



Exterior of the house designed by Peter and built in 2003.

A Contemporary Approach to Antiques Collecting

by Peter Eaton and Joan Brownstein

Peter —

About forty years ago, when this generation's group of dealers and collectors was first beginning to have an impact on the antiques business in New England, we all went to the same sources for ideas and information. Unless we had collectors in the family, how did we learn what was acceptable in a "collection?" What was *really* good? How stuff fit together? How we were supposed to use it? What a room was supposed to look like? Most of us went to the same places for answers — Sturbridge Village, Deerfield,

Shelburne, perhaps even Williamsburg or Winterthur. Maybe we went to the MFA or The Met, or the Brooklyn Museum. We visited the dealers from the preceding generation — Bacon, Cogan, Considine, French, Hammitt, Liverant, Walton. And we saw the same thing everywhere — period room settings. (Zeke Liverant and John Walton had shops, but we knew they lived in old houses and had stuff tucked away.) Many of us searched for, and often bought, old houses — which some would use as shops, while others

used them as settings for their developing collections.

I was one of the "many." My first house was a 1740 Colonial, with a big attached barn, in southeastern New Hampshire. The basic shop was the room settings of the downstairs of the house — with overflow in the barn loft. My next house was a big 1720 Colonial, also in southeastern New Hampshire. It featured seven fireplaces, walls of raised paneling and sheathing, and there was a detached barn. Again the main shop was the room settings in

the house, but there was more inventory, so I built what would now be called a “gallery setting” in the barn. To me, it was still a place to put the overflow, but I was beginning to look at things differently. John Kirk’s series on public television and his early books, particularly *The Impecunious Collector*, made me start to look at pieces as individual “objects.” The whole idea of aesthetics came into play, and I wanted the people who visited the shop to see each piece separately — to judge each piece on its own merits and its particular relationship to the aesthetics that were — or should have been — important to the craftsman who had made the piece. Gradually the better things made their way from the house to the “gallery” in the barn, and the secondary stuff became part of the room settings in the house.

In the late 1980s, I bought a mid-nineteenth-century brick commercial building in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and the shift toward individual objects as opposed to creating eighteenth-century rooms became more pronounced. This time the entire second floor was carpeted, with white walls, track lighting, and high ceilings. There was no attempt to make the third-floor living space a “period” room. Fifteen years later it was time for another change — and this time it led to the construction of a building that was designed to completely emphasize the display of individual objects.

The point of all this “personal history” is that I’ve learned that antiques — and folk art — don’t need to be “part” of anything. They stand alone, based on their aesthetic quality and their condition.

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View of the living room looking toward the porch. Furniture shown includes a pair of Chinese cupboards dating from the 15th or 16th century, surmounted with a collection of Northern Song black and brown ware.

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Peter and Joan in their living room. Behind them are a pair of New England oil on panel portraits by an unidentified artist. The pair date from 1822 and are in their original grain painted frames. On the floor by an 18th-century Chinese table are Neolithic Chinese pots.





Chinese furniture and pottery, Oriental rugs, English and European metalwork and ceramics, and pottery of the American Southwest can all be mixed with American furniture and folk art. The constant is not how it “fits” together, the constant is an awareness of quality and an aesthetic judgment based on that knowledge. We’ve tried to create an environment where collectors and other dealers can see that mixing old and new, ancient and modern, *can* work — and can be both visually and emotionally satisfying.

Joan —

Likewise, I can claim a forty-year odyssey to our present approach to living with what we collect. My first “modern” space was a loft in a mid-nineteenth-century brick factory building in New York while I was getting a graduate



Bedroom with Chinese furniture and pottery, an American cherry candlestand, and a painting by Joan.

degree in fine arts. I had 2,500 square feet of “raw” space and could not afford separate living and work spaces. Nor would I have wanted to divide my huge open space, nor obstruct the view through floor-to-ceiling front windows. I made minimal concessions to basic amenities and left the space largely as I’d found it.

The first house that I bought was a 1730 Colonial, with exposed beams, sheathed walls, and original wide pine floors. I loved its warmth and charm, and collecting furniture appropriate for its age coincided with the start of my business selling folk art paintings. However, I always kept a separate loft where I painted and kept the categories of objects that I thought inappropriate for a period home, which at that time included a growing collection of architect-designed twentieth-century furniture — which seemed to work well in a 150-year-old shoe factory. In a later move, I tried to connect my living and work spaces and designed and built a house in which the spectrum of my collecting interests could be displayed together.

Peter and I live in a house that he designed and which was built four years ago. Folk art paintings hang over seventeenth-century Chinese tables covered with Song Dynasty pottery. A carved stone dog lives on the end of a long, black granite counter top in the kitchen, along with a collection of Richard Meier-designed silver candlesticks. A school-girl memorial is over my desk.

Twentieth-century abstract artists were among the first collectors of American folk art. They collected it, and it, in turn, influenced their work. European artists — Picasso is a good example — were hugely influenced



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This room, referred to as “Peter’s Room,” combines objects from a number of eras. A pair of Prior-Hamblin portraits of a Maine sea captain and his wife, 1841, share space with the work of Dutch folk artist Charles Delin, who painted Newburyport sea captains when they docked in Maastricht and Amsterdam. Furnishings include a pair of Queen Anne armchairs, a New York state Kast, and Thomas Moser Arts & Crafts furniture.

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A large 19th-century Chinese storage vessel fills the space in front of a bank of windows.

by African art. Our Queen Anne and Chippendale chairs have roots in earlier Chinese chairs, as does the work of twentieth-century masters like Wright and McIntosh.

In a recent *Art News* survey of the top 100 collectors in the world, five of the top ten included Old Masters or ancient art in their collections, as well as contemporary, or folk, or primitive art. Some people mix their collections in traditional homes; others live in SoHo-style lofts or ultra contemporary homes. What is consistent within these collections is quality.

All art borrows from other art, sometimes

from other periods and from other cultures. Aesthetics shared by different cultures and — on a more pure level — the simple sharing of beauty unites objects of disparate times and places. For us, a modern setting and a house that functions as a backdrop for what we collect, works. ■

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