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'Cherished Possessions: A New England Legacy'

BY STEPHEN MAY
NEW YORK CITY — Motivated by concern that "our New England antiques are fast disappearing because no society has made their preservation its exclusive object," Boston blue-blood William Sumner Appleton and a group of like-minded citizens founded the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) in 1910. The first organization of its kind in America, from the start its mission has been to protect the region's architectural and cultural heritage.

Today, SPNEA, which recently changed its name to Historic New England, maintains 35 historic houses open to the public and sited on 1,350 acres. The organization's vast collections comprise more than 110,000 items, running the gamut from furniture, household objects and needlework to costumes, decora-

175 objects were chosen not only for their visual and aesthetic appeal, but also for the stories they tell about nearly 400 years of regional life.

Dating from the Seventeenth to the middle of the Twentieth Century, the objects take on special meaning because they emanate from a region of the country that has been central to the founding of the nation and to the shaping of its heart, soul, psyche and history. It was in New England that the American Revolution began, where the cultural and intellectual foundations of the nation were laid, and where aesthetic tastes, traditions and values were established that inspired a young country and continue to influence Twenty-First Century life.

"The thrust of the exhibition is, above all, about the way objects link us to the past," says

Highlighting works on view that were created before the American Revolution is a remarkably sophisticated, elaborately ornamented cradle that dates to 1665-1685. Although constructed by typical joinery, its 22 panels, 33 turned spindles, 19 buttons and 8 finials differ markedly from the mostly simple, straightforward cradles that predominated in colonial Massachusetts. A tour de force of Seventeenth Century craftsmanship, it belonged to John Thacher of Yarmouth on Cape Cod. Understandably, it occupied a place of honor in the Thacher family for more than 300 years.

A fine example of the needlework art that began to appear in Boston in the 1730s is a "Fishing Lady Picture," 1745-50. It shows a young woman holding a fishing pole, surrounded by a pastoral land-



The japanned high chest of drawers believed to have been decorated by Robert Davis or Stephen Whiting (1735–45) was the height of fashion in the American colonies. The 7-foot-tall chest features japanned birds, mythical figures and buildings.



Susan Norton, 1906, in Rome with her teddy bear.

New England owns more than 1.5 million historical photographs, architectural drawings and other documents relating to New England.

Drawing from these extensive holdings, Historic New England curator Nancy Carlisle has organized Historic New England's first major traveling exhibition, "Cherished Possessions: A New England Legacy," currently on view at the Bard Graduate Center. More than

important about these objects, she adds, "is not only what they say about the past, but what they say to us today. One of their messages is, quite simply, look...and enjoy."

Ranging from the beautiful to the quirky and reflecting craftsmanship of self-taught artisans, as well as academically trained artists, "Cherished Possessions" offers surprises and delights. It also educates and evokes nostalgia.



"Perhaps no more cherished object exists than a favorite childhood toy, whether it be a treasured doll or a beloved stuffed animal," states the *Cherished Possessions* catalog. This bear, once owned by Susan Norton, crossed the Atlantic with young Susan some 80 years prior to being donated to SPNEA.

using a harvesting scene to varied birds and animals to a strolling couple. A product of months of skilled work, this large chimneypiece for years decorated the home of the Lowell family in Cambridge, Mass.

The importance of religion in early New England is symbolized by a tall, elegantly carved pulpit that was paid for by patriot John Hancock and installed in Boston's important Brattle Street Church in the early 1770s. While the building was used as a military barracks during the British occupation of 1775, church deacons protected the gleaming mahogany piece behind a wooden case.

A striking portrait, 1785–87, of the Reverend Eli Forbes painted by Dutch-born artist Christian Gullager shows a solemn, forceful Forbes declaiming from a similar pulpit in the First Church of Gloucester, Mass., where he served for many years.

