



An Eye for Antiques

WITH THE AMERICAN ANTIQUES BUSINESS UNDERGOING ENORMOUS CHANGE THESE DAYS, A SUCCESSFUL DEALER OFFERS SOME ADVICE ON WISE COLLECTING.



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& Photographed by Jill Peterson

Previous Page: Built around 1770, this wonderfully preserved New England Georgian Colonial in Rockingham, Vermont, is the home of Stephen Corrigan and Douglas Jackman and has housed their antique business for 25 years. Among its many vintage features is the original double-paneled front door, very rare for an 18th century house.

Left: The home's original keeping room is a trove of fine antiques as part of the Stephen Douglas Antiques offerings. In the foreground is a small splay-legged William and Mary maple tavern table from about 1720. To the left is a large North Shore kitchen dresser (another name for cupboard) displaying collections of redware and stoneware. In the far corner is an 18th century paneled-door corner cupboard from Deerfield, Mass. The eight-foot sawbuck table is surrounded by four William and Mary banister-back chairs from New York State and two fan-back Windsor chairs from Boston, with the ensemble dating to the late 1700s. In the foreground at right is a rare circa 1690 New England Great Chair

Some people are known to have any eye for antiques. Amid a jumble of auction or estate-sale artifacts, they can spot the one item that has the pleasing purity of form, attractive patina and provenance to truly enhance a home's decor or a prized collection. For those fortunate to have that kind of eye, their antiques not only provide great satisfaction, they also usually increase in value as time goes by, despite ups and downs in the economy.

Stephen Corrigan has that kind of eye. He's been collecting and selling antiques since he was a boy, and for the past quarter-century has operated Stephen Douglas Antiques with his partner, Douglas Jackman, in Rockingham, Vermont. Fellow dealers and customers alike have long regarded their venture to be one of New England's premier antique businesses.

Some say having an eye for antiques is a gift, maybe even in the genes. But Stephen Corrigan believes a good eye originates with two things: a deep love of antiques and the willingness to learn about them. Let's say you're new to antiques and you want to start a collection but hope to avoid the mistakes — like spending way more than a piece is actually worth — all too common to new seekers of early items.

“I’d recommend two things,” Stephen says. “Keep an open mind and be willing to learn. I know collectors who don’t want to spend any time educating themselves. They’re buying something because it looks nice, and that’s their only criteria – which is not a bad criterion, but it shouldn’t be the only criterion for buying something.”

“Arming yourself with as much intelligence as you can will make for a better collection in the end,” he explains. “You can’t buy something just because it looks good. You have to buy it because it is good. And most good collectors do learn, they want to learn. The fact is, the more items you examine and experience, the better your decisions about the quality of what you’re buying and the rightness of what you’re buying. It’s homework, but it’ll reward you in the end.”

So how does the new collector learn? Stephen believes it’s never been easier, due to the abundance of books and periodicals now available, as well as the Internet. Plus, Americans are blessed with several of the world’s finest museums, with their abundant collections of early pieces.

“You can go to the library and it doesn’t cost you a thing. Museums cost you very little and you can actually look at the stuff, look at the construction of the items, touch them. The more you can examine examples of what you’re interested in — whether it’s ceramics, paintings, furniture or whatever — the easier it’ll be to make an informed value judgment when it comes time to buy.”



An Early Start

As a child living in the Massachusetts town of Reading — founded in 1644 and home to many surviving 17th- and 18th-century homes — Stephen was surrounded by “a bed-rock of antiques.” He’d already developed a love of early pieces by age thirteen when his parents for his birthday gave him a spinning wheel he coveted.

“At that time, you could buy a lot of interesting antiques for a quarter or fifty cents, which is about all I had to spend,” he recalls with a chuckle of the early 1960s. “I was hoarding my lunch money to buy things. When I was fourteen I joined our local historical society, which was full of old ladies and men and they thought I was cute to be interested in these things, so if they had anything to sell, they’d show it to me. I didn’t

Left: A corner of the keeping room features this circa 1780 Vermont hooded dresser holding an array of pewter plates, woodenware and textiles. This style of cupboard was a common domestic piece in New England homes of the period, as is the putty-green paint that also was a common woodwork color. A tall sand-weighted lighting stand sits on the corner of the 18th century bar in the foreground.

Right: Renowned itinerant stenciler Moses Eaton decorated this bedroom around 1825. The room remains an outstanding, pristine example of Eaton's craft because the plaster walls have never been painted or wallpapered to conceal the stenciled designs. While room stenciling was a popular decorating technique during the period, this rare example is authenticated by Eaton's signature willow-tree design on one section of a wall. The room's furnishings are from the same early 19th century period, many of them also stenciled. The bed is from Maine and is grained and stenciled. The stenciled trunk at the foot of the bed is from Massachusetts. The dome-topped trunk is covered with paper, as is the Vermont bandbox, both from the 1830s. The chair in front of the window is an early stenciled piece, while the fan-back Windsor rocking chair in the foreground is from the late 1700s.



know what I was doing, but I had the interest and was buying whatever I could with my small amount of money.”

Within a year, he was a dealer in his first antique show. “A friend of my mother’s ran a small antique show in our town and she convinced my mother to let me have a booth in the show, which cost \$10,” Steve says. “Well, that was a lot of money for me, so my mother gave me the \$10 and I did exactly \$10 in business at the show. It was not necessarily a paying proposition, but from then on I was hooked.”

Stephen continued doing shows as a teenager and into his college years, earning spending money and then some. “I was doing shows through college on weekends and during the summer, maybe seven or eight shows a year,” he explains. “My parents had worked hard to put me through college and were determined that I was going to have a real job. My mother didn’t consider the antiques business to be a real job. She considered me a junk dealer, and my father really didn’t care what I did as long as I didn’t cost him money.”

