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Sacred Space: The Shaker Museum's New Future Offers Opportunities for Embracing Contradictions

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Rendering of the new Shaker Museum in Chatham, N.Y.
COURTESY SHAKER MUSEUM, CHATHAM, NEW YORK

In July, I joined a small group for a tour of the collection of the Shaker Museum in Old Chatham, New York, where we meandered among metal shelves filled with thousands of wooden boxes and benches, baskets and tables, brooms and bureaus, chests and ladder-back chairs, all meticulously catalogued and digitized. Despite the obvious care invested in the objects' documentation and organization, however, the institution's old barn and outbuildings are "not appropriate storage for the world's most significant collection of Shaker material culture," according to Shaker Museum Executive Director Lacy Schutz. "We just can't keep [the HVAC system] running anymore," she said, adding that the

facilities aren't compliant with accessibility standards, and that it would be prohibitively expensive to bring everything up to code.

So plans are in place for the 18,000-item collection, which has not been accessible to the public since 2009, to move about eight miles south to downtown Chatham, where the firms Selldorf Architects and Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects are working to transform an early 19th-century redbrick building—previously housing a sanitarium, a theater, a roller rink, a hotel, a furniture store, a knitting factory, and a car dealership—into the Shaker Museum's new home. The 30,000-square-foot museum will include galleries for permanent and rotating exhibitions, conservation and storage facilities, and a gift shop.

The Shakers, or “Shaking Quakers,” as they were known for their exuberant movement during prayer, are a millenarian Protestant sect that emerged in England in the mid-18th century, arrived in the United States in 1774, and, in the 1780s, began building communities that eventually spread from Maine to Kentucky. Mount Lebanon, New York, about 15 minutes northeast of Chatham, was home to the Shakers' Central Ministry for more than a century. Formally named the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, a reference to the notion that founding leader Ann Lee was Christ's female counterpart, the group embraced gender equality, celibacy, racial inclusion, pacifism, and the communal ownership of property. These commitments contradicted prevailing social norms of the 18th century, requiring strict protocols and infrastructures to reinforce the community's internal social order.

Those protocols took the form of the Millennial Laws, which codified myriad dimensions of daily life, including diet, dress, reading material, routine cleaning, and permissible paint colors for buildings and furnishings. (Meetinghouses, for example, were to be painted white; barns, dark blue; and bedsteads, green.) In turn, those laws—especially when enforced by both the Central Ministry and local elders in the various villages—helped shape a material environment that encouraged unity within the community and separation from the outside world. Shaker villages were planned around a large meetinghouse. Visitors frequently commented on the villages' immaculate gardens and orchards, with their perfectly straight rows of trees. Sturdy stone or brick dwelling houses were designed to uphold a strict separation of the sexes, efficient division of labor, and ideals of neatness and cleanliness.



Storage units on view in an exhibition of Shaker kitchen furniture at the Shaker Museum, ca. late 1950s.

PHOTO LOUIS H. FROHMAN/COURTESY SHAKER MUSEUM, CHATHAM, NEW YORK

Inside Shaker residential, meeting, and work spaces, woodwork and other handicrafts served to bolster similar values. Wooden boxes held seeds and herbs and spools of thread, all central to the Shakers' business with the outside world. Shaker furniture makers were known for crafting bespoke wooden counters and worktables to suit the needs of individual tailors, laundresses, and bookkeepers. Trestle tables structured the way Shakers sat together in the dining room and silently shared food, and benches ordered their bodies in worship. These artifacts, which exemplify the relationship between material order and social order within the Shaker community, are well represented in the museum collection.

Less amenable to museum acquisition are the massive built-in cabinets with cupboards and drawers set into the walls of Shaker retiring rooms (bedrooms), offices, dining rooms, hallways, and kitchens. The Shaker Museum has one such cabinet in its collection; several others remain in situ at various Shaker villages that have been preserved as historic sites. These embedded furnishings allowed residents to keep floors open—minimizing the need for mopping and dusting—and optimize leftover spaces, like the areas under stairwells. Because Shaker dwellings commonly housed 70 or 80 residents, their furnishings had to function on an institutional scale and meet communal needs. The Great Stone Dwelling in Enfield, New Hampshire, has more than 800 built-in drawers; another Shaker building, in Hancock, Massachusetts, has 369 drawers and 245 cupboard doors. Dwelling house attics frequently featured monumental built-in installations to store out-of-season bedding and clothes. Buildings were assigned letters, while rooms, closets, and drawers were assigned numbers, enabling Shaker Sisters to easily locate every blanket and bonnet, and

transforming the houses into “large filing cabinets,” as architectural historian Julie Nicoletta has described them.

All those drawers and cabinets also facilitated discretion and modesty. The Shakers discouraged ostentatious material display—at least until the second half of the 19th century, when they relaxed many prohibitions and sought to modernize in order to attract more converts to replenish their declining population. Yet even if their walls were devoid of pictures and their buildings of ornamentation, “the *tout ensemble* of the Shaker villages often pleased visitors and passers-by,” art historian Joseph Manca writes in his 2019 book *Shaker Vision: Seeing Beauty in Early America*. The Shakers were conscious of how their settlements looked from the public roads; they cultivated an ordered beauty that was “meant to impress the world and also attract outsiders to the sect.”



