



## Stanley Weiss

“Flip through the pages of this impressive volume, and you will discover a remarkable trove of treasures,” writes Brock Jobe, Winterthur’s professor of American decorative arts emeritus, in the foreword to *Fine American Antiques in The Stanley Weiss Collection*. Impressive it is, with 300 pages of cabinets and clocks, sofas and sideboards, desks and dining tables, ranging from Colonial to Classical, a visual odyssey through the forms, designs and patterns of the past. Weiss’ new catalog presents more than 650 examples of American furniture from his vast collection, picking up in scope where Albert Sack’s 1957 ten-volume compendium left off. Weiss, who was invited to be on a panel to discuss “Passion for Collecting” during the recent Winter Show in New York City, sat down with *Antiques and The Arts Weekly* to talk about his passion.



### *What was behind your move to combine your private and public collection?*

It was time to reunify our public and private collections as a result of a confluence of events: our daughters had grown up and left home, and we had finished my real estate developments in downtown Providence, which was an integral part of the Providence Renaissance, beginning in our historic retail core. This included the restoration of the old Tilden-Thurber Building, among many others, and the development of the Hotel Providence, a four-diamond boutique hotel enhanced by Grace Park adjacent to Grace Church. At that time we worked with the Rhode Island School of Design to bring students into this newly reemerging Soho-ish area now called our Arts and Entertainment District.

### *How did you settle on a location?*

Finding a new spot is not easy. We wanted a location in the Brown/RISD orbit that would also provide for a very large ground level floor with no obstructions and very high ceilings. So we are now behind a ballet school in a friendly, residential neighborhood. We have also downsized from the Halsey Mansion to a pied-a-terre at the center of Benefit Street, a brick townhouse — on the Thomas Boynton Ives block, circa 1812 — at the foot of Brown and RISD’s ivory towers — one school uphill, the other downhill. We also have a year-roundish house in historic Wickford Village on Narragansett Bay, a half hour’s drive south of Providence.

### *How do you characterize your collection?*

We continue our collection much like a museum. As collectors of the best, we have and will continue to add where appropriate — and also deaccession by selling pieces to those wanting the best, be it a museum or an astute connoisseur. As Sack would say, “...the best for the best.” Some of the pieces in the private collection do not have prices, and beyond a certain point, we request a call. We stand by the standards that one finds in Sack’s description referenced in the following, and those that know me in the business know my standards. Our collection is meant to live on and be a market that opens on a daily basis and not one that opens its doors a couple of times a year for an auction. Our collection, in each category, sets a standard, as Sack would have illustrated in *Good, Better, Best*. Albert Sack would have been very happy to see what we’ve built over the many years since he told me to “do my own thing” with our collection. This way, we build a legacy, which is the reason for our current internet-connected publication.

### *Differentiators?*

Many collections are the usual a little bit of this, a little bit of that; a little porcelain, some oils, rugs, etc: the decorative arts. Ours was meant to be a collection of furniture and associated mirrors and clocks. It’s about the woods that I talk about in the preface to our new book. Therefore, we cover Queen Anne through Chippendale, which we call Colonial, and post-1800, which we call Classical, with Phyfe, Sheraton, and Hepplewhite styles pre-Civil War and some later examples in the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, including Herter Brothers. This is the legacy I have in mind of codifying, in part, some of the finest of its type. As an aside: nobody wants to overpay, and one must see value into who they are dealing with. That constitutes provenance. The auction house is not always the place to find bargains. We see many things that are dumped, faked and with problems and many stylistically just don’t make it.

### *You say that a love of the violin in your youth sparked your appreciation for fine woods and craftsmanship. Thoughts about what if your life had taken an exclusively musical turn?*

While I was born in Brooklyn (Brownsville), we moved to Queens when I was starting high school. My neighbor in Queens across the street, Leonard Hindel went to Music and Art High School in New York, and we met, oddly enough, at a summer music workshop in the Tanglewood/Stockbridge area of Massachusetts.

That’s how I met Lenny. Lenny was a bassoonist and I a violinist. We both got scholarships to the Manhattan School of music. I didn’t go, but Lenny did. I felt, if I wasn’t going to be a great virtuoso, I wasn’t interested. Well, Lenny’s first job was with the Metropolitan Opera for a few years, then onto the New York Philharmonic where he retired. Perhaps that is your answer: Lenny took the musical track and that may be the story I could have expected to live.

