



The Classical Language

A conversation between
architects Norman Askins
and Steven Spandle

By Stephen Spandle
and Norman Askins,
with Michelle Ried Moody
and Brandy S. Culp

Two practitioners of traditional design—architects Norman Askins of Atlanta, Georgia, and Steven Spandle of New York City—discuss their passion for all things classical. Both avid collectors of American furniture and other decorative arts, they share their thoughts on architecture, art, collecting, and the enduring influence of classicism in the twenty-first century.

With an interwoven history beyond their southern roots, Norman and Steven have a professional relationship that spans more than twenty years. Here, we learn how their architectural work informs—and is informed by—their love of collecting and travel. They also discuss their core belief that classicism is a language, not a style, and how traditional architecture continues to grow in popularity among clients of all ages, owing to its fundamental principles of beauty, balance, and comfort.

Loon by Frey, 2020. Ash, cedar bark, porcupine quill on birch bark, and dye; height (overall) 36, diameter 23 inches. *Collection of Catherine Stiefel, Stoner photograph.*

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Brandy Culp and Michelle Moody: Can you tell us about a meaningful educational experience that led you to practice classical architecture?

Norman Askins: My family supported anything related to education and my love of architecture. But out of all my educational experiences, the Attingham Summer School was one of the top things for me, and I went during my early practice. It was a game changer.

Stephen Spandle:: My Attingham experience was amazing and transformative as well. Norman told me about the program, and I made lifelong connections with classmates there, people I still call on to this day. The study of architecture through travel is an integral part of my practice.

BC/MM: Norman, many regard you as one of the few architects who continued to practice classicism during a time when modernist and contemporary architects dominated the conversation.

NA: For years, I used to say that when I started my practice you could put all the classical architects in Atlanta in

a broom closet. There was Philip Shutze and then James Means, who initially worked in Shutze's firm. I met him through a client of his, who took us out to lunch. Jimmy said to call him if I needed anything and every now and again, I'd call him and ask "where do you get heart pine" or "where do you get handmade hardware or old slate?" When he died, it left a real void—there was no one really practicing classical architecture here after Jimmy Means. That's when I decided to move to Atlanta and start my practice.

BC/MM: You both attended Georgia Tech. While you were students, did you feel there was an expectation—or even a pressure—to pursue modernism in your projects and careers?

NA: Well, you had to back then. I did a classical building for a final project ... I was given the lowest passing grade possible. But one of my history professors was a modernist who grew up with all the classical stuff. He encouraged me to go to UVA and do architectural history.

SS: Even when I was at Georgia Tech years later, instructors told me I couldn't do traditional design. I tried my



hand at modernism and was pretty good at it, but didn't love it. I was lucky enough to take Elizabeth Dowling's "Intro to Classical Design" course and her history classes. She eventually went on to help establish the first master of science program in classical design in the country. Betty is the person who first told me about the program at Notre Dame, where I attended graduate school, and she also introduced me to Norman.

BC/MM: Another common thread between you both is your involvement with one of the most iconic, classically inspired buildings in the United States—the White House. Tell us more.

NA: I was just a little tapper in my twenties when I worked at White House in the late 1960s during the Nixon administration. I was working for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation at the time. We started out with a project to redesign the chairs in the Cabinet Room. Then we started redesigning office spaces for people like Rosemary Woods, who was Nixon's secretary. The three-martini lunch was an everyday event back in those days. We'd make sure to do all the work in the morning because the afternoon was just a nightmare.

SS: By the time I came along the martini lunches were gone [laughs]. From 2017 to 2021, I worked on various restoration projects at the White House and the presidential retreat at Camp David in Maryland. We also designed and built the White House Tennis Pavilion. It was one of the first new, permanent buildings on the White House grounds in the last century and solved the problem of there not being an outdoor space where first families could go that was private. The donor for the Pavilion wanted to do something to improve the White House Tennis Court. As a result, Tham and I were asked to evaluate the existing conditions. The obvious need was an indoor space where one could take a break from the elements. We realized that the White House had a serious lack of private outdoor space for use by the First Family. As a result, we designed the Tennis Pavilion to be a place of respite. An indoor/outdoor space where the First Family could comfortably spend time out of the public eye.

