



This apple peeler is part of the Shaker exhibit on display at the Davenport Museum of Art.

Shaker art: It's simply beautiful

Review

'Crafting Utopia: The Art of Shaker Women' will be on display through Nov. 26 at the Davenport Museum of Art.

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A palpable feeling of peace emanates from the Davenport Museum of Art's current exhibit, "Crafting Utopia: The Art of Shaker Women." This collection of furniture and tools for everyday living in a simpler time comes from the Shaker village in Hancock, Mass., one of the last to close.

One might expect the austere

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absence of color seen in some other religious sects, but the Shakers loved the flash of crimson in a hooded cape, the rich wine color of a velvet bonnet further embellished with diamond quilting, and silk scarves in delicious pastels.

If you want to brief yourself before taking a look, the exhibit includes a table where you can sit and read about the sect that produced these beautiful things.

Ann Lee, born in Manchester, England, had a dazzling vision of Jesus in 1770 and founded a religious sect that tried to serve God day and night and never commit sin. Members believed in celibacy and the necessity of putting their hands to work and their hearts to God.

Ms. Lee brought eight followers to New York in 1774, and the movement spread as the Shakers tried to create a heaven on earth. Besides reading about the movement, you can watch a video in which a few of the surviving Shakers talk about their lives.

They raised silkworms, and somehow they managed to create waterproof and wrinkle-proof cloth.

The exhibit showcases ordinary objects like wooden pails and wood and tin dippers, which are beautiful because of their perfect proportions and careful workmanship. Also included is a simple but useful towel rack holding reproduction towels woven like the originals.

An ironstone pitcher with a raised leaf design and a matching washbowl sit on a washstand of tiger maple, butternut and pine with brass and iron touches. An ironstone chamber pot looks almost too small for its intended purpose.

A drop-leaf writing table of

birch and white pine invites the touch, but don't yield to the temptation. One also may be tempted to sit in a slender rocking chair with a seat of woven cloth tape. Resist!

The exhibit also includes a small hanging cupboard, a lidded wooden box, simple iron tongs and shovel, and a side chair with a caned seat. A tape loom creates the cloth tape for which the Shakers found so many uses.

Some things have unfamiliar names and uses, such as the table swift. It looks like a device for winding yarn.

A sewing case with many drawers and a cross-legged sewing table that looks like a TV table seem to be very useful pieces.

A spool rack, a lap-held tape loom and wool cards hint at their uses, and a tripod candle stand would have provided illumination however they were plied.

Beautifully precise samplers are part of the exhibit, as is a Brother's work shirt, a collarless garment of coarse linen.

Wooden carriers and boxes in oval and square shapes have rich colors, and a leather-lined basket, an apple basket and a number of basket molds also are on display.

Even the grubby side of life called for beautiful tools like carefully shaped whisk brooms and dustpans and a scrub brush with a leather strap.

The Shakers invented the clothespin, and the work of their hands is beautiful, but only about a dozen of them survive. Thomas Jefferson once said of them, "If their principles are maintained, they are destined to overthrow all other religions."

That hasn't happened. Why? Perhaps because when celibacy rules, every generation has to start from square one.