### *The challenges of moving your collection into a modern one-story gallery from the Halsey House and four-story Tilden-Thurber Building?*

Moving hundreds of pieces out of the mansion and Tilden-Thurber building is precisely one of the attractions of our new site, which is 10,000 square feet directly off the sidewalk with two curb cuts and 18-foot ceilings of open span. This was originally an A&P warehouse. The new location accommodates the scope of material beautifully, as we can now display an array of related examples side by side, on elevated levels down a 50-foot span of space. It’s quite a thing to see, reminiscent of the Yale Art Gallery’s exhibition space and the decorative arts storage areas at the Boston MFA.

Furniture is very difficult to move, and there’s an old saying: that’s when the damage happens. We have a long-term relationship with a small mover moving fine antiques along the coast, Maine to Florida. When you

( continued on page 8 )



The new gallery at 212 Fourth Street, Providence, R.I.



# Q & A

(continued from page 1)

go beyond that, my assistant can provide a lecture. Our rule is that everything that goes out is fully insured for breakage. And there is always an inspection before. When 1stDibs sells a piece, they take on the delivery responsibility, and we have never had an issue.

***Do you mourn the passing of classic volumes of furniture scholarship even as you bring a more dynamic facsimile online?***

Yes, but there is still currently work being done in the field, and people like Brock Jobe, Phillip Zimmerman, etc. are continuing to publish in this spirit.

***An auction conundrum noted of late — often reproduction furniture by the likes of Eldred Wheeler and others can bring as strong if not stronger prices than period pieces. Comment?***

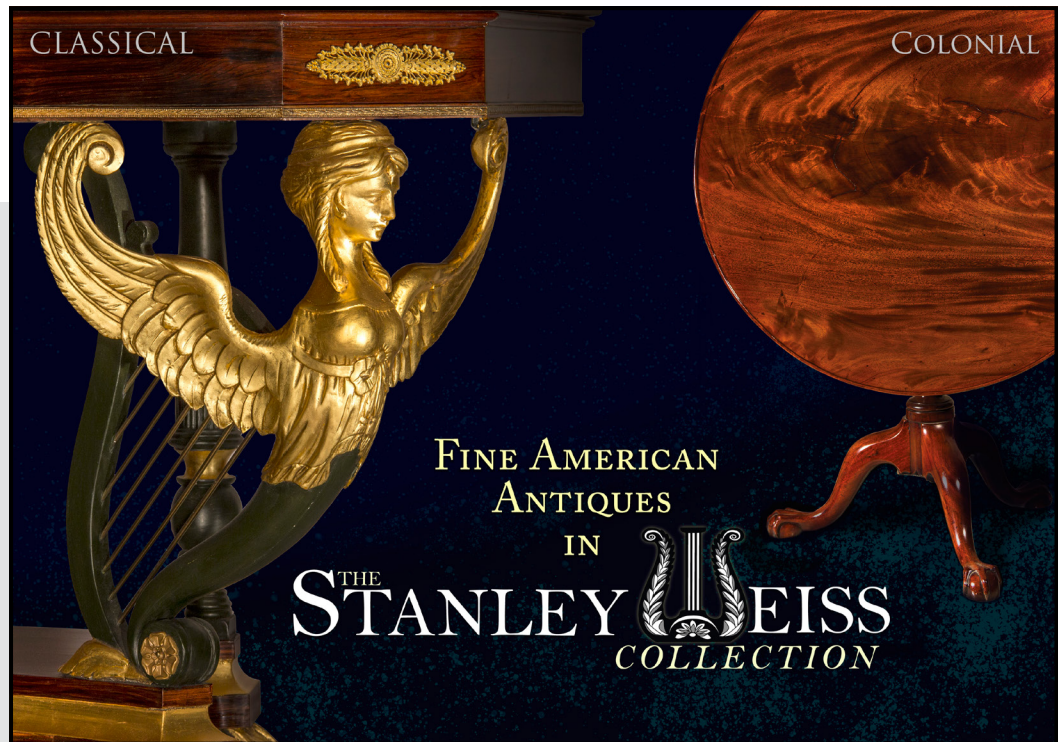
I agree. It all depends on how screwed up the period piece is and the case one can make for the Eldred Wheeler item. If I were offered a period Queen Anne candlestand with a plain, uninspired base and a new top, I might prefer an Eldred Wheeler piece, especially with vibrant tiger maple. The Eldred Wheeler pieces I've seen with labels are excellent. We have some in our guest house in Wickford Village.

