Living with antiques:

New England and European antiques at home in Connecticut

By May Brawley Hill
A

n inspiring example of American-French rapprochement began eight years ago in the hills of Connecticut, Litchfield County. On Memorial Day weekend in 1997, Jeffrey Morgan, a Connecticut Yankee by birth and breeding, and Robert Custi
tur, a French architect and interior de
signer who had established in New York City for many years, met in the house of a mutual friend in Washington, Con
necticut.

Morgan had become an expert in the restora
tion of the area’s early houses and had assembled a small but choice collection of early-19th-century furniture and objects. In the late 1980s while still at school, he had apprenticed himself to a local antiques dealer, and after college he bought a decrepit, 1739 saltbox in Kent, Connecticut, and spent the next decade meticulously restoring it while working as a chef in several of the area’s trendy restaurants. Two early local finds, a cherry Queen Anne chair by a woodbury, Connecticut, cabinetmaker and a drop-leaf tea table from the same period with a provenance from the Marsh family in Morris, Connecticut, held places of honor in his small parlour. His present house (Pl. III, XII), purchased in 1979 and also a saltbox, is further north and on a less traveled road in Kent. As his experi
cence in restoration and his collection grew, friends and acquaintances came to rely on his expertise, and he now works as a consultant.

Couturier had grown up in Paris and came to New York City after architecture school, encouraged by the British financier James Gold
gsmith (1933-1997), who gave him several important commissions. His career took off, and he is now re
nowned for his elegant interiors filled with European furniture and rare decorative objects. As he began spending weekends with Morgan, vis
ing local antiques dealers, he gradu
al
ly came to appreciate American fur
niture, confessing that he had never considered American antiques seri
ously until he saw them in context. At
the same time, he suggested making the
austerity-furnished interior of Morgan’s old saltbox a bit more com
fortable with the addition of uphol
sters. Morgan categorically refused any upholstered furniture, except for a Cromwellian settle that arrived with Couturier the following weekend. The pair’s inspired collaboration in the creation of two marvellous houses can be dated from that gift.

As might be expected with two such passion
ate and knowledgeable lovers of antiques, the small rooms in Mor
gan’s house began to overflow with treasures, so they built an elegant square outbuilding with a pyramidal roof (modeled on the eighteenth-century brick school nearby) to house Couturier, his two shift towns, and the growing collection (Pl. IV). Not long afterward, land stretching down to North Street Lake from Morgan’s saltbox became available, and Couturier bought it. At the same
time, Morgan saw an opportunity to rescue an abandoned 1730s house with an exceptional chimney in nearby Dover Plains, New York. The house was carefully dismantled and moved to Kent, but the building inspector withheld approval to re
construct it on Couturier’s new property. This setback fired Couturier’s imagination, and on one rainy Sunday day afternoon he drew plans for a

house to be built into the slope down to the lake. His initial concept of two two-story pavilions, one for a grand salon with dining room and kitchen below and the other for bedrooms, connected by a one-story entry hall, remained unchanged, although refine
ments were made in the course of construc
tion. As the house was going up in the expe
rienced hands of John W. Mathews, a local restoration carpenter, Couturier began to acquire suitable furnishings at auction and on buying trips in Europe.

The square pavilions with their pyramidal roofs are French in inspiration, but they are clad in clapboards (see Pls. II, III). Mahogany planks cover the entry facade and that of the larger pavilion’s first floor, and they are scored and painted to imitate stone (see Pl. II). Only the upper floors of the pavilions are visible as one advances down the drive
way and past the formal garden with its box
parterres and reflecting pool (see Pl. III).

The spacious interiors, on a scale sym
pathetic to the European pieces Couturier admires, are a revelation. The wide-board floors that give an impression of age to the rooms were milled from eighteenth-centu
ry chestnut beams. When the new house was completed, Morgan marveled, “It was odd that everything worked and the floors didn’t move!”

