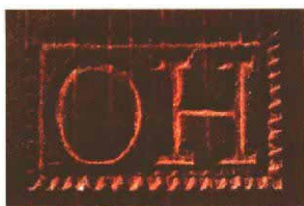


Elements of the Shaker Style

Chris Becksvoort
reveals authentic details
that will help you stay
true to the form

Woodworking masters Jere Osgood, Sam Maloof and George Nakashima each evolved a style and explored it to its ultimate conclusion, and to hell with what was in vogue. The Shakers did the same thing, continually refining their idiom until they approached perfection, without regard to the latest trend. They developed a style of furniture that blends well and fits comfortably in any type of house. The Shakers went out of their way to eschew fashion: The result is timelessness.

I grew up in a house full of Danish modern furniture, which was, it turns out, heavily influenced by Shaker designs. Like the Danish furniture makers, I fell under the sway of Shaker furniture the moment I discovered it—in my case, during a slide lecture in an architecture appreciation course I took in college. The simplicity and utility of the furniture I saw in the slides stunned me. In the late 1970s, I began restoring Shaker furniture, and much of my own work has been in the Shaker



"We want a good plain substantial Shaker article, yea, one that bears credit to our profession & tells who and what we are, true and honest before the world, without hypocrisy or any false covering."

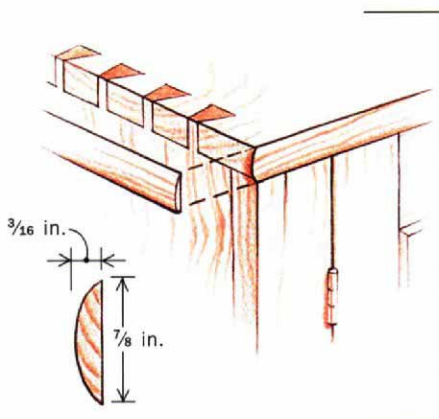
—Orren Haskins, Shaker craftsman

vein ever since. I very seldom reproduce slavishly, but you can look at my work and without batting an eye see its derivation is Shaker.

To make a Shaker-looking piece, adopt a Shaker attitude: Keep it simple in design and materials, make it functional and incorporate authentic details. The details shown on these pages were commonly used by the Shakers until about 1860, after which their furniture began to show the worldly influence of the Victorian style.

The Shakers believed "that which has in itself the highest use possesses the greatest beauty." It took the rest of the world nearly a century to come to the same conclusion, when, in the early 20th century, Louis Sullivan declared "form follows function." But these dictums alone do not lead inevitably to a particular style, much less to a specific set of elements and

CROWN MOLDINGS

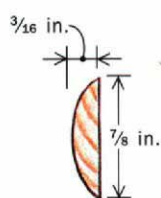


Moldings along the tops of Shaker case pieces are hard to justify as anything but decorative. Most styles of furniture (and architecture) incorporate moldings or some type of overhang at the top. To the eye, a crown molding or overhang denotes an ending; it is much like a period at the end of a sentence. The Shakers, presumably, were not immune to this near-universal need for closure.

BASE MOLDINGS



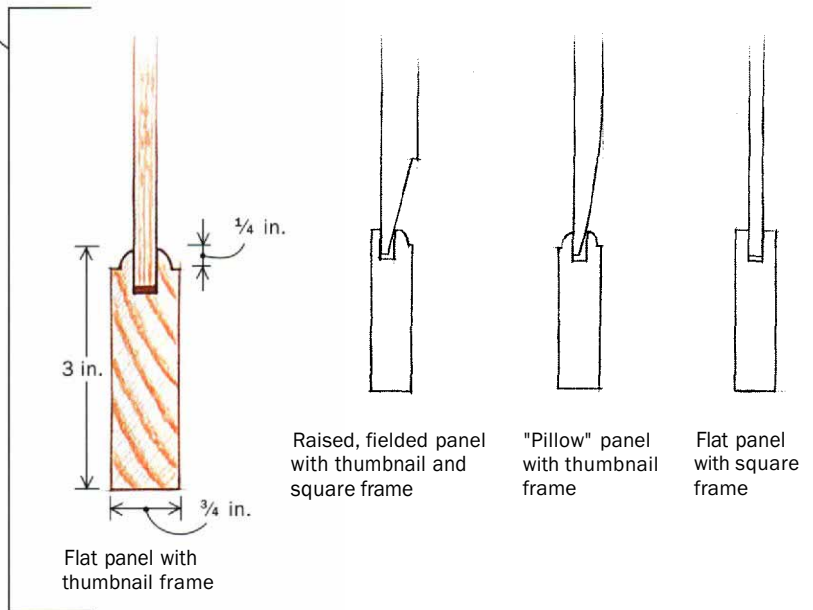
Shaker craftsmen used base moldings and profiled bracket bases for protection, not decoration. A rounded or shaped edge is far less prone to splintering or chipping than is a sharp, square corner. This is especially true near the floor, where base molds and brackets are likely to encounter brooms and mops or shoes and boots.