The architectural design of the Tennis Pavilion drew inspiration from the neoclassical elements that define the White House, particularly the East and West Wings. The structure's Doric columns, fanlight windows, limestone cladding, and interior decorative elements all echo the grandeur of the White House itself. The result

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is a building that seamlessly blends into the historic fabric of the grounds.

A notable design feature is the walk-out double-hung windows that bookend the East façade of the building. These are a nod to Thomas Jefferson and his Garden Pavilion at Monticello The overall structure is patterned on an orangery, such as the one at Wye House in Maryland. Windows are painted mahogany, with a large steel door unit that runs continuously behind the limestone column screen. In pleasant weather, the entire East façade can be opened up for a direct connection to the tennis court.

BC/MM: There remains an ongoing debate between architectural language and architectural style. Classical architecture is sometimes described as a style—do you agree, or do you feel it is a language?

NA: Many things fell in the ditch, along the way in history. But classicism has managed to survive. Classism is not a

style. It’s a language. That’s why so many people love it, even though they may not know why.

SS: A language! As a language, classicism can be used by anyone, and it is readily adaptable. It invites you to judge beauty on its own merits. Beautiful things are beautiful things, period. And that’s timeless.

BC/MM: What do you think the future holds for classical architecture?

NA: Young people want decent furniture and traditional design, but they don’t want it to look like “grandma’s house.” You have to young-it way up. I do edgy trims that are not classical but have classical proportions. You’d be amazed how sexy it is.

SS: Yes, “stripped down” classicism is getting a lot of attention. It’s about the mix. About making it look fresh. We have a client who bought an outdated penthouse apartment in a historic building on Riverside Drive in New York. They

and the interior designer wanted a very clean, fresh look, but something that you couldn’t “date.” So, the new design has a very 1920s aesthetic that looks back to David Adler and Francis Elkins—stripped-down classicism.

BC/MM: Is there any single house or building to which you always return for inspiration?

NA: My favorite house is Beauport, the Sleeper-McCann House in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

SS: We share that. When I moved to Boston, Norman told me Beauport was one of the best house museums he had ever visited, and I had to go. Beauport is a precedent that I return to over and over, and I visit whenever I have the chance. The floor plan is higgledy-piggledy—it makes no sense whatsoever, but each room is spectacular in itself. And the collection is wonderful. I reference the rooms in my work.

And I went on a night tour with the Institute of Classical Architecture and Art, and they turned on all the period

lighting. The fixtures were all original to Sleeper’s design. It was magnificent—all those punched-tin lanterns. Now I buy antique lanterns all the time!

BC/MM: Do you think your interest in classical architecture has influenced the way you approach your collections and collecting?

NA: You need things appropriate to the architecture. I live in an Italian-revival house that I designed, and the objects on the upper floors reflect that style. You see, my wife had European stuff and I had Americana, so mine went to the basement. My basement is my American wing.

SS: I got to know historic houses through house museums, and most of them were furnished with beautiful and appropriate collections. In my mind growing up, great architecture came with great objects, things that fit within the architecture and looked perfect in the space.

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As circumstances allowed, I started buying objects I just thought were pretty, and then I started collecting more seriously, based on more informed criteria. That's how collecting works. You start with objects that are attainable at one point in life and then as better items become accessible, you can trade up.

BC/MM: Do you think that being a collector has influenced your architectural practices?

NA: I won't give my clients "un-furnishable" rooms! I think about spaces and how objects will live in the spaces that I design. When I'm doing schematic design, I always draw in the furniture. We all know there are architects who have designed impossible rooms to arrange. **SS:** I absolutely look at objects as precedent in my architectural practice. I am constantly looking at furniture details in museums, house museums, and private houses. Furniture profiles can inspire beautiful cabinetry or a kitchen design. We always look to the decorative arts for inspiration.

BC/MM: You have both mentioned a passion for books and collecting books. How are books a tool of the architect and should architects study precedent?

NA: I love architectural monographs, from which you can study the plans. I tell my office that I don't lend out books because I never see them again, but then in the next sentence I say, "You take this book, go home, and study why this looks good. Why did they do this? Try to figure it out." I also say you absolutely must measure architecture to understand architecture—to get the nuances. You can learn the good, the bad, the ugly. I've measured a million houses, and I learn something every time I do it.

SS: I agree; sometimes it is about learning what you shouldn't do as much as what you should. Study the details. Books help you train your eye and learn about historical precedents. Building a good library is essential for all classical architects.

