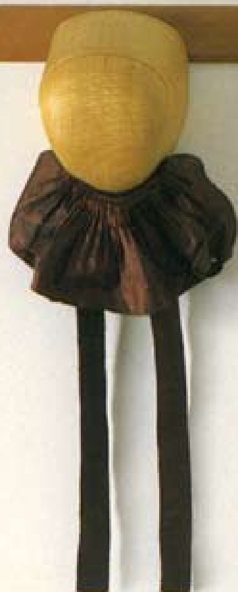
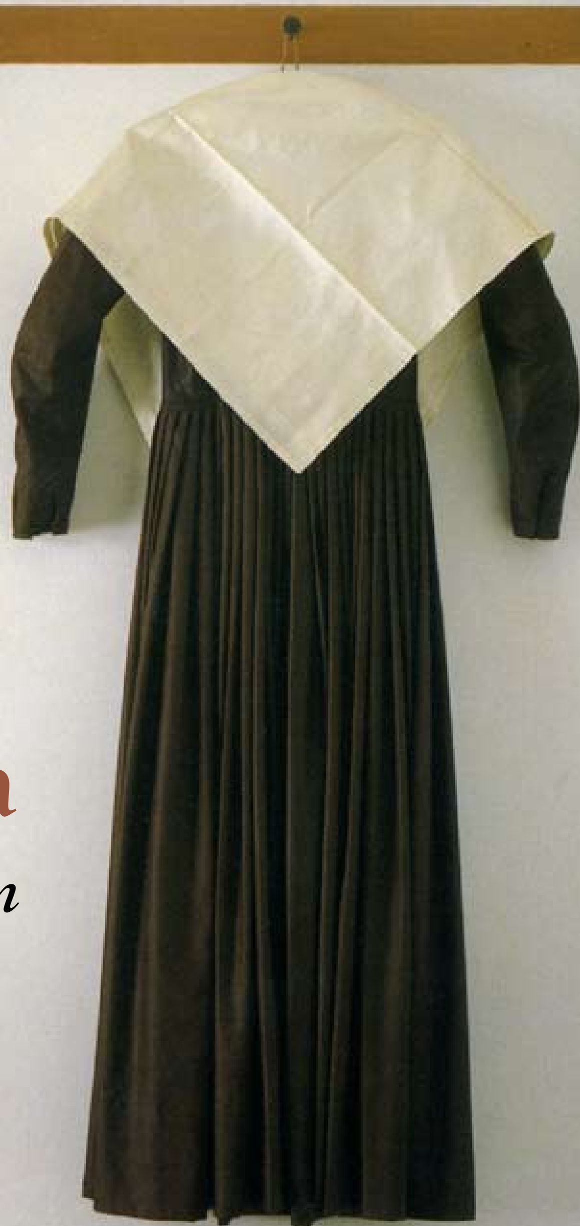
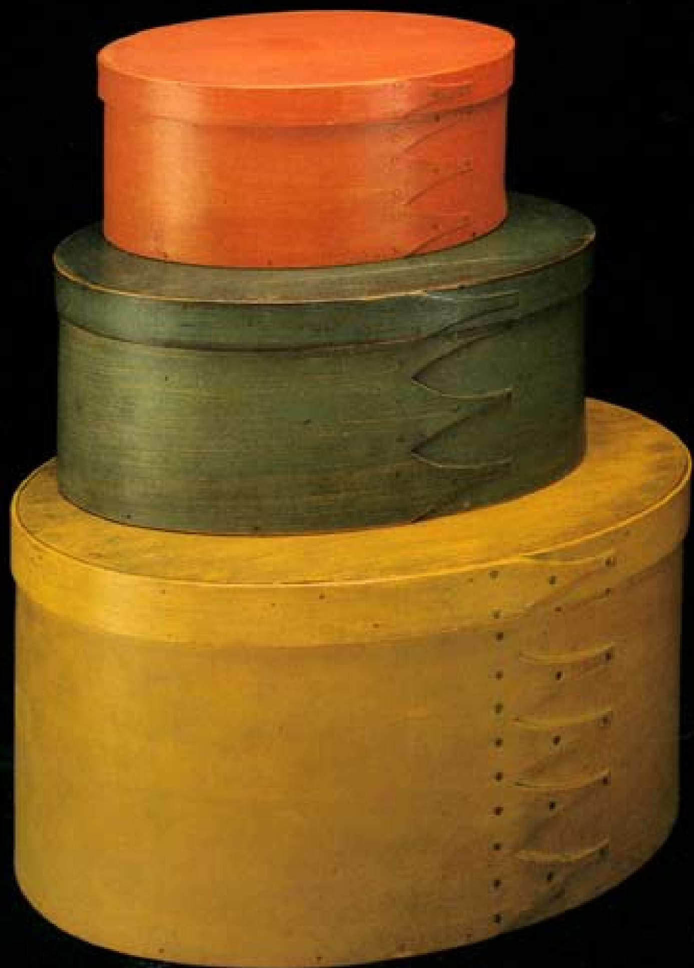



