Shaker Inspiration Five Decades of Fine Craftsmanship By Christian Becksvoort

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By Christian Becksvoort







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Introduction

Opinionated? You bet. Nobody goes through life without forming strong likes, dislikes and opinions.

Informative? Positive. Again, working at a craft for five decades or more, one acquires, skills, knowledge and techniques that want to be shared.

Interesting and inspirational? I hope so. Let me state right here and now, however, that this is not intended to be the definitive last word. Nor is it intended to be a path to woodworking nirvana, nor a silver bullet for your business – and I'm not trying to foist my inspirations off on you. I am not a marketing specialist, lawyer, financial advisor or PR guru. What follows is just an overview of what has worked for me – a sharing of my experiences, failures and successes. Feel free to follow your own path. If any of my suggestions motivate or spark your own creativity, all the better.

Rigid? Not. I try to find a balance in my shop, and to suggest other options. I am not an "unplugged" or "silent" woodworker. I can't make a living without machines. Nor am I a powertool fanatic. I think that items spit out by CNC machines are useful for mass production, but have nothing to do with craftsmanship. I use hand tools where it shows, and machines where it doesn't. You make your own choices.

Remember what's important to you, your family, your friends, your standards, your idea of "craftsmanship." Remember to volunteer, to give back and to help others.

Chris Becksvoort, December 2017



Chapter 3:

Solid Wood Furniture Construction

I take wood movement very seriously. Once a piece is out of my shop and paid for, I expect never to see it again. Consequently, I've designed each step of my case construction to allow for seasonal movement in every step of the

process. Let's have a look at a few of these.

Full Panel vs. Frame & Panel

Full-panel construction, sometimes called slab or wide-panel construction,



3-1. Wide-panel construction. The case maintains its height and width year round, but will change in depth, front to back. *DENNIS GRIGGS PHOTO.*

consists of a single board, or a series of boards glued up to form a wider panel. In a case piece, the grain would run up one side, across the top, down the other side and along the bottom. As reiterated from Chapter 1, wood moves across the grain but not in length. Consequently, a carcase built using wide panels will retain its height and width, but the front-to-back depth will vary depending on the seasons and humidity. In the case of a blanket box, the grain wraps all the way around, and the height varies from summer to winter.

Frame-and-panel (or stick-and-panel) construction consists of a relatively narrow frame running around all four sides of a panel, which, no matter what the size of the panel, is free to "float" in the frame, and has no bearing on the wood movement of the frame. Because the frame has long grain running up, across, down and back, the frame remains the same size year-round. There are pros and cons to both approaches, so let's have a closer look.

Until the Middle Ages, Western furniture was all constructed of wide boards or joined panels. However, the Egyptians, as early as the reign of Tu-



tankhamun around 1,300 BCE, used frame-and-panel construction for some of their very ornate pieces. The obvious advantage to wide-board construction is that it's much less work. A six-board chest requires six boards, joinery or nails, and voilà, you're done. If you're going to use frame-and-panel construction for all six surfaces, you will require at least five pieces of wood for each surface, or 30 pieces of wood for the entire exterior case. All those pieces have to be edged, grooved and mortised or tenoned. Right off the bat, the frame-and-panel construction is much more work. Most frame-and-panel building is actually a hybrid, utilizing frames and panels for the sides, bottom and back, and a wide board or panel for

3-2. Wide-panel pine blanket box. In this example, the depth and width remain the same, while the height changes slightly from summer to winter. *DENNIS GRIGGS PHOTO.*

3-3. Frame-and-panel Shaker tailor counter in figured cherry. This is more complex to construct than a wide-panel construction, but it's very stable. DENNIS GRIGGS PHOTO.





3-4. Splined-and-battened closet door. It's somewhat primitive, but it gets the job done.

the top. Nobody wants an expansion gap on a desktop or cabinet top. The same goes for shelves, and sometime bottoms, if the interior is to be used as a shelf. It just invites dust and crumbs to collect on any horizontal surface gaps. So the top of a desk or cabinet, or shelves made with single panels, have to be attached in a manner that allows wood to move with the seasons. With all that extra work, you get a cabinet that is extremely stable, and all those frames can be glued together in any configuration without having to deal with movement (except for the top and shelves).

