

lifestyle

A
Contemporary
Home for a
Classic
Collection

by Joan Brownstein and Peter Eaton

photography by Kevin Allen

While this Virginia couple has been collecting American antiques since the mid-1970s, they began to concentrate on what is now their core collection of American folk portraits and inlaid furniture ten years ago when they built their current house. Working with a small number of dealers, they have assembled a collection of consistently high-quality late-eighteenth- through early-nineteenth-century material notable for its remarkable examples by artists and cabinet-makers whose work at this level is sought by discerning collectors.

Although both the husband and wife have collected since childhood, their first purchases of American furniture as a couple were made in the 1970s while residing in a modernized Washington, D. C., townhouse. A subsequent house was furnished with traditional Queen Anne and Chippendale furniture. With the purchase of their first folk art portrait in 2003—Ammi Phillips' 1835 portrait of Elizabeth Mygans—they began to collect with a different sense of

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:

The ceiling height and abundant light make the great room a natural display area for many of the couple's interests. The two stands beside the matching sofas reflect the owners' interest in both form and surface quality. One, with a dramatically shaped top and unusual inlay is made of cherry; the other with carved rosettes applied to the corners of the top is made completely of bird's-eye maple. Each stand retains its original surface. On the far wall to the right of the double doors to the patio, is the colorful J. H. Davis watercolor of seventeen-year-old Dorinda York painted in 1837, and pictured in *Three American Watercolor Painters* (1974), by Gail and Norbert Savage. A small theorem of fruit depicts a Canton ware bowl, circa 1830. Beneath is an octagonal-topped sewing stand with an inlaid and molded-edge lift top, inlaid facade, and with line-inlaid splayed legs and cross-stretchers. This rare stand is made of mahogany, retains its original surface, and was probably made in Newburyport, Mass. or Portsmouth, N.H., circa 1800. To the left of the door is one of three known "grandmother" clocks attributed to the Mulliken family of clockmakers. The others are pictured in Nutting's *Furniture Treasury* (1928) and Brooks Palmer's *The American Clock* (1928).

"We asked the architect," says the wife, "for a design that would take advantage of the site of the house, which is secluded and wooded." To accomplish this, Washington, D. C., architect Jack McCartney used floor-to-ceiling glass connectors with small gardens outside, between five connected buildings, symmetrically placed and surrounded by trees.

Some of the pieces of most importance to the collectors are displayed in the foyer. A Federal card table, probably made in or near Providence, R.I., circa 1800, is one of the finest examples of the form. Above it is a portrait of Kate Elting, painted in New Paltz, New York, probably in 1824. The sitter's white dress shows the artist's ability to adroitly picture transparent fabric. Kate leans on the edge of a table that is still in the Elting family house in New Paltz, now owned by the Huguenot Society, and in which portraits of other members of her family still hang. The original gilded leaf and berry frame is labeled by its maker, "Bernard/Carver, Gilder, and Looking—Glass Manufacturer/1-2 Warren Street (New York City);" the firm was at this location only in 1824.





The mantelpiece of the great room holds two shelf clocks. To the left, a wooden works pillar and scroll example—in perfect condition—by Samuel Terry, circa 1825, with a beautiful eglomisé tablet. On the right is a rare Aaron Willard dish-dial shelf clock with an eight-day movement and a separate alarm train. This, too, has an exceptional eglomisé tablet and is in perfect condition; it is pictured in Paul Foley's *Willard's Patent Time Pieces: a History of the Weight Driven Banjo Clock 1800-1900* (2002). The Chippendale tall clock in the corner, circa 1790-1810, is signed by Daniel Burnap of East Windsor, Conn., and descended in the clockmaker's family. The brass dial is richly engraved and the case is highlighted by twist-turned columns on both hood and waist, and a cross-banded door centered by a filch of crotch-grained mahogany. A Burnap family sampler from the same period is in the master bedroom.

