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shining tree of life: what the shakers did

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Weary old faiths make art, while hot young sects make only trouble. Insincerity—or, at least, familiarity—seems to be a precondition of a great religious art: the wheezing and worldly Renaissance Papacy produced the Sistine ceiling, while the young Apostolic Church left only a few scratched graffiti in the catacombs. In America, certainly, very little art has attached itself directly to our own dazzling variety of sects and cults, perhaps because true belief is too busy with eternity to worry about the décor. The great exception is the Shakers, who managed, throughout the hundred or so years of their flourishing, to make objects so magically austere that they continue to astonish our eyes and our sense of form long after the last Shakers stopped shaking. Everything that they touched is breathtaking in its beauty and simplicity. It is not a negative simplicity, either—a simplicity of gewgaws eliminated and ornament excised, which, like that of a distressed object found in a barn, appeals by accident to modern eyes trained already in the joys of minimalism. No, their objects show a knowing, creative, shaping simplicity, and to look at a single Shaker box is to see an attenuated asymmetry, a slender, bending eccentricity, which truly anticipates and rivals the bending organic sleekness of Brancusi's "Bird in Flight" or the algorithmic logic of Bauhaus spoons and forks. Shaker objects don't look simple; they look specifically Shaker.

Yet, what the Shakers thought they were doing when they made their boxes and ladders and clocks, and why we think what they did was so lovely, remains something of a mystery, despite a booming market and the books to go with it. How did a sect so small make objects so sublime? Did they know what they were doing when they did what they did? Or were they doing something else, and doing this other, better thing on their way there?

The Shakers' early inheritance is English, and began with a strange visionary figure, Ann Lee, born on Leap Day in 1736. She was a woman who, in her lifetime, travelled, so to speak, from the world of E. P. Thompson to the world of William James—from a povertystricken and embattled sectarian North of England millennial religion to the new world of American self-made faith. At a time when Manchester was slowly becoming the industrial hell that, a hundred years later, Engels reported it to be, she was reared with seven siblings in a hovel, and her more luridly Freudian biographers suggest that hearing her father impregnate her mother again and again left her with the revulsion toward sex that distinguished her faith from competing millennial visions. Illiterate, visionary, charismatic, she took part in the swirl of "enthusiastick" sects that emerged at the time, dissenting from the Anglican Church and expecting the Apocalypse; in fact, the name Shakers was given originally to a subset of the people we know as Friends, the Quakers. The Friends and the Believers—those following Ann Lee—seem to have been mixed up by the authorities—if not by themselves—into a porridge of dissenters.

After a career as an amateur sermonizer, Mother Ann, as she was known, was thrown into prison, in 1772, for disrupting the Anglican Sabbath. There, she had a vision that she was the second coming of Christ; she also began to believe that sex was the root of all evil. The idea had a genuine edge not so much of feminist rage as of women's pain: she had lost her four children to illness, and came of age in a working-class world in which constant pregnancy was a prime source of suffering. Her anti-sexual ethic was not so much anti-pleasure as anti-pregnancy.

In 1774, she and her husband and several followers emigrated to America and, after a brief stay in New York, formed a community just north of Albany. It was only then that the Believers began to emerge as a distinct cult with a distinct cult practice—a religious sect gathered around a single charismatic figure. People used to think that the Shakers recruited mostly from the poor and unhoused, eager for even a chaste roof to shelter under. It's now clear, though, that a cross-section of the American population, rich and poor and in-between, joined them, for the usual mixture of reasons. And a regular intake of orphans and abandoned children gave the Shaker colonies the slightly misleading appearance of family. (There was a regular intake, as well, of people who wandered in for food and shelter in inclement times—"winter Shakers", they were called.)

Mother Ann's early followers shared her belief that she was a reborn Christ. She represented the fulfilled and completed Christ—her presence made the Messiah now sexually complete, both man and woman. Her latter-day followers tried to tone down her messianic pretensions, but they were clear, and outlasted her life. In an 1827 letter (published in 1985 by Stephen J. Stein, a Shaker historian), a young Kentucky Shaker, William S. Byrd, of the famous Virginia Byrds, admits that many "scoff at the idea of Christ's making his second appearance in Ann Lee", but then adds, defiantly, "The same Christ that dwelt in Jesus of Nazareth, appeared the second time in this female, the spiritual Mother of all the new creation of God." Much as St. Augustine lent some of his sense of guilt and morbidity to early Christianity, Ann gave her neurasthenic desire for order and hyper-organization to all the later Shakers. Crowded poor people learn to hate disorder with a passion that for the wealthy is only a pastime; Groucho Marx, to take another important American spiritual leader, was so appalled by the chaos of his tenement childhood that, it was said, for the rest of his life he hated to have one kind of food on his plate touch another. (Whenever we see a fanatic appetite for order, there were probably once six kids in one room.)