Crafting Utopia

The Art of Shaker Women



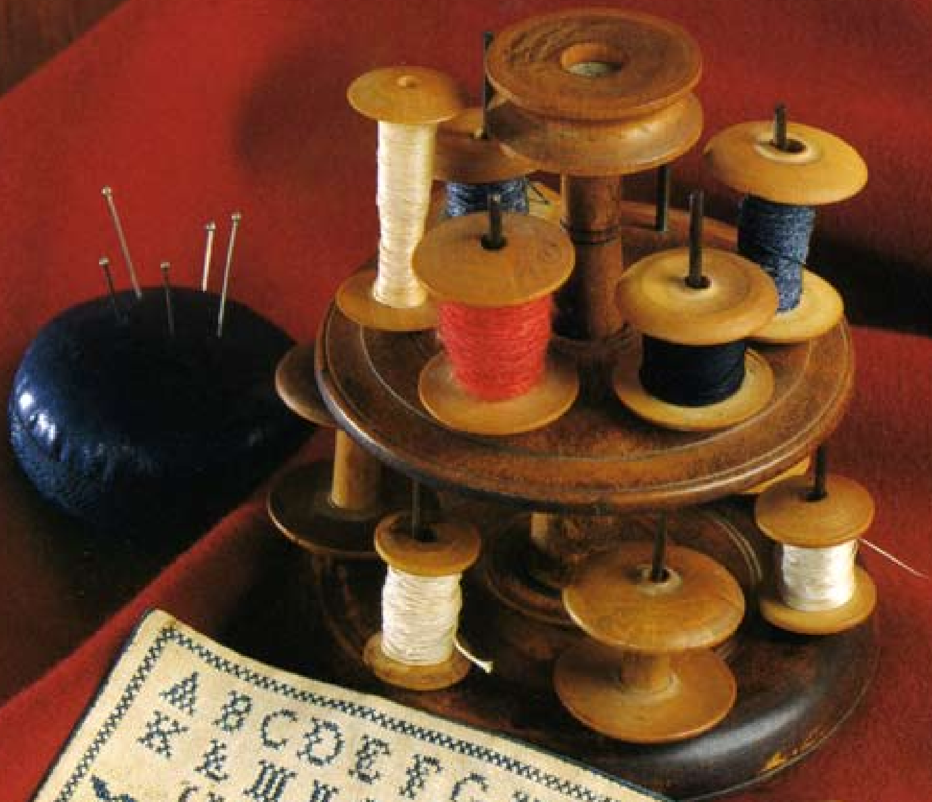
The Midwest as Utopia:
The Amana Colonies and Bishop Hill

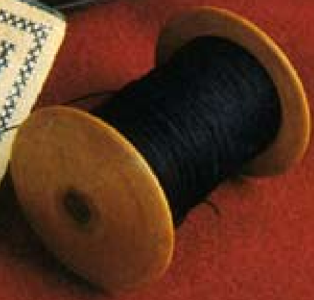
Scores of religious and communal societies flourished in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries. Although most of these were short lived, a few, like the Shaker movement, took hold and became part of the American fabric. The promise of tolerance granted to these various belief systems and the increasing and more powerful role of women in the 19th century were two contributing factors to the growth of communal societies that either sought Eden in America or waited for Christ's next coming.

Other utopian societies pushed further West than the Shakers. The Amana Society in Iowa traced its roots to a German sect called inspirationists, who believed that God provided divine guidance through a succession of human instruments whose spiritual lineage reached back to the 16th century. In 1854, one of these "instruments", a German carpenter, Christian Metz, led the leaders of his New York community to Iowa where they purchased thousands of acres on the Iowa River. They named the six villages that comprised their new utopia, Arnana, from a verse in the Song of Solomon. In a few years, pooled resources and pooled labor created a prosperous farming and industrial society. As in other religious, communal societies, the people of Amana wore uniform clothing to discourage vanity, sensuality, and comparisons of rank. Marriage was allowed but celibacy was promoted. The incorporated group flourished until 1932, when business and religious activities were split into two societies.

