

Butternut House

RENOWNED TEXTILE ARTIST MAGGIE BONANOMI LOVES THINGS WORN, WEATHERED AND MENDED. IT'S A LOOK SHE SAVORS IN HER ART, FURNITURE AND HER 19TH CENTURY HOME.

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Step into Maggie Bonanomi's house in Lexington, Missouri, and right away you know you're in the home of an artist. Everything you lay eyes on is unique and personal and somehow all comes together with a great sense of harmony.

It's an 1840s house and Maggie makes sure the walls, floors, and ceilings wear their cracks and stains with pride. Likewise, much of her furniture has been rubbed bare from a century of use and been subjected to countless make-do repairs, yet it reflects the dignity that comes from still being in use, still being wanted.

Everywhere throughout the home Maggie shares with Harold, her husband of over forty-two years, are her sundry collections of tin candleholders and crocks, early document boxes and Red Wing pottery, breadboards and lanterns, fabric puzzle balls and transferware dishes, old marble-paged books and battered baskets, all sharing shelf space with an occasional bird's nest, feather, or even an acorn or two.



"I lean toward quirky, homely things," Maggie says with a laugh. "I like to say if it hasn't been repaired or broken or stained or wired together, I probably won't have it. Those things are always more affordable than the finer pieces, and they're also just a little more human. And I like that."

Adorning the walls and floors of almost every room are beautiful wool-applique hangings, hooked rugs, bed covers and numerous other textiles Maggie has created over the years. The fact is, she's renowned as the author of six popular books of textile projects and is a sought-after teacher of textile-related classes across the country.

And if you look at Maggie's textiles – with their palette of gentle grays, taupes, greens, and other muted hues – it suddenly hits you that they and her home's décor share a related artistic sense of color, form and texture. She's even named her home "Butternut House" after the brownish-yellow dye derived from acorns or walnuts, often used on homespun.

"Somebody, one time when I was making something, called me an artist and it took me years to decide that, well, maybe I am an artist – I always thought it was presumptuous to say so – but I guess I do have an eye for putting things together," she says. "I look at it as a gift I'm lucky to have."

Life on the Move

Maggie's father was in the Air Force and took his wife and children to California, Washington, Kansas, Nebraska, New Hampshire, and back to California again, where she was in three different schools in a single semester. "I just thought everybody moved," she recalls. "It was normal for us to just pack up and move on again and again."

Previous page: The front of the house in Lexington, Missouri, that Maggie has named "Butternut House" is an addition built in 1845. The single-story rear of the house dates to about four years earlier. The yellow color is historically accurate for houses of that period in that part of Missouri.

Top: The house exterior is stucco over clapboard. The first-floor windows are the living room, and the second-floor are the bedroom and stairway.

Middle: The first-floor entry hall, showing the faded checkerboard floor Maggie painted using green-black and taupe instead of the more traditional black and white, creating a more subdued effect.

Bottom: A few of the many plants Maggie cares for in her house, some sitting on one of her early transferware platters.





The living room, where Maggie displays several of her collections. The hanging cupboard holds tin candleholders, document boxes, redware, and puzzle balls among other treasures. The walnut step-back cupboard at left has its original reddish-brown paint and holds several of Maggie's transferware pieces. The large grain chest in the foreground has its old red paint and displays an old ironstone cake stand, chalkware pumpkin, and an ironstone platter with several little treen cups. The large lantern is a reproduction created by a friend's husband.



As a young woman in Los Angeles, she met Harold, an Army veteran who re-enlisted after they were married. For twenty years, that meant raising two daughters while the family moved from California to Colorado, then to Germany, back to Oklahoma, back again to Germany, and finally to Junction City, Kansas, where Harold retired in 1990 to begin a second career driving a semi truck.

"I grew up sewing things – doll clothes as a kid, my own clothes when I was in school – and then when we moved around in my married life, I always had a sewing machine with me," she says in her rapid and energetic manner of speaking. "When you move around, you want where you're living to look like a home. Maybe you make curtains, maybe something for your girls' room, so you develop the skills that come in handy. It's always easy to get textiles, but maybe not so easy with art supplies."

creating, in making things, and at some point my interest settled on textiles," she says. "You make something and somebody says, 'Oh, I want that.' So you make something else and sell a few more things."

