

LOCATION INTERIORS

Have a Seat, Morticia!

American Gothic enthusiasts go against today's modern, minimalist, synthetic grain

BY TONI SCHLESINGER

The other night, Tony Curtis was in a mid-century movie with some pole lamp behind his head. Then what? It became obvious that the mid-century—and the Bauhaus before that—has brought us to a blank and minimalist standstill. In the dull, flat, glassy and Corian world of today, there are no recesses, no secrets, no shadows, no historical associations to dream about.

This column began out of a longing for hawking parties and men on thundering horses, a brutish-invasion sort of thing with big stone columns—English, maybe Hogwarts, or then again French. A trip to St. John the Divine would have been enough. But the subsequent journey, not unlike that of Victoria Winters in *Dark Shadows* (“My name is Victoria Winters. My journey is beginning...”) took a detour and became a fall into the rabbit hole of American Gothic, a turning, twisting, woody world of sofas, tables and chairs from 1830 to 1860.

The hard-core collectors of American Gothic are a closed and inbred society. David Scott Parker, an architect, estimated that there are perhaps 10, including him: three men named David (one is a scholar); Cher (at least before she sold a lot of her pieces at Sotheby's last year); Richard Iversen, an ornamental horticultural professor with a Gothic country house in his Queens basement; Timothy Husband, the curator of medieval art at the Cloisters; artist Hunt Slonem; and a sprinkling of others, though more may be hidden under pointed arches across the country. “Hard-core” means owning 100 or more pieces each. These collectors

cannot get enough of the furniture's crockets, finials, steeples, dripping arches, milk thistle leaves—some lunatic, all transcendent, and a favorite among America's intellectual aristocracy back then (Thomas Jefferson among them), given the style's subliminal English longings. American Gothic was particularly fashionable for libraries, for it was good to have the remotely medieval appropriate chair for reading the *Bride of Lammermoor*. Mr. Parker's collection, distributed throughout his 1848 Gramercy Park townhouse and his Carpenter Gothic house in Southport, Conn., includes a chair that used to belong to Cher, upholstered with leopard-printed calfskin, which is six feet tall and looks like it is trying very hard to get to heaven.

American Gothic collectors get a twitch in their cheek if their collections are confused with 20th-century American Gothic Revival, or English Gothic Revival, French Gothic Revival, Muscular Gothic Revival, Modern Gothic Revival, or pretty much any other kind of Gothic revival. Much of Modern Gothic Revival was mass-produced, they say, nostrils flared. And English Gothic Revival is so common. It was the American cabinet-makers who came over from Europe in the 1800's—New York City was the center of furniture-making—and, throwing off the rules of their teachers, went off on their own, creating sometimes wild and innovative work.

American Gothic chairs are charming (one of them is 10 feet tall). They win one over with their self-importance, almost like hammy actors sitting up straight and inviting one to sit on their laps. For the unknowing, sitting in an American Gothic chair could mean two bites on the neck after a somnambulant sleep. There's



a bit of frontier vampire and Hawthorne noir about this furniture. Many of the chairs are painful to sit in, with all the carvings on the back. In a Charles Addams cartoon, vaguely remembered, Gomez says to Morticia, who is sitting in one: “Morticia, are you uncomfortable?” She says, “Marvelously so.”

After spending enough time with American Gothic—a week—it came to mind that modern life and its minimalism is actually a denial of life, with its smooth surfaces and synthetic veneers (natural materials bring with them the continuing realization that life has a beginning and an end). Looking at American Gothic, one cannot help but think of beginnings and endings, of embracing the inevitable, of heaven (if one believes in it) and where one might be going, or not. Its collectors insist that the work isn't ecclesiastical and get upset if the pieces are perceived as *memento mori* in any way. But “Gothic revival was very popular during the Civil War,” said collector and textile designer Douglas Hartman, who, with his partner Michael Villani, a businessman in real estate and diamonds, has a townhouse with 170 American Gothic chairs and photographs of people from the Civil War era. “I think there was so much death and destruction that the Gothic revival helped bring a spiritual calm, helped people reflect, to come to terms with death.” Some of the furniture pieces do look like churches in miniature, especially the chair with the rose window in its back.

Lee B. Anderson, 89, the *éminence grise* of the circle, used to bring his boys together for long evenings in his spidery, six-story, 13-room James Renwick Jr. townhouse, circa 1855 (he prefers not to disclose the neighborhood), with the skinny, winding stairway that leads from one inky, yellowing room full of paintings and marble statues up to the next. The group would talk about quatrefoils and sandwich-glass sugar bowls and drip stones—though now, it is said, hardly anybody talks to anybody else.



PHOTOS: JAMES HAMILTON

“That's true,” said David Marshall, everybody's dealer, who operates out of his command post at his Antique Room on Atlantic Avenue, the sun barely coming in and falling briefly on the dark wood of a highly vertical sofa set and some dolls in a cabinet. Mr. Marshall said that an American Gothic chair today could cost \$2,000 to \$8,000. (The highest price ever offered was \$225,000, at Hirsch & Adler Galleries' 2006 American Gothic show.) Mr. Hartman and Mr. Villani got their first two chairs 10 years ago for \$550. Mr. Slonem remembers that rainy day on Bleecker in the 1970's when he got his—for \$50. Now he has at least 150, he said, distributed among his painting studio in the Village, his house upstate and his two plantations in Louisiana.

Their set could get contentious. In better times, the parties at Mr. Anderson's “always ended up down in the basement, in the little room full of chairs, looking at stretchers and undersides and [asking,] ‘Was it really American?’” said collector Timothy Husband, 61, curator of medieval art at the Cloisters. His entire dining room is American Gothic, though he said that he goes into other areas, including “Muscular Gothic—Lee would be horrified.”

Mr. Anderson, 89, a retired art-education teacher, is almost complete-

Above left: Artist Hunt Slonem and his Abyssinian, Tiki, snuggle up in a bishop's chair. Right: Architect David Scott Parker and his Jack Russell terrier, Jack, enjoy a chair that used to belong to Cher. Below: More from Mr. Slonem's collection.

ly blind now and, of course, furious about it. “All my friends have died. It happened to me; it will happen to you,” he said, sitting in his lower level crowded with paintings and marble statues and glass globe lamps.

During the Second World War, while stationed in London, Mr. Anderson fell in love with Strawberry Hill, Horace Walpole's 18th-century ultimate Gothic villa. After he came back to the States, Mr. Anderson worked as an art teacher and began collecting 19th-century Hudson River School landscape paintings. “I sold 12 for a million and a quarter, and I became a playboy,” Mr. Anderson said. “I was very naughty—Paris, London, three, four times a year”

What about Cher's collection? Did he know Cher?

“She came here.” He was wearing a leopard printed belt. “The first time, she stayed five hours. I found a lot for her for her house in Miami. She had better taste than the curators at the Met. But she went more off into English Gothic.”