

The Shakers Are Movers, Too

The country's most significant collection of Shaker objects, out of public view for a decade, will relocate to an \$18 million museum complex designed by Annabelle Selldorf.

By Patricia Leigh Brown
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CHATHAM, N.Y. — In an earlier life, the moribund red brick Victorian at the foot of Main Street in this thriving Columbia County village had been a sanitarium, a hotel and tavern, a furniture store and an auto dealership. These were the warm-up acts for its latest incarnation: a permanent new home for the Shaker Museum, widely considered the country's most significant collection of Shaker furniture, objects and archival material. The museum, set to open in 2023 and to include a new addition, is being designed by the architect Annabelle Selldorf, whose current projects include the expansion of The Frick Collection in New York and an addition for The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego La Jolla.

"Modern architects tend to like the clarity and simplicity of Shaker furniture and architecture," Ms. Selldorf said. "But of course, it's so much more profound than that. It's about equality, sustainability and community, to mention a few of the values. The pairing of the two really appealed to me."



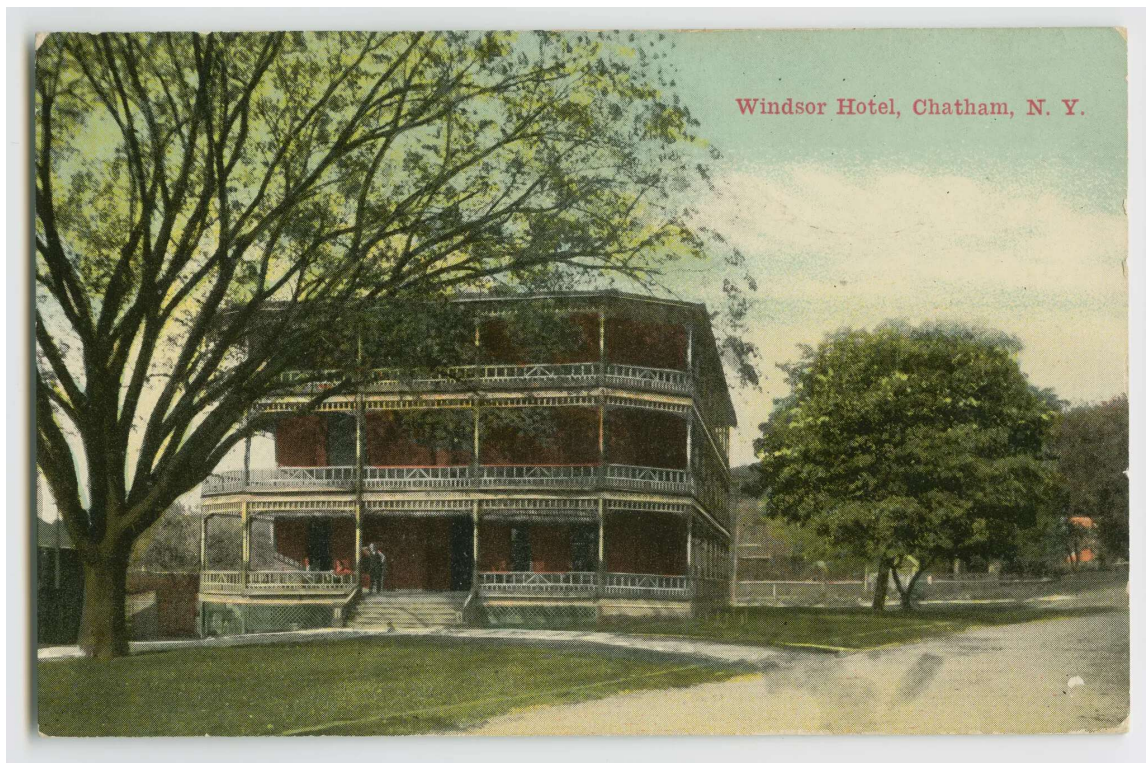
Lacy Schutz, the museum's executive director. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



Annabelle Selldorf, architect of the new Shaker Museum. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The collection, which is online, has been physically housed in somewhat dilapidated farm buildings and has not been on public view for a decade. The new \$18 million complex will house a conservation and storage facility, permanent and rotating exhibitions, a public reading room and a community space. Ms. Selldorf, who is something of a court architect to the art world, has designed a series of glass links to connect the old and new structures. These will open up to a Shaker-inspired landscape by the firm Nelson Byrd Woltz made up of medicinal and native plants and a small garden of concentric circles loosely based on Shaker dances. Ms. Selldorf's renderings, along with a few stellar pieces, are currently on view in "The Future is a Gift," a pop-up exhibition in Chatham, a village located close to the Shaker heartlands of New Lebanon, N.Y. and Hancock, Mass.

The new museum is the latest example of what William D. Moore, the director of the American and New England Studies program at Boston University, has dubbed "Shaker fever." Perhaps no one was more stricken than John Stanton Williams (1902-1982), the wealthy New York stockbroker-turned-gentleman farmer whose passion for antique farm implements eventually led him to Shaker barns and then communities, where he amassed the encyclopedic collection of more than 18,000 objects that form the backbone of the new facility.



The new museum will make its home partly in a Victorian-era hotel. A postcard shows the early use of the building— originally Park Hotel and then the Windsor Hotel. via Shaker Museum

In contrast to competitors, who bought with an eye for resale, Williams was a bit of a nerd whose primary interest in the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, as the Shakers were officially known, was their entrepreneurial and technological prowess. He befriended Eldresses and Sisters, amassing key pieces from a religious sect best known at the time for communal practices that included celibacy, shared economic resources, male and female leadership, an abhorrence of excess and the ecstatic liturgical dancing that gave birth to the popular name "Shakers."

