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# OUT OF AFRICA

Treasured family collections from abroad  
embellish a lakeside cottage

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A *Punu* mask from Gabon, Africa. Opposite: Shelves displaying African art and contemporary ceramics border the staircase.

**T**HE TWO DARK, WOODEN, animal-head masks—one with carved, red-painted teeth, the second with an open, yawning mouth—displayed in this sunny New England stairwell are a strong, graphic presence. The majestic pair, speaking of other places, of other lives, and of faraway mystery, were created for ritual use from the simplest materials by the *Baule* people of the Ivory Coast, Africa.

The African art—and other international objects—in the Stockbridge, Massachusetts, home of Catherine and Matthew Mandel is well-chosen, visually arresting, and beautiful; but for this couple, it means more. It means family. These pieces are not just part of the décor but significant reminders of those most dear to them. When they were designing the house with architect Pamela Sandler, exhibiting the art collections was their first consideration. “We like to use the things, to live with the art,” explains Catherine, a ceramist and jewelry designer. “When we built this house, we decided we wanted each object to have its place and be properly lit.”

The *Baule* masks and the two graceful, carved antelope head-dresses created by the *Bamana* people of Mali, positioned on specially built ledges alongside the staircase, were collected by

Catherine's father, Dr. Arcady Corman, a physician in the south of France. Many of the African pieces were gleaned during flea-market excursions, which are among her most cherished childhood memories of growing up in Tarbes, later in Toulouse. "When you're Jewish and have lost everything, as my parents did ... there's nothing from their heritage," says Catherine.

The Mandels met in 1967; Catherine was visiting relatives in Connecticut, and Matt was about to begin medical school in France. Married in 1970, they lived in France for a year before he transferred to medical school in Philadelphia; eventually they settled in Longmeadow, Massachusetts. In 1981, lured by Tanglewood, they became second-home owners in the Berkshires. When Matt, an anesthesiologist, retired in 1999, they became full-time residents—in a new house built on the site of their lakefront vacation cottage. Now Matt is a founding board member and co-medical director of Volunteers in Medicine (VIM) in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

Familiar with Sandler's work, they commissioned a modern house that would reflect the old and new, suit the landscape, and showcase their treasures. To fit the footprint of the old cottage and accommodate year-round living, it had to be three stories. "We want lots of nooks and crannies," they told her.

From the road, the Arts and Crafts-style bungalow, sided in brown shakes and



Matthew and Catherine Mandel. Below: The couple's Arts and Crafts-style home was designed by architect Pamela Sandler.





A medieval stone statue (above) sits in a niche in the master bedroom (right).

dusty olive clapboards, is attractive but modest, shaded by tall pines and rambunctious shrubs. A rustic trellis and fence by local artisan Janice Shields mark its front path. Once inside, the house reveals its surprises.

The home's most-used spaces—living room, dining room, bedrooms—and the majority of its windows are on the lakeside; the staircase and entry face the street. Narrow windows along its sides admit light while assuring privacy from the neighbors. Floors are wide heart pine, salvaged from a barn that was being demolished, and rough-hewn beams are new, but look old—craftily distressed by contractor



Chris May. “We told Pam we wanted the ceilings to be high, with old wood to harmonize with the primitive art,” Catherine explains. Interior walls and trim are a fresh white throughout—the focus everywhere is on the art, not the wall treatments.

The foyer features a generous interior window that offers a glimpse of the bright stairwell and an antique French chandelier, its fragile twisted-wire arms embellished with metal daisies; a matching fixture is suspended over the dining table. In the living and dining rooms, large windows and French doors reveal the shimmering expanse of the lake beyond. The living room’s red rug is a vintage Bokhara, its warm russet tones complementing the neutral caramel leather couch, contemporary brown velvet chairs, and modern

chrome-and-black leather chaise. A window seat, with storage underneath, welcomes guests with a tan cushion and brown and cream pillows. On the opposite wall, floor-to-ceiling bookcases feature open shelves above and storage cabinets below.

“We had to make every space count,” Sandler recalls. “I visited the Mandel’s primary residence. I took pictures and measured all their wonderful pieces.” Even the liquor cabinet is cleverly tucked away under the staircase, with doors made to fit the angled space. “The idea came from a Japanese piece of furniture called a [step, or *kaidan*] *tansu*. I love the staircase,” she declares. “It’s like an Escher drawing—one of the places an architect can have some fun.”