She quickly points out that her sewing machine served her well over the years, but for quite a while she's hand-sewn everything. "I've always been interested in



Top: Numerous tin candleholders, old books, early redware, and fabric puzzle balls (Maggie made the one at the far right) adorn the hanging cupboard in the living room.

Left: Maggie's collection of transferware nearly fills the living room's step-back cupboard, an original Missouri piece that Maggie bought years ago in Nebraska, moved to Colorado, back to Nebraska and finally home to Missouri.

Above: A vignette of early items in the hanging cupboard, including a tiny old oil can that Maggie puts on display "just because it's so cute."



Left: The living room fireplace is an original, shallow, coal-burning hearth that Maggie painted in putty-gray and black. When she and Harold bought the house, it was pink and burgundy. Her collection of black document boxes and lunch boxes adorn the mantel.



Above: The round tavern table is a Missouri piece probably dating to the mid-1800s, here holding several prized marbled-paper old books, journals, and tin candleholders.

Below: Another view of the living room.



During the years in Junction City, as she was selling her textile art at crafts shows, some friends introduced her to the American furniture and arts of the 1700s and 1800s. "They talked about houses being 'early,' and I wondered, 'What do they mean by early?' So I started looking at books and seeing these wonderful textiles," she continues. "That's when I realized that the early 19th century is my favorite time."

Finding the House

Maggie and Harold's 1941 cottage in Junction City was a three-hour drive from Kansas City, where she was doing shows and teaching classes. She wanted someplace closer. "When I first came to Lexington to see a friend's shop, I had this 'Aha!' moment - this was the place," she recalls of her first visit in 2003. "There were old buildings, antiques, and arts. The people were friendly and I fell in love with the town."

Lexington is on the bluffs of the Missouri River, about 40 miles east of Kansas City. In the 1830s it was bustling and prosperous, the largest city west of St. Louis and the hub for merchants who outfitted trappers, traders and settlers heading west on the overland trails. Today Lexington, with about 4,500 residents, still has over 150 homes and buildings predating the Civil War, arranged into four historic districts.

The original, single-story section of Maggie's house was built in 1841 and a front, two-story part was added in 1845. It's a small house with a living room, sitting and dining room, kitchen and bathroom on the first floor, and a large bedroom and bathroom on the second floor. "It's laid out sort of like a shotgun house, with no central corridor," she says.

"This town has a lot mansions, but this house was for an average person, kind of plain and simple," she says. "But when we bought it, it was suffering from an overdose of over-the-top Victorian." Walls were garishly painted, some of them covered with pink iridescent wallpaper, and one of the fireplaces was bright pink and burgundy. "It took eight months to peel off tons of wallpaper and doo-dads that were stuck



Above: The mule chest is from Iowa. "I just love the shape of the skirt along the bottom," Maggie says. "It just had to come home with me." The "dirt" folk-art sign is by an artist friend in Topeka, and the windmill is another folk-art piece Maggie couldn't resist. It shares the top of the chest with some of Maggie's favorite crocks, a gray pantry box, and a yellow stone pear. Looking past the chest, you can see the entry hall with the checkerboard floor and the stairs to the second floor.



Left: The yellow plantation desk might actually be two pieces married together, Maggie says, and was bought in Lexington. It holds a number of vintage books, some early artwork including three silhouettes from Maggie's ancestors, and document boxes. The view through the doorway is into the dining room and on into the kitchen.



Above: The doll is the living room's yellow desk is by Oregon dollmaker Christine Crocker and the portrait is by Missouri artist Steve Sheldon. This vignette features several natural items. "I collect acorns, birds' nests, feathers, leaves," Maggie says. "I like nature's things."

above the windows. Eventually we turned it back into what it should have been – a little, simple, early house."

