

Q & A

Peter Eaton & Joan Brownstein

The two dealers have been friends since 1980 and have been married for 15 years. They recently relocated from Newbury, Mass., to Wiscasset, Maine, and have an open shop in an Eighteenth Century home and gallery just off Main Street. They met when each was exhibiting at several antiques shows a year; he was primarily dealing with furniture and accessories from the Pilgrim century through 1820, and she was dealing in folk art and schoolgirl art. In the past, their show schedule included the premier events in the world of American antiques, including the Winter Antiques Show and Winterthur

Museum's Delaware Antiques Show. Brownstein is now being treated for Parkinson's disease and has had three major back surgeries, curtailing their show schedule. Eaton, always with an interest in American history and a fascination for the objects that made history come alive, was teaching school when a girlfriend's father gave him his first antique — a slat back chair. His first purchased antique, a #7 Shaker armchair missing an arm, cost \$5 at a Goodwill store. He started buying for resale in 1970, learning the differences between good, better and best. Brownstein knew from childhood that she would be an artist, and while working and living in New York's Finger Lakes region, discovered the rich heritage of folk paintings from that area, including works by Henry Walton, Noah North, M.W. Hopkins and others. She began buying for resale about 1980.



Tell us about the move to Wiscasset.

PE: We were both ready for a new chapter in our lives. One of our reasons for the move was that we wanted to get off the grid. By that, I mean we wanted to operate differently than we had in the past, when our efforts concentrated on shows and our established collector base. We wanted to experiment with an open shop in a new area that allowed us to meet potential customers who were unfamiliar with the "antiques world" and who did not know us. Equally important was the fact that we wanted more space so that Joan could display her own work. An affluent tourist location, Wiscasset has proved ideal and the shop is now open seven days a week.

Are you meeting new customers?

PE: Yes. Take for example, Labor Day weekend. We had more people in the shop on that one day than we would have had all summer in Newbury. Ninety percent of the people we're seeing now never heard of either one of us. We have the time to talk to these people and discuss things they may never have been exposed to. We wanted to display our objects in such a way as to emphasize their aesthetic qualities, not simply that they might have been made in the Seventeenth or Eighteenth Century. We've learned that antiques and folk art don't need to be "part" of anything. They can stand alone, based on those aesthetic qualities and condition. It seems to be working; we're selling to new customers. We have a broad selection of items, not just those that we're well known for.

How are you using the word broad?

PE: In some ways, Joan and I really are two different businesses. I still buy and sell the furniture

and accessories that I always have: aesthetically designed and well-crafted early objects with original surfaces. The new shop gives Joan the space to display not only her folk and schoolgirl art, but also her other interests, namely midcentury studio pottery, daguerreotypes, midcentury design furniture, and importantly, her own work — things she has made.

Joan, what does he mean by "things Joan has made?"

JB: Our shop now includes my own paintings, jewelry and collages. I love creating these kinds of things and have been doing it for years. I've always considered myself an artist. I thought, at first, I'd

be a landscape painter until I discovered the work of Mark Rothko through an exhibition catalog that I found at the Keene, N.H., public library. I took it home and wouldn't return it — eventually paying for it. When I started in the antiques business, I saw it as another art-related activity. At that point, I knew almost nothing about folk art, but it's aesthetic appeal, particularly folk portraiture, really drew me and I quickly began what has become a 30-year education. Folk art has influenced my own art, but, more accurately, my art influenced my understanding of folk art. I recently had my first solo show in decades, at the Cooley Gallery in Old Lyme, Conn., and I hope to do more.

—Rick Russack

