

*The Legacy of Mormon Furniture: The Mormon Material Culture, Undergirded by Faith, Commitment, and Craftsmanship*, by Marilyn Conover Barker, photographs by Scott Peterson and others (Gibbs Smith, 1995)

Appreciation of Mormon material culture has come a long way. We now have a beautiful coffee-table book on Mormon furniture! This book tells the early Mormon story through the work of the LDS cabinetmakers and wood-carvers who crafted furniture from the 1840s through the late nineteenth century. The history is illustrated with photographs of chairs, tables, cupboards, and beds.

This furniture underscores the massive effort the early Saints made to recreate the genteel and refined middle-class culture they left behind in England and Scandinavia and on the East Coast. They chose not to live the free frontier life of the open West. The powerful yearning for respectability, seen in photographs of pioneers with neat, starched aprons and white picket fences against the wind-swept desert, can also be seen in this furniture.

Barker rightly links the production of silk with the creation of furniture, showing the lengths to which Mormons were willing to go to upgrade their material lives. Just as they would care for worms in order to wear finery, so they took the simple woods available to them and applied faux finishes, striving for a finer appearance.

Mormon pioneers included many good carpenters and cabinetmakers

who worked the pine into square and blocky cupboards, simple rail chairs with turned legs, heavy rocking chairs, and bedsteads and settees with cutout headboards. Unlike Shakers whose simple furniture was ideologically based, Mormon furniture was derived from contemporary styles, perhaps because the Mormon leader was an eastern-trained cabinetmaker: "At no time did the Mormon Church sponsor design style that could represent their religious philosophy. Mormons were encouraged to sponsor excellent craftsmanship, but design was left to the choice of the individual cabinetmaker and buyer" (26).

Arranged for reference use, this book offers profusely illustrated chapters on furniture types, cabinetmakers, county histories of local craftsmen (but where is the county map?), the work of cooperatives, and finally a section on faux graining techniques. The gorgeous illustrations contrast wonderfully with their simple, spare subjects. The book's subtitle suggests that the early Mormon material culture reveals the faith and commitment of the pioneers. The photographs and the earnest tone of the text underscore that claim.

—Claudia L. Bushman

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*Beyond the River*, by Michael Fillerup (Signature Books, 1995)

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