DOOR FRAMES AND PANELS

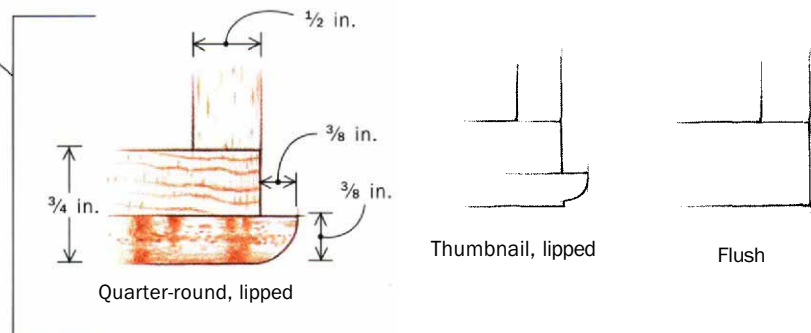
The doors on early Shaker pieces usually had raised, fielded panels. Over time, however, the raised panel fell out of favor, perhaps because it appeared too decorative or possibly because the shoulder was seen as just another dust collector. In any event, the flat panel ultimately replaced the more traditional raised panel as the first choice of Shaker cabinetmakers. In the transition, the pillow panel, as I call it, was sometimes used. Instead of having a well-defined, shouldered field, the panel was planed on all four edges to fit the groove in the frame. The result was a field that was barely noticeable.

Although square-shouldered door frames were used on occasion, more often than not, the frames featured a quarter-round thumbnail profile along their inside edges. To me, this represents a perfect example of a utilitarian, as opposed to a strictly decorative, molding. Rounded edges along the inside of the door frame are much easier to keep clean than straight, square shoulders.



DRAWERS

Shaker craftsmen built both flush and lipped drawers. Flush drawers had square edges and fit fully into their openings. Lipped drawers, although more difficult to make, covered the gap around the drawer front to keep out dust. The lips, however, were usually on the top and two sides only. A lip on the bottom was considered too fragile, should the drawer have to be set on the ground. The quarter-round and thumbnail profiles were commonly used on all four edges of lipped drawers. Neither the Shakers nor their worldly contemporaries used the bevel-edged, raised door panel as a drawer front. That design fiasco was perpetrated on consumers by the kitchen-cabinet industry.



Cherry cupboard
80 in. by 44 in. by 19 in.
Canterbury, New Hampshire
Circa 1850-1900

details, In addition to being inspired by their beliefs, the Shakers and the furniture they made were influenced by their historical context.

In short, the Shakers took the furniture they were familiar with, the local styles from New England to Kentucky, and stripped it of superfluous ornamentation. The Shaker craftsman Orren Haskins (1815-1892) perhaps said it best:

"Why patronize the outside world?... We want a good plain substantial Shaker article, yea, one that bears credit to our profession & tells who and what we are, true and honest before the world, without hypocrisy or any false covering. The world at large can scarcely keep pace with it self in its stiles and fassions which last but a short time, when something still more worthless or absurd takes its place. Let good enough alone, and take good common sense for our guide in all our pursuits, and we are safe within and without."

Shaker furniture, especially from the classic period of 1820 to 1850, contains little in the way of excessive moldings and virtually no carving or veneer. The Shakers favored native materials and were dead set against materials they felt were decadent, such as brass. The Western communities tended to follow the local vernacular style to a much greater degree than their Eastern counterparts. So the Shaker furniture from Ohio and Kentucky appears more ornate.

Some forms of furniture were never built by the Shakers. You will never see Shaker coffee tables, for example, nor tea tables, highboys, pencil-post beds or upholstered pieces. Some furniture companies market these items "in the Shaker style," including improbable pieces such as entertainment centers.

