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TEAPOTS, ANYONE?

20 Years, 200 Pots, 1 Brilliant Collection

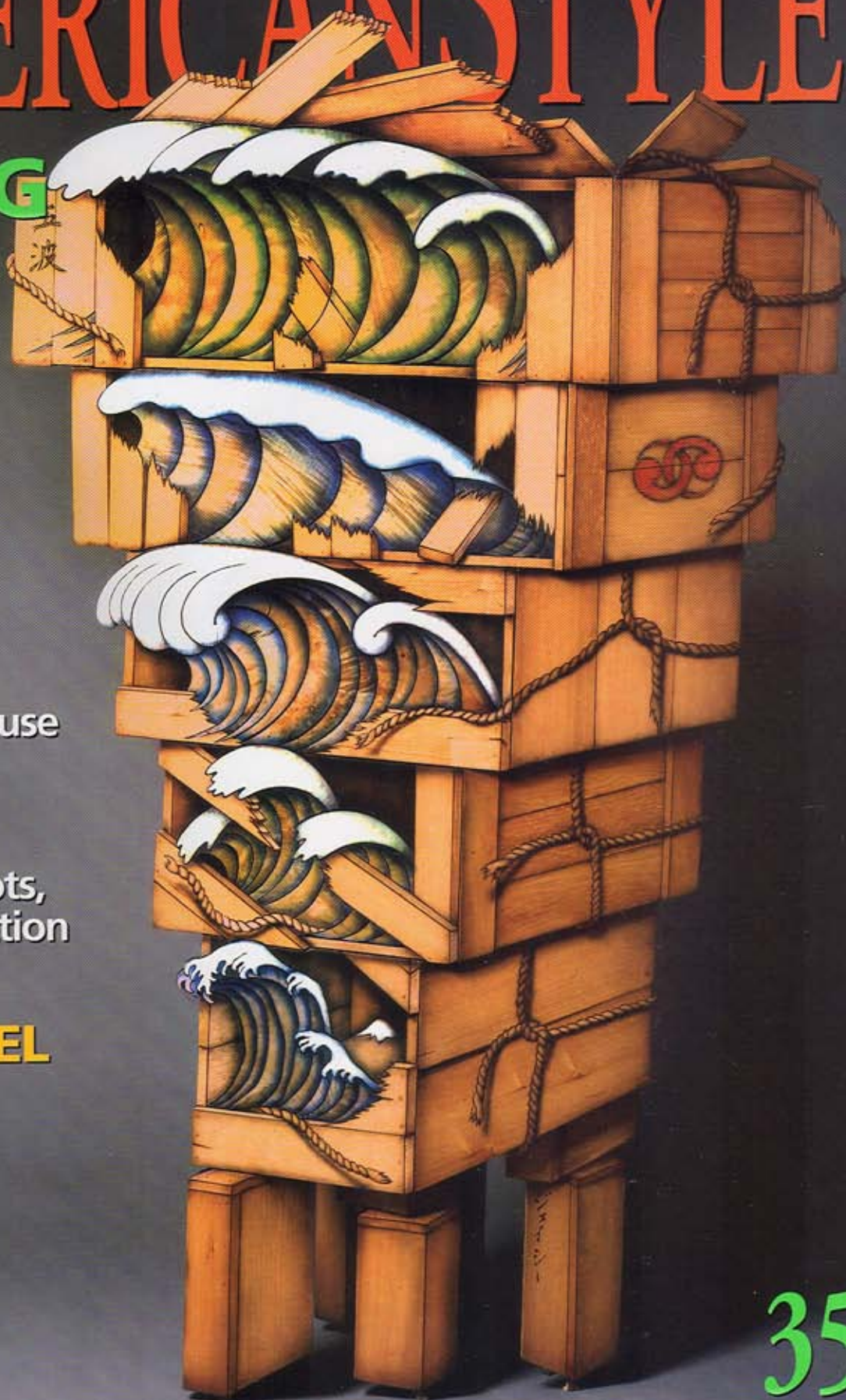
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COZYING UP TO
Teapots

For
nearly 20 years,
this Chicago couple has
steeped themselves in the
old and the new, the opulent
and the austere, the short
and the stout