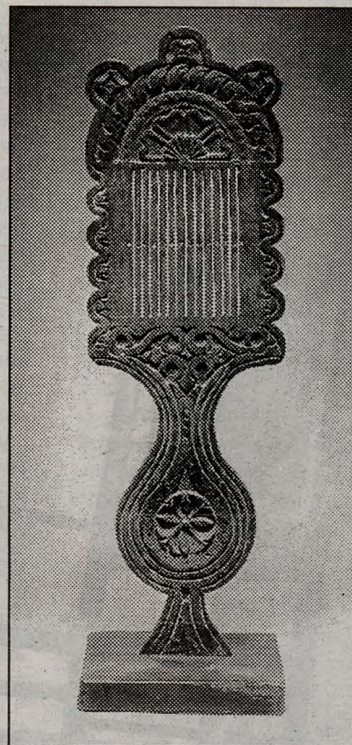
One of the most interesting items in the exhibition is a humble, battered pewter teapot, circa 1750, that is thought to have belonged to Crispus Attucks. He was the African American slave who became the first martyr of the Revolution when he was killed by British troops in the Boston Massacre in 1770. The teapot, obviously highly regarded by Attucks and his family, has a makeshift appearance with its crudely repaired spout and an attached handle from a basket now serving as its own. Passed down through the family of Attucks' master and eventually presented to Historic New England, this unpretentious object recalls and helps immortalize an early American hero.

A contrasting, nearly contem-

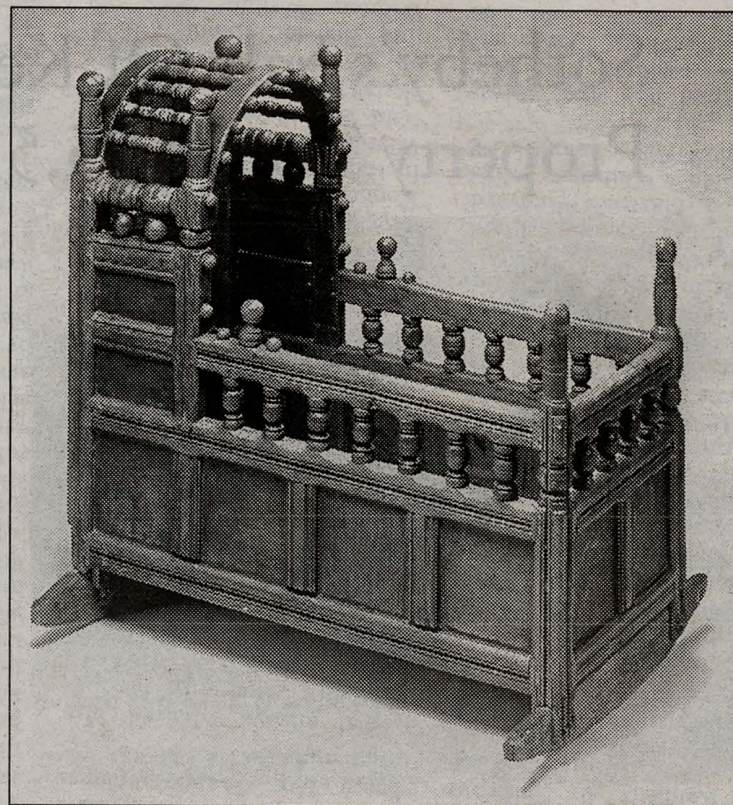
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The portrait of Sara Norton, painted by Edward Burne-Jones and presented to Charles Eliot Norton, is signed "EBJ to CEN."



The tape loom, circa 1668, attributed to the Searle/Dennis workshops in Ipswich, Mass., was a gift of Bertram and Nina Fletcher Little.



This elaborately ornamented cradle dates to 1665–1685. A tour de force of Seventeenth Century craftsmanship, it belonged to John Thacher of Yarmouth on Cape Cod.

‘Cherished Possessions: A New England Legacy’

(continued from page one)

poraneous piece, a rare japanned high chest of drawers believed to have been decorated by Robert Davis or Stephen Whiting, 1735–45, was acquired by wealthy Boston merchant Josiah Quincy to underscore his elevated status. Representing

other furnishings from the house, such as portraits of family members, tankards, side chairs, tea chests and silver and jelly glasses to trace the history of the clan for nearly a century. The handsome house and its contents, largely untouched from the Eighteenth Century, were left to SPNEA in 1977.

ent families who were trained in their early teens in the arts of embroidery. For better or worse, “during the early part of the Nineteenth Century, the pinnacle of women’s schooling was symbolized by elaborate needlework pictures,” according to Carlisle.

