

Maine Home

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+DESIGN

Prouts Neck Pedigree

Brothers in Artistry
Winslow Homer + John Calvin Stevens

Joyce Tenneson

Intimacy and intrigue in Maine

MECA at Masonic Temple

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Art History

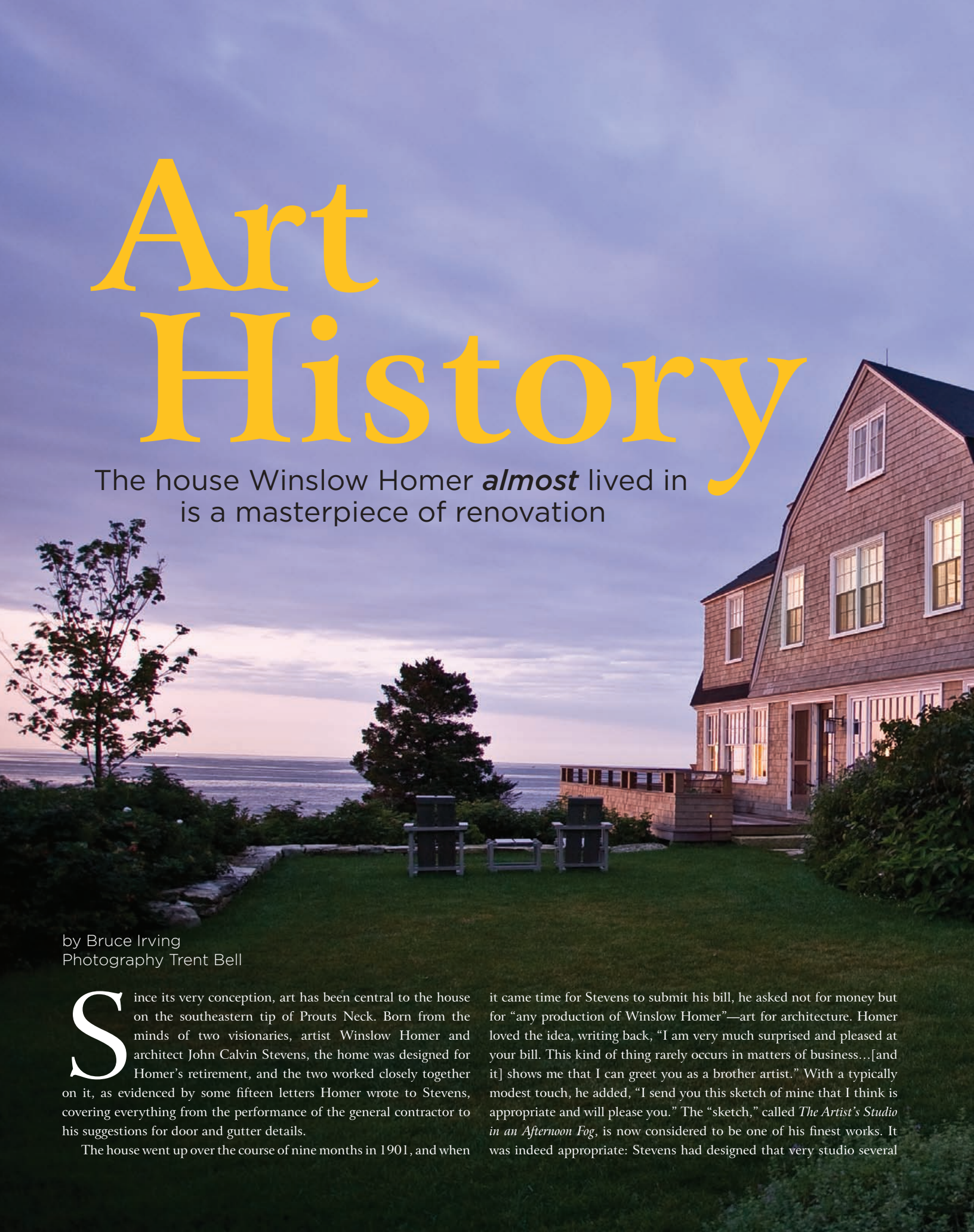
The house Winslow Homer *almost* lived in is a masterpiece of renovation

by Bruce Irving
Photography Trent Bell

Since its very conception, art has been central to the house on the southeastern tip of Prouts Neck. Born from the minds of two visionaries, artist Winslow Homer and architect John Calvin Stevens, the home was designed for Homer's retirement, and the two worked closely together on it, as evidenced by some fifteen letters Homer wrote to Stevens, covering everything from the performance of the general contractor to his suggestions for door and gutter details.