Persevering through college, he landed positions at companies first in New Hampshire and then back in Massachusetts. “It became obvious quite quickly that even though I had a good accounting position, I was making as much money dickering and dealing on the side with my antiques as I was in my 9-to-5 job. So after three years of work, I took a big leap,” he says. “This was in 1973 and we were in a horrible recession — not a good time to be making a big leap from having a paycheck to having no paycheck. But I did it and survived all right.”

“For some reason — and I don’t know why this happened — I seemed to have a good sense of what was good and what wasn’t good. Everyone says I have a good eye, and I guess I do,” he admits. “I don’t know where it comes from, but it’s ability to look at something and know if it’s nice, if it has good style and proportions and if it’s interesting.”

Moving in 1974 to Woodstock, Vermont — another town rich in New England character — Stephen opened a shop on the village green and within two years met Doug, who at the time was a Harvard

University researcher working in primate medicine and completely new to antique collecting.

“I had him set aside \$5 a week and we started buying things. In the course of a year, he’d built up a nice inventory through buying and selling pieces, and it gave him enough confidence to think he could leave his job and make a living doing antiques,” Stephen says. “And that’s what we’ve been doing ever since.”

A Changing World

Because the business of selling antiques has been around for hundreds of years, it’s been subject to change, change, and more change. Yet, along with the rest of the world, the business of buying and selling antiques today is experiencing perhaps its most intense period of evolution.

“Interestingly enough, when I first started out in the 1960s, the old-timers said the antiques business was over with, there was nothing more to be found,” Stephen recalls. “Well, that turned out to be terribly wrong. But in recent years the antiques business has changed greatly and you can put that right in the lap of the computer. The computer has let a good many people sit at home in their pajamas and shop for antiques. They go to eBay and other websites where they can look at a wide range things without ever getting into the car and going anywhere.”

“Very few people go out shopping for antiques anymore,” he continues, “and very few people have shops anymore. When I first started in this business, every town had two or three antique shops. New Hampshire, Vermont, and Massachusetts were littered with them. But I don’t think there are too many people now who say, ‘Gee, honey, let’s get in the car and go antiquing.’ It used to be a big pastime when I was younger. That’s the way a lot of people spent their Sunday afternoons. Nobody does that now.”

Observers agree that changes in technology, in the economics of operating a small business, and in people’s tastes all have conspired to radically change the American antique trade in recent years, and the long reach of today’s print and electronic media has been a powerful factor in instigating that change.

“Things tend to go in cycles in our business, with much of it spawned by the decorating magazines and what they deem interesting. I don’t know

Right: This corner of the Moses Eaton stenciled bedroom features a circa 1835 painted Sheraton-style four-drawer chest. The chest is an unusual New England piece because of its all-original painted decoration. It once belonged to baseball star Ted Williams and his wife when they lived in nearby Putney, Vermont. On the wall are a fancy Sheraton gold-leaf mirror from the 1840s and an 1847 portrait of Perley Chandler, a silversmith in Chelsea, Vermont, painted by H.K. Godwin. The two chairs are an 18th century French Queen Anne side chair in its striking original blue, and a small Windsor with its original painted decoration from the 1820s.



how these tastes are formed, but they certainly swing widely,” he observes. “I’ve been in business long enough to know there are whole categories of things that everybody just had to have — a pickle bottle, or a hogscraper candlestick, or ironstone china — and they had to have it because everybody else had to have it. But the fact is, these things are always changing.”

Sticking With the Unusual

In times of change, some people withdraw and others strive to take advantage of the situation. One key to the success of Stephen Douglas Antiques over the years has been in offering an extensive array of early pieces — many of them high-end, spectacular items, others of more modest value — but always with a focus on what Steve terms “the unusual.”

“I’m just as interested in selling people something for \$25 as I am for selling them something for \$25,000, if it’s what they want,” he explains. “But I look to offer things that are unusual, things that’ll fit into people’s collections and maybe even start them collecting something if they weren’t thinking about it.”

The many items Stephen Douglas Antiques offers — most of which the men sell directly from their circa 1770 Vermont homestead — are 18th and 19th century Americana with an emphasis on country pieces. Still, the variety is enormous, and people’s appreciation of the pieces often is in direct relation to their knowledge of antiques.

“If you’re going to collect, you need to take the time to really study and look at the range of possibilities of what you’re collecting,” Stephen says. “If you’re going to collect pantry boxes, then start looking at different pantry boxes. What are the niceties and what are the refinements? What makes one better than the other? When you’re considering buying a particular Windsor chair, can you make a decision based on what is good style, good form, good surface? Learning these things takes time — it means you don’t necessarily buy the first one you see — but educating yourself gives you a basis to know what you’re doing. It doesn’t mean you won’t make a mistake. Everybody makes mistakes, and that’s perfectly okay.”

If you make a well-informed buying decision on a good piece, the possibility of the piece increasing in value over time is greatly improved. Still, there are no guarantees, and Stephen believes there are returns on your investment even more important than future dollar value.

“You should be pleasing yourself, buying things that really excite you and excite you all the time,” he says. “I’ll admit that not everything I buy does that, but I’ve bought things that I walk by every day and I get the same little jolt I did when I bought them. And if you’re collecting things, that’s what you should do — collect the things that give you that jolt, that excite you and will continue to excite you. And, as a bonus, if you’ve picked well, the piece also will probably be worth a lot more over time.”

Gregory LeFever writes on historical topics and is a contributing editor to Early American Life magazine.