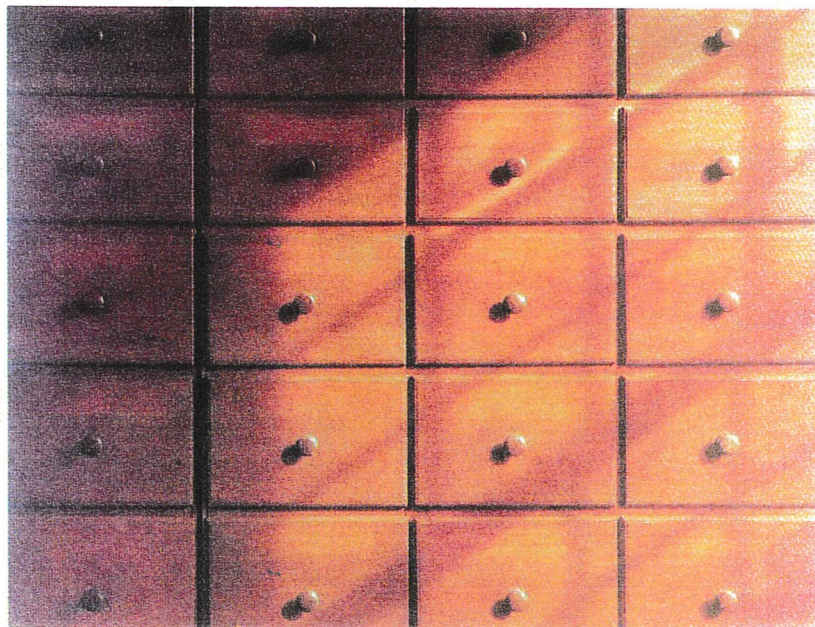
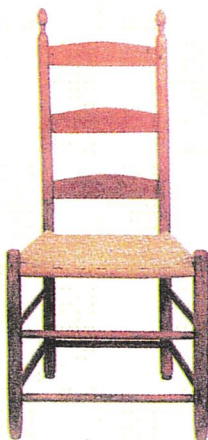


# The charms of Shaker style



Furniture expert Andrew Matthews explains the history and philosophy behind Shaker design



The Shakers, or United Society Of Believers in the First and Second Appearance of Christ, were 19th century America's largest and best-known communal utopian society.

The highly ordered and disciplined Shakers were famous for their unusual way of life, for the shaking and jerking of the body during worship that gave them their name, and for the excellence and simplicity of their woodcraft which continues to be influential today.

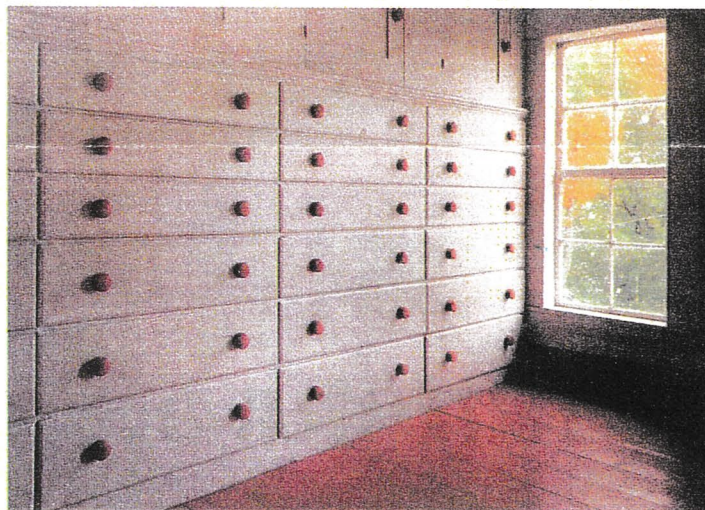
The Shakers' religion was not just a once-a week affair but also something to be put into practice in every part of their daily lives. Their doctrine was fundamental to the running of the society and central to its designs and practical application in both architecture and craftwork. These aspects were reflected in the following principles: basic uniformity of design, balance and proportion to suit its needs, mastery of techniques, absence of adornment and sense of form.

## CHAIRS

The Shakers were prolific in the making of chairs, the side chair or slat-back being the best known. Constructed from cherry, walnut, maple or ash, it had no carving or paint finish to clutter its simplicity.

The chair-makers showed mastery in shaving away excess weight without loss of strength or durability. This made the chair light and portable to hang from the wall-mounted pegboards whilst the floors were cleaned – commonly they were hung upside down to prevent the seating being discoloured by dust.

Legs were gently tapered to give a delicate appearance with back-posts being topped with finials or pomells. These were not decorative but acted as handles to lift the chair without damaging it. Early seating consisted of wood laths, then leather, cane or woven cotton or wool strip. Rockers



were extremely popular with each component measured and fitted to the body. Shaker craftsmen, in their search for functional perfection, experimented with proportion in relation to physical requirements and the result was a perfect balance of parts. Ingenious devices were invented to extend the function of chairs, such as a tilting foot – a simple wooden ball and socket joint attached to the chair's back legs. This allowed the sitter to lean back whilst keeping the back legs flat to the floor.

## TABLES

Shaker tables, although sold outside the community, were for the most part designed and made for the use of Shakers themselves. Large trestle tables were required for the dining rooms, and these too were shaved down to a minimum. The central rail was moved underneath the top to allow sitters unrestricted leg room. Many work tables, and indeed beds, were fitted with castors to ease cleaning.

## CHESTS AND CUPBOARDS

Shaker communal living required much storage for its members in their respective dormitories. Anything not in use was to be put away to avoid dust and untidiness.

The religious principle of order and neatness caused them to provide a place for everything and everything in its place. To this end all manner of boxes, blanket chests and chests of drawers were built.

The best example is in the making of built-in cupboards – the natural conclusion to the quest for orderliness and neatness.

These cupboards were wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling with numerous drawers that graduated in size, large at the bottom to small at the top. Built into the dormitory wall as a permanent construction, when closed the cupboard achieved a harmonious plane, broken only by the carefully aligned knobs.

