

WHERE THE



WILD THINGS ARE

James Soby, the pioneering modern art collector and critic, once hosted guests like Alexander Calder, Joan Miró, and Salvador Dalí in this Connecticut Greek Revival. Now a museum curator and his young family are breathing new life into its storied, charming good bones.

BY CATHERINE HONG
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS MOTTALINI



An antique copy of a painting by Poussin hangs over the original granite mantel in the sitting room of Margaret Heiner and Oliver Tostmann's Greek Revival home in Farmington, Connecticut, which was renovated by Heide Hendricks and Rafe Churchill of the firm Hendricks Churchill. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** The couple's children, wearing home-made papier-mâché fox masks, in the sitting area of the kitchen, the sofa is from Hammertown Barn and the side tables are by West Elm. Heiner and Tostmann in the library. The classical exterior of the 1833 house.



ABOVE: In the front sitting room, the sofa is upholstered in a Kravet fabric, the chair (right) is by Gustav Stickley, the cocktail table is a Chinese antique, and the 18th-century English tea table (right) is from Montage Antiques. The chandelier is by Circa Lighting, the curtains are of a Carleton V floral, and the rug is an antique Heriz.



ABOVE: The kitchen's custom cabinetry is fitted with soapstone counters, and the island's maple countertop is by Brooks Cabinetry. The 1940s industrial pendants are English, the vase is from the End of History, and the curtains are of a Clarence House fabric. In the dining room, the Louis Philippe-style table is from Robuck, and the ladder-back chairs have custom blue-leather cushions; the artwork is by Eddie Martinez.

THE CENTRAL CONNECTICUT TOWN OF FARMINGTON is best known today—if it's known much at all—as home to the Otis elevator company and the exclusive all-girls private school Miss Porter's. But in the 1930s and '40s, Alexander Calder, Joan Miró, and Salvador Dalí knew the town, which is just outside of Hartford, as the location of their friend James Soby's country home. A critic, collector, and influential early champion of modern art, Soby regularly hosted his circle of art-world intimates at the stately Greek Revival house, which he purchased in 1935. Snapshots from the era (now in the archives of the Museum of Modern Art, along with most of his collection) depict Miró and Yves Tanguy smoking in the living room; Calder on the patio, dancing to an accordion; and Soby and Le Corbusier standing on the roof.

"There was dancing, drinking, dressing up, outrageous parties—not exactly the mundane life we lead today," says the house's current owner, Margaret Heiner, who, with her husband, Oliver Tostmann, moved here seven years ago, soon after he became curator of European art at Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum. Both art professionals (Heiner

owned a contemporary art gallery in Washington, D.C.), they loved the home's unique history as well as its unusual design, encompassing gracious formal rooms with 10-foot-high ceilings in the front and an airy, sun-filled modern wing in the rear. "We had looked at a lot of older homes in the area that felt too cramped," says the German-born Tostmann, who stands six foot five.

By the time the Heiner-Tostmanns purchased the property in 2013, the house, while structurally sound, had accumulated a surfeit of carpeting, built-in cabinetry, and chair molding. "We wanted to return the house to more of its original simplicity," Tostmann says. Exposing additional blank wall space would also allow them to hang their art collection more freely. Also on their list: an overhaul of the dismal kitchen and a gut renovation of the detached garage, which the couple converted into a guesthouse and studio. "We wanted to work with someone local who had a taste for New England tradition, and that's how we found Heide and Rafe," says Heiner, referring to Heide Hendricks and Rafe Churchill—the married principals of Hendricks Churchill, an interior design and architecture firm based in Sharon,

Connecticut, that specializes in historic restoration. "We loved the simplicity of Rafe's designs," she adds. "And Heide's taste and color sense are brilliant."

The result is a sensitive refresh of the 1833 home that takes into account the house's history and location, as well as the couple's art collection (including both Old Masters and contemporary works), eclectic furniture, and two young children, ages six and eight. A major alteration was the widening of the doorway between the formerly closed-in kitchen and the dining room. "I had wanted an eat-in kitchen, but Heide and Rafe convinced us that we'd be happier eating in the dining room and using the kitchen's windowed nook as a lounging area," says Heiner. "They were totally right." For the kitchen itself, Hendricks chose a moody color scheme—slate blue industrial lighting, dove gray painted cabinetry—and butcher block counters to evoke a cozy "downstairs *Downton Abbey*" vibe.

Other elements of the house required only the barest assistance. Throughout, the worn oak floors were simply sanded down and given a matte coating so that they appear "freshly scrubbed," says Churchill, who believes that the

imperfections and "even the awkward repair patches" of old floors help "tell the story" of a house. The firm's philosophy, he explains, involves thinking just as much about "what we're *not* going to change" as what they will. The study, for example, was transformed by the use of monochromatic color. "The millwork was there, so we just painted everything an indigo gray for a cocoon-like feeling," he says.

Perhaps the most liberating area to reimagine, say the designers, was the sprawling family room in the rear, an addition that Soby commissioned as a gallery for his Calders, de Chiricos, Rousseaus, and Matisse. Unlike the older rooms in the front, which are furnished with antiques, this bright, expansive space is punctuated with seating by Saarinen, Thonet, and artist Rob Pruitt; a work table from Blu Dot ("it's the dining table from our old house in D.C.," says Heiner); and a profusion of ceramics and houseplants. Its easy comforts—conducive to family movies, papier-mâché crafts, and remote schooling—have been welcome during these past months of quarantine, say the couple. With any luck, when things finally go back to normal, they'll be able to throw some art-world parties there too. ■



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: In the library, the live-edge wood desk is custom, and both the Eames chair and George Nelson floor lamp are vintage. In the children's room, a vintage Jenny Lind bed is topped with a Garnet Hill Kids quilt, the bunny lamp is from the MoMA Design Store, and the sconce is by Matt Alford Studio; the artwork is by John Borden Evans. The family room's Saarinen chair and Moroccan pouf are vintage, the yellow table is by Muuto, and the artwork is by Afifa Aleiby. **OPPOSITE:** In the guest bedroom, the bed and lamps are family heirlooms, the vintage chair is in a Castel velvet mohair, the wallpaper is by Lake August, and the Beni Ourain rug is vintage. For details, see Resources.