

In the foyer above the sofa is *October*, 1883, by Walter Launt Palmer.

## INTERIOR DESIGNER

**Glimpses Into a Hidden New York**

Eric Cohler visits with art dealer and collector  
Deedee Wigmore



By Eric Cohler

In her gallery's mission statement, Deedee Wigmore states that "our goal is to help clients create meaningful collections of American art." Having known Deedee for several years and now interviewing her one on one, I can attest to her goal and especially to the word "meaningful." In fact, purposeful

is another adjective that comes to mind when discussing the president of D. Wigmore Fine Arts. Deedee is not only one of the leading dealers in American art, she is a significant collector in her own right, who with her husband, Barrie, has developed a uniquely personal collection. Barrie serves as a trustee

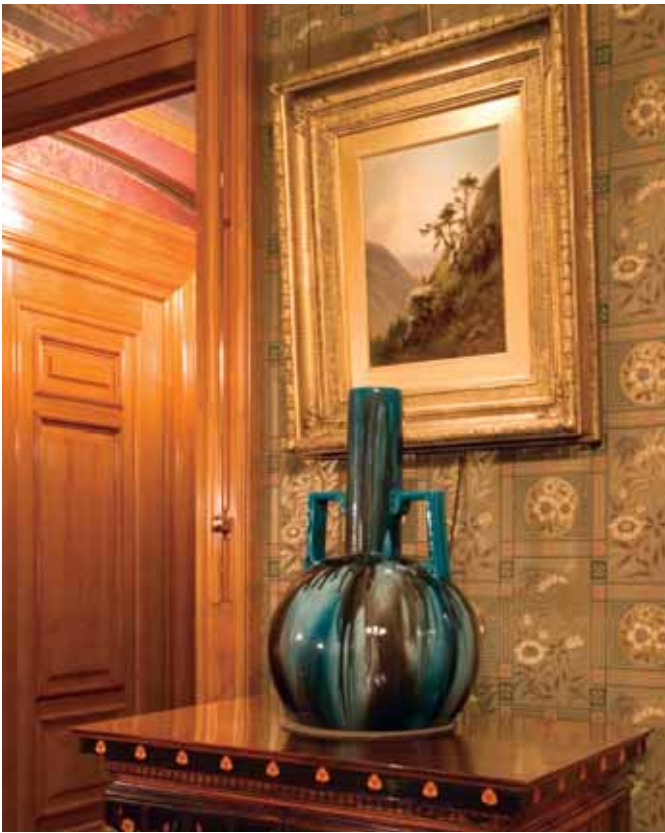
of the Metropolitan Museum, to which he and Deedee have donated four rooms of Arts and Crafts-style furniture and decorative arts. The collection includes works by Herter, Furness, Kimbell, Tiffany, Lafarge and Veter.

I often find it's much more revealing to visit a gallery owner's home than gallery. This



(From left) On the left side of the living room doors is a painting by Edmund Darch Lewis. In the hall facing the living room is Sanford R. Gifford's painting *Claverack Creek*. To the right of the living room doors is *Adirondack Otters* by Arthur F. Tait. On the right-side wall is a painting by Asher B. Durand. Ceramic table to the right is by A. Pugin and center table is by Frank Furness.

**"In the case of Deedee Wigmore, going to her home was a magical journey, transporting me to another time and place—the New York of the late 19th century. She and Barrie live in one of those storied Victorian buildings on Central Park West that one usually only glimpses on television during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade or in a Woody Allen movie."**



Painting is *A Kindered Spirit, White Mountains* by Benjamin Champney. Jeweled cabinet is Herter Brothers and vase is by Christopher Dresser.



Above the Herter Brothers server is Sanford R. Gifford's painting *No Man's Land*.

behind-the-scenes look allows me to see what dealers collect for themselves, and it's not always what I expect. Sometimes I'm shocked, sometimes delighted. In the case of Deedee Wigmore, it was a magical journey, transporting me to another time and place—the New York of the late 19th century. She and Barrie live in one of those storied Victorian buildings on Central Park West that one usually glimpses only on television during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade or in a Woody Allen movie. These buildings are so much a part of the fabric of New York that most New Yorkers know them by name rather than address.

**Eric Cohler:** Deedee, I never would have guessed that your home was as layered and as authentically 19th century as it is. It's fantastic and sublimely beautiful.

**Deedee Wigmore:** Thank you. Barrie and I have worked hard to bring the collection together. We started with very little. I was 20 and in college when we married, and shortly thereafter we were living in Oxford, England. I began to explore museums and antiques shops, looking and absorbing as much as

possible. Barrie was a graduate student, so collecting on a serious scale, aside from a few small ceramics, wasn't an option. We later moved to Canada, where I completed my education at the University of Toronto, and then to New York, where Barrie worked in finance and I went to work at Knoedler. I became their American art specialist.

