



The altar table that started it all. Originally used for worship, then as Peter's desk, it now takes the central spot in Peter and Joan's living room. On it are 17th-century European candlesticks and a modern ceramic flask made by a monk in Weston Priory, Vt., who is the only Western potter to be granted the title "National Treasure" by the Chinese. The chair has details and lines in common with western Queen Anne and Chippendale furniture.

'It was this altar table'

Peter Eaton and Joan Brownstein show their collections of Chinese furniture and pottery to John Fiske

"It was this altar table," Peter Eaton replied when I asked him where his passion for Chinese vernacular furniture had come from. "It was 25 years ago, and like most dealers I was on the road all the time. I was about to move into my new place in Newburyport and was wondering what to collect for myself. All I knew was that I didn't want to collect American, because I didn't want to compete with my customers. I still don't," he added, "and neither does Joan. We don't live with what we sell.

"Then, out of the blue, in an antiques shop in Maine, I saw this table. I didn't

know anything about it, and neither did the woman in the shop – she suggested that I come back later when the owner would be in. Two weeks later, the table was still there. I looked at it again, and I was ... overcome." There was a long pause while Peter looked for the right word. "Overcome," he said quietly.

This time the owner was there, and was able to tell Peter that it was a seventeenth-century Chinese scholar's table, and that it had come from one of the best-known antiques collectors in the country. So Peter bought it, brought it home and for many years used it as his desk.



Detail of the altar table showing the surface that Peter prizes so highly, and that he deprecatingly described as a 400-year degradation of lacquer. Note the double through-tenons from the leg. Chinese woodworking joints are far more intricate than those on Western furniture; they are never pegged or glued and are invariably as tight today as the day they were made.

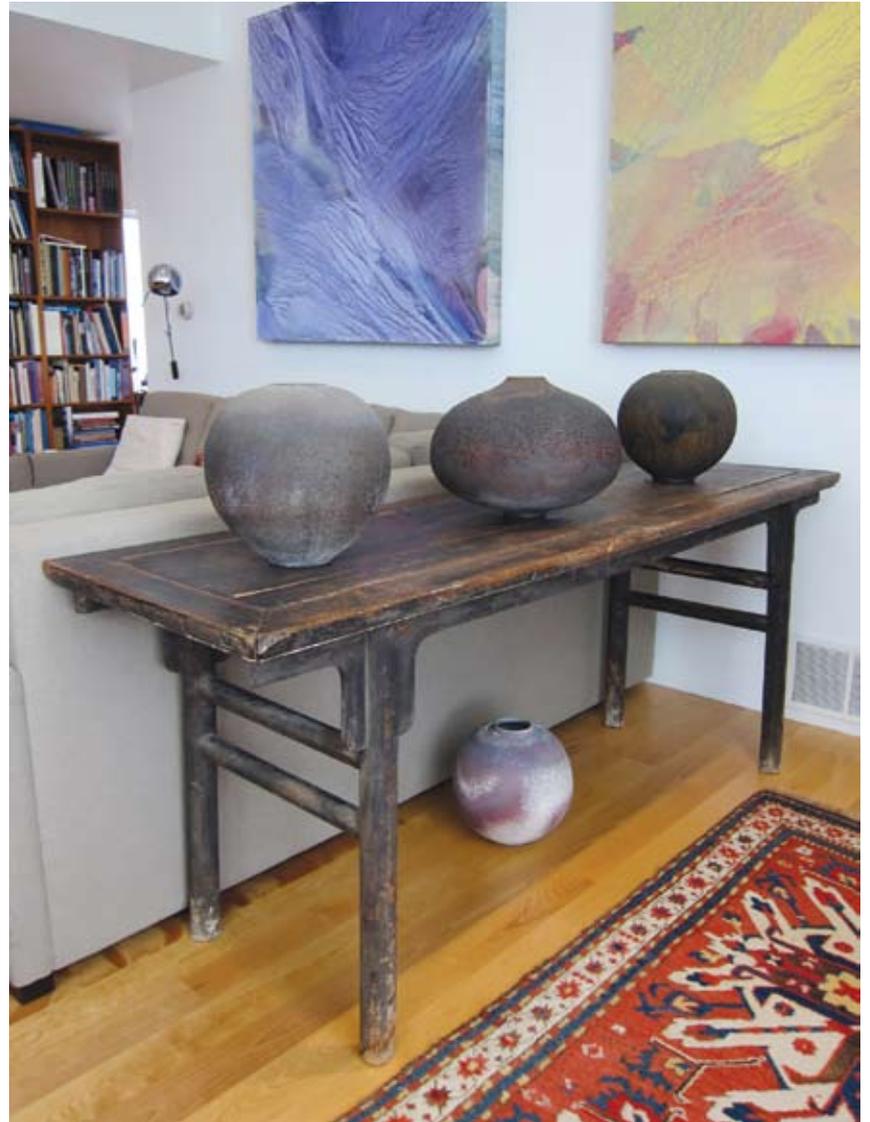
Now I was sitting with a cup of coffee just a few feet away from it. “It’s the simplicity of form, the purity of line and the quality of the surface,” said Peter. “That’s what I always look for in furniture, whether it’s American, English or Chinese, and that’s what struck me so strongly about this table.”