Wide-panel cases go together much faster and look a lot cleaner, because there are not gaps or interruptions in the grain. Once the four sides are together, expansion and contraction becomes a major issue whenever grain runs perpendicular to an existing panel. Think doors, backs, web frames and mouldings. Most woodworkers opt for an approach that is a hybrid in those situations. Doors for the most part are virtually always frames and panels to avoid massive gaps. Backs as well, in some cases. Alternatively, a series of single boards can be used to isolate wood movement as much as possible (see backs, below).

Doors

Even before frame-and-panel doors come into widespread use, larger doors had to accommodate seasonal wood movement in one way or another. The most common method was to use a series of individual boards, rabbeted, splined or shiplapped, with small spaces in between to allow movement. These doors, sometime two or even three layers thick, were held flat with battens on the inside. The battens were nailed, "clinched," or killed (yes, dead as a door nail). Nowadays, screws are often used instead.

Almost all furniture doors are made with frame-and-panel construction. Let's go over some of the options. For cabinet doors, a 1/4" (6.4mm) groove is run into the top and bottom rails, and likewise the two stiles. Panels can be flat, flush on one or both sides, raised, carved, moulded or inset. In any event, if the panel is solid wood, it is allowed to move, or "float," in the grooves. Some woodworkers purchase small rubber balls to keep panels from rattling. I find that a cheaper and easier method is to center the panel, and drive a small brad (from the inside of the door) through the middle of the rails, close



3-5A. Dovetail batten, visible only from the sides and interior.



3-5B. Door with breadboard ends – just like a tabletop.



3-5C. Hidden breadboard batten, visible from the top, bottom and both edges.



3-5D. Totally invisible batten. Lots more work, but really cool.

to the edge through the panel tongue, and into (but not through) the front of the frame. A bit of filler, or a tiny wood plug makes it all but invisible.

On fine furniture, the corners of doors are usually mortised, tenoned and pinned, for maximum glue area and strength. On tiny clock or desk doors, a bridle joint can be substituted for increased glue area. Kitchen cabinet shops often use stick-and-cope construction. A moulding profile is run along the stile and coped into the rail end, forming a snug, yet relatively weak corner joint. Alternatively, many woodworkers use dowels in the corners, while biscuits are another alternative. Although stronger than a stick-andcope joint, these methods don't have much glue area and are therefore not as structurally strong as a full mortiseand-tenon joint.

So what about slab doors? As stated above, battens are necessary to keep the slab flat. However, I find them cumbersome and gawky looking, and I have been using several alternative techniques. The first is the fairly traditional fitted dovetail batten. It's flush with the inside of the door, and anchored with a small brad at the center.

The second is to make breadboard ends. After all, if you can use breadboards on tabletops and desk lids to keep them flat, why not on doors?

The third procedure is a bit trickier: the hidden breadboard. Cut a groove into the top and bottom ends of the door, and insert the breadboard, or batten, inside the groove. Again, anchor it in the middle.

Finally, the coolest of them all: the totally invisible batten. Make a core of the same wood as the rest of the door, and rip off strips on both sides. Then cut off both ends of the center section, and groove the edges you just cut. Make a batten of the desired width with tongues along both long edges, and cut it slightly shorter than

the center of the core. Glue the whole back together and flatten it. Then glue a face veneer, 1/16" to 1/4"(1.5mm to 6mm) thick, depending on the size of the door, to both sides. Edge all four sides and you have a stable slab door. Nothing showing.

Backs

For cabinet backs you have a few choices. The cheapest, fastest and least historically correct is a sheet of plywood. For higher-quality furniture, and in keeping with historical accuracy, the traditional loose board back, either in primary or secondary wood (depending on if the back will show) will fit the bill. Backs are usually let into rabbets so as not to show on the sides of the case. When using individual boards, the ones on either side are often glued or nailed to the edge of the rabbet. They are connected with either shiplap, tongue and groove, or splines to keep the boards in line, and exclude dust, dirt and light. The boards are nailed top and bottom and on any fixed shelves or dividers. Fairly simple, and relatively painless. However, there is a slight drawback. After years of wood movement, the nail holes tend to become oval, the boards loosen, and no longer offer a lot of diagonal racking resistance, especially in larger cases.