The side wall of the west end of the great room holds a portrait of Catherine Clinton Heston by her husband, Isaac Heston from Hestonville near Philadelphia, painted circa 1774, the year of their marriage. Catherine Heston's portrait on wood panel is in its original black-painted frame. Illustrated in *Folk Art in American Life* (1995) by Robert Bishop and Jacqueline Atkins, the painting is related to a signed fireboard in the collection of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection. Next to it is a 1797 work by Rufus Hathaway of Israel Forster (1779-1863) of Manchester, Mass., which is illustrated in Lanci Valentine's *Rufus Hathaway: Artist and Physician, 1770-1822* (1987). The painting is one of the few images of a young person by Hathaway and one of a small group produced in a spandrelled or oval format. Israel has his hand tucked into his vest, obviously to serve the artist who had trouble drawing hands.

purpose and enthusiasm. This newfound direction was in part an emotional response to the people depicted and a new awareness of how well the paintings worked in a contemporary setting.

Simultaneously they recognized that the furniture in the houses at the time such portraits were painted would have been high-style vernacular pieces, most likely inlaid Federal examples from New

England. The stage was set. The new house they had just built offered a superb backdrop for such a collection

The house, designed by Washington architect Jack McCartney, was ready for



The focal point of the east end of the great room is the Newport tea table made of choice mahogany, which descended in the Morris family of Philadelphia and was found covered with years of accumulated dirt in one of the family's barns. The Federal sofa, with rounded ends is a delicate example of the form. The wing chair, with dramatically shaped wings and bell-flower inlaid legs, is from Portsmouth, N.H., circa 1790-1800. The lolling chair, with an equally tall back, has remarkable inlaid and "scooped" arms, bell flower and dot inlays on the arm supports, and was probably made in the Concord, N.H., area, possibly by George Rogers. The mahogany candle stand beside the lolling chair, one of several inlaid examples in the collection, is a tour de force of "high country" work; its combination of form and ornamentation reflects the best of New England Federal period furniture. The initials "EB" are inlaid on the top of the block under the tilting top. The pieces in this room view illustrate the union of the collectors' interest in furniture and painting, "representing," as the husband says, "their awareness that one should be a complement to the other because they share a similar aesthetic."

Above the fireplace at the east end of the room hangs the double portrait of the Davis children, Eliza Cheever Davis and John Derby Davis, painted in Boston circa 1795 by Edward Savage (1761-1817). This painting measures a commanding fifty-four inches in height and is in its original gilded neoclassical frame. It is a fine example of Federal portraiture of children and one of Savage's most intimate paintings.

The great room also contains two Phillips portraits from the 1835-1840 period. One is of Elizabeth Mygans. The painting's dark background and its original dark painted frame contribute to making this a beautiful and sensitive portrait of this young woman. Like the portrait of Helen Lena Ten Broeck, over the mantel in the west end of the room, this painting projects the sitter's personality to a high degree, evidenced by the collectors' nicknames for them: "Lena" and "Betsy."

Beside "Betsy" is Phillips' portrait, in its original painted frame, of a handsome George Sunderland (1818-1905) at age twenty-one, painted by the artist in 1840. One of the rare examples of a signed and dated work by the artist, it is cited in numerous publications. The discovery of the portrait by Barbara and Lawrence Holdridge allowed art historians to connect earlier and later periods of his work, as earlier signed examples of his work had already been found. George is firmly outlined against a solid colored background, and his clothing is painted in a straightforward but highly stylized way, giving him a poster-like quality found in Phillips' work of this time, which serves to heighten the visual impact of the work. It is another example of the artist's ability to paint in a workman-like way and yet produce a memorable portrait.



them to move into in 2001. Secluded and wooded, the couple asked the architect to make the most of the property's natural setting. They also wanted a house with a lot of natural light and uninterrupted wall space on which to hang art. McCartney accommodated them by building five structures with glass connectors. Natural light is available from at least two sides in every room. Floor to ceiling windows merge interior and exterior environments.

Since their first Ammi Phillips (1788–1865) purchase, the itinerant artist has been a focus of the couples collecting through most of the last decade. Portraits by the artist in the collection come from the three major eras of his work: the softer, dreamlike images of the “Border Period” pictures (1812–1819) whose sitters lived in the areas adjacent to the New York, Massachusetts, and Vermont borders; the images of Phillips’ so-called “Realist Period” (1820–1828), which have deeper tonalities, greater clarity of drawing, and more inherent value contrasts; and the “Kent Period” portraits (1829–1838), named for a group of works found in the Kent, Connecticut, area and which exhibit much stronger value contrasts with their significantly darker background.

