

At Home with Peter Tillou

By Lisa Aznaran

The drive from Wilton to Litchfield is about an hour, and today it was like driving into a beautiful snow globe. Litchfield is the quintessential Connecticut town and ranks among the most scenic in the state - highlighted by a charming town center with church steeples and wooden buildings painted in cheery colors. What a fitting setting for an afternoon with art and antiques dealer Peter Tillou.



Art & Antiques Dealer Peter Tillou

Peter's house is a short walk from the town center, on an enchanting street lined with older homes. His house is a stately white dwelling with a circular drive and a snow-covered rock wall entry. I was giddy with anticipation, anxious to see what might be waiting inside.

I rang the bell and a handsome, wide smile greeted me. Dressed in brown corduroy pants and a cozy cardigan sweater, he graciously invited me into a well-appointed entryway. My eyes must have widened because he encouraged me to look around the rooms, bursting with objects d'art, while he wrapped up a meeting in another part of the house. I must say, I was all too happy to be left alone to catch my breath and gather my thoughts.

After discovering Litchfield on a buying trip in college, Peter settled there with his family. He's been in his current house for twelve years. He lived in the house next door for twenty-five years, moving to the grander home only when he outgrew the first one.

Peter devotes much of his time these days to the National History Museum and travels with them to help build their collection. They are lucky to have such a scholar in their midst. Peter's expertise, gathered over many years, spans coins, armor, American and European painters and furniture makers.

A renovated 1904 landmark bank building in town, which he affectionately calls "The Bank," is where Peter keeps the majority of his collection. He invites clients in by appointment, but admits that many collectors shy away from making appointments because they sometimes feel obligated to buy. He assures me that that is not the case. People should stop by if they are in town -announced or unannounced.

By age 8, he knew what he wanted to be

Peter shared with me his early days in the antiques business, and we both had a good laugh when he recounted his



Tillou will display rare Dutch Masterworks from the early 17th century

misadventures as a youngster eager to buy and sell antiques.



Pastel of an actress, circa 1900, Haarlam. "Her ruffled pink dress and red camisole seem to leap from the canvas. Simply gorgeous. I never knew such rich detail was possible with pastel." Lisa Aznaran

Image Courtesy of Peter Tillou

He began buying old coins at the age of eight, and by age twelve his sense for trading and dealing had already started to develop. It was then that he made his first “real deal,” which I’ll let Peter tell you about. Suffice to say it involved his mother’s beloved violin, a savvy pawn broker and a hard lesson learned.

At age fifteen, Peter began dealing in armor and Native American art, for which he still has a great passion.

Peter truly savors the kindness shared by those who helped him enter the business: Joe Kindig, his mentor with whom he lived during College; Martha Jackson, whom he also lived with during college; and Robert Ables, who knew everything there was to know about guns. “I was lucky,” Peter said sincerely. “They took me under their wings; perhaps because I was so young and determined.” They also helped fund some of his buying trips and bought items from him. When asked if he always knew that antiques would be his path, he replied, “Yes, I had so much passion that it had to be.”

Perhaps it is all of this kindness that makes Peter such a warm and gracious soul. He deeply wants to give back to those with even the slightest itch for collecting. As a matter of fact, when we talked about “collecting for the beginner” he suggested asking right out: “Why does *this* piece cost so much when it so closely resembles another, for a lot less money?”

He knows that not everyone is knowledgeable when they begin collecting. It is helpful, he said, to learn what makes one piece more valuable than the next. “It is perfectly alright to inquire. You can learn about proportion, quality, and surface.” Peter has that gift for educating in a non-threatening way, and his wide smile makes listening to him all the more inviting.



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Trusted by collectors around the world

Most, if not all of Peter’s clients are individual collectors. He works with people around the world to find those “very special” pieces. Peter keeps a partnership with the Rich Gallery in London for his European presence. He likes to work with collectors at all levels, and says that younger clients may look for several years before they buy, but then they hit a big success in their career or they come into an inheritance and they have the opportunity to purchase a piece they really love.

It must take a tremendous amount of time and dedication to develop these lifelong relationships. It is hard to believe that Peter is a “one-man show,” building one client at a time. If the time he shared with me is any indication of the care and attention he

gives his clients, I understand why they trust and love him. I wanted to ask him over for dinner. I could have talked with him for days.

Only the best will do

For Peter's more astute buyers - those building versus beginning their collections - he said that most are looking for "that great singular treasure and they are willing to compete for it." There are really just a few of these irreplaceable items out there, he said, and once they are gone, they are gone. "I have several of these pieces and I plan on bringing them to the show," he said as he showed me around his home. "I only exhibit at a couple of the best shows a year; and I bring my very best pieces; because those attending these shows deserve to see my best."



a remarkable 16th century cassone (chest) from Northern Italy, which is inlaid with ivory and mother of pearl

Peter was kind enough to show me some of the magnificent Dutch Masterworks he will be exhibiting, dating to the early 17th century, by Herman Doucher, Jean P. Gilleman and others - all in excellent condition. The rich colors were just spectacular, and I was mesmerized by these beautiful paintings. How could something that old still have the power to grab all of my senses? I had goose bumps!

He also showed me an incredible pastel of a beautiful woman, circa 1900, whose ruffled pink dress and red camisole seem to leap from the canvas. Simply gorgeous. I never knew such rich detail was possible with pastel. It is *so* beautiful, I could look at this painting for hours.

Lovers of rare antique furniture will also want to visit Peter at the show. Among the items he is bringing are a remarkable 16th century *cassone* (chest) from Northern Italy, which is inlaid with ivory and mother of pearl, and a magnificent 17th century Spanish table. Peter explained that the chest features a sumptuous inlay technique known as *intarsia certosina*, which, rather than using wood alone, incorporated small polygonal tesserae of wood, bone, ivory or mother of pearl in geometric patterns. An outstanding piece, both in terms of beauty and rarity.

As we came to the end of our conversation - which was too soon for me - I asked Peter if he could offer one piece of advice to collectors, be they novice or experienced, what would it be? He said, "Buy the best for what your budget will allow. I encourage people to buy one *great* piece a year versus 3 *good* pieces."

Peter's son Jeff, who is also in the business, lives in Litchfield with his family. Just after our conversation all of the boys, including the grandchildren, were off for a winter adventure. Jeff has his own antique shop in town. I stopped in for a visit and yes, he too has that Tillou touch.

Nice to know that the Tillou legacy will carry on for generations to come. Peter has another son, Trace, who is an artist living in Sanibel, Florida. I'm sure he'll enjoy a family visit after the show.

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