



# Found Beauty

*A historic New Jersey farmhouse serves as a creative incubator for jewelry designer CARA BROWN year-round, and especially during the holidays.*

By CATHY STILL MCGOWIN • Photography by TRIA GIOVAN

**OPPOSITE:** Cara's husband, David, kicks off the season with a signature cranberry cocktail named after their home, Harvest Field, a reference from the Bible verse Matthew 9:38. **BELOW:** The windowsill behind the bar displays a sculpture by English artist Ann Carrington. Using silver plate and stainless serving pieces, she fashions bouquets out of cast-off utensils.



**S**ometimes, the best things really do come in small packages. No one knows this better than jewelry and fashion maven Cara Brown. "I have always loved trinkets," she says. "There could be 40 little items collected on one tabletop, and I would look at them all." Cara's fascination with tiny treasures eventually turned into a passion as she began seeking out things to add her own provenance to, whether it's a relic she transforms into a necklace or an adornment she adds to the custom vintage tweed jackets she designs. "I've always had an affinity for old things," Cara says. "My mom was an interior designer. During my formative years, she taught me about fabrics, texture, and the importance of learning about antiques."

Being surrounded by design at a young age propelled Cara's

own creative stirring. After she graduated from Vanderbilt with a degree in marketing and returned to her home state of Texas, a friend introduced her to the thrill of hunting for vintage beads and old jewelry. Together, the duo bought and repurposed their finds by disassembling the baubles and reimagining them as intricate Christmas ornaments. Eventually, they showed them to buyers at Neiman Marcus, and the company immediately placed an order for 200.

In 2001, Cara temporarily put her business on hold when she and husband David moved from Texas to Hopewell, New Jersey, so he could pursue a master's degree in counseling. Cara turned her attention to raising their children but satiated her appetite for design by decorating their 1724 home. "I had always yearned for an old farmhouse," she says. "There's nothing like this in Texas!"

Listed on the national, state, and local historic registers, the farmhouse was built by Huguenots forced to flee France for



BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: The property's gate, built by Amish carpenters, visually relates to the clapboard dormers on the stucco-and-stone farmhouse. Pinecone-studded wreaths are tied to garland with chocolate-brown ribbon. • The mudroom door is dressed with a garland of balsam, cypress, and hemlock. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Cara commissioned the large, cheerful, contemporary painting in the living room from local artist Elizabeth Endres. A Picasso print hangs above the fireplace. • Some of Cara's earliest ornaments were created in tandem with a friend from Texas. "We used about 1,500 pins per ball to hold the beads in place," Cara says. • The mantel's garland is studded with amaryllis blooms, gold-dipped pinecones, French tulips, and branches of faux red berries. "The berries are the only faux thing I use," Jennifer says. "Unlike real ones, they don't fall off and make a mess."



*"I love scouring markets and shops for hidden treasures. There's nothing better than uncovering a piece with an interesting history."* —CARA BROWN

religious persecution. "They used stone from this very property to build it," says Cara. "I especially love the wide plank floors, wood ceilings, and beams."

Without compromising the integrity of the original structure, Cara and David contributed elements from their own aesthetic lexicon. Additions include a hand-painted mural that extends from the entry to the dining room and up the staircase. Paint colors are from the Williamsburg Paint Color Collection by Benjamin Moore, and rooms are filled with antiques, some purchased together as a couple and others passed down from family members. Pieces include a 1920s English chest used as a bar in the dining room, an 1880s Welsh

dresser, and an 1890s French dining table and chairs. The bureau in the enclosed porch belonged to David's grandmother. "We wanted everything to look like it belonged here," Cara says. "Our goal was to dress up what was otherwise a fairly primitive home and property."

The house is elevated even more during the holidays when Cara and David welcome their children home. "At Christmas-time, we want to create a beautiful setting where we can all just enjoy being together," Cara says. To help her set the scene, she calls upon friend and floral designer Jennifer Figge. "We added floral arrangements that reflect the style of the house and also complement Cara's collections," Jennifer says. Using clippings





from the garden combined with hothouse flowers, the floral designer conceived an elegant, woody scheme that mixes conventional Christmas blooms and foliage such as amaryllis, paperwhites, and evergreens with purple clematis, peach ranunculus, and burgundy Agonis grass. She accented it all with blue-gray silk ribbon. "The mix is festive and playful while also enhancing the colors in the house," Jennifer says.

On the dining table, a trio of arrangements picks up the colors in Cara's Persian rug and in her antique Amari china, a collection she keeps on display on a sideboard year-round. Arrangements in the living room play to the jewel tones in Cara's handmade Christmas ornaments and topiaries arranged on the coffee table. "These are some of the first ones I ever made," Cara says. "Now that I'm able to fully focus on my design business, I like that these pieces serve as a reminder of where it all started. Bringing them out every year makes the holidays even more special." 4



**THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Lois Lane, the family's Golden Retriever, is no doubt the best gift under the tree. Floral designer Jennifer Figge filled the tree with antique bells and a combo of fresh and dried florals. Flowers and greenery include Queen Anne's lace, tulips, bay leaf, eucalyptus, and English ivy. The circa 1800s antique angel crowns the tree. • The antique Amari china cued the colors in the floral arrangements and in the monogrammed napkins from Leontine Linens. • Cara serves up a woody-themed cake dressed with meringue mushrooms and dried apples that resemble lichens. **OPPOSITE:** Antiques fill the Browns' dining room, creating a warm, cozy scene. Painted by artist Carol Nagel, the mural brings the fields, trees, and barns from the property's bucolic setting to the interiors.

## WHAT'S OLD IS NEW

A love for jewelry, history, and mementos led Cara Brown to her greatest passion—preserving memories in a fresh new way for the next generation.

Cara's earliest creative endeavor was crafting intricately-designed Christmas ornaments out of vintage beads and jewelry. She later began making necklaces out of relics such as old coins, 1920s belt buckles, and English horse brass. "You don't always have to use things as they were originally intended," Cara says. "I like to make my own rules." The handcrafted designs combine found objects with hand-knotted, semi-precious, or antique beads. "I look for statement pieces that tell a story and can start a conversation," she says. "The designs look equally good with a T-shirt or black tie."

In addition to her jewelry collection, Cara is also the founder of LifeJacket™, a line of vintage tweed blazers upcycled and embellished to tell the wearer's personal story. The jackets are adorned with patches, embroidery, and a Bible verse—representations of significant life moments. "It's like a grown-up letter jacket for women," she says. Each design is personally developed by Cara through one-on-one consultation, custom tailoring, and hand embroidery in order to tell a person's unique story. Her own LifeJacket, a vintage Ralph Lauren tweed, features patches and embroidery that symbolize her children and her home state of Texas. It also includes a verse (Romans 8:28) and Cara's wedding date. As she likes to say, "Life goes by fast. Jacket required." [carabrowndesigns.com](http://carabrowndesigns.com) | 609.730.0506

