

Living with antiques
SHAKER



By Tom Christopher

The family has eaten supper at the beautifully simple trestle table shown in Figure 4 for twenty-odd years, almost every night they have spent at their upstate New York farm. Except, of course, when the table is on the road, gracing some museum exhibition. Which is often enough, for this is a superlative example of Shaker design and craftsmanship, made for the elders of the Watervliet, New York, community, the very first Shaker settlement in America, sometime around 1830, in the heyday of the utopian sect's youth. The table spent the summer and fall of 2007, for example, at the Shelburne Museum in Vermont, and the spring of last year in New York City at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts.

Now, though, the table is back, and it seems very much at home in the decidedly contemporary kitchen. It is among friends, after all. The spacious farmhouse is furnished almost entirely with Shaker masterpieces. Together they constitute a remarkable collection, a monument not only to Shaker ingenuity and skill, but also to a twenty-five-year partnership between the dealer John Keith Russell and a very dedicated pair of collectors (who, in the true Shaker spirit,

A family follows the Shaker spirit in assembling a collection of furniture



Facing page: Fig. 1. This sewing desk attributed to Elder Henry Green (1844–1931) of the Shaker community at Alfred, Maine, 1870, has a red-stained birch and pine case with natural drawer fronts. Stacked on it is an assortment of nineteenth-century stained maple and pine storage boxes from various Shaker communities. *Photographs are by Paul Rocheleau.*

This page: Fig. 2. An ash basket from the Canterbury, New Hampshire, Shaker community, c. 1840, is placed on a painted pine blanket chest from the Sabbathday Lake, Maine, community, c. 1830.

Fig. 3. Ladder-back side chairs made by William Perkins (1861–1934) and Lillian Barlow (1876–1942) of the Mount Lebanon, New York, community, c. 1920, surround a cherry trestle table from the Harvard, Massachusetts, community, c. 1830–1840.





Almost everything in the collection was made by Shakers for use within their own communities... before the Civil War

Fig. 4. The figured maple and cherry ministry dining table and two-slat chairs in the kitchen are from the Watervliet, New York, community, c. 1830–1840. The painted box for holding wood at the left is from Canterbury, c. 1860.

Fig. 5. This painted and grained maple chair is initialed “FW” by its maker Freegift Wells (1785–1871), Watervliet, c. 1850.

private hands. One compromise was unavoidable: to obtain eight matched chairs for their dining room table—a large, cherry-based table made about 1830 to 1840 at the Harvard, Massachusetts, Shaker village (Fig. 3)—the collectors settled for a set made during the 1920s for sale to outsiders (to “the world,” as the Shakers put it) by Brother William Perkins and Sister Lillian Barlow, the last two cabinetmakers at the Mount Lebanon, New York, Shaker village. Otherwise though, aside from one chair with a rare two-slat back, everything in this collection was made by Shakers for use within their own communities, and for the most part during their classic period, the era before the Civil War when the sect was flourishing and its members were living largely independent of outside influence.

But it is more than just the quality that sets this collection apart. What distinguishes it in Russell’s view is the owners’ insistence that each piece fills a need in their day-to-day lives. Many collectors want one of every type

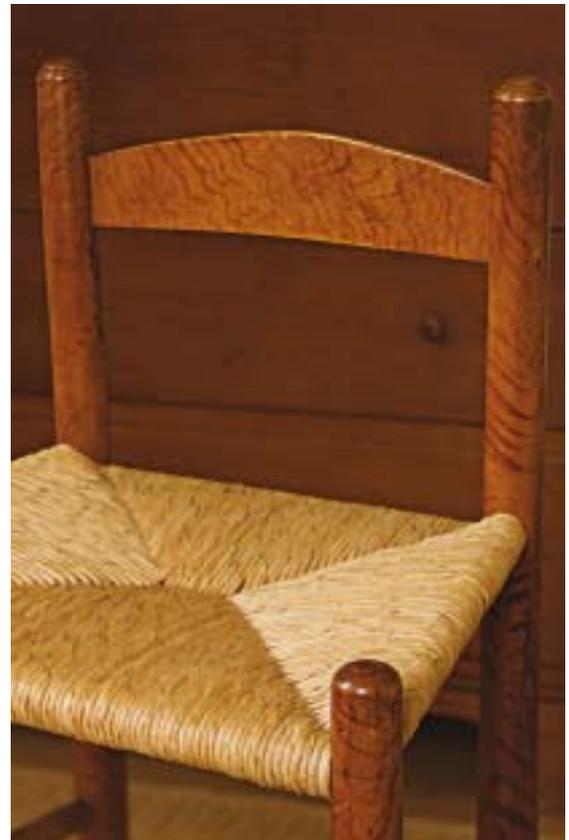
prefer to remain anonymous).

