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Sidebar: Shaker Furniture

The members of the Shaker religious communities were enjoined to make all things “plain and without superfluity,” and much of their furniture from the mid-19th century was completely undecorated. The spare forms, exposed joinery and sturdy craftsmanship in Shaker woodwork appealed to Modernist sensibilities in America and Europe, yet it was every bit as American as any of the 18th-century Colonial styles that had been so popular in the first part of the century. It had some of the same sense of virtue as the earlier Gothic.

It should be noted that Shaker furniture was not uniform. The style changed over the years, reflecting changes of fashion outside the communities. Some was decorated with molding and beaded edges, and a few late 19th-century examples were downright Victorian. Perhaps surprisingly, before the 1850s much Shaker furniture was painted or stained in bright colors. In many cases, the Shakers themselves stripped the painted furniture back down to plain wood as the fashion passed. It was not all handmade: they exploited power machinery when they could, and the Shaker community in Mount Lebanon, N.Y. operated a highly mechanized chair factory for five decades.