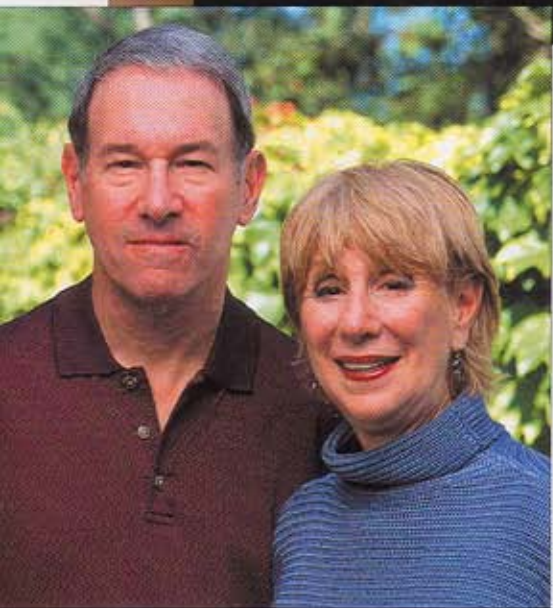
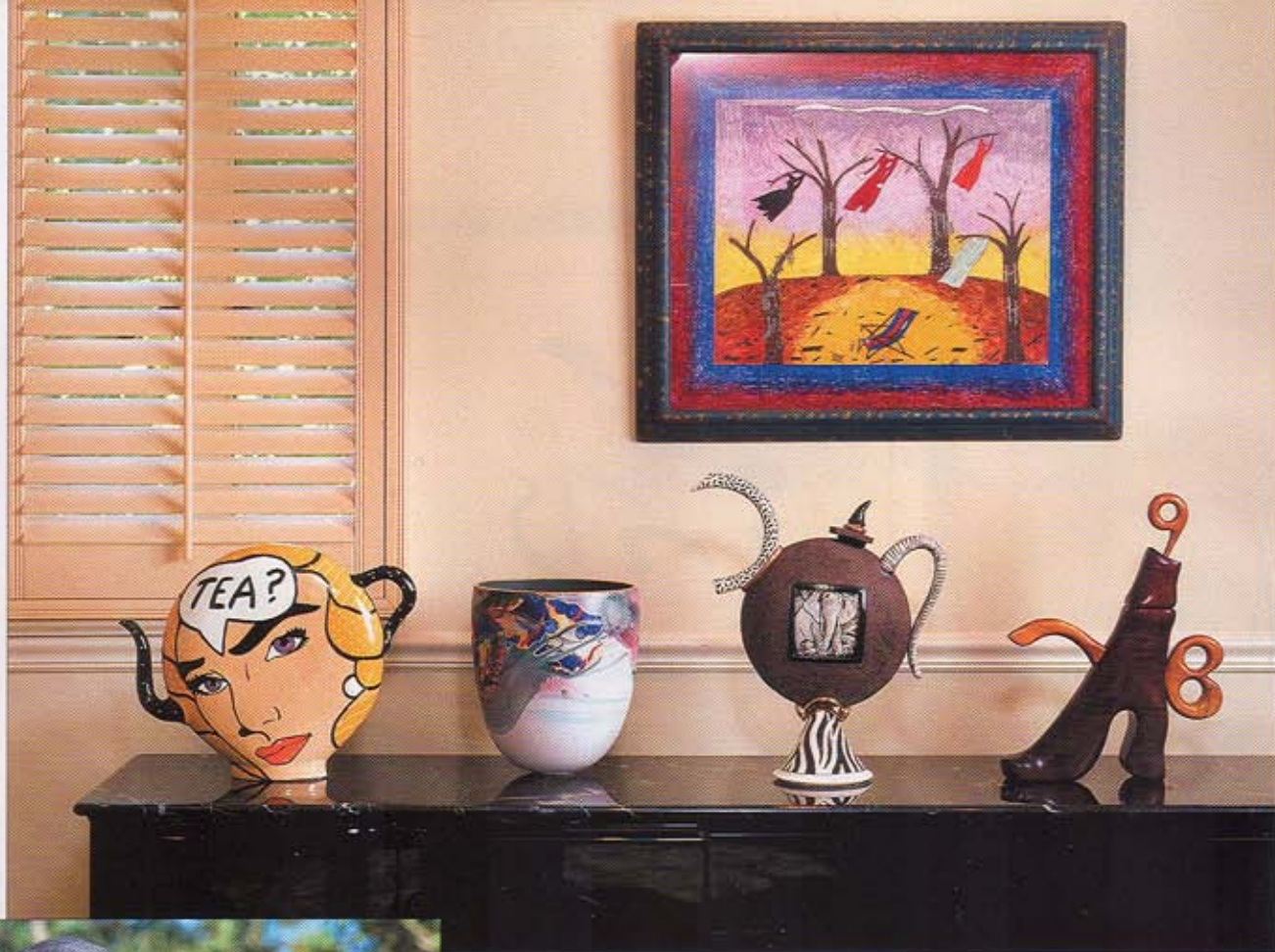
By MARGARET LITTMAN

Photography by JESSIE WALKER



If Patti and Steve Vile should invite you over for tea, be forewarned: you may end up having a long conversation in their tomato-red, first-floor bathroom. The topic: the Viles' favorite—teapots.

