

At Jeffrey Tillou Antiques—

Connecticut Treasures From The Finn Collection



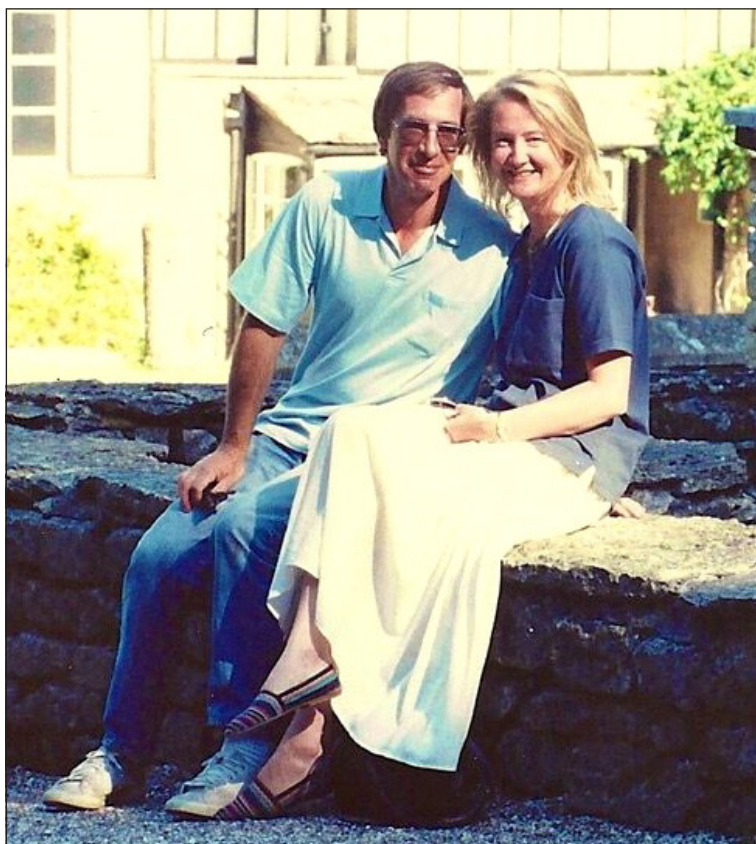
This rare, possibly made-to-order Chippendale oxbow faux-drawer cabinet has diagonal corner braces, a feature found in Litchfield, Conn. Cherry with pine and poplar secondary woods, height 35½ inches.

BY LAURA BEACH

LITCHFIELD, CONN. — Ann Finn and her late husband, Joel, were what every collecting couple should be. Over a period of decades, they assembled a highly focused gathering of furniture and landscape paintings associated with the wooded, boulder-strewn hills of the western Connecticut landscape they called home. Their contrasting but complementary professional backgrounds — Joel was an engineer turned tech entrepreneur, Ann is an art historian and museum administrator — resulted in a patient, intellectually disciplined and rigorous approach to art and antiques, and in a collection difficult to duplicate today.

Asked by Ann Finn to represent the couple, Litchfield dealer Jeffrey Tillou is inviting friends, colleagues and the public to join him on Saturday, June 2, from 5 to 8 pm. The evening is intended as a tribute to the Finns and as a celebration of the distinctive arts of western Connecticut.

Finn's early work for IBM brought him from upstate New York to suburban Connecticut. After moving to rural Litchfield County in the 1980s, he began assembling parcels of land, much of it now conserved by the Weantinoge Heritage Land Trust. His desire to furnish



Joel and Ann Finn.

with locally made pieces prompted him to seek case furniture by Eighteenth Century craftsmen from the then largely agrarian communities of Woodbury, Southbury and Newtown. His hunt led him to Waterbury's Mattatuck Museum, and to its then curator and his future wife. As Ann recalled, "He liked to tell people we were introduced by someone who had been dead for 200 years: the maker of the furniture he collected from Litchfield County."

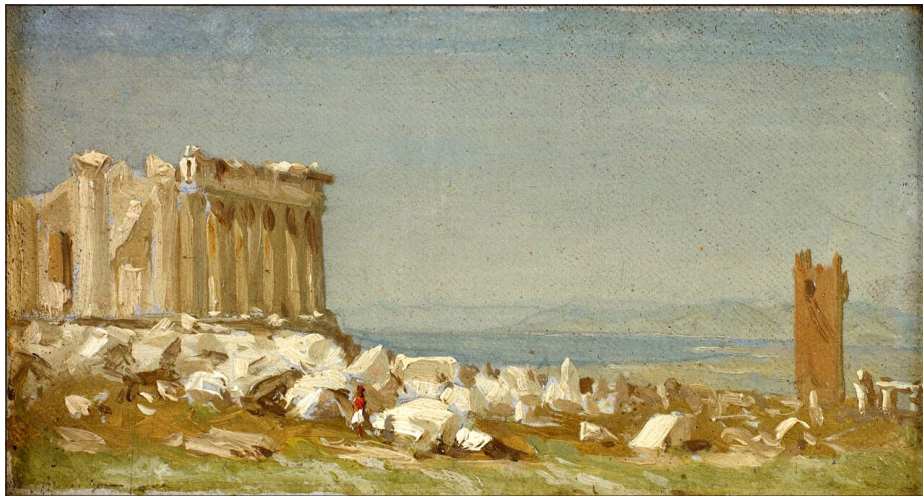
Much of the furniture on view at Jeffrey Tillou Antiques is illustrated in two important references, *Making Furniture in Preindustrial America*, *The Social Economy of Newtown and Woodbury, Connecticut* by Edward S. Cooke Jr, and *To Please Any Taste, Litchfield County Furniture and Furniture Makers, 1780–1830* by Cooke; Ann Y. Smith, as Mrs Finn is professionally known; and Derin Bray.

