



## DESIGN & DECORATING

HOUSE TOUR

# AN ODDBALL MENAGERIE

Artist Hunt Slonem arrays his quirky collections, from Neo-Gothic chairs to marble busts of Marie Antoinette, in time-warping vignettes

BY KELLY CROW

VERY FEW ARTISTS are as legendary for their studios as for their paintings, but New York artist Hunt Slonem's workshop on 34th Street is a Wunderkammer worth seeing firsthand. Since moving into a 25,000-square-foot warehouse in March, Mr. Slonem has peppered his studio's walls with his own Neo-Gothic paintings of rabbits, peacocks and portraits of Abraham Lincoln—all loosely painted in the same fair-weather style that made his and poet the Franciscan Clemente so popular in the late 1970s and early '80s. (Today, Mr. Slonem's works sell through Marlborough Gallery for between \$4,000 to \$50,000.)

Mr. Slonem's studio décor doesn't stop with the walls, though. At age 60, he has spent a glitzy lifetime amassing quirky collections, from Neo-Gothic chairs in top hats to marble busts of Marie Antoinette, and he's arrayed many of these objects throughout the space in time-warping vignettes. At the center is a dining table covered in more than 300 colored glass candlesticks, each topped with a spindly white topper. All of it seems to infuse his art, particularly the wire cages in back that house with his 50 pet birds, mostly parrots.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art owns one of his best-known paintings, "St. Martin de Porres," a 1961 work that depicts a Pezarian saint surrounded by a rosy work of tropical birds and leaves. Like Edward Hicks or Odilon Redon before him, Mr. Slonem is an artist whose portrayal of man and nature is one of peasantlike mystical contemplation.

Mr. Slonem credits his father's upbringing with nurturing his love for things Gothic and exotic. He was born in Maine, but as the son of a Navy officer, he spent his childhood on military bases all over. He grew up in Hawaii and later collected stamps and butterflies in Louisiana. He studied in Nicaragua, Mexico and New Orleans. His favorite was art. "In the first grade, I drew a picture of myself standing with an axel," he says. "I was never confident about wanting to be an artist."

On the release of his new monograph, "The Worlds of Hunt Slonem" (Vendome Press), he walked us around his studio.



### ▲ Multiplying Bunnies

Just inside the studio's doors is the wall of rabbits, a series Mr. Slonem began in the early 1980 after he discovered that of his birth, 1950, was 11 years of the rabbit in the Chinese zodiac calendar often repeats the same agency in his series. He says the act is almost ritualistic meditation. "It has an holy resonance repeat them."

### ▲ Party Space

Mr. Slonem still lives in the left apartment he moved into in 1977 but he does nearly all his entertaining here, at his studio in the industrial Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan. This summer, he celebrated the space with a birthday party attended by more than 200 people, including music collectors like Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie. The only downside? "There's no AC in here," he says. "It was stupidly the hottest party of the season."

### ▲ Plantation Ceramics

Mr. Slonem has lived in New York since 1973, but in the past decade he's also bought a pair of Louisiana plantations. He says this "junk to the South" has influenced his collecting—including these 18th-century Old Davis vases featured with gift tobacco leaves.



### ▲ Top Hats and Gothic Chairs

The studio is peppered with Victorian and Neo-Gothic furniture; Mr. Slonem owns 300 chairs alone. He says the time period is often overlooked by designers because it seems “creepy,” but the “finals and arches all point up to God.” He began a series of paintings about Abraham Lincoln a decade ago, shortly after he bought an 1873 home called Cordts Mansion in Kingston, N.Y., where former presidents, including William McKinley, visited. He now owns more than 150 top hats.

### Pedestals and Bird Paintings

Saturday mornings, Mr. Slonem says he can usually be found trolling the flea markets; lately, he's been shopping for pedestals to prop up his collection of marble busts. “I'm a believer that if you get three or more of the same thing together, you've got a good look going,” he adds.

### Glass Vessels

In the 1980s, Mr. Slonem began paying as much as \$20 apiece at flea markets for these color-hand-blown glass vases and decanters made in the 1940s and 50s by a West Virginia glass company called Steubenville. Today, he says, collectors pay as much as \$3,000 apiece for this century glassware. He says he initially learned how to collect by watching others: “All my friends I've befriended people who had interesting collections.”

