

City folk

Joan and Victor Johnson rethink and reinstall their collection in a Philadelphia town house



By Laura Beach



Twenty-five years ago in these pages, Beatrice B. Garvan wrote about an anonymous collection of Pennsylvania folk art that was already more than a quarter-century in the making. Garvan was struck by the coherence of the assemblage that was ever in flux, by the sense of motion generated by the collectors' unyielding search for the best.

The collectors, Philadelphians Joan M. and Victor L. Johnson, have long been known to enthusiasts of American decorative arts but it was only with their 2009 move from the country to a penthouse apartment in Society Hill that they felt comfortable going public. Their disclosure here coincides with their recent promised gift of 240 frakturs, most of them from Pennsylvania, to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Joan Johnson has been a trustee since 1993. Experts say the collection, which will more than double the museum's holdings, is the most comprehensive in private hands. Lisa Minardi,

assistant curator at Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library and a specialist in Pennsylvania decorative arts, is cataloguing the gift, which will be the subject of an exhibition, tentatively scheduled for 2015, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The Johnsons began collecting American folk art soon after they married in 1955, filling a 1937 stone farmhouse designed by G. Edwin Brumbaugh (1890–1983) with antiques. After purchasing forty-two hundred square feet of raw space in the city in 2007, the couple worked with Nottingham, Pennsylvania, architect Joan Fleckenstein to re-create the old interiors using Brumbaugh's original plans, now at Winterthur. The project tested Joan's talent as an interior designer and allowed the couple to refine their collection and reconsider its presentation. Offered here is a glimpse of a life's work at its most distilled. "Joan approaches the material from an aesthetic standpoint. If she loves something she becomes a scholar of it," says Patrick Bell of

Facing page: Joan and Victor Johnson asked architect Joan Fleckenstein to replicate the interiors of their colonial revival farmhouse when they moved to a penthouse apartment in Society Hill in 2009. Opening onto an elevator, the painted and decorated doorway of c. 1810, from Joe Kindig Antiques, is from Edenton, North Carolina. Recently acquired from Boston dealer Stephen Score, the portraits of siblings Theodore, age seven, and Henrietta Myers, age eighteen months, are signed, inscribed, and dated 1840 by J. B. Gregory and may be from upstate New York. The painted and decorated schoolmaster's desk, possibly from Nova Scotia, was in the first loan exhibition that Joan Johnson organized for the Philadelphia Antiques Show in 1976.

In the Johnsons' living room hangs *The Peaceable Kingdom* of 1837 by Edward Hicks (1780–1849), the second version of the painting the couple has owned. Beneath it is a miniature dower chest from Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, c. 1790, atop a paint-decorated Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, blanket chest dated January 8, 1784, and inscribed in sulfur inlay to its owner, Maria Bachman. Joan wears contemporary jewelry by New York artist John Iverson.

This page: *The Peaceable Kingdom* by Edward Hicks (1780–1849), 1837. Oil on canvas, 29 1/2 by 36 inches.

Bible bookplate inscribed to Catarina Meyer, November 4, 1829, possibly by Samuel Moyer (1767–1844), Ontario, Canada. Watercolor and ink on paper, 7 1/2 by 7 inches.

Malley Queen of Sedburg by the Sussel-Washington Artist (active c. 1760–1779), Pennsylvania, late eighteenth century. Watercolor and ink on paper, by inches.

Olde Hope Antiques, who shares his friend's interest in folk art's formal qualities.

The objects are a guide to the characters, a word used advisedly, who influenced the collectors' development. A favorite primitive portrait of a mother and child came from Harry B. Hartman, the Marietta, Pennsylvania, dealer who opened Joan's eyes to folk



art in the 1950s. Attributed to Pennsylvania potter Israel Rothrock and decorated with a double eagle, a redware plate that belonged to *Saturday Evening Post* editor George Horace Lorimer (1867–1937) was acquired on a trip to Ginsburg and Levy in Manhattan with Bea Garvan. There is the Schwenkfelder fraktur that the crusty authority Pastor Frederick S. Weiser (1935–2009) agreed to sell, but only after the Johnsons earned his respect; and the rare Massachusetts William and Mary easy chair, illustrated in Benno M. Forman's *American Seating Furniture: 1630–1730*, that the couple pried out of the hands of the theatrical New Hampshire dealer Roger Bacon (1904–1982). There are many recent acquisitions, as well.

One story, told by Victor, epitomizes the couple's disciplined habits. In 1969, keen on owning a *Peaceable Kingdom* by the Pennsylvania Quaker Edward Hicks, the couple approached the Philadelphia dealer and Hicks authority Robert Carlen (1906–1990), who told them to wait in line. Undeterred, the Johnsons, assisted by curator Mary Black (1922–1992), continued their search. When Carlen unexpectedly called late one night two months later, they were ready with an offer. The couple eventually acquired a second Hicks, one of



four known versions of *The Residence of David Twining*, and in 1991 traded their first *Peaceable Kingdom* for a better example. The work, one of many upgrades in the collection, is illustrated here.

On the occasion of their fiftieth anniversary in 2005, the couple endowed a gallery of Pennsylvania German and other rural Pennsylvania decorative arts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In the future, this gallery may contain a rotating display of the Johnsons' fraktur in addition to related works from the museum's collection.

Patience, persistence, resilience, resourcefulness, collaboration and a belief in giving. For guidance and inspiration on what it means to collect, we look to Joan and Victor Johnson.