

**A Connoisseur's Guide to New York City Antiques; Boston's Birthday
Those High-Flying Rugs; The Great Garbisch Collection**

ANTIQUES WORLD

MAY 1980

\$2.50

A LIFETIME OF LOVE AND LORE: THE GARBISCH COLLECTION

For five decades, Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch quietly collected an amazing range of fine art and antiques. Now many of them go on the block

by JIM POWELL

In 1972, after Edgar William Garbisch bought a superb American Chippendale block-and-shell knee-hole desk for a then-record price of \$120,000, he told the auctioneer, Sotheby Parke Bernet's John Marion: "Ship it to our farm, but don't put it on a moving van—much too expensive. Use a station wagon." With that, the wry, soft-spoken Mr. Garbisch marked a climax of the collecting that he and his wife, Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, had been pursuing for five decades.

They were well known as champions of American naive paintings, considered crude and unworthy of serious collector interest when the Garbisches started collecting them in the 1940s. The couple assembled 2,552 examples, exhibited them around the world, and in the 1950s began donating them to twenty-three museums. But aside from the primitives, their collection was not widely known. The couple died within days of each other last December, just three weeks short of their fiftieth wedding anniversary, and Sotheby Parke Bernet this month will auction artworks from their New York apartment and their estate along Maryland's Eastern Shore. Included in the sale are wide-ranging collections of American formal and country furniture, American glass, American iron and brass work, Chinese export porcelain, European porcelain, French furniture, Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and modern paintings. Many of the objects are extraordinary.

The sale—to be held May 12 and 17 in New York, and May 22 to 24 at the Garbisch country home in Cambridge, Maryland—is estimated to bring more than \$20 million, so it looms as the largest sale ever

held in America and the second largest anywhere. (The record holder is the sale of the Baron Robert Von Hirsch collection, which realized \$36 million in London two years ago.) But even the list of objects up for auction, impressive as it is, doesn't cover everything the Garbisches collected. At one time or another, they also had frakturs, needlework, theorem paintings, hooked rugs, English silver, jewels, costume jewelry, European and Oriental costumes, and French designer gowns. As their interests changed, the Garbisches gave these away to museums or had them auctioned. "During my life I collected just about everything," Mrs. Garbisch once told Clifford Schaefer, their curator since 1950.

A sports enthusiast all his life, Edgar Garbisch was tall, erect, and fit. Business associates say that he was a formal person who didn't display much sense of humor. He seemed to approach collecting with the same seriousness he brought to business. He liked to be called Colonel, a rank he earned in World War II. Born in La Porte, Indiana, in 1899, he garnered All-America honors in football at the United States Military Academy at West Point. He was also a four-year letterman in tennis. In 1926 he joined the Postum Cereal Company. Within three years, he advanced to sales manager. Soon after Postum became part of General Foods, he left to begin a decade as a Wall Street stockbroker, then president of two paper products companies and vice-president of two fast-growing advertising agencies. In 1937, Colonel Garbisch was elected director of Grocery Store Products, maker of Cream of Wheat cereal and B & B Mushrooms. He

Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch, c. 1968, at their country home; they hold a porcelain artichoke from Mrs. Garbisch's collection.

Jim Powell is a freelance writer with a special interest in the antiques and art market.





In the dining room at Pokety: a Federal mahogany table, early nineteenth century; eight Philadelphia Chippendale chairs, from 1775-90; and in the background, a Federal sideboard, c. 1795.

The Gun Room at Pokety, right, where the Garbisches spent many informal evenings, displays the collection of American blown-glass flasks.

became president two years later. He retired after selling the company to Clorox in 1970.

As a millionaire in his own right, Colonel Garbisch could have financed a lot of collecting. But it certainly helped that he married Bernice Chrysler, daughter of the auto magnate Walter P. Chrysler. She had a passion for collecting, an eye for good design, and an open checkbook. She was an attractive woman who, acquaintances recall, had a knack for making people comfortable. Born in Oelwein, Iowa, in 1908, she grew up in a home furnished with European art and antiques. She is said to have acquired some French Impressionist paintings when she was young, long before they became fashionable. Mr. Schaefer, their curator, believes that shortly after the couple were married in January 1930, Mrs. Garbisch began collecting European porcelains.