Frame-and-panel backs to the rescue. Although quite a bit more work, the end result is a very attractive back, with about the same stability as plywood (figure 3-6), built basically like a door. I have a standard procedure for all my cherry case pieces, from small wall cabinets, 15-drawer chests, to full size bookcases and even wardrobes. Rabbets on the backs are always 5/8" (1.6cm) deep while the frame side stiles, and top rail is perfectly quartersawn, with a maximum width of 1-5/8" (4.1cm). If working with a more rambunctious wood like yellow birch or hickory, I go with 1-1/2" (3.8cm) for



3-6. Paneled back. When working in cherry, all my backs (no matter the size of the case) have the top and two side frames perfectly quartersawn, and no more than 1-5/8" wide.



Chapter 5: On Design

Design is an even more slippery topic than craftsmanship. Back to the dictionary. Design: "A plan, drawing or concept produced to show the look and function, or workings, of a building, garment, or other object before it is built or made." That's way better than the craftsmanship definition in Chapter 4. Usually, a design starts with an idea or concept. What I'm really trying to uncover here is how to develop an idea, or to put it more plainly, how does one become a designer?

Unless you are distantly related to Leonardo da Vinci, this is going to require a bit of work, education and practice. What, more practice? You bet; nothing comes easy. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, I learned how to read blueprints early on, and followed them meticulously. A lifetime of merely following plans will make you a pretty decent woodworker, but not much of a designer. You've got to give some thought to what you are building, and why it's built this way. Engage mentally with your work. Why is this drawer at the bottom of the cabinet instead of at the top? Question, evaluate, compare.

Function

The biggest takeaway I've learned from studying, admiring and restoring Shaker furniture is that it is first and foremost functional. "All beauty rests on utility," and, "That which in itself has the highest use, possesses the greatest beauty." These Shaker proverbs perfectly state their design ethic, nearly a century before Louis Sullivan declared that, "Form ever follows function." These are words that I design by, that have served me well, that I still keep in mind each time a client wants a new piece. From a furniture maker or designer's point of view, that, I think, should be the first and foremost principle of design.

If you're predisposed to add your own ideas, a curve, a flair, a new texture or color, whatever, that's fine – as long as your take doesn't supersede or replace the primary function of the design: to be useful and functional. A chair has to function as a chair. Is that too difficult a concept to grasp? I roll my eyes when I walk into a gallery or student woodworking show and see a table with a slanted top, or a chair with no seat. "Art furniture" is great, as long as it still meets its primary criteria – to be fully functional as a chair, table, desk or bed. If your idea of whimsy or creativity overwhelms, interferes with or totally obliterates that primary use, then you've crossed a line. Call it sculpture if you're so inclined, but don't call it furniture. It gives us a bad name.

An advertisement I came up with a few years back, and still use on occasion, reads, "Any artist can make something you've never seen before. Very few can create something you'll want to see or use for the rest of your life."To quote the Shakers again, "All beauty that has no foundation in use, soon grows distasteful and needs continuous replacement with something new." In other words, just because it's different doesn't automatically mean it's good or worthwhile. I keep reminding myself not to let my sense of originality overwhelm my sense of purpose. Function is indeed foremost when designing furniture.

Historic Precedents

One can certainly do worse than to follow or imitate historic pieces when



5-1. Queen Anne tea table. This is one of my early efforts, which made me appreciate the Shaker style even more.

designing furniture. I think that's how many of us got our start. With an open mind, and a willingness to learn, we can gain tremendously from copying existing work. Subtle techniques, profiles, proportions and a different way of observing, can all leave impressions on us when copying good or great works from the past. Call it osmosis. Eventually you, too, will be able to discern what makes a great design as opposed to something just ordinary. For example, in one of my previous jobs, I was called upon to make Queen Anne tables and chairs. It took a while to master the technique of creating a cabriole leg. It took even longer to distinguish the subtleties of a really good leg from a ho-hum, or disproportionate leg. Eventually, I got it.

