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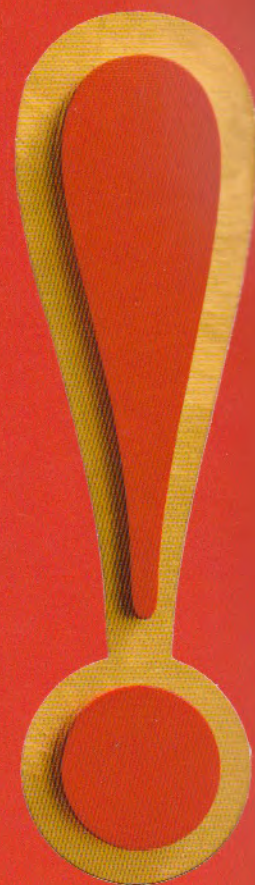
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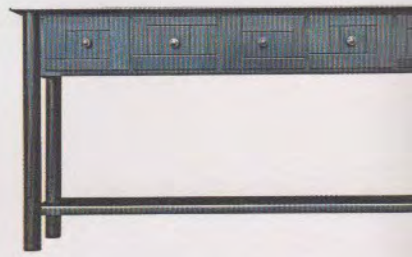
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**INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH ISSUE**



# SHAKER HERITAGE

US design and its cultural identity. **Glenn Adamson**, director of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, reflects on the relationship between history and the contemporary world

by **Valentina Croci**

*From left, a house in the Canterbury Shaker Village founded in 1792 at Canterbury, New Hampshire; the Neo Shaker lounge chair by Frederic Frety for **Environment**, the chair from the Neri&Hu collection produced by **De La Espada**; the Five Drawers table by the designer-artisan Jim Rose, distributed by **Edgewood Orchard Gallery**; the No.8 table by **Charles de Lisle**; the Aria rocking chair by **Westminster Teak**; the Silva lamp by Nicke Sheridan for **Cerno**; the Fortuna daybed by **Michael Felix***



**A**merican culture comes from a particular melting pot of civilizations, always in a state of evolution. What has always been seen as the land of opportunity lives up to that reputation in the case of Italian furniture manufacturers and exports. So is it possible to identify the cultural legacies that have formed contemporary design in the US today? Apart from the automotive sector and that of technological consumer goods, where the design tradition of the New World still has a lot to offer, there is one home-grown movement that has generated a style that still has an impact today on furniture design in the States: the Shakers.

Members of an offshoot from the Quakers, the "Shakers" or "Shaking Quakers" had roots in France, where they were harshly persecuted towards the end of the 17th century. They fled to England, where they were welcomed among the Protestants. But this coexistence was short-lived, and at the end of the 18th century the Shakers again migrated, this time to New England. By the end of the 19th century there were 25 Shaker villages, with about 4000 people in the community. Today only three rural villages remain active. Their interpretation of Puritanism led them to develop a substantially self-sufficient lifestyle, an attitude expressed on multiple levels, from clothing to furniture, shunning any decoration in favor of pure utilitarian objects. The Shakers were among the first to make wood-working shops for the serial construction of furniture, developing a recognizable, vivid style. Due to the essential design and impeccable workmanship, their furnishings are now cult items for collectors, and some see them as the forerunners of the minimalism of American design.

We asked Glenn Adamson, director of the Museum of Arts and Design of New York, to tell us about the Shaker legacy and its impact on contemporary expressions in furniture design in the States (and elsewhere).

"The simplicity of Shaker design will always be relevant for designers – particularly those who prize the clarity of form that

is based in direct, unadorned making. There are some designers who create contemporary renditions of Shaker furniture: Ian Ingersoll in Connecticut and Jim Rose in Wisconsin are both interesting examples. I also see affinities between Shaker design and Japanese woodwork, including designers like Sori Yanagi and (more recently) Nendo."

■ **IS THERE A HISTORICAL EUROPEAN MATRIX BEHIND THE AESTHETIC AND DESIGN APPROACH DEVELOPED BY THE SHAKERS IN THE UNITED STATES?**

"That's an interesting topic, because the influences on the Shakers aren't usually considered – since their forms are so pure and nearly abstract, people tend to view them as completely novel. In fact, however, the tradition of neoclassical furniture as developed in France, Germany and England is an important precursor for Shaker work, as are the furniture and other crafts made in 18th-century New England. You could say that the Shakers simply removed the ornament from neoclassical forms, leaving only the basic shape of the case of drawers or ladder-back chairs."

■ **WHAT OTHER CULTURES HAVE INFLUENCED FURNITURE DESIGN IN THE UNITED STATES?**

"In my view, the strongest influences at the moment have more to do with technology, rather than with historical precedent. Later this year at MAD, we are doing a major project on the artist and furniture maker Wendell Castle. The exhibition emphasizes his use of robotic technology to realize his forms – which are rooted in modernist sculptural aesthetics (more Henry Moore and Constantin Brancusi than Bauhaus, perhaps), but to me they speak most powerfully of process and materiality. Of course the modernism of the Bauhaus represents a strong legacy for both architecture and design in America. I would definitely mention Jonathan Muecke, here, a designer from Minneapolis who was commissioned to do a pavilion for the latest edition of Design Miami: I was very impressed with how he is reinterpreting the legacy of modernism." ■