A window-filled entryway to the salon was recently added on the garden side of the house (see Pl. V). Here a heroic French porcelain urn on a column, stamped “Steven

1900,” invites a closer look at the molded
tapestry and velvet swags that ornament it. A pair of late eighteenth-century gilt
dirigibles from northern Italy flanks the urn. Not visible are Sèvres de fleur, a pastel of about 1917, by Edouard Vaillant (1868-
1946), and Himmer Cathedral, an oil on can
vas dated 1817, by Maurice Utrillo (1883-
1955), showing the cathedral before the German bombirdment in World War I. From the entry, the visitor climbs a few steps into the breathtaking salon, with its soaring crown ceiling and light streaming in from tall windows on all sides (Pl. VII). Sus
dended from the nineteen-foot-high ceiling is an imposing eighteenth-century Dutch
eight-arm brass chandelier, which Couturier found disassembled in Paris and knew would be perfect for the space. One wall is dominated by a spectacular seventeenth-
century walnut cupboard (see Pl. VII). Couturier believes it to be Alsatian and calls it an armoire. Morgan insists it is a Dutch
dirigible. Whatever its origin, it retains its manu
velous original turned finials. On the top are pairs of eighteenth-century Delft platters and lidded jars, together with pairs of paint
ed tin urns and obelisks.

An imposing late-seventeenth-century French masterpiece from Florence sur
rounds the fireplace (see Pl. VII). In front of it stands a fantastically carved and gilded eighteenth-century fire screen from Turin, its mirrored insert suggesting a grtanto, with a blue-painted waterfall cascading down the center. On the mantel, flanking a seven
teenth-century Flemish glass chandelier, stand two porcelain sphynxes representing Mo
dime de Pompeuca (1712-1764) and Mo
ndime Da Barry (1743-1793). Their heads, cut off at some revolutionary moment, were fortunately saved and are now happily re
stored. The French brass candelsticks date from about 1760. Perchering above is a grand English portrait of Lady Elizabeth Somersett (see Dormer, c. 1610-1635), painted by Gil
bert Jackson (c. 1622-1624) about 1625. She married Edward Somersett (1603-
1684), later marquess of Worcester, in 1628. It is evident in the portrait that she is with

Facing page:

Pl. V. Entryway on garden side of Custurier’s house.

Pl. VI. Detail of a seventeenth-century European walnut cupboard in Custurier’s living room.

This page:

Pl. VII. Living room in Custurier’s house.
eled on one in an eighteenth-century Rhode Island house. An oak wainscot chair of about 1630 stands at the head of an English oak refectory table of about 1690. At the other end of the table, not visible in the photograph, is an elaborately carved wainscot chair made earlier in the seventeenth century; its crest rail includes a fleur-de-lis, possibly a reference to the exiled Stuart king in France and suggesting a Scottish origin. The Cromwellian settle originally bought for Morgan's salloon now stands on one side of the table, and similar armchairs with bobbin turnings from the same period are on the other. A notable English oak press cupboard from the 1670s stands against the right-hand wall in the photograph. Among the objects on top of it are an English oak box of about the same date and a late seventeenth-century Dutch copper milk jug found in Litchfield. The Dutch portrait of an unknown woman was painted about 1620 by Nicolaes Eliasz. Pickenry (c.1588-c.1655). Visible on the mantelsash are one of a pair of English pewter chargers and one of a pair of capstan candlesticks, unusual in pewter.

On the table is a pair of seventeenth-century turned brass candlesticks from the Netherlands. The carpet is a nineteenth-century Sissiharab.