**EC:** When did you begin collecting?

**DW:** In the early 1970s. I began the collection with art and objects that were affordable as well as beautiful. Our collection was considered unfashionable, as it was mostly Eastlake and Herter Brothers furniture. The late Victorian aesthetic movement was not in vogue in the 1970s, but it didn't bother me a bit. I loved the art and furniture; it is extremely well made, and there were then many superb examples on the market.

**EC:** Not the case today. It's almost impossible to find the quality and caliber of your collection.

**DW:** True. It's becoming more difficult and more expensive. The market's taken off and rare pieces are just not available.

**EC:** What was your first major purchase?

**DW:** A table. I saw it in the window of an antiques store downtown and knew that I had to have it. Barrie thought that I had lost my mind. It was a financial stretch, but I loved the piece; it spoke to me and that's the essence of collecting.

**EC:** Do you still have the table?

**DW:** (laughs) No. I upgraded. It's ironic, as one's collection grows and one is exposed to better quality, what one once thought of as fine and rare can become mundane. Not always, but it does happen. Our collection now includes work by Frank Furness, Kimbell & Cabus, Christopher Dresser and Martin Brother's ceramics. The American Aesthetic movement really lasted only a short time, probably no more than 14 years.

**EC:** What happened?

**DW:** Styles change, tastes change. It's the same today. There's always the shock of the new, but then there are those who revere the past and true quality.



(From left) *Wineburn Mountains* is by Jervis McEntee. *Low Tide, Hertherington Cove* is by Alfred Thompson Bricher.

EC: Speaking of the past, what areas of study did you concentrate on in school in your early career before branching out on your own?

DW: I would have to admit I was a generalist at first. My expertise ran to old masters, French Impressionists and Abstract Expressionism. I loved it all. It was what I call the pursuit of beauty.

EC: A pursuit that one never quite catches up with—but one that has apparently served you well.

DW: Yes, it's an elusive search, but worth every moment.

EC: How did you fully transition to the Arts and Crafts and Aesthetic periods?

DW: Barrie and I purchased an old summer compound in the Adirondacks and needed to furnish the main house. In the late 1970s and early '80s, Arts and Crafts furniture was incredibly reasonable and it went with the cottage-like style of the house. It seemed a natural fit. We both fell in love with the sculptural lines and amazing quality of the period. We saved as much money as we could to furnish the house, driving six hours each

way every weekend to bring our pieces up from the city and from shops along the way.

EC: Where did you find the furniture?

DW: Through private dealers, at auction, estate sales and antiques stores. One of our most recent purchases is a fabulous pair of firedogs from a Biddle home outside Philadelphia. We purchased these from Margot Johnson. She's an amazing resource.

EC: Let's talk about the Metropolitan Museum. You and Barrie have endowed several rooms there. What a wonderful gift to the city and to future generations.

DW: Barrie and I created the Deedee Wigmore Galleries several years ago. There are four galleries devoted to highlighting the finest examples of Arts and Crafts and Aesthetic Movement furnishings, decorative arts and paintings, including one room with more than 70 examples of Tiffany mosaics, furniture and favrile glass.

EC: What's been the driving force behind all of your collecting?

DW: Creating a unified vision with Barrie.

Having a clear direction and forging a path. We also believe in pruning our collection regularly, winnowing it down to the distillation of the essential. We live this way at home. Our collection is as pure as we can make it without living in a bubble. This is 2007, after all, but we both want the collection to be the focus of our home. This means we have tried to be as authentic to the periods we collect as possible. Even though my own gallery represents artists of the late 19th through the late 20th centuries, at home we have only art considered contemporary within the period it was created.

EC: Good point. People often forget that what we view as old-fashioned or antique now was considered contemporary art or furniture in its day.

DW: The Arts and Crafts movement was radical in the late 19th century. It cut through all of the Victorian clutter to deliver a strong vision and strength.

EC: In the photos of your apartment, I notice exposed cords on picture lights and lamps.

DW: Even though we did an extensive

restoration when we bought the apartment, we wanted to leave some of the wiring exposed. Many of the electric cords are wrapped in silk.

EC: The way most early electric lighting was usually done.

DW: Yes. In fact, our building was originally illuminated by gas and a few years later by electricity. The old gas jets are in the walls even today, although they no longer function.

EC: Luckily.

DW: Ha! That authentic we're not.