Ann Lee became wildly controversial, and was attacked several times—and once, it seems, sexually assaulted—by gangs of local men. One of these beatings may have been the cause of her sudden death, in 1784. It was left to her disciples—particularly Joseph Meacham and Lucy Wright—to organize the Believers into fully self-sustaining celibate but coed communities. They spread quickly and, through the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, the Shakers became American icons, establishing colonies in the Massachusetts towns of Pittsfield and Harvard, and then throughout New England and as far south as Kentucky. Still, even at their height, around 1840, the Shakers were never very many: perhaps five thousand true Believers, altogether. During Ann's lifetime, the shaking of the Shakers was already legendary, not to say notorious: they would expunge the old Adam by evenings of violent dancing and rhapsodic writhing. After the establishment of the communities, the thing became more formalized: a regimented after-dinner trembling, like line dancing at a sock hop. But what the dancing represented—a sublimation of, rather than an invitation to, sex—was apparent, and undisguised, and attracted the attention of visitors from Thoreau to Charles Dickens.

So far, so weird. How did they begin to make beautiful things, and why did those things take the form they did? There is no straight line between belief and building. Both Quaker and Shaker styles came of age in the early nineteenth century, at the time of a general neoclassical revival throughout Europe and America, when linear, stripped-down, right-angle schematics were everywhere. If the Shakers were going to make objects at all, those were the kind of objects they would make; it's not as though they were imitating the Nymphenburg rococo in that other utopian colony down the road.

Yet, the Shakers made specifically stylish things, where others didn't. As a fine recent anthology, Quaker Aesthetics, has shown, the Friends, apart from a general tendency toward the plain and suspicion of the fancy, had no real style separate from that of their fellow Americans. They wore, more or less, the same clothes and used the same furniture as everyone else. (They just disapproved of their own use of them more than other people did.) So, why did the *Shakers* have a style of their own?

Most of the elements of Shakerism are common to orders and sects: the Dervishes whirled, Dominican monks renounced the flesh. What seems distinctive is, first, their feminism and its insistence on coed monasticism, which made much of the sexual while also denying it. Theirs was a genuinely radical feminism. Shaker communities, though not specifically matriarchal in rule—there were plenty of male elders, too—were among the few American communities of nearly perfect sexual equality. There is even a sense, perceptible in the letters and other writings, that this made a Shaker colony a welcome place for "effeminate" men—a surviving letter reveals a code of homoerotic innuendo that is as easy to decrypt as pig Latin.

What also distinguished the Shakers was their odd join between violent anti-worldliness and thoroughgoing commercial materialism. Monks and monkish communities have, of course, sold goods to the world for a long time—from medieval cheese to Moonie cappuccinos. But the Shakers, faced with the need to support large communities, worked particularly hard to manufacture things for money. Many of the objects that we think of as archetypally Shaker—the long oval boxes with their lovely triple folds, the clean brooms and chairs—were designed and made largely for outside sale. With most tribes and sects that we look to as artistic innovators, the line between cult object and commodity product—between the true African fetish and airport art—is, if often far from sharp, at least tenable. It wasn't with the Shakers. Shaker style was a commodity almost as soon as Shakerism was a cult. Contrary to Thomas Merton's romantic assertion that each Shaker chair was made as though no other chair had been made before, Shaker chairs and other wooden objects were made in semi-industrial conditions for a growing middle-class market.

It is here, ironically, in the need to make things to sell to other people, that the first stirrings of a distinct style begin. This is not to say that the objects were made insincerely, or that Shakerism in design was a scam. The built-in cupboards and chairs and ladders constructed only for other Shakers, in Shaker communities, are made in the same spirit as the things for sale. The point is that no line was drawn the other way around, either; what was made for sale looked like what was made for sacred. The urge to make consumer goods is, after all, one of the keenest spiritual disciplines that an ascetic can face: it forces spirit to take form. An ascetic drinking tea from a cup decides not to care what kind of cup he's drinking from; an ascetic forced to *make* a cup has to ask what kind of cup he ought to drink from. By the mid-nineteenth century, "Shaker" had become a brand name.

