

Life & Arts Arts

Art review: How can Shaker furniture be so alike when communities were miles apart?

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN April 10, 2023 67 0

The oddest aspect of Shaker furniture may be its distinguishing feature. That design – so pure, so elegant and modern that we all recognize it as “Shaker Style” – was produced by 18 different Shaker communities that had 2,000 to 4,000 people. Yet it all looks the same. Nobody produced a design manual. Nobody sent drawings. And nobody made a YouTube tutorial.

“Masterworks of Shaker Design: A Tale of Two Enfields” at the New Britain Museum of American Art is the first of a planned series of Shaker craftsmanship from the past 175 years. This exhibit focuses on material from Enfield, Conn., and Enfield, N.H., two Shaker communities established only a year apart. Later exhibits will focus on objects from a single pair of Shaker communities. All share signature elements of Shaker furniture and all come from disparate, often geographically distant Shaker settlements.

Precisely why that is remains a mystery, curator M. Stephen Miller says. Nevertheless, a stroll through this small but lovely collection of sewing tables, blanket chests, a free-standing chest, chairs and a tripod desk and table begs the question: How do people at such geographical distances from each other design furniture that looks so analogous?



'Built-in Case of Drawers and Cupboards, butternut and pine' (1858) by Grove Wright, part of New Britain Museum of American Art's exhibit that runs until Aug. 6. (New Britain Museum of American Art)

Who were the Shakers?

Shakers began making their own furniture as soon as they were “gathered into community,” applying their basic “three C” tenets: communal ownership of all goods, regular private confession and celibacy. The Shakers, all pacifists, were almost immediately self-sufficient, and, as Miller has noted, grew to have substantial influence and economic success.

“The Shakers were the first in the country to market their seeds on a retail basis, in small paper envelopes,” Miller said. They specialized in seeds for the southern markets, like Georgia and Tennessee. Connecticut Shakers were particularly successful farmers because of the fertility of the bottom land of the Connecticut River.

Shakers grew vegetables, herbs, seed beds and grazing land and operated a lucrative lead pipe industry. By the mid-19th century, Connecticut’s Enfield Shakers were highly prosperous – their brooms, pails and “fancy goods” were sold by Shaker peddlers. The group’s seed industry collapsed, however, with the Civil War because of a Union embargo on goods intended for the South.

The Shaker movement itself focused on humility, purity, harmony and “true gospel simplicity.” Was that what became incarnated in the austere elegance of the group’s furniture? Was it the no-nonsense practicality and strident disdain for the flummery of ornament? Or was it something about the reverence for hard labor and function that spawned such minimalism?

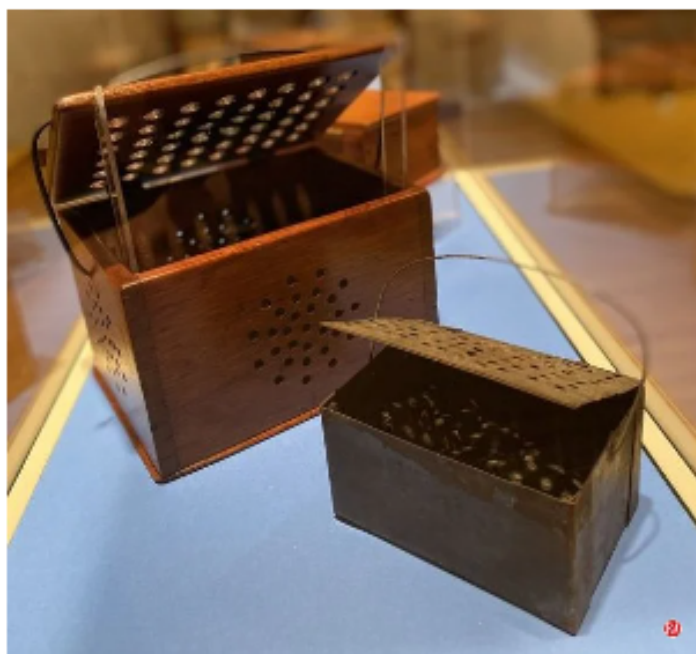
Miller says it may be a bit of both. “The Shakers lived (and still live) within a narrowly defined set of standards, simplicity being a key one of these,” he said. “Using only as much material and adornment as needed for the work to meet its needs, one ends up with something that looks a lot like what the Shakers did.”



