





# WINDOW to the PAST

*This couple's  
Connecticut home  
is a grand display  
of fine American art  
and furniture from  
the 1800s*

*By John O'Hern Photography by Francis Smith*



Above: The exterior of the couple's home in Connecticut.; Opposite page: At the far end of the foyer is a tall case clock, circa 1790, by Aaron Willard (1757-1844). In the foreground is a New York mahogany Classical arm chair, circa 1830. The paintings by the stairs are, top to bottom, *Coastal Scene* by George Henry Smillie (1840-1921) and *Copy of Frederick Church's Niagara Falls* by John Mooney (1843-1918). On the landing are paintings of Newport, Rhode Island, and Cape May, New Jersey, by William Trost Richards (1833-1905) hanging above a New York Classical mahogany pier table, circa 1825.

In the middle of several hundred acres of Connecticut farm land sits a house that is an eminently livable museum of early-19<sup>th</sup>-century furniture and mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup>-century paintings assembled over time with knowledge, passion and love.

Both collectors “were seriously

preconditioned to be collectors,” the wife admits. She was brought up in New England “with a love of all things ‘Colonial’ engendered by history loving parents whose idea of a wonderful Sunday was church, followed by Sunday lunch at one of the historic coaching inns that proliferated then or a visit to

some small museum, historic site or antiques dealer. We were encouraged to form little collections of our own—a way of keeping us entertained—but insidiously enough, instilling an interest in and an understanding of material culture, i.e. what is an object historically, what is it for, how does





In the Classical parlor off the foyer are, from top, *Long Island Marsh* by James Suydam (1819-1865) and *Pond in Newport* by John Frederick Kensett (1816-1872). Above the New York Federal sofa with reeded drum supports, circa 1815, are top to bottom: *View from Olana*, *Frederick Church's Residence on the Hudson* by Walter Launt Palmer (1859-1913), and three views of the Hudson Valley by, from left, William Merritt Post (1856-1935), Samuel Colman (1832-1920) and Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910). The Marble bust by Pierce Francis Connelly (1841-1932) is circa 1860s. The New York Classical center table is around 1825.

it work, is it beautiful. After that, you just could not *not* look at things.”

Her husband's parents traveled the world, as did her own. Her husband's parents collected pre-Columbian pottery. Her parents bought Japanese ukiyo-e prints and went on to collect early-20<sup>th</sup>-century American art glass.

Both collectors attended law school and practiced law. She studied American paintings as well at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York, took a sojourn at The Metropolitan Museum of Art where her volunteer work in the department of American decorative arts turned into a 10-year stint doing research on 19<sup>th</sup>-century American furniture, learning and refining her discerning eye.

When the couple began their life together, they bought “a true 1825 Greek Revival house in the Hudson Valley,” she says. “Of course, then we had to go about furnishing it. We moved in with a bed, a table and a marble portrait bust because the house had a niche.



In the Classical parlor is *Passing Clouds* by George Inness (1825-1894), which hangs above a New York Federal card table with double lyre supports, circa 1818. The New York Classical bookcase and chair are Duncan Phyfe, circa 1830.



In the Classical parlor, *Brighton Meadow, Boston* by Ernest Wadsworth Longfellow (1835-1921) hangs above a New York Federal "French" sideboard, circa 1810. On the adjoining wall from top to bottom are *Hudson Valley Landscape* by Homer Dodge Martin (1836-1897) and *Gate at Olana* by Walter Launt Palmer (1854-1903). Above the New York Classical bookcase, circa 1830 is *White Mountains* by Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902). The New York Federal lyre back chair is circa 1815.



On the far wall of the Federal parlor is *Everglades, Florida*, by Hermann Herzog (1832-1932). To the right of the opening in the Classical parlor is *Dusk* by Jervis McEntee (1828-1891). Above the New York Classical mahogany recamier (one of a pair), from around 1830, are from top to bottom, left to right: *Indian Encampment* by Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919) and two seascapes by McEntee. Next to the opening is a rare New York Classical standing desk, around 1835. In the foreground is a New York Classical box sofa, around 1834.

"I understood the forms of Federal America, but the house was such a specific style," she continues, "I had to find what American furniture was appropriate to this house. There was not a lot of published information then about furniture after about 1815. At that time, however, the Hudson Valley was awash with dealers, collectors, auction houses and cabinetmakers. It was not hard to fall in with them and distinguish 'your grandmother's Empire furniture' from fine American classical forms. As we looked for what we needed—furniture—we also looked for American paintings and bought them when we could. And so it happens."

The couple and their children lived in England for an extended period and brought their American furniture with them. While researching furniture topics, she explains, "every time I saw what looked to be an American Federal piece, it turned out to be Scottish. Although much American





Hanging above the New York Federal "Pedestal End" sideboard, circa 1810, is *Adirondacks View* by William Trost Richards (1833-1905). On the left, top to bottom are *Niagara Falls from the Canadian Side* by John Frederick Kensett (1816-1872) and Richards' *Seascape*. On the right from top to bottom are *Massachusetts Coast* by Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880) and *Roman Landscape* by Elihu Vedder (1836-1923). The New York Federal klismos chairs are from around 1810. The silver tea set is Baltimore, 1818.