Skeptics said that the work was a form of self-coerced indenture: the Shakers could make more objects more cheaply because, as one defense of the Shakers puts it, artisans "were free of distractions" and "freed from financial worries", and, as a critic would say, were not free (or *chose* not to be free) to sell their skills at their true value on an open market. As Michael Downing documents in a richly human book about American spirituality, Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion, and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center, the Zen community in San Francisco, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, similarly produced excellence and exhaustion in equal measure. The Zen community could draw on underpaid cooks to run the Greens restaurant as the Shakers could draw on unpaid artisans to make their clocks; the proportion between beatitude found and skill exploited was left to the maker to figure. The enterprise gave the Shakers a curious double existence as a scary sect and a solid brand. And the Shaker brand was gold. "When a man buys a kag of apple sass of you," the humorist Artemus Ward wrote approvingly, around the time of the Civil War, "he don't find a grate many shavins under a few layers of sass."

But if that helps explain why they made so many boxes, it doesn't explain what made the boxes so fine. Some insight into what the Shakers were doing and thinking comes from the rare occasions when they were making art objects, properly so called, visionary drawings. These were produced when, from the eighteen-twenties to the eighteen-fifties—around the time of the Second Great Awakening—the Shakers, within their already spiritualized environment, went through a kind of spiritual reawakening of their own.

A spiritual reawakening within a community already drawn taut by spiritual aspiration must have created a strenuous atmosphere. Visions and ghosts came down, and the Shakers, chiefly women and young girls, made "gift drawings": the drawings were gifts from above, not gifts to another. For the most part, they are conventional folk art—except for several by a Shaker woman named Hannah Cohoon, who lived in the Hancock community, and who was a kind of Emily Dickinson of drawing. Her four surviving signed drawings show a concentration on a single form rather than a chatty, anecdotal all-overness, quite outside the normal round of folk art. One of them, "A Little Basket Full of Beautiful Apples" (1856), is among the key drawings in American art, with a tonic sense of abundance—all the apples just alike, each with its rub-on of rouge, like blush applied by an adolescent girl—allied to obsessive order. Another, the famous "Tree of Light" (or "Blazing Tree") (1845), shows us a vision seen in a dream: a tree with each leaf embroidered with fire, part of the normal Shaker iconography of the tree of life but also alarming in its overcharged richness. Cohoon's intensity was concentrated not on transcendental images of saints or God but on homely American objects, picnic tables, and baskets of apples.

This way of imbuing the ordinary with a sense of the numinous is at the heart of the Shaker aesthetic, by far the best extended account of which can be found in The Shaker World: Art, Life, Belief, by the art historian John T. Kirk. Kirk argues that there are Shaker specificities, and that they reside in a series of simple design moves that are independent of the neoclassical run of the time, making a unique combination of slenderness, tenderness, and boxiness. Shaker ladders and chairs and tables tend, first of all, to be improbably long, attenuated. There was a practical reason for this: communal living demands long tables in large buildings. Things grow long naturally in dormitories. But practical necessity is *always* the lever of creation; the line between practical necessity and aesthetic impulse is not merely fine but nonexistent. (The last thing in the world Michelangelo wanted to paint was a ceiling. Once up there, he saw the celestial possibilities.) This constant attenuation—a pulling out of chair legs and table lengths—is one of the things that make Shaker design so seductive, in the most direct way. For attenuation in art inherently has two meanings: long, slender things are chic, as with every fashion model, and they are spiritual, as with the figures in Chartres or Blake's flamelike personages.

Shaker objects are also unusually repetitive: Kirk calls these Shaker formats "tight grids", and they infect everything the Shakers made—a last, long, lingering echo of Mother Ann's hatred of the collapsed and squalid mess of the one-room home. Everything in the Shaker world, from brooms to villages, is laid out in rows, grids, tightly packaged and formatted. (The insistence on the villages' grid planning was even formalized in the Shakers' "Millennial Laws" of 1821.) The grid plan of a Shaker village is unlike the seemingly similar neoclassical grid plan of, say, Quaker Philadelphia, where the regular spacing allows a rational calm to fall over the streets and squares. The plans for Shaker villages are, instead, tight and surprisingly asymmetrical, with long straight main streets and side streets that jog off abruptly at odd intersections; like Shaker furniture, Shaker plans can accept asymmetry if it is dictated by practicality. Shaker plans look less like something drawn up in an Enlightenment encyclopedia than like something sketched by a seer with an Etch-a-Sketch, lines sprouting and kicking out at odd but angular angles.

