

A cottage, *this photo*, serves as homeowner Cara Brown's studio and makes a perfect setting for cocktails on a late-summer evening. Artist Carol Nagel painted the space's botanical mural and one in the dining room of the main house, *opposite*, which was built in 1724 by French settlers.



polishing a GEM

USING HER ASTUTE EYE, A JEWELRY DESIGNER STRINGS TOGETHER FAMILY KEEPSAKES, ANTIQUES, AND MODERN ART TO HIGHLIGHT THE INNATE BEAUTY OF A 1700s STONE FARMHOUSE.

writer: SARAH EGGE photographer: TRIA GIOVAN stylist: ANNA MOLVIK



“We tend to not be particularly trendy. We love a more classic style, but maybe with a little bit of fun art and a pop of color here and there.”

—homeowner Cara Brown

If a full and happy house can reflect full and happy hearts, the Brown family’s 1724 stone farmhouse does just that. Nestled into the rolling hills of rural New Jersey, the house’s compact rooms brim with collected treasures and beloved heirlooms. “Is there a hashtag for ‘not a minimalist’?” Cara Brown asks with a laugh. She proudly owns her eclectic style, which includes pedigreed European antiques and modern art. It’s a look she began gravitating to as a child watching her interior designer mother coax clients into displaying forgotten family pieces. “She gave the items that might have once been in a drawer a special place in the home, and I always loved that,” Cara says.

After college, Cara turned her hobby of scavenging yard sales and antiques stores into a business with a friend, making Christmas ornaments hand-beaded with vintage

jewelry. That skill of applying contemporary design to something old and overlooked led to her current jewelry-design business, Cara Brown Designs, in which she turns antique pieces like English horse brasses into one-of-a-kind necklaces. Not surprisingly, these are also the skills she called upon when decorating the perfectly preserved cottage she and her husband, David, moved into in 2005. “We haven’t altered the house so much,” she says. Instead, they focused on furnishing it. “We love a wide range of artwork, and that mix creates a unique backdrop for each room. Like my jewelry, each piece has its own story.”

Coming from a large Tudor-style home in Texas, Cara, David, and their three children made a big adjustment to the quaint home with low 18th-century ceilings. “At times, we’re on top of each other, but we love it,” Cara says. “It’s not a big house, but every room is so special.”

In the living room of Cara and David Brown’s richly hued rural New Jersey home, *opposite*, a blue velvet sofa picks up the colors of an Elizabeth Endres painting and a rug David found. *This photo*, a reading nook is in the original 1724 portion of the house. (Other rooms were built in 1760, and a breakfast room was added in 1980.) David has selected the vintage and antique rugs throughout the house. When a rug gets too worn, Cara uses it to cover pillows or, in this case, a footstool positioned between two leather chairs that have the classic lines she prefers.



Cara and David bought their antique French dining furniture, *this photo*, over time from the same Philadelphia dealer. The chairs wear their original blue mohair upholstery. “I hope I never have to re-cover them,” Cara says. She picked up the handmade copper lantern years ago and had it installed in this pass-through space. Some of Cara’s favorite treasures line the shelves of a hutch, *opposite left*, and share pride of place on the living room coffee table, *opposite right*. She found the cloisonné box in Birmingham, Alabama, while hosting a jewelry trunk show there. “When I travel, I can’t wait to explore my friends’ favorite antiques spots,” she says.



HOMEOWNER CARA BROWN COLLECTS ANTIQUES OF VARYING ORIGINS AND STYLES, BUT VIVACIOUS COLORS AND A LITTLE PATINA UNITE THE MIX.



To fit the new space, Cara and David carefully edited their belongings, keeping only the heirlooms that meant the most, such as David’s grandmother’s Queen Anne secretary, 18th-century club chairs found during a trip to Europe, and a set of Imari ware they bought when they were first married. Some pieces are from curated antiques stores and some are garage sale finds. A Picasso-signed lithograph mingles with paintings by emerging artists. Cara is open to anything as long as it meets one important criterion: She has to fall in love with it. “I’m not a person who turns things over very easily,” she says. “That’s not how we approach collecting. We choose things we’ll have for a lifetime.”

That broad view is also how they see their family’s time in the cottage. As happy as they have been in the home, they regard themselves as part of a continuum. “It’s our turn in this house’s history,” Cara says. “We’re stewards of it, and

we’re doing things that will continue to stand the test of time.” To that end, over the years they have invested in a slate roof and copper gutters, and they extended the patio using reclaimed bricks and stone. Last summer, they built a small outbuilding for Cara to use as a studio. Every detail, from the copper-topped cupola to the mural rendered by the same artist who painted their dining room, was planned to make it look as if it had always been on the property.

Whether she’s working in her studio on a jewelry piece or arranging curios on their Welsh dresser, Cara is content. “Sometimes old farmhouses with big, heavy beams can feel dark, and people shy away from them. But in all that we do, we try to create a light and cozy feeling that makes anyone feel welcome,” she says. “People often come in and say, ‘This is such a happy house!’” ❁

Designers: Cara and David Brown

The Browns enclosed a porch, *this photo*, to create a light-filled entry and gallery for cherished pieces. They brought back the carved Indian chair and desk from a trip to England. The armchair is from the 1960s and wears its original upholstery. Cara and David's room, *opposite top*, is a serene space thanks to layers of neutral hues and textures, including a paper sculpture above the bed. The bench was a garage sale find. "As soon as I saw it, I thought, *That is going in the back of my car*. I think I paid \$20 for it," Cara says. The patterned Euro shams came from her mother. "They were my favorite pillows growing up," Cara says.



Slim French beds share a bookcase nightstand for a just-right fit in their daughter's bedroom, *far left*. "Scale is always an interesting challenge," Cara says. "It is sometimes tricky to make it feel livable without feeling squished." The walls of the farmhouse, *left*, are 18 inches thick because of the stone masonry used to construct them. All the stone was taken from the property, Cara says, and the couple continue to unearth material to maintain the pathways and garden-bed edges as well.