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 midcentury movie with some pole lamp behind his head. Then what? It became obvious that the midcentury—and the Bauhaus before that—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 bawling parties and men on thundering horses, a brusque-invading-tribe-sort of thing with big stone columns—English, maybe Hogwart's, 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 twisting, twisting, woozy world of soffits, tables and chairs from 1830 to 1880.

The hard-core collectors of American Gothic are a closed and birored society. David Scott Parker, an architect, estimated that there are perhaps 10, including him: three men named Daniel (one is a stepfather), and a couple at least before she sold a lot of her pieces at Sotheby's last year); Richard Svensen, an ornamental horticultural professor with a Gothic country house in his Queens basement; Timothy Husband, the curator of medieval at the University of Pennsylvania; and a sprinkling of others, though more may be hidden under secreted arches across the country. "Hard-core" means owning 100 or more pieces each. These collectors cannot get enough of the furniture's crockets, finials, steeplest, dripings, arches, mill-tilted leaves—some innate, all transcendent, and a favorite among America's intellectual set—because they've 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 leopards-print calathus, 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 19th-century American Gothic Revival, English Gothic Revival, English Revival, Victorian Gothic Revival, Modern Gothic Revival, or pretty much any other kind of Gothic revival. Much of Modern Gothic Revival was mass-produced, they say, not really flawed. And English Gothic Revival is so common. It was the American cabinetmakers who came over from Europe in the 1830s—New York City was the center of furniture manufacturing—and, throwing off the rules of their teachers, went off on their own, creating something wild and innovative work.

American Gothic chairs are charming (one of them is 10 feet tall). They win one over with their self-importance, as if hunkering actors sitting up straight and inviting one to sit on their laps. For the uninformed, sitting in an American Gothic chair could mean two hours on the neck after a somnambulant sleep. There's a bit of frontier vampire and Hawker chintz 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: "Morty—how 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 world 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 businesswoman 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 dominance of her life, used to bring his boys together for long evenings in his spidery, six-story, 13-room James Bowne Jr. townhouse, circa 1850. He prefers not to disclose the neighborhood, with the dingy, winding-stairway that leads from one inky, yellowing room full of paintings and marbel statues up to the next. The group would talk about quatrefoils and sandwich boards and drip-stones—though now, it is said, hardly anybody talks to anybody else.

"That's true," said David Marshall, everybody's dealer, who operates out of his command post at an antique focus 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 Hirschl & Adler Galleries' "American Gothic, show."") Mr. Hartman and Mr. Villani got their first two chairs 10 years ago for $850. Mr. Sleson remembers that rainy day on Bleeker in 1970s when he got his—for $50. Now he has at least 100, he said, distributed among his painting studios 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 undertakers and laughing." "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 "Masonic Gothic—Joe would be horrified." Mr. Anderson, 89, a retired art education teacher, is almost completely 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 globes.

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. "Sold 12 for a million and a quarter, and I became a playboy," Mr. Anderson said. "It 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 New York Observer"