The house went up over the course of nine months in 1901, and when

it came time for Stevens to submit his bill, he asked not for money but for "any production of Winslow Homer"—art for architecture. Homer loved the idea, writing back, "I am very much surprised and pleased at your bill. This kind of thing rarely occurs in matters of business...[and it] shows me that I can greet you as a brother artist." With a typically modest touch, he added, "I send you this sketch of mine that I think is appropriate and will please you." The "sketch," called *The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon Fog*, is now considered to be one of his finest works. It was indeed appropriate: Stevens had designed that very studio several







It wasn't built in a day, but the team had only nine months to completely restore and modernize the Homer house. The only change detectable from the road is hardly so: the roofline was raised slightly to allow the third floor to be used for living space.

(Above) Designer Laurent Bourgois put together an interior mix anchored by modernity and Maine: the pine-paneled living room features a chest of drawers designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and a painting by Louise Nevelson, a Russian-born artist who grew up in Rockland. The lamps are from a Paris antique shop.

Behind the living room's Christophe Delcourt couch sits a Robert Indiana Love sculpture in stainless steel (right). Beyond, the enclosed front porch is painted in an orange brick color that Bourgois chose as being "warm in both the summer and the winter."

The dining room, also paneled in pine, holds an Andrew Wyeth painting, Antique Art Nouveau table and chairs by the Belgian designer Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, and a chandelier made to Bourgois's design by Mathieu Lustrerie, an artisan in the south of France (opposite).

years earlier, reworking a carriage house on the Homer family's nearby property into a place for Winslow to live and work. It suited the artist so well that he never moved into the new house; instead, it was leased out until his death in 1910.

The home's next stage of life was marked by the fine art of Yankee thrift. Following extensive renovations by its new owners, the house then coasted through the ensuing nine decades with little more than the (very) occasional paint job and a bit of new plumbing and wiring now and again. When the current owner bought it in 2006, the house stood somewhere near the intersection of benign neglect and deferred maintenance—a not-uncommon state for a seaside cottage with blue blood.

The new owner—a Texas-based renewable-energy entrepreneur whose family had been coming to Prouts Neck for years—had a keen respect for the building's pedigree, and his contribution to its ongoing history would call on the artistry of two local professionals, architect Sam Van Dam and general contractor Larry Wagner, and of two others from very far away: Paris-based interior designers Laurent Bourgois and Luc Deflandre. (Bourgois, also an architect, had designed the owner's Texas house in 2001.) The team's charge: restore the house to its original beauty while imbuing it with all the comforts that modern amenities can bring.

Van Dam's firm, Portland-based Van Dam Architecture and Design, is known for a modernist style that respects traditional architecture. This project would call on all of the designer's talents, as he and project







By raising the roof and dormer heights, the architects gave the owners vaulted third-floor offices with built-in bookshelves, a custom carpet by Hartley's of Paris, and a daybed with an Atlantic Ocean view.

An immense amount of work brought back the enclosed front porch, whose floor had sunk by five inches. Art Nouveau chairs and table by Richard Riemerschmid, an early-twentieth-century German designer, are illuminated by a Danish Modern lamp by Arne Jacobsen. The fireplace features custom tiles by Parisian ceramicist Armelle Benoit.