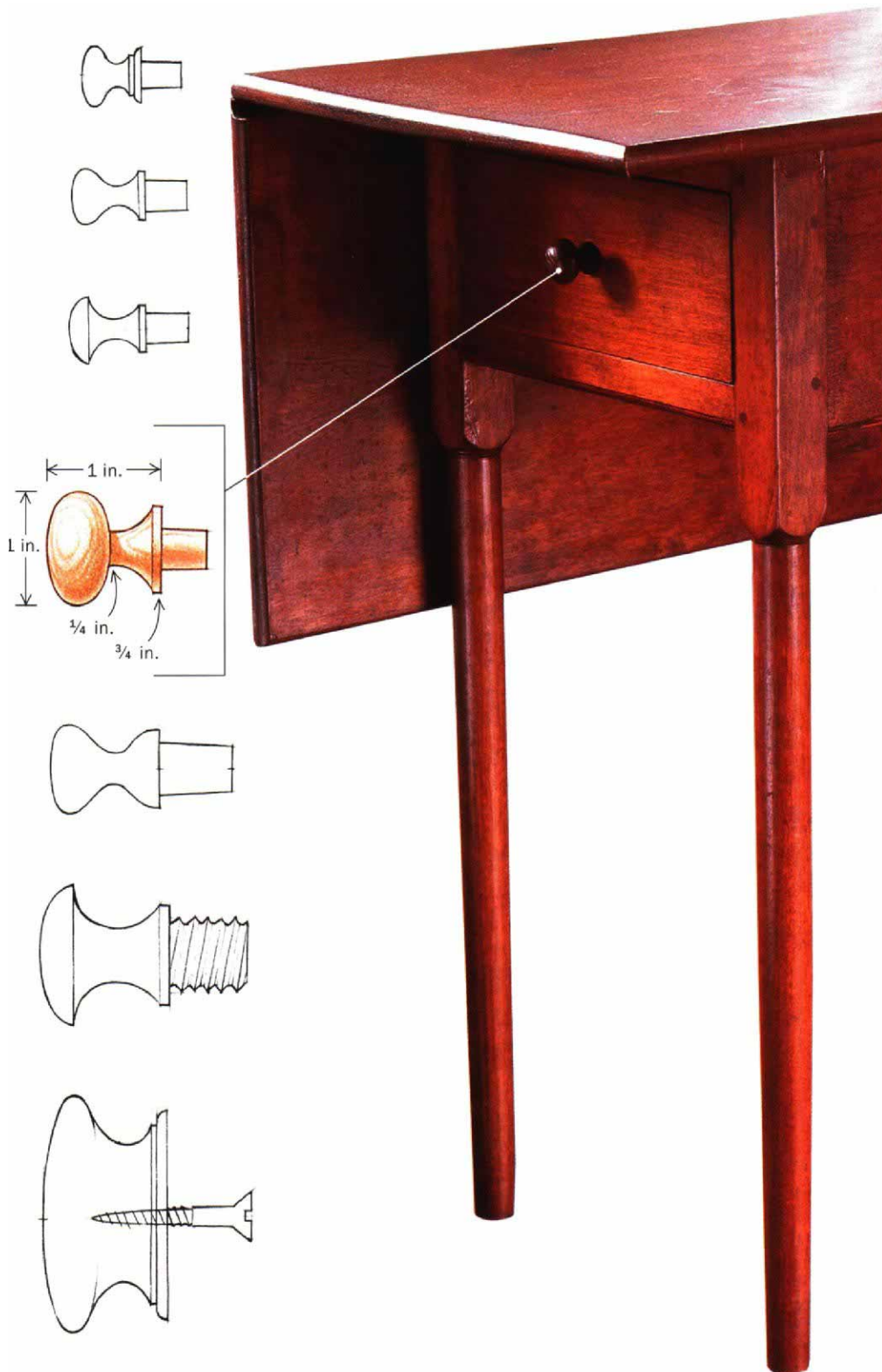
Certain elements appear over and over in Shaker furniture and make sense within the idiom. In striving for a design that remains faithful to the Shaker style, be mindful of their approach—just as you wouldn't build Queen Anne out of poplar, you wouldn't build Shaker out of rosewood. And pay close attention to the details.

Chris Becksvoort is the author of The Shaker Legacy, available this fall from Taunton Press.

KNOBS

Shaker craftsmen continued the theme of simplicity right down to the knobs. Prior to the 1850s, most Shaker knobs were shopmade, although some early pieces had commercially manufactured porcelain knobs in either white or agate, a marbled brown color. After 1860, manufactured knobs became more and more common.

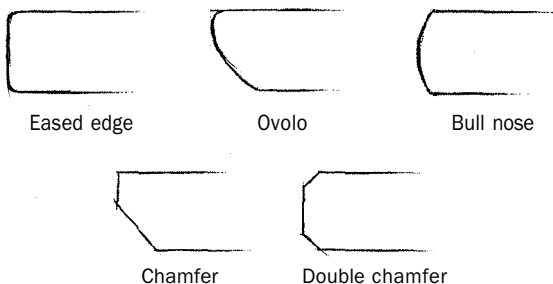
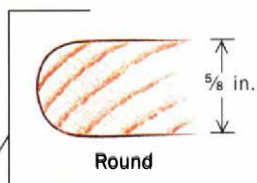
The typical Shaker knob was a variation of the mushroom form. Sizes ranged from $\frac{3}{8}$ in. dia. on tiny desk drawers to $2\frac{1}{4}$ in. dia. on large built-ins. Knobs up to $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. dia. were typically spindle turned, with either a plain tenon (glued and wedged through the door or drawer front) or a threaded tenon. Larger knobs were usually face turned and attached with steel screws from the inside. Shop-built Shaker knobs were always made of hardwoods, often of a contrasting species to the rest of the piece.



