

Master class: collecting the classics in California



By Laura Beach

Photography by Tim Street-Porter

Of all the clichés about collecting, the most shop-worn may be that art and antiques transform acquirers into something more worthy—caretakers. Reality is more complicated. Transcendently great objects, pieces that distill some essence of our shared experience through a bewitching combination of physical beauty and historical truth, tend to collect us.

In a field as settled as American folk art, gathered assiduously since the early decades of the twentieth century, the bloodlines for pieces of surpassing excellence—many of them, anyway—are well established. The California couple who created the classic collection of early New England furniture and folk art shown here join, through their association with recognized treasures, a sympathetic community linked by its love for the relics of everyday life. From

Fig. 1. The inlaid mahogany sideboard is from Rhode Island, possibly by Townsend Goddard (1750–1790) and his first cousin William Engs Jr. (1744–1826) of Providence or by an Engs family member in Providence or Newport, c. 1782–1805. Flanking it are two New England cherry side chairs with rush seats, c. 1780, and above hangs a pair of portraits on poplar panels, probably New York, c. 1830. The mirrored tin sconces are eighteenth century.

Fig. 2. Worth family mourning picture, New England, c. 1815. Watercolor and ink on paper, 11 by 13 ½ inches.

Karin and Jonathan Fielding have brought early New England furniture and folk art with rich historical associations to the West Coast





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Edith Gregor Halpert to Nina Fletcher Little, all are a presence on these pages.

A saltwater farm in Maine with tumble-down views to the sea prompted Jonathan E. and Karin B. Fielding’s interest in antiques in the early 1990s. “We took a ten-day vacation with our two little boys one summer,” Karin recalls. “We fell in love with the area and purchased an old Cape, portions of which date to the eighteenth century. We knew nothing about antiques but thought it would be fun to furnish with them.” A retired minister who lived down the road encouraged them to be in touch with Ross Levett, a graduate of Historic Deerfield’s summer fellowship program who had begun dealing in the old and the rare shortly before he settled in Maine in 1970. “Jonathan came to the house, said they were interested in collecting, and asked if I would show them things,” Levett says. “They were concerned that they were too late. I told them what an old Parisian dealer once told me: everything will come. It’s been a very nice process. Jonathan and Karin have great curiosity and real passion for the material.”

Over time, the collection—or collections, for their interiors in California and Maine have developed distinct identities—grew and became more refined. About a decade ago, Jonathan, who is director of Los Angeles County’s Department of Public Health, and Karin, a member of the American Folk Art Museum’s board of trustees, began moving some of their favorite things to Los Angeles, where they live in a 1920s Spanish-style house with enviable light and a relaxed West Coast mien. Working with the Westborough, Massachusetts-based authority David Wheatcroft, their principal advisor, they began focusing on foremost examples of seventeenth-through early nineteenth-century New England furniture, primitive painting, needlework, and accessories. “Our taste is quite broad. We are not collecting one particular genre or just two-dimensional art. It’s whatever we see that appeals to us, from the beginning to the *Flowering*,” says Jonathan, referencing *The Flowering of American Folk Art, 1776–1876*, the 1974 catalogue by Jean Lipman (1909–1998) and Alice Winchester (1907–1996) that defined taste for a generation of late twentieth-century collectors of traditional American folk art.

Harold B. Nelson, curator of American decorative arts at the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Bo-



anical Gardens in San Marino, California, often visits the couple, with whom he has grown close. “They are unusually sensitive to the integrity of the art. They collect the artists who interest them the most—John Brewster Jr., Ammi Phillips, and Sheldon Peck, for instance—in depth, a richer, more interesting approach,” Nelson says.

Jonathan Fielding harbors special affection for Brewster, the deaf-mute itinerant whose inability to hear seems to have sharpened his visual acuity. Ashen in palette and solemn in countenance, Brewster’s exquisitely subtle portraits of Major David Coffin and Elizabeth Stone Coffin date to 1801 and are thought to be his earliest Newburyport, Massachusetts, commissions (Figs. 4, 5).

Another choice work is a full-length oil on wood portrait of a girl in a white dress seated in a painted chair attributed to Sheldon Peck (Fig. 9). It dates from about 1830 and was probably painted soon after Peck moved to upstate New York from Vermont in 1828.