In 1846, a group fleeing religious persecution in Sweden established the town of Bishop Hill in western Illinois. The promise of fertile farmland near the Mississippi and religious tolerance drew the group's leader, Eric Jansson, to the area in an attempt to build a paradise on earth. Cholera epidemics, bad business investments, and Jansson's oppressive rule of the community contributed to its eventual demise in 1861. One hundred years later the Bishop Hill Heritage Association was formed to restore the remaining buildings so that visitors could get a sense of this "Utopia on the prairie."

—Michelle Robinson, Curator, Davenport Museum of Art





The Shakers

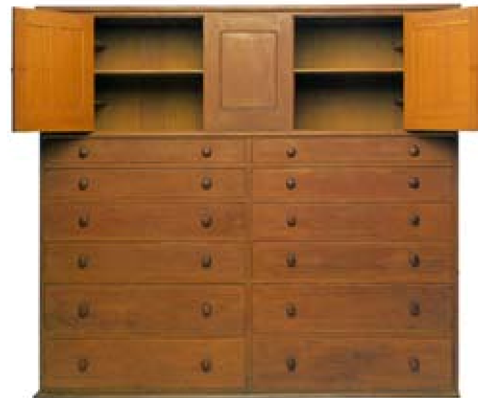
The Shaker "story" has been told repeatedly. Shakers have been looked at in terms of their architecture, furniture, textiles, and wooden wares produced during their most prolific period of production in the early and mid-nineteenth century, and through the songs and dances that accompanied their worship. The most common view of Shaker history has been through their products, but without so much attention to Shaker women and the religious culture that inspired them.

The material culture of the Shakers has received considerable scholarly and pictorial attention, particularly in the architecture and furniture created between 1800 and 1850. The pieces produced during that era have been identified by contemporary antiques dealers and collectors as "classics" in Shaker design, somehow the hallmark of ideal Shaker craftsmanship. They may best be understood, however, by placing them back into context in which they were created, not by isolating them from the rest of Shaker production or by discounting what was being produced in the world outside of their communities. The challenge, then, is to better understand the foundation of Shakerism, for it is from that foundation that Shaker "styles" have developed.

The originating members of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing shared an association with religious enthusiasts James and Jane Wardley, tailors from Bolton, England. The Wardleys headed a loosely organized group of dissenters who had broken from traditional organized religion. Often referred to as "Shaking Quakers," the Wardley Society shared little with the established Quakers In fact, early documents associate Wardleys and their followers with "the Denomination called Methodists."[1]

More likely the reference to "Quakers" was about the physical quaking they experienced during religious excitement than from any

1. Goodrich manuscript, pg. 2



solid connection to the Society of Friends. About 1760, the Wardleys' group was joined by an earnest young woman named Ann Lee (1736-1784). Ann was an illiterate laborer in the textile mills in Manchester. She had been raised in a religious family, though Ann continually sought a deeper sense of spirituality. She had been given in marriage to Abraham Standerin (Stanley) who, like Ann's father, was a blacksmith. Four children were born to Ann and Abraham, all of whom died in infancy. Ann's life and circumstances left her feeling unfulfilled. She found welcome and spiritual comfort in the Wardleys' group.

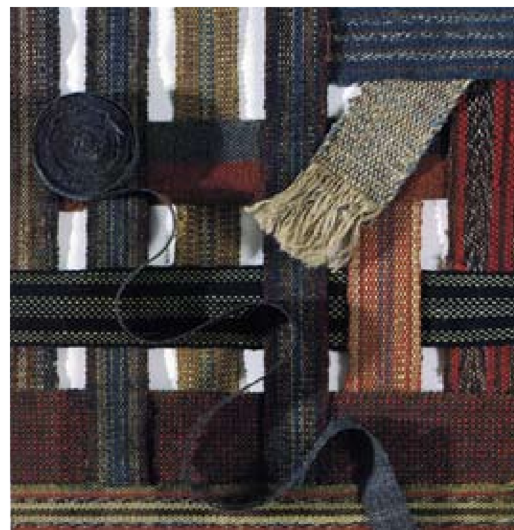
The "Shaking Quakers" were radical dissidents, actively challenging the practices of the existing churches in England, rejecting their pageantry and extravagances.

The "Shaking Quakers" were radical dissidents, actively challenging the practices of the existing churches in England, rejecting their pageantry and extravagances. Not content simply to hold their own worship services, the early Shakers frequently disrupted other public worship, and were arrested and jailed for the complaints levied against them. Their powerful testimonies excited public attention and drew curious inquiries, while at the same time their activities stirred equally powerful emotions in their opponents. The Shakers' own worship included trances, spirit possessions, and physical agitations.

