How the Shakers Influenced Generations of Artists and Designers

By Alina Cohen
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Installation view of Amie Cunat, *Meetinghouse.* VICTORI + MO, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and VICTORI + MO.

The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing—the Christian sect known more informally as the Shakers—ritually shouted, sang in tongues, and danced ecstatically. What they didn't do is procreate. The group's steadfast commitment to celibacy by definition prevented them from building a sustainable community.

But the Protestant sect, founded in the 18th century, instead secured their legacy by creating iconic American furniture. The simplicity, functionality, and unadorned clarity of their textiles, tables, chairs, and woodwork prefigured minimal and modernist tenets. In 2016, the Metropolitan Museum of Art made this connection explicit with its "Simple Gifts" exhibition, which linked 20th-century performance and design by the likes of Isamu Noguchi and Martha Graham with Shaker objects. The group's craft principles have inspired

and appealed to American artists for decades; their creative production enjoys an afterlife in both gallery settings and prominent collections.

The Shakers evolved out of a Quaker group in the United Kingdom that faced persecution for their noisy worship. A textile worker, Ann Lee, became a leader of the sect and developed their doctrine—craftspeople were always central to the Shaker movement. In 1774, Lee and her disciples travelled to America to establish their own millenarian church, which believed that Jesus Christ would rule on Earth for 1,000 years, followed by the apocalypse. As the Shakers were banned from having children, they had to recruit outsiders in order to continue their traditions. Membership spiked around 6,000 in the middle of the 19th century. Now, a mere two members belong to the church.

The Shakers made and sold furniture to support their communities and worship god. Totally unconcerned with stylistic conventions, they eliminated all decoration and created timeless designs. The typical Shaker table, bench, or chair is smooth, undecorated, and simple—a kind of Platonic ideal for furniture. Uncomplicated shapes and finishes highlight the natural intricacies within the wood that comprises the pieces. The sect also made brightly colored round boxes (washed with milk paint) that were made from wrapped wood and fastened with small copper tacks.

The Shaker Village at Pleasant Hill. Photo by Carl Wycoff, via Flickr.

An emphasis on utility, respect for materials, and skilled handiwork defined their aesthetic. Ideologically, the Shakers advocated equality, communal activity, and pacifism (they were notably exempt from fighting in the Civil War). According to John Keith Russell, who runs an antiques shop in South Salem, New York, their communal spaces, or meetinghouses, were open and filled with windows because "they believed in light. Heaven had lots of light and it was open and it was clean," he said.

One contemporary artist recently became so enthralled with Shaker architecture and its attendant ideals that she created her own iteration of their signature aesthetic. At Brooklyn gallery Victori + Mo Contemporary, Amie Cunat is exhibiting her installation *Meetinghouse* (2018), a colorful riff on the titular Shaker institution, on view through May 27th. Cunat constructed the walls, rafters, and the rest of her architectural intervention (except for a rug, a broom, and cords for hanging candelabras) from cardboard and paper. The artist used a sourcebook to learn how to make Shaker furniture and YouTube videos for instruction on creating her banded chair. Entering from a characterless hallway in an industrial Bushwick building, the viewer encounters a chartreuse and mustard foyer made more welcoming by a rocking chair, a rug, and a table with a candle on top.

"There's a misconception that Shakers were really modest in color because of their wardrobe," Cunat says, referring to the sect's conservative uniform dress. "They actually were pretty experimental, especially towards the late 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s, when synthetic dyes were available." The artist first visited the Hancock Shaker Village in Massachusetts about a year and a half ago. Its colorful interiors in particular inspired her to further investigate the group, and to translate their designs into her own visual language.

Installation view of Amie Cunat, *Meetinghouse,* VICTORI + MO, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and VICTORI + MO.

After *Meetinghouse*'s sunny, near-blinding entryway, the bright blue-and-turquoise main room of the installation serves as a calming, more pensive respite. A hidden door in the wall leads to a cupboard of sorts, empty except for a stack of round boxes. If the first two rooms represent sites for collective gatherings, Cunat tells *Artsy* that the secret alcove is devoted to the individual.