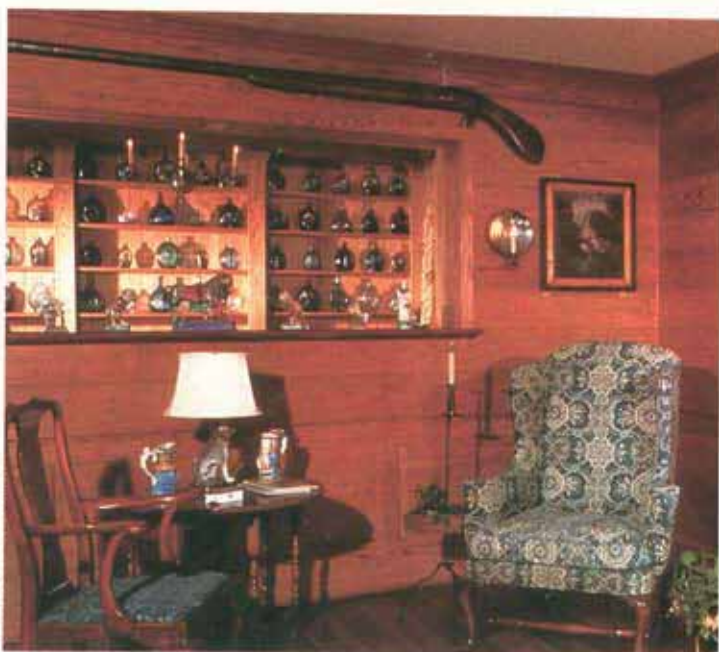
In 1941 she inherited Pokety, the hunting lodge her father had built about ten miles west of Cambridge, on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The lodge, which is also up for sale through Sotheby Parke Bernet, is set a mile and a quarter away from the main road amid 480 acres of pines, sycamores, poplars, and soybean fields. It commands three and a half miles of shoreline on Le-Compte Bay. Bernard Baruch once lived across the water, and Henry Francis du Pont had an estate nearby. After Colonel Garbisch returned from wartime service, the couple commissioned the architect Thomas T. Waterman to convert the hunting lodge into an eighteenth century Georgian-style manor. Waterman had done important work at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, and at the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum in Delaware.

Pokety was finished in 1950. It's an enchanting place today. The front door opens to the Great Hall,

the center of the house. It's flanked by a West Wing which contains a paneled gun room and bar, library, powder room, four guest rooms with baths; and an East Wing with a dining room, dining porch, and kitchen. Upstairs are the master quarters—sitting room, bedroom, two dressing rooms and two baths. Altogether there are twenty rooms. Throughout the building, floors and doors are made of eighteenth century heart pine, window panes are of eighteenth century hand-blown glass. Landscaping includes America's largest privately owned English boxwood garden.

The Garbisches decided to furnish Pokety mainly with early American art and antiques. They relished the search, and did not use a decorator or commission anyone to do their buying for them. They acquired the standard reference works of the time—sparse pickings, as the most important scholarship has been done since then. They scoured auction catalogues and browsed through presale exhibitions. Several times a week, for years, Mrs. Garbisch checked the new arrivals at her favorite Madison Avenue dealers. Before major antiques shows, they wrote dealers describing what they wanted and asking that things of possible interest be set aside. To project a low-key image, Colonel Garbisch, usually an impeccable, conservative dresser, often wore an old rumpled suit and baggy pants; Mrs. Garbisch wore conservative suits and no jewelry.

This was quite a departure, because Mrs. Garbisch had a flair for high fashion. For years, she and the Colonel traveled to Paris twice a year, stayed at the Ritz Hotel, went to the Jeu de Paume museum—famed for its Impressionist collection—and she bought \$40,000 to \$60,000 worth of designer clothes



One of the highlights of the Garbisch collection: a Goddard and Townsend Chippendale kneehole desk, c. 1760-80.

per trip. She'd come home with dozens of new gowns. She had a weakness for those trimmed with feathers, though one of her more spectacular selections sparkled with bits of orange coral. She would wear a gown a few times, then donate it to the Museum of the City of New York, the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, Virginia, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "For twenty-five years, she was one of our most generous donors," said Judith Straeten, assistant curator of the Metropolitan's Costume Institute. She also loved fine jewels. During the 1970s, when she decided to simplify her life, she auctioned her jewelry collection through Sotheby Parke Bernet; the sale realized \$1.5 million.

Dealers remember Mrs. Garbisch as a conservative client who did not seem to do much checking of the merchandise before she bought. She reportedly didn't negotiate much, either. If she really had her heart set on something, she bought it, even if the price seemed stiff. Colonel Garbisch, on the other hand, always bargained. It was said he annoyed some dealers and on occasion lost important pieces because of the delays resulting from his haggling and from the press of his other business.

Occasionally they found themselves with misrepresented objects. This happened mostly with relatively inexpensive objects, when they didn't anticipate problems and let their guard down. It also happened at antiques shows, because of the pressure to make a quick decision before someone else bought. Colonel Garbisch had all the paintings thoroughly checked before purchase, including examination with ultraviolet light. In some cases, especially with the costly Impressionist works, he demanded a documented history of past ownership. When the Garbisches discovered

something wasn't right about a piece, they disposed of it.

