

MARY EMMERLING'S New Country Collecting



Text by Carol Sama Sheehan
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA GREENE

June 13, 1996

Sharon —

Thanks for letting us
photograph your wonderful
home —

Enjoy —

♥ Mary Emma

Guided by Intuition



AS A YOUNG GIRL growing up in the Arizona desert, Sharon Mrozinski filled her scrapbooks with cut-out images of New England life, an irony not lost on the dealer who today purveys Americana from an 18th-century sea captain's house in Wiscasset, Maine.

"I did not make my first trip to New England until I was an adult," Sharon admits, "but it was all that I had imagined." So much so that she can't remember a time when she was not buying, selling, or collecting New England antiques.

"I was introduced to New England on the best of terms," she says, through a visit to a friend's family home on Georgetown Island, Maine. This was an early-18th-century farmhouse, basically unchanged in spirit and in fact. "There was no running water, not telephone, and no electricity when I stayed there," Sharon recalls. "I remember the fires in the hearth, the evening presence of oil lamps, and the trips we made to the



On a circa 1820 Maine blanket chest with original gray paint, a family of vintage teddy bears keeps company with a plucky papier-mâché canine wrapped in painted cloth. OPPOSITE: A collection of painted cloth and leather balls from the mid-1800s, used for playing games like tenpins, adds graphic interest to an old Amish shelf.



well to fetch water for bathing and cooking.”

The matriarch of the family had furnished the house in true Down East fashion, scrounging antiques for next to nothing, and the result was a home with authentic Yankee character. Sharon was so taken by the experience that she was almost reluctant to return home to California. When she did, she went with a plan: to open an antiques business that would satisfy her craving for New England, and finance annual buying trips to Maine.

As time went on, Sharon developed an unerring instinct for American antiques with original surfaces. “The old Yankee

mentality to keep and use everything is what has allowed these furnishings to survive to this day,” she observes. Her shop in Carmel Valley was one of the few with Early American folk art and furnishings.

In 1986, she and husband Paul, an architect, moved her rapidly growing collection of painted furniture, textiles, and accessories to Wiscasset’s Marston House, a Federal-style residence built in about 1785, spacious enough to serve both as home and shop. Sharon discovered in Wiscasset, Maine, a cohesive community of dealers, “a sort of collective in a village,” she explains, “with each of us eager for people to visit all of us.”

The shop within Marston House is

RIGHT: In a period house scant on storage, an antique leather trunk holds the owner's surplus of pillows. BELOW: The shop in Marston House, Wiscasset, Maine, exudes the atmosphere of an old general store, thanks to early mannequins, bins of fabric bolts, straw hats, and hand-painted signs. The vests are made locally by a seamstress who uses bits and pieces salvaged by the owner from old quilts. OPPOSITE: An 18th-century ship builder's level makes a graphic statement on the living room wall of antiques and textiles dealer Sharon Mrozinski. The old signs are prized for their hand-lettering and striking artwork.







OPPOSITE: Beneath a New England hooked rug dating from the late 1800s, a set of 1820 country Windsor chairs, with original paint and decoration, stands ready for inspection.



ABOVE LEFT: One of a pair of becketts—the handle or pull found on the side of a captain's sea chest—shows the high art practiced by 18th-century sailors on ordinary items. ABOVE: An early cast-iron urn is filled with balls originally used to extract moisture from pulp in the 18th-century process of papermaking. The papier-mâché barnyard animals are contemporary. LEFT: A circa 1820 raised-panel cupboard with original paint doubles as a pantry in the keeping room, an 1850s addition to the house. A generous pine work table from England that can seat twelve is paired with centennial Windsor chairs.



ABOVE: Framed hand-colored studies of eggs from an early ornithology publication are joined by assorted old stone and alabaster balls, nesting in seedling pots on a mantel, to emphasize their common form. LEFT: A bedroom shows its New England loyalties with its barn-red walls and the old textile patterns found on the hand-painted floor and homespun-covered bed.

invitingly laid out, a neat assemblage of early painted furniture and painted smalls, quilts, homespun, ticking, hooked rugs, decoys, baskets, architectural and garden implements, weathervanes, and birdhouses. "I have never liked clutter," says Sharon, "so I've always furnished both the shop and my house sparingly. The older I get, the more I like grays and whites—fortunately, as the hair is turning quickly!"

As a dealer, Sharon lets her intuition be her guide. "You can't always believe what somebody else tells you about a piece," she observes. "Once a picker brought me a table he was sure I would love, but I didn't like a thing about it. Then I asked to look into his truck, and there I found an amazing treasure. It was the backboard of an old fan window with the glass missing, on which time and the elements had traced a kind of trompe l'oeil of a fan window. A surprise discovery like that really makes this business fun."

Sharon was always very close to her

father. "I was Daddy's little girl," she notes. But when he came east to visit Sharon and Paul and their two boys for the first time, he was a bit

taken aback by the timeworn furnishings in their home. "You used to have such good taste," he remarked wistfully, trying hard not to sound negative. "To Dad, all the old furniture I had collected represented poverty," Sharon laughs. "To me, it stood for things people went out to the barn to build—tables and cupboards meant for everyday use, now mellow with age but still utilitarian. That's why, even today, I'll buy a piece of old fabric just for the beautiful mend in it."



LEFT: The birds-on-a-wire sculpture was a gift to Sharon Mrozinski from her "picker." ABOVE: A chest of many drawers, originally a fixture in an Amish general store, serves a similar purpose in Marston House. The old laundry hamper with original paint and stack of early linen sheets occupies a place of honor on an antique sawbuck table, 1800–20.