Cunat often invokes food metaphors when discussing her materials. "I like this kind of marshmallowy, crunchy feel that cardboard leaves once you wrap it in paper and paint it," she says. Indeed, the walls look lush, smooth, and delectable; her palette evokes Willy Wonka's candy factory. She describes how she embellished her boxes and "made them into these cute little Jujubes candies." The broom, the first and last piece of the installation she worked on, "became like an ice cream sandwich."

Donald Judd, *Chair*, 1984. Sotheby's: Important Design

Her sensuous descriptions both complement and contradict the ascetic Shaker lifestyle. Speaking of the group's celibacy, Cunat says, "I think there's something wonderful about the futility in that act. I like this idea of a community who were so committed to a set of ideals that they basically wiped themselves out." Yet she also views Shaker construction as their "outlet of intimacy." Affection, love, and desire for touch got sublimated into furniture making.

Artists before Cunat, certainly, have also gravitated toward the Shaker aesthetic. Mount Lebanon's Shaker Museum is currently exhibiting artist Ellsworth Kelly's prints alongside the Shaker furniture collection he amassed with his partner, photographer Jack Shear. Shear himself photographed Shakers and their architectural sites in his own work. The first piece of Shaker furniture Kelly bought, around 1970, was a simple wood table purchased at an upstate auction. In a film produced by the museum, Kelly calls the furniture "simple and

well-structured and in the same categories that I like to make paintings." He even compares the panels in one of his works to the structure of a Shaker bureau.

Installation view of "Line and Curve," at Jeff Bailey Gallery, 2018. Photo by Jeff Bailey Gallery. Courtesy of Shaker Museum | Mount Lebanon.

Jerry Grant, the institution's director of collections and research, says that Kelly and Shear's purchases derived from necessity and an appreciation of the clean Shaker aesthetic, rather than any active desire to become collectors. They were in good company: Jasper Johns, Kenneth Noland, and Charles Sheeler owned these kinds of antiques, as well. Though Kelly's art wasn't necessarily directly influenced by the Shakers, the latter's culture has more explicitly inspired well-known sculptors and photographers. In 1996, a group of international artists, including Mona Hatoum and Nari Ward, attended a residency at the world's last active Shaker community in Sabbathday Lake, Maine. Responding to the experience, they made work that was later exhibited at the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art and at New York's American Folk Art Museum. Hatoum created a sculpture involving a crib, Ward repurposed objects from a dumpsite, and Wolfgang Tillmans, who stopped by the site as well, captured the tranquil settings through photographs.

The show built upon a resurgence in Shaker popularity that was spurred, in part, by the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1986, the museum mounted its "Shaker Design" show, which featured 140 objects. "It showed an international audience that Shaker furniture had some importance," recalls Grant. "It really got in the public eye." As Carol Vogel wrote in the *New York Times*, "Whether it be an object as simple as a wooden box or as intricate as a tall-case clock, the work of the Shakers more than a century ago is still considered among the purist forms of American design." Vogel extolled the "graceful lines" and "perfect proportions" that made the work seem "downright sophisticated."

Amie Cunat, *Broom*, 2018. VICTORI+MO CONTEMPORARY

Amie Cunat, *Meetinghouse Candelabra*, 2018. VICTORI+MO CONTEMPORARY

A decade later, the Parrish Art Museum in the Hamptons connected Shaker furniture with Donald Judd's Minimalist sculpture, mounting simultaneous exhibitions of the two. The show coincided with a traveling presentation of 86 Shaker objects (originally from the Mount Lebanon community) entitled "Shaker: The Art of Craftsmanship."

Notably, the aforementioned 1986 exhibition wasn't the Whitney's first presentation of this kind. In 1935 (five years after it was founded) the museum hosted a show entitled "Shaker Handicrafts." Dealer John Keith Russell describes how the museum's first director, Juliana Force, was a collector herself. She exhibited Shaker drawings and prints of flowers, trees, and villages alongside their cupboards, rocking chairs, tables, and desks. As it was still refining its own nascent vision, the institution was making a bold statement: Furniture crafted by a singular, idealistic, even revolutionary religious sect had an integral place in the history of American art.

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