Since buying the house ten years ago, Maggie and Harold have replaced the roof, lined a chimney to make a second fireplace operational, and devoted most of their efforts to redecorating the house in Maggie's highly individual style.

Preferring the 'Worn Out'

Here's something Maggie said about one of her floors, and it goes right to the heart of her decorating style: "The rest of the house is so old that I didn't want anything that looked too new. The floor is distinctive with the raw wood showing through. To me, it looks worn out and probably in need of a new paint job, and that's the effect I was going for."

The floor in question is in her dining room where the previous owner had stripped it to bare cottonwood. Instead of attempting to refinish the floorboards or lay down a fresh coat of paint, Maggie decided to create a faded checkerboard effect, painting the squares with a thinned burnt umber. The result gives the appearance of a century's worth of footsteps having worn off most of the original checkerboard design.

On the entryway floor, she painted a bolder checkerboard, but again instead of using the traditional black and white paints, Maggie this time relied on a subdued greenish-black for the squares against



Far left: Maggie's crock collection is one of her favorites, and this sitting area groups together some of her finest pieces. Old books, especially with the colorful marbled paper, are another favorite. Here you can see part of the intentionally faded checkboard design Maggie painted on the floor.

Left: Another tabletop vignette of crockery, old books, and a touch of nature. The small painting is by Steve Sheldon of Whitehorse Antiques in Rocheport, Missouri, skilled at reproducing art styles of the early 1800s.

Below: The plaster walls in this room retain their original pale blue color. Though stained with soot here and there, the walls are so pleasing and unusual that Maggie is keeping them as they are. A favorite furniture piece is the end table next to the settee. "It's a goofy little table and its proportions are off, but I like it because of that," she says. Another painting by Steve Sheldon hangs on the wall, and the stately Windsor chair is from Lawrence Crouse Workshop. Maggie also likes the verdigris patina of the old weathervane.





Sunlight spills into the dining area, highlighting the Kentucky country table and six early, stencil-back plank chairs. The house's previous owner had stripped the floors and Maggie kept the bare wood, offsetting it with some of her favorite colors: honey-brown walls, gray-and-black fireplace, and weathered salmon-colored shutters. Maggie created the room's several hooked rugs and applique table-top piece. The unusual pie safe with 12 tin panels conceals a television.



a light, grayish taupe. She applied the paint with a foam roller to further enhance the faded, distressed appearance.

Removing the torn and peeling wallpaper in the dining room revealed an unusually beautiful robin's egg blue tint to the plaster. "Whether the plaster took the color from some wallpaper or maybe someone had washed that color onto the walls at one time, we can't tell," she says. "It's a wonderful color and people are amazed. There are also areas on the wall and ceiling where they'd had wallpaper and the paper split. The coal soot and smoke from the fire-place left its mark and we've left it that way."

"It's splotted, and it's my favorite wall."

Appeal of the Primitive

Maggie was living in Junction City during the 1980s when the antiques and home-décor scene began to turn toward

Above: The white cupboard in the dining room stands seven feet tall and came from an historic home along the Missouri River. It now houses much of Maggie's extensive ironstone collection.

Below: Someone had stripped the old cupboard, so Maggie redid it with milkpaint and some skilled distressing. The deep, vintage wooden bowl is another favorite piece. Maggie said she painted the two stylized flower vases on the door panels on a whim with paint from another room she'd been decorating, and decided to leave them.





Left: The dry sink is an early Missouri piece and one of the first Maggie bought specifically for this house. It and the drying rack above it provide display space for a number of Maggie's finds, both natural and manmade.

Below: A young girl in 1833 drew and wrote on these two framed pages of her composition book. "I love that the words are misspelled, sounded out," says Maggie, who used the girl's design as inspiration for a bedcover pattern in her first textile-project book.



the original-surface, more primitive look. "I was finding this world of really great old cupboards and starting to see pieces of old quilts, and I wondered about what these things had been through – this rug or that bedcover that's been used for a hundred years or more and then repaired, and it's survived. It all just fascinated me."

