

## **BROOM INTRODUCTION (by Dr. Linda Johnson)**

The Shakers of Watervliet, New York, are credited with being the first colony to raise broom corn (a variety of sorghum) and manufacturing brooms as early as 1781. Essential to kitchens and cleanliness, broom making was one of the most successful and widespread Enterprises, thought to have been begun by Brother Theodore Bates of Watervliet in 1798.

By 1805 the Shaker broom industry was flourishing at the Mount Lebanon, New York, community, with sales in Albany, Hudson, and Boston, and broom making was universally practiced by the Shakers at all of the communities. Almost every society participated in the manufacture and sold to one another as occasion demanded, but each had its own markets and maintained its own relationships. Brother Theodore is credited with inventing the flat broom, and the Shakers gained a reputation for such quality that their round and flat brooms and brushes remained in great demand throughout the 19th century. Related manufactures included long handled brooms for cleaning walls and ceilings, shoe brushes, push brooms, mops, scrub brushes, whisk brooms, clothes brushes, and dust brushes. By 1850, broom-making was so popular that more than 1 million brooms were constructed in that year in Massachusetts alone.

The business of turning broom handles for other Shaker communities was under way by 1805. Broom handles were made of soft maple timber and were turned in a common foot operated lathe.

Humble, deceptively simple in design, the broom doesn't always get the recognition it deserves. It's used for cleaning. It's prone to being left in a corner. It bristles. It's time to get swept off your feet.

## **DIY**

Broomcorn is usually planted between May 1 and June 15 in Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado before being harvested in October. As contemporary broommakers question the cost, sustainability, and labor practices of large broomcorn growing operations, many have begun growing personal plots of broomcorn. This broomcorn was grown by broomshire Abbey Carlstrom of Dirt Kicker Brooms in the Willamette Valley of Oregon.

## **BROOM BELT**

While many sources credit Benjamin Franklin with bringing broomcorn (sorghum) seeds to the United States from France in 1757, the truth is likely more complex. The details of that fabled story itself vary in multiple sources. In some versions Franklin brought a full plant, in others a seed was trapped in a brush that came into Franklin's possession. Another claims a Philadelphia woman gave Franklin the seed.

Some researchers suspect that in reality the first sorghum arrived on ships transporting enslaved Africans to the colonies in the 17th century. Sorghum is native to the African continent, but given that select histories were prioritized and recorded up until this point, the origin is difficult to trace.

Early colonists used their farming knowledge in combination with Indigenous growing techniques to plant broomcorn, which grows similarly to maize. The Connecticut River Valley and neighboring regions of New England became the epicenter of broom production, creating a "Broom Belt." Broomcorn cultivation rapidly spread to western states, alongside the colonies' expansion, reaching California in 1861.

To this day, much of the broomcorn that independent broommakers use comes from Mexico.

## **BROOMS AS HISTORICAL PORTALS**

- Can brooms serve as portals?
- What can we learn from the history of colonial broommaking to better the future?
- What lessons from the Shakers' broommaking and worldview still ring clear?
- Which histories are still being prioritized, and which excluded?
- What does it mean to create a personal cottage industry today?
- Is there a place where identities as an artist, a queer person, a broommaker, a craftsperson, and a historian can come together?

## **TEXTILES**

The Shakers were practical people who repurposed well-worn home textiles when making other objects for the home. In the spirit of Shaker resourcefulness, Richards' older textiles too, became something new.

## **BROOMMAKING**

The world of craft contains both cultural sharing and theft, works of necessity and beauty, exotification and romanticizing. It is messy.

The folkloric tone of broom history is curious at best and begs the questions of the origins of the American broom. The development of broommaking is attributable to a much more varied and communal lineage of makers. Working both in isolation and in groups, these makers were motivated alternately by necessity and spiritual purpose.

Shaker labor benefited the group. They rarely applied for patents or signed their work—a stark difference from the mainstream legacy of American individualism.

Colonial women were initially left out of the broommaking process, despite being brooms' primary users. In addition to bringing seed from central Africa, enslaved peoples were likely flattening brooms much earlier than what is thought. Early shaved birch brooms used in the colonies are an Indigenous design. Children and older members of a community often made brooms, due to the accessibility of the broommaking process.

There is a history to brooms beyond just their industry, and it was collective. The Shakers probably would have liked that.

## **COLORS**

There are many pride flags, all serving as emblems for the various communities in the 2SLGBTQIA+ spectrum. Like national flags, each color in a pride flag conveys a meaning chosen for its contribution to the aggregate ideal for which the flag stands. Daniel Quasar's 2018 Progress Pride flag has become a symbol of contemporary queer identity and acceptance. It is a variation of Gilbert Baker's rainbow flag (1978), Monica Helm's Transgender Flag (1999), and Amber Hikes' More Color, More Pride flag that included black and brown stripes (2017).

Pride Broom (2022) was constructed from remnants of old clothing belonging to the artist, their partner, their daughter, their friends, and members of their community.

The broomstick is also painted with Shaker colors. Almost all Shaker furniture, built-ins, objects, floors, and buildings were painted specific colors. The Shakers' dedication to craft in the name of beauty on this plane of existence was expressed through their use of color—often choosing blues and yellows, colors associated with spiritual light and transcendence.

**TOOLS**

Forms, silhouettes, and connections (Richards calls them "conjunctions") from antique farming equipment and religious tools are synthesized to make these works of art.