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## December 21st, 2009 Shaker Devotees Keep the Faith

Willis Henry Auctions, Inc.,

Harvard, Massachusetts by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Willis Henry

Three different dealers bought

the half-dozen top lots at Willis Henry's Shaker auction under a tent on the grounds of the Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, Massachusetts, on Saturday, October 3, 2009. They bought for stock and for clients. Either way, they obviously felt confident, and the sweep was the marketplace, at least for

Shaker, has started to rise up from its former depths. John Keith Russell of South Salem, New York, paid \$117,000 (including buyer's premium) for a ministry trestle dining table. A New Lebanon, New York, example in cherry, it is just 5'5"

long, indicating that it was used by community elders or eldresses. A rarity, it is only the third ministry table known in private hands, and Russell has owned the other two. Each of the three tables differs slightly in form and origins,

Russell said. An example in cherry came from Harvard; another in cherry with a bird'seye maple base came from *Shaker Furniture* (2003) by Timothy D. Rieman and Jean M. Burks. "But this one is the only one known in a paint, in a color,'

i.e., its original cranberry red finish. "That's very distinctive." The condition is "unblemished," Russell said. "All of them, for some reason, have been well taken care of, unaltered, untouched, probably because of their great beauty and continued usability." In the past the Henrys have eschewed published estimates,

Previewers could find them on line and also in a typed list displayed in the tent. The table's estimate was the sale's most Russell, it seemed irrelevant. what it might bring, I would have told you there was no upper cap," he said. "There is no reason why

higher. But on that day, with

those people there, that's what I

was willing to pay, and no one

was willing to pay more." He

but since availing themselves of

Internet bidding on Artfact, the

added, "It was in my estimation a very reasonable price." Russell also bought a large (6'6" x 5' x 20") double cupboard over drawers that had lost nearly all of its finish. "It was bought with a full restoration in mind," said Russell, who paid \$58,500 against expectations of \$50,000/80,000. In fact, he brought restorers to see it prior to his purchase.

The piece was originally stained

a chrome yellow with a varnish

over that," Russell said. "At least

that history, so we have a guide.

We'll be working almost entirely

integrity is one hundred percent.

with the finish. The structural

It has not lost height, not been

cut or altered. All knobs are in

place. The interior color, a light pumpkin, is untouched." At the preview some people wondered about 11 holes drilled above its two doors. The catalog's hunch was "possibly for ventilation." Russell said, "Those holes were threaded, meant for turned pegs." They will be restored. Besides the fact that dealers like himself were spending money, Russell noted another indicator

pieces went, even in a smaller than normal crowd. I think for people who would like to add to collections or to start one—not only in Shaker but in many forms Rosetta's room at Mount of Americana—the circumstances of the last two decades, where you just couldn't afford it, is not the case today." Dealers should celebrate the situation rather than bemoan it, said Russell, who also bought in the middle range. "I bought things that in thirty years of

dealing in Shaker and in seven or

eight years of collecting before

that, I have seen so rarely. And I

paid hundreds of dollars, not

Hampshire, whose bill was

\$58,500 for another of the star

thousands of dollars for them."

Doug Hamel of Chichester, New

sale. "This was a healthy market

lots, a three-drawer worktable, reiterated much of what Russell said about the market, based on his assessment of the sale. "I was surprised that the auction was way stronger than most of us expected," he said. "But more as the top market did very well.

Shaker is alive and well."

The Shakers were intensely communal, seeming not to glory in individual achievements, but signed work is not uncommon. Hamel's other big purchase was a New Lebanon seed shop desk, signed twice by Orren Haskins. Made of butternut, pine, and cherry, it came to the sale from an Arizona collection, formed in the East. It was knocked down to Hamel for \$43,875. Hamel also bought a rare bound manuscript of so-called inspired writing from the Shakers' Era of Manifestations. Dating from 1838-40, it contains spirit messages, many from Mother Ann Lee (1736-1784). "It

that than they were with the full-size example. "It was a real sleeper," said Wilkins of the little (3¼" x 6" x 2½") charmer that could easily be held between one's thumb and forefinger. "We were prepared to pay well into five figures for it and were astounded that we were able to steal it. The piece is almost unique in our experience"—they have owned just one other—"and we've been buying and selling Shaker

for thirty-five years."

Two factors may have held the miniature's price down, in Wilkins's opinion. One was the weather. During the preview on the afternoon before the sale skies were a gloomy gray; some previewers were using flashlights to look at objects in the dim light. Willis Henry said he would never have another outdoor auction again, while his wife, Karel, was saying never to say never. On the day of the sale, a chilly rain fell, sometimes heavily, on this spot of land about 30 miles west of Boston.

and for pleasure to some very special child."