To this day, I have deep respect for the effort, craftsmanship and design that goes into that style of furniture. However, I could never figure out why a chair or table leg would need an eagle claw grasping a cue ball. To put it another way, that style never spoke to me.

Shaker designs, on the other hand,

got my immediate attention. I grew up with Scandinavian furniture in our home. It turns out that in 1927, a Shaker armed rocker found its way to Denmark, where it came to the attention of architect and designer Kaare Klint. While teaching at the Danish Royal Academy of Fine Arts, he had a drawing made of the chair and had students reproduce it. It was 10 years later that Edward Deming Andrews' book "Shaker Furniture: The Craftsmanship of an American Communal Sect" was published, and the Danes discovered the Shakers. The unembellished functionalism clearly struck a chord with them.

Designers such as Borge Mogensen and Hans Wegner were equally influenced by these designs. A Danish delegation actually visited the Hancock Shaker community and returned home impressed by the clean walls of drawers, peg boards and trestle tables. Most historians consider Shaker furniture to be the first modern style furniture. As Hans Wegner noted, "There is much confusion today about what is modern, what is functional, and my hope always is that people will not be drawn to novelty, but will learn to value what is simple and pure in good design. And things should do the job they were designed for. I don't think that's asking too much." Sound familiar?

The Danes took the Shaker design and functionalism to heart, and began producing their version. In the 1960s, they sold it back to us as "Danish Modern."

Evolution of My Designs

I first became aware of Shaker furniture in college. In an art appreciation class, during an otherwise uneventful slide show, images of Shaker clocks, chairs, cabinets and built-ins made an appearance. I took note and something clicked. A few years later, while working in the Washington, D.C., area, I chanced upon a Shaker exhibit at the Renwick Gallery of what was then called the National Collection of Fine Arts (now the National Museum of American Art). I went back many times, transfixed by the unadorned simplicity. Little did I realize that decades later I would touch, measure and reproduce many of the very pieces I was looking at. I bought, and still treasure, the catalog from that 1973 exhibit.

Design Elements

Design elements are merely a set of guidelines, principles or standards that designers incorporate when coming up with a new idea. Each style of furniture has its own design elements, or distinctive characteristics, that immediately identify it as "that" style. For example, Arts & Crafts has its exposed and protruding tenons, corner braces and, of course, dark quartersawn oak.

^{5-2.} Catalog of the Renwick Shaker Exhibit, 1973. This was my first encounter with actual Shaker pieces.

SECTION III: *INSPIRATION*

Chapter 10:

My Designs – A Baker's Dozen

y work has definitely been influenced by Shaker designs. I grew up surrounded by Scandinavian furniture, only to find out that the Scandinavians were also enthralled by Shaker furniture (See Chapter 5).

Therefore it's no small surprise that Shaker design left such a lasting impact on my personal style and aesthetic. My fist experience with Shaker furniture goes back to that aforementioned 1974 exhibit at the Renwick Gallery. I was amazed and astounded by the variety of antique, yet seemingly modern designs. I went back multiple times to try to take it all in. That sense of fascination and awe has never left me.

Though not all my creations are

Shaker inspired, they strongly follow the Shaker's basic tenet of design – that is, function is foremost. Many of my lamp and music stand designs are also influenced by Scandinavian furniture. They are bit looser, more free-flowing, less angular.

The measured drawings included both in this chapter and the next are intended for intermediate woodworkers, and for private use only. If you're building these pieces (some more complex than others), I assume that you are familiar with basic joinery: dados; rabbets; mortise and tenons; dovetails; laps joints etc. Following the guidelines for dimensional changes in wood in Chapter 1 and the techniques outlined in Chapter 3, you should be able to construct a basic case, web frame, back, door, drawer etc., though I don't go into exacting details for each of these items. You'll also notice there is no "Bill of Materials"; you already know my thoughts on those. So take your dimensions directly off of your work. If you're not sure, build a prototype out of pine, poplar or scrap wood. You can never get too much practice. And have fun doing what you love.

The 13 pieces that follow represent a fair introduction to my work and what has inspired me.





