



Y A N K E E

T R E A S U R E



## Marston House has become a must-stop for browsers and collectors

by JANICE BYRD

**C**an an Arizona-born, California-raised antiques dealer adapt to the restrained sensibilities of New England Yankee furnishings?

Certainly, if she happens to have the taste, talent and style of Sharon Mrozinski. Since she and her husband Paul opened Marston House in Bethel, Maine, 10 years ago, the combination antiques shop and bed and breakfast has become one of this charming town's finest attractions. Indeed, the 18th-century former sea-captain's house is a must stop for any serious antiques and design



Clockwise from far left: The shop is as welcoming as a cozy parlor. The Mrozinskis relax in the garden. Antiques range from furniture to clay pots. Pitch forks and Shaker hats line a gallery. The front porch hints at what's inside.

photographs by BRIAN VANDEN BRINK

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enthusiast who visits the area.

And there are plenty of them. Wiscasset, which bills itself as "The prettiest little village in Maine," is a mecca for antiques buffs with about 25 shops selling vintage goods.

Tye Burke, who with Chris Ridolf owns Roosterfish, an antiques store on Charles Street in Boston, is a frequent visitor to Marston House. "Sharon does everything to perfection," says Burke. "She has designed Marston House with restraint rather than simplicity. This is the most sophisticated idea in design and you have to be very sophisticated to pull it off."

Mrozinski's inventory is a potpourri of Americana such as toys, yellow-ware bowls, ottomans covered in crazy quilts, hay forks, sap buckets, Shaker hats, American flags and painted furniture. "With antiques," says Mrozinski, who had a successful antiques shop in Carmel, Calif., before moving to Maine, "there is usually only one of each piece, so you have to keep constantly changing. In order to stay in business, I have to redefine myself at least once each year."

That's just one reason the Main Street shop is so popular. Established clients from all over the country check in to see what Mrozinski has in stock. So do scores of tourists and vacationers who can't resist the visual lure of the sprawling front porch, which is usually filled with an appealing mix of goods.

"Now, I'm interested in earlier, rougher, utilitarian pieces," says Mrozinski of her current inventory. "I like pieces to be used and handled and not just to be a pretty picture on a table. I like to put everything to use."

Take the vintage sheets and towels that Mrozinski sells. "I love to use these linens on my bed and in my bathroom," she says. "There is a spirit about them and anything else that generations of women before us made. It connects us with the past, just like farming. There is something therapeutic about handling and using these old relics."

The building itself is something of a relic.

"Marston House was in awful condition when we bought it," says Paul Mrozinski. "When we moved in in 1987, the roof was falling apart, the plaster ceilings were hang-



ing down, the furnace didn't function and every radiator had blown apart from freezing. We didn't even have a stove. We cooked in an electric wok for months, and we had four children living at home at the time."

Given Paul's architectural background, they were not naive about what they had gotten into. They knew it would take a positive attitude — and time — to make it work.

"But there we were that first year," he says, "on the route of the July 4th parade. We wanted people to know that there was something happening on the corner."

So they painted the front of the building white to give it a fresh new look. It took them five years, however, to totally redo the roof.

Behind the main structure, a carriage house, provides an intimate, private setting for bed and breakfast guests, who can choose between two newly renovated rooms decorated in a blend of comfortable furniture and Americana. "We designed them with ourselves in mind," says Sharon, who loves to travel. "We always look for a place where we can just be together, that's romantic without a lot of distractions."

To add to that sense of intimacy and privacy, breakfast is served either in the guests' room or in the garden. Inside the shop, which is painted in a palette of gray and white, the merchandise is ever changing, the only constant being Mrozinski's clear point of view.

During the winter, the Mrozinskis sometimes travel to England and Europe. During last year's trip to Cornwall, Sharon discovered the beauty in agricultural elements such as troughs, tools and other utilitarian objects. As soon as the pieces arrive at Marston House, they take on a new life with Mrozinski's vision and the help of local craftsman. Troughs become planters, tools become sculptural pieces when hung on a wall and everyday pieces such as old ladders are wonderful for displaying plants. Remnants of antique quilts are stitched into vests, while bolts of heavy linen are sewn into gardening smocks.

"In my shop, I love to keep people off guard. I stretch myself and see what I respond to and see what inspires me," says Mrozinski. "That's what my business is all about." ▲

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