

consensus collecting



photography by Ellen McDermott

Being in the right place at the right time; a cliché perhaps, but that is exactly how Stephen and Dinah Lefkowitz found their Old Saybrook, Connecticut, home. House hunting along the Connecticut shore, the couple decided to walk through the historic area of North Cove. Strolling down one small street after another, they came to a dead end in front of a wonderful Federal

house. A woman happened to be out front and asked their business in the area. When she learned they were looking for a house to buy she invited them inside. As Dinah says, “Stephen fell in love for the second time.” She adds, “Little did I know, but he bought me the house shortly thereafter on my birthday.”

Very proud of the house and its history (it is listed in the National Register of Historic Places), Stephen relates that it was built in the 1790s by Willoughby Lynde (1759–1817), a sea captain and descendant of the early families of the area, which was settled in the 1630s. The now silted waterway was once a flourishing port, with ships embarking regularly on the triangular trade. In fact, the ell to one side of the house was originally a ships’ bakery and chandlery located on one of the piers. When the port became inaccessible to large vessels the pier fell into disrepair. The



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Carved from one piece of wood, this red, white, and blue “sailor’s rope” mirror is a tour de force. Purchased from the Snyders, it is a favorite of Dinah’s.

The small Queen Anne drop-leaf table and Norwich, Conn., candlestand with scalloped edge are from Arthur Liverant. The couple purchased the diminutive Federal sofa from Marguerite Riordan. The slipware pitcher was a present they gave each other for Christmas; purchased while visiting John Walton’s Connecticut shop. The miniature Native American woven sweet grass basket (left) was Dinah’s first foray into the realm of collecting. Coincidentally, the dealer was someone with whom Stephen had gone to high school.

PREVIOUS PAGE:

Says Dinah of the tables and chairs on their sun porch, “The angles of the Windsor chair spindles remind me of a Ben Shahn (1898–1969) painting of New York City antennas.” The chairs are variously from Jim and Nancy Glazer, Elliot and Grace Snyder, and John Keith Russell, from whom the couple also purchased the red painted harvest table. “I knew the minute I saw it that we had to own it,” says Dinah “Another dealer kept calling us to see if we would sell it to him.” The bowl is from Jan Whitlock.







PREVIOUS PAGE:

This trio creates a symphony of undulations and curves. The shaping of the skirt on the cherry high chest ties it to the Wethersfield area of Connecticut. The exaggerated, yet delicate curve of the knees and ankles is truly balletic. The crows, by Charles Perdue, 1910 (from Russ and Karen Goldberger), add a bit of whimsy. "I grew up near open fields," says Dinah, "and it was a common sight to see flocks of crows." The transitional William and Mary/Queen Anne grain-painted side chairs (from the Snyders) are attributed to the Gaines School of New Hampshire.

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The circa-1820 yarn-sewn rug with crewel embroidery was probably originally made for the top of a table. Rare for its early date, it is also significant for its sophisticated design. It was one of the first pieces the couple purchased from Elliot and Grace Snyder; the red painted Rhode Island Windsors are also from the Berkshire dealers. The elegant Newport table is from David Schorsch, and the painted dressing box, which retains its original mirror, is from Peter Eaton.

small building, perhaps the oldest structure in Old Saybrook, was saved and attached to the house. In remarkable condition, it retains its original door, flooring, ceiling, and walls.

"We were collecting before purchasing the house," says Stephen, "but after we moved in, our collecting became very focused." The couple purchased needed objects like a dining table and chairs. While such pieces had a utilitarian bent and were site specific, many of their purchases were based purely on beauty and form. Stephen and Dinah found the house to be a perfect setting for the objects. Notes Stephen "The rooms called out for period furniture."

Even with over two hundred pieces in the house, there is no sense of overcrowding. Each is given space to be seen and admired, much like art-work or sculpture. Simple elegance is a hallmark of the couple's aesthetic



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Textiles, furniture, graining, and carved “smalls”—this corner of the living room encapsulates the variety within the collection. The couple purchased the Philadelphia Chippendale drop-leaf table from Sandy Jacobs; the grain-painted dome-top box and shelf from the Snyders; the appliqué rug on the wall, from Sam Herrup; the floor rug, from Thurston Nichols; the merganser decoy by Samuel Collins Sr., from David Schorsch; and the birds on the shelf, from, among others, David Wheatcroft and David Good.

Perhaps the oldest structure in Old Saybrook, the ell of the main house dates to the turn of the eighteenth century. Two stellar Windsor chairs are placed on the porch: a green comb-back from Stephen Score, and a red knuckle-arm fan back from David Schorsch. Both exhibit extraordinary form and original paint. The house, not shown, has a classic hall-parlor and central chimney floor plan. The front entrance is illustrated in *Connecticut River Valley Doorways* (1983).

NEXT PAGE:

Dinah is always on the lookout for Chinese checkers' boards. Their color schemes here work well in the kitchen, where the painted table and set of bowback Windsors lend a relaxed feel to the well trafficked space. The circa-1900 circus rug adds a bit of whimsy.







sensibilities. The one-time owner of a retail store specializing in Modern design, Dinah is drawn to clean lines and the effects that negative and positive space have on an overall visual statement. The collection is positioned to play off the space in a dialogue with the paneled woodwork, crisp white walls, and historic setting—the effect is contemporary in its stylish arrangement.