One of two Ammi Phillips portraits from the late Border period is a rare mother and child portrait in the hallway—of Mrs. Northrop Bentley and her daughter, Louisa, painted circa 1815–1818. A portrait in the foyer of Kate Elting (1824) is one of the “Women in White,” a group of portraits having roots in the artist’s Border Period and painted until the middle of his Realist Period, the time during which this image was rendered.¹ Within the “Kent” group is the splendid image over the living room fireplace of Lena Ten Broeck,



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:

Portrait of Catherine Clinton Heston by her husband, Isaac Heston, circa 1774. See page 156 for more information.

Set off in a corner of the great room is a rare, small, veneered maple Queen Anne dressing table, measuring only 28½ inches wide. This piece was probably made in the Hartford, Conn., area, circa 1740. A nearly identical example is shown in *Connecticut Valley Furniture*, Kugelman and Lionetti (2005). Above the dressing table is an exceptional mahogany shelf clock signed “David Wood of Newburyport.” The interior door of this circa 1805 Massachusetts clock retains his label “David Wood Watch and Clockmaker Newburyport.” A similar clock is in the Department of State collection, as seen in *Treasures of State*, Conger and Rollins (1991).

The superb Phillips portrait above the mantelpiece is of Helen Lena Ten Broeck (1803–1839) and is inscribed by the artist with her name and the date, 1834. She is seated on a black Federal sofa with brass upholstery tacks, a frequent prop for the artist, and wears a remarkably tactile green velvet dress embroidered with black leaf and vine decoration on her belt and cuffs and which has finely detailed translucent white lace on its collar. She holds a red book, the color of which heightens the visual drama of the work, complementary colors emphasizing each other in opposition. The painting has a deep mahogany colored background, against which the sitter stands out in sharp relief, rhythmically outlined. Her pale face is luminous beneath the exaggerated rolls of her hair. The painting is in its original dark green-painted frame with a raised painted yellow edge.

Detail of the inlay and craftsmanship on a candlestand and lolling chair in the east end of the great room.

Portrait of Israel Forster by Rufus Hathaway, 1797. See page 156 for more information.





Around the corner from the foyer is a group of watercolor portraits by Jacob Maentel (1763–1863) of six members of the Musser family of Reamstown, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, painted on October 23, 1826. The sitters are George, his wife, Elizabeth (Sweitzer), and children Sarah, Edward, and Carolina in three-quarter and full-length portraits, shown with yellow-decorated chairs or in landscapes. An earlier portrait of the children’s grandfather hangs among them. This group is a rare intact family group of portraits by the artist, and shows how Maentel conceptually organized a large group of figures, giving each age its own style of setting and pose. The collectors also own the inscribed Musser family record. Beyond the Maentels, the banjo clock on the far wall, signed “Simon Willard & sons #4327,” retains its decorated original eglomisé panels. Beside it, a Thomas Chambers painting of the shipwreck of the *Bristol off Rockaway Beach*, New York, is one of two Chambers sea scenes in the collection. The wife comments that when her son saw their first Chambers painting he said, “You finally bought something I like!”



In the stairway hangs an appliquéd Baltimore Album Quilt, 1848–1852, by Elizabeth MacCullough Hervey. Of the twenty-five blocks, three with-in rings are unique to this otherwise classic quilt, and the image of the fisherman is unknown in any other example.

A circa 1850s–1870s German Noah’s Ark, with more than 340 figures, is installed between one of the connecting sections of glass that join the segmented buildings.

so highly stylized it verges on abstraction. “We admired Phillips’ portraits for a long time,” says the wife. “Elizabeth Mygans, who I call Betsy, was our first portrait,” she adds, “and I had my morning coffee with her for years...Now I share my coffee with Lena, but my favorite is Kate, my ‘Woman in White.’ Such a pout!”