The era of Louis XV (c. 1715-1774) has once luxuriously and aristocratically, sensually and intimate, has great appeal for Courtrier, as can be seen in his boudoir (Pl. X). He designed the fireplace surround and woodwork here as a sympathetic background for the beech alowce bed by Jacob of about 1780, as well as for a mahogany pedestal table by Joseph Gegenbach, known as Camille (1712-1797), and a pair of square-back armchairs by Jacob that may have been made for Marie Antoinette's bedroom at the Château de Fontainebleau. The crest rail of the alowce bed is faced with foliage swags. Above it hangs a 1743 portrait of Angélique Sophie (1702-1789), the marquise de Berthelot, by Louis Vigée (1715-1767); a Russian peasant scene, by Jean Baptiste Le Prince (1724-1781), is over the fireplace. Both retain their original frames. P. The floor is an extraordinary late eighteenth-century Aubusson carpet.

American furniture dominates in the principal bedroom, on the floor above the boudoir (Pl. XO). On the right in the photograph is one of Morgan's favorite pieces—a maple high chest of drawers of about 1750 from the North Shore of Massachusetts that retains its original brasses and drops flanking the apron. Morgan comments that it is much better than one his family let get away, adding, "It's got great legs!" Beyond the high chest is one of a pair of unusual brass-on-back armchairs of the early 1700s from Chelseaford, Massachusetts; the four banisters are grouped in pairs and the wider space between is given definition by a pointed crest that forms an almost Gothic arch. In front of the window is an eastern Massachusetts trumpet-leg dressing table of the same period, which once belonged to Mabel Brady Garvan (Mrs. Francis P. Garvan; 1866-1979) and was pictured in Wallace Nutting's Furniture Treasures. Its pine and maple frame had been badly stripped so it was recently repainted. It is notable for cross stretchers that do not match. An Irish triple-top oak settee of about 1750 stands under the central window, in the corner are an eighteenth-century English embroidered banian and an exceptional hat armchair attributed to Daniel Marot I (1661-1752), which Courtrier found in a shop in Litchfield. Marot, a Huguenot forced to flee to the Netherlands in 1669 after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, became the chief designer to William, prince of Orange, who sat for the English throne in 1689 as William III. In 1694 Marot was called to London. He is widely credited with introducing French baroque interior design to England. Among the elements that evidence the continental origin of the chair's design are the vigorous scrollwork of the back; the elaborate crest, with its scrolls and crown repeated and inverted underneath the splats; the crisp baluster and ring turnings; the double-D stretchers; and the carved trumpet legs. Despite its spaciousness, the new house has only five major rooms: Morgan's salloon has just three, plus a kitchen and built-in unobtrusively slipped into the lean-to on the north side. The largest room is the old kitchen, dominated by the massive cooking fireplace with a brick oven (Pl. XIII). A mid-eighteenth-century brass and iron clock; in working condition (with its original weight) hangs over the fireplace, waiting to turn the spit. The painted English gateleg table of about 1700 in the center of the room is surrounded by three of a set of six black-painted American mid-eighteenth-century banister-back side chairs and a contemporary armchair of heroic proportions. The table is covered with a homespun linen cloth and set with pewter and a tin-glazed earthenware bowl. At the right is a red-painted dresser of the 1730s from eastern Massachusetts; on its shelves is a collection of pewter and tin-glazed earthenware, both undecorated utilitarian objects and elegant ones, such as a rare Bristol posses pot of about 1720. A crescent-shaped dating from the early eighteenth century blocks a cross from the outside door, which is behind it. (Morgan calls it his version of a storm door.) Under the windows is a southern Connecticut pine and maple table of about 1720 with turned legs and molded stretchers. To its left is a slate-back.
armchair of the same date, also made in southern Connecticut, Morgan relishes the untouched worn surface of the chair and the sets of initials carved into the flat arms. (A woman’s homespun cap hangs on one arm.) On the wall above is an English oak press cupboard of about 1700 (see PL XV). The small period objects throughout the room, including a set of iron cooking implements, homespun items, and various lighting devices (among them a pierced tin hanging lantern and an iron Betty lamp), give the impression that the eighteenth-century occupant has just stepped away. Indeed, the room has no electric outlets, and is illuminated solely by candle and firelight.

