Like the American makers of high-style period furniture that preceded and later co-existed with them, Shaker craftsmen were involved in the process of reduction, of stripping away superfluous ornamentation, in order to reveal the fundamental forms that lay underneath carved, turned, and veneered detail.

Those early Shaker craftsmen simplified the work of the great 18th-century American craftsmen who had themselves simplified the more elaborate baroque and rococo forms that had crossed the Atlantic from Europe. While a Boston Queen Anne candlestand is simpler than the English forms that preceded it, the Shaker rendition of that table is simpler still, with its Queen Anne origins revealing themselves only perhaps in a bandsawn profile of a slipper foot.

Many contemporary American furniture makers still turn to Shaker models for inspiration; and while few modern American makers reproduce specific Shaker originals, many – particularly those in the Northeast where Shakerism was most solidly entrenched – acknowledge their debt to the usually anonymous craftsmen who fashioned the furniture and woodenware on display at Sabbathday Lake and other Shaker communities elsewhere in the United States.

**Sabbathday Lake**

Sabbathday Lake in southeastern Maine is now home to four practicing Shakers. These four individuals – two...
men and two women – continue the Shaker tradition of self-sufficiency, supporting themselves with their work in the historically Shaker occupation of agronomy on the community’s 1,800 acres, as well as craft work. (Herbs produced at Sabbathday Lake can be purchased from the community’s website at www.shaker.lib.me.us/catalog.htm.

Unlike the restored Shaker village at Pleasant Hill, Ky., which has a staff of 170, Sabbathday Lake operates with a number of volunteers and a paid staff of four, a number that increases to five during the tourist season. One employee, Leonard Brooks, lives on the site in a tidy white frame home across Route 26 from the Sabbathday Lake library of Shaker research materials. Brooks is the museum director for the Sabbathday Lake Shaker community and is in charge of the many exhibits of Shaker artifacts available there for public viewing.

That staff includes a librarian and two guides who offer 75-minute tours of the museum at Sabbathday Lake. This museum includes not only artifacts from Sabbathday Lake but also material from other Shaker communities, in particular those in Maine. Early in the 20th century as the other Maine Shaker communities were closing their doors, the material possessions of those communities were shipped to Sabbathday Lake. As a result, any student of Shaker furniture – in particular any student of furniture
produced in Maine communities – will find the collection at Sabbathday Lake of great interest.

The community is one of the earliest Shaker settlements anywhere, dating to 1783. Within a scant year, the population had ballooned to almost 200. Then on April 19, 1794, the adult members of Sabbathday Lake took the covenant formalizing their acceptance of the doctrine of the founder of the Shaker movement, Mother Ann Lee. Although other Shaker communities could claim larger numbers of inhabitants, Sabbathday Lake is the only community in Maine – or anywhere else – that has survived to the present day, continually inhabited by practicing Shakers.

The pursuit of simplicity in furniture making, as well as everything else, was the product of a lifestyle that put the Shakers outside the American mainstream – a lifestyle embracing the absolute equality of the sexes, the total surrender of personal goods, and – for many the most perplexing feature of Shaker life – the commitment to celibacy.

Charles Durfee and Peter Turner are two of those furniture makers whose work strongly reflects the Shaker aesthetic. While neither Durfee nor Turner embraced the Shaker lifestyle, each lived an unconventional lifestyle in his early years.

Turner worked for Greenpeace for eight years doing environmental work, and Durfee worked at the Apprentice Shop in Bath for two years in the 1970s building wooden boats with hand tools while living communally with other program participants in a small collection of yurts (portable wood dwellings) outside town.

Charlie Durfee, a furniture maker near Woolwich, Maine, lives only 45 minutes from Sabbathday Lake, but despite this geographical proximity, Durfee hasn’t found himself drawn to the furniture in the Sabbathday Lake collection, preferring the work in the collections of other Shaker museums, in particular the

"This stand up desk in old growth pine is inspired by pieces in Hancock and Mount Lebanon, although the Shakers would not have used the tombstone-arched panels."
museum at Hancock, Mass. (Leonard Brooks, the current museum director, observes that the collection now includes furniture dating to the 1790s, including much that is available for study.)

Durfee has visited Sabbathday Lake many times. He’s attended worship services there. He’s eaten in the dining hall — in Shaker-imposed silence. He has been an interested observer over the last 30 years as the remaining Sabbathday Lake Shakers struggled to retain their identity in the presence of declining membership.

“In those days (the 1970s),” Durfee said, “there were four, five, or six very elderly women who were what you might call original Shakers. They had been lifelong Shakers. They had grown up as Shakers. Since then, all but one of them has died, the one who is now the leader of Sabbathday Lake — Sister Frances who’s probably well into her seventies.”

Durfee’s awareness of the Shaker tradition in furniture making has prompted him to travel to the Shaker collections at Hancock, Mass., and Mt. Lebanon, N.Y., to study the forms on display there.

Like Shaker furniture makers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Durfee has worn many different hats during his working life. He started out as a history major at Oberlin College in Ohio. After graduating in 1968, he was drafted and served in Vietnam as a clerk. Following his military service, he tried graduate school for a year, thinking he might pursue a career in academics, but he soon realized he craved a more active profession.

