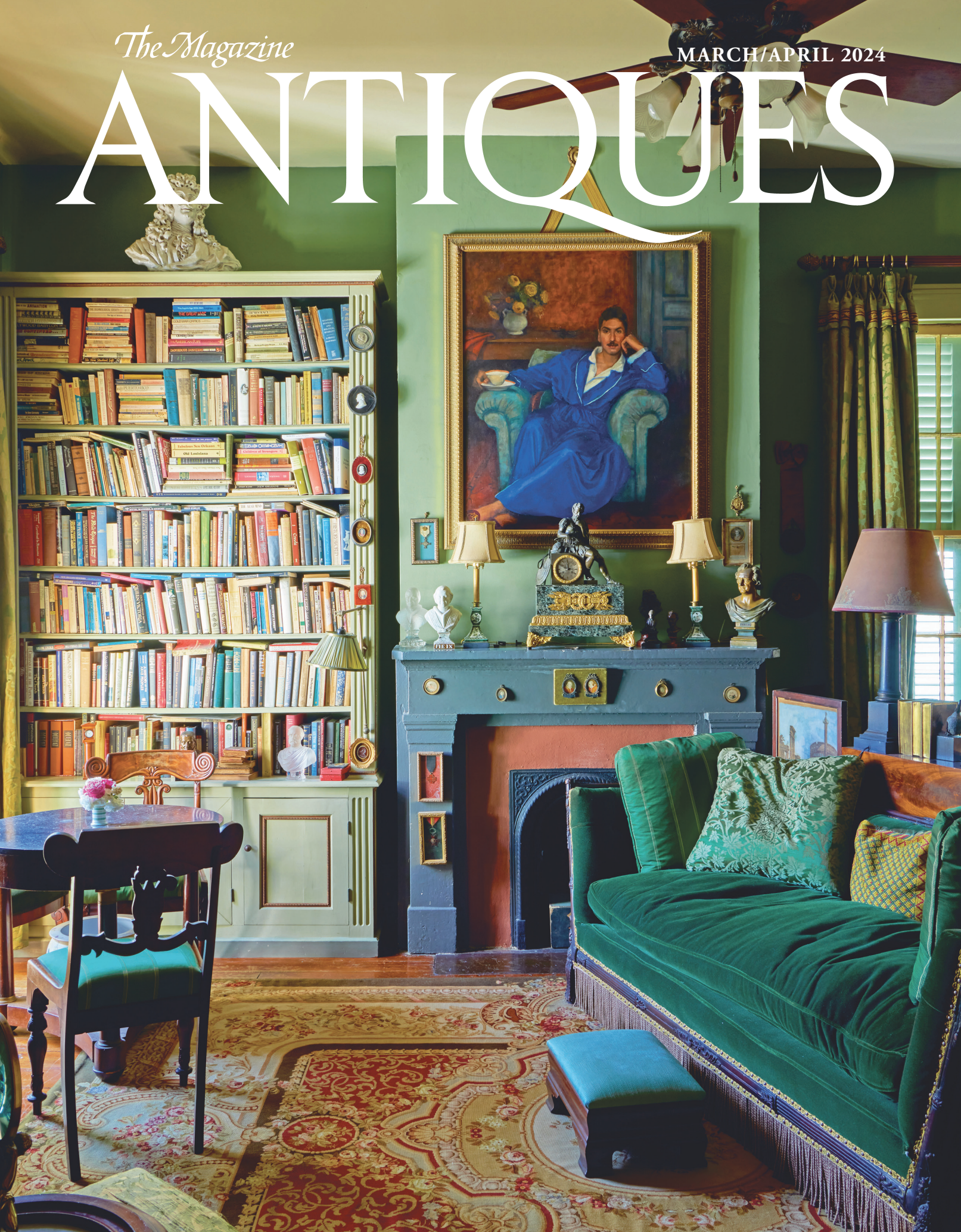


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ANTIQUES



A Stitch from Time Past

ON
COLLECTING
ANTIQUE
SEWING
BOXES



The Sewing Circle, engraved by Henry Moses (1782–1870) and published by W. and J. Munn, 1804. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota, Minnich Collection, Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund.

Chinese export black lacquer sewing box with gilt feet and ivory sewing tools, 1800s. Photograph courtesy of Bonhams.



As the ladies gather around the fireplace, they settle into seat cushions. Out come needles, thread, yarn, fabrics. One woman continues work on a baby sweater, another tools a decorative stitch on a pillow, and a third unrolls a needlepoint canvas. Similar rituals go back centuries, perhaps millennia. We have seen it depicted in arts and letters in ways that range from illustrations of courtly sewing and needlework circles in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and paintings such as Giacomo Ceruti's *Women Working on Pillow Lace (The Sewing School)* (1720) to the pages of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and the 1995 BBC interpretation of that novel, which opens with a woman's hands busy with embroidery.

Most of these scenes feature a sewing box—a container produced specifically to hold sewing supplies, often in small internal compartments. (The drawing rooms of the wealthiest usually held that piece of furniture known as a worktable, with its signature hanging silk bag holding materials

and works in progress.) Sewing boxes were commonly kept in the public rooms of a house, as textile work was understood to be an essential part of domestic craft, and the boxes could be quite elaborate. In time, some began to collect these sewing boxes as objects.

