

Renovated by architect Robert Orr, the smooth (as opposed to clapboard) facade was restored to what was originally there; he also designed the Greek Revival-style porch.

**FACING PAGE:** Designers Catherine Olasky and Max Sinsteden incorporated dried citrus slices into the wreath that adorns the front door.



# 'Tis the Season

A nineteenth-century Connecticut country house is dressed to the nines to celebrate the holidays.



TEXT BY LISA H. SPEIDEL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY READ MCKENDREE





It wasn't a typical start-from-scratch interior design commission. The couple came armed with most of the rugs and wood furniture—a lifetime full of treasures—and were looking to reinvigorate an 1845 Essex, Connecticut, country house. “Finding someone who has an

eye to put it all together and still give it a fresh look—they have to be pretty talented,” says one of the homeowners.

But Catherine Olasky and Maximilian Sinsteden aren't your typical designers, either. Classically trained, the young designers have

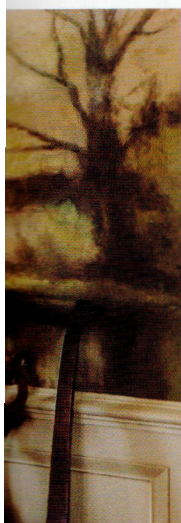






**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT:**

The dining room's custom mural by Scott Waterman is based on a four-season study of the surrounding area. The newel post and stair rail are original and were refinished in a French polish. The fixture hanging above the table is a nineteenth-century Pennsylvania Dutch light in the style of an Italian Renaissance original.



racked up resumé: the former got her start in New York with Bunny Williams and then moved to London to work for Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler; the latter, who started in the industry at fifteen, worked for David Easton and Charlotte Moss. "We're both obsessed with English antiques and an understated European aesthetic," says Sinsteden. So, in a nutshell: the project was a perfect match.

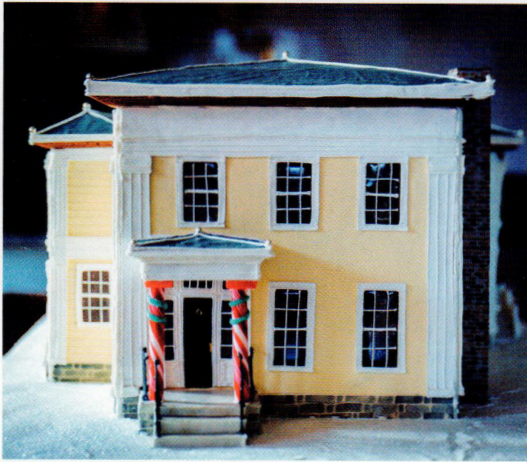
With an apartment in Manhattan, the retired pair longed for a retreat from city life. "We fell in love with the home and the property, but really we fell in love with the village," remembers one of the men. Quintessential New England, steeped in history, and perched on the banks of the Connecticut River—it was idyllic. When it came to the house, "my plan was we were going to refinish the floors and change the doors," says the owner with a knowing laugh. "Eighteen months later...we had completely rebuilt it. Every board, everything. There's

nothing we didn't change."

Olasky and Sinsteden set out to essentially undue an extensive prior renovation and take the property back in time. "It was not meant to be a restoration," says Olasky. "But the goal was to make it feel right. It's all believable but not exact." Sinsteden notes that the front facade of the house is smooth, just as it would have been back in the day. Inside, he points to the paneling in the kitchen, which is purposely asymmetrical for an authentic look. "Almost everything is new," says the owner, "but it looks older than the house we bought. We tried to put back some of the history."

The couple use the whole house—when guests come up from the city, they'll they gather for drinks in the living room, move to the dining room for a meal, then sit by the fire in the keeping room—so it was important to make it "comfortable and casual," says the homeowner. "But at the same time,





**THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** The designers based the mantel lambrequin on one they saw at a London house museum. Olasky sourced dozens of antique and vintage ornaments to pair with the owners' collection of art glass ornaments. The kitchen table and stools were made by Connecticut furniture maker Peter Van Beckum. A scale model of the house by Patti Paige of Baked Ideas sits on the kitchen table during the holidays.



**FACING PAGE:** Robert Orr designed the paneling in the keeping room to be imperfect—just as it might have been if it were original.









An existing outbuilding on the property—a perfect spot to enjoy a glass of wine—was reimagined into what the homeowners call the Summer House; the designers had the walls faux grained by a talented house painter. **FACING PAGE:** Two sets of French doors in the Summer House let warm breezes pass through from the Connecticut River to the garden.









that doesn't preclude elegance."

The men spend weeks at a time year-round in Essex, but are particularly charmed by the small town during the holidays. Everyone gets in on the fun, from the famed 1776 Griswold Inn, just a few doors down, to the parade of boats dressed for the season. They knew they had to join in and signed up for the holiday house tour their first year in town. Like little elves, Olasky and Sinsteden decked the halls—with period decor, of course—from garlands and pomander balls aplenty to Lametta draped strand by strand on the Christmas tree and a custom-designed lambrequin hung on the mantel with care. Olasky even hunted down antique ornaments from a barn in North Dakota to pair with the hand-blown ones the men have collected for decades. "Nothing is ever simple with us," jokes Sinsteden, who fondly remembers decorating till the wee hours of the night, tunes turned up. But it sure is beautiful—and festive.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** For details about this home, see *Resources*.

**ABOVE:** In the guest bedroom, Rose Tarlow linen was paper-backed to apply to the walls. **BELOW:** The walls of the master bath are covered in wallpaper resembling cerused oak by Noblis. **RIGHT:** A series of nineteenth-century botanical engravings found in Virginia hangs over a sofa by Michael Dawkins.

**ARCHITECT  
FOR RENOVATION:**  
Robert Orr,  
Robert Orr + Associates

**INTERIOR DESIGNERS:**  
Catherine Olasky and  
Maximilian Sinsteden,  
Olasky & Sinsteden

**BUILDER:**  
HP Broom Housewright





