



Shaker Business

John Keith Russell talks to John Fiske about Shaker furniture, the antiques business and the future

You've spent nearly 40 years passionately collecting and dealing in Shaker, John. What is it that has kept your enthusiasm and engagement for all that time?" I threw the question to John Keith Russell as a way of getting our conversation started. I hardly needed to ask another. John's enthusiasm kept his ideas coming so quickly that my note-taking could hardly keep up.

"Fundamentally," he said, "the Shaker

concept of design was so pure, unlike anything we'd seen before. They were creating art objects that functioned, and that were in line with their spiritual beliefs. Their furniture may look simple, but that's because they purified it: Their objects are actually complex, perfectly adapted to their function, with nothing, absolutely nothing, that is superfluous to their function or their design. A piece of Shaker furniture always looks contemporary, because

the purity of form doesn't tie it to any one particular period. It's just 'Shaker.'"

"It is interesting," John continued, "that Shaker has always appealed to art collectors, and historically, a remarkably high proportion of Shaker collectors have also collected contemporary art. I've seen a Shaker table underneath a Calder mobile, and they looked terrific together. It's that purity of form that allows Shaker to fit into so many different contexts."

Previous page: Three Enfield Shaker child's chairs, c. 1840. These three diminutive chairs were last seen during the 1986 Whitney Museum of Art's exhibit; *Shaker Design*. These special chairs are part of a small grouping known. All were finely turned and constructed of highly figured maple.

John is optimistic about the future of Shaker, despite the fact that the market has shrunk dramatically since its peak in the mid-1980s. "There is not enough material to sustain an onrush of new collectors, so we need only attract a few, not too many, because then demand would overwhelm supply and prices would go out of sight. Just enough to sustain a nice steady market would be nice."

When times were good

In the 1980s, you could go to any major Americana show, and expect the first 20 to 30 people in line to be looking for Shaker. There'd be at least five, and maybe as many as ten, dealers on the floor with Shaker material, and when the doors opened, the customers would run to their favorite dealer. In those days, there were at least a dozen active dealers in Shaker: Today, you would barely need the fingers on one hand to count them.

I asked John what it was that made him one of the few survivors. His answer came in a flash: "Lack of intelligence." I picked myself up off the floor. "I don't have a survival gene in my DNA,"

he explained, "so when others saw the money going to other specialties, they jumped ship and followed the money. I couldn't do that; Shaker has never lost its magic for me. I just had to stay with it."

The Shaker market is so small that no-one could survive on it alone. What has kept John a thriving dealer, through good times and bad, is his expertise in other segments of the Americana market: Folk art and furniture, for example.

