

Shaker design: Unadorned, not unsophisticated

BY CHRISTIAN BECKSVOORT

Many people view Shaker furniture as simple. I built my career making Shaker pieces. It may be unadorned, but it's not simple. The fact that it has few, if any, decorative elements doesn't mean it is rudimentary or lacking in elegance. The joinery, often hidden, is by no means elementary; instead it is frequently quite involved and of complex craftsmanship.

The Shakers were pragmatic and believed that utility was priority number one. That does not mean they ignored design or quality. Their work was incredibly well made. Many original Shaker pieces are over 200 years old and are still in fine

condition. As a friend of mine used to say, "Antiques are old because they were built right." Combining natural materials, superb craftsmanship, and no-frills designs is what made Shaker furniture aesthetically timeless and durable. Hundreds of years after the first Shaker piece was made, the style is still sought after today.

Clean, unadorned lines

When I first started woodworking, I built my share of decorative pieces. I've made a fair number of cabriole legs, carved elements, reeds, and flutes. Although in many cases I

Building in the Shaker way

Becksvoort has a three-pronged approach when copying or adapting Shaker designs. His methods range from building exact replicas, to making subtle changes to originals, to bold borrowing of elements to use in his own designs.

THE ORIGINAL SHAKER DESK

This early Shaker sewing desk was built out of pine and maple with a clear finish. The ogee curves on the base point to either Enfield, Conn., or Canterbury, N.H., as the origin.



NO-WIGGLE-ROOM REPRODUCTIONS

When making an exact reproduction, Becksvoort is as faithful as possible, replicating the dimensions, wood, techniques, and hardware (even if it must be custom made), and using period-appropriate screws, nails, hide glue, and finish. (Linda Coit applied a period finish to one of his reproductions in FWW #203). The two pieces are nearly identical, but the new wood and finish have a different aroma.



admire the craftsmanship involved, superfluous decorations are not my cup of tea. If you think about it, our personal taste determines pretty much all our design decisions from the clothes we wear to the cars we drive, the furniture we have in our homes, and beyond. My individual taste just happens to run closer to the Shaker aesthetic than, say, very ornate period furniture.

To my design sense, a smooth, clean surface is more appealing than one that is interrupted, embellished, or decorated. That's one reason I admire and emulate not only Shaker design, but also Scandinavian and Mid-Century Modern work. They seem to share a design ethic: Keep it

clean, uncluttered, and functional. Adding complex moldings, carvings, intarsia, scrolls, proud joinery, and excess hardware can detract rather than add to the overall design and function. Shaker details come in the form of subtle tapers, very simple moldings (if any at all), asymmetry, and an occasional curve.

It's important to consider grain when you're trying to build a piece with clean lines and subtle details. Nothing catches your eye (and not in a good way) more than flat cathedral grain running out and glued next to straight parallel grain. Your eye instantly notices the interrupted grain and tells you it's a lousy match. I spend an inordinate amount of time grain matching boards when gluing up wider panels, and I'm sure that the

INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN METHODS

When copying Shaker designs, Becksvoort is open to using more modern building practices. His version, at right, of an early tinware cupboard (sometimes called a chimney cupboard) from the Church Family, Mt. Lebanon, N.Y., is mostly identical to the original, but has modern hardware and a different finish. He also gave it a frame-and-panel back, while the original had individual boards.



LEAVING FINGERPRINTS

Becksvoort often blends his DNA into an existing Shaker design, making small changes that can have a big impact. After making his pine interpretation (far left) of the Mt. Lebanon tinware cupboard, he built this version (left) in cherry. Not only did he change the wood species, but he used his preferred flat, flush panel doors. He kept the original dimensions but updated the look with these tweaks.



designer's notebook continued

more experienced Shaker craftsmen did likewise. The idea is to minimize the look of individual boards. Gluing long parallel grain to long parallel grain is the best way to accomplish that.

The practical side of less adornment

As a craftsman, I much prefer to finish a smooth, flat surface than one that is interrupted by moldings, carvings, scrolls, and raised or inset surface decor. I really dislike brushing or wiping into corners, which you'll encounter when finishing almost any piece of furniture, including Shaker. Why make life even more complicated? The only thing worse than finishing is dusting. Trying to get dust, dirt, and grime out of angles, crevices, and complex moldings is a real chore. Unlike finishing, it must be done over and over, year after year. As you may have gathered, I like to make it functional, keep it clean, make it smooth. It's easy on the eye, and ultimately easy on the hand. □

Christian Becksvoort is a longtime contributing editor and expert in Shaker design.

Building in the Shaker way continued

SO LONG SYMMETRY

The original tall cabinet is from Enfield, Conn., and most likely was made by Brother Abner Allen, who favored tapered drawer sides and raised-panel doors. This cupboard was originally a built-in; the top and bottom were added later. The correct orientation is with the big door at the top. But the piece is usually shown upside down, as it is seen here. If you look closely, you can see that the keyhole in the bigger door is upside down.

AN HOMAGE TO SHAKER ASYMMETRY

Becksvoort will often borrow certain design elements (an act he calls clever thievery) and incorporate them in his original pieces. One of his favorite examples is the asymmetrical drawer configuration he used on this sideboard. The original design is from the well-known tall cabinet with four drawers (above). He adopted its off-kilter layout, adding two more drawers to the original pattern.