BC/MM: In a word, what's the most significant takeaway for enthusiasts or practitioners of classical architecture.

NA: Passion!

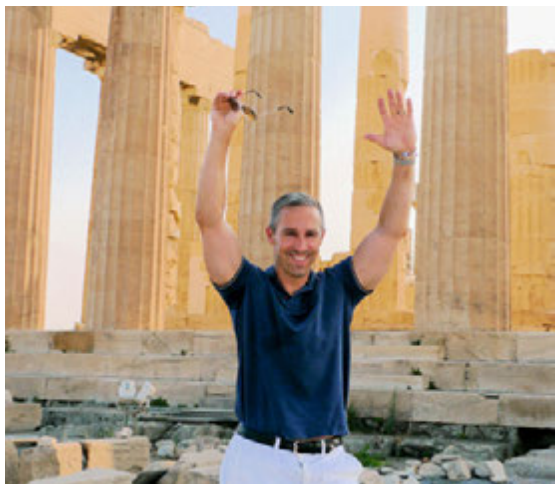
SS: I agree! I absolutely think that if you are passionate about something and you believe that it can happen, it might happen.

For further information about Steven W. Spandle and Norman D. Askins, please visit swspandle.com and www.normanaskins.com/

BRANDY S. CULP, whose writing has appeared in the Magazine Antiques among other publications, serves as chief of staff and curator at Steven W. Spandle Architect.



GUEST EDITOR'S LETTER



While speaking recently with a friend and trying to explain the challenges of choreographing the issue of *The Magazine* ANTIQUES now in your hands, I chuckled when she responded, “It’s like you’re putting together a brilliant dinner party.” So be it. Despite having written and photographed countless magazine articles and over sixty books on design, architecture, preservation, and agriculture, I have never had the opportunity to compose an entire issue of a magazine. I have, however, always gravitated toward an informed and interesting mix, so here we go!

I began composing the lineup of this issue while looking back on a 2010 trip to Athens, Greece with my father, Carl and my son, Elio. With obsessive, almost maniacal curiosity, I had read and plotted out the trip for months before leaving, familiarizing myself with the subtle nuances that the deliberate and meticulous “refinements” implemented by the architects of the Parthenon in the fifth century BC had contributed to the history of architecture. Upon observation in Athens, I witnessed for myself the curvature of the stylobate of the temple, and the entasis of the Doric columns seen behind me in the photograph shown above, and I officially became a Philhellene.

With the architectural vocabulary of ancient Greece fresh in my mind, I returned to the United States, where I went to see what was soon to become our home, Staats Hall—a Doric Greek Revival marvel in Dutchess County, New York. It had been built in 1839, the year that photography was invented concurrently in both France and England, and it was on a street that contained my Dad’s nickname. Listening to the universe, I bought it immediately.

I then jumped into the challenging abyss of restoring a historic home and beginning a collection of classical American

furniture to furnish it. I started buying very slowly at first while we were working on restoring the house. My eye had become well trained while first collecting Amish quilts and restoring Caucasian carpets as a kid, frequenting the flea markets at Clignancourt in Paris and the photography sales at Sotheby’s in college, later discovering mid-century French architects’ furniture, and finally putting together a very unexpected collection of nineteenth century photographs of veiled women in the Levant. All this energy seemed to dovetail with my areas of study or travel.

By the time my son was ten, he and his friends were well acquainted with lions, eagles, serpents, sphinxes, and medusas due to the scavenger hunts at Staats. You will read more about his experiences growing up with a father who dragged him to historic sites and museums on page (?).

Through my work writing for *Interview* in college, then photographing for *Vogue*, *ELLE Decor*, *Architectural Digest*, and presently at *The World of Interiors*, I have met the most illuminating and learned collectors as I evolved from shooting fashion to shooting Interiors, architecture, and travel. The clients that I have the most fun with willingly explore the odd stories that we all have accrued on our paths on the search for our personal Holy Grail. Which brings me to several questions that continue to fascinate me: how and why do atypical collections come together? What is the driving force, psychosis, or even primal trauma that plays a part in putting together a truly important or unprecedented collection? I have specifically asked all the writers in this issue to dig in significantly deeper than one might expect to offer the reader some profound insights into what passions and curiosities are explored and, if ever, satisfied. Our homes are often the repository of our collections, and they can also be magnificent opportunities for self-expression.