There are 18 on display shelves against the bathroom wall in the couple's suburban Chicago home and three more on



On the preceding pages, Robin Campo's orange "Hot Screwdriver" is displayed with two other diminutive teapots, Nancy Adams' 5-inch-high "Woodland Frog Tea" and a Yixing-inspired work by Fong Choo. The Viles' latest acquisition, a green teapot by glass artist Wes Hunting, anchors the right end of the mantle. The raku-fired teapot in the foreground is by Rick Foris.

Steve and Patti Vile's eclectic collection includes "Tea?" from Joanne Delomba Studios, a Patrick Dragon earthenware bowl, an Elephant Walk series teapot by Barry and Rosalind Hage, and the boot-shaped "Government T-Issue" by wood artist Dale Lewis. On the wall is Hollis Sigler's "This Is an Unacceptable Situation," from the late Chicago artist's breast cancer series.

a shelf above the commode. About 10 percent of their collection, these teapots include ones by ceramic artists Wesley Anderegg, Mia Tyson and Gerald Hong—certainly not the dregs relegated out of primary view. Rather, their placement is reflective of the way the Viles incorporate their collection into their home and their lives.

"I want to live with these things, really bring them into my house," Patti says. "It is not a decorator thing." Besides, Steve jokes, "we spend a lot of time in here."

Long-time collectors, with an impressive array of wall art and outdoor sculpture, the Viles were attracted to their first teapot during a trip to Russia 18 years ago. Steve hand-carried it back on the plane. "It looked like a little sculpture to us," Patti says. "We had friends who had started collecting glass at that time, but glass left us cold. We just wanted something warmer. We had no idea it would become such a passion."

Steve cites the teapots' "ceremony of parts—the spout, the bowl, the handle" among elements they admire. "At some point, people started asking us if we were

Freelance writer Margaret Littman is the Chicago correspondent for *Art&Antiques* magazine.



A line of little teapots: shell-drenched, by Susan Beiner; antique cloisonné, purchased on a trip to China in 1989; and Bakelite, a teapot-shaped purse found at an antique store. Shelves full of teapots in the first-floor bathroom, right, include the large-handled raku teapot created by Gerald Hong, a sgraffito design by Mia Tyson and the flexing "Lumphead," by Wesley Anderegg.





Little teapots elephantine—a Patrick Horsley design with trumpeting spout—and cottage-like, a six- and a two-cup variety from England. In a corner of the living room, Paul Sierra's "A Past Ahead" oil on canvas spans nearly five feet, and dozens of teapots line the mantle and a shelf over the patio door. "Landscape," the angular glass sculpture on the coffee table, is by Bohumil Elias and was purchased on a trip to Czechoslovakia in 1989.