"This is the appeal of the primitive," she goes on. "It's not the pristine, polished antiques. It's things that are homely and repaired and loved and used and used and used because there was no store nearby to run out to and replace them."

Maggie's furniture includes some reproduction chairs and sofa for basic comfort, but there are also many cupboards, chests, tables and shelves that are battered, weathered, and distressed – most having some eccentric attribute that Maggie points to and says, "See this? It's why I love this piece."

"I'm not a purist," she says. "I like kind of quirky things. I like the house to have a certain feel and to fit the period, but I'm not working on being museum accurate."

As an example, among her many collections are several black tin document boxes and old lunch boxes, which she displays on the mantel of the living room fireplace. "A woman came here who has a very Victorian home and she was quite concerned about those lunch boxes," Maggie explains. "She said, 'Do you think they would've really had their lunch boxes on their fireplace in the living room?' And I said I don't think so, maybe the fireplace in the kitchen. She was trying to be nice, but I had to laugh because those are not my concerns."



Above: Maggie traded this large gray-and-black cupboard for two chandeliers and it remains one of her best-loved pieces. It stands next to her stove, which here is covered by a large breadboard while several other members of her breadboard collection stand nearby.

Right: Breadboards and mortars with their pestles abound in Maggie's kitchen amidst other kitchen paraphernalia, at least until she needs to use the stove. A friend of hers had discovered a box of old test tubes and Maggie found an old holder for them – "a nice little spice rack," she laughs.



"And people sometimes get really concerned about the way I have things arranged," she adds. "But sometimes things end up where they do because I've got them in my hands and I just need a place to set them down."

Finding Enjoyment

With the Lexington house as her home base, Maggie these days is busy writing her popular books of textile projects and teaching classes around the country. Kansas City Star Books has published all six of Maggie's books, including her most recent, "A Day at Sunny Brook," which came out in July. Each book has a theme and offers a number of textile projects such as bed covers, table runners, scrap-books, and hooked rugs, as examples. Her books are available in many quilt shops and online. "The things I design for my books are things I want for my house," she says. "So I redecorate my



Above: The bedroom covers nearly the entire second floor, with several of Maggie's textile creations on display, including the hanging applique pieces and hooked rugs, though the quilts are antiques. The blanket chest by the window is an early Missouri piece, as are the old bench with blue paint and the small brown chest, both at the foot of the bed. Maggie collects children's small chairs and there are several throughout the house.

Far right: A little upstairs nook "perfect for curling up and reading" is formed by two early Kansas cupboards. Maggie hand-pieced one of the quilts, using a variety of old indigo fabrics.

Right: An old Missouri apothecary cupboard Maggie found with two missing drawers, which endears it to her.





house and set it up for photo shoots." Her house has been the backdrop for many of the photos in her several books.

Her classes usually focus on similar wool applique projects, and she admits, "I'm always looking for a new way to do something for the classes."

For her personal pursuits, she enjoys applique, rug hooking and similar crafts, though quilting is "too precise" and therefore not a favorite. "I love finding old pieces of textile and incorporating them into my pieces," she continues. "I like finding them because they make a piece look older, and I love the aging of the fabric."

Once again, Maggie's textile and décor philosophies come together. "I like the simplicity of the textiles, though I don't like primitive that looks like you blind-folded yourself and tried to stab a needle into something, even if there's a market for it," she laughs. "I like honest simplicity and I enjoy it in teaching where everything doesn't have to be so perfect and you don't have to go by every rule and you can just, you know, enjoy."



Top: Maggie enjoys the peaceful sunlight in the bedroom as it plays off the colors of the room's many textiles. A hidden surprise was the bedroom closet containing the shelves of an early gray cupboard.

Above: The cover of Maggie's just-published textile-project book, "A Day at Sunny Brook," features a photo taken in her dining area. The book contains several projects that follow a young girl through a school day. The theme was inspired by an 1800s book Maggie found, entitled "How to Be Pretty Though Plain." Sunny Brook is her sixth book of textile projects, published by Kansas City Star Books.

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