

Classic Shaker

Discover the difference between the masterful and the near-miss

BY CHRISTIAN BECKSVOORT



Many furniture makers are inspired to build Shaker pieces. I can see why. After all, Shaker design embodies all you'd want in a piece of furniture. The style is defined by clean lines and excellent craftsmanship, and more importantly, the pieces are highly functional. But it can be hard to distinguish a piece that's truly Shaker from one that's diluted by non-Shaker influences.

Like any other seminal furniture style or movement, Shaker style experienced different periods. Initially, the Shakers were influenced by the furniture they found in New England. Then, around 1820, Shaker design came into its own. For the next 40 years, the Shakers produced their finest furniture. The worldly influences found in earlier furniture were gone and their work took on that classic and unique look the Shakers are famous for. After 1860, Shaker communities began to decline and outside influences, particularly Victorian, crept back into Shaker work.

Shaker pieces are abundant, and you can copy any that strike your fancy. But to build in the truly classic style, you need to know its forms

and details. I've been around Shaker furniture since the 1970s, helping to restore and even build pieces for the Sabbathday Lake Shakers in Maine. That experience has given me insight into what makes a piece quintessentially Shaker. To help you understand the essential elements, I've put together this guide, drawn from two New England Shaker villages: Sabbathday Lake and Hancock. I'll show five types of furniture, pointing out details that arose from outside and those born in the movement that make the pieces classic.

Online Extra

See the water-powered machinery at Hancock Shaker Village at FineWoodworking.com/extras.

Christian Becksvoort is a contributing editor.

Candle stands

Candle stands are among the most diverse and creative designs of any Shaker furniture. But within all that diversity there is a uniquely Shaker spin on the form.



PRIMITIVE

Simple and unrefined. Early stands like this one, built in 1820 at Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in Maine, have the least ornate posts and legs. The post has a long swell-taper that ends in a small cove above a cylinder. The legs are really slightly tapered dowels fit into drilled mortises in the post. The rectangular and square-edge top is another indication of early design.



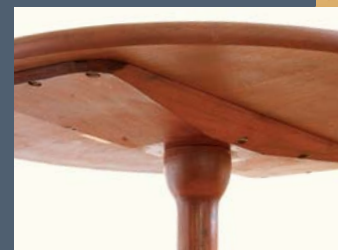
QUEEN ANNE

Snake in the garden. The most prominent features on this stand are the Queen Anne snakefoot legs, an obvious worldly influence. The post's shape has changed, becoming more ornate. The top has been dressed up as well, having an undercut ovolo edge profile.



QUINTESSENTIAL

Reminiscent of a wine bottle, the post starts at the top with a tulip-shaped swell that flows downward through a stretched out S-curve and ends in a cylinder with a slightly reduced diameter. The beautiful "spider" legs taper in thickness from top to bottom and dovetail into the post, where their curve creates a seamless transition from leg to post. The round top has a slightly radiused edge profile.



Every detail counts. Tapered in thickness and beveled on the edge, even the brace under the top (rarely, if ever, seen) is elegant. The post's tulip-shaped swell is another perfectly executed but mostly unseen detail.

Sewing desks

One of the hallmarks of classic Shaker design is purpose-built furniture, embodied beautifully in the highly utilitarian sewing desks used by the women, or Sisters, of the community.

Ad-hoc isn't classic. This early sewing desk, built around 1815 at Sabbathday Lake in Maine, seems to have started life as a small bureau, with the top gallery added later. The legs, with their whale-tale shape, and faux panel sides were likely borrowed from furniture the Shakers found around them at the time.



Mixed but not matched. This desk probably started life as a side stand, with the six-drawer gallery added to repurpose it for sewing. Both parts show the excellent craftsmanship and design typical of Shaker work, but they don't work together to form a single, coherent design.

IMPROVED



PURPOSE-BUILT BEAUTY

Although built in 1890 by Elder Henry Green of Alfred, Maine, this matched set of sewing desks retains the classic features of crisp, unadorned lines, frame-and-panel construction, large drawers on the bottom, and stepped back gallery. And they were clearly built as sewing desks, with pull-out work surfaces. Almost every community had similar desks.

Trestle tables

The Shakers didn't invent the trestle table, but they refined its design and adapted it for communal life.



THE BEST SHAKER LEGS ARE TURNED

Although the foot design of this trestle table is similar to the one on its larger cousin (below left), the arch is not as high and there is a chamfer on the top edges rather than a roundover. But what really sets it apart is the turned leg with moldings, making this a more pleasing table and an excellent example of the Shakers' finest work.



TOO FLAT

A step behind. At 20 feet in length, this communal dining table was definitely purpose-built. The high arched feet are attractive and the slight radius on the toes carries up the legs and onto the curved supports. But the legs are flat, making it a less-refined design.



TOO FANCY

Worldly details. The Victorian influence is clear in this trestle table built by Brother Delmer Wilson at Sabbathday Lake around 1920, notably in the molded edge of the top. It also lacks the breadboard ends of the classic table and has square feet and legs.

Dressers

The best Shaker chests are strictly functional. Carvings, veneer, and ornamentation are absent and moldings are used only sparingly.



NEAR-MISS

Something missing. This tall chest of drawers, built in 1806, is a near-perfect design, but it also is a great example of how one missing detail can throw off the entire design. It has a bracket base but no top molding, so it looks a just a bit bottom heavy and incomplete.

NOTHING LEFT TO CHANCE

Topped with a small half-molding that counters the simple details below, this cupboard over a chest of drawers is a fully resolved design. The top molding ties into the quarter-round molding on the frame-and-panel doors, and the center stile in the cupboard is twice the width of the outside stiles.

Restraint at the floor.

The sides have elegant, understated feet cut into them, a detail carried around to the front by the addition of two small pieces of wood cut to match the shape on the sides. This style suits the overall design better than the bracket foot found on the earlier dresser.



Don't forget the middle.

This half-round molding separates the top and bottom, and echoes the moldings on top and around the door panels.



Built-ins

The Shakers were ever mindful of order and efficiency: "A place for everything and everything in its place" became their motto. So, virtually every building in a Shaker village had built-ins. They're found in attics and knee-walls, next to chimneys, in corners, and under stairs.



NOTHING NEW

Early built-in hasn't broken free. This is one of the earliest examples of a Shaker built-in. Found next to a post in the Sabbathday Lake Meeting House (built in 1794), its construction is similar to techniques used in New England at that time. It has raised, beveled door panels and surface mounted H-hinges.



VICTORIAN

Outside creeps back in. When the Trustees Office at Hancock, Mass. was refurbished in 1895, its built-ins were also updated to a Victorian style. The door frames have stopped bevels on their inside edges and the doors are surrounded with a walnut bead, a detail picked up in the walnut cock beading on the drawers. The porcelain knobs are a Victorian touch, too.

Shakers weren't shy with color

Most of us think of cherry's warm glow when we think of Shaker furniture. However, the Shakers often painted their pieces. The exteriors of these built-ins at Hancock Shaker Village show just how bold the original paint colors were. An analysis of the faded original paint (still present inside the cabinets) allowed conservators to remake it accurately and return the cabinets to their lost vitality.



UNDERSTATED BEAUTY

Located in the dwelling house at Hancock Shaker Village in Massachusetts, this built-in has door panels that appear flat, even though they have soft bevels. The rails and stiles have a quarter-round molding on their inside edges that echoes the quarter-round thumbnail profile on the lipped drawer fronts.