They did most of their buying during the 1940s and 1950s. They sought furniture to help create a period flavor for each room at Pokety. They're said to have entertained at least twice a week, usually in the impressive Great Hall, furnished with American Queen Anne and Chippendale pieces and illuminated solely by candlelight. There, for example, sat the block-and-shell kneehole desk Colonel Garbisch bought for \$120,000. It dates from c. 1760-80 and is attributed to Goddard and Townsend, the famed Newport, Rhode Island, cabinetmakers. Colonel Garbisch one year gave his wife a Chippendale bombé chest of drawers as a Valentine Day present, and this stands by the front door. In one corner is a Chippendale block-and-shell tall-case clock attributed to Caleb Wheaton, a Newport maker. There's a Philadelphia highboy accompanied by a matching lowboy.

Each of the other rooms also has its own integrity. The dining room is for Federal period furniture, the guest rooms, painted and curly maple country furniture. There's a William and Mary room and a seventeenth century room. Mrs. Garbisch loved miniature highboys, lowboys, and chests, and there are twenty-five such pieces scattered through the house.

She bought English and German porcelain in flower, fruit, and vegetable forms, and amassed a zoo of Dutch Delft horses, cows, rabbits, and birds. She plunged into Chinese export porcelain, and before she was through, acquired more than 2,000 pieces. Rare forms make this one of the finest collections in private hands. As with most of their things, the Garbisches collected porcelain to live with and enjoy. Perhaps most people would display \$500 dishes over their

mantel; the Garbisches used them for dinner plates. Just about every flat surface at Pokety—tables, lowboys, window seats, chests—was covered with porcelain. There were other decorative accessories as well, including some seventy early American whiskey bottles in a rainbow of colors, fine examples of hand-blown glass worth about \$250,000 and displayed on shelves behind the bar.

The walls, of course, were covered with the superb collection of American naive paintings. The Garbisches had a fast start: In 1944 they bought seven versions of Edward Hicks's famed *Peaceable Kingdom*. Folk paintings were the passion of their life. They acquired fifty-four naive paintings in 1945, seventy in 1946, 124 in 1947, 240 in 1948, and 477—their peak—in 1949. Heavy buying continued for another decade and a half. By then, in the mid-1960s, they had an example of almost everything they wanted to represent, and the supply of fine naive paintings had dwindled as many other collectors came to share their taste. "Good American primitive paintings reflect extraordinary creative imagination and possess unusual artistic values," they wrote in the catalogue for an exhibition of the collection. "Therefore, we felt they merit an important place not only in the history of American art but in the history of world art as well."

The general feeling at Pokety is informality and warmth. The Garbisches' New York quarters has a very different atmosphere. Around 1958, when they moved from a Seventy-second Street apartment to a six-room suite at New York's posh Carlyle Hotel, they sought the formality and elegance of antique French furniture. Among their pieces were a Louis XV serpentine-front commode with tulipwood marquetry and Rococo mounts, attributed to Charles Cressent, the leading French cabinetmaker of his day. There are two nearly identical Louis XVI commodes of tulipwood ornamented with floral panels in marquetry and signed C. Topino; a Louis XV ormolu-mounted small

table signed I. Dubois; a large Louis XIV Savonnerie carpet.

To complement the elegant furnishings, the Garbisches turned to sophisticated paintings from the Impressionist era on. The forty-one examples being offered at Sotheby Parke Bernet are perhaps the most important collection of its kind ever to appear at auction. There's a still life by Cézanne, *Peaches with Two Green Pears*; Gauguin, *Tahitian Women Under the Palms*; Signac's *The Port of St. Tropez*; Van Gogh's *Portrait of Adeline Ravoux*; Picasso's *Acrobat Seated with Arms Crossed*. There are a couple of works by Degas, ten Renoirs, and examples by Matisse, Monet, and Vuillard.

Their art donations go back to 1953, when the late William Campbell of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., took an interest in their American naive paintings. Since then, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Baltimore Museum of Art, and many others have added Garbisch naive paintings to their collections. The Garbisches also donated academic paintings to various museums. In addition, they donated early American furniture to the White House and Blair House, the President's guest house, during the 1960s.

Museums proved less interested in their frakturs, needlework, cutout pictures, theorem paintings, watercolors, and pastels, which, as small objects, are relatively time-consuming to mount and difficult to protect against theft. The Garbisches arranged for them to be auctioned in 1974 in a sale that realized \$600,000, then a record for American folk art. Colonel Garbisch was incredulous; he told friends he had bought many of these things for as little as 25 cents years ago when nobody else wanted them.

The Garbisches rank among the great collectors in the number and range of quality objects acquired, their museum donations, and their impact on a field. It's an impact that will continue to be felt after the record prices their sale is likely to bring. ♣



"The Cat," c. 1840, was one of the many American naive paintings collected by the Garbisches. Right, Pokety, their estate near Cambridge, Maryland.



SOTHEBY PARKE BERNET