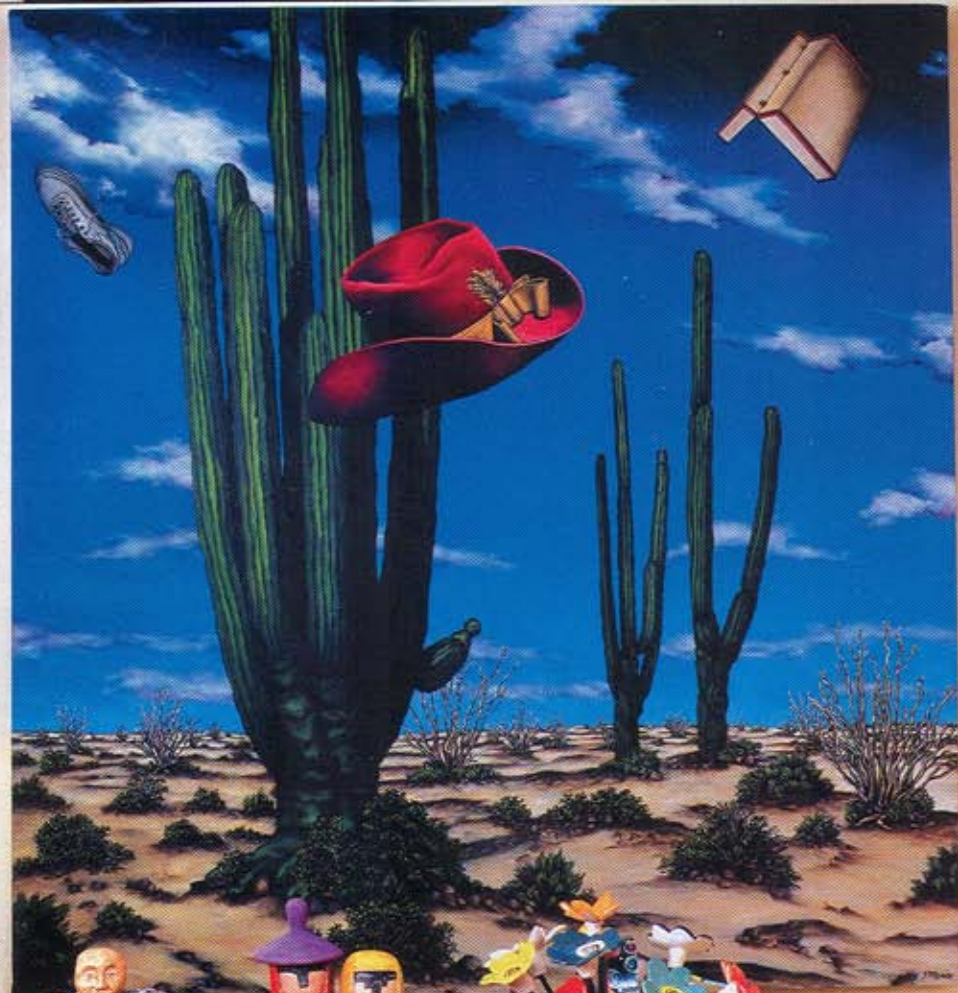
collectors, and we started taking it more seriously," he notes. "But, it is still a surprise to us when we look around and see all these artists making teapots in creative ways."

Acquiring 12 to 20 new teapots each year, attending four or five art and craft shows every summer, and scouring gallery districts and antique stores while traveling, the Viles now have more than 200 of these "little sculptures." Unlike their impressive, albeit smaller, wall art collection, which is limited to Chicago-area artists including Ed Paschke, Jim Nutt and John Pittman, there are no restrictions on what teapots make it into their home—and their hearts.

It's a matter of falling in love with the object. "And we both have to fall in love," Steve says. Over the years, that has resulted in buying teapots ranging from \$15 to "the thousands," with more concern for aesthetic and instinct than market value. On a recent trip to Vietnam, for instance, the couple acquired five teapots, despite the fact that they were not looking to add to the collection. The acquisitions included a small, painted clay water buffalo teapot designed as an inexpensive souvenir and a raku teapot by Khuu Duc, whose work has an international following.

The Viles like the range of teapots available, from \$100 art fair finds to the pricier items that take them several weeks to decide to buy. Their 1928 home is infused with Hall China and other pots from the 1940s and 1950s, British cottage kettles from the 1930s and an elaborate 17th-century cloisonné teapot from China. Most of the works are functional and could be used to brew a cup of Earl Gray, although there are exceptions, notably a teapot-shaped Bakelite purse (a tea bag) and a wooden one shaped like a boot.

Although the art of teapot making is more than 500 years old, most in the Viles'



"IT IS STILL A SURPRISE TO ... SEE ALL THESE ARTISTS MAKING **teapots** IN CREATIVE WAYS." —Steve Vile

collection are contemporary, and some do not look like teapots at all. Among Patti's favorites is a sculptural one of a young child, with the top of his foot as the hidden teapot lid. But even the functional works in their collection aren't used as such. The art is off limits for hot water. Steve bought Patti a utilitarian stainless steel kettle for the green and herbal teas she drinks.

The couple frequents Chicago's Lillstreet Art Center, the Illinois Artisans Shop and SOFA, the International Exposition of Sculpture Objects and Functional Art. They visit art fairs, boutique galleries and private showings at artists' studios.

"Legacies: Memorabilia Baja," a large-scale oil on canvas by Chicago-area artist Jacqueline Moses, hangs above teapots, from left, by Marilyn Andrews, Elyse Saperstein, and Fiona and Sheldon Collins. The Collins' handpainted floral teapot is a frequent centerpiece at gatherings hosted by the Viles.