One sees the same principle—apparent rationality inflected with an underlying obsessiveness—in the prime Shaker objects. In an amazing midcentury case with cupboard and drawers made by the carpenters in the community in Enfield, Connecticut, two doors, above and below, mismatch, while two central drawers are broken up arrhythmically into smaller parts. It is like a cupboard in Morse code, stuttering out one half and two shorts. That Shaker box, similarly, bends around, and each element has a logic to it—the copper tacks to prevent rust, the beautiful embracing swallowtail fingers to keep the box from cracking—but it has none of the "that's that" shortcut simplicity of folk objects; instead, a kind of underlying delirium infects it, an obsessive overcharge of finish, the sense of a will to perfection investing an otherwise humdrum object. "Trifles make perfection, but perfection is no trifle" was a Shaker motto. "God is in the details"—but the details have to provide evidence of God.

The Shakers were ascetics without being Puritans. They didn't object to color and comfort, even as they rejected ornament and luxury. (Many of the objects that look ascetic to us have simply lost their original paint.) A wonderful chair in the Hancock village is made to lean back: a rocking chair without rockers, at perpetual tilt. Yet, all these elements—the flat grid patterning, the acceptance of asymmetry, the tolerance for the drumbeat repetition of similar elements without an evident hierarchy of form—add up to a simple idea: Shaker design, while reaching toward an ideal of beauty, unconsciously rejects the human body as a primary source of form. To a degree that we hardly credit, everything in our built environment traditionally echoes our own shape: we have pediments for heads and claw and ball feet, and our objects proceed from trunklike bases to fragile tops. Repetition and the grid are two alternatives to design that refer to classical perspective space and the roundly realized human body. They reappear in twentieth-century art through the Cubist desire to make playthings that snubbed their noses at perspective, and the Teutonic urge to make a new language of pure form. Once you have got rid of the body as a natural referent for design, and no longer think "pictorially" about objects, grids and repeats begin to appear as alternative systems, whether you are in Japan, Montmartre, or Hancock. The love of asymmetry, which seems to us so sophisticated, involves a violation of the same taboo, since symmetry is the essence of human beauty. All Shaker design implies a liberation from "humanism" of this kind. When we make objects that look like us, we unconsciously are flattering ourselves. The Shakers made objects that look like objects, and that follow a non-human law of design.

One sees the pattern clearly in the evolution of the casement clocks—what we call grandfather clocks—made by the Youngs family of New York over three generations, in and out of the community of Believers. The clocks of the elder Youngses, Seth and his son Benjamin, as described in Glendyne R. Wergland's One Shaker Life, are in the manner of Greek columns, with strongly articulated bases, long shafts, and "heads" with clock faces. Over time, the clocks that Benjamin made became more narrowly "neoclassical": the bases simplified and their moldings reduced, the clock-head narrowed in size, the clock's lines made neater and more geometrical. But Isaac Newton Youngs, the grandson, was reared as a Shaker, and the clocks he made became as reductive as a refrigerator case, with the sides of the clock neither tapering nor swelling, and, telltale sign, with a knob on the clock face as well as on the clock body to allow the worker to adjust or repair the inside: the allergy to putting a functional element on an object's "face" was overruled, because the artisan was not thinking of it as a face. In each case, the clocks got not merely simpler—though they did that, too—but progressively less figural.

This doesn't mean that the Shaker objects are "inhuman" in the sense of being cold. They aren't cold. The brooms and clocks and boxes create an atmosphere of serenity, loveliness, calm certainty. But these are monastic virtues rather than liberal ones. We miss the radical edge of Shaker art if we don't see that it is not meant to be "humanistic". (As much as the Moonies ever have, Shaker communities worked hard to exterminate individuality: people dined together, slept together, and even, in Hancock, were buried together, in a single common grave marked "Shakers" .) Most religious objects, from Baroque Catholic baldachins to Hindu temple ornaments, are worldly but immaterial, made with immense sophistication in order to make the ordinary physical world seem to vanish in a smoke cloud of spirals and twists and flames. Shaker objects are, like Zen Japanese ones—unworldly but material, far from sensuality but solid as a rock. They annihilate the body, and leave us timeless form to tell the time with.

