

*Selling Shaker: The Commodification of Shaker Design in the Twentieth Century.* By Stephen Bowe and Peter Richmond. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007. x + 404 pp. Photographs, bibliography, notes, index. Paper, \$40.00. ISBN: 1-846-31009-1.

Reviewed by Per Hansen

In 1774, a small religious group migrated from Manchester, England, and settled in New England. The sect, which came to be known as Shakers, established a number of small communities, where they lived in accordance with their strict religious beliefs. Mother Ann Lee, who led the group across the Atlantic, coined the slogan, “Put your hands to work and your hearts to God,” and this they did. The hands were employed in—among other things—producing furniture and tools for themselves, and eventually in selling furniture to the outside world.

Stephen Bowe and Peter Richmond, design scholars and historians at Liverpool John Moores University and the University of Liverpool, respectively, have written *Selling Shaker*, in which they describe and analyze what they call the “commodification” of Shaker furniture during the twentieth century. They have arranged the book chronologically, and they focus on the many Shaker exhibitions organized in the United States and—later on—in the United Kingdom. Correspondingly, they primarily rely on exhibition catalogues to support their text, while drawing from magazines, books, newspapers, and periodicals to supplement their analysis.

Bowe and Richmond’s focus is on how Shaker furniture was represented and how this representation changed over time. They discuss in detail the primary disseminators of information about the Shakers, including a number of museums. Among the earliest and most important promoters were Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, antique dealers and scholars, who, besides collecting some of the best pieces for themselves, began in the 1920s to construct a narrative that “modernized” Shaker furniture. While they emphasized its similarities with the contemporary style of modernism or functionalism, other aspects of the work were omitted. By making a point of the craftsmanship, simplicity, honesty, and utility of the Shaker furniture, they established a parallel with modern aesthetics. At the same time, interest in Shaker furniture arose because it coincided with a period when Americans were seeking out indigenous American design, a trend that accelerated at the turn of the century. The Shaker narrative, as it was constructed by the Andrews, fit perfectly into this context. This was the beginning of the first commercial phase, launching sales of many significant pieces of Shaker furniture to wealthy collectors and museums.

The second phase of commercialization started in the 1940s, when collecting and selling original Shaker furniture became more widespread and reproductions began to find their way into the marketplace. Finally, beginning in the mid-1970s, its market penetration increased: the furniture also became known abroad; auction houses, among others, sold pieces to celebrities, such as Bill Cosby and Oprah Winfrey; and consumers of more modest means began to be able to purchase mass-produced reproductions. By the

late 1990s, Shaker furniture was established as a brand and was sold in mainstream furniture stores, such as IKEA, Conran, and Marks & Spencer.

While the Andrews' modernism narrative remained influential, modifications to it occurred over time. An argument was made that some of the Shaker furniture built around 1860 was also influenced by the Victorian style, and a parallel interpretation, "Shaker furniture as art discourse," began to compete with the functionalist interpretation. That such shifts in perspective occurred is not surprising. As the context changed, the meaning of Shaker furniture changed with it, and the Andrews' narrative began to come under pressure.

*Selling Shaker* deals with an interesting topic, and the authors draw some interesting conclusions. However, the book suffers from some annoying shortcomings. First of all, rather than interpreting and analyzing the material and then presenting it in their own words, Bowe and Richmond use lengthy, repetitive—and sometimes irrelevant—quotations to illustrate their points. Often, these quotations are left to speak for themselves. Since they constitute about 30 percent to 40 percent of the text, the analysis is often unfocused and undisciplined. Another problem is that even though the book contains some references to material culture, it suffers from a lack of theoretical perspective, especially on consumers. Critical questions are not addressed. For instance, What consumer groups did Shaker furniture appeal to and why? What was the role of Shaker furniture in consumers' construction of lifestyle and identity? Nor do the authors explain how business used the Shaker exhibitions and narratives in promoting reproductions. They also leave unexplored how the advent of consumer society, the decline of modernism, and the rise of "postmodernism" influenced the production, distribution, and consumption of Shaker furniture.

In all fairness, I should point out that *Selling Shaker* is not a business history—even broadly conceived. Therefore, it is hardly fair to blame the authors for failing to appeal to business historians (again, broadly conceived). However, even considered on its own merits, the heavy use of quotations (even in the many footnotes), the relatively sparse primary material, and the lack of a stringent analytic focus leads me to conclude that the authors were overwhelmed by their material. Thus, the interesting observations and insights that they do make are often lost. A shorter, more focused book, or even deciding to shape their material into an article, would have been a better solution.

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