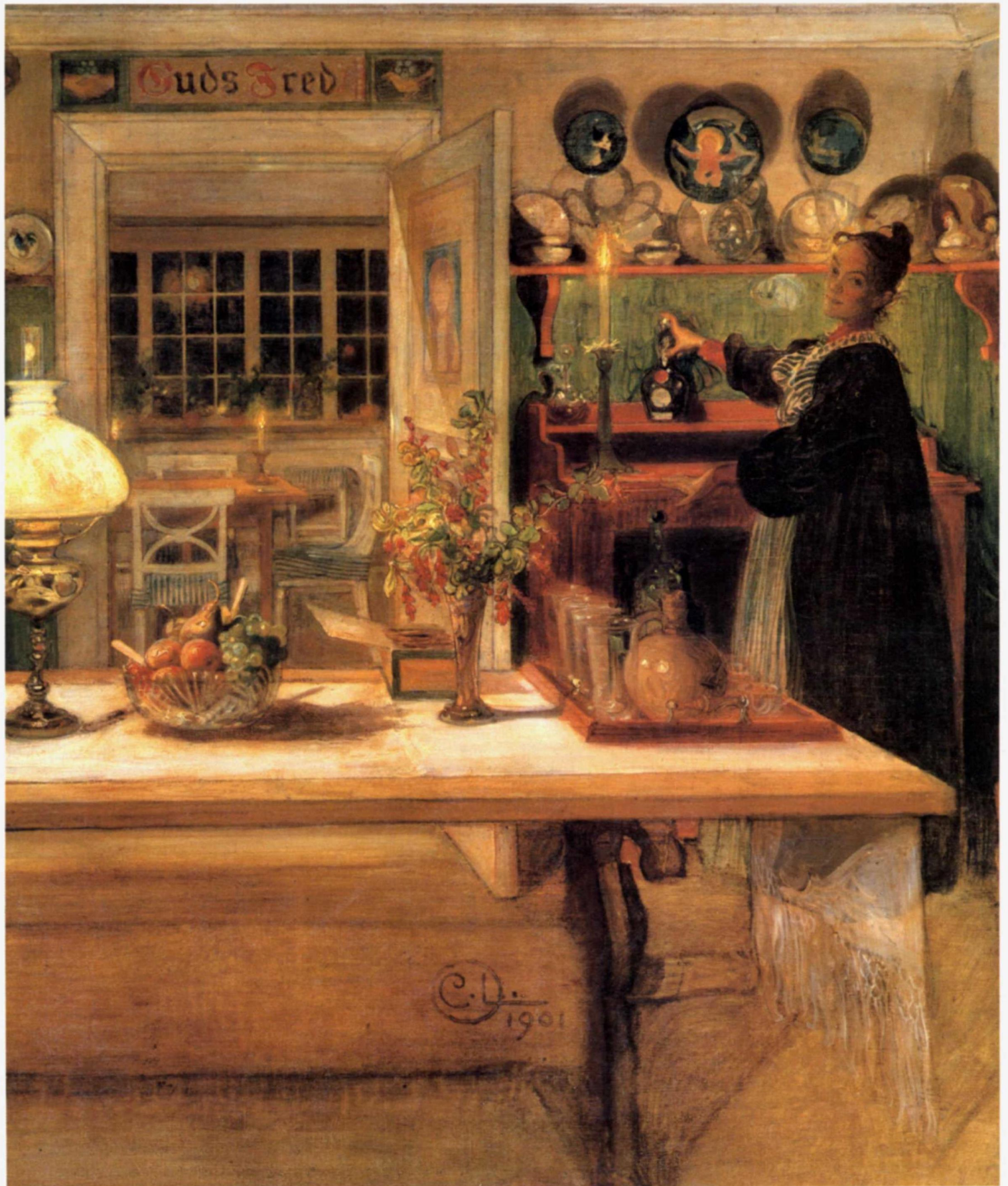


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Immersed in a World of Americana