An oval box, date unknown.

COURTESY SHAKER MUSEUM, CHATHAM, NEW YORK

It also provided many Shaker communities their livelihood. Their ladder-back chairs, flat brooms, and iconic swallowtail-jointed oval boxes sold widely, and inspired emulation among artists, entrepreneurs, and designers, from counterfeit furniture makers in the 19th century to Danish modernist designers to countless painters, choreographers, architects, and restaurateurs today. In the early 20th century, collectors, curators, and photographers fetishized the clarity and elegance of Shaker creations. As a result, many of their successors reduce the group’s craft to its aesthetic qualities, presenting it as a form of proto-minimalist art, or reading Shaker chairs and brooms as primary texts that tell a romantic story of purity and simplicity at odds with the more complex reality of life among the faithful.

Even as the community's population has declined from over 6,000 in the mid-19th century to just three Believers today, Shaker material culture has continued to resonate. As historian William D. Moore describes in his 2020 book *Shaker Fever: America's Twentieth-Century Fascination with a Communitarian Sect*, we've witnessed several waves of Shaker Fever during periods of national upheaval or redefinition. Shaker aesthetics are conveniently polysemous and contemplative. In the 1970s, Moore explains, enthusiasts "found in the constructed Shaker legacy a precedent for feminism, a rejection of materialism, and an intellectual balm for the stresses of deindustrialization, national economic stagnation, and the decades of the culture wars." The Shaker ideal speaks to the same persistent dynamics today. The looming climate crisis also makes the community's relative self-sufficiency and responsible land management seem particularly worthy of emulation.

Executive Director Schutz likewise explained that the Shaker Museum's collection has widespread appeal, as "the values that underpin [the Shaker] aesthetic are so attractive to people right now: gender equality, racial equality, sustainability." This contemporary wave of Shaker Fever is driven in part by widespread political disillusionment, social division, and ecological despair—and by the hope that a utopian community and its orderly environment might suggest strategies for our own salvation.

Yet rather than imagining the Shakers as a romantic ideal, it might be more valuable to acknowledge the community's contradictions and compromises. The Shakers manifested their faith through both rapturous movement and rigorous order; they embraced both simplicity and technological progress; they espoused gender equality while upholding traditional gendered labor roles; they promoted social equality while governing their own community through what some apostates and critics regarded as a rather autocratic centralized authority. They were removed from the world yet regularly did business with it. As Brother Arnold Hadd of the Sabbathday Lake Shakers—the last remaining active Shaker community—said in a 2014 interview, "We are the ultimate capitalistic communists." On a 2020 Shaker Museum panel discussion about the sect's continuing relevance, religious scholar Ashon Crawley explained that the Shakers performed labor as a spiritual practice in order to sustain their community, while also knowingly interacting with a world market committed to exploitation and profit. This interaction required that they willingly compromise on their vow of separation. Especially as their commercial enterprises ramped up and their population declined, Shakers occasionally hired laborers from outside the community, relying on non-Believers to produce their divinely inspired wares.



A seed box, ca. 1860.

COURTESY SHAKER MUSEUM, CHATHAM, NEW YORK

In this age when museums, schools, and other cultural institutions are reckoning with their colonial and racial legacies, and political factionalism and authoritarianism are spreading, it is imperative that we eschew romanticization and engage with the complex realities undergirding the seeming simplicity of Shaker life. How can the Shaker Museum engage with the community's compromises and contradictions? It has already begun to ask these questions through an interdisciplinary study group, public programs, ongoing partnerships with values-aligned local organizations, and a series of pop-up exhibitions exploring themes such as racial and gender equality and the ethics of entrepreneurship. This work sets the stage for future exhibitions and programming in the new space.

That space itself will be well suited to such purposefully “impure” investigations of Shaker history. The renovated 19th-century brick structure and the fiber-cement addition will be linked by a glass connector and supported by a structural system of timbers, embodying the mix of craft traditions and technological innovation that characterized Shaker practice. There are plans for a full-height casework in the museum lobby featuring Shaker wares for sale, and landscaping based around plants the Shakers once sold as herbal medicines, each exemplifying the Shakers' pragmatic engagements with commerce and the outside world. In short, the museum campus productively blends the crafted and the engineered, the traditional and the progressive, the spiritual and the commercial, the then and the now, creating an ideal environment for public pedagogy.

And much like a Shaker meetinghouse, the museum facility is sited and structured in a manner intended to spark the curiosity of passersby—to draw them into the galleries, or to a public event where curators and community members can thoughtfully contextualize the

collection. As the Shaker Museum is also home to a robust library and archive that includes the extensive records of the Central Ministry, such tools for critical contextualization are readily at hand.

Shaker objects, in their ordered beauty, lend themselves to exhibition on shelves and in vitrines. Yet there is the potential here to productively trouble order, which is both a defining, divine principle of Shaker life and central to museological conventions. By engaging with the environments in which the Shakers lived, and in which we live today, the Shaker Museum can help us imagine new models for ordering our relations with others, for grappling with complex ideological negotiations, and for furnishing a future world that embodies the values of compromise by which we want to live.



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