

# ANTIQUES

And The Arts Weekly

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\*\*\*\*\* August 4, 2006



Published by The Bee Publishing Company, Newtown, Connecticut



## The House That Imagination Built

*Peter Eaton And Joan Brownstein Craft A Contemporary  
Setting For Antique Furniture And Folk Art*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LAURA BEACH

NEWBURY, MASS. — Stretching two and a half miles between Newbury and Newburyport, High Street is famous for its stately parade of Federal houses, artifacts of an era when the seafaring communities north of Boston were commercial powers.

But only a mile away on Parker Street, a dramatic three-story dwelling crowns the hill at the end of a long, sloping lawn. As progressive as the rest of Newbury is traditional, the structure is, by virtue of its proportion and restrained ornamentation, classical

in feeling.

“The gas station attendant asked me if I was building a chicken coop. The local reaction has been polite otherwise,” Peter Eaton says with a laugh. Antiques dealers, Eaton and his wife, Joan Brownstein, esigned the house themselves and constructed it in 2002 with the help of The Great Room, a Portsmouth, N.H., designer and builder.

The house is a revelation for those who know the dealers mainly

Originally Published in Antiques and The Arts Weekly, The Bee Publishing Company, Newtown, CT.

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Eaton's study features shelves of Roman, Assyrian and Venetian glass. In 1988 he commissioned the Maine cabinetmaking firm Thomas Moser to make the Craftsman-style club chairs of cherrywood, a design that was later added to the Moser line.

# The House That Imagination Built

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The dealers combined artifacts from different cultures and eras to striking effect in their contemporary home.

The house is a revelation for those who know the dealers mainly from antiques shows. Room-setting displays allow exhibitors to advertise their taste and expertise while revealing their personal style and talent for design. But, as Eaton and Brownstein demonstrate, you can't always tell a dealer by his or her booth.

A specialist in New England furniture for the past 36 years, Eaton is particularly known for William and Mary and country Queen Anne pieces. Over the years, Brownstein has honed her reputation for New England folk painting, especially portraits and miniatures.

Their 24-by-24-foot showroom is on the first floor of the house. Their spacious, high-ceilinged private quarters above provide an *au courant* lesson in living with antiques.

"People frequently ask us, 'How do you mix old and new? How do you update an interior?' We believe that quality is the common denominator. Things that have good form can be displayed side by side," says Eaton, whose love of architecture is evident even in the candlesticks that he collects.

"We wanted to create a space where you can see every object," says Brownstein, persuaded that art shines against a simple backdrop.

Like many dealers, Eaton and Brownstein bring to their work varied interests, talents and experiences. Both have graduate degrees and formerly taught. Brownstein is a painter who supported herself as a working artist before devoting herself full-time to antiques. Her abstract landscapes — achieved by diluting acrylic paints, then carefully pouring the paint over the canvas to build depth — revel in color and texture.

"Specific landscapes don't intrigue me. I'm interested in creating a sense of deep space abstractly, a more geological or topographical approach to landscape painting," she explains.

The couple, who first met professionally in 1980, is drawn to airy, open spaces bathed in natural light. In the mid-1980s, Eaton purchased and renovated an 1851 brick commercial building on State Street in Newburyport. His capacious second-story showroom had 16-foot-high ceilings. Eaton lived on the third floor, with a circular staircase that ascended to a rooftop terrace with harbor views.

"I got tired of bar patrons on the street below, parking difficulties and carrying furniture upstairs," Eaton said of his life downtown. When he decided to move, the dealer, who grew up in Newbury, first investigated a lodge hall in Merrimack and a barn on the New Hampshire border, then bought land from his mother that his parents had owned since 1961.

"My father used to hit golf balls from





Completed in 2002, the house features vertical siding of white-stained cedar and banks of windows on its exterior. The interior combines white walls with pale birch floors and black granite countertops.

the bottom of the hill," recalls Eaton, who still occasionally finds balls in his lawn.

"We were interested in how the interior space would feel," says Brownstein, describing the design origins of their 5,300-square-foot residence. The couple admires the work of Richard Meier, the Pritzker Prize-winning architect best known for the Getty Center in Los Angeles and the High Museum in Atlanta. Like the dealers, Meier is preoccupied with the subtle, transitory effects of light over time.

"We tried to incorporate characteristics of Meier's work, such as banks of windows and vertical siding. For simplicity's sake, we insisted that inside the house there be no trim framing the baseboards, windows and doors," says Brownstein.

