

Press Information

## The Shakers: A World in the Making

07 June 2025 – 28 September 2025  
Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein

**How did an 18th-century American free church inspire generations of artists, architects and designers around the world? The Shakers were a religious group for whom design and architecture were an expression of beliefs surrounding community, labour and social equality. The new exhibition »The Shakers: A World in the Making« examines how this resulted in meticulously crafted furniture and vernacular architecture that continue to resonate centuries later. Bringing together a wide range of Shaker furniture, architectural elements, tools and commercial goods, paired with newly commissioned works by contemporary artists and designers, »The Shakers: A World in the Making« reveals the complex social, material and spiritual context that created the »Shaker style«, and what possibilities its values offer today. The exhibition is organised by the Vitra Design Museum, the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia, and the Wüstenrot Foundation in collaboration with Shaker Museum.**

Founded in England in the late 18th century, the Shakers emigrated to the American colonies in 1774 where they established eighteen distinct communities, from Kentucky to Maine. Within these communities, the Shakers created furniture, domestic objects and architecture that were soon hailed for their radical simplicity, as well as their innovative use of standardisation and serial production. The group's contributions to design and architecture are still celebrated today but often interpreted purely in terms of their aesthetic. Instead, »The Shakers: A World in the Making« explores how Shaker design was deeply rooted in the Shakers' religious practise of worship and labour. Designed by Milan-based studio Formafantasma, the exhibition brings together more than 150 original objects, most of which have been loaned from the world-leading collection of Shaker Museum in Chatham, New York.

In addition to historic works, the exhibition also includes new research and commissions from seven international contemporary designers and artists. These commissioned works engage the Shaker artefacts in dialogue, with each artist approaching the Shakers and their material culture from a unique and personal perspective – a link between past and present that allows visitors to forge new connections with one of history's most compelling experiments in alternative communal living. Through this mixture of contemporary and historical material, the exhibition explores the enduring resonances of the Shakers in the 21st century, including topics such as gender, inclusion and sustainability. »The Shakers: A World in the Making« challenges the conventional narratives that surround Shaker design and instead grounds it within the broader contexts that shaped it.

The exhibition is structured through four thematic sections, all of which are named after quotes from members of the Shaker community. The first, »The Place Just Right«, provides an

introduction to the world view and social structures that defined Shaker life. Historic and contemporary photography of Shaker architecture is paired with objects such as a shaker dwelling staircase and a four-metre-long bench to reveal the material realities of their communal and sex-segregated, celibate living. Meanwhile, a radio from the Canterbury Shaker community shows how the group welcomed external innovations and technologies, despite their retreat from secular society. This emphasis on sound is carried through to objects that examine the most famous outward expression of Shaker belief: the worshipful dance for which they gained the nickname of

»Shakers«. A metronome, piano-violin, and hymn book all examine Shaker music and dance, which is a theme continued in a video compilation of »POWER«, a dance piece from artist and choreographer Reggie Wilson that considers the legacy of Shaker dance, and its overlap with African-American dance practices and music traditions.

The second space, »When We Find a Good Thing, We Stick To It«, focuses on the material culture of Shaker communities, revealing how their religious beliefs forged the »Shaker style« that remains influential to this day. Garments and furniture such as cabinets, chests of drawers and sewing desks highlight the community's instinct towards order and structure, as codified in their 1821 and 1845 Millennial Laws. Many of these same forces are apparent in a selection of the community's chairs, which are noteworthy for their standardisation, utility and scope for customisation. The relationship between the Shakers' drive towards codification, and its potential to nevertheless allow for individual interpretation, evolution and even religious heresy, is explored in a commission from contemporary artist Kameelah Janan Rasheed – a series of abstracted glyphs that draw on the 19th-century writings of Mother Rebecca Cox Jackson, a Black Shaker Eldress and founder of the only Shaker community established within a city.

»Every Force Evolves a Form«, the third section of the exhibition, examines the seemingly paradoxical interplay between the Shakers' ambitions to create an insulated society and a design ethos welcoming of change, innovation and commerce. Shaker household goods, such as their highly optimised oval boxes and fancy goods, were manufactured and sold to support their communities. The space also includes a display of innovative Shaker brooms, work benches and rudimentary power tools that highlight the community's openness to new technologies. The Shakers' unique place in the transition from traditional crafts to modern design is reflected in a commission from designer and artist Christien Meindertsma. An admirer of Shaker crafts, Meindertsma has reinterpreted their basketry tradition as a contemporary prototype for a biodegradable coffin woven from Dutch willow. Meanwhile, Shaker society's inclusivity, which was considered progressive for its adaptation of surroundings and objects to accommodate physical impairments, is explored by artist Finnegan Shannon. David Hartt's »The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (Tree of Light)« interrogates the rigidity of Shaker life, engaging with their spirituality and history through film.

The final section of the exhibition, »I Don't Want to be Remembered as a Chair«, considers the legacy of the Shaker movement, and the contemporary relevance of its community-led creative production. Within its historic exhibits, it presents a series of intricate »gift drawings« from 1830 to 1850, which emerged from divine visions experienced and recorded by Shaker Sisters. The Shaker belief in labour as a form of worship, meanwhile, is reinterpreted by artist and

designer Chris Halstrøm through a large-scale embroidered art work in which the artist understands each stitch as a prayer. As a centrepiece of this section, artist Amie Cunat has created »Meetinghouse 2«, a scaled reinterpretation of a Shaker meetinghouse, the communal dwelling in which Shakers gathered for worship, which can be accessed by visitors and encourages their own reflection on spirituality and community.