In Tillou's accompanying catalog, Cooke, the Charles F. Montgomery professor of American decorative arts at Yale University, writes, "As a result of his homework, analytical mind and perseverance, he [Joel] acquired some of the seminal examples of the region's case furniture and tables, often in excellent condition in terms of old finishes, and championed the creativity developed in the hills of northwest Connecticut."

The area's furniture shows the influence of joiners who migrated to Connecticut's northwest corner from towns to the south and east. Characteristic features include deeply carved lobed shells, C-scroll knee returns and, in some cases, curved bandy legs and



"Sunset" by William Sonntag Sr, circa 1860, oil on canvas, hung over a mantel in the Finns' great room.



Study for "The Ruins of the Parthenon" by Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823–1880), 1869, oil on artist's board, 3½ by 6¼ inches. Gifford's last great painting, for which this was preliminary, hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

unusual forms of carved feet. The Finns were drawn to the quirkiness of the work, which sometimes exhibits unusual carvings and other embellishments, or unconventional construction.

Highlights of the current presentation include the catalog's cover piece, a handsome Chippendale bonnet-top highboy that descended in the Stiles family of Woodbury. Of it, Tillou remarks, "It doesn't get any better than this. It is documented, fully intact, has its original brasses, surface and finials, and, proportionally, is a beautiful work of art." Two Woodbury flat-top highboys are enough alike to be mistaken for a pair. Another favorite is a Woodbury highboy with a stepped cornice, perhaps meant to suggest china shelves. From Litchfield, a Chippendale oxbow faux-drawer cabinet was probably a special order.

The couple's approach to collecting New England landscape paintings originated with Smith's training at the University of Michigan, where she studied with David Carew Huntington (1922–1990), the Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) scholar credited with helping save the painter's home, Olana, in the 1960s. The couple acquired "View from Narragansett" by John Kensett (1816–1872) around the time Smith produced *Images of Contentment: John Frederick Kensett and The Connecticut Shore*, a catalog and exhibition at the Mattatuck Museum in 2001. They drove to New York's Catskill Mountains to study Kaaterskill Clove, a touchstone

for Nineteenth Century artists and the subject of one of two paintings by Sanford Gifford (1823–1880) in their collection.

Closer to home were Litchfield County views by John Casilear (1811–1893) and Edward Nichols (1819–1871). The couple's gathering of paintings by Alexander Theobald Van Laer (1857–1920), whose house stands on West Street in Litchfield, is unsurpassed. Joel's fascination with the little-known Van Laer, whose sketchbooks he pursued and ultimately acquired, ran parallel to his love for Litchfield's overlooked furniture.

"Joel and Ann did not jump in head first. Taking time allowed them to educate themselves, to evaluate what they saw and focus on the best examples. I hope others will be inspired to see what they can do over time. It's about collecting versus decorating," Tillou says.

Tillou assembled a team of experts to review the Finn holdings, inviting conservator Robert Lionetti, a contributor to *Connecticut Valley Furniture by Eliphalet Chapin and His Contemporaries, 1750–1800*, to weigh in on the furniture, and paintings conservator Tom Yost to evaluate the fine arts. Their conclusions inform catalog and exhibition.

Selections from "The Ann and Joel Finn Collection" remain on view through the summer at Jeffrey Tillou Antiques. The gallery is at 39 West Street in Litchfield.

For additional information, 860-567-9693 or www.tillouantiques.com.



Chippendale bonnet-top highboy, Woodbury, Conn., circa 1770–80. Cherry with poplar secondary wood. This handsome piece with closed bonnet descended in the Stiles family. It was acquired in the 1980s from Avis Hicock, who lived in the Main Street house in Woodbury that had belonged to her great-grandfather David J. Stiles. Edward Cooke Jr illustrated the case piece in his study *Making Furniture in Preindustrial Furniture, The Social Economy of Newtown and Woodbury, Connecticut*.



Queen Anne highboy, probably Woodbury, Conn., circa 1760–80. Cherry with yellow poplar and white pine secondary woods. This piece descended in the Sherman family of Woodbury and is notable for its stepped cornice, a regional characteristic.