The Shakers endured frequent public arrest, prosecution, and confinement as result of the fear they incited in non-believers. They were physically abused by angry mobs who sought them out, usually when they were in private homes counseling potential converts or holding worship meetings. Ann Lee's charisma, maternal nature, and her strength of spiritual conviction earned her great admiration and allegiance from members of the group, and placed her naturally in a position to assume a leadership role. During a period of incarceration, "Mother Ann," as she became known, received a vision that foretold of a better life in America and the promise of an

expansion of her testimony of Christ's Second Coming. She decided to leave England, abandoning the religious excesses of the established churches and fleeing the constant persecutions that beset the Shakers there. In the spring of 1774, Mother Ann Lee and a small band of followers embarked on a long and arduous journey to American soil.

On August 6, 1774 the Shakers landed in New York. Life in America was not easy. By necessity the Shakers separated and individually sought paid labor. They were fortunate to find domestic and manual labor positions. Accounts that were written decades later about those first years describe the Shakers as being, "Destitute of the means of support." After more than a year apart, they purchased land and gathered together at a place called Niskeyuna, near Albany, New York. It was undeveloped land in a "wilderness state," land that would require significant effort by them to transform it to a permanent settlement and habitat for spiritual peace. Initially they were not besieged with inquiries about their religion, but the Shakers worked hard and waited patiently for the anticipated opening of people's minds to the gospel. They continued to occupy themselves with improving their living conditions, readying for the increase they prayed would come. It was not long before word spread about them.



> *...Early in the Spring of the year 1780 there was a report circulating concerning a strange people discovered in the wilderness not far from Albany, who appeared exceedingly religious but in their forms and manners could not be comprehended, and that there was a woman with them that was called Mother ... These reports occasioned much tumult among all ranks of people and many conjectures were in circulation but some were terrified and frightened, but others had for some time been possessed with a belief that God was about to bring to pass his work...*[2]

2. Goodrich manuscript, pg. 5

The Shakers had indeed made themselves known. Ann Lee took her brother, William Lee, and James Whitaker, the strongest of her followers and left the relative safety of their home in Niskeyuna to begin their public testimony. They traveled to towns in eastern New York and western Massachusetts to spread Mother Ann's teachings and to find like-minded souls to gather into spiritual community. The Shaker missionaries were responding to the many denominations that were involved in the religious revivals in that region. The results of their efforts finally brought serious inquiries to them. As the response to their preaching grew, Mother Ann and the Elders traveled extensively spreading her spiritual vision while continuing to endure the persecutions aimed at them from nonbelievers.

