



the founder of vermont's shelburne museum started out
by using her own home, the brick house, as a showcase
for her passion for collecting americana and folk art.

MUSEUM IN THE MAKING

TEXT BY JACI CONRY | PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE SHELBURNE MUSEUM

For her 1910 wedding, Electra Havemeyer's new in-laws, Dr. William Seward and Lila Vanderbilt Webb, presented her with a brick farmhouse. When her husband, J. Watson Webb, first showed her the 1847 structure on 1,000 acres in Shelburne, Vermont, he asked, "Don't you think this is a lovely old house?" | In a later recount of the day, Electra admitted to being speechless. | The house, modest to begin with,



had been abandoned. To the young bride it looked as though, if not for the sturdy boards covering the windows, it would fall down completely. She might have been right. “I used my allowance to board up the windows so it would not go to pieces,” her husband had said.

Still, as J. Watson noted, the house did have lovely proportions. Electra didn’t know it at the time, but her

wedding gift would become a grand laboratory for her experiments in interior design and a showplace for the vast collections of Americana and folk art she would cultivate. The Brick House, as she came to refer to it, became an artistic endeavor that set her on the path to creating the Shelburne Museum, one of the nation’s most diverse museums of art and Americana.

The Webbs felt that the Brick House, perched on a hill overlooking Lake Champlain and the Adirondack Mountains, would make an ideal sporting lodge. The couple loved the outdoors. Electra, in particular, was a great hunter who often stuffed her prey. (In fact, a ten-foot bear she shot in Alaska is among the collections of Shelburne Museum.)

Shortly after their wedding, the Webbs called on the prestigious New York City architecture firm of Cross and Cross to help them renovate the house. The initial work, completed in 1913, included the addition of a two-and-a-half-story brick wing on the south end.

Six years later, the couple hired Cross and Cross to enlarge the house again. This time the renovations included a new two-story wing on the north end of the house to hold a library, an informal living room, additional guest bedrooms and bathrooms, a pantry, a kitchen and servant quarters. Most significant, the



PREVIOUS PAGE: Reproduction 1800s wallpaper adorns the front hall. **ABOVE:** A view of Lake Champlain. **LEFT:** The dining table holds a bowl of “witches balls” collected by Electra Webb.



main entrance was moved from the west side of the house to the new north facade, allowing for a much larger center hall dominated by a graceful, cantilevered staircase.

With its living space nearly doubled, the house became a rambling forty-room manor where Electra and J. Watson spent their leisure time, accompanied by their growing family and many friends and acquaintances.

The celebrated landscape architect Ellen Biddle Shipman designed the gardens and stately terraces surrounding the house, incorporating indigenous varieties of flowering bushes such as spirea and lilacs along with Boston ivy, woodbine, bittersweet, wood clematis and other vines.

With all of the additions and improvements made to the Colonial Revival country home, Electra began to see the Brick House as more than just a hunting lodge. She set to work creating an interior that would reflect her own aesthetic and showcase her growing collections of folk art and Americana.

Born in 1888, Electra was the daughter of founder and president of the American Sugar Refining Company, H.O. Havemeyer, and his wife, Louise Havemeyer. Her parents were prolific collectors of Impressionist and Asian art and she grew up surrounded by masterpieces. Like her parents, Electra developed a passion for collecting, but she didn't always share their collecting sensibilities and tastes.

Her first significant folk acquisition, made when she was eighteen, was a nineteenth-century tobacconist figure she bought for \$15 and named "Mary O'Connor" after her nanny. "Electra was thrilled with the cigar store figure. Her mother, on the other hand, was horrified," says Sam Ankerson, marketing communications manager for the Shelburne Museum. "Louisine couldn't believe Electra would buy such a thing, that her taste in art would differ so much

TOP: An early nineteenth-century folk art painting above a guest-room fireplace. **LEFT:** Electra's first acquisition, a cigar store Indian, stands in the first floor hallway.

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from her own. Electra wasn't fazed by her mother's reaction at all. In fact it may have even made her more passionate about folk art."

Electra believed that being a collector was her calling. "It's just something that is born in you, the way if you're an artist or a writer, it's born in you. Ever since I was a child, I've had a desire to collect," she once said.

In the 1920s she began in earnest to fill the Brick House with American antique furniture, art, ceramics, blown and pressed glass, dolls, quilts and pewter. She mixed patterned wallpapers, textiles, hooked rugs and decorative arts to make her rooms richly layered, three-dimensional compositions.

Electra experimented with detailed antique paneling, decorative woodwork and faux painting throughout the house. She installed double-paneled wainscoting in her daughter's bedroom. Another room, painted a deep blue, is dominated by a folk art fireboard above the fireplace that features a trompe l'oeil painting of a brick hearth with a vase of sunflowers set in its center. Elsewhere in the house, she had wood paneling inlaid with disassembled nineteenth-century hatboxes.

Electra blended period and reproduction furnishings to suit her vision. In the formal living room, for example, she mixed fine eighteenth-century Newport furniture with reproduction hooked rugs,

The unusual paneling in this guestroom was salvaged from an eighteenth-century Southern plantation house.





Norway maples line the quarter-mile driveway that leads to the house.

antique eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French silhouettes, and old butter churns made into electric lamps.

After Electra died in 1960, her son J. Watson Webb Jr. lived in the house. When he died in 2000, the Brick House became part of the Shelburne Museum. The house has been restored to look as it did in the 1930s, the period in which Electra was most actively collecting.

Electra amassed one of the finest collections of Americana in this country. Her collection influenced other collectors, such as Henry Francis du Pont, founder of Delaware's Winterthur Museum. Du Pont credited a 1923 visit to the Brick House, during which he was fascinated by the colors of a pine dresser filled with pink Staffordshire plates, with his decision to begin collecting American antiques. Upon Electra's death, her children gave the dresser to Winterthur. A reproduction of the piece stands at the Brick House today, along with a few other reproductions.

But most of the furnishings and accessories are originals, hand-selected and arranged by Electra herself—including the whimsical cigar store figure "Mary O'Connor" that started it all. **NEH**

EDITOR'S NOTE The Brick House is open for tours at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays in July and August. \$25 (\$20 for Shelburne Museum members). Tours leave from the Shelburne Museum, Route 7, Shelburne, Vermont, (802) 985-3348, www.shelburnemuseum.org/brick_house.

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