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In the Arts: Fascinating Shaker show speaks of spirit occupying form

By PHILIP ISAACSON



"Tree of Life" needlework from the exhibition of Shaker items at the Portland Museum of Art.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist sage, has written that the Shakers believed their furniture was designed by angels. I note this because I have been rereading his admirable introduction to "Religion in Wood," the seminal book on the material culture of the Shakers by Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews.

My excursion into the 50-old book is relevant to this column in light of the Portland Museum of Art's "Gather Up the Fragments: The Andrews Shaker Collection." The exhibition is of such importance and is so enriching of my own interests that I have been pulling out the literature on the subject.

Whether, after seeing the show, you will join with Merton in concluding that the peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it, I cannot say.

I do offer testimony that at times, I have seen Shaker chairs so exquisite in their proportions and so perfect in their workmanship that they, celestial associations aside, stand as universal exemplars of harmony.

This proposition does not apply to every object in this show, but for a blanket appraisal of the event, the term "fascinating" is not overly enthusiastic. If the name "Shaker" and if the concept that an object should be what it is supposed to be enter into your own vision, you will find the event irresistible.

The material at PMA covers a range of mid-19th-century endeavors in the Shaker communities of Hancock, Mass., and nearby New Lebanon, N.Y. The time and locale add up to what has come to be thought of as the classic period in Shaker aesthetics and, thus, is the period to which we have been most often exposed.

In that sense, much of the show is an affirmation of the inspiration and simplicity that we associate with Shaker work.

It confirms the approval that we grant it, and adds materiality to what we have known largely through books and illustration.



Haystack School of Crafts in Deer Isle, designed by architect Edward Larrabee Barnes, from "Haystack's Architecture: Vision and Legacy."

To apprehend the perfection of the show's iconic 1840 Mount Lebanon pine chest in close quarters is, in itself, worth a trip to the museum. It would be an object of admiration even if nothing were known of its manufacture. Add what we do know about the intention of its makers, and it becomes an act of worship by them.

The show is graced by a number of what have come to be known as Spirit Drawings. There are complex views as to their inspirational source, but between 1840 and the middle of the 1850s, a small quantity of ink and watercolor drawings were produced in the Hancock and New Lebanon communities that, through their visual naivete and the ephemerality of their touch, are utterly beguiling. These too are worth a trip to the PMA.

I have avoided any particular reference to the Andrews in this review. They, like Lord Elgin and the Parthenon marbles, Bernard Berenson's association with Joseph Duveen or A.S.W. Rosenbach's acquisition of great works of printing, tell complex and controversial stories. I elect to believe, however, that it is substantially through the Andrews' devotion to the uniqueness and importance of things Shaker that much has been preserved for our benefit. This show draws upon material that was owned or at one time passed through their hands.

In its 200 or so items, it can be seen as testimony to a belief that spirit may so occupy form as to become an act of worship.

A thick handsome book that shares the same title as the show serves as its catalog. It is a compendium of Shaker material culture.

HAYSTACK INSPIRATIONS

I also urge a visit to "Haystack's Architecture: Vision and Legacy" at Storefront for Architecture, a peripatetic gallery at 490 Congress St., Portland.

Organized by architect Carol A. Wilson, it is an encomium to Haystack School of Crafts in Deer Isle, its architect Edward Larrabee Barnes and current attitudes on Modernism in architecture.

Haystack lightly touches upon a thin ribbon of granite separating the forest from the sea. In its design, we catch the impulse of the architect in all of its freshness. In aesthetic terms, it is a light sketch about the forest, wind, moving water, clouds and the fragile intersection of them with the geometry of Modernism.

Its concept is of lightly scaled wooden platforms cautiously bumped down the side of the state of Maine.

If you pulled Haystack up and carted it away, there would be no residual imprint; Barnes never would have been there. In achieving its design, the architect's pencil must have moved quickly across the paper, and so do clouds.

It is ironic that Barnes' thrilling achievement should predicate its future on an aesthetic that embraces transience. The structures along those platforms make a virtue of fragility.

The school's shops, cabins and small halls -- all in light, untreated cedar shingles -- suggest themselves as informal pavilions, here for a limited purpose and for a limited time and cavalier about what the climate has in store for them.

The choice of fabric, of forms and the response to the site are so congenial, so embracing of one another, that they seem to exclude any other expressive solution. In architecture, that is rare.

There is no coyness in Haystack. The long platforms and structures along it stand for what takes place within their precincts, the acquisition of artisanal skills and the accommodation of them to current views on aesthetics. They embrace the virtue of things made by hand.

Haystack looks like it could have been made by a group of Maine carpenters -- and it was.

Accompanying the models, plans and photographs of Haystack are similar presentations by 12 distinguished architects from the U.S. and Canada whose work, in some manner, has a kinship with Barnes'.

AFFINITY IN DRAWING

A concomitant (and down-the-street neighbor) to the Haystack show is "Drawing the Line #10" at the June Fitzpatrick at MECA. The names of the participants -- Noa Warren, Kendra Ferguson, Greg Parker and August Ventimiglia -- speak to the affinity of artists to the Haystack aesthetic. They share with one another the logic of geometry -- the hard edge, linear clarity and economy.

The most effusive of the drawing exhibitors is Warren. Devising networks of lines, he may coax them into lacy undulations or, by contrast, into strictly regimented and severely angulated formations. Against dark grounds, the lines -- whether lazy or attentive -- are declarative and forceful.

Ferguson is a minimalist of such subtlety that her work is accomplished more through incision, occasional cutting and even more occasional collage than through markings in graphite. The sheet is the statement; the administrations to it are revealed after search and are exquisite. Work of this order is rare and of great delight.

Ventimiglia's chalk drawings extract from repetitive lines -- some parallel, some calculated to vector to a central point -- a density that belies their origin. The lines form into modulated belts that read as infinitely varied.

Greg Parker is a master of geometric abstraction, and it is a pleasure to see recent work by him. It appears on large suspended sheets, and like his classic drawings, plays large architectonic forms against darkening skies. They are haunting.

There are also handsome examples of his earlier pastel and graphite cellular forms on tight panels.

This show represents classic geometric Modernism as we have come to understand it.

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ON VIEW

"GATHER UP THE FRAGMENTS: THE ANDREWS SHAKER COLLECTION"

WHERE: Portland Museum of Art, 7 Congress Square. 775-6148

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Sunday; until 9 p.m. Friday

CLOSES: Feb. 5

"HAYSTACK'S ARCHITECTURE: VISION AND LEGACY"

WHERE: Storefront for Architecture, 490 Congress St., Portland. 781-4684

HOURS: 2 to 6 p.m. Thursday to Saturday

CLOSES: Dec. 10

"DRAWING THE LINE #10"

WHERE: June Fitzpatrick Gallery at MECA, 522 Congress St., Portland. 699-5083

HOURS: Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday

CLOSES: Nov. 26

Additional Photos



[click image to enlarge](#)

Untitled (yellow radial) by August Ventimiglia at the June Fitzpatrick Gallery at MECA in Portland.



[click image to enlarge](#)

Chair from the exhibition of Shaker items at the Portland Museum of Art.



[click image to enlarge](#)

A home in Ghent, Belgium, designed by architect Toshiko Mori, from "Haystack's Architecture: Vision and Legacy."



[click image to enlarge](#)

A home designed