Part of the exhibit 'Masterworks of Shaker Design: A Tale of Two Enfields. (New Britain Museum of American Art)

What it looks like is a modest double school desk, made in Connecticut, still sporting a few ink stains. Like its cousin from New Hampshire, the desk is frugal in its essentiality: A top, a hinge, two compartments, four slender legs. Miller has paired it with two Shaker chairs, one with a seat woven of rush and another of wool tape. The latter needed repair through the middle, so Shakers created a brass “cuff” to envelop the chair leg and prevent it from splitting.

Oddly, though they are known for their furniture, the only furniture made for sale on a large scale were chairs, Miller said. And these were made only at the community in Mount Lebanon, N.Y. However, as communities closed, furniture and furnishings were often sold off. In some cases, museums were given objects, Miller said. Shockingly, in the 1920s, when the Connecticut Corrections Department took over most of the former Shaker village at Enfield, “they found the artifacts left behind a nuisance and destroyed them,” Miller wrote via email.



Part of the exhibit 'Masterworks of Shaker Design: A Tale of Two Enfields. This tin-plated iron box was filled with ashes and served as a foot warmer. (New Britain Museum of American Art)

Among the more eye-catching objects in the exhibit are a series of exquisite sewing tables. Sewing was an integral communal effort for the Shakers and ultimately became a critical economic one, Miller said. One of these tables, from New Hampshire, features an ample top and single door, a design later “repurposed” to include a series of four drawers on its top. The piece is stunning not just for its practicality (who doesn’t need more drawers) but for its harmony. There is a deep mathematical, almost algebraic, sense of proportion in these pieces. A second marvelously preserved sewing desk, just adjacent, is larger and features even more drawers, but they are nearly hidden in the compact frame that supports the table.

In his email, Miller explained that men began to leave Shaker communities earlier and more quickly than women, a severe blow to the running of Shaker farms. That meant that women who were left were “forced to provide the economic needs at all Shaker communities by making small, labor-intensive goods for sale.” The items themselves were designed to be used in the sewing arts. They included lined and outfitted wooden boxes with handles, made by men, with sewing accoutrements: a needle case, pincushion, needle-holder and wax.

"For the Shakers, sisters spent many, many hours at these endeavors and many furniture pieces were made – or adapted – to allow more than one sister to use the piece at a time," Miller said. "In many instances, a table made earlier in the 19th century was adapted to this use with the addition of a gallery top."

Every Shaker "retiring room," or bedroom, had built-in drawers and cupboards, like the monumental chest made by Connecticut master craftsman Grove Wright in 1858 that appears to be physically embedded in the museum. The enormous piece features 22 drawers and is surrounded by several cupboards and stupefies with its enormity and lack of guile. It was removed from Enfield to the museum in 2014 when the building it was in faced near collapse.

Not all such utilitarian chests were built into Shaker homes. Some, like the 200-year-old tall chest, from the New Hampshire community, were free-standing. Though the Shakers eschewed surface adornment, the exposed joinery and the grain of the wood are small marvels.

The exhibit is tidy and spare, a bit like the Shakers themselves. It could use more wall text, particularly for the description of the lovely boxes and sewing reticules.

By 1911, the Shakers' inability to attract new converts led them to sell off their fields, first to local farmers, then to a tobacco conglomerate, which sold the land to the state of Connecticut. The state used the Shaker land to create a prison farm.

IF YOU GO

What: "Masterworks of Shaker Design: A Tale of Two Enfields"

Where: New Britain Museum of American Art, 56 Lexington St., New Britain

When: Through Aug. 6

How: visit nbmaa.org or call 860-229-0257.