The Pope family of Connecticut collected a trove of objects during travels across Europe and Asia, and from New York dealers at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth and brought them to their estate, Hill-Stead in the town of Farmington, now a museum. Of the things the Popes collected, at least six were sewing boxes, acquired “for their aesthetic qualities rather than function,” says Melanie Bourbeau, senior curator at Hill-Stead. Of the sewing boxes in the collection, she adds, “it is unlikely these items were purchased with an eye toward using them,” as they were “showcased in both public spaces and private bedrooms.” They were, “almost certainly obtained simply to please.”

The best-known member of the Pope family, Theodate Pope Riddle (1867–1946), was one of the first licensed female architects in America. She was a preservationist, an artist, a collector, and, Bourbeau says, an





at least mildly accomplished sewer. She wrote in her teenage diaries of working on charity sewing projects and, later, at twenty-two, she noted proudly on June 3, 1889, while on a grand tour in Europe, that she had successfully shortened the sleeves of a blouse.

Riddle designed Hill-Stead to house her parents as well as their massive collection of artworks, which include paintings by Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Mary Cassatt as well as Italian maiolica and a sixth-century Corinthian vessel. The colonial revival mansion was the final stop in a cross-country move relocating the family from the Midwest, where her father, Alfred Pope, had built a fortune in the iron industry. Riddle had attended Miss Porter's School and was raised to be a



Installation view of *Born in 1867: Theodate's Generation*, which contextualizes women from a broad range of backgrounds and geographies at a moment of societal transition, at the Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington, Connecticut. Photograph courtesy of the Hill-Stead Museum.

Musical sewing box in scallop shell form featuring mother-of-pearl and ebony veneer, French, 1810–1840. Bonhams photograph.

Tortoiseshell-covered box, with ivory and metal trim and a rectangular mother-of-pearl medallion on the lid, before early 1900s. The interior features a fitted compartment and ruched silk lining and holds sewing tools and notions, including pierced mother-of-pearl bobbin tops, a small silk covered pumpkin-shaped pin cushion, a small pierced-ivory box containing a pincushion, an ivory darning tool, and French and American spools of thread. Hill-Stead Museum.



lady, educated to be a thinker, and encouraged to be an artist. Her independent streak was nurtured not tamped down, still a rarity at the time.

And so, about a century after Austen emphasized the societal importance of being able to do needlework that wasn't just functional, but beautiful, the sewing box was caught in a transitional moment. It was already on its way to becoming a sculptural object, and yet the ritual elements of the practice of gathering with needle and fiber remained. It should come as no surprise, then, that the sewing box has retained many ritual characteristics,



English Regency-era tortoiseshell and ivory sewing box with mother-of-pearl floral inlay and ivory bun feet. *Bonhams photograph.*

Sarcophagus-shaped satinwood box with inlaid and metal adornments and a fitted velvet-lined and mirrored interior, before early 1900s. The sewing tools are made of cut glass, mother-of-pearl, and metal. *Hill-Stead Museum.*

Unadorned tortoiseshell sewing box with mother-of-pearl escutcheon, French, 1810–1840. The interior features a mirrored lid and a fitted silk-lined compartment, beneath which there is a shallow 1/8-inch “secret” space. Many of the sewing tools are made of mother-of-pearl and emblazoned with a pansy motif. *Hill-Stead Museum.*

even if relegated to a purely decorative function. They are imbued with even more nostalgia today when the slowness they suggest—the time taken to embroider a napkin—has become rare.

Sewing wasn't, of course, all fun and games, shirt sleeves and social calls. Riddle started a sewing and cooking school in Farmington in 1900 to serve women who were not as lucky as herself. For seventeen years the school, Bourbeau says, “was intended to provide a skill as a means for less fortunate girls to earn an income.” They wouldn't be altering clothing while on a grand tour but doing piecework for pennies just to get by. What was one lady's accomplishment was another's way to earn a living.

Today, sewing boxes are decorative sculpture that can be used to communicate a particular perspective or worldliness through style and material, much as how the Popes used them. They can also be a fairly accessible antique, leading to continued popularity with young collectors, and affordable simple versions frequently pop up in booths at antiques malls.



One can imagine where a simple undecorated sewing box may have found a home, perhaps in the belongings of one of Riddle's sewing school students. A more ornate example, like a straw-work sewing box sold as part of a lot at Case Auctions for \$600 and carrying Napoleonic prisoner of war provenance, may have been bought by a lady while overseas. “These beautifully crafted utilitarian boxes were usually held in high regard as a form of enjoyment in the evening hours,” says Muffie Cunningham, director of decorative arts at the Hudson, New York, auction house Stair Galleries, speaking about a fine Regency-period example that would have been right at home in an Austen-era sitting room, and that sold for \$400.

Today, Hill-Stead remains much as Theodate Pope Riddle intended it to be—complete with art, objects, and those things that blur the line between the two. A special exhibition open through the end of March,



Born in 1867: Theodate's Generation, captures a moment of transition and expansion, contextualizing a time when women like Riddle and her contemporaries (Laura Ingalls Wilder was six days younger) could both become “accomplished” in the ways their parents' generation expected and break through barriers that had previously seemed impenetrable. They could use sewing boxes and collect them as sculpture. They could shorten a sleeve and roll one up to get into the muck of life.