The small room off the old kitchen serves as Morgan’s office (PL XVI). He works at a New Hampshire maple and pine desk of the 1770s, its original black-painted surface in perfect condition. The desk has unusually high bracket feet and one original escutcheon. He sits in the Litchfield County cherry side chair of about 1750 that stood in his first house. Not visible is a small English seventeenth-century court cupboard that at some point in its long history acquired a coat of white paint, which Morgan has meticulously removing a bit at a time.

Since the entry door on the south side of the house opens directly into the old kitchen rather than into a stair-hall entry, as in larger center chimney saltbox houses, the bedroom (PL XVI) is accessible only from a small corridor behind the chimneys (see PL XIV). The bed, which is a reproduction, is hung with nineteenth-century Indian palampores, the gift of a friend. In the center of the room is a lovely maple tea table of about 1740 from eastern Connecticut or Rhode Island, with a two-board top and straight legs ending in pad feet. Morgan particularly delights in the “nice buttery feet” of the tabletop, a patina that only old maple achieves. On one side of the table is a slat-back side chair of about 1780, while on the other is the mate to the Chelmford, Massachusetts, hat-inter-back armchair in the bedroom of Costurier’s house (see PL XI). Above the chair hangs a portrait of Abraham Gibson (1769-1816) of Boston, painted by Ethan Allen Greenwood (1778-1856) about 1814. On the far wall is a red-painted early eighteenth-century high chest of drawers from eastern Massachusetts that has miraculously retained all of its trumpet turned legs. The turned stretchers and posts of the black-painted slat-back armchair of the 1670s, under the window, suggest it originated in eastern Massachusetts as well. Flanking the large fireplace are a rustic box for firewood and in the foreground, a slat-back chair of the 1780s from Berkshire County, Massachusetts, with old red paint over the original black. Arranged on the high mantelshelf is a collection of pewter chargers.

Visitors to either house are made to feel immediately welcome and their aesthetic appetites totally gratified, whether by European or American fare, both of which are equally at home in this corner of Connecticut.
Like his contemporary Cornelius Jarensens van Couden (1593–1661), Gilbert Jackson had "a way of painting lace which makes it look as though soaked in water" (Ellis K. Waterhouse, Painting in Britain 1530–1790 [Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1962], p. 390). After Lady Elizabeth's demise and her husband's remarriage, the portrait was sent to her brother, Robert Dormer (c. 1610–1643), second Baron Dormer of Wyre and first earl of Carnarvon. It remained in the family until recently.

Jean-Michael Frank, the great-uncle of Anne Frank (1929–1945), came to New York City in the late 1930s and is known for his art deco designs and for decorating the Nelson Rockefeller apartment at 720 Park Avenue. He committed suicide in 1941.

Georges Jacob was a leading chairmaker in Paris who introduced classical forms into his designs and devised the square-back chair. He became a maître meunier in 1765.

Joseph Gengenbach, called Camas, was an ébéniste known for his use of solid mahogany. Jacob's work for Marie Antoinette's boudoir and bath at the Château de Fontainebleau dates to 1785. (The queen did not visit Fontainebleau after that year and never saw the work completed.) One chair and the bed are stamped by Jacob.

A companion portrait of Henri Camille (1693–1770), marquis de Berthingham, who was an envoy to Louis XV, hangs in Couturier's New York City apartment. The frame of the painting by Le Prince bears the signature of Claude Pepin (mâître 1775). Louis XV sent Le Prince to Russia in 1758 to document life there. Gerald G. Stiebel, from whose establishment Couturier bought all three paintings, kindly furnished this information.

Wallace Nutting, Furniture Treasury... (Old America Company, Framingham, Massachusetts, 1928), vol. 1, pl. 393.

Several plates in Daniel Marot's collected engravings, L'oeuvre de Daniel Marot, architecte de sa majeste britannique Guillaume III... (A. Garnier, Paris, 1913), show stools and chairs with the distinctive double-C stretchers.

For his role in introducing the French baroque style to England, see David Nickerson, English Furniture of the Eighteenth Century (G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1963).