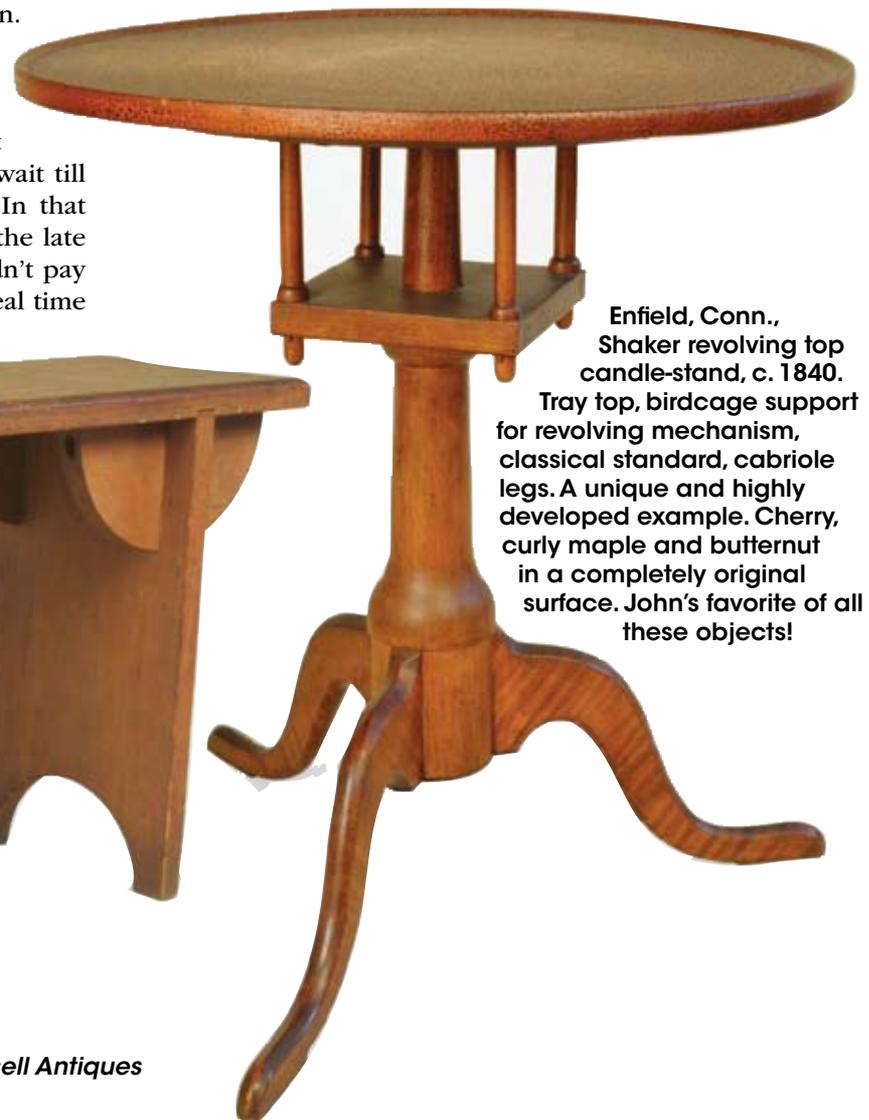
I was so lucky, he told me, to have come into the business in the late 1970s – you didn't have to know how to run a business then. We were all on an escalator going ever upward. If you made a mistake, and paid too much for something, you just had to put it to one side and wait till the prices caught up with it. In that mercurial time for Americana, in the late '70s and the early '80s, you didn't pay for your mistakes. It was an ideal time to enter the business.



Two painted Shaker oval storage boxes, c. 1840. New Hampshire, probably Canterbury. Both of these boxes were made in the same shop, possibly at the same time and by the same hand. Their original painted surfaces are still strong and vibrant, and condition is excellent.



New Lebanon, N.Y., butterfly bench, c. 1840. A wonderful example of Shaker balance of design, where the interlocking half round leg supports echo the cutouts on the legs.



Enfield, Conn., Shaker revolving top candle-stand, c. 1840. Tray top, birdcage support for revolving mechanism, classical standard, cabriole legs. A unique and highly developed example. Cherry, curly maple and butternut in a completely original surface. John's favorite of all these objects!

All photos courtesy John Keith Russell Antiques

So I learned my business at the easiest possible time. But it's been a hard ride in the Shaker world since 1990 or '91, when the entire art market took a big hit. Shaker has never fully recovered from that peak. Exceptional pieces still bring exceptional prices, but the middle market remains hard.

The Shaker market did not parallel the general Americana market, which by comparison chugged along quite well until about 2006. The Shaker market was hit earlier than Americana by the lack of new collectors. In the last decade, however, Shaker and Americana have become more similar. There has been little "next-generation" interest for most of the last decade.

