

ART REVIEW

Where Teapots and Teddy Bears Rank as Treasures, Too

By GRACE GLUECK

The pewter teapot that belonged to a great-grandmother. The cape made of feathers worn by a stylish aunt. The inlaid mahogany table that saw generations of chess and card games.

What do New England worthies do with prized family possessions when they wish to assure their survival? Why, they donate them to that high-minded Boston institution, Historic New England, formerly the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, founded by William Sumner Appleton in 1910.

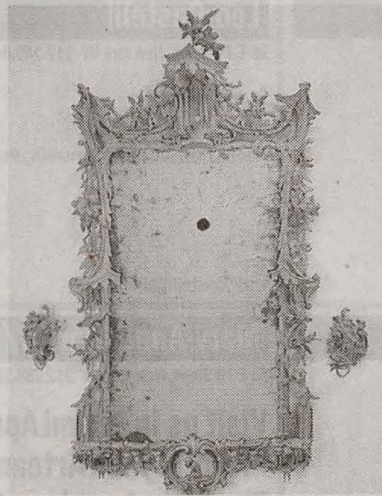
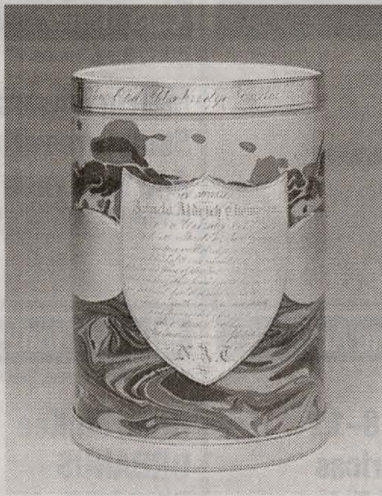
Which means that over the course of its nearly 100-year existence the society has accumulated more than 100,000 objects and 400,000 photographs, as well as some 800,000 visual records and manuscripts. It also owns and administers 35 historic properties including the 18th-century dwelling of a wealthy trader and Tory, Jonathan Sayward, in York, Me., and the modernist home in Lincoln, Mass., built in 1938 by the Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius after he left Nazi Germany for a teaching post at Harvard.

More than 100 choice objects from the society's acquisitions are now on view in "Cherished Possessions: A New England Legacy" at the Bard Graduate Center, a stop for the traveling show organized by Historic New England to make its treasures known to a broader audience. The artifacts run the gamut of grand to quirky: a carved mahogany pulpit to a gravestone salesman's sample.

Together with their well-preserved histories, "they give a sense of an entire region, of lives lived large and small from the 17th century until well into the 20th, of changes in attitudes, customs, habits and beliefs and of the region's place in the world at large," writes Nancy Carlisle, Historic New England's curator and the author of the catalog.

What makes the show different from hundreds of others devoted to American antiques is that, thanks in no small part to bright captioning, you do feel a sense of family connection to the objects. The stories of their ownership and their places in particular settings lend them what

"Cherished Possessions: A New England Legacy" is on view at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, (212) 501-3000, through June 5.



A cider mug with a silver maternal tribute; a 1763 English looking glass with sconces; and a 1906 teddy bear. Photographs by Peter Harholdt/Historic New England

'Cherished Possessions'

Bard Graduate Center

might be called personality.

A commonplace earthenware cider mug (1780-1800), once owned by the mother of Col. Newell Aldrich Thompson of Boston, was embellished by him with a silver shield paying tribute to her "prudence and domestic fidelity." It was apologetically given in 1923 to the society by his son, who noted that it would "take up very little room."

A relic box, containing two worm-eaten pieces of bread said to have been brought here from Britain in 1630 by one Robert Pierce, was donated by a 20th-century descendent, Ann Pierce Shaughnessy. The saving of the bread was in line with a long New England tradition of attachment to relics, and perhaps it also served as a symbol of the family's long continuity.

Susan Norton (1902-1989) bequeathed to the society a plush-and-sawdust teddy bear that she played with as a child. It is shown with photographs of her at age 4 in Rome, and later at her grandfather's house in Cambridge, Mass. The teddy bear — named after President Theodore Roosevelt, who refused to shoot a bear cub brought to him during a hunting party — had first been marketed only a few years earlier, and this one proved robust enough to survive for some 100 years and counting.

But part of the fun is that these relatively humble objects keep company with high-end treasures saturated with elegance, opulence and even splendor.

One is John Singleton Copley's 1793 portrait of Richard Codman, a handsome profligate from a rich and socially prominent Boston family who was known for his wit, charm and lavish spending. Painted in London, it shows Codman seated before a red damask curtain, his white wig and black suit accented by a foppish white silk stock and lacy cuffs, proclaiming the dandy that he was.

Another example is the luxurious winter ensemble of royal blue velvet and silk, trimmed with chinchilla, made in 1883 for Miss C. L. W. French of Roxbury and Boston by a Parisian couturier, Camille Lipman. The outfit consists of a bodice, skirt, overskirt, jacket and matching fur muff. It not only announced its owner's fashion savvy, but it could also keep her snug during winter promenades on Commonwealth Avenue.

And then there are the incredibly ornate carved looking glass and sconces, bought in London by Nathaniel Barrell in 1763 for the house in provincial York, Me., that he moved into by marrying Sally Sayward, daughter of the wealthy merchant Jonathan Sayward. Certainly one of the most fashionable and expensive looking glasses of the day, it is distinguished by the superb quality of its carving and by its stone-colored finish, which made it classier than the more prevalent gilded examples.

Although the show's objects lean heavily toward acquisitions by the white Anglo-Saxon squirearchy that for generations ruled New England, the presence of later arrivals has not been entirely neglected.

An amusing shot of three Vermont ladies drinking tea while standing up

at a Daughters of the American Revolution gathering, was taken by Verner Reed in 1953. Reminiscent of the famous Grant Wood painting "Daughters of Revolution" (1932), it contrasts with a large color photograph, made in 1996 by Dana Salvo, of Margaret Giacalone, an Italian-Portuguese woman from the fishing community in Gloucester, Mass. She stands next to an elaborate household altar to St. Joseph she created for daily prayer.

And a display of lively ceramic pieces created by young Jewish and Italian women in the early 20th century relates to the founding of the Saturday Evening Girls Club, a social and literary organization benefiting immigrants. It was established by three Boston women, including the philanthropist Helen Storrow granddaughter and grandniece of the feminists Martha Coffin Wright and Lucretia Coffin Mott.

An offshoot was the Paul Revere Pottery, which enabled members to learn a money-earning skill while attached to the literary club. Their pottery is of a different order from what you would find among the sanctified holdings of New England Brahmins, but it is very attractive.

Among the show's surprises are examples of modernist furnishings: a streamlined tea set designed in 1969 by the Architects Collaborative, Walter Gropius's architectural firm; a pair of minimal "butterfly stools" from 1954 by Sori Yanagi of Tokyo; and a chaise longue, called "Long Chair," by Marcel Breuer. All are from the Gropius house.

But, happily, the modernist bromide "less is more" does not apply to this show, a harvest of riches from New England's vast attic.