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**WHAT:** Crafting Utopia: The Art of Shaker Women

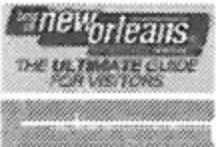
**WHEN:** Through Nov. 17

**WHERE:** Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane Campus, 865-5328

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Bare essentials: The almost geometric beauty of Shaker furniture can be seen in works like this spinning wheel, which becomes an almost Platonic archetype.

Who were those people, anyway? On the rare occasions when the Shakers are mentioned, it is usually for their furniture, which is prized by collectors. But they were not a furniture company; they were one of those idealistic religious cults that flourished in America's earliest decades, a utopian offshoot of the Quakers who lived communally and believed that the apocalypse was imminent. Beyond furniture,

they were also known for their celibacy, which circumvented their ability to breed new little Shakers. Because they were also exclusive and stopped accepting new members long ago, they are all but extinct today.

What does this have to do with art? Not much and a lot. The Shakers made their own furniture and tools because they believed in a life of labor undertaken with a pure heart. In design, this translated into a spare, straight and narrow quality as well as a

precisely fastidious use of resources. Shaker women were decision makers and laborers and performed tasks that were considered "men's work" in the secular world outside. This *Crafting Utopia* show at the Newcomb Art Gallery is a first-of-its-kind look at the arts and crafts of the women of the Hancock Shaker Village, which was founded in Pittsfield, Mass., in 1790. Their designs appear to have changed very little since and might induce mild culture shock in locals if for no other reason than that the Shaker aesthetic is in many ways the opposite of all that south Louisiana stands for in design.

In other words, the heft, grace and generosity of line seen in 19th century Louisiana furniture by, say, Prudent Mallard, are nowhere to be seen here, and I have to admit to being put off by Shaker stuff for years because of what I'd seen in pictures and a few objects on display. It all looked so, well, uptight: pinched, rigid and uncomfortable. Even when I briefly lived near Hancock Village, I never visited the place. As a native Louisianian, any sort of Puritanism has always rubbed me the wrong way. But once you get over the initial shock, this *Crafting Utopia* show can be real eye opener, and there actually is a lot to be admired here.

First of all, there is an almost geometric beauty to all those functional objects reduced to their simplest possible forms. A spinning wheel like the one seen here becomes an almost Platonic archetype -- a distilled essence of spinning wheel -- by virtue of being reduced to its barest and sparest essentials. The same applies to their legendary oval boxes, oblong covered wooden canisters that at first glance might almost pass for the designs of another utopian movement, the legendary Bauhaus design group of 1920s Germany, such is their cleanly machined precision.

Such items also recall a story about Ludwig Wittgenstein, the legendary Austrian philosopher of mathematics, who once redid his sister's apartment according to his own design, a scheme so spare that bare light bulbs protruded from sockets set directly into the plaster. The door and window trim was so minimal as to be almost nonexistent; of course, it was false economy -- their family was the wealthiest in Austria at the time -- but it does suggest that Wittgenstein might have empathized with the Shakers.

One could go on about the pristine craftsmanship and Spartan eloquence of their designs for ordinary furniture and tools, but it was while admiring an ingeniously crafted sewing desk that I came to realize what it was that gave such ostensibly severe objects their surprising glow of inner warmth. No, it wasn't any brand of furniture oil or anything like that. It's just that when you look very closely at every little detail affecting the way each wooden or metal part is crafted, everything is there for a reason; even the slightest mark expresses a profound regard for their birch, maple, iron, brass or leather materials, as well as a deep integrity of purpose on their part. These items are not only beautifully made under their deceptively simple surfaces, they are also – to put it as simply as possible – labors of love. And you know, you just don't see that every day. You really don't. It's still an acquired taste, and I'd certainly never want to be a Shaker, but in their own peculiar way, they really were on to something.



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