Re-presenting antiques

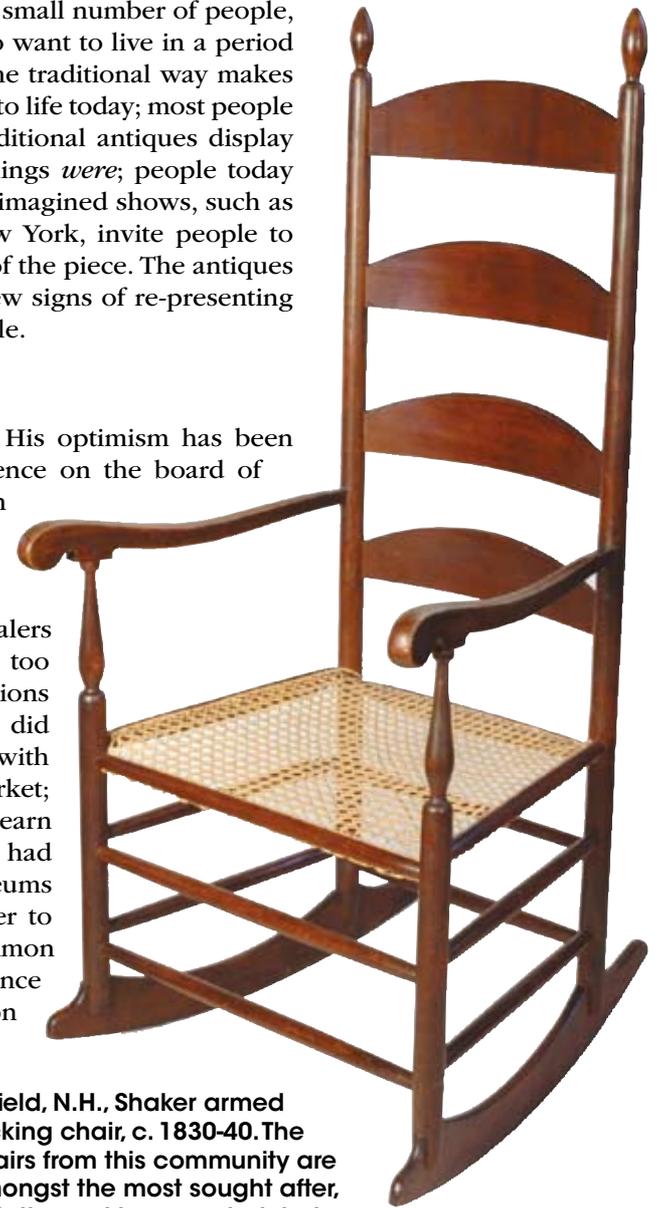
Shaker, John told me, might be able to point to a way out of the doldrums. As he had pointed out earlier, its purity of form enables it to fit well into many different contexts. It also encourages people to look at it as an art object, rather than an historic object. And that, John believes, is the way of the future. We limit the scope of antiques when we only look at them in an original setting: A Pilgrim chair does not have to be in a dim room with a walk-in fireplace. Take it out, set it by itself and look at it: It will survive the change, and may be all the better for it.

The room-setting booths in a traditional Americana antiques show send people the wrong message: They tell you what else has to be in the room. John traces this back in his experience to the original Hartford shows, whose contract stipulated that booths had to be walled in white paper and that antiques had to be exhibited in period

room settings. Today, it is only a small number of people, most of them aging rapidly, who want to live in a period setting. Exhibiting antiques in the traditional way makes them seem even more irrelevant to life today; most people just don't live like that. The traditional antiques display presents a panorama of how things *were*; people today want to see what things *are*. Re-imagined shows, such as the January Metro show in New York, invite people to see antiques in terms of the art of the piece. The antiques business is showing at least a few signs of re-presenting itself to a non-traditional clientele.

Collaborative efforts

So John remains optimistic. His optimism has been increased by his recent experience on the board of Hancock Shaker Village. Earlier in our conversation John had often mentioned his belief that there is not enough collaboration in the antiques business: Most dealers were too individualistic and too competitive. They went to auctions to buy competitively, but they did not see that they could work with auctioneers to expand the market; they went to museums to learn from their collections, but they had little thought about how museums and dealers could work together to increase interest in their common material. But he does see evidence that a non-traditional collaboration



Enfield, N.H., Shaker armed rocking chair, c. 1830-40. The chairs from this community are amongst the most sought after, with the rocking armchair being the most desirable. This example is notable for the cane seat. Only a handful of these chairs exist: Most have a tape or rush seat which alters the delicate lines of the chair. Birch in an original stain and varnish surface.



Enfield, N.H., Shaker painted table, c. 1840. Of grand proportions measuring 32" to the top work surface and retaining an original bright red painted surface. One of the finest known examples of painted Shaker furniture.

