

June 22, 1986

Last Friday I saw something quite remarkable. It was an exhibition in the Whitney Museum of Shaker Furniture.

The exhibitors are, naturally enough, most interested in the esthetic qualities of these remarkable objects: the complete absence of any applied ornamentation, together with the skillful use of form, color and line to produce an effect that is strikingly pleasing to the eye. But what came most vividly to my own mind when in the presence of these simple, harmonious devices was the concept of obedience. The makers of these objects were obedient—obedient first of all to the needs of the users whom these objects were meant to serve. All the makers' intelligence and skill, devoid of any merely egotistical idiosyncracies, was bent to joyful, useful and efficient service. Secondly, these craftspeople were obedient to the materials at hand, moulding and shaping them in ways which were entirely compatible to their inner nature. Indeed, these objects were fashioned out of a very deep inner silence.

The Shakers would probably be amazed, and perhaps even deeply distressed, to be remembered primarily as the makers of fine furniture. For their craft was but an incidental byproduct of their main purpose, which was to live in a community which was animated by the values of peace, cooperation, joy, simplicity and worship. And yet, even though these objects are a peripheral byproduct of that bold and noble experiment, there is a way in which they reveal everything about it. True, one cannot tell the exact history of the community by looking at the furniture and tools; yet there is a sense in which these objects reveal everything that is essential about their makers.

Each of us probably has a main thrust to our lives, a central consideration to which we self-consciously bend our best efforts. Yet, it might occur that the most significant thing that we do, the thing that most affects other people, for better or for worse, is something we do on the side, something to which we give less attention or that we regard as incidental. It is with respect to such things that what we are we teach, in spite of ourselves. The Shakers show us that if we, within ourselves, are as we should be, all that we do, whether small or large, will radiate truth and light.