The house, which took a year and a half to complete, is made of white-stained cedar. The clean lines of the interior are enhanced by white walls and pale birch flooring from Jerry Conway of Conway Wood Products in New Milford, Conn.

Customers enter through the gallery on the bottom floor and, if invited, may take stairs or the elevator to the upper floors. A long drive curls up around the house to a private, second-floor entrance facing away from the street. Punctuated by rectangular apertures, narrow stair halls on either end of the residence are thoughtful exercises in the play of light and shadow.

The second-floor great room incorporates a dining area, living room and open plan kitchen. The understated

cooking space features black granite countertops and gray satin laminate cabinets.

At the far end of the 48-by-24-foot great room are two Sixteenth Century double-door Ming cupboards in undisturbed original surface. Eaton began collecting antique Chinese furniture around 1990, eventually acquiring nearly 40 rare forms. His first acquisition, which he found in an antiques shop in Maine, was a scholar's desk. Now a centerpiece of the great room, the ample desk supports hefty Dutch brass candlesticks dating to the Seventeenth Century and English pottery dishes whose slip decoration suggests Chinese calligraphy.

"It's the antiquity and wonderful surface that I love," Eaton says of the furniture. He continues to buy Chinese pottery. Sources for antique Chinese furniture have dwindled in the past five years, he says.

The Chinese cupboards flank the entrance to a screened porch where the dealers cook, entertain and relax. Elevated on supports, the porch also forms a canopy over the gallery entrance below, making it possible for the dealers to load and unload furniture in inclement weather.

Off the great room is Eaton's 24-by-24-foot study, an intimate space containing his work desk, shelves of Roman, Assyrian and Venetian glass, Song dynasty blackware, American furniture, a few Continental accessories, an Italian Modern sideboard and American folk portraits.

"I went to Thomas Moser's factory in



Elevated on supports, the second story screened porch forms a canopy over the entrance to the gallery below, making it possible to load both in and out during inclement weather.



Eaton's first piece of Chinese furniture was this scholar's desk found in an antiques shop in Maine. It displays Seventeenth Century Dutch brass candlesticks and English slip pottery.





The 24-by-24-foot gallery showcases their specialties: New England furniture, folk art, primitive portraits and miniatures.



Airy and open, the kitchen features gray satin laminate cabinets and black granite countertops.



The Brownstein painting that hangs in the library.



Speaking as an artist, Brownstein says, "I am interested in creating a sense of deep space abstractly, a more geologic or topographical approach to landscape painting." Her technique involves diluting acrylic paints and then pouring them over the canvas to create a sense of dimension.



The third floor master bedroom features wraparound windows with minimal blinds. "For simplicity sake we insisted that there be no trim framing the baseboards, windows or doors," Brownstein explained.





The great room accommodates two Sixteenth Century double-door Ming cupboards, rear, in undisturbed original surface. Eaton began collecting Chinese furniture around 1990, eventually acquiring nearly 40 rare forms.



*Richard Meier: The Architect as Designer and Artist* provided inspiration for the 5,300-square-foot house. The couple even gave a copy of the book to their builder, The Great Room of Portsmouth, N.H.



Peter Eaton and Joan Brownstein replicated the best qualities — including ample space, high ceilings and abundant natural light — of Eaton's previous residence and showroom on State Street, Newburyport, Mass.

Maine in 1988 and asked for a club chair. They made these for me, then incorporated the design into their line," Eaton says of his Craftsman-style cherrywood chairs.

Directly overhead is Brownstein's studio. Her large canvases vie for space with her collection of natural specimens, whose unpredictable textures, colors and patterns mirror those in her paintings. It is here that Brownstein, a dedicated researcher, devotes herself to the study of folk painters such as Ammi Phillips.

The south-facing master bedroom mingles antique Chinese furniture and pottery, early candlesticks, a contemporary bed, paintings by Brownstein and Caucasian rugs. The adjacent bathroom was meant to be paneled with white granite. The installer instead laid richly veined marble that vividly contrasts with the black granite countertops.

Further down the hall, an orderly library lined with carefully labeled black ring binders offers more proof of this couple's scholarly devotion to antiques.

Of the many ways to live with antiques, Eaton and Brownstein have found one that showcases the best of the past in a manner well-suited to the present.



Miniatures, a Brownstein specialty, fill a showcase in the gallery.



The couple admires the work of Meier, the Pritzker Prize-winning architect best known for the Getty Center in Los Angeles and the High Museum in Atlanta. They incorporated several of Meier's stylistic signatures, such as the vertical bank of windows illuminating this stair hall, into the design of their house.