

# ESSEX STREET

## Concerning Superfluities Shaker Material Culture and Affinities

With James Bishop, Stanley Brown, Sara Deraedt, Robert Gober, Wade Guyton, Agnes Martin, Helen Mirra, Laurie Parsons, Sarah Rapson, Rosemarie Trockel, Jackie Winsor

Organized in collaboration with John Keith Russell Antiques  
November 3<sup>rd</sup> – December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019

Opening Reception Sunday November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4-7PM, Walk Thru with John Keith Russell 6PM

“industry, temperance and frugality are cardinal virtues...”  
Shaker Compendium, 1859

“Concerning Superfluities not Owned. Fancy articles of any kind, or articles which are superfluously finished, trimmed or ornamented are not suitable for Believers...”  
Millennial Laws, 1821

The Shakers, or the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, as they referred to themselves, began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Their first leader was a woman named Ann Lee. Lee was an imprisoned Quaker in Manchester, England when she had “a revelation, directing her to repair to America; also that the second Christian Church would be established in America; that the colonies would gain their independence; and that liberty of conscience would be secured to all people...”<sup>1</sup> Along with 8 followers she sailed to America and settled in what is now New York State, first establishing a community in New Lebanon. Though Lee was repeatedly imprisoned in America, which led to her untimely death in 1784, Shaker beliefs spread throughout New England and then to the west. At the height of the movement in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century there were approximately 6,800 Shakers living in the communal order across 18 villages.

The Shakers preached, and to a great extent practiced, a radical lifestyle. They believed in gender equality, racial equality, pacifism, communalism with no personal property, and complete celibacy. Their lives were guided by a strict social order that stressed an independence from mainstream society, which they referred to as “the world.” Their weekly worship services were given over to an ecstatic form of group dancing, from which they get their given name, the Shakers.

“Above all, Shaker life freed Believers from the whimsical prison called style.”<sup>2</sup> With just two Shakers still alive, their most lasting legacies are their architecture, furniture and innovations. Their devotion to purpose driven design, cleanliness, labor, and overall order manifested itself in some of the most meticulous, well-crafted and beautiful furniture the world has ever known. Towering cases of drawers arranged with the most balanced proportions, all pristinely dovetailed, still slide open gracefully and effortlessly despite 200 years of usage. Hand turned chairs, thrones of modesty, sturdy beyond the minimalism of their means, still rock back and forth despite 200 years of usage. Everything was done with a purpose and as a part of a system. Well known is their tendency to paint their furniture in bold colors, but this was done not so much for the purpose of decoration, but to preserve and protect the wood beneath, and sometimes to indicate the part in an overall order and configuration. Furthermore, the Shaker's steadfast devotion to systems and function led to a number of important inventions; from the seed packet, to the clothespin, to the metal pen, to the circular buzz saw, to a mechanized washing machine, to the flat broom, to the tilting chair. As the centuries unfolded, and the Shaker communities dwindled, they increasingly turned to selling their goods to the world for sustenance. The full and diverse range of furniture, objects, clothing, inventions and technical structures and how they embodied societal and religious ideals, are respectfully known as Shaker Material Culture. As one of the last remaining Eldress stated “I don't want to be remembered as a chair.”

Shaker Material Culture is humble, streamlined, unadorned, industrial and defined by its utility. Yet at the same time its perfection is geared toward the divine. Herein lies the seemingly central paradox of Shaker Material Culture, which is also the premise of the exhibition: the marriage of the technical with the transcendent. The exhibition does not attempt to draw out explicit connections between the Shakers and the included artists, though some have long studied and collected Shaker Material Culture. Instead it conveys resonances, tendencies and affinities.

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<sup>1</sup> Shaker Compendium, 1859

<sup>2</sup> June Sprigg, Shaker Design at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1986

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