



The living room has been doubled in size with the acquisition of the adjoining townhouse. In the center of the room is the piece of furniture the couple refer to as a *tête-à-tête-à-tête*. The painting on the easel is *Venice* by Henry Pember Smith (1854-1907). Other works in the room are by Seymour Joseph Guy (1824-1910), *Knit One, Purl Two*; James Wells Champney (1843-1903), *The Lesson*; Francis Day (1863-1942), *The Marriage Contract*; Conrad Wise Chapman (1842-1910), *Skating in the Bois de Boulogne*; and Edward Lamson Henry (1841-1919), *One Sunday Afternoon*.

PASSION & VISION

An 1871 Upper East Side brownstone is returned to its historic roots

BY JOHN O'HERN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCIS SMITH





In the dining room are works by (at left by clock) Albert Fitch Bellows (1829-1883), *An Encounter on the River Path*; (to right of mirror) Charles Xavier Harris (born 1856), *The Decision*, 1884; and above, *On the Old Turnpike Road, New England*, by Henry Pember Smith (1854-1907).

Regardless of the talents of architects, designers, contractors or art consultants, the passion and vision of the collector has to be the impetus in designing a home and assembling a cohesive collection. When the passion and vision are allowed to evolve, great things can happen.

S and J lived in a 1970s New York City apartment with contemporary art and furniture—think Victor Vasarely and Friedel Dzubas. In 1985, ready for a change, they sold their furniture (a neighbor purchased nearly everything in the living and dining rooms) and bought an 1871 brownstone townhouse.

“The house spoke to us,” S observes, “and we decided to honor its integrity but bring in modern plumbing, heating and wiring. The house had been done up, but there were original floors, moldings and

fireplaces, and we decided to restore it and add to it.”

They hired an old family friend to help them with the interior design. “We’ve known Albert Pensis for over 40 years,” S explains. “He was director of interior design at Bloomingdale’s and was corporate senior vice president of design at W. & J. Sloane where my uncle was president. Albert designed my parent’s house in Pennsylvania and also did work for my aunt and uncle and my two sisters.”

Furnishing the first 15-foot-wide townhouse was inspired by a chance find. The couple discovered a Wooton desk, manufactured in Indiana in the 1870s. “I didn’t know what it was at first,” J recalls. “I immediately thought ‘An 1870s desk in an 1870s house!’” The rest is history.

The couple began to acquire furniture, paintings and sculpture from the period with purpose and

focus. S went to college with Linda S. Ferber who is now vice president and senior art historian at the New-York Historical Society. She encouraged the couple to concentrate on American paintings that reflect the period of the house.

Jennifer C. Krieger, managing partner of Hawthorne Fine Art in New York, has been working with the couple on acquiring the fine art for their collection. “This collection is a tribute to the Victorian aesthetic in America. Along with the architectural setting, period furnishings and decorative objects of the home, the paintings within illustrate the varied subjects that inspired artists to celebrate everyday life in America. While the paintings have been selected for their aesthetic beauty they also serve an academic role in providing records of their cultural moment.”

Krieger notes that the themes of

Reading of the Will by Louis Charles Moeller (1855-1930) hangs in the arch of bookcases salvaged from the Rizzoli bookstore.





the collection include the activities of women, those engaged in domestic or commercial work or in quieter modes of contemplation and reflection; the depiction of children, their games, demeanor and dress; the richly furnished Victorian interior as a stage for these activities; and the designed landscape and aesthetics in American scenery, picturesque, beautiful and sublime.

The couple's selection of furniture is more eclectic, reflecting the period, but not defined by big names in Victorian furniture. One criterion, however, was to buy furniture with its wood in fine condition so that only the fabric would have to be replaced. "We didn't want to have any major restoration," S explains. The criterion for their paintings, however, is that they be in pristine condition.

Looking for a period bar for their home, the couple did research online. One day, poking around in the basement of a salvage company in Harlem, S saw some woodwork that looked familiar. She remembered seeing the bookcases in the home of an executive of Rizzoli, the famed bookstore that was originally on Fifth Avenue. The bookcases had been salvaged when the company moved to 57th Street. S called her designer and architect to see if they would fit. They now grace the living room. S and J have recently purchased an Edwardian tea cart since they still don't have a bar.

Other finds that have been incorporated into the home have come from shops on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, the Cartier mansion, and the home of the former owner of The Russian Tea Room, further enhancing its connection to New York City.