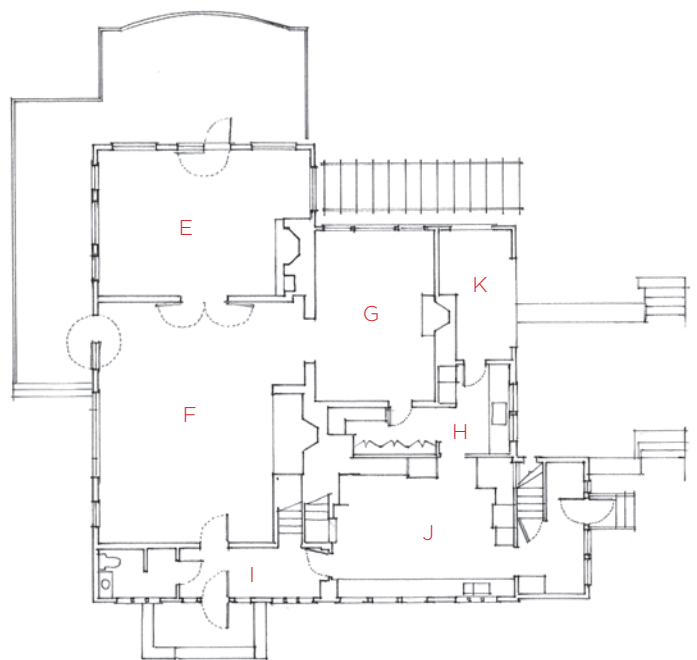
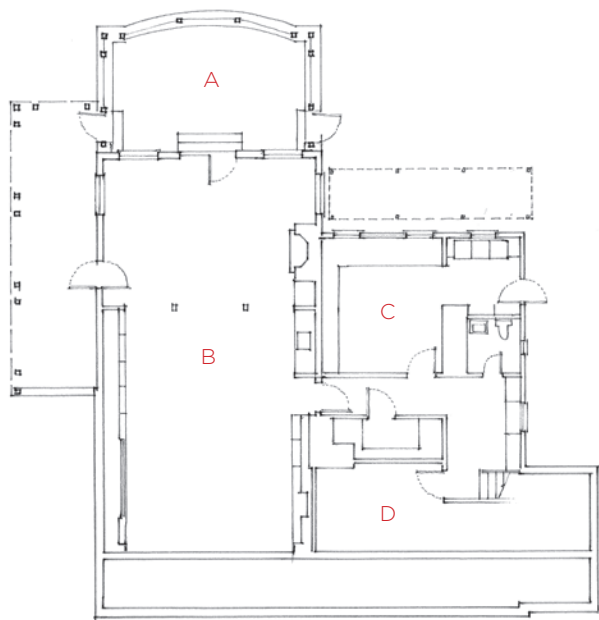
The front porch's carpet is a custom design by Bourgois and made by Galerie Diurne in Paris. On it sits a pair of chairs by the French Modernist architect Robert Mallet-Stevens (below).



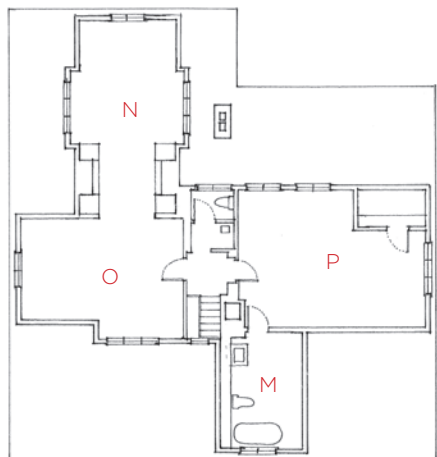
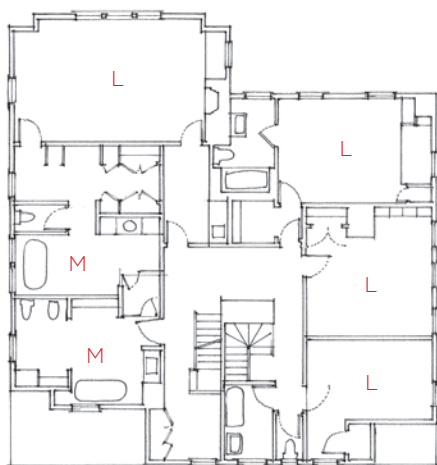
architect Catherine Lo worked to recast the building for contemporary living without obscuring its historic roots. The Parisians would take on the interior finishes and furniture, striving to find pieces, as Bourgois recalls, that were “both part of the history of design but also easy and proper for everyday life.” For his part, Wagner, whose Eider Construction is the building and maintenance firm of choice on Prouts Neck, faced a landmark building with good looks and good genes but “terrible structural deficiencies.”