The Shakers waned as swiftly as they rose, and by the early twentieth century they were as much a relic cult as a living force. They existed in order to be in decline: the Fall and the Paradise are about the same thing. (There is evidence that the Shakers themselves, even by the end of the nineteenth century, lived in conventional rooms with ordinary objects.) In this way, though, Shakerism—the enthusiasm of the Shaker design, and the accompanying cult of box and broom—is not merely a nostalgic invention. Rather, it has always been a nostalgic invention: the nostalgia was there almost before the experience happened. After their first blooming period, the Shakers existed to be remembered. But, at the same time, consumer-goods Shakerism, which led to catalogues of Shaker chairs, cloaks, and baskets, continued to accelerate, until Shaker shopping was a major occupation, and this is a phenomenon of the late nineteenth century, not the twentieth.

The Shakers, then, did not simply survive as a path to purity never pursued. Instead, they permanently defined a curiously American composition, played in the blue key of E: enlightenment, entrepreneurialism, and exploitation all in counterpoint, with a half-heard chord of illicit eroticism. The attempt to make monastic communities that will be simultaneously asexual, industrial, and fully integrated into the entrepreneurial society around them—that will do good and do well—is so deeply embedded in our history that it recurs again and again. As Downing documents, its latest incarnation has been the Zen experience—which is uncannily like the Shaker experience, and which also involved the implantation of a slightly misunderstood alien dogma, and an immense outpouring of American spiritual yearning, a taste for commercial prosperity on the part of its leaders, and an inability to figure out what the hell to do about sex. As the Shakers made a revolution in American objects, American Zen made a revolution in American cooking, giving vegetarian food dignity. And, when the communities went into crisis, first the plates, and then the food, were what was left.

We should, perhaps, feel disappointed by this descent from the spirit, but some of us may wonder if the spirit has greater gifts to give. Food and boxes are not ethically neutral; they radiate their own aura into the harried lives of people who own them, even if only as aspiration. They were elevated, not debased, to become bourgeois amenities; they passed from the realm of false belief to the realm of spiritualized form. A forthcoming book, Selling Shaker: The Promotion of Shaker Design in the Twentieth Century, by Stephen Bowe and Peter Richmond, discusses, with a good deal of detailed analysis and some fine mordant humor, the slow process by which Shakerism continues to creep into the American marketplace, as Mother Ann's purities become the playthings of Oprah Winfrey. But a sneaking— not quite justifiable—prejudice infects the study, in the authors' implicit belief that believing that Mother Ann was God and sex evil was intrinsically a higher-order activity than just liking to own Shaker boxes. This belief feels more Puritanical than Shakerian. Surely, the aesthetic contemplation for other purposes of objects first made for cult use is more or less where the idea of art begins—the Shaker work counter in the hands of Oprah is, in this sense, not very different from the Renaissance altarpiece in the hands of Bernard Berenson—and, after all, Shakerism crept into the American marketplace by way of the American marketplace, where the Shakers placed it. In American art, the line between the goods and the good is a fine one, and doesn't benefit from being stared at too hard or cut too finely. In a commercial society, the membrane that separates spirit and store is always permeable.

Yet, the blazing tree remains alight. Kirk ends his fine book with a slightly naïve inquiry into the relation between Shakerism and the objects of American minimalism, and shows that the formal elements of the two—the grid, the repeated element, the entire anti-humanism of the approach—rhyme if they do not repeat. Look-alikes aside, what most connects the minimal art of Judd and Serra and Stella with their very improbable predecessors is their fanaticism. The moderns are uncompromising, too: only this box now and now this box again. That same uncompromising fanaticism gives life to what might otherwise be mere Teutonic austerity and pedantic insistence. The violence done to natural form, and to the humanism it implies, creates a serene result with a perceptible violence just beneath.

American art benefits from the fanatic, as American writing does not: the visual arts threaten to disappear back into the big jumble of things we see and own unless they are marked by some kind of extremism. Writers may be Friends, but artists are Believers, or they are not much. The twin legacy of Shakerism is true to the twin roots of the Shakers' vision: they remain both as a model of wild-eyed and unreal renunciation and as makers of simple good things. The shining tree of life is a tree of light that illuminates the way for believers. It is also on fire, and can only be consumed.

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