

Shaker crafts viewed as art, history

By MARY CHALLENGER
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The Shakers believed they were worshipping God with every broom they sewed, every piece of furniture they carved, every fabric they wove.

Judging by the modern workplace, this philosophy failed to capture the fancy of mainstream America. Still, the Shakers, a sect of the Quakers who immigrated from England in the 1770s, did leave behind a valuable legacy — their craftsmanship.

Examples of Shaker works can be seen in "Crafting Utopia, The Art of Shaker Women," an exhibit opening today at the Davenport Museum of Art. The exhibit, which runs through Nov. 26, features 125 objects from the Hancock Village near Pittsfield,



Apple peeler

Mass., one of the last Shaker villages to close. The artifacts include cupboards, rocking chairs, desks, candlestands, spinning wheels, clothing and woven baskets.

After the showing in Davenport, these objects will go on display at The Louvre in Paris. At first glance, "Crafting Utopia" might seem a better fit for a historical museum, something curator Michelle Robinson freely acknowledges.

"This is new for us," she said. "We've never done a contextual historical show before. I've been

DETAILS

WHAT: "Crafting Utopia, the Art of Shaker Women"

WHERE: Davenport Museum of Art, 1737 W. 12th St.

WHEN: Today through Nov. 26. The museum is open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Thursday 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Sunday 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

COST: Admission is free (\$3 donation encouraged)

SPECIAL EVENTS: For today's opening, there will be music and dance, pie and cider from 1 to 4 p.m. Every day, in the children's center, visitors can build oval boxes out of poster paper, work with Shaker fabric, decorate seed packets and make Shaker "gift" drawings.

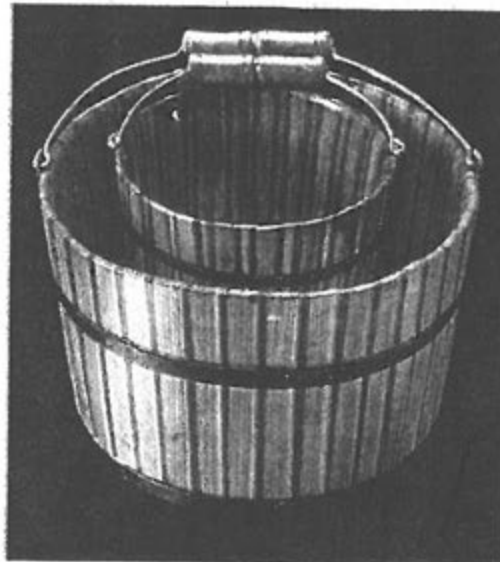
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trying to bring new and different things to the community and this was such a unique opportunity I couldn't pass this up."

The Shaker exhibition is part of the art world's embrace of "decorative arts" — the notion that household items can be art.

"Decorative arts are becoming more and more popular," Robinson said. "Eighteenth-century English furniture Chippendale, no one would say that's not art, but when Chippendale was making those chairs, people sat in them. Finely made objects have always been welcomed in the art world, and I think these qualify."

It's not just the quality of the



SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Shaker art: Wooden stave buckets.

artifacts but the history of the people who made them that makes "Crafting Utopia" so interesting. Officially known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, the Shakers believed in celibate communal living and exuberant worship. Their services were so heavy on dance and music they came to be known as the "Shaking Quakers."

The Shakers were innovators in other ways as well, Robinson said. They were among the earliest societies to look at the issue of gender equality and were renowned for their progressive farming methods and inventions, such as sewn brooms and the circular saw. They established stores where they sold herbal medicines, packets of hybrid

seeds and other crafts.

"Crafting Utopia" is as much an introduction to Shaker society as it is to Shaker arts and crafts. A special on the Shakers by documentarian Ken Burns will be shown continuously in the lobby of the art museum, and a local couple that once lived in a Shaker community will demonstrate Shaker music and dance.

Children (and adults) will be invited to make Shaker oval boxes

out of poster board, and the gift shop will be selling a Shaker cookbook.

"My mouth drools every time I look at it," Robinson said.

About the only thing the exhibit doesn't have is examples of Shaker "gift" drawings: watercolor drawings inspired by Bible verses. The Shaker gift drawings from Hancock Village are being exhibited elsewhere, Robinson said.

"We're trying to present a more or less comprehensive look at Shaker life, Shaker culture and the wonderful philosophy that all work is worship," Robinson said. "It's a pretty neat philosophy if you think about it."

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