Orson Welles once said, “The enemy of art is the absence of limitations.” Given the numerous limitations faced by the team, it is safe to say that art was not threatened during this project. One of the most significant obstacles was an informal but unbreakable rule laid down by the summer community: no construction, not even painting, from June 15 to September 15. Wagner has grown accustomed to this unwritten rule, having worked on many of the 170 homes on the Neck—but this was a big job. To address major structural issues, he and his crew had to insert thirty-two pieces of steel, including a new ridge beam in the roof. The enclosed front-porch floor, concrete over deteriorating wood joists, “had sunk five inches and counting; we were scared to walk on it,” Wagner recalls. The basement was raw earth and half occluded by water-oozing ledge, and the new plan called for turning it into conditioned space with a state-of-the-art media room.

Displaying the characteristic unflappability of a good builder, Wagner shrugs when recollecting the project. “We always had a roof over our heads,” he says. Throughout the fall and winter, the crew gutted and rebuilt the house. Modern systems went in, including a geothermal heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning system. Every window was replaced with an exact replica, down to the distinctive angular muntin profiles. The front porch was reclad in cypress paneling, and salvaged heart pine was matched to the original flooring. Van Dam modified the roof to add living space to the third floor (with glorious views), designed a new, curved exterior porch (with more glorious views), and rearranged the layout of the second floor to hold two guest bedrooms, the son’s bedroom, and a master suite with soaking tub, glass shower, and a modestly scaled bedroom (with, of course, a glorious view). Bourgois and Deflandre installed custom-designed sconces and pendant lights, and brought in decorative painters from France to blend the old and new



- A Screened Porch
- B Media Room
- C Laundry
- D Mechanical
- E Family Room
- F Living Room
- G Dining Room
- H Pantry
- I Front Entry
- J Kitchen
- K Smoking Porch
- L Bedroom
- M Bathroom
- N Study
- O Family Room
- P Guest Room



The once-dank basement now holds this sun-lit laundry (opposite), a media room, and a game room.

Kept in its original location at the front of the house, the kitchen (above) is a simply finished space of honed black granite, painted cabinets, beadboard walls, and the original pine floor stained dark. The lamp over the table is by the Dutch firm Droog Design.





The serene master bedroom (opposite, top) is anchored on a vintage Swedish rug from the 1930s. Ceramicist Arnelle Benoit picked up its blues when making the fireplace tiles; she also made the bedside lamps.

It's easy to tell the owner's favorite color: the watery blues of the master bedroom take on bolder hues in its private bathroom (opposite, bottom), complete with a clawfoot tub from Waterworks. Bathtub fixtures are by Dornbracht.

Beautiful stonework graces the site, all done by Bowdoin mason George Couture, who used weathered granite for the rock walls. The open porch above the pergola is original to the house; it gets screens in the summer, but its use as a cigar-smoking retreat most likely would keep it bug free anyway.



wood paneling (“They actually had palettes with thumbholes,” smiles Wagner). The final touch: upholstery and drapes by the renowned French firm Phelippeau Tapissier. Van Dam still marvels at the quality of the work. “I’d never seen anything like it,” he says while displaying the finely stitched edge of a living room curtain.

As the June 15 moratorium approached, the art of design and construction gave way to art in the traditional sense. The owners decided that their house would hold pieces by artists from Maine or who had lived in Maine at one time: Jamie Wyeth, William Wegman, Rockwell Kent, Eirene Efstathiou, and even a sculptural rug by Angela Adams, to name a few. The result is a symphony of traditional architecture, contemporary art, eclectic furnishings, and, of course, the continual, timeless wash of the sea. In an afternoon fog, it’s a place that Homer would have wanted to paint—or retire to. **MH+D**

For more information, see Resources on page 96.

Overlooking Stratton and Bluff islands in Saco Bay, the new front porch provides a vantage point Homer and Stevens would have appreciated.

