

## House&Home

# Whole lotta Shaker goin' on

**Interiors** | A new museum will honour the spare, elegant furniture enjoying a voguish resurgence made by the Shaker community, writes *Caroline Roux*

**T**hey invented the flat broom, the circular saw and a wheel-driven washing machine. A new museum will celebrate their contribution to seed banking and racial and gender parity too. Meet the Shakers

When Ellsworth Kelly, the painter and sculptor celebrated for his hard-edged minimalist works, moved to Columbia County in upstate New York in 1970, he arrived without any furniture. “Then I saw a wooden table in a farmhouse auction,” he said, in a film made shortly before his death in 2015. “It was simple and very well structured – in the same category as I like to make my paintings.”

He recounts how he fought off keen competition from another couple, and only once he’d sealed the deal was told by friends that the rigorously conceived table he’d acquired – sleekly planed planks on four perfectly proportioned, slightly splayed legs – was a key piece of Shaker furniture.

Kelly would countenance no other kind of design for the rest of his life in his Spencertown home. “I don’t take out in my own work, I just don’t put in, and that’s a very Shaker idea,” he said.

“Ellsworth wasn’t a collector,”

says Jack Shear, his husband, a photographer. “He lived with the furniture.”

And he wasn’t the only one to be instinctively drawn to the artefacts, made over a 150-year period by the adherents of a movement that wanted to create paradise on earth.

Charles Sheeler, considered to be a founder of American Modernism in the early 20th century, was a huge fan; and Juliana Force, the first director of the Whitney Museum of Art, had plenty of pieces in her Manhattan home in the 1920s and 1930s. Carlo Scarpa, the Italian architect known for his preference for materiality and craft over decoration, developed

back comfortably and safely – something the Shakers perfected in the early 19th century.

The Shakers were founded in the late 18th century by Ann Lee, an illiterate but charismatic woman from Manchester, who set sail for the US with a troupe of followers from Liverpool in 1774 to start a new life. The name came from their ecstatic form of worship, which induced a great deal of trembling – or shaking. With their beliefs that labour is spiritual, one must be celibate to truly serve God and minds are to be opened and free from sin, they expanded their numbers through the 19th century, reaching 6,000 at their peak.



SHAKERS NEAR LEBANON, STATE OF NEWYORK.

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a Shaker-inspired suite of dining furniture for Bernini in 1977, and called it the Kentucky range. He designed the chairs, in oak and walnut, to be slightly inclined at the front, allowing users to swing

Creating communities around New York state and Massachusetts, the Shakers developed their own architecture and design – big on function and devoid of outside influence. Eschewing



embellishment, its beauty came from the fine proportions and elegant use of honest materials. They added wheels to chairs, to transport the disabled; and created the first seed packets for commercial sale. From boxes and brooms to bonnets and wheelbarrows, everything they made was infused with a reliable simplicity, and a now fashionable durability.

"I'd say that Shaker has been one of my biggest influences," says Russell Pinch, the London designer of high-end wooden furniture with a smart store in Belgravia's Ebury Street. "My godfather gave me a Shaker box for my 21st birthday – he worked for Herman Miller – and I've never looked back." Pinch's Iona mirror design directly references the wraparound joint the Shakers developed to allow wood to expand and contract, and his Avery chair – first made in the early 2000s – is still in production. "The Shakers were all about finding elegance through proportion, and that's what I'm continually striving for," he says.

The Circulo Mexicano, a trendy

hotel in Mexico City that opened last year in a handsome 19th-century building, has rooms that pay deliberate homage to Shaker living with furniture that hangs on the walls (a Shaker space-saving favourite) and rows of Shaker pegs for visitors' possessions.

In December 2017, the specialist antiques dealer John Keith Russell made his first appearance at Design Miami, showing the Shakers' handsome but undecorative objects among the more flamboyant contemporary artefacts that the Miami audience is attuned to.

"It brought me a whole new customer base," says Russell, who went on to open a gallery in South Salem, New York. It turned out that the gallerists selling sought-after contemporary art over the road at Art Basel couldn't get enough of his towers of brightly coloured oval boxes or ladder-back chairs. Russell says museums and collectors overseas are catching up too. The National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne is building a collection, and he has just completed a sale with a private



Wheelchair made from a modified rocking chair, c1830  
Shaker Museum

collector in Hong Kong.

"I could talk forever about the Shakers," says Lacy Schutz, director of the Shaker Museum in Chatham, New York. "Not just the objects, but the ethos. They believed in gender equality; they accepted African-Americans into their ranks, and traded with native Americans. They freed women from the dangers of childbirth through celibacy. Shakers aren't born, but absorbed into the fold from outside. Other museums are having to respond to issues around gender and race, and for us it's already part of the narrative."

**'They believed in gender equality and accepted African-Americans into their ranks'**

The museum's collection (which can be accessed digitally) is based on the 18,000 Shaker artefacts brought together by John Stanton Williams, a wealthy Manhattanite turned gentleman farmer who died in 1982. There are a further 120 objects from the Ellsworth Kelly/Jack Shear collection (including the wooden table bought by Kelly and now boasting rings from his coffee cup).

But a new complex is being built in Chatham at a cost of \$18m. It will be completed in 2024. The designers, New York-based Selldorf Architects, are combining a hefty red-brick building from the turn of the 20th century – in its time housing everything from a hotel to a sanatorium to a furniture store – totalling 30,000 sq ft of space.

"The brick building will remain as 'untouched' as possible," says Annabelle Selldorf, "while the new spaces will be simple, clear and efficient, with cross-

laminated timber construction that's informed by the guiding principles of Shaker design." The landscape, by Nelson Byrd Woltz, will feature the medicinal and native plants that the original Shakers learnt about from the native Americans with whom they initially shared the land.

Meanwhile, Jack Shear has donated a space, a small storefront in Chatham, to keep the spirit of the project alive. This summer, an exhibition called *The Future is a Gift* shows a handful of key pieces from the collection, including a large blue-painted tailors' counter, a basket, a cloak and a revolving chair.

"They are all aesthetically beautifully and speak of the values of the community," says Schutz. The community, however, would be shocked by the monetary value of these pieces on the collecting market. "Desks and clocks are the most sought after," says John Keith Russell. "The incredible sideboards, which we call counters in the US, sell for up to \$500,000."

While several Shaker villages have been preserved for their historic interest, particularly at New Lebanon, near Chatham, and at Hancock, near Pittsfield in Massachusetts, the two remaining Shakers – Brother Arnold and Sister June – live at Sabbathday Lake in Maine. Arnold, in his sixties, and June, in her eighties, have recently been joined by new convert Brother Andrew, a youngster of 28.

That might not be enough for the ultimate survival of the group, but there's no doubt that collectors, museums and contemporary designers are going to ensure that the designs last for ever.

[shakermuseum.us](http://shakermuseum.us)

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[www.shakermuseum.us](http://www.shakermuseum.us)

518.794.9100