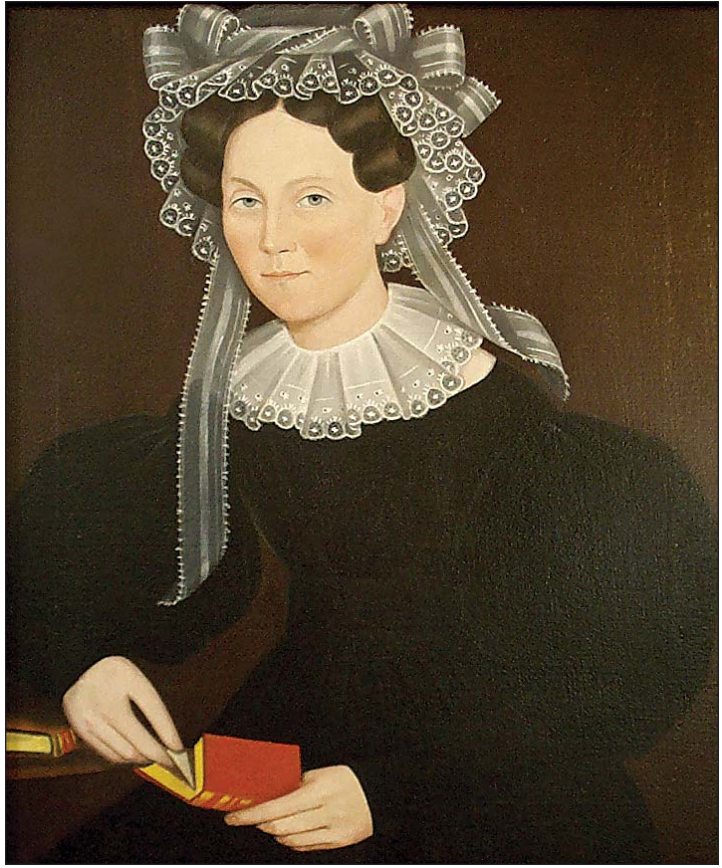
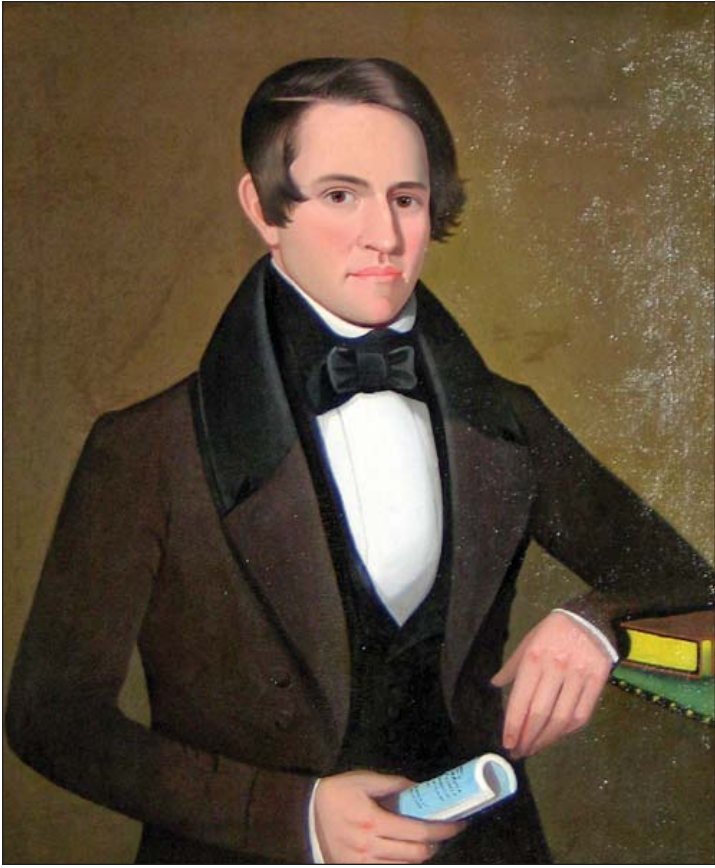
Eighteenth-century portraits include that of Israel Forster by Rufus Hathaway (1770–1822), Isaac Heston’s 1774 portrait of his wife Catherine Clinton Heston, and a double portrait by Boston artist



The suite of paint-decorated seating furniture in the master bedroom includes two side chairs and a small settee that are in remarkable original condition. While painted chairs were made in many urban centers, these most resemble those from Portsmouth, N.H., circa 1810. The American geometric hooked wool floor rug dates to the late nineteenth century.