The couple has bought almost exclusively from dealers. As industry doyen Albert Sack has said many a time, the best collections are formed with the insight and advice of dealers. Stephen and Dinah have formed close friendships with many in the field, particularly Elliott and Grace Snyder, from whom they have acquired quite a few of their objects, some of which have never seen a salesroom floor. A case in point is the arresting high chest of drawers in the living room, which was only briefly in the dealers' bedroom prior to being whisked away to Connecticut by Stephen and Dinah.

Continually on the hunt, the couple has been seen at nearly every antiques show where Americana is offered; Stephen methodically assessing the collections in each booth, while Dinah



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ABOVE: Stephen and Dinah deliberately place pieces where they will be most visually striking; an example of which is the paneling on the hanging cupboard that complements the paneled doors beside the fireplace. Dinah says of the cupboard, "It is one of our rarest pieces. The detail and ornament for the size are extraordinary; and it retains the original mustard paint. Some people think it is from Pennsylvania, others think it is from Connecticut; the jury is still out." The colors on the painted Native American basket echo those on the shelf and the exquisite oval-top table, visually uniting both pieces. Stephen says of the table, "It is tiny and so pure. Just after we bought it at the New Hampshire Antique Dealers' show (from Walters-Benesek) we turned it upside down and the top fell off. It was clear they had started life together."

The dramatic splay of the legs, upturned ears on the crest, shape of the seat, and well-defined turnings on this Norwich, Conn., Windsor chair have earned it a place as "one of our best Windsors," says Dinah. "Several dealers have told us they would love to have the chair," purchased from dealer Harold Cole. The grain-painted table from Maine is from Russ and Karen Goldberger; the 1940-1950s carved whale—stamped "C.VOORHEES"—is from Wayne Pratt; the rug from upstate New York and mirror are from Courcier and Wilkins.

Though of simple form, the red-painted dressing table epitomizes elegance with its shapely top and tall, slender legs (from the Snyders). The table would likely have been covered originally in a long white cloth. The painted dome-top box has newspapers glued inside that date to the 1840s; the likely time of its manufacture (Harold Cole). The profile of the looking glass crest is reminiscent of a tulip, attributing it to the Connecticut River Valley. The stars and stripes hooked rug dates to circa 1870. Both pieces are from the Snyders.



PREVIOUS PAGE:

The dining room has some of the more formal furniture. The table and assembled chairs share the distinctive creased knee seen on Chippendale furniture from Salem, Mass. The barrel-back corner cupboard, from coastal Connecticut via Jeff Tillou, retains its original marbled paint. The framed circa-1835 stenciled watercolor theorem painting, from David Schorsch, would originally have been used as a table cover.

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"These delicate Chippendale chairs are among my very favorite pieces acquired from the Snyders," says Dinah. Their grained surface is a rare feature. The octagonal tilt-top stand, also from the Snyders, exhibits wonderful form. The red painted basket was acquired from Walters-Benesek.

darts with intent, looking for their next purchase. As Dinah says, "Stephen is the scholar; I just react."

For most collectors, there is at least one object they let get away and always remember. This was almost the case with what became one of the couple's favorite objects; a hanging cupboard acquired from the Snyders. Complete with original paint, an elaborate crest, dentil molding, paneling, and even a secret compartment, the cupboard is what Stephen calls "charming and unique." Yet he almost turned it down. "Elliot sent me a photograph," Stephen remembers. "It didn't reveal the compact size and detailing of the piece. We almost didn't pursue it," He adds, "But, when Dinah and I saw it in person, we knew we had to have it. For a country piece, it is amazingly visual and complex."

This visual dynamism is true for so many of the pieces in their collection. Objects they have acquired are remarkable in their bold turnings, sculptural form, varied textures, and color palette. Though many of the objects would be considered country pieces, each example has an understated elegance, sophistication, and

personality not always found in products of non urban manufacture.

In addition to line and design, original paint and old surface are important criteria for the couple. One of their loves is baskets. They acquire only those in perfect condition and with their original paint. "It is truly special," says Dinah, "that something so utilitarian can be so wonderful. The fact that some baskets, so fragile by nature, remain in such good condition is a testament to the respect they were given by their owners through the generations."

The quality of Stephen and Dinah's collection is appreciated and recognized by aficionados in the field. Museum curators have requested loans, and dealers have called offering to purchase objects. On several occasions, the couple has opened their home to groups interested in antiques and folk art.

Though respect and appreciation for the collections in their stewardship is primary, the couple is quick to point out that the objects are used in their daily lives; their enjoyment increased by the stories and memories associated with each piece. This is what collecting is about for this Connecticut couple. @

THIS PAGE, CENTER: One of a pair of theorem paintings; the other is of flowers. From the Snyders, they date to the mid-nineteenth century.

THIS PAGE, BOTTOM: A striking example of a Salem, Mass., corner chair, circa 1770.

