughly from the 1790s through the 1820s, and Victorian began in the 1860s and ran through the 1890s, though by the 1860s there was a sharp drop in the production of Shaker furniture. During the classic period, the Shakers perfected forms and meticulously crafted their pieces with remarkable details, such as fine and precise dovetail joints. Primitive pieces are heavier and less refined, while Victorian models are more ornate and worldly. Sometimes, the template is more about aesthetics than era. Take the 1860-70 desk that holds the auction record for a piece of Shaker furniture, having fetched \$491,400 in July 2006 at Willis Henry Auctions of Marshfield, Massachusetts: Though later in conception, it is very much classic in its design.

## CHAIR TRADE

While the vast majority of the furniture made by the Shakers was for their own use, the Mount Lebanon Shaker Village in New York established a factory in the 1860s to produce chairs to sell to the outside world. They manufactured examples in eight sizes, ranging from a small child's chair (size 0) to a large adult's chair (size 7) in both rocking and straight models. The factory was shuttered about 1935, just before the community closed. Today, the smallest and largest chairs are typically the most valuable. "A simple slat-back side chair with decent surface is not an expensive item," notes Stephen Fletcher, director of American furniture and decorative arts at Skinner. Fletcher has even heard dealers complain that they're unable to sell the chairs, which can be priced as low as a few hundred dollars. But he notes: "If you have an extraordinary armed rocker that has fantastic appeal vertically but isn't very wide, and if they used an interesting lumber like tiger maple, that's the sort of chair any collector would pay a handsome price—say, in the five figures—to own."

## AUTHOR UNKNOWN

Pieces that were signed by a recognized maker bring top dollar, but the vast majority of works do not bear their creator's name, making the process of authentication challenging. "A methodological study of the signed pieces gives us certain construction techniques and other characteristics that enable us to attribute works to certain makers or more often to certain communities," says Schorsch. But there is plenty of vintage furniture on the market that has been falsely linked to the Shakers. "A

## The Essentials

- + True Shaker furniture is rare. They did not make pieces to sell to the outside world, and most remained where they were fabricated, eventually finding their way into village museums.
- + Chairs made at Mount Lebanon in New York were the only mass-produced items. To authenticate a production chair, look for both a stamped number indicating the size on the back of a slat, and, if the original finish is intact, a decal with which the chairs were often marked.
- + Works by master craftspeople such as **Orren Haskins**, **Thomas Damon**, and **Henry Green** set the standard.
- + "In the 1920s, Shaker furniture was discovered by designers and artists working to develop modernism," says **Michael Graham**. Indeed, Shaker greatly influenced design in America by makers such as **George Nakashima** and **Roy McMakin**, and in Denmark by figures like **Børge Mogensen** and **Hans Wegner**.

lot of people think that if something is simple, well made, and painted, then it must be Shaker, and that has sustained a particular segment of the antiques market," cautions Graham. As with art, says Ségalot, provenance matters: "You should be able to trace the history of each piece—you need to know where it went since it was executed."

## MINT CONDITION

According to Fletcher, there is nothing charming about a little wear and tear when it comes to Shaker items. "Take a piece of 18th-century New England furniture, a tavern table, for example, with a top that has a wonderful dry surface—there could be stains and knife marks, and people will love it. With a piece of Shaker furniture, those flaws aren't seen as a good thing," says Fletcher, who speculates that people are more sensitive to condition problems due to the lack of adornment. He also notes that a refinished surface, very common today, dramatically lowers the value of a Shaker model. "When a piece with its original colored surface appears, it brings a premium," he says.

## ON THE HORIZON

Willis Henry Auctions, which holds an annual sale of Shaker pieces, plans its next auction for the second weekend of September at Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Skinner likewise aims to host an auction of Shaker items this fall. According to John Keith Russell, a dealer in South Salem, New York, "Two-thirds of the Shaker trade takes place at a private dealer level." But the supply remains largely untapped: Many collections of Shaker furniture remain in private hands and have yet to surface on the market. ▣