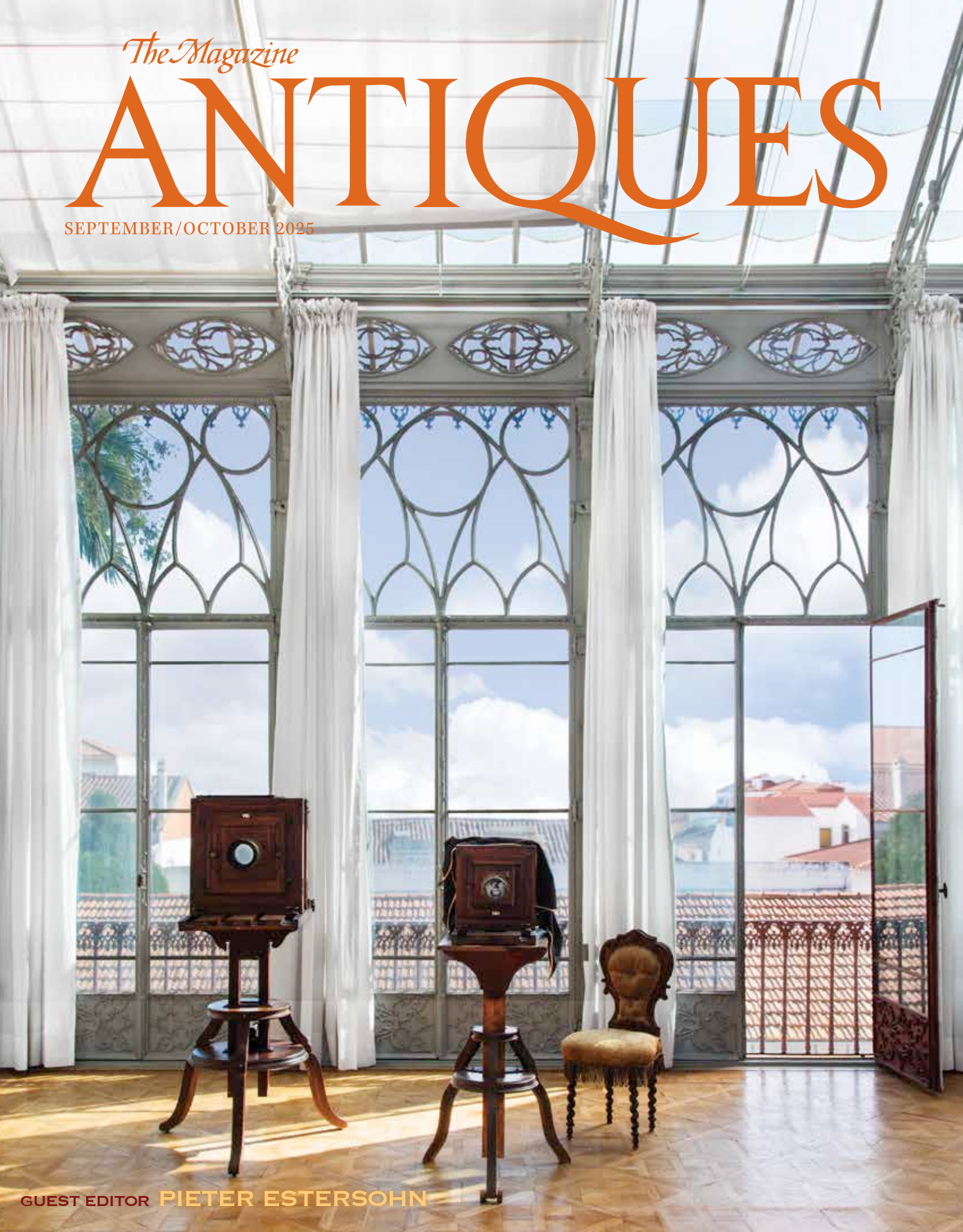
Putting together this issue has been a wonderful experience, as I’ve had the opportunity to explore these themes through photography, which you will see in the pages of this issue. I have felt supported by the entire team of editors, publishers, and art directors who miraculously pivot with each guest editor’s perspective and approach. Many dear friends have been generous enough to share their wisdom, homes, and skills here, and to join the guest list of this metaphoric and as you will soon see, literal party inside these pages. Dinner is served!

Pieter Estersohn

The Magazine

ANTIQUES

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2025



GUEST EDITOR **PIETER ESTERSOHN**