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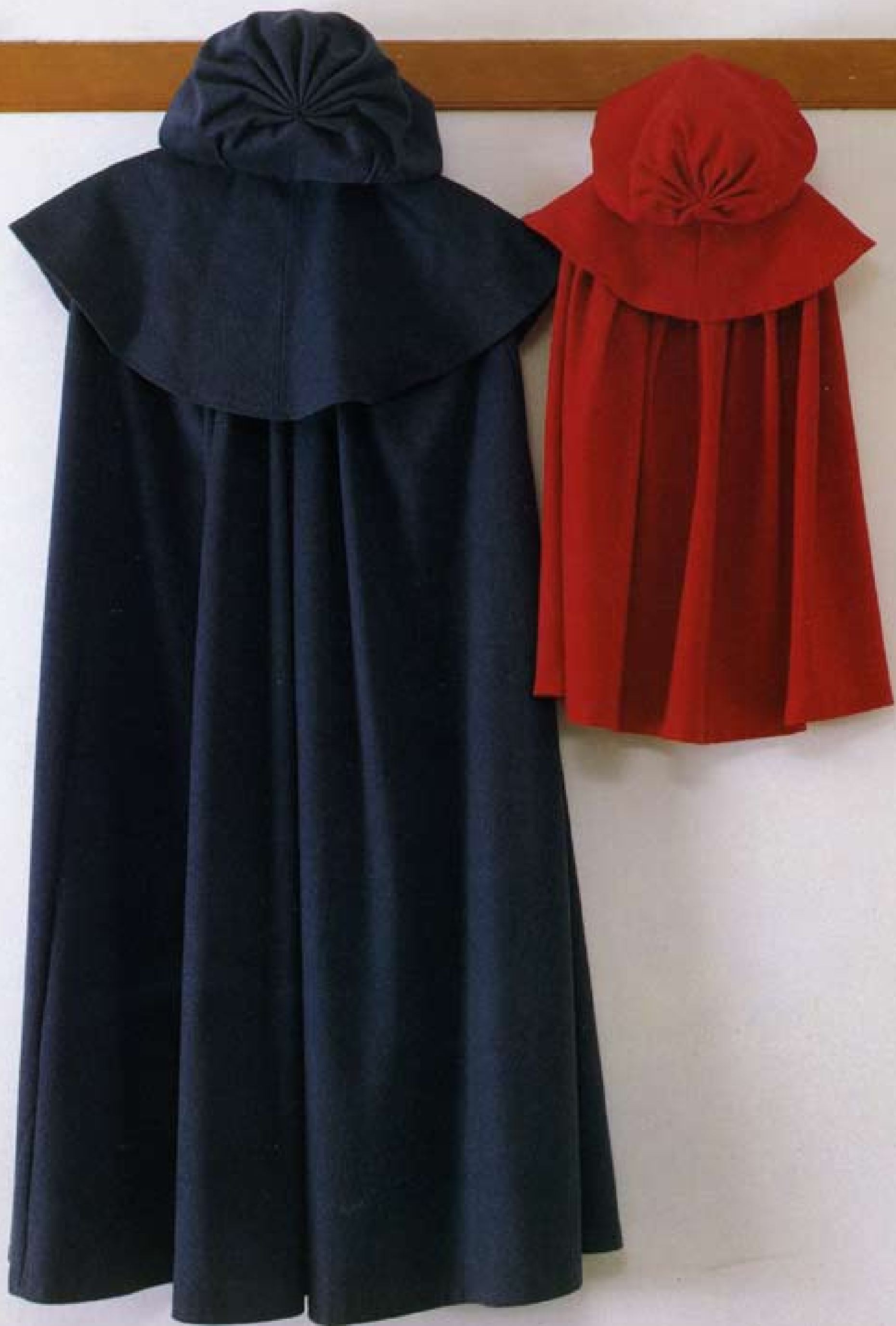
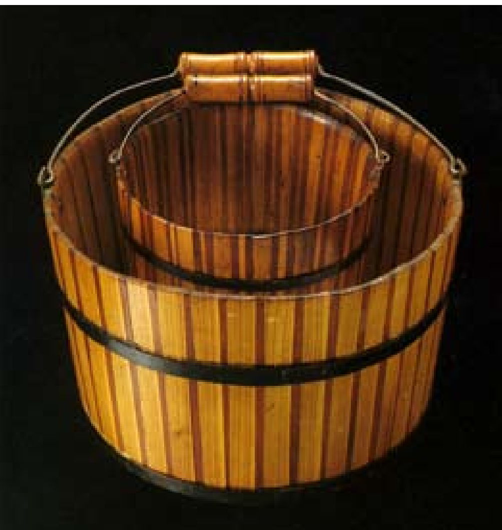
In 1783 Mother Ann Lee died, "and was carried no doubt in the chariots of God by Angels into the holy heavens to live with God in the celestial abodes of everlasting joy."[3] The dynamics of Shakerism, however, did not die with Ann Lee. She had imbued her followers with her spiritual vision and her zeal, and their determination that Shakerism should continue demanded even greater attention to the attraction and commitment of a growing membership. Ann Lee had been in America only ten years but she had become the driving impulse behind the formation of the Shaker Church. Her vision brought the founding members to America, and it was through her leadership and inspiration that so many were brought to the fold during the first decades. While she did not live to see the formal organization of the Shaker Society in America, her remarkable influence inspired the next generation of leaders to support the establishment of eleven distinct Shaker villages in New England by 1800. The Shaker Church was brought into formal order under the leadership of Father Joseph Meacham and Mother Lucy Wright, the first American born

3. Goodrich manuscript, pg. 12





Shaker "parents" and the first to share in the dual male/female system of leadership. Under their careful guidance and diligence, the Shaker traditions we are so familiar with today were developed. Within three years after the death of Ann Lee, the loose "neighborhoods" of traditional families of converts began to gather formally into organized self-contained villages made up of spiritual families. Mount Lebanon was the first, on Christmas Day 1787, to formally acknowledge themselves as an established Church.

It was from the roots planted by Mother Ann, however, that the greatest influence in Shaker history was felt. Her commitment to self-denial and focused dedication to God had enabled her to minister to thousands of potential converts. Her rejection of the rituals and excesses of the churches in England, her commitment to celibacy, the equality but segregation of the sexes, and the Shaker tradition of dedicating all worldly goods to God are all reflected in the more visual, material history of the Shakers and contributed directly to the development of Shaker "style." Mother Ann's admonition to live "in the world, but not of the world" clearly affected the manipulation of landscapes during the development of Shaker villages that became insulated from "the world."