An extraordinary piece of furniture sits



Top: Ascending the staircase are *Figures in an Interior* by Edward Lamson Henry (1841-1919), *Flower Sellers* by Abbott Fuller Graves (1859-1936), and *A Drawer of Memories* by Harry Herman Roseland (1866/68-1950).

Left: *Couple by a Waterfall in the Catskills*, 1899, by George Henry Hall (1825-1913), hangs above a table adorned with a sculpture, *Girl Dancing*, by Bessie Potter Vonnoh (1872-1955).



From left hangs a Julius LeBlanc Stewart (1855-1919) titled *La vicomtesse de Gouy d'Arc*, 1887; Hugh Bolton Jones' (1848-1927) *Lakeside*, 1871; and Louis Lang's (1814-1893) *Flower Girl*, 1840.



A painting, *Breaking Waves*, by William Trost Richards (1833-1905) hangs above a sofa and one of the couple's collections of samplers hangs to the left.



See-Saw, Margery Daw by Seymour Joseph Guy (1824-1910) hangs above a sofa in the hall and his *Summer Issue* hangs to the left of the mirror. Letitia Bonnet Hart's (1867-1953) *Woman at her Desk* hangs above it. Johannes Vetten's (Dutch, 1827-1866) painting *Children Playing* hangs to the right of the mirror and below it is Alice Barber Stephens' (1858-1932) *An Eighteenth Century Belle*. A



John Rogers (1829-1904) bronze, *The School Examination*, sits in front of the mirror. The staircase was reconstructed when the two townhouses were joined and an elevator was installed behind the wall with the sofa and the Seymour Joseph Guy painting.

in the middle of the couple's living room, graced by a bust of Queen Victoria. During the Victorian Period, small settees were made in an S-shape to allow two people to face each other for conversation while being separated by an armrest or another part of the furniture. These *tête-à-têtes* (from the French for head-to-head) maintained Victorian propriety. As if it weren't intimidating enough to have the queen overlooking the conversation, this *tête-à-tête* has a third seat, prompting S to call it a *tête-à-tête-à-tête*. Its purpose remains a mystery.

After living in their home for 14 years, S and J acquired the adjoining townhouse, thinking their children might choose to live there. When it became apparent that they would find their own homes, the couple decided to expand into the adjoining space in 2002.

They put the collection in storage and moved into an apartment a block away. "I visited the house every day," S explains.

"Every week for two years," she continues, "we met with Pensis, our architect William Leggio, and our contractor, the CNR Group. Since there wasn't any heat we huddled in our winter coats and went over the plans. In the early days, we could look right up to the roof! William had been recommended to us by our architect for the first house, Massimo Piamonti, who had moved to Rome before we purchased the second property."

The few antiques they brought with them from their contemporary apartment relate to their children. "We brought a child's highchair that folded into a low feeding table, an antique iron crib and a harvester cradle that we used to rock the children to sleep when they were babies," S recalls.

S and J have expanded the "activities of women" theme by adding to S's mother's collection of samplers with the help of Amy Finkel of M. Finkel & Daughter in Philadelphia. "They are truly works of art," S explains. "The quality of the work is so beautiful. We have samplers by two sisters and try to find the work



In the original 1871 stairwell are paintings by (straight ahead, upper most) William Verplanck Birney (1858-1909), *Sunlight (Girl Reading)*; (right wall) Xanthus Russell Smith (1839-1929), *On the Tacony*; (left most) George Henry Smillie (1840-1921), *A Recollection of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania*; (straight ahead) three works by Edward Lamson Henry (1841-1919): *The Old Clock on the Stairs*; *Leaving Home*; and *The Ruins of Old on the James River*.

of teachers, their students and family members. We are interested in learning as much as possible about the art we have purchases,” she continues, “the

artists, their personal lives and who and what influenced their work. We have been aided in this research by Barbara Gallati, an expert in 19th-

century American art.”

J mentioned their collection of vintage walking sticks. “Some of them are system canes,” he explains. “One



An exterior view of the home.



The Locket, another painting by Seymour Joseph Guy (1824-1910), hangs in a bedroom.

opens to form an easel and another opens into a telescope. The problem is that the more complex the canes are, the longer it takes to put them

back together!”

Among S’s favorite pieces is a sculpture, *Girl Dancing*, by Bessie Potter Vonnoh that sits next to another

of her favorites, a Louis Comfort Tiffany lily lamp. When asked about his favorites, J replies, “I enjoy all of it!” ■