

Shakers

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Shaker

Shakerism was founded by an illiterate English factory worker named Ann Lee. Guided by divine visions and signs, she and eight pilgrims came to America in 1774 to spread her gospel in the New World (Florentine Films and WETA,2023, www.pbs.org).

The Shakers were guided by core values of conviction, integrity, inclusion, and innovation. They were early advocates of gender equality, welcomed African Americans, practiced pacifism, and put community needs above individual ones (Shaker Museum,2023, www.shakermuseum.us). They were successful entrepreneurs known for their various manufacturing enterprises, their creation of beautiful objects that have fascinated generations of admirers, and their significant impact on modern design and architecture (Shaker Museum,2023, www.shakermuseum.us). The Shaker philosophy has led to an amazing array of designs. The Shakers invented, among other things, the circular saw, the washing machine, and the flat broom (Poter,2007, www.bokardo.com). They were known for their seed and medicinal enterprises, and for manufacturing brooms, chairs, baskets, cloaks, bonnets, and round and oval bent-wood boxes of durable furniture (Shaker Museum,2023, www.shakermuseum.us).

The Shaker design philosophy is one of prioritization: their main priority is to be necessary and useful(Poter,2007, www.bokardo.com). Then, once that has been achieved, make something beautiful. To me, this is a great way to explain design, without sacrificing beauty or expression of the designer (Poter,2007, www.bokardo.com). "Beauty rests on utility. That which has in itself the highest use possesses the greatest beauty (Harwood,2012, p.502). Anything may, with strict propriety, be called perfect which perfectly answers the purpose of which it was designed." — Shaker saying (Harwood,2012, p.502).

The Shakers made important contributions to religious thought, progressive causes, music, craft, agriculture, and industry in the 19th and 20th centuries (Shaker Museum,2023, www.shakermuseum.us).

Shaker's religious beliefs are essentially fundamental Christianity, although there are some clearly unique beliefs that deviate from the main branches of Christianity and other sects (Encyclopedia of World Cultures,2018, www.encyclopedia.com). The Shakers reject the Trinity; instead, they believe in a God made up of female and male elements reflected both in the supernatural and the real worlds (Encyclopedia of World Cultures,2018, www.encyclopedia.com). The requirement of celibacy is based on the belief that sin arose from Adam and Eve's sexual behavior in the Garden of Eden, although they do not feel that non-Shakers who marry and have sexual relations are sinners (Encyclopedia of World Cultures,2018, www.encyclopedia.com). The Shakers were also strong believers in active, direct communication with the deceased, but this practice apparently declined over the years (Encyclopedia of World Cultures,2018, www.encyclopedia.com).

In 1821, the first of the Millennial Laws, rules for life and conduct, are circulated among Shaker communities (Harwood,2012, p.503).

All members share equally in the community, so order, uniformity, and consistency dominate daily life, including dress, schedules, tasks, housing, and furnishings (Harwood,2012, p.503).

The Shakers believed society could be perfected and a paradise on earth created through communal living, gender and racial equality, pacifism, confession of sin, celibacy, and separation from the world (Shaker Museum,2023, www.shakermuseum.us). The Shakers' religious and administrative leadership consisted of a man and a woman who held equal authority at each level. They worshiped

with their own unique songs and dances, and brought spiritual practice into their everyday tasks (Shaker Museum,2023, www.shakermuseum.us).

Today, just a few Shakers still live in a single village in Maine. To all appearances, these are the last Shakers (Florentine Films and WETA,2023, www.pbs.org). But the living Shakers faithfully assert that their religion will never die. Mother Ann predicted that Shakerism would dwindle to as few members as a child could count on one hand, and then overcome all nations (Florentine Films and WETA,2023, www.pbs.org). “This is God’s work,” says Sister Mildred Barker, “and what could bring that to an end? Nothing that we humans, that mortals do.” (Florentine Films and WETA,2023, www.pbs.org).

Following the Civil War, membership declines as public fascination with utopian societies and religious fervor wanes (Harwood,2012, p.502). The simple and celibate Shaker way of life no longer appeals. Economic woes plague some communities, and they begin to disband and sell or abandon their buildings. Membership continues to dwindle through the 19th and 20th centuries (Harwood,2012,p.502). Today, one active community remains, and a few villages are museums or preservation (Harwood,2012,p.502).

References

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