Wilkins did, however, venture an analysis of why middle-range items are starting to move. "Pieces of American furniture in general are bringing crème de la crème—of which there's not a lot out there right now,

Willis Henry auctions for 15 years. But perhaps they haven't been noticed until now, he speculated, because they haven't bought in such quantity before. The husband has been an "entrepreneur" since age 16. He and his wife ("a medical professional") are in their early 50's now and have limited time to attend antiques shows but do like "the free market environment" of auctions. "I used to be a coin collector," he continued. "Then I became a professional numismatist. I made a lot of money in the seventies and

development. And I find it fascinating to watch the business cycles. It's a

cliché but true: the only constant is change. I have no idea whether this is

motivated us [to buy at this auction in quantity]. We'll hang on to these

the bottom of this cycle, but [that possibility] was one thing that

things for five or ten or twenty years, and if past experience is any

Besides the unnamed collection from Arizona, others were from

Shaker Museum and Library in Old Chatham, New York. The

California and upstate New York. The only named consignors were

Charles and Helen Upton, whose Shaker pieces were exhibited, along

with those of Faith and Edward Deming Andrews, at the Old Chatham

indication...." He left it at that.

Andrewses famously began collecting Shaker as early as the 1920's; they also published much of the earliest scholarship. Items handled by them have almost as much aura and mystique as those bought directly from Shakers. The Uptons came along later but, like the Andrewses, bought much of their collection from Shakers or from people with close ties to them. As their devotees well know, Shakers, often mythologized as simple folk, were actually quite the opposite. In need of an economic life in order to support themselves, they were adept not only at developing a wide range of consumer products, they also successfully publicized them through the use of clever advertising, and engaged a network of "Non-Believers"

community in New Gloucester, Maine. On the night before the sale, Michael Volmar, curator of the Fruitlands Museum, presented a slide lecture about the Shakers' rise and fall in Harvard. The community was settled about two miles away from Fruitlands. Established there by the 1790's, they thrived for a time with a population that peaked at about 150 in 1850, Volmar said. By 1918, however, they were forced to close, because of dwindling numbers. By then, Clara Endicott Sears (1863-1960) of Boston had bought Fruitlands to use as her summer estate, having named it after Bronson

put it simply, their celibacy along with cultural change got the better of

them. Today only four remain; they live at the Sabbathday Lake Shaker

Shaker buildings, as well as a Shaker cemetery, on residential South Shaker Road. One can also see, across the valley from Fruitlands, the land on which there used to be a community of Shakers in Shirley, Massachusetts. After the Shirley Shakers left, their buildings were used as an orphanage, then a home for what we used to call juvenile delinquents. Today it is another type of facility—a prison, where security lights blaze harshly at night. Maybe the Shakers wouldn't mind those lights as much as we do. As Doug Hamel noted, "The Shakers were the first ones in Canterbury to have power—their own generating plant."

potatoes in casserole, and maple sugar sour cream cake for dessert. Even though these dishes bore little resemblance to those whose recipes are in Sister Frances A. Carr's 1985 cookbook Shaker Your Plate: Of Shaker Cooks and Cooking, there is no doubt about it—the Shakers ate well. Skilled horticulturalists and successful orchardists, they pioneered canning. They even canned meat. Sister Carr wrote about canning poultry in the 1950's, using chickens her community had raised. "There

At the sale food-related items included an apple core spool and donut cutter that sold in one lot for \$702; a covered tin pail, labeled "Shaker's Apple Sauce," that fetched \$760.50; and a lot of two rolling pins that was knocked down to collector and M.A.D. contributor Fran Kramer for \$819. Clearly, the Shaker collecting community has an unusually strong sense of camaraderie. It must be the Shakers' influence. We have concentrated

be a mistake not to remember the Shakers' real reason for being-their spiritual quest. For more information about the community officially known as United

For more information about the auction, contact Willis Henry Auctions, based in Marshfield, Massachusetts, at (781) 834-7774 or see the Web site (www.willishenry.com).