A Maine piece that found its way to California with the collectors is a portrait, possibly of a Mr. Thissele, that formerly belonged to the noted collectors Raymond and Susan Egan. The watercolor and pencil on paper likeness is attributed to the Carver Limner based on its similarities to three portraits depicting the Barnabas Bartol Carver family of Freeport, Maine.¹

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Fig. 3. Bonnet-top high chest of drawers attributed to Eliphalet Chapin (1741–1807), East Windsor, Connecticut, c. 1774. Cherry with eastern white pine and yellow pine; height 81, width 38, depth 19 inches. The original owners, Jerusha (1755–1844) and Samuel Wolcott (1751–1813), also of East Windsor, were cousins who married on December 19, 1774. They owned a high chest that at Samuel’s death was valued at \$17.

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Fig. 4. Portrait of Elizabeth Stone Coffin (1767–1811) by John Brewster Jr. (1766–1854), Newburyport, Massachusetts, 1801. Inscribed “AET 39 June 10, 1801 J. Brewster Pinxt.” at lower left. Oil on canvas, 34 by 27 ½ inches.

Fig. 5. Portrait of Major David Coffin (1763–1838) by Brewster, 1801. Inscribed “AET 49 June 13, 1801 J. Brewster Pinxt.” at lower left. Oil on canvas, 34 by 27 ½ inches.

Fig. 6. Landscape with figures attributed to Winthrop Chandler (1747–1790), 1770s. Oil on pine, 22 ½ by 60 inches. The panel was originally installed in the Ebenezer Waters (1739–1808) house in West Sutton, Massachusetts.



The Fieldings prefer early New England furniture that illustrates the transmission of style through time and from city to town to farm.



With its skewed perspective and eccentric if heartfelt detail, the watercolor and ink memorial to members of the Worth family of about 1815 in Figure 2, speaks to much of what contemporary audiences love about American folk art. The well-known piece has a distinguished history in the pioneering collections of Isabel Carleton Wilde (1877–1951) and of her fellow dealer Halpert. “When you can relate a piece to its period, understand how it fits into the culture, it’s quite exciting,” says Jonathan, acknowledging the couple’s love of history. “We are interested in how people lived,” adds Karin, citing Ammi Phillips’s portrait of Betsy Brownell Gilbert as an example (see Fig. 7). Phillips probably painted the likeness, one of the artist’s signature “women in white,” around 1820.² Gilbert’s white dress, later dyed black, and

tortoiseshell comb descended with the painting and also belong to the Fieldings. Another treasure with rich historical associations is an animated scene of village life attributed to Winthrop Chandler (Fig. 6). It originally hung over the mantel in the West Sutton, Massachusetts, home of Ebenezer Waters, whose step-granddaughter is said to have married clergyman Henry Ward Beecher (1813–1887) in 1837 in the parlor where the painting hung, Nina Fletcher Little, who later owned the painting, wrote about first seeing it in her memoir, *Little by Little*.³ The Fieldings prefer early New England furniture in old or original surface and gravitate to pieces that illustrate the transmission of style through time and from city to town to farm. Among the oldest pieces they own is a maple slant-front desk of about

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Fig. 7. A portrait of Betsy Brownell Gilbert (1796–1825) by Ammi Phillips (1788–1865), c. 1820, hangs above a cherry slant-front desk probably from western Massachusetts or Suffield, Connecticut, 1790–1810. The rush-seated New England cherry side chair is from c. 1780.

Fig. 8. Portrait of Cynthia Mary Osborn (1834–1842) by Samuel Miller (c. 1807–1853), c. 1840. Oil on canvas, 56 by 35 ½ inches. This rare portrait bears a strong resemblance to *Picking Flowers*, a full-length portrait by Miller in the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York. According to the museum, there are at least sixteen stylistically related portraits by the Boston-area artist, about whom little is known.

Fig. 9. Portrait of a little girl attributed to Sheldon Peck (1797–1868), c. 1830. Oil on wood, 24 by 19 ½ inches.

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Fig. 10. The maple slant-front desk on its original ball feet, c. 1700–1740, may have originally belonged to Reverend Ebenezer Devotion (1684–1741). Made in the Connecticut River Valley, it descended in the Devotion family of Scotland, Connecticut, until about 1991. The small watercolor, ink, and appliqué portraits on the desk, possibly by the so-called Puffy Sleeve artist, depict a Samuel and Elvira Fish, c. 1830. Above hangs an early nineteenth-century watercolor portrait of Gilman Dudley of New Hampshire attributed to G. Wilson. The Fieldings’ growing interest in needlework is expressed in, from left, a silk on linen sampler worked by twelve-year-old Martha Bradley (b. 1774) of Dracut, Massachusetts, in 1786; and a sampler by Mary Craig Hamlen (b. 1774) of the continuous bow window chair dates from c. 1790.