TABLETOP EDGES

A fair number of Shaker tabletop edges were square or only slightly eased. A square edge, however, was by no means the only profile used. Shaker craftsmen realized that a simple, shaped profile was not only less prone to damage than a square edge but also less painful when bumped.

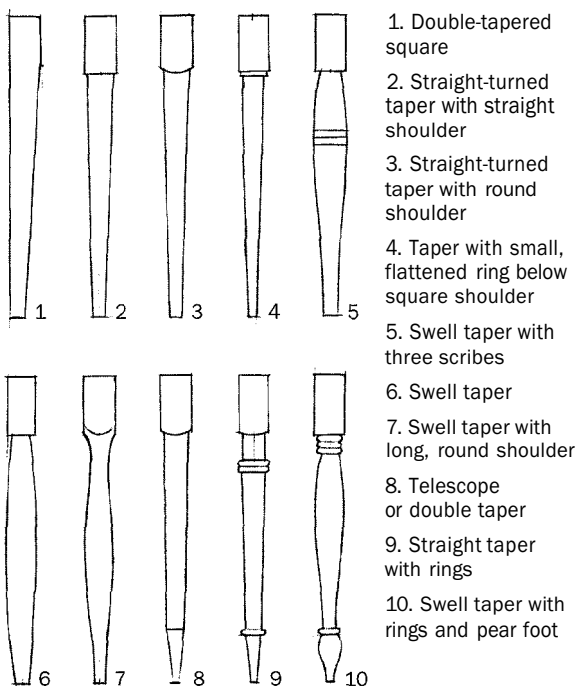
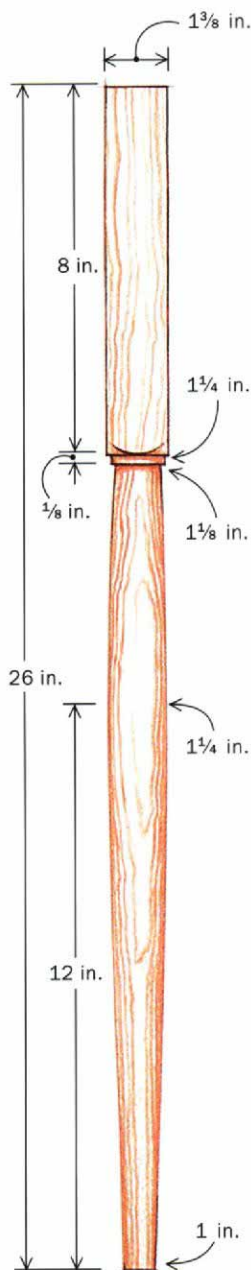
Rule joints were used on drop-leaf tables. The joint looked crisp and was less likely to lodge crumbs or pinch items hanging over the edges.



LEGS AND TURNINGS

Shaker table legs were, for the most part, quite simple. The double-tapered square leg was by far the most common form. The tapers were cut only on the two inside faces to give the leg a wider, sturdier stance and appearance. Another favorite leg was the straight-turned taper, most often seen on drop-leaf tables. These legs are often splayed a few degrees, because turned tapered legs attached at 90° to the top appear pigeon-toed. Swell tapers were also popular. This form started a bit narrow under the shoulder, then swelled to a maximum diameter at one-quarter to one-half of the way down.

Shaker craftsmen handled the transition from the square area at the top of the leg to the turned portion in several ways. Frequently, they cut the shoulder perfectly square, a 90° cut with a parting tool. An easier, more common transition was the 45° cut, resulting in a rounded shoulder.



1. Double-tapered square
2. Straight-turned taper with straight shoulder
3. Straight-turned taper with round shoulder
4. Taper with small, flattened ring below square shoulder
5. Swell taper with three scribes
6. Swell taper
7. Swell taper with long, round shoulder
8. Telescope or double taper
9. Straight taper with rings
10. Swell taper with rings and pear foot

Cherry single drop-leaf desk
Top: 14½ in. by 30 in.; leaf: 12 in.
Carcass: 12¾ in. by 20½ in.
Canterbury, New Hampshire
Circa 1850-1900