A Folk Art Collection in an 1820s Farmhouse

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER VITALE



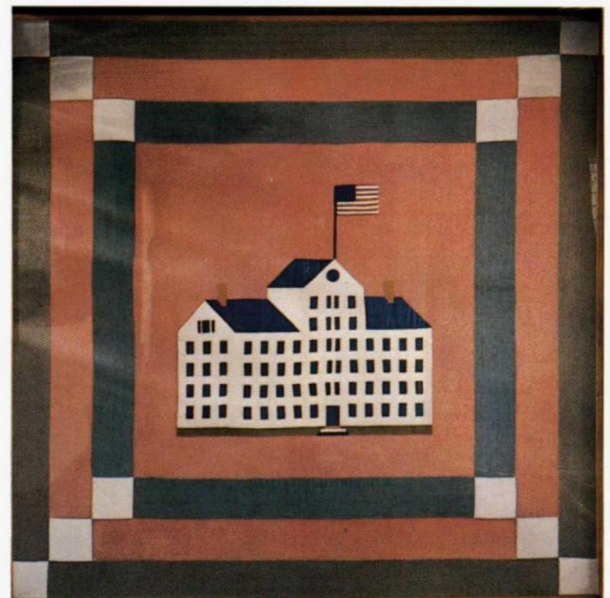
NESTLED IN THE rolling meadows of northern Westchester County stands a Greek Revival farmhouse of unusual beauty. It was built during the late 1820s, and is rich in the architectural details of that period—framing pilasters at the corners of the façade, simple moldings around the door and windows. The setting is just as distinctive, for the original owner chose to erect his dwelling on a gentle knoll surrounded by woods and a massive outcropping of rock. It is the perfect

background for a collection of American folk art and country furniture.

Holding an enduring and passionate interest in the American decorative arts, the present owners, a young couple, acquired the home some time ago, with a dual purpose in mind. First, it was to be a comfortable, relaxing retreat from the bustle of Manhattan life. However, they had a second, more pressing need for the house. As collectors in the field of nineteenth-century American deco-

rative arts, they had a love for the exuberant, less sophisticated folk art and country furniture of that period. They had gathered a significant body of pieces that did not mesh comfortably with their more refined examples in the city. A house in the country to hold and display the burgeoning collection was the answer.

When first seen by the owners, the house was immensely charming and livable, except for one area. In the late nineteenth century a shed had



OPPOSITE: Of classical proportions, this late-1820s Greek Revival farmhouse is a repository for a fine collection of 19th-century American folk art and country furniture. The owners' giant schnauzer stands guard at the stone fence. ABOVE LEFT: Wallpaper-covered bandboxes atop a dining room cupboard, and a stenciled and painted cornice board above the doorway in the Downstairs Hall, attest to the 19th-century penchant for exuberant decoration and color. The portrait of John Quincy Adams Stedman, 1833, is by Asahel Powers. ABOVE RIGHT: On an appliquéd quilt face, a Massachusetts school or factory is depicted with an unerring sense of composition and pattern.

been attached, and later converted into a large living room. It was a dark, narrow space at the rear of the house, depressing in its condition, but with possibilities. Here, the owners envisioned a newly renovated area, where the folk art pieces and comfortable country furnishings would blend with the older sections of the house, and they called upon architect Edward F. Knowles to set their plan in motion.

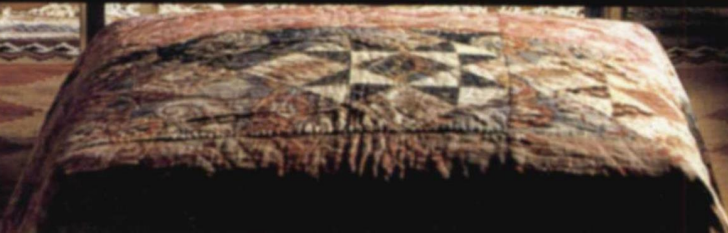
"We established two goals right

away," Mr. Knowles recalls. "One was to create casual seating areas that would look out onto the grounds, and the other was to set aside special areas for displaying specific works of art. The challenge was incorporating a more modern space with the Greek Revival style of the older dwelling. We wanted a smooth transition from the smaller rooms, which you often find in these old houses, to the larger space. I accomplished this mostly through a careful choice of materials

and by being aware of the scale and spirit of the decorative elements."

Dramatic glassed-in bays were added, expanding the sense of space and, with new vertical windows in the older section of the room, offering a vantage point for viewing the changing seasons. Within the room, weathered clapboard, salvaged from an abandoned bungalow colony, and plank floors of pine maintain the aura of rustic simplicity.