By the mid-1830's there was a consciousness among many Shakers about the lack of a direct connection to Mother Ann and the first generation of leaders. The Elders and Eldresses who had known them were passing, and the new, younger generation of Shakers seemed not to share the zeal of earlier generations. There were many, though, who sought a connection with the Hancock Shaker Village spiritual energy of past generations of Shakers.

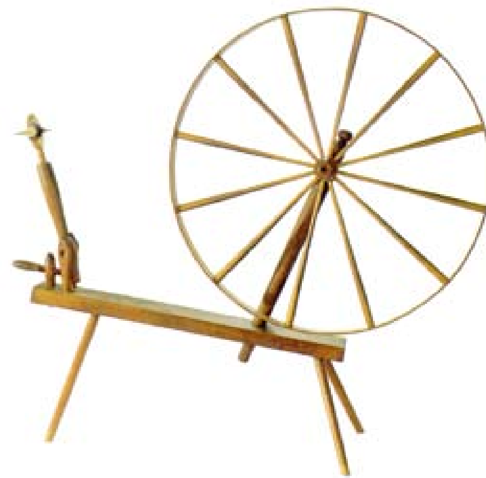
In 1837, the Shaker community at Watervliet, New York, reported the spirit possession of several young girls, manifested in a whirling, twirling trance. Members at other communities experienced similar manifestations, including dreams and visions, "Gifts" were received by

many in the forms of songs and drawings. These events were part of a renewed, intense religious revival that may have been a response to the feelings of distance from the founding generation. This revival continued for more than twenty years, waning by the 1860s.

Even as the Shakers experienced an increased religious fervor during the decades of revival, membership in communities had begun to drop off. Senior members passed on, some of the younger members were attracted by the exciting opportunities offered by the Industrial Revolution and "went to the world," and the number of new converts did not replace the losses. There were attempts made to attract new members by "updating" the appearances of the architecture, furniture, and manner of dress. Large numbers of children were brought into villages as orphans or at the request of parents who desired an education for their children.

Some of the younger members were attracted by the exciting opportunities offered by the Industrial Revolution and "went to the world."

In spite of these efforts, populations continued to decline, and individual communities began to consolidate within their borders, selling off unused personal property and real estate. Eventually whole communities were closed, relocating their members to more stable Shaker villages. In 1900 there were fifteen active villages. By 1930 there were six that remained open, and after the sale of Hancock's property to become a museum in 1960, only the communities at Canterbury, New Hampshire, and Sabbathday Lake in Maine continued the Shaker legacy. The community at Canterbury closed in the fall of 1992 with the death of their last Shaker resident, Ethel Hudson. Today the Shakers at Sabbathday Lake in Maine carry on the faith and traditions begun in America more than two hundred years ago.