10-1. Cherry side table. 30" H x 52" W x 16" D (76.2cm x 133cm x 40.6cm). The single-board top ends are curved, reflecting the slight curves in the end and side rails. The legs are straight tapered from the square shoulders down, and splayed out at 2°. *DENNIS GRIGGS PHOTO.*





Chapter 12: Shaker Classics

C hown here are a few pieces that Utypify classic Shaker design. Many consider Shaker furniture to be "simple." That's far from the reality. It's unadorned, for sure, but often more complex than the pieces appear. The designs, aesthetics, joinery and meticulous craftsmanship are truly created as an "act of worship." True, not all Shaker pieces were perfect. The range of workmanship is evident in nailed-together drawers made for shop use, while those for offices and dwelling houses were fastidiously dovetailed. Likewise, not all Shaker woodworkers had the same degree of talent or experience. But as a general rule of thumb, antiques are old because they were built well.

These designs can be roughly categorized into three periods: Early, Classic and Victorian.

Early (called primitive by some) Shaker furniture was more or less the same as those pieces being made and in and used in New England and the upper and lower Midwest by non Shakers. Pieces from the earliest community's founding in Watervliet, N.Y., in 1776, until about 1820, are considered early. Some of the original converts were cabinet or furniture makers, and brought their design vocabulary with them. Hence there is little difference between the early Shaker pieces and those from the surrounding geographic areas. Even though converts usually brought all their worldly belongings with them, including furniture, there was still a need for additional pieces. These were often designs for a larger, communal setting.

Typically, the early designs were of single-board (or slab) construction, often with wide face frames and conventional raised-panel doors, with wood or iron hardware. Butterfly hinges were often face-mounted. Milk paint was often the finish of choice. Toward the end of the early period, elements such as the mushroom knob, the Shaker peg and built-ins began to appear. The Meeting House at Watervliet, dating to 1794, has all three of these elements.

The Classic period, from roughly 1820 to 1850 or '60, typifies what most of us think of as Shaker furniture. By the early 1800s, membership in the Shaker faith had grown, the Millennial Laws were codified (in 1821) and a coherent design vocabulary began to form, following the rules of simplicity and functionalism. By that time, a second generation of Shakers, those brought in as children and who grew up in the faith, emerged, and they followed the dictates of utilitarianism. Although there are no know drawings or dimensioned plans of Shaker designs, every member knew that, "Beauty rests on utility" and, "That which in itself has the highest use possesses the greatest beauty." This was almost 100 years before Chicago architect Louis Sullivan declared that, "Form ever follows function."

The Shakers did not invent the builtin, the peg board or the ladderback chair, yet they refined these objects to the point that they became their own. Classic designs did away with the raised panel, and replaced it with a flat or "pillow" panel on doors. Mouldings were refined and lessened, and nonessentials, dust catchers and "gingerbread" were deleted. Overall, the designs became cleaner, more functional and lighter in appearance. Milk paint was still used often in bright colors: yellow floors, green beds, blue trim and red highlights. Clear finishes were also coming popular, and were sometimes used with color on the same piece. Figured woods were considered a natural

adornment, and were not shunned.

The Victorian period, from about 1860 on, saw the Shakers adapting to the times. Victorian Shaker designs, quite restrained, are often considered the "step-child," because some Shaker collectors don't think of these in the same terms of the "classic" pieces (the noted Shaker historian Edward Demming Andrews ignored this period entirely.) On the other hand, Victorian aficionados consider the style much too plain. This period has an interesting design evolution. Milk paint and bright colors disappeared almost entirely, and clear finishes such as shellac became prevalent. Mouldings became more prominent, arched doors and panels came into vogue, and brass hardware became more acceptable. Inevitably, "gingerbread" (scroll-sawn decorative elements) also made an appearance. Yet not all pieces built during this period were of the Victorian style. Elder Henry Green of the Alfred, Maine, community made several classic sewing desks during the 1880s and 1890s.

Other than functionalism, there is no one element that describes all Shaker designs – but furniture historians consider Shaker furniture to be the first "modern" designs, and the Shakers were the first to fully embrace asymmetrical designs. Again, utility was of prime importance. If a work counter required drawers on the right and doors on the left, then so be it. To me, the designs are not just modern, but almost timeless. I recall delivering a reproduction to a "glass and chrome" loft in New York City, and the cabinet fit the decor perfectly.