EC: Seriously, Deedee, the collection is magnificent and it's so gracious of you to share your private space with us. We're thrilled. It's rare to see a collection of such depth and richness.

DW: It's my pleasure. I have learned by collecting and hope that others will learn too. One can never see or read too much about the period in which they are most interested.

EC: But then again, you seem to have catholic tastes when it comes to art—at least in the gallery.

DW: The gallery is where I get to play. It's like a laboratory. Here I can depart from the strict discipline that I have established in the collection at home to indulge my passion for American modernism as well as 19th century classics. I started the gallery on a shoestring in 1980 with all my fingers crossed. It was a tiny space at first and then it kept growing.

EC: How large is your gallery now?

DW: A few thousand square feet. At first, most work was on consignment, but as the gallery developed I began to acquire my own inventory and several large estates, many of which I've sold out. Discovering an artist with a large enough body of work to create an exhibition and a serious collection all available for sale is a challenge.

EC: One that I would think is becoming more difficult all the time.

DW: Exactly. I travel all over the country looking for the most unusual material on the market. This is the hunt, the quest for the very best. However, I want to stress it's not always about cost. The gallery has works in every price category from a few thousand



Sculpture is *The Apprentice* is by Thomas LoMedico. Gate and fire screen by W. Hunt Diederich

dollars on up. There are first-, second- and third-tier artists, and there is a place for all of these depending on where one is in one's collection at a given point.

EC: Meaning . . .

DW: A collector starting out with a limited budget and unbridled enthusiasm might begin with a third-tier early 20th century artist, and graduate to a second or first tier as he or she can afford to do so. This is not to say there is anything wrong with lesser-known artists or less-seminal works by established names, just that we all have to begin somewhere.

EC: To take that plunge?

DW: Exactly. Moreover, it is OK to make mistakes. We all do from time to time. Just confront it and move on. As one learns more about art or a particular artist, one grows in sophistication and this is vital to any truly serious collector. Education and growth.

EC: Can a collection be strictly personal?

DW: Absolutely and most good ones are. There is a woman who has spent 30 years collecting shopping bags from Bloomingdale's and this collection was exhibited at the Smithsonian. The shopping bags document an entire period of American consumerism. It



Painting is *Path along the Hudson* by John F. Kensett. A Rockwood vase sits on a Kimball and Cabus revolving table. PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANICS SMITH

cost nothing to assemble, save creativity and thinking outside of the box.

EC: Or the bag! Who are some of your favorite artists?

DW: Gifford, Kensett, Bierstadt, Hassam. However, I started with a rock collection. As a young girl, growing up in Spokane, Washington, it was what I could afford and it captured my imagination as well. Two vital elements are affordability and creativity. I still have the collection. It's up in the country and gives me joy every time I look at it, even today.

EC: Speaking of today, what do younger

collectors look for when collecting?

DW: Younger collectors seem to gravitate toward more immediate history, to recognizable icons. They want accessibility, to feel a connection.

EC: So connecting the dots are important?

DW: Crucial. Connectivity and a sense of subjective reality make for a true collector. As a collector, one needs to possess energy, emotion and invention.

EC: Being a collector is not easy, then?

DW: No. It's an iterative process.

EC: Are most collectors born or made?

DW: Tricky question. It works both ways. Some people are born collectors—it's in the fiber of their being. Others acquire the collecting "gene" through marriage, financial resources or exposure to interesting objects.

EC: What's next for you?

DW: A little lecturing here and there, building my own collection with Barrie and of course catching the next wave for the gallery.

EC: You need to stay ahead of the curve?

DW: I like to shake things up a bit. "Next" is always key. Our current show, Paul Jenkins, 1955-1960, *Space, Color and Light*, is on view through April.

EC: Jenkins is an artist whose time has returned. I always felt that he was overlooked in recent years.

DW: Yes, but in his day his work held tremendous currency. All the elements of superb artistry are there, the tension, movement and full flow of style. Remarkable, really, and still affordable.

EC: Gives supply and demand a new shade of nuance. In the catalogue for your show, it states, "Jenkins paintings are deliberate and guided with great concern for textural quality. Like Jackson Pollock, Jenkins believed in the validity of the invented technique." I believe the same can be said for you.

DW: That's a heavy mantle to live up to, thank you.

EC: You're living proof, Deedee. ●

*Eric Cohler, president of Eric Cohler Inc., holds a Masters Degree in Historic Preservation from the Columbia School of Architecture. He won a Designer of the Year Award in 1998 and in 2000 the D&D Building in New York recognized him as one of the 26 leading designers in the U.S. Eric has appeared on CBS Morning and Evening News and CNN Style and he is a featured designer on the Home & Garden TV Network.*