by Jeanne Schinto

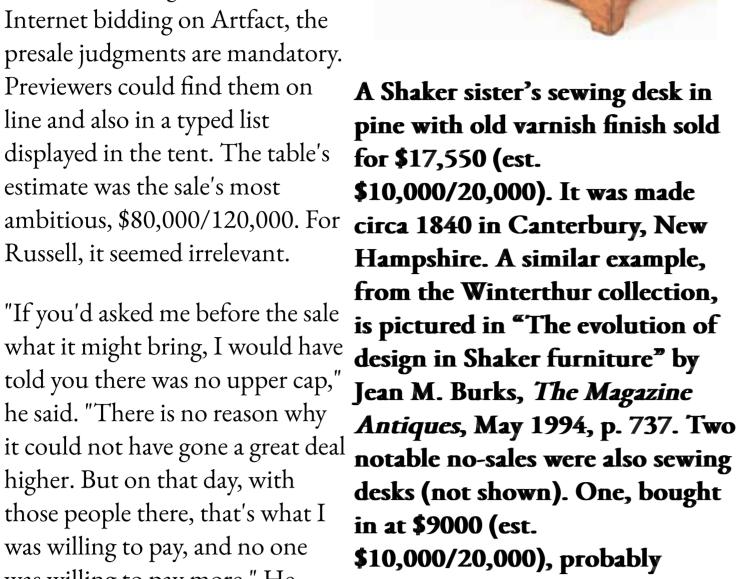


cranberry red paint. Made in

1830 or 1840 in Mount Lebanon,

New York, very likely for use by

the ministry of that Shaker interpreted by some as a sign that **community, it came to the sale** from the Upton collection. Not noted in the catalog is that three dovetailed drawers were added to the table about 1860. Previewers could see the faint impressions of the screws for the drawers' sliders. A week before the sale the drawers, their six runners, and all the screws were found in the Uptons' attic. Russell said, "It's one of the nicest things I think any of us have ever had the opportunity to see. Amongst the realm of Shaker furniture, their dining tables have always been revered. They distilled the form down to the most usable design possible, and a lot of contemporary furniture designers have copied the Shaker trestle table. [George] Nakashima certainly did. The list goes on and on." Another, much larger shown) was bought in at \$25,000 (est. \$40,000/60,000). It was made circa 1840 in Mount Lebanon of cherry, maple, and pine and had some apparent restoration to the base.



belonged to Eldress Rosetta

Stephens, whose worktable went to Doug Hamel. Made of cherry, butternut, and walnut with its original varnish finish, it was exhibited at the sale with a photograph of the eldress and what appears to be the desk in the background. One dealer we spoke with now regrets having passed it up. (A post-auction sale may have occurred.) The other desk, in poplar and cherry with its original varnish finish and original porcelain pulls, was passed without a bid. Dated 1880-1900 and attributed to five percent of the surface still has Elder Henry Green of Alfred, Maine, it was estimated at \$8000/16,000. Purchased from Eldress Rosetta



The cover lot was a two-drawer

bittersweet red finish and white

\$20,000/40,000). "The piece is a

"most notably, of course, for the

blanket chest with its original

bone escutcheons. It sold to

**Robert Wilkins and Suzanne** 

classic of its kind from every

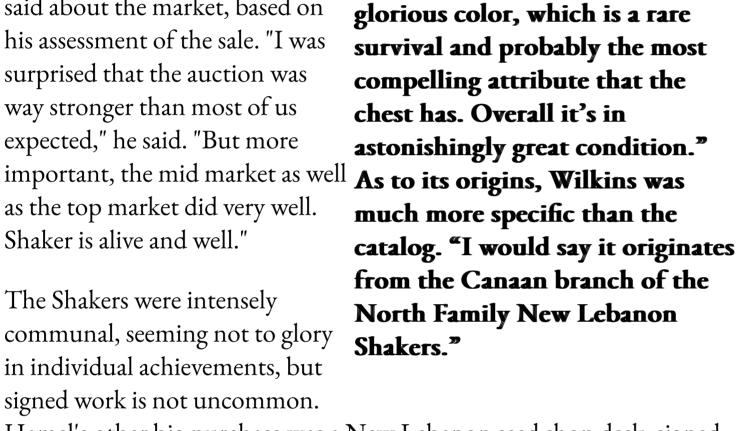
point of view," said Wilkins,

Courcier for \$39,780 (est.

Stephens in the 1950's, this circa

1840 three-drawer worktable in

figured cherry with its original



was very important to me that it was complete," said Hamel of the book, for which he paid \$22,230. "An awful lot of the manuscripts we see have a lot of great calligraphy for four pages and then they're blank. This one is complete all the way through. It has great visual appeal, including its chrome yellow page edges." The dealer also noted that the penmanship was not merely beautiful but also very readable. Robert W. Wilkins of Yarmouth Port, Massachusetts, who attended the sale with his wife and business partner, Suzanne Courcier, (and black cocker spaniel, Pearl) bought the sale's cover lot, a blanket chest in its original bittersweet red finish. The price was \$39,780. They also bought a miniature blanket chest for \$2106 and seemed almost more thrilled with

product of Canterbury, New Hampshire. The one they used to own, a one-drawer mini, was from there and had the same bittersweet on the outside and the same chrome yellow inside. "It is very unusual for anything Shaker to be painted by Shakers on the inside," Wilkins said. It's also unusual for Shakers to make toys. "And there's no other way to describe this," said Wilkins, who explained that Shakers didn't think of childhood in terms of playthings. There was a wooden spinning top in the sale, but generally, Shaker-made gifts to children were supposed to inspire rather than entertain. "This was made lovingly and given for joy

The Henrys did not note in the catalog where they thought the

miniature had been made, but Wilkins and Courcier believe it is a

"Suzanne and I had the benefit of seeing the piece in bright sunlight at Will and Karel's in Pembroke [Massachusetts] well in advance of the sale," said Wilkins. "We experienced it in all of its glory. There's nothing like light to give you the full benefit of what you're looking at and to enable you to make a clear determination of what it is you're planning to buy. The color on that piece is exquisite. And it didn't translate well in

photos. It's a difficult piece to grasp until you have it in your hands."

auction are just as likely to go under the money. This piece was lot

number three. "People really hadn't settled into their seats yet," said

knows for sure why things happen as they do.