***You describe your redevelopment of the Tilden-Thurber building and acquisition of the Halsey Mansion during the Providence Renaissance under the leadership of the city's mayor "Buddy" Cianci. What is Cianci's greatest legacy for Providence?***

I knew Buddy from the beginning and have a couple of delightful personal letters from him to me. Buddy chose me the winner of a competition to develop Grace Park in the center of the Arts and Entertainment district, across from the Tilden-Thurber building, my office and antique storage locker. I later restored the existing buildings surrounding the park with an 80-room boutique hotel, four diamond, etc. I have a picture of Cianci and myself with Governor Sundlun at the hotel's grand opening; it took a lot of intestinal fortitude to build a hotel like that in the center of a number of empty buildings at that time. This is the area that RISD and others consider a bohemian SoHo environment. Cianci later appointed me to the Port of Providence and later the Providence Public Building Authority where I am currently chairman of the board 20 years later. Buddy was a wonderful persona, and a great cheerleader for Providence but he certainly had his demons.

***Best source for developing an "eye"?***

There are three very good elementary books by Kirk. All are good starters, especially *Early American Furniture: How to Recognize, Evaluate, Buy, and Care For the Most Beautiful Pieces — High Style, Country, Primitive and Rustic*, as well as *The Impecunious Collector's Guide to American Antiques and American Furniture & the British Tradition to 1830*. But after you've done the reading, it's only by going out and turning over a lot of furniture at auction and bringing a strong light that you really develop a working sense of the material you are dealing with and importantly, doing this with somebody that knows what they're looking at. In the beginning we worked with one of the best pickers, who I eventually hired. There's no getting away from it. If someone spends



six months trying to fake something and you — as a relative novice — think you can pick it up, you'll find out six months later, that the hand was faster than the eye. The process requires looking at real things upside down, time and time again with good lighting to see how "clean" a piece is. As for style and form, it brings to mind a Queen Anne bonnet top walnut-veneered Boston highboy with a shell, which came up at auction in New York. Sounds great, but the pad feet were wimpy and the bonnet top over-proportioned to the case compounded with a somewhat wider width than is customary. Well, how does one know this? It comes from looking at comparative examples, and that's all part of developing an eye for form and style. And that's also why we published the catalog, because our material will, therefore, have a provenance with the Stanley Weiss Collection coming from the catalog. Inclusion in our publication represents a piece that is absolutely right and which we stand behind. So, hopefully, our catalog will have some real shelf life.

***When is it acceptable to handle pieces of furniture that have replaced parts or minor restoration?***

It depends how minor the restoration. For example, I have a fabulous Newport bonnet-top highboy:



An early Chippendale mahogany bonnet-top highboy with original finial, Newport, R.I., circa 1765, by the Townsend/Goddard School of cabinetmakers.

it's early, with a wonderful provenance and all the charm in the world. The wood radiates beautiful red figuring along with claw and ball feet and a magnificent shell. It has a chip in a rear pad foot. Does that disqualify it? Of course not. It depends on the rarity, its provenance, etc. Its assets far outweigh the negative, but there are definite limits. We would suggest Sack's guidelines as spelled out in Sack's *Good, Better, Best*. I recall Sack's bill of sale, which would always state "no alteration or replacements" and then go on with the exceptions, i.e. brasses, or glue blocks, etc. It's a balance between the assets and liabilities and the heavy finger on the scale is often one's pocketbook.

***Since your website was established in the late 1990s, how many pieces of furniture have you sold through it?***

Many hundreds have been sold since our website premiered in 1998. A fairly complete list with our archived pictures can be found at [www.stanleyweiss.com/inventory/sold](http://www.stanleyweiss.com/inventory/sold).

***What message do you have for the millennial who is utterly satisfied with furnishing his living spaces with Ikea furniture and big screen TVs?***

I'd tell them to "raid the icebox" when they are ready to settle in. I'd tell them to see what their parents have, or their grandparents, and what they can get for zero. Of course, you're probably not going to beat Ikea because those young people in dense urban areas are not settling in, nor should they, necessarily. Furniture is seen as disposable to them, and strictly utilitarian. That's the situation when what you're buying has to be transportable. When one seeks permanence, in a residential setting, then assembling or collecting takes root. Aside from raiding the icebox, if you love furniture, then scout out the local auctions, consignment shops or even the Salvation Army. When I went to Brown, I always stuck my nose in there, and once bought an oak Mission rocker. There is a balance between viewing your visual psychological lifespaces from the window out, and living within the confines of your window, replete with treasures. However, today, most high rises have floor-to-ceiling windows and open floor plans with limited walls, so this trend is not conducive to collecting and showcasing one's treasures. Consequently, this trend has led to a desire for pieces that are inconsequential and do not interrupt the view, rather than great pieces that are themselves worth viewing.

***How does one visit your collection?***

A call to our gallery in Providence with a day's notice is essential as we are always up to something. 212 Fourth Street, Providence, R.I.; 401-272-3200. The catalog, \$55, can be ordered by phone at the number above.

— W.A. Demers