Also in the master bedroom is one of the few nineteenth-century American rugs by a known maker. Marcy Hunting of East Hampton, Long Island, made this rug circa 1810. In shades of crewel yarns embroidered onto a wool twill ground, the design is reminiscent of eighteenth-century bed hangings and bed rugs. The interest in exotics is evidenced in the Hoopoe bird taken from an early publication of bird engravings.



PREVIOUS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM UPER LEFT:
Portrait of George Sunderland by Ammi Phillips, 1840. See page 157 for more information.

Portrait of Elizabeth Mygans by Ammi Phillips, circa 1835–40. See page 157 for more information.

In the hall and opposite the Maentel family group hang two portraits by Ammi Phillips, that of a Mrs. Robinson, circa 1819 (not seen here), and a portrait of Mrs. William Northrop Bentley and her daughter, Louisa, painted circa 1815–1818. Few double portraits by Phillips have been found, and the daughter holding a slice of watermelon is a show stopper. Louisa was an adult when her husband, Edwin Griggs, ran off to join the Gold Rush in 1848; she never saw him again. It is details like this that make the portraits more personal and draw the wife to them, each becoming part of an extended family.

Between the Phillips paintings hangs a family record by Aurelia Austin, a professional decorative painter. Interestingly, Elias Phillips and his second wife Elizabeth Northrop, for whom the record was made, were both painted by Ammi Phillips, as were other members of the Northrop family, including the portrait of Mrs. William Northrop Bentley shown at left. The work is from Fishkill, New York, and dated 1836.

THIS PAGE TOP:

Double portrait of the Davis children by Edward Savage, circa 1795. See page 157 for more information.



The quality of the inlay work on this Rhode Island card table in the foyer is matched by the original finish and condition. The covered urns on the legs, rather than on the plinths, which are composed of grained mahogany, are an unusual and attractive treatment.

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:

In a corner of the kitchen is a small wooden works clock with a wonderful dry grain-painted surface. The brightly-painted dial is centered by a three-masted ship, and the free-hand decoration simulating inlay on the hood is exceptional. Leaves, diamonds, circles, vines, flowers, and garlands are detailed in white, yellow, orange, red, and black. The "Greek key" inlay banding on the case door is painted in gold, as are the "brass" finials. This minutely detailed decoration stands in contrast with the broad swaths of grained paint on the case. With a chestnut backboard and old repair labels from two towns in Rhode Island, this clock was probably made there in circa 1815-1820.





The formal dining room has a mix of both Chippendale and Federal furniture. The double-pedestal mahogany dining table from New York is surrounded by a set of six Boston or Salem Chippendale mahogany chairs, circa 1760. The scrolled top corner cupboard, probably from the mid-Atlantic states, is one of the wife's favorite pieces. It is enhanced with burl and satinwood, inlay, carved sunflower rosettes, and finials carved to resemble pine cones. Retaining all of its original glass and its original surface, it is both functional and very dramatic. The eight-day, brass movement tall clock in the other corner of the dining room plays seven songs. It is among the husband's favorite pieces—combining his interests in provenance, inlay, and mechanical complexity. Made of cherry and figured maple in 1817, it is one of only three clocks by Asa Munger of Herkimer, N.Y., and descended in his daughter's family.

Complementing the furniture is a group of four schoolgirl embroideries with classical themes, stitched and painted at Boston schools in the early nineteenth century. Two show scenes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline* (lower left, upper right). Work from the Saunders and Beach Academy are represented on the upper left with "the Monarch and the Butterfly" and on the lower right "Telemachus and Mentor on the Island of Calypso."

Edward Savage (1761–1817) of the Davis children, Eliza Cheever Davis and John Derby Davis.