A 7½-foot mirror 1807 with



Arts and Crafts period earthenware bowls and vases with stylized images of animals, birds and flowers, painted for the Paul Revere Pottery of Boston by young immigrant women as part of an early Twentieth Century social uplift project.



Termed the "gold standard" in colonial America, this Boston Chippendale side chair represents the height of style for the period.

can chest features japanned birds, mythical figures and buildings. Carefully preserved by the Quincy family and twice saved from house fires, this arresting treasure has been studied extensively by scholars and is admired for its elegance and rarity. A related documented high chest that had been signed by Davis was auctioned at Skinner's in Boston in November 2004 for just under \$2 million.

The manner in which the Revolution disrupted colonists and sometimes tore families apart over choosing sides is suggested by several Historic New England objects. Jonathan Sayward, a wealthy leading citizen of York, Maine, who remained loyal to England, was stripped of his businesses and public offices and confined to his house during the war. A portrait of this stalwart gentleman, likely painted around 1760 by an unknown Boston artist, depicts him at the height of his pre-Revolutionary prestige and power.

On display are a number of items from his home, now the Sayward-Wheeler House, which is maintained by Historic New England in York, and whose "contents are considered by many to be the most intact surviving Eighteenth Century assemblage in the country," according to Carlisle. Among the many original furnishings that remain in original locations picked by the Saywards is a long mahogany clock. This 92-inch-high treasure, designed in the latest English fashion and probably made in Portsmouth, N.H., remains to this day (when not on tour) affixed to boards in the corner of Sayward's handsome sitting room.

Historic New England uses

Insights into a little-known aspect of the American Revolution are reflected in a white-and-blue plate-printed gown apparently worn by Deborah Sampson, a farmer's daughter, at her wedding in 1784. Sampson (1760–1827) gained fame earlier during the Revolution when, dressed as a man, she was wounded in combat while serving with the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Discharged when her identity was revealed, she was later awarded back pay and a pension for her service. Sampson eventually wrote a memoir and toured, wearing a soldier's uniform, giving talks about her wartime experiences.

The gown, reworked from an older dress to fit Sampson's 5-foot-7-inch frame, was probably her wedding gown. "Its very survival," observes Carlisle, "suggests that it probably was what she wore to be married in, for those are the dresses that are most often saved." The gown remained in Sampson's family until 1988, when it was given to SPNEA.

A section of the exhibition is devoted to the period 1790–1820, when New England went through periods of prosperity and pride, as well as decline during embargoes arising out of conflicts with Great Britain. Eventually, power shifted away from coastal cities to the region's emerging manufacturing towns. Portraits, clothing, furniture and household items trace the ups-and-downs of this turbulent era.

Several mourning pictures of this time, each featuring a classical tomb surmounted by an urn and flanked by two or more members of a grieving family, were created by girls from afflu-

ence. The scene into the Trojan War scene reflects the wealth and taste of Boston merchant John Osborn. This mirror and its mate were installed in the early 1800s in the Harrison Gray Otis House in Boston, where they normally hang today in exactly the same spot as nearly 200 years ago, in what is now Historic New England's headquarters.

Prosperity, growth and innovation, characteristics of New England between 1820 and 1930, are suggested by a Gothic-inspired settee and side chair from the eye-popping pink Gothic Revival Roseland Cottage, 1846, in Woodstock, Conn. This grand mansion, on the expansive town green, is fully furnished, intelligently interpreted and open to the public.

Other objects testify to the skills of regional craftspeople and the interests of their patrons. A graceful Victorian earthenware vase, 1887, featuring a painted olive branch was created by writer-gardener extraordinaire and influential Isles of Shoals hostess Cecilia Thaxter.

The strikingly simplified book designs and colorful stained glass work of Bostonian Sarah Wyman Whitman, produced toward the end of the Nineteenth Century, demonstrate the sophistication and elegance of this pioneering woman designer.

Also noteworthy are Arts and Crafts period earthenware bowls and vases with stylized images of animals, birds and flowers, painted for the Paul Revere Pottery of Boston by young immigrant women as part of an early Twentieth Century social uplift project.

The global travels of New Englanders, whether on commercial ships or as tourists, are reflect-



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ed in diverse objects they brought back to the region. A memorable example is an intricately carved, Bombay blackwood armchair, circa 1850, acquired in India by young Charles Eliot Norton, later a Harvard professor.