The collection itself infuses the





Designed by architect Edward F. Knowles, the New Room is a congenial space for displaying a wide variety of folk objects. Large windows are shaded by Levolor blinds to protect the pieces from light; walls and ceiling of weathered clapboard keep the mood rustic. OPPOSITE: A rocking horse toy, griffin carousel ornaments and an expressive robin from a West Virginia inn indicate the range of animal motifs found in the 19th century. Seating is provided by Hitchcock chairs, painted with Hudson River scenes, and a daybed, circa 1825. Still life by 19th-century artist Joseph Proctor. ABOVE: Silhouetted in the gallery area are a rare Shaker goat cart, and a candlestand whimsically supported by three cranes. In 1853 Jacob Turnerly fashioned the whalebone-inlaid doll's cradle for his four-year-old daughter Sarah. Display cases hold more fragile items, including duck decoys, firemen's parade hats and ceramics.

Rooms are composed with an eye to the color, texture and theme of the objects and artworks.



RIGHT: Plain pine surfaces and whitewashed walls in the Dining Room set off a variety of pieces to good advantage and create a convivial, tavernlike atmosphere. The more formal qualities of the painted and stenciled Hitchcock chairs and the painting of Fort Hamilton, New York, and the Narrows, circa 1870, contrast with the simpler, bolder patterns in the *Ohio Streak o' Lightning* crib quilt, an Odd Fellows lodge sign and a guinea hen squeak toy. A New England example of the tinsmith's craft, the chandelier boasts five delicately curved arms. ABOVE: In the Sitting Room, as throughout the house, the residents have grouped objects and artworks in thematic arrangements. A painted fireboard, circa 1835, signed "L. Johnston," depicts a lively farmyard; the spotted-hen weather vane, 1840-50, is a three-dimensional extension of the rural scene. Smaller objects include a Pennsylvania watercolor of a lady, a glass rolling pin, and a miniature cigar store Indian from New York State.







ABOVE: The Sitting Room exemplifies the country furniture that has been chosen for its comfort and its casual appeal, over more formal, refined furniture styles of the 19th century. A jelly cupboard retains its original painted surface, the tones blending with Clarence House chintz draperies and upholstered furniture. Peacocks, balloons and flowers brighten the bandboxes atop the cupboard. OPPOSITE: The serenity of the Guest Room is ruffled by the antics of five calligraphic lions, created with zestful pen strokes. In a more somber example of craftsmanship, the geometry of a wooden checkerboard repeats the patchwork pattern of the Amish quilt. Comfortably curved seat and contoured stiles distinguish a rare bentwood rocking chair. The hooked rug, depicting Adam and Eve driven from the Garden of Eden, lends an admonitory note.





ABOVE: Squirrels, often kept as pets in 19th-century America, were not usually housed in cages as luxurious as the architectonic model displayed in the Upstairs Hall. Draperies of Clarence House chintz and a needlepoint rug from Patterson, Flynn & Martin decorate the master bedroom beyond. OPPOSITE: Covering the bed in the Master Bedroom, an unusually elaborate calico album quilt, dated 1856, is in lacy contrast to the *Flying Cranes* crib quilt on the stretcher. The solidly formed wooden horse stands on a bucket bench. Itinerant artist Charles C. Hofmann recorded the *View of the Schuylkill County Almshouse Property, at the Year 1881*. Wall lamp by Koch & Lowy.

room with homeyness. On the walls are trade signs and a naïve painting; painted tables and a daybed are interspersed with contemporary furnishings. Objects, from a doll's cradle to squirrel cages, populate the surfaces. More fragile items are prudently housed in display cases designed by Mr. Knowles to protect delicate painted features. The gallery area displays a rare Shaker goat cart and an exquisitely carved candlestand.

Throughout the house, in fact, the owners have taken extraordinary care to integrate the wide diversity of ob-

jects and furniture, while still preserving their intrinsic appeal. Rooms are composed with an eye to the color, texture and theme of the artworks. The background colors for walls, fabrics and rugs have been meticulously chosen to magnify and enhance the innate qualities of the pieces. Paintings, weather vanes, quilts and bandboxes complement each other and create a rhythmic flow from room to room.

The owners' enthusiasm for maintaining a close thematic continuity becomes an imaginative game of vi-

sual hide-and-peek. In the sitting room, for instance, a colorful, engaging farmhouse and barnyard scene, painted on a fireboard, faces the fireplace. Nearby, in close harmony with the painting, a robust spotted-hen weather vane becomes an extension in space of the rural scene.

Ever mindful of comfort, the preservation of fragile objects and the special pleasures of old familiarity, the owners have transformed their farmhouse into a sympathetic haven for themselves and their collection. □

—Robert Bishop