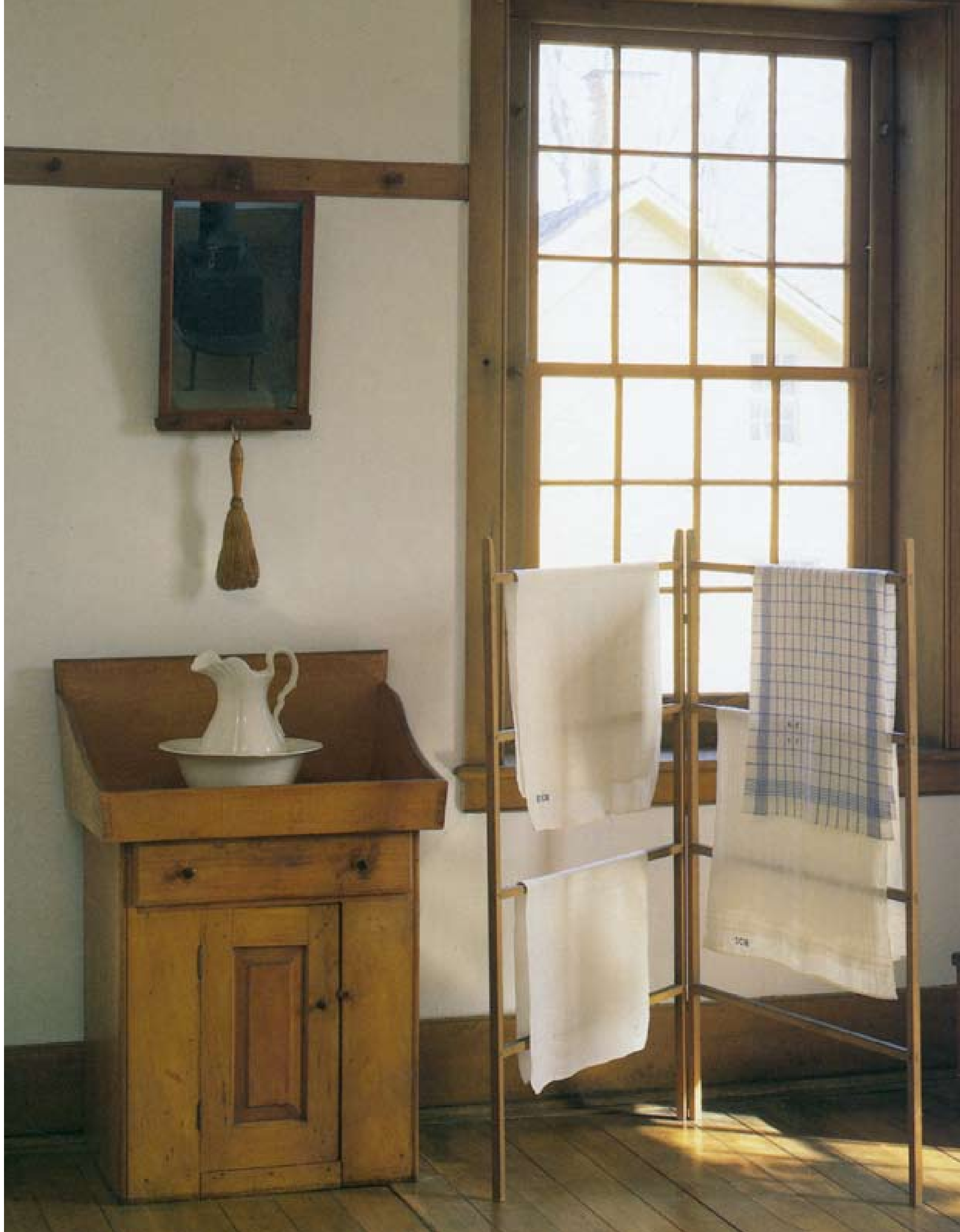


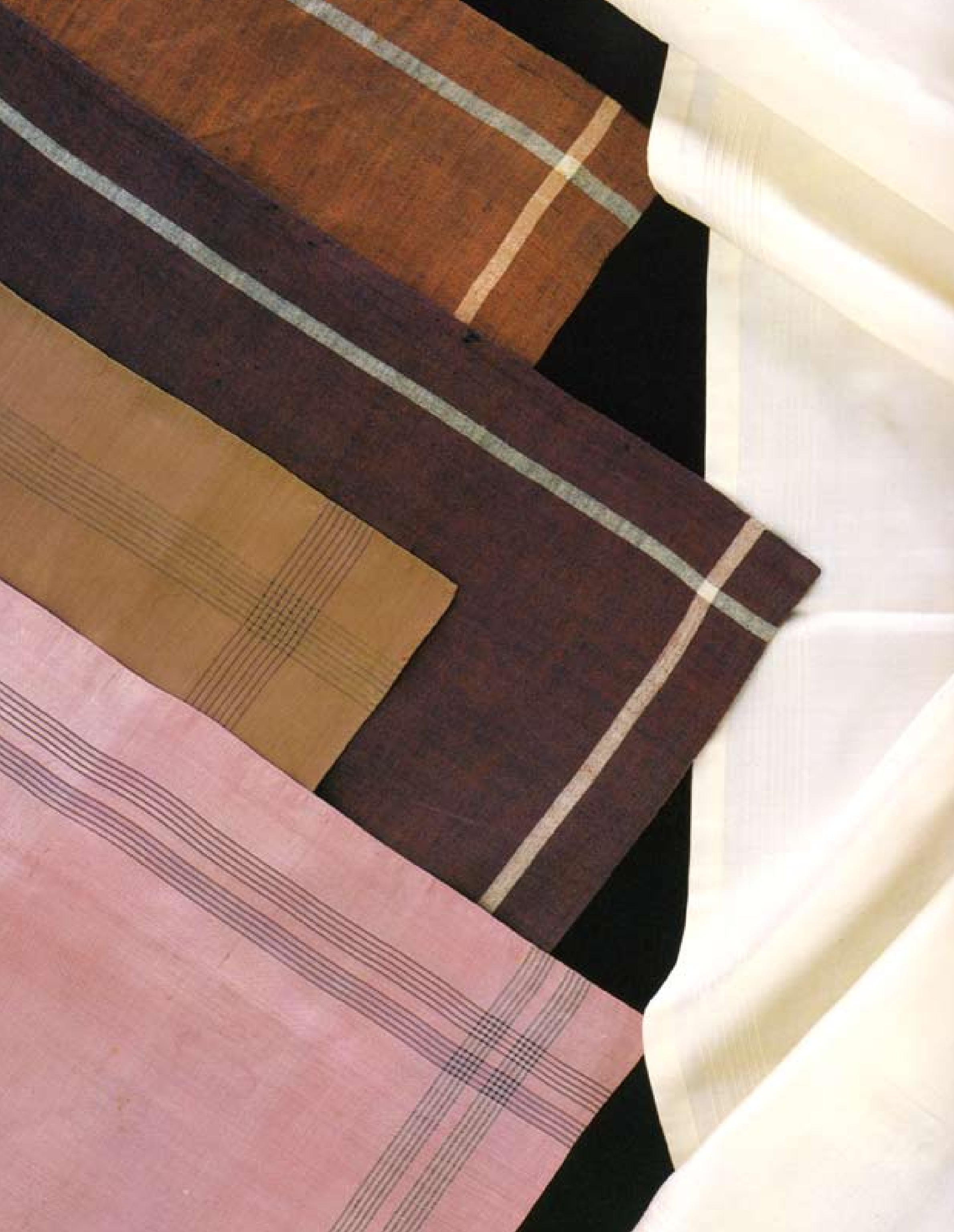
Brothers and Sisters, young and old, manage a farm of more than nineteen hundred acres with about fifty sheep, several pigs, two steers, acres of apple orchards, and extensive herb and kitchen gardens. They maintain a significant research library of primary Shaker materials and operate a museum out of several of their buildings, providing a comprehensive story of Shakerism that has endured in Maine since the community's founding in 1793.