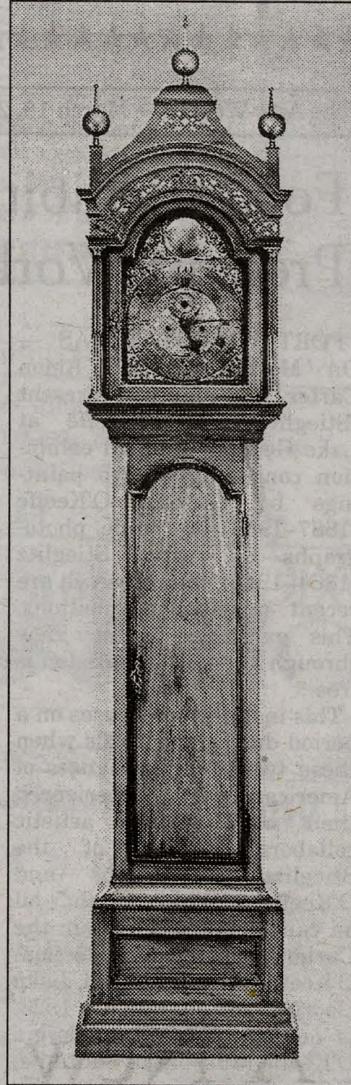
Architect Ogden Codman's collection of photographs of mid-century India underscores the exoticism of its people and structures.

Spread throughout the exhibition are oil paintings by self-trained artists, as well as by trained painters. An insightful portrait of Captain Isaac Manchester, 1806-07, of Bristol, R.I., by Cephas Thompson, captures the tough, harsh visage of a

brain. Filled with meaning, these treasured personal possessions have truly become cherished objects.

The lavishly illustrated catalog, 448 pages, contains insightful commentaries by Carlisle. Published by Historic New England in association with Antique Collectors Club, Ltd, it sells for \$50.

After opening at Colby College of Art in 2003 and traveling to Amon Carter Museum and the Honolulu Academy of Arts, the show is currently at The Bard Graduate Center, New York City, through June 5. It will continue traveling, with the next stop at the Public Museum of Grand Rapids (Michigan) July 2



Among the many original furnishings that remain in original locations is this Portsmouth mahogany clock from the Sayward-Wheeler House, York, Maine.



These brocaded shoes were the height of style in the latter part of the Eighteenth Century.



after a Federal law prohibited American participation in the trade.

A naively painted, highly evocative canvas, "Great Storm At Providence," after 1815, possibly by James Kidder, depicts dark skies, a storm-tossed harbor and ships and buildings engulfed in water following an unexpected hurricane at high tide in 1815.

Most unforgettable of all is "Boston Harbor from Mr Greene's House, Pemberton Hill," 1819, by English-trained painter Robert Salmon. Eight feet tall and 15 feet wide, it offers a carefully detailed, panoramic view of the growing maritime and commercial city. Boston was then the fourth largest city in the nation.

Objects normally seen in properties operated by Historic New England are bound to stimulate interest in visiting these carefully maintained historic sites. Among the highlights: a colorful Navajo rug from Castle Tucker, 1807, in Wiscasset, Maine; ceramics, furniture, textiles and a memorable painting ("Diane Atwood Gordon," circa 1822, attributed to A. Ellis) from the fascinating collection assembled by longtime SPNEA director Bertram K. Little and his wife, author and folk art authority Nina Fletcher Little, at Cogswell's Grant, circa 1730, in Essex, Mass.; and nesting tables, chairs, butterfly stools and a tea set reflecting the modernist tastes of Bauhaus-School-founder-turned-Harvard-professor Walter Gropius in Gropius House, 1938, in Lincoln, Mass.

In keeping with Historic New England's mission to preserve and cherish all layers of history and perpetuate pride in New England's past, "Cherished Possessions" offers rewards for the eyes and sustenance for the

regarding Historic New England, contact the organization at 141 Cambridge Street, Boston MA 02114; 617-227-3956 or www.historicnewengland.org.

The Bard Graduate Center is at 18 West 86th Street, New York, NY 10024; 212-501-3000 or www.bgc.bard.edu.



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1822, attributed to A. Ellis comes from the collection of longtime SPNEA director Bertram K. Little and his wife Nina Fletcher Little.



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