The collection is not huge—fifty to sixty pieces, no more than a hundred even if you count all the objects in sets, such as the eight dining chairs, separately. The quality, though, is superb. The kitchen table, for example, is one of only three so-called ministry tables in

within a genre, such as Shaker baskets for example; others focus on particular craftsmen or the development of a type—they want, for instance, to own every permutation of the drop-leaf tables made in a particular Shaker community about 1840. Creating such assemblages is exciting and satisfying, but what these particular collectors have done has required investing their lives as well as their funds.

They have also followed the Shaker ethic of keeping only what you can use. When Russell found an irresistible cherry and poplar sewing counter with butternut drawer fronts, used by Eldress Fanny Estabrook, according to Sister Mary Frances Dahm, who sold the piece at the time the Shaker village in Hancock, Massachusetts, was failing, the couple decided it would fit perfectly into a spot in the master bedroom (see Fig. 9). That meant the superb 1840s drop-leaf table that had occupied the place had to be sent back to Russell’s showroom. For the most part though, the collection has been unusually stable: once a piece has been adopted, it is cherished.

Shaker law and practice forbid private ownership except



in rare cases, and craftsmen were discouraged from signing pieces. As a result, assigning provenance to most pieces involves a kind of practical archaeology; after some thirty-five years of looking, asking, and reading, Russell can usually determine from details of the joinery in which workshop and within a few years when a piece was made. Here and there, though, bits of history have survived in this collection. The near vertical drop of the cabriole legs of a candlestand in the farmhouse living room, for instance, indicates that it was made in the Alfred community in Maine, Russell says. Eldress Fannie C. Casey of that community presented it to a Catholic priest whose order, the Brothers of Christian Instruction, purchased the land and buildings from the last Shaker inhabitants in 1931.

A little cherrywood box (Figs. 6, 6a) made at the Harvard village provides a glimpse of Shaker personal life. Inside, along with a pair of sewing scissors, is a prayer book with an inscription noting that it was a gift from Catherine Walker to her daughter Annie on her twelfth birthday; Shaker converts may have taken up a life of celibacy, but emotional ties endured.



Sometimes the pieces themselves tell the stories. There is a table with legs that unscrew so that the whole can be folded up. “The original tailgate table” as Russell describes it. The table was made to fit into the back of a wagon or buggy by the Canterbury Village Shakers of New Hampshire so that they could take it with them when they went out on the road to sell wares, herbs, or seeds.

And there are mysteries—the blanket chest over drawers in the downstairs hall, for instance (Fig. 10). Why was an extra small locking drawer pieced into the front panel? Analysis of the construction reveals that the drawer is original to the piece, but judging from the awkward way it is enclosed, by a wooden tunnel running through the well of the chest, the drawer was an afterthought. What caused the craftsman to rethink his work? Did the user for whom the piece was intended belatedly reveal some special need? Because Shakers typically had little or no private property, locked storage was uncommon in their furniture. What then was secured in here? The only thing that is certain is that this feature is not reproduced in any other known surviving Shaker chest over drawers; the piece is unique.

Observers of the contemporary antiques scene have remarked on the irony of the fact that interest in the

Figs. 6, 6a. This small cherry storage box was made at Harvard, c. 1850. Beside it in Fig. 6a is a small prayer book presented to Ann L. “Annie” Walker (c. 1847–1911) of Harvard on her twelfth birthday in 1859 by her mother, also a Shaker.

Fig. 7. The birch armed rocker, two-slat maple dining chair (mounted on wall), two-drawer pine blanket chest, and ladder-back maple side chair are all from Watervliet, c. 1830–1840.

Fig. 8. Above a red-painted pine blanket chest from Canterbury, c. 1820, hangs a second-phase Navajo child's blanket, c. 1850. In the background is a birch candlestand from the Alfred community, c. 1840, on which is an ash basket from the Shakers at Enfield, Connecticut, c. 1850.



Fig. 9. In front of the fireplace is a maple number 7 production two-slat armchair from Mount Lebanon, c. 1870. Beside it is a cherry and butternut sewing counter from Hancock, Massachusetts, c. 1840, that was used by Eldress Fanny Estabrook (1870–1960).