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1700 to 1740 on its original ball feet, which remained in the Devotion family of Scotland, Connecticut, until it was acquired by Nathan Liverant and Son around 1991 (see Fig. 10). A gum, cherry, and oak desk-on-frame of approximately the same date came through Newbury, Massachusetts, dealer Peter H. Eaton, who also handled a closely related example but without a stretcher base that is now in a Massachusetts collection (Fig. 14).

Eaton also supplied a large walnut table that is roughly comparable in date and from the Boston area. With drop leaves and baluster-turned legs, it stands as one of the pre-eminent New England survivals of the form, writes furniture scholar Martha H. Willoughby, commending the table's large scale, crisp turnings, and dry, reddish ground (Fig. 12).⁴

The Fieldings also admire furniture for its sculptural quality. This is especially true of their chairs, which include a Boston banister-back side chair of about 1710 to 1725 with an elaborately carved and pierced crest and an early layer of black paint, and a banister-back armchair of about 1730 to 1750 with simplified details suggesting its origin in a rural shop familiar with Boston precedent. Acquired in 2005, a maple side chair with Spanish feet and a distinctive saddle-shaped crest is attributed to the Portsmouth, New Hampshire, cabinetmaker John Gaines III and dates to between about 1735 and his death in 1743 (Fig. 13).

Long on the Fieldings' wish list were two later examples of case furniture, a Chippendale high chest of drawers and a Federal sideboard.

The diminutive sideboard they purchased in 2008, with a serpentine front and chevron inlays (see Fig. 1), is possibly from the Goddard and Engs shop, active in Providence, Rhode Island, from about 1782 to 1790, or by an Engs family member in Newport or Providence, and may have belonged to William Ellery (1727–1820), a Newport-born signer of the Declaration of Independence.⁵ In 2010 they acquired a cherry high chest of drawers made around 1774 for Samuel and Jerusha Wolcott of East Windsor, Connecticut, probably by Eliphalet Chapin (Fig. 3).

"People walk into our house and wonder if we have been frequenting garage sales," Karin says with a smile. Beyond a handful of enthusiasts, early American art can be a puzzlement to some in southern California, she says, where collectors more often gravitate to the contemporary scene. The Fieldings would like that to change. Newly named to advisory councils at the Huntington, Karin and Jonathan lent several pieces of American stitchery, a developing interest, to the mu-



seum's recent exhibition *Useful Hours: Needlework and Painted Textiles from Southern California Collections* and have invited a stream of visitors, some of them fellow members of the American Folk Art Society, to tour their house and collection.

Halpert and Little would be pleased.

¹ See Stacy C. Hollander, *American Radiance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum* (Harry N. Abrams in association with the American Folk Art Museum, New York, 2001), pp. 48–49 and pp. 386–387. ² Joan R. Brownstein and Bobbi Terkowitz, "A brilliant formula: Ammi Phillips's women in white," *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, vol. 172, no. 5 (November 2007), pp. 152–161, esp. Fig. 2. ³ Beecher's wife, Eunice White Bullard, had previously been identified as Ebenezer Waters's daughter, but in fact she was his step-granddaughter from son-in-law's second marriage. Nina Fletcher Little, *Little by Little: Six Decades of Collecting American Decorative Arts* (E.P. Dutton, New York, 1984), p. 91. She also wrote about the work in "Recently Discovered Paintings by Winthrop Chandler," *Art in America*, April 1948, pp. 81–97. ⁴ Martha H. Willoughby, privately commissioned research, November 2012. ⁵ *Ibid.* Willoughby states that the sideboard, if a product of the Goddard and Engs shop, was probably made by Townsend Goddard (1750–1790) and his first cousin William Engs Jr. (1744–1826).

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Fig. 11. Tall-case clock with wooden works signed by Riley Whiting (1785–1835), Winchester, Connecticut, 1819–c. 1828. Grain-painted, smoked, and sponge-decorated pine; height 87, width 18 3/8, depth 10 1/2 inches.

Fig. 12. Its large size, crisp turnings, and original red wash make this walnut table with drop leaves, Boston region, c. 1700–1740, an outstanding example of its kind. On it is a New England burl bowl.

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Fig. 13. Side chair attributed to John Gaines III (1704–1743), Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1735–1743. Maple; height 40 7/8, width 20 1/2, depth 14 inches.

Fig. 14. Desk-on-frame, probably Connecticut or upstate New York, c. 1710–1740. Gum, cherry, and oak; height 42 1/2, width 27 1/4, depth 16 1/4 inches.

Fig. 15. Spoon rack, possibly Hudson River valley of New York or Connecticut, c. 1760. Probably pine with original paint; height 24, width 12 1/4, depth 5 1/8 inches. This is among the most elaborate and well-preserved examples of spoon racks to survive from early North America. The pewter spoons are Dutch, late seventeenth century.