He then heard about a program in Bath, Maine, run by Lance Lee called the Apprentice Shop, which taught wooden boat building in a working boat shop. “The people who built the boats were apprentices,” Charlie explained. “There were instructors who were working with them to show them along the way. I eventually joined in 1975. I came to Bath and spent two years in the program. There were 8 or 10 or so of us. The guys were all bearded. The women had long hair and skirts — very much the 1970s kind of scene. We lived just out of town in a bunch of yurts, without much heat, no running water, no electricity. In the winter, it was very cold.

“That was my first experience taking a piece of rough lumber and making it into something. Those two years were a turning point in my life.”

Over the next 10 years, Durfee worked in a number of woodworking settings, finally opening his own shop in Bath, Maine. Then he and his wife, Jen, bought the rural property on which their home and Charlie’s shop now stand.

During his furniture-making life, Charlie has worked primarily in the colonial and Shaker genres, although he rarely makes exact reproductions of any specific historical forms. Instead, he works in the manner of his woodworking ancestors, bringing a colonial or Shaker sensibility to work he himself has designed. “I like the simplicity of Shaker work,” he explained. “I enjoy the quiet voice.”
After an eight-year stint as an environmental activist for Greenpeace, Peter Turner decided to become a furniture maker. This wasn’t something for which his background had prepared him. It was simply an acknowledgment of the fact that he wanted to make a living using his hands.

Because he was living in Boston at the time, he visited the city’s North Bennet Street School – one of the most prestigious craft programs in the country – thinking he might enroll there, but the admissions director suggested that he go out and get some experience in woodworking and then come back and enroll. “That way, you’ll learn more,” the admissions director explained.

Peter did go out and work as a furniture maker, but he never returned to enroll at North Bennet Street. Instead, he learned the trade in several Boston furniture shops. The first of these was the Paine Furniture Company. There, he worked in the warehouse, repairing damaged furniture. For the most part, this meant burning in shellac sticks to fill scratches, but, on the strength of this experience, he then landed a job working at a large Boston shop, building high-end commercial board room furniture.

His timing was perfect because he arrived just as the company’s production schedule had slowed enough to allow Peter the time to learn his craft at a leisurely pace. “When I got there, there was this huge shop with a 16” Northfield jointer and big Watkins 16” sliding table saw and only three employees because the company had just lost a huge account.”

The owner of the shop allowed Peter to come in on his own time and use this well-equipped shop to work on personal projects. In addition, the private workshop for the North Bennet Street instructors was just across the street and up a couple of flights. “So, whenever I had a question, I’d just

Form follows function. The shelves on these side tables have proven to be very useful.
paddle across the road and ask. They were all so generous.”

When Peter had grown confident of his woodworking skills, he and his wife, Colleen, left Boston for southern Maine, where Peter had grown up. He quickly landed a job in a millwork shop there where he “… avoided most of the laminate work and got to make solid wood doors for some of the buildings downtown.”

Shaker craftsmen were masters of matching specific pieces of furniture to specific sets of needs. For example, if a pair of Shaker sisters needed a table with drawers opening on two opposing sides so the two sisters could work simultaneously, one on either side of that table, a Shaker furniture maker would build a piece matching that specification.

Peter has a similarly pragmatic approach to his craft. In the case of the project underway on the day of my visit – a display for Lalique glass hood ornaments – Peter’s client already had a design roughed in on paper. “He had a concept which was bases made out of aluminum tubing with a circular top. I suggested columns made out of his wood (eucalyptus) and sent him an article about columns. When he got my idea, he switched to wood columns.” The focus here is not on the piece or the craftsman who’s building it. The focus is on meeting a client’s specifications within the context of an aesthetically appealing construction.

The Shaker aesthetic has always been a strong force in Peter’s work, particularly early on when he was “… trying to get a grasp on design. I’ve always trusted my eye,” he explained. “I can look at something and know – if I like it – that it’s good. The Shaker stuff does that for me.”

Peter is a frequent instructor at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport, Maine, run by Peter Korn. (Durfee has taught there as well.) During his visits to the school, he’s had several opportunities to view Korn’s slide show, and something Peter Korn said during one of those slide presentations sticks in Turner’s mind. “He said he does this (builds furniture) to provide himself a sense of order that exists nowhere else in his life. I identified with that 100%. I’m not a very organized guy, but when I build a piece of furniture, it can be very precise and completely within my control.

“When you look at a piece, you feel that sense of orderliness, and Shaker furniture evokes that feeling in me.”

**The Shaker aesthetic**

Over the last three decades in Maine, several forces have exerted powerful influences in the state’s woodworking scene. One is the revival of wooden boat making in which Durfee had immersed himself for several years. Another is the work being done in the shops of Thomas Moser, a Maine craftsman noted – at least in his early years – for producing many Shaker-inspired forms in large numbers. More recently, with the establishment of Korn’s school and the development of the Lie-Nielsen Toolworks, Maine has seen a further evolution of the state’s culture of craftsmanship.

All of this activity has taken place against the backdrop of one of the most potent and enduring forces in American furniture making: the aesthetic developed by a handful of 19th century Shaker craftsmen who labored to articulate in wood their devotion to God.

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**Kerry Pierce**

Pierce has been a professional furniture maker for more than 20 years. He is the author of 11 woodworking books – including the recently published “Pleasant Hill Shaker Furniture” – as well as dozens of magazine articles. His work has appeared in many regional shows, including, most recently, Ohio Furniture by Contemporary Masters at the Ohio Decorative Arts Center.
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