Built-in display cases in the master bedroom allow room for a wall of teapots including "Chicago Water Tower," by Illinois artist Dan Anderson. On the wall is a work by Art Institute of Chicago graduate Martina Lopez, who combines photography, painting and digital imagery. Sculptures accenting the Viles' back yard include life-size horses created by Florida artist Keith Bradley.

They like talking to vendors and learning about the art. They like finding a new creative talent.

Like the generalists Tina M. Carter describes in her *Teapots: The Collector's Guide to Selecting, Displaying and Enjoying New and Vintage Teapots*, the Viles are drawn "by visual appeal rather than category."

That would account for the figural teapots in the shapes of English automobiles displayed next to Susan Beiner's self-described "opulent" porcelain funnel adorned with seashells and Patrick Horsley's square bronze and stoneware pot. All have become a part of the Viles' life: as centerpieces in the dining room, in tabletop vignettes, on shelves in their second-floor bedrooms. "It's organic. It is not static," says Patti, who, with Steve, is constantly rearranging to incorporate new pieces and to make sure that smaller, less flashy works aren't overshadowed by showier displays.

"I worry that some of them don't have space to breathe," she says. "You want each one to have a certain amount of space, but we change locations so that we'll get to look at one at eye level, with a different color background or with a different neighbor."



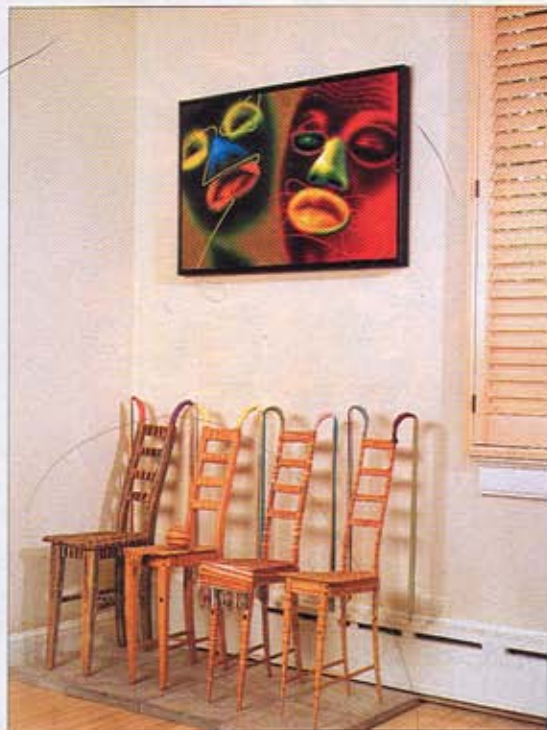
THE VILES LOVE OPENING NEW COLLECTORS TO THE IDEA OF **teapots** AS SOMETHING MORE THAN JUST FULL OF HOT WATER.

Over the years the Viles have arranged the teapots by height, color, theme and artist. And they enjoy sharing their displays, opening their home to groups from The Art Institute of Chicago, Brandeis University and other organizations. In fact, it is not uncommon for strangers to approach the couple and ask to see the remodeled "eclectic Tudor" home. The house has been theirs for more than 30 years, and while the Viles "appreciate and respect whatever architectural features of the 1920s remain," they've redone the kitchen twice and torn off the back of the house in 2000 for an addition. It now includes a spiral staircase to Steve's office (possibly the house's only teapot-free room), an open den, a balcony overlooking the sculpture-filled back yard and, of course, built-in shelves for the teapots.

While the Paschkes and the four large outdoor sculptures would impress at other homes, it is the teapots that visitors most often want to see. Patti calls their open houses "sort of selfish," because she and her husband love watching people's reactions to the works, and they love opening new collectors to the idea of teapots as something more than just full of hot water.

The Viles encourage visitors to get close to the works. Even their two poodles—Gordon and Josephine—and five grandchildren, ages 6 months to 5 years, are welcome, in part because they've grown up with the collection. "We live in every room of the house," Patti says. "We did not want to, in any way, parcel them off."

When the grandkids come to visit, they always seek out their favorite teapots. The only downside, she says, is overenthusiasm. "You know how when you are 3 years old you can sing the same thing over and over and over? Well, I am a little tired of 'I'm a Little Teapot.'" ☐



Little teapots block-formed, by Michael Corney; commissioned, from Missy Kaolin after the Viles met her on a visit to the Berkshires; and confrontational, Wesley Andereggs "Lumphead." In the living room, Ed Paschke's "Side by Side" hangs over a Margaret Wharton chair ensemble, "Related Sisters," four pieces made from the same deconstructed "mother" chair.