Mateo Kries, Director of the Vitra Design Museum: »Our museum has always had a strong interest in exploring design currents that lay off the beaten track and illustrate the wider cultural, philosophical, and even spiritual context of design. Our furniture collection includes several Shaker pieces, which were part of the inspiration to realise this exhibition. The exhibition itself is the result of a productive transatlantic collaboration that, in light of current political shifts, seems more important than ever. «

Mea Hoffmann, co-curator of the exhibition: »»The Shakers: A World in the Making« looks at the Shaker legacy, both in terms of the group's design and worldview, from a contemporary perspective, inviting artists and designers to explore what the Shaker world might have to offer us today. The different expertise of each institution involved in the exhibition has resulted in an enriching collaboration that bridges not only an ocean but also connects contemporary artists and designers in a dynamic dialogue that reflects on the enduring relevance of the Shakers. «

The exhibition is guided by a broad range of events and workshops. Following its premiere at the Vitra Design Museum, the exhibition will be presented at the Milwaukee Museum of Art (25 September 2026 – 31 January 2027), the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (31 January – 9 August 2026) and in further international museum venues.

## **Exhibition catalogue**

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication that features its historic exhibits as well as artist contributions, in addition to thematic essays and interviews from leading scholars and academics including Sarah Margolis-Pineo, Glenn Adamson, Jeffrey De Blois, Aaron Betsky, Shoshana Resnikoff, Mea Hoffmann, Hallie Ringle, Irene Cheng, Cauleen Smith, Mabel O. Wilson and Johann Hinrich Claussen. It is illustrated with newly commissioned images of Shaker objects and architecture by photographer Alex Lesage. The graphic design by London-based studio A Practice for Everyday Life weaves these perspectives into a dynamic and contemporary reappraisal of the Shaker world.

## **The Shakers: A World in the Making**

Publisher: Vitra Design Museum, Wüstenrot Foundation

Concept: Mea Hoffmann, Shoshana Resnikoff, Chyna Bounds, Zoë Ryan, Hallie Ringle

Graphic Design: A Practice for Everyday Life

286 pages | ISBN 978-3-945852-66-8 (EN) | Hardcover | 22x28cm (portrait size) | 59,00 €

## **General information**

Exhibition title:	The Shakers: A World in the Making
Duration:	07 June 2025 to 28 September 2025
Curators	Mea Hoffmann, Vitra Design Museum Shoshana Resnikoff, Milwaukee Art Museum Hallie Ringle, Zoë Ryan, Institute of Contemporary Art at University of Pennsylvania
Exhibition design:	Formafantasma
Exhibition graphics	A Practice for Everyday Life
Hashtags:	#VDMShakers
Press images:	<a href="http://www.design-museum.de/press-images">www.design-museum.de/press-images</a>
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An exhibition organised by the Vitra Design Museum, the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia, and the Wüstenrot Foundation

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Contemporary  
University Art  
of Pennsylvania

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In collaboration with

Shaker  
Museum

## **Partners**

The Milwaukee Art Museum is an essential destination for art and architecture and a vital cultural resource that connects visitors to dynamic art experiences and one another. Housed in iconic buildings by Santiago Calatrava, Eero Saarinen, and David Kahler on a 24-acre lakefront campus, the Museum is Wisconsin's largest art institution and home to both broad and deep collections, with exceptional holdings in American painting, sculpture, and decorative arts; conceptual and minimalist art; prints and drawings; European art from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century; photography and new media; modern and contemporary design; folk and self-taught art; and twentieth-century Haitian art. A bold symbol of Milwaukee's ambition and forward-thinking vision, the Museum is a place for community building, education, and celebration that fosters creativity, free speech, and critical discourse for audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

The Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania (ICA Philadelphia) is a global hub for contemporary art and ideas. Free and open to all, ICA Philadelphia is dedicated to supporting artistic practices across disciplines and to serving as a laboratory for risk-taking, community-building, and knowledge-creation. Since 1963, ICA Philadelphia has championed the University's commitment to cultivating the next generation of imaginative creators and thinkers. Through commissions, exhibitions, programs, publications, and special projects, ICA Philadelphia fosters bold experimentation, curiosity, and discovery.

The Wüstenrot Foundation looks after material and non-material cultural heritage. At the same time, the foundation searches for ways to enable our community to rise to the diverse challenges it faces in the future. In doing so, it views cultural heritage as the starting point and as an important point of reference. The foundation's goal is to provide impetus through the development and propagation of practice-oriented models, and thereby bring about positive change beyond its own actions. In the thematic fields of monuments, future questions, urban and rural regions, literature, arts and culture, and education, the Wüstenrot Foundation conceptualises and realises its own projects, and promotes the ideas and proposals of other not-for-profit institutions. The foundation is particularly focused on quality of life, the built environment and interaction with our shared cultural heritage, whereby the main emphasis lies on cultural assets from the period after 1945.

Shaker Museum in Chatham, NY, houses the most comprehensive collection of Shaker material culture, including furniture, tools, medicines and seeds, textiles, photographs, and a vast library. It highlights and celebrates the Shakers' progressive social legacy as well as their entrepreneurialism and technological innovations in manufacturing, architecture, agriculture, and engineering. Shaker Museum founder John S. Williams began collecting directly from the Shakers in the 1930s and opened a museum in 1950. Williams built strong relationships with the Shakers, and in return they entrusted him with significant and treasured pieces of their history. Celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, Shaker Museum is breaking ground on its new home in Chatham, New York, working with Selldorf Architects to adapt a 19th-century building into a museum, cultural centre, and community gathering space.