Behind the column is *View of the Hudson River from West Point* by Jasper Francis Cropsey (1823-1900) hanging above a New York Classical pier table, circa 1825, and one of a pair of bronze Argand lamps, around 1815. Hanging above a New York Federal serving table are two *Views of the Amalfi Coast* by William Stanley Haseltine (1835-1900).

furniture was based largely on English prototypes, I discovered that much high style New York furniture was based on Scottish prototypes and in fact, aside from Duncan Phyfe, a lot of the New York cabinetmakers were Scots. They brought over forms they understood, making them plainer and bigger. The construction methods and decorative choices were somewhat different as well. I eventually wrote about this, and these New York pieces also form a significant part of our collection."

The collection grew over time in a thoughtful manner and has found its home in their Connecticut property, revised and expanded to accommodate it.

"It has always been important to us that our objects 'talk' to one another and we collected on that basis whether we knew it or not. When you are engaged in this sort of thing, you learn



Top left: Between the windows in the guest room is a landscape by David Johnson (1827-1908) hanging above a rare New York Federal dressing table with lyre supports, attributed to Charles-Honoré Lannuier (1779-1819). To the left from top to bottom are *Landscape Sketch* by Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910) and *Artist's Barnyard* by Jerome Thompson (1814-1886). They hang above a Philadelphia Federal mahogany block front worktable. The two New York Federal mahogany chairs are circa 1805. On the far left is *Flight into Egypt* by Joshua Shaw (1776-1861). The bed, sofa, table and dolphin piano stool are New York pieces and the tea set is from Albany, New York.; Bottom left: On the fireplace wall of the guest room are, from left to right, top to bottom, *Portrait of a Child* by William Babcock (1826-1899), an *Oval Landscape* by David Johnson (1827-1908), *Still Life* by Paul LaCroix (1827-1869), a copy of a popular English print by an anonymous American artist and *Tranquil Landscape* by John William Casilear (1811-1893). A pair of rare New York Federal mahogany lyre back chairs flank the carved Philadelphia mantel, around 1795. The early-19<sup>th</sup>-century English lantern has painted scenes of Stowe, England.; Right: In the Federal parlor from top to bottom are *Greenwood Lake* by Jasper Francis Cropsey (1823-1900) and *Pantheon, Paris* by Thomas Moran (1837-1926). They hang above one of a pair of rare New York Federal trick leg card tables, circa 1815. The Federal mantle is from Brooklyn, 1796.

as much about yourself as about the objects. It all has to be in some way intellectually coherent in my world. New York high style Federal furniture is of a piece. You appreciate one thing with reference to the others. Together, the objects inform each other. For example, there are four basic types of New York sideboards and we have an example of each type; there are three types of highly sought-after New York klismos chairs and we have examples of

each. These pieces tell a story of how American style swerved away from its prototypes in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

"Similarly with paintings," she continues. "We happen to like the landscapes of the Hudson River group of painters and we focus on certain artists. We like, if possible, to have several paintings by the same artist to show progression—to tell their story but also to chart the whole intellectual basis of the movement. We have

grand landscapes and seascapes; we have intimate woodland scenes and pictures of rocks; we have paintings that American artists did as they explored Europe, South America, the Arctic. We have paintings by women. This group of American painters glorified America—it was awe-inspiring, beautiful, majestic, uplifting—the embodiment of Manifest Destiny, but also setting the groundwork for later American art. American landscape paintings are





Top left: In the office through the doorway of the master bedroom is *Woman with Turban* by J. Alden Weir (1852-1919). In the master bedroom is *Portrait of Beatrice Claflin, Lady Gosford* by William Merritt Chase (1849-1916). It hangs above a rare New York mahogany harp back chair circa 1805. To the left is *Street in Spain* by Samuel Colman (1832-1920) and a rare New York mahogany shaving mirror with lyre supports. On the right are two *Hudson Valley Views* by James Renwick Brevoort (1832-1918). The furniture is New York Federal.; Bottom left: Above the bed in the master bedroom is *Pond* by William de Leftwich Dodge (1867-1935). Next to it is *Autumn Pasture* by James Renwick Brevoort (1832-1918). Above the New York Federal serpentine chest of drawers, around 1800, is *Portrait of Mrs. Isabel Hoyt* by Eastman Johnson (1824-1906). The New York Federal bed, circa 1818, is attributed to Michael Allison (1773-1855).; Right: In a corner of the master bedroom are one of a pair of New York Federal mahogany eagle back klismos chairs and a New York Federal mahogany astragal end worktable, circa 1800. The paintings are, from top, *Lago Maggiore, Italy*, by Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880) and *Palisades* by George Inness (1825-1894).

in many ways abstractions—they are paintings of light and the disposition of form to create an emotional response. One is not distracted by figure groups because they are largely incidental. This is a thread that is carried right into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“Do we have favorites? Of course, and we miss them when we’re in our Florida home,” she adds. “The *View from Olana* by Walter Launt Palmer, painted early in his career is one. Hung in the bright foyer, it has the daylight crispness of a winter scene but when

lit during the evening, the subtlety of the salmon, blue sky dominates. Olana is still there, the magical light of the Hudson is still there. Another is *Passing Clouds*, a masterpiece by George Inness painted just as he turned from being a Hudson River painter to something else—an interpreter of the divinity of light. The upstate New York view is captivating in its coloristic and atmospheric effects. There are also pieces of furniture that are special. A few years ago, our daughter was at home from school and came down to

breakfast one morning and said, ‘I woke up and now I understand why you have such love for this furniture. Everything has feet as if it were dancing.’

“A person is behind the creation of each painting, object,” she notes. “That person’s effort went into creating a design idea, a reflection of one’s time, an expression of a philosophy, and if you are open to it, this emanates from their work. These are living pieces of history, of culture, and we feel ourselves to be conservators, enjoying, engaging and watching over them.” ■