The successful combination of antique

In the living room, furnishings and art create a sophisticated *mélange*, while in dining area, shelving lights draw attention to a collection of Toby jugs.





Catherine Mandel made the ceramic bowls atop the Warren Platner coffee table.

and modern furniture in this well-designed contemporary space provides an ideal environment for enjoying its collections. "I've always liked to mix contemporary pieces with antiques," Catherine says. "My father taught me how to see. He should have been a





Ashanti dolls from Ghana, Africa, retain their delicate brass earrings and strands of tiny beads. Below: The library nook in the living room.

decorator. He really formed my eye. The memories of having bought these objects with him, conversations around the table, the people who came to see the pieces: it's the memories. And it also formed my taste."

During World War II, Catherine's father

was in prison camp in Germany. He managed to appropriate two books on African art and promised himself he'd collect it someday. After the war, Catherine recounts, France still had colonies in Africa; African art was inexpensive and easy to find. Dr. Corman





A *Bamana* iron statuette and a teacup by Berkshire potter Paula Shalan.  
Right: The under-stair liquor cabinet was inspired by the Japanese *kaidan tansu*.

received some pieces from his patients; he purchased most in flea markets and antique shops. Eventually his collection became well known in France, and upon his death, Catherine and her brother divided the objects.

One of the first pieces her father purchased was not African but a European medieval religious statue. The wooden figure, with closed eyes, has a powerful quality, though its hands are missing. Joining it, African pieces, placed throughout the house, represent





A *Baule* mask from Ivory Coast, Africa. Below: A *Bamana* headdress from Mali, Africa.

“We wanted the ceilings to be high, with old wood to harmonize with the African art,” Catherine says. “These are objects that have lived with us our whole lives.”



different peoples from various areas of the continent. “In African art,” Catherine explains, “none of the wooden pieces are much older than one hundred or one-hundred-and-twenty years.” In the living room, five carved wood *Ashanti* dolls from Ghana look down from a high niche designed for their display. Between eight and sixteen inches tall, the figures, often carried by women in their backpacks, show wear from handling, yet the strands of tiny glass beads adorning each are still in place. A reliquary figure of ham-

An equestrian figure from the *Sunufo* people of the Ivory Coast, Africa, atop a French Louis VIII stool.



mered and pierced brass and copper over carved wood is from the *Kota* people of Gabon. A carved and painted wooden mask, portraying a woman with an elaborate hairstyle and a serene, enigmatic expression, would have been worn by a dancer performing on stilts during a ritual of the *Punu* people, also of Gabon. Another treasure is a small, female equestrian figure from the *Senufo* tribe of Ivory Coast, the wood boasting a warm, rich patina.

The Mandels' collection isn't limited to Catherine's heritage. For Matt, the dining room conjures up memories of his mother, with a still-growing collection of Toby jugs that she started on a trip to England's Stratford-on-Avon in 1938 when she was just a

A still life by French artist Jeanne Saliceti hangs above a medieval wooden *santo*.





A Kota reliquary figure  
from Gabon, Africa.

girl. Matt, who was a teenager when she passed away, inherited his mother's ninety jugs; over the years, he has nearly doubled her collection. These small pitchers, first manufactured in Staffordshire, England, in about 1780, were made to resemble a jolly Englishman with red cheeks and a pot belly, his black tri-cornered hat forming the spout. The finely detailed character mugs often honored or satirized popular figures of the day. Mostly antique, the convivial porcelain vessels, ranging in size from just an inch or two tall to almost a foot high, populate the dining room, arranged along an illuminated shelf about eighteen inches below the ceiling and inside a pair of custom cabinets under the half-wall separating the dining room from the kitchen.

Most important to the Mandels, the art, the antiques, are all reminders of family. "For me," Catherine says, "having gone as a child to the flea markets with my father—he never went to Africa—it's a connection to my parents. This dining room table is the one Matt played under as a child. These are objects that have lived with us our whole lives."

Matt adds, "We both had parents who were very important to us. It feels like they live with us; I feel like my mother is here." **h+g**

*Lesley Ann Beck is managing editor of BBQ: Berkshire Business Quarterly and senior editor at Berkshire Living.*

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