The qualities that most fascinated Williams were the Shakers' embrace of new technology and their economic self-sufficiency and business savvy. Among the items the Shakers produced for commercial consumption were seeds in pioneering packets, medicinal compounds, chairs, brooms, collegiate letter sweaters, wooden buckets and ladies' cloaks (in racy red, in contrast to the black worn by Shaker sisters). In addition to now-archetypal furniture in original paint, including Shaker blue, Williams bought washing machines, fire engines, hand looms for weaving, mortising machines for crafting beams, bonnets and the contents of a blacksmith's shop, to name a few.



A wool felt cloak labeled “E. J. Neale and Company,” ca. 1910-1930, Church Family, Mount Lebanon is part of the collection of the Shaker Museum. via Shaker Museum



Wheelchair made from a modified rocking chair, ca. 1830, one of the collections' more intriguing artifacts. Shaker design accommodated disabled people. via Shaker Museum

The Shakers also repurposed familiar objects — one of the collections' more intriguing artifacts is a rocking chair from the 1830s outfitted with wooden wheels to accommodate people with disabilities, and there is an early example of blue orthopedic shoes. Rather than focus on Shakers as the subjects of New Deal photography or as the precursors of Modernism, Williams probed their Protestant work ethic and Yankee ingenuity, approaching his task like “an anthropologist documenting the decline of a culture,” Prof. Moore said. He also gathered an influential community of supporters, including Norman Rockwell, Eric Sloane and Zelina Brunswick, the textile designer and chairman of the famous fabric house.

The museum's exhibitions are still in the nascent stages. Maggie Taft, a guest curator, said the permanent exhibition will address the fundamental aspects of Shakerism, which reached its Zenith in the 1840s with 18 villages from Maine to Kentucky, but also the unexpected subtexts. The sect — an international Protestant monastic community — was founded in 1774 by Mother Ann Lee, the charismatic illiterate daughter of an English blacksmith (a swatch of one of her aprons is among the museum's most prized possessions).

Although the sect was known for gender equality, Ms. Taft noted that women and men were “divided in ways that resembled worldly labor divisions” — with men toiling outside on agriculture and other tasks while the women worked indoors. The exhibition will also explore the different generations of Shakerism, especially the third generation after Mother Ann Lee's death in 1784, when young women's “encounters” with her were manifested in drawings and texts thought to be “gifts” from the spirits.



Box for consignment of garden seeds, ca. 1860, in the Shaker Museum. via Shaker Museum



Pine tailor's counter painted blue, ca. 1815, in the Shaker Museum. New exhibitions will go beyond the visual to focus on the human aspects of the furniture, including sustainability and gender equality. via Shaker Museum

The spare, modernistic furnishings for which the Shakers are best known are typically exhibited for their aesthetics. These pieces were not intended for individual use, however, but rather shared among groups or men and women. Time has shed light on a pine wheelbarrow featured in the 1986 “Shaker Design” show at the Whitney Museum, which was said to be used for clearing land: Research has shown it hauled boxes of medicine. The idea will be to go beyond the visual to focus on the human aspects of the furniture.

“The Shakers were radical in the kinds of decisions they were making about gender equality, racial equality, vegetarianism, accessibility, shared property and pacificism — choices far more progressive than their contemporaries and things we are still wrestling with today,” Ms. Taft said.

The 30,000 visitors a year who are projected to visit the museum will be a boon to Columbia County, where some 15 percent of the housing stock consists of second homes typically owned by weekend New Yorkers. It seems likely to spark a Shaker tourism circuit that would include Hancock Shaker Village in nearby Pittsfield, Mass., a living history museum that has an archetypal Round Barn, baby animals and goat yoga.



The shell of the Great Stone Barn on the historic site in New Lebanon, formerly Mt. Lebanon. via Shaker Museum



Lithograph, "Shakers, their mode of Worship," ca. 1835, Shaker Museum. via Shaker Museum

The Shaker Museum itself owns 91 acres with 10 Shaker buildings in nearby New Lebanon, — once Mount Lebanon, the spiritual and administrative Mother Ship of the Shaker communities throughout New England, Kentucky, Ohio and Florida. One centerpiece is the shell of the Great Stone Barn, a National Historic Landmark that was damaged by fire in the 1970s. Its ingenious three-story design — “a machine of a building,” in the words Jerry V. Grant, the museum’s director of collections and research — was built into a hill and allowed hay to be pitchforked to the cows below, with manure deposited by a railway system into a vault from which it could be carted away into the pastures. It was an early example of sustainability. “They were on it,” said Lacy Schutz, the museum’s executive director.

Once the province of the North Family, as the community was known, the museum’s property in New Lebanon includes a still-elegant Granary which, like many of the museum’s objects, conveys the sense of the human hand, with pencil marks for orders scribbled on the beams. The museum has restored hiking trails amid weatherworn stone walls and is offering tours of the collection this summer.

Mr. Grant said that the Shakers themselves would not have understood the obsession with aesthetics that persists among collectors and imitators of Shaker furniture today; they were merely trying to create a physical environment that harmonized and didn't interfere with how they chose to live their lives.

To the Shakers, material culture was not spiritual, Brother Arnold Hadd of the Sabbathday Lake Shakers in Maine once explained to an interviewer. It was just material. The Shakers “were the shrewdest Yankees going,” he noted. “We are the ultimate capitalistic communists.”

Visiting Shaker sites in New York

Information on the summer series of events at several Shaker sites, including walking tours of the historic Mount Lebanon grounds and tours of the collection on select days in Old Chatham (where the collection is currently stored at 88 Shaker Museum Road): [shakersummerseries21.com](#). Tours are also by appointment.

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