Shaker museums and historical societies across America that exhibit their Shaker collections tend to portray nineteenth century Shaker life at the height of their membership and material productivity. The image museums provide is often one of a rigid, austere life, void of any of life's pleasures. Characteristics of nineteenth century photography reinforce that notion with the still, solemn faces captured on film. Nothing could be farther from the truth, however, and a journey into the manuscripts written by Shaker women reveal their participation in a rich, fulfilling lifestyle that provided the comfort of a close community, material security, and a spiritual home to thousands of men, women, and children. Sleigh rides, picnics, plays, musical presentations, visits to and from friends and family, trips to the circus, and other forms of entertainment all played and play important roles in the lives of the Shakers.

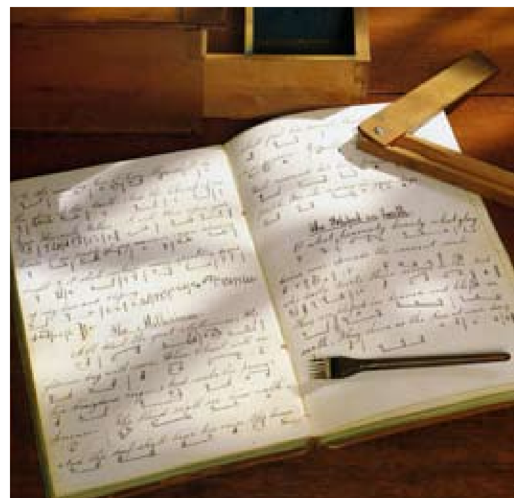
A journey into the manuscripts written by Shaker women reveal their participation in a rich, fulfilling lifestyle that provided the comfort of a close community, material security, and a spiritual home to thousands of men, women, and children.

—Sharon D. Koomler, Curator of Collections, Hancock Shaker Village.





Hancock Shaker Village is the sole lender to the *Crafting Utopia, the Art of Shaker Women* exhibition. "The City of Peace," as the Shakers called Hancock, was settled in 1790 and is a living history museum of Shaker life, crafts and farming. Located in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Hancock Shaker Village is the most extensive of the restored shaker villages and houses the largest collection of Shaker furniture and artifacts at an original site. Rural life in primarily 18th and 19th centuries is presented through an interactive, dynamic program of presentations, talks, tours and demonstrations.



For more information, write:
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Website: www.hancockshakervillage.org

International Arts & Artists (IA&A) is honored to be the organizer of the *Crafting Utopia, the Art of Shaker Women* exhibition. IA&A is a non-profit arts service organization based in Washington, DC that has quickly emerged as a leader in offering innovative and thought-provoking exhibitions to museums and arts institutions in the United States, Europe, and Asia.

Exhibition Curator: Sharon D. Koomler, Curator of Collections, Hancock Shaker Village
Exhibition Coordinator: Michael S. Ennis, IA&A
Exhibition Assistance: Ellen Arnold and Antoine Devaux, IA&A

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Go search the whole creation, and trace the world around. See if in any nations, a people can be found, whose doctrine and behavior is honest, just and true, who live like Christ the Savior; who are the faithful few.

—Excerpt from Richard McNemar's "The Shakers"