



Arts in society

The purified aesthetic

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The press were extraordinarily kind to the exhibition of Shaker furniture as it passed modestly through England after its opening at Manchester, ending at the v&a. It was as if there had been an unseasonable outbreak of superstitious awe which protected the show against normal critical process, just because the Shakers were a woman-bossed, communal, body-contact, group-dancing, transcendental sect from America! I mean, under normal circumstances, coarse satirical Wallaby accents, or effete satirical Old Salopian accents would have been raised in cries of "That's just *too* timely, mate . . . a woman-bossed, communal, body-contact what from where? You made it up!"

But, instead, only one paper that I know of was un-gentle enough even to point out that there is a better collection of Shaker artifacts, better displayed, permanently domiciled here in England, at the American Museum at Claverton (outside Bath)—but then that paper was *Ghost Dance Times*, the Architectural Association's irrepressible hebdomodal toilet tissue. Perhaps the other papers didn't know it was there—a faint aura of wide-eyed ignorance pervaded the whole thing, as if nobody ever heard of the Shakers before, and/or didn't read the small print on the catalogue.

Because, among the small print are the names of the organiser/designers of the show, Karl and Eva Mang—and that puts the whole affair into a far larger context than just the Shakers, and raises the whole problem of the Puritan aesthetic and its accompanying mythologies. The Mangs are Austrian, and entered the cultural big time with a show of their local Viennese culture heroes, Das Haus Thonet, the firm that invented the bentwood chair, and furnished most of the civilised world with it.

Now both Thonet and Shaker chairs are prized for the same thing—their neat functional simplicity—in spite of their diametri-

cally opposed origins, and the taste that prizes that kind of design has one of its most important roots stuck in Vienna too, in the high-Freudian, Schoenbergian, isn't-that-young-Wittgenstein years before 1914; and above all in the writings of the great, weird, witty, pungent, mildly paranoid and increasingly deaf Adolf Loos.

So good was Loos's writing, and especially his master-squib, *Ornament and Crime* of 1908, that this particular Viennese paranoia of his became world currency—the Mangs' 1965 Thonet show would have been little more than parochial industrial archaeology had they not astutely timed it to coincide with a major international design congress, where it predictably caused such a furor among the foreign delegates that their success was then assured, and the show toured the world.

All through the history of this cultivated fancy for the elegantly simple, however, runs a strain of intellectual muddle—creative muddle, certainly, or the fancy would not have become world currency, but muddle all the same. The muddle lies deep in the heart of the apparently simple (and obvious) equation between the simple life and simple design, the equation that practically every commentator ever on the Shakers has taken as QED.

Right at the beginning, Loos implied the equation. He set up the peasantry, close to the earth and all that, as innate designers who can do no wrong. The unaffected house of the untrained peasant, unlike the villa of the trained architect, is as if built by God. And right there in 1908 he sets up engineers as the modern equivalent of peasants, their plain straightforward bridges and railroad tracks, ships and locomotives as God-right in their functionalism as the peasants' houses.

However, in *Ornament and Crime* Loos also recounts, as a kind of parable, how he horrified his cobbler by asking him to make a pair of shoes without ornament. Decoration, he has to admit, is the humble craftsman's pleasure in his work, and to deprive him of it would be as unfeeling as to shout "God is dead" at old ladies going in to mass. Not all "maniacs of simplicity" could see this (compare George Sturt's romantic fictions of *The Wheelwright's Shop*) or were prepared to admit it if they did. The received opinion of the lumpen-intelligentsia is still that simple design comes from a simple life close to the soil: design as the continuation of pastoral by other means.

But if Loos had regretfully phased the peasantry out of the argument to whom does he hand the torch of *ornamentlosigkeit*? His answer was unequivocal: modern, civilised man!

The mass-produced Thonet chair, made by technology so advanced for its day that even America couldn't match it, fitted this picture perfectly. Loos admired Thonet all his life, almost certainly sat on a Thonet chair to compose *Ornament and Crime* and everything else he wrote in cafes—for which, as like as not, he had specified Thonet furniture himself if he was the designer (as in Vienna's marvellous American

Bar in the Kärntnerdurchgang, which still survived almost unaltered last time I looked). Loos's practical acts and his persuasive words made the Thonet chair a much-prized 20th century classic, and it is with us still—though, with an irony that proves Clio the muse of history to be one of our better satirists, it now turns up in the kind of smarty-pants furniture shops that offers the rest of the peasant-kitchen/fake-simple-life kit; the knotty-pine tables, French pie-dishes, enamelled jugs and strings of plastic onions to hang on the Cedartex Instabord walls.

What interests me, though, among the contemporary manifestations of the simple-life muddle, is that when our latter-day Shakers decide to bug out of modern civilisation, they do it by Loos's rulebook still, albeit held upside down. That is, rejecting the world of the unadorned business suit (clothing Loos specifically admired) and its ornamentless glass office-buildings (influenced by Loos's writings) and setting up as instant peasants in New Mexico, the Cotswolds or Tolmers Village, they paint their faces, wear embroidered clothes and hand-crafted jewellery, muralise their houses within and graffitiate them without. The Drop City community in Colorado, dismembering car bodies to build domes for needful shelter, collected up all the driving mirrors to make vast, useless but hugely decorative solar sculptures.

Forsaking the world of capitalist machine production, they're like into Handicraft Man, and *therefore*, it seems, into decoration. All right, so maybe they are over-reacting; but I still think they are on to something. Anthropologically, we know hardly a single peasant culture, even the most poverty-stricken, that doesn't decorate its goods and chattels. Indeed, if they didn't, most anthropologists wouldn't know they had a culture, would they? I find very dubious the proposition that plain unadorned design tells us anything worth knowing about "the ardours of a life close to nature," and all that, since one of the most arduous and apparently closest to nature that we have good evidence of, the life of the Australian aborigines, always seems to find time and energy to make artwork of its artefacts.

The absence of decoration is much more likely to be a moral choice, made by sophisticated people who have the time and energy to enjoy the luxury of moral choices. "The Shakers saw in the simplicity, purity and perfection of their environment a necessary corollary to their spiritual life. They eschewed all the ordinary luxuries and adornments of life and person, and strove to live a life of order, serenity and simplicity imbued with moral purpose. Purity of form and perfection of workmanship were moral obligations."

Check off the key words in that incantatory but well-informed passage from Herwin Schaeffer: simplicity, purity, perfection, order, serenity, simplicity (again), moral, purity (again), perfection (again), moral (again). It's the true voice of the Puritan aesthetic; simplicity of form as a protesta-