By happy coincidence, long before Joan Brownstein and Peter Eaton had come together to form one of the best-known couples in the antiques business, Joan had developed a love for Chinese art in college, but in her case it was painting and sculpture. She said that their tastes and interests obviously meshed together, but that at first, she had found furniture very different from art. I asked her to explain more fully. She thought for a moment: Furniture, she said, had a long time span, whereas Chinese art was quick, almost spontaneous. The aesthetic of furniture, its essential form, changed very little over centuries, but in Zen painting, she told me, the artist “saw” the essential form of a tree, for example, and then rapidly transferred it to paper with a few expressive strokes of the brush. Joan is an artist herself, and seeing her powerful abstract

paintings hanging above sixteenth-century Chinese furniture is a truly joyful experience.

The vernacular aesthetic

Peter and Joan both share a deep-seated belief in a universal aesthetic sense that ultimately underlies all human cultures and that transcends all differences of time and place. “Beauty does not lie in the eye of the beholder,” Peter has told me more than once. “It lies in the quality of the object.” For Peter there are qualities of line, proportion, mass and, very importantly, surface that make art, art, whatever the culture that produced it: They create an essential similarity between, say, the colonial, New England vernacular furniture in which he deals, and the vernacular Chinese furniture among which he lives. In a similar vein, Joan showed me how groupings of twentieth-century American pottery, traditional Navaho pottery and pottery from the Song dynasty all sat harmoniously on a Chinese vernacular table. The way Peter and Joan live with their Chinese antiques and art provides an instant demonstration of how beauty transcends difference.



In the library a 17th-century long table stands behind a modern sectional sofa. On it are pots by Harvey Sadow, dated 1987, with carefully worked surfaces that harmonize perfectly with the naturally aged surface of the table. On the wall are two of Joan’s paintings.



Two 17th-century long tables on opposite sides of the living room. One is more ornate and distinctly Chinese: The other could almost have been designed in 20th-century America.

A Pair of Fifteenth- or Sixteenth-Century Cupboards

Peter acquired one of these cupboards early in his collecting career. The other was owned by Frank Cowan; when he died, Peter was able to acquire it from his estate. The two were not made as a pair, though they are virtually identical,

and this is the first time they have been brought together in their lifetimes of nearly 600 years. When Peter and Joan built their house, they designed the far wall of the living room to accommodate the two cupboards.



The cupboards in their specially designed places against the back wall of the living room.



One of the cupboards with the doors open. On top is Song pottery, beside it is a large Song storage jar, and inside is Chinese Neolithic pottery from 2000 BCE. The pots were decorated on the tops only because they were set in the earth in tombs, and only the tops would have been visible. The other cupboard contains Christmas decorations.



A tomb pottery version of the cupboards. Miniature furniture made of earthenware was buried with the deceased for use in the afterlife. Because the tombs can be dated accurately, tomb pottery is useful in dating the furniture it copies.



The untouched surface of a door. Originally the cupboards were red lacquer with designs in the door panels. Centuries of use, and the effects of light and of widely fluctuating temperatures have combined to produce this richly textured surface.



One of the two cupboards on the back wall of the living room with a group of Song dynasty pottery on top.

Peter's taste in furniture is for the vernacular. In China, he said, there are three distinct classes of furniture – the classical, the vernacular and the primitive. Classical furniture was found in the Emperor's court, it was owned by other wealthy families, was made of expensive hard woods imported from South East Asia and was often elaborately carved or decorated. Vernacular furniture was owned by less aristocratic families, usually in the provinces. It followed the same forms as classical, but made them in native woods, and simplified, or even eliminated, the carving and decoration. The primitive was more crudely made and was everyday household furniture. Classical furniture was thinly lacquered so that the expensive wood could be seen through the finish. But the native wood of vernacular furniture was not as highly regarded so the lacquer was used to cover the grain and to provide a lacquered surface that was attractive in its own right.

Colonial New England furniture, Peter pointed out, followed a similar pattern: Expensive imported mahogany for the rich folk in the cities, similar forms in native woods for leading families in country towns, and "country" (rather than "primitive") for everyone else. A vernacular Connecticut piece from the eighteenth century has the same "feel" for Peter as a vernacular Chinese piece that is 300 years older and from the other side of the world.

The word "feel" may seem a little vague. Peter went on to point more precisely to similarities of line and form between Chinese and Queen Anne and Chippendale furniture in both America and England, and to say that even modern forms frequently echo it. The Chinese aesthetic underlies much Western design from at least the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries. In chairs, in particular, the echo between Chinese and English/American forms seems particularly strong.