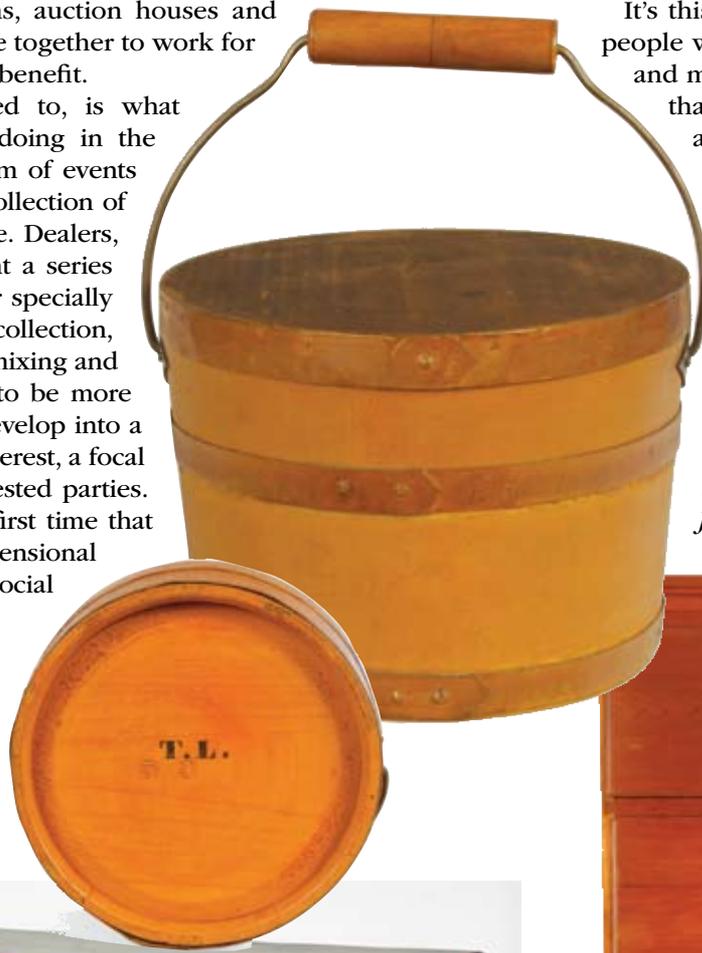
Shaker Collecting Begins

Dr. J. J. Gerald McCue, who died two years ago at the age of 97, was, in conjunction with his wife Dr. Miriam McCue, one of the pioneer collectors who bought from the Shakers themselves. The other pioneer was Edward Demming Andrews who did more than anybody to get the outside world to appreciate Shaker material. He was a widely published author. His earliest landmark achievement was the exhibition he curated at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York in 1935. This was the first time that Shaker had been presented to the outside world. Before then, the Shakers had lived apart, and people were generally unaware that they had created a society that was utopian of spirit and material. The Whitney Exhibition blew it all open and major figures in the art world attended. After it, many Americana collections included some Shaker, perhaps a single piece, or perhaps a grouping. Andrews' collection later formed the basis of the Shaker Hancock Village collection.

is growing, that dealers, museums, auction houses and publications are beginning to come together to work for the common good from which all benefit.

An example that John pointed to, is what Hancock Shaker Village will be doing in the fall. There will be a whole program of events organized around the sale of the collection of Drs. J. J. Gerald and Miriam McCue. Dealers, curators and collectors will present a series of seminars, the museum will offer specially designed, expanded tours of its collection, and there will be social events for mixing and sharing. The museum would like to be more than a museum; it would like to develop into a comprehensive center of Shaker interest, a focal point of collaboration for all interested parties. The program this fall will be the first time that the museum has offered a multidimensional event – educational, business and social – all under one roof.

Canterbury, N.H., Shaker pail, c. 1850. Retains a remarkable untouched yellow/ochre painted surface. "T.L." on base is probably Sister Tabitha Lapsley. A great surviving example of Shaker cooperage.



It's this sort of collaboration, John believes, that can turn people with a passing curiosity about Shaker into collectors and museum-goers; it can help develop them into people that want to learn and see more. That can only be a good thing for everyone in the world of Shaker. And, I would think, for the world of antiques in general.

John Keith Russell has been a dealer in Shaker and American for 33 years. He has presided over the Antiques Dealers' Association of America for 15 of the last 26 years and is currently their treasurer. He is also a member of the Board of Trustees of Hancock Shaker Village.

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Enfield, Conn., Shaker sewing desk, c. 1860-70. A later form still following the classical Shaker tradition. Note: The addition of commercial porcelain knobs (original) seems to "Victorianize" the piece. Walnut in an original stain and varnish surface.



Watervliet, N.Y., Shaker tall chest of drawers, c. 1820-30. Even though this piece lost its original red painted surface many years ago, that is overshadowed by the combination of early Shaker aesthetic blended with superb construction detail. A rare example with great provenance.