Wilkins, adding that, of course, auctions are unpredictable, and no one

The other factor that may have worked in their favor was the miniature

chest's placement in the sale. Many bidders habitually wait for bargains at

the end of a long day, but those same bidders know the first few lots of an

prices we haven't seen in thirty-five years," he said. "So for people who love antiques and are patient and diligent and don't have to have the because of the market's constrictions—there are opportunities to be had at auctions and from dealers. We're all adjusting our sights. This climate won't last forever, and smart people are paying attention and availing themselves of bargains."

One smart couple was clearly in evidence. Using bidder card 33, they did

not make a splash by buying top lots or even underbidding them. Instead

they bought at least a dozen pieces at the low end, only one of which was

basket, \$643.50; an armchair, \$643.50; a dressing chair, \$468; a side chair

and stool, \$760.50; two bootjacks, \$292.50; a cutlery carrier, \$585; a yarn

The couple was too busy buying to talk at the sale, but we reached them

husband said that he, his wife, and four children live in the Harvard area

by phone a few days later. Speaking on condition of anonymity, the

over \$3000. Some of those purchases were a desk box, \$819; an apple

winder, \$1170; a side chair, \$1404; and a washstand, \$1170.

in an early 19th-century farmhouse. Not newcomers, they have attended eighties dealing in rare coins and precious metals. I also did real-estate

to help distribute them. Unafraid of technology, they always tried to innovate, whether it was an industry (such as individual seed packets) that they invented or one (such as medicines) that they adopted. Then, to

Alcott's utopian community of Transcendentalists who lived on the same acreage in 1843-44. Lasting seven months, Alcott's group is a reminder

that not many utopian experiments work out nearly as well as the

On the Fruitlands property, Sears reassembled a 1794 building that had

museum, established by Sears in 1922. One can still see the ruins of other

served as the Harvard Shakers workshop and office. It is now a Shaker

Shakers' did.

After Volmar's lecture, dinner was served at Fruitlands, an entire Shaker menu as interpreted by the Cast Iron Kitchen, Maynard, Massachusetts. Among the dishes were Sabbathday Lake stuffed eggs, grilled lamb chops with a mushroom sherry sauce, roasted beets, Shaker acorn squash and

was something very special about the flavor of home preserved chicken. I have never experienced that delicious flavor in any chicken dish since."

here on their objects and the prices they brought at this sale, but it would

Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, see the Friends of the Shakers Web site (www.maineshakers.com).

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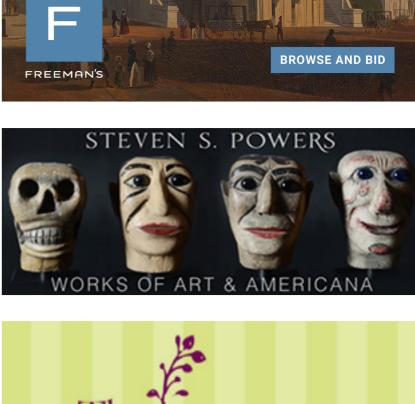
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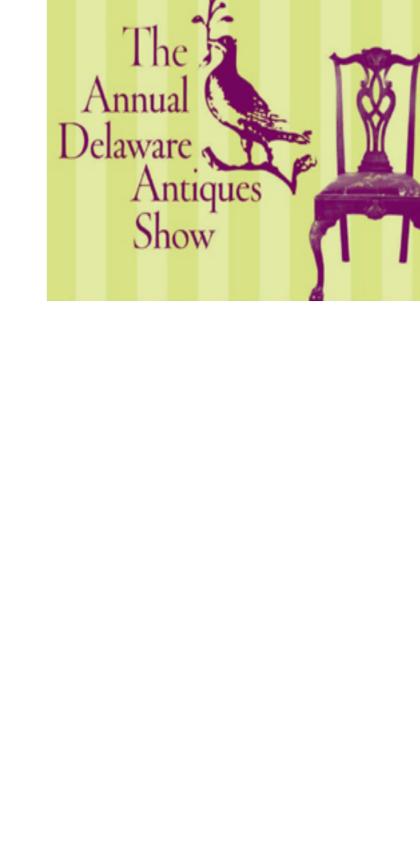
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