Fig. 10. This red-painted pine blanket chest over drawers, with its unusual ninth drawer, was made at Canterbury, c. 1830. On it are an ash basket from Enfield, c. 1850, and two painted maple and pine storage boxes.



craftsmanship of the unworldly Shakers should have boomed during our generation of public excess. Certainly, there is something strange about an auction where people bid hundreds of thousands of dollars for a table or desk that was never intended to have an owner. Russell tells the story of an encounter between Edward Deming Andrews (1894–1964), the pioneering Shaker scholar and antiques dealer, and one of the last of the brethren of the Mount Lebanon village. When Andrews asked to buy a candlestand by the Shaker's bed, the brother refused to sell. That candlestand, the brother pointed out, was where he put his watch at night. So disturbed was he by the thought that the candlestand might be removed, he screwed one of its feet to the floor. The point, Russell explains, was not ownership—the Shaker did not say it was his table, and there were many possible replacements in the nearly vacant community. For him, it was a matter of function: that was where he put his watch.

Perhaps what we seek in Shaker furniture is an antidote. Its famous simplicity and graceful functionalism was, after all, no accident. In their pursuit of a godly life, the Shakers tried to follow what they saw as divine principles in their dwellings and community. Their furniture's style was a reflection and an enhancement of a philosophy of living that was deliberately spare, honest in its avoidance of superfluous decoration, and selfless. You built not to flatter a customer but to satisfy a collective need. Because work was a form of worship, the joinery was not hidden. Rather, you crafted it so perfectly that the joinery became a chief beauty of the product.

You cannot live with such things, Russell's farmhouse collectors say, and not be affected by them. The chairs around the kitchen table have low backs; Shakers wanted to be able to push their chairs under the table after a meal to keep the space orderly and simplify the after-meal cleanup. Such a chair may not provide as much support for your back, but from a certain perspective, that is an advantage. One of the collectors says that when he comes to this table, he thinks of the elders who used to gather around it to direct their community. At such a table, you sit differently.

TOM CHRISTOPHER is a writer living in Middletown, Connecticut.

Perhaps what we seek in Shaker furniture is an antidote. Its famous simplicity and graceful functionalism was, after all, no accident

JOHN KEITH RUSSELL was living in the fast lane—literally—when he first encountered Shaker furniture. It was the early 1970s and he was in his twenties working for Porsche Stuttgart in the racing department. He was traveling eleven months of the year providing technical data, parts, and support to the 350 racing teams worldwide that then used Porsche-built cars. On a one-day layover in New York, he attended a year-end holiday party that wound up in the home of a Shaker collector. What he saw that night, Russell says, amounted to an epiphany: furniture with craftsmanship and function-driven form equal to that of the Porsche cars he loved. Before he went on his way to Daytona, Florida, the next morning, he stopped off at his parents' house in Pound Ridge, New York, to store the chair he had purchased from the collector.

That purchase, Russell says, was the little stone that changes the course of the river. He was flying from Stuttgart to the United States at least a dozen times a year back then, and every time he did he would visit the few dealers who specialized in Shaker furniture. He shopped and read voraciously. "I collected my way into the business," he says. At twenty-six, Russell found that racing was taking an unacceptable toll on him. He knew what he wanted to do next. He signed on for two years as an assistant in a New York antiques shop. Then he went to his father for a small loan, bought some stock, restored an early nineteenth-century meetinghouse in South Salem, New York, and set up shop. He opened for business in March of 1979; he is at the same location thirty years later, older but, he insists, a lot more knowledgeable.

You earn the knowledge. Russell recalls another dealer approaching him at an antiques show in Hartford, Connecticut, offering him a Perkins and Barlow chair at a low price because the man had determined that its finials must be replacements, since they were not of a piece with the posts they crowned. Russell paid the asking price and then informed the fellow that the beds of the Shaker lathes were not long enough to make those posts and finials out of a single piece of wood, so the finials were always turned separately for such chairs. You could consider the difference between what the other dealer could have charged and what he did, the price of his tuition.

Shaker furniture and artifacts remain Russell's specialty, but it is not possible, he admits, to make a living dealing only in those. About 80 percent of his business is in other early American antiques, notably baskets and pottery, as well as clocks and furniture.

Currently serving his eighth ("and *final*") two-year term as president of the Antiques Dealers Association of America, Russell insists that serious collecting is not only for the wealthy. "It is still possible today to live with antiques," he says. "The economics in many instances are the same as they were twenty, twenty-five years ago. You can still buy good things. In my shop, I have a *perfect* one-drawer Sheraton blanket chest in the original red, not a scratch on it." It is priced, Russell says, in the low four figures. Amortize that over a two-hundred-year lifespan.

John Keith Russell shown seated in a Perkins and Barlow chair.