While the folk portraits are the most significant and visually dramatic component of the collection, they also serve as a complementary accompaniment to the furniture. When the couple began to con-

centrate on Federal furniture, they were quickly drawn in by such details as the bell-flower inlay on their Sheraton wing chair and lolling chair; the floral inlay on two superb card tables; and the complex inlays on several candle and light stands.

Traditional pieces such as the Chippendale block-front desk from the

Bowditch family; the Newport tea table from the Morris family of Philadelphia; the sideboard from the Palmer Collection, one of the earliest and best known collections of Connecticut furniture; and the set of six Chippendale side chairs from the Randall family, direct descendants of John Alden, one of the original settlers of



The large painting above the card table, by an unidentified artist, at the fireplace end of the husband's study is an early example of a fully developed folk art landscape painting, circa 1810-1820. Below the painting is a rare Federal card table attributed to Nathan Lombard of Sutton, Mass. (A table of similar form is in the Garvin collection at Yale.) The shelf clock on the mantel is signed by John Bailey of Hanover, Mass, and the rear of the moon-phase dial is signed "J. Minott 1793," regarded as one of the best Federal-era dial painters. Made to appear as a clock sitting on a separate base, both sections have brass, stop-fluted columns, ogee bases, and the lower case features an applied scrolled molding and deeply-carved paneled door.

FACING PAGE:

William Coffin's *Ship in a Storm* (1846) in its original grain painted frame hangs in the husband's study. Acquired in 1999, it was the couple's first American folk art purchase, and appears on the frontispiece of Robert Bishop's *Folk Painters of America* (1979). The Chippendale blockfront desk from the North Shore of Massachusetts has a three-shell interior and original brasses. It descended in the family of Nathaniel Bowditch (1773-1838), author of *The New American Practical Navigator* (1802); a first edition copy of which rests in the desk interior.

In the husband's industry he is looking for the next generation of innovation, but his respect is deep for what was done in the past. The tall clock beside the desk is attributed to Benjamin Cheney of Hartford, ca.1780-1790, and illustrates the husband's interest in clocks. "The notion," he says, "that clocks reflect the highest level of technological innovation in their period fascinates me; they were cutting edge" Its cherry case houses a complex wooden works movement with a rare carved rocking ship mechanism. This is possibly the only known American wooden works clock with this feature. While most wooden works have "30 hour" movements, this example runs for only 14 to 16 hours, indicating that the maker had not worked out the proper gear relationships required.





Within the master bedroom, a blue-painted Pennsylvania blanket chest, with whimsically enhanced black swirls, scallop, and dot decoration, sits beneath a large New England hooked rug, dated 1892.

FACING PAGE:

The landscaping uses native plants, emphasizing the woodland feel. In the back of the house, a series of waterfall steps lead down to a koi pond and a swimming pool. The view here is from the pond looking into the solarium seating area off the large modern kitchen.


FACING PAGE INSET:

Designed to offer lots of wall space and light, the wife playfully refers to her home as "Monopoly houses," shown in this architect's rendering. Courtesy of McCartney Architects, Washington, D.C.

the Plymouth Colony, all serve as a foundation for the collection.

The couple's other collecting interests can be seen in their examples of schoolgirl art; hooked and yarn-sewn rugs, a wonderful Elizabeth McCullough Hervey Baltimore album quilt; and painted furniture that includes a rare intact group of two chairs and a matching settee from the Portsmouth, New Hampshire, area.

These multiple interests and collections are a perfect fit for this house built for collectors: simultaneously modern and

classic, comfortable and formal, the house is a perfect backdrop and an architectural statement about its time and the function it was designed to serve. The couple's ability to assemble such a stellar collection is a testament to their discerning taste and their devotion to the task. 

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Antique Needlework, Old Saybrook, Ct.; Jan Whitlock Textiles & Interiors, Chadds Ford, Pa.; and authors Joan Brownstein of Joan R. Brownstein American Folk Paintings, and Peter Eaton of Peter Eaton Antiques, both of Newbury, Mass., for their expertise and guidance in assembling this collection.

1. Joan Brownstein and Bobbi Terkowitz, "A Brilliant Formula: Ammi Phillips's Women in White," *The Magazine Antiques* (November, 2007):152-161.