Peter and Joan knew they had to collect something to put on their furniture: Song (pronounced Sung) pottery had so many similarities with vernacular furniture that it was an obvious choice. Poorly documented and disregarded, it survived in the shadow of the far more prestigious porcelain of the Ming dynasty. (The Song is a two-part dynasty, Northern Song, 960-1127, and Southern Song, 1127-1279. The Ming dynasty lasted from 1368 till 1644.) Joan and Peter's collection is primarily of Northern Song, and, like vernacular furniture upon which they show it, its appeal lies in its perfection of line, simplicity of form and, of course, the surface. I found it helpful to think of Ming porcelain as the equivalent of classical furniture, and Song pottery as vernacular -- less sophisticated, less courtly, and more down to earth. Indeed, Song glazes were earth colored, green, black and brown, and they are a perfect fit for the aged surfaces of vernacular.

Joan has been particularly drawn to

the black and brown glazes that were used on everyday kitchenware. She believes there were 20 or 30 different black and brown glazes, and she is determined to find an example of every one. Her large collection of teabowls must be close to achieving her goal.

Collecting

Collecting vernacular furniture was not easy. When Peter began, there was almost nothing published in English. Peter was, and still is, a

friend of Michael Dunn, a dealer who did more than anyone to open American eyes to the beauties of Chinese vernacular furniture. Michael was a frequent visitor to China and had met the man who had somehow worked himself into the position of being the point man through whose hands all Chinese furniture passed on its way to export. Through this contact, Michael was able to find vernacular, provincial furniture to which he would not otherwise had had access: He also learned as much as he could and brought



Line, surface, age – what more can you ask of an antique? One of a pair of 16th- or 17th-century chairs. The turned spindle under the arm is a sign of an early date.



A very large Song storage jar. The grandchildren enjoy climbing up it, putting their heads inside and making weird noises so they can listen to the echoes.



A 17th-century cup whose natural surface merges into the old lacquered surface of the 17th-century altar table until the two are almost undistinguishable. Two sections of the rim have been smoothed to make drinking more comfortable, and an iron hook has been added, but the cup still retains much of the quality of a found object.



Five Song dynasty teabowls from the couple's collection that illustrate the almost infinite variety achievable within the brown and black glazes. It is believed that as the fashion for different types of tea changed, so the color of the glazes changed to match the color of the tea.

this knowledge back to the US along with the furniture. But even in the Chinese literature, there was no mention of vernacular furniture until the mid-1990s: All the attention was directed to the more prestigious classical furniture. The pattern held for ceramics: Plenty of studies of Ming porcelain, but none of Song pottery.

Frank Cowan was another collector. Frank collected widely – English, Chinese, European, almost anything provided it was from the seventeenth century or earlier, and provided that

it had a special something about it. Frank did not go for the mundane. The trio of Michael, Frank and Peter today might be called “early adopters”: They did more than anyone to introduce Chinese vernacular furniture to America.

The 1990s was also the decade in which Song pottery became recognized and appreciated, both in China and in this country, where an exhibition at Harvard and a book brought it to the attention of American collectors and ceramicists.

Peter will not accept restoration, either in his

antiques business or in his personal collection. But restoration can be a tricky topic. Peter told me of a Chinese treatise warning of restoration or fakery and describing the sorts of restoration most commonly found: It was published, wait for it, around 1100 AD. As Peter said, with a wry smile and a shrug of his shoulders, “If a restoration or even a fake is 1,000 years old...”

Peter went on to tell me that much of the vernacular furniture brought to America arrived covered in dirt and farmyard mud. The story was that during the Cultural Revolution (proclaimed by Mao in 1966) furniture like this was considered “revisionist” and out of line with Communist ideals. So it was thrown out into barns and farmyards and subjected to politically malign neglect. Given the times, it is quite remarkable that any of it survived. But survive it did, often under layers of mud. Joan told me that she will carry to her grave the image of Peter standing on their lawn washing mud off 500-year-old furniture with a garden hose.

On occasions, the hose revealed that the story of mud and the Cultural Revolution was not always true: The hosing sometimes uncovered restoration that had clearly be done more recently than the 1960s. Post-Maoist mud could be an effective and easy cover-up. One piece that put Peter in a dilemma was a very rare three-seat settee whose (minor and early) restoration was brought to light by the hose. Upset as he was to see the restoration (and he told me he was angry for months), Peter finally decided to keep the settee because of its rarity and its beauty. He’s pleased that he did – it occupies a prominent spot in their living room. And I’m pleased that I got the chance to see it, restored or not.

Thank you, Peter and Joan. You showed me that the eye for beauty can see across chasms of time and distance, and that the there-and-then can live happily in the here-and-now. Not that I need to point that out to any collector of any category of antiques.

For more from the Chinese Collection of Peter Eaton and Joan Brownstein, visit *Online Exclusive*.



Peter and Joan refer to this as the “kitchen table.” It is where they eat when they are alone together. Joan invited me to sit at it to see how comfortable it was. I did, and I was not in the least surprised: Nobody needs to convince me that antiques can be as useful to us as they were to their original owners.



A double rarity. First because the three-seat settee is, as far as Peter can tell, an unrecorded form, and second, because it is the only piece in the collection with some restoration.



Some of the restoration: One of the corner brackets has been restored.