The pieces shown here are a mix of early, mostly classic and some Victorian. Many have been shown in other publications, and are fairly representative of the Shaker style. A few are making a first time appearance here.

My association with the Shakers at Sabbathday Lake started in the mid '70s. My interest, area of expertise and my vocation is furniture – specifically, Shaker furniture. Yet, by concentrating on this one small facet of the Shakers' contribution to society, I am in some respects, short-changing them. When Mother Ann Lee and her followers landed in New York in 1774, furniture was the farthest thing from their minds.

The Shakers, whose official name

is the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, are first and foremost a Christian, celibate and communal religious sect. Their arts, crafts and inventions are purely secondary to their theology, the life of Christ, which also stresses pacifism, equality of the sexes and races. In the larger context, that is a more important legacy than their material creations. However, it is my hope that through their furniture, it may ignite in some readers a further interest in this small but highly influential social and religious group of progressives.

These 16 pieces represent just a fraction of the furniture that the Shakers produced. Should you get the chance, take a look at the genuine article. Visit the Shaker museums at Harvard or Hancock, Mass., Watervliet and Mt. Lebanon, N.Y., Canterbury and Enfield, N.H., Pleasant Hill and South Union, Ky., Shaker Heights, Ohio, or Alfred and New Gloucester, Maine. Seeing the objects, the history, the colors and the workmanship up close and personal is an amazing experience. It has sustained me for decades, and hopefully will leave a lasting impression on you as well.

"Anything may, with strict propriety, be called perfect, which perfectly answers the purpose for which it was designed."

- Shaker Proverb



12-1. Spindle-back bench. 33" H x 61-1/4" W x 17-1/2" D (83.8cm x 155.5cm x 44.5cm).

This is one of several extant settees made in the Enfield, N.H., community in the early 19th century. These and similar settees were used in the meeting house; some are up to 12' long. This one has a pine seat with maple legs, rungs, spindles and back. The back is tapered from 5/8" at the bottom to 1/2" at the top. Structurally, the maple legs joined into the pine seat are somewhat weak. Visually, it is a fascinating piece; the seat ends are kidney shaped, and rounded and tapered on three sides.

COURTESY OF THE SHAKER MUSEUM, MT. LEBANON, N.Y. JOHN MULLIGAN PHOTO.



12-2. Shaker production chairs. Sizes vary.

The Shakers made their chairs predominantly for their own use, and some for sale. However, at the Mt. Lebanon, N.Y., community, Br. Robert Wagan started and ran a production shop of chairs for sale to the world, a major industry for that community. The chairs ranged in size from the smallest, "o," to the largest "7." The variety of options were almost mind boggling: straight chairs with no arms, chairs with arms, rockers without arms, rockers with arms, and each of those were available with the traditional Mt. Lebanon acorn finials, shawl rails and woven backs. Finishes included mahogany (the most popular), ebony, cherry or white (natural). The early chairs had splint seats, while later ones had the traditional Shaker webbing, originally in wool but later in cotton. These were available in a variety of solid colors, as well as stripped and flame patterns. Not only that, but several weaving patterns were also an option. Shown are six variations of Mt. Lebanon rockers.

COURTESY OF THE SHAKER MUSEUM, MT. LEBANON, N.Y. MICHAEL FREDERICKS PHOTO.

12-3. Rocker. (right) 44" H x 21" W x 23-1/2" D (111.8cm x 53.3cm x 59.7cm).

This Alfred, Maine, rocking chair, is identified by the rounded shoulder with a barely visible ridge at the top of the post, and the typical rounded finial, or pommel. This is one of several made by an unknown maker around 1820. The front posts have a vase-shaped turning from the seat up, and the arms have a flat side scroll. The finish is red paint, except for the two top slats which are natural; they were either stripped or they are replacements. Most of the New England rocking chairs had relatively short rockers (the extremely short ones were known as "suicide rockers," because you didn't want to fall asleep in them), while those of the southern communities, notably in Pleasant Hill, Ky., were much longer, for a more enjoy-able rocking experience.

COURTESY OF THE UNITED SOCIETY OF SHAKERS, SABBATHDAY LAKE, MAINE.

