

Tilden-Thurber and the Weiss Collection

by Lita Solis-Cohen

What do you do when buying antique furniture is your passion and your house is full? Open a shop; become a dealer. That's what Stanley Weiss did. Twenty years ago he bought the landmark Tilden-Thurber building at the corner of Matthewson and Westminster Streets in downtown Providence, Rhode Island, and restored it to the way it was in 1895, when it was built as a shop filled with the latest in elegant china, silver, and jewelry.

Over the years Weiss has filled all four floors with furniture, most of it made in the 19th century. There is a

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small room of Gorham silver on the ground floor, a nod to Gorham Thurber. Thurber was a partner with his cousin John Gorham in Gorham Manufacturing Company in Providence, at one time the largest maker of sterling silver wares in the world. John Gorham and Gorham Thurber and another partner, Henry T. Brown, had opened a retail store in 1856 as an outlet for Gorham silver and other luxury goods, the predecessor of Tilden-Thurber. The store was renamed when Harry Tilden became a partner, and the bigger building was completed down the street.

"We thought we should have some Gorham silver in the shop because so much of it was sold right here," said Weiss. Like Bailey, Banks & Bidle in Philadelphia and Black, Starr & Frost on Fifth Avenue in New York City, Tilden-Thurber was the place where brides registered and the carriage trade shopped for gifts.

Now downtown Providence is quiet. The mall and convention center near I-95 have diverted retail traffic, and artist studios fill the buildings that once housed the commercial hub of the city. Stanley Weiss, a successful real estate investor, owns a number of the buildings in downtown Providence.

Weiss is not a native of Rhode Island. "I grew up in Brooklyn, played the violin, and won a scholarship to the Manhattan School of Music, but I knew I wasn't good enough to be a solo performer. So I went to Hunter College, majored in sociology, won a research fellowship to the University of Michigan, and then came to Brown [University] to work on a Ph.D. as a National Science Foundation Fellow.

"Before I finished my thesis, I went to work for Citizens Bank in Providence, took courses in finance, accounting, marketing, and business law in an MBA program, and found myself working in trusts and estates. After the bank taught me how to count, I sold my huge Leica camera collection for a five-figure sum and began acquiring real estate. My best clients at the bank kept asking me to find them



If it has a lyre base, Stanley Weiss will take a good look at it. If it is priced right, he'll probably buy it. An accomplished musician, he has collected tables and chairs with lyres and harps along with caryatids, sphinxes, and animal paws. He bought this Philadelphia Classical mahogany and bird's-eye maple card table with a blocked front, a lyre-form standard on a plinth base, and saber legs for \$21,240 (est. \$9000/15,000) at Northeast Auctions on August 7. The table with bird's-eye maple veneer and satinwood banding had failed to sell at Christie's in January (est. \$30,000/40,000). Weiss tried to buy it after the Christie's sale without success. One similar, perhaps its mate, is illustrated in Wendy Cooper's 1980 book *In Praise of America*. Weiss has another card table of the same design, probably from the same shop, made of plum pudding mahogany. Northeast Auctions photo.

real estate deals. So I left the bank, on good terms, and went into real estate full time."

By that time, Weiss had married and had two little girls. He met his wife when he went to New Orleans for a job interview. "I knew I did not want the job, but I went anyway and was fixed up with Beth Phillips, and she became my wife," Weiss recounted. "And in New Orleans I found Neal Auctions. Neal had a lot of Classical furniture, and I became a good customer. I still am. Just three

weeks ago at a Neal sale I bought a pair of lyre-base Federal card tables made in the Seymour shop in Boston."

Weiss is applying the same strategy to collecting furniture as he did to acquiring real estate. He is a contrarian. In the late 1980's, when real estate was booming, he and his partner sold a shopping center and apartment complex for a huge profit. The following year the market collapsed. When prices were at a low, he bought the Tilden-Thurber building along with a lot of other downtown Providence properties.

One of those properties is now a hotel. Others are leased to the Rhode Island School of Design. "It took me a long time, but one after another I turned the properties around. I still have a few other projects in the works, but I am not acquiring real estate anymore," Weiss confessed.

As a contrarian he is acquiring furniture during the current slump in the market. He does his homework. At Ronald Bourgeault's Northeast Auctions sale on August 7, for instance, he bought a circa 1815 Philadelphia Classical mahogany and bird's-eye maple card table with striped satinwood banding around the edge, a blocked front, a lyre-form base on a standard plinth, and saber legs. It's like the one Wendy Cooper illustrated in *In Praise of America* (1980), p. 261, fig. 301.

"This table is a time capsule," said Weiss on the phone after the sale. "The wood is choice; the mounts and the cast brass paw casters have never been polished or disturbed. It's the best of the best, in fine condition."

In January 2010 it had been at Christie's, estimated at \$30,000/40,000, and was bought in at \$28,000. Weiss said he tried to buy it after that auction but wasn't successful. Bourgeault estimated it at \$9000/15,000. Weiss bought it for \$21,240 (includes buyer's premium). In his house he has another Philadelphia card table of the same design made of plum pudding mahogany, probably from the same shop (possibly Henry Connelly).

The bird's-eye maple table will go into his house, the Halsey House, a large Federal mansion with semicircular bays that make it resemble a sideboard with a Classical portico in the middle. The house, built in 1801 by Colonel Thomas Lloyd Halsey, a successful Providence shipping merchant, is now filled to overflowing with Stanley Weiss's own collection.

Something will have to go off to the shop to make room for the table. "I never sell from



The Newport, Rhode Island, porringer-top breakfast or tea table, 1735-50, is \$18,000 on the Stanley Weiss Collection Web site. A similar table in walnut is illustrated in *American Furniture: Queen Anne and Chippendale Periods* by Joseph Downs (Winterthur, 1952), plate 302. Weiss collects and deals in 18th-century furniture, but Classical furniture is his greatest passion.



Stanley Weiss plays his Giuseppe Guarneri del Gesu violin, noting that Paganini preferred a Guarneri to a Stradivarius. He seems to be accompanied by the woman at the piano in the portrait by John Blunt. Weiss said he bought the painting at a Christie's auction years ago.

the house, but I do move some things along," said Weiss, admitting he is his own best client and that his wife thinks the house is much too crowded.

The shop is run by Marc Beaulac, 32, a brilliant Web master, professional photographer, researcher, and general assistant. At any given time, Beaulac has about 440 items posted on eBay with a link to the Stanley Weiss Collection Web site (www.stanleyweiss.com), where 500 more items are pictured along with details and references as well as 600 sold items posted for research purposes. "We get fifty thousand visits a month; that is not just hits, that is visits, meaning people stay on the site and look around," said Beaulac.

"From our Web site we sold a large Beidermeier dining table and a set of eight Federal mahogany lyre-back chairs to a Japanese businessman, who was so thrilled with his purchases he sent us a picture of his conference room with the table and chairs in place, and we

have it posted on the Web site," said Weiss.

"We sent a piano to Australia, and we have sold a pair of Chinese ancestor portraits to France," added Beaulac. "We sell furniture to all parts of the U.S. but not much in Providence."

Weiss tries to run a one-price shop. Every item on the Web site is priced, but in this market he has been known to take reasonable offers and turn unreasonable offers down. Shoppers can see high-resolution images of the whole piece and then zoom in on details of its construction. There are multiple views of most pieces. In addition, Beaulac often scans similar examples that have been published in books and magazines, and he cites similar examples in museum collections for comparison.

The Web site is a good place to see a range of quality and design of late 18th- and 19th-century furniture. There are a few second period Classical pieces and some bench-made reproduc-



This Classical drop-leaf table with lyre support, attributed to Rufus Pierce, Boston, 1830, is \$14,000 on the Web site. Most of the lyre-base furniture in the Stanley Weiss collection is at Halsey House and not for sale.



The rosewood Classical harmonicon, labeled "Francis H. Smith/ Baltimore," circa 1830, is \$18,500 on the Stanley Weiss Collection Web site, where multiple views and an image of the label can be found.



This carved mahogany lyre-back side chair, probably from the Ernest F. Hagen shop, circa 1890, is \$2800 on the Web site. At Leigh Keno's first auction on May 1, Weiss bought a set of eight Phyfe-type curule armchairs, made of heavy dense mahogany and attributed to the shop of Ernest F. Hagen (1830-1913), for \$19,040. A classic design and very comfortable, they are in use at Halsey House.



The fourth floor, like the third floor at the Tilden-Thurber building, is jam packed with furniture. Pictured are four of a dozen Federal sofas. The camel-back sofa with a serpentine front rail (left) was made in 18th-century Philadelphia, and so was the 18th-century linen press (back right). The two Federal card tables in the foreground are among 30 card tables in stock. The Federal looking glasses are among two dozen for sale. All are pictured and priced on the Stanley Weiss Collection Web site. "A few special things on the second floor were recently moved there from Halsey House and are not posted on the Web site, but everything at Tilden-Thurber is for sale," said Weiss.

tions, all clearly captioned and dated. There is some English furniture as well—Georgian, Regency, and Edwardian.

The Web site is divided into tables, case pieces, seating, clocks, and miscellaneous; the last includes pianos and beds. There is a mahogany-cased harmonicon with original graduated glasses, labeled "Francis H. Smith/ Baltimore," circa 1830, for \$18,500. For \$3200 there's a lyre-shaped hatrack, similar to one documented in a bill from Anthony Quervelle in Philadelphia in 1835.

Scholarship means a lot to Weiss. Brock Jobe and the Winterthur Fellows come to dinner when they make their annual trip to Providence to see the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design and the Rhode Island Historical Society. Then they examine the furniture at Halsey House and at Tilden-Thurber.

"I invite curators from RISD

and the John Brown House and others involved in New England studies and the trade to come to dinner, so that the new scholars can meet them. Beth makes a New Orleans jambalaya; it's a lot of fun," Weiss said.

Weiss does not conceal his enthusiasm. "I like finding furniture, putting together a meaningful collection. I don't do paintings, chandeliers, or silver. I like pre-Civil War American furniture, but I don't turn away a great piece of Herter. I would not think of buying a piece of colonial Philadelphia furniture without asking Alan Miller's opinion. I have a good bit of knowledge about Federal things, but I enjoy looking things over with Brock Jobe or Clark Pearce or Robert Mussey. I am always learning. There are good people in this field."

Some dealers don't know what to make of Weiss, and some of them are hostile. Do they resent the fact that he did not pay his

dues at Brimfield and doesn't have to sell a piece a week to survive?

"Stanley has a passion, and he acts on it," said Alan Miller. "It is so utterly opposite of the fly in your face gloom we see today. The trade should welcome him."

Stanley Weiss said he doesn't consider what he does work. "I like what I do, and I do it seven days a week," he said. "I just wonder what to do next? Should I do a show?"

