

STEPHEN KNOLLENBERG

A Michigan Cottage is Stripped Down to Become a Serene Setting for Folk Pieces

Text by Susan Sheehan | Photography by Gordon Beall

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Long story short: In 1994 a young man attends a party at a cottage in Douglas, Michigan. The cottage is “terribly decorated” but, he recalls, “had a magical quality.” Two years later it is sold. When he revisits it in 1999, the cottage is again on the market. It is still painted in vivid colors that don’t appeal—coral red and hunter green. By now the young man, Stephen Knollenberg, has become an interior designer, based in the Detroit suburb of Birmingham. The time is right for buying a cottage “with lovely bones” in a wooded setting, sitting on a bluff overlooking a golf course. Lake Michigan is just three blocks away, Birmingham a two-and-a-half-hour drive. The cottage will become his and his then-partner Arthur Jones’s weekend residence.

“The first several years were spent remedying the sins of the past,” Knollenberg says. “The flagstone fireplaces in the living room and den had been painted hunter green and camel. They were sandblasted as soon as I could pick up a phone and were restored to their natural

state.” The walls and ceilings—most are tongue-and-groove pine paneling—were primed and given multiple coats of white paint. “Nearly all the ceilings are vaulted—the living room is 17 feet high at its peak—which is pleasantly unusual in a 1940s cottage. I admired the architecture of the paneling, and once the cottage had been whitewashed, it seemed to regain what I imagine to have been its original character and charm.”

The floors in the main rooms had been covered with camel-colored synthetic carpeting. This was discarded, and the random-width pegged white-oak floors were refinished and stained a dark walnut. “I replaced the metal doors a previous owner had installed between the front porch and the entrance hall with a pair of multipane cross-buck doors,” Knollenberg explains. “They were being used on opposite sides of the garage. I could tell they were original to the cottage, so I used them to create a new front entrance. They look as if they’ve always been there.”

Douglas and the adjacent Saugatuck are in Allegan County, in western Michigan. Both have a “bohemian” flavor and “happenings” that remind Knollenberg of Provincetown and other sea spots on Cape Cod, he says. He purchased the early-20th-century five-legged table that now centers the entrance hall at an Allegan County antiques show. While visiting the Cape, he found the copper lantern that is suspended above the table; it had been a streetlight in 19th-century Boston. “When I was in Paris, shopping the fleas at Clignancourt, I bought a wood folk art walking stick,” the designer says. “Ironically, it looked very American.” The carved snake-encircled piece, mounted on a stand, is on top of the table.

The entrance hall leads to the great room, another study in black and white with forged-iron accents, the designer’s childhood piano—a dark-walnut Wurlitzer—and two sofas slipcovered in off-white linen. A 19th-century black leather nailhead trunk he acquired in London serves as an end table. The objects on the walls reflect Knollenberg’s affinity for one-of-a-kind pieces and for three-dimensional art. A running-horse weathervane and an arrow weathervane seem to travel above the piano. “I’m attached to folk art weathervanes,” he says. On another wall is a large framed 19th-century wool flag. “I like the ‘What is it?’ question it poses and its graphic sensibility,” he explains. “I have a passion for old yachting flags, and I collect trunks and canes.”

The living area is separated from the dining area by a pair of draperies that hang from a beam; the upper sections are white sailcloth; the lower sections, tobacco-colored suede. In the dining area, an assortment of chairs surrounds a nine-foot-long English refectory table. Knollenberg is particularly fond of a Directoire tiered chandelier he bought for the room at a shop in Birmingham. “I had it de-electrified,” he says. “Look at the gilt-lead stars that act as counter-weights to hold the candle cups in place. On Thanksgiving, when I invite family and friends, I close the draperies to obscure the dining area and kitchen while the meal is being prepared. When the turkey is ready to serve, the candles are lighted and the draperies are opened for holiday drama.”

The cottage is so privately sited that just one room, a guest room, has a window shade. Even the windows in the master bedroom are unadorned. Camel wool-felt hangings around the tester bed can be pulled to keep out morning sunlight.

The kitchen is the only room in the cottage that was gutted. Cobbled wood tiles set in concrete replaced ceramic floor tiles. “The tiles are sections of walnut trees of varying diameter with the bark left on,” Knollenberg notes. “They’re sliced up like cookie dough.”

All the appliances were replaced except one: a Frigidaire Flair range installed by the original owner in the early 1960s. “I designed the kitchen around it,” Knollenberg says. “The burners are in a pull-out drawer. The oven doors open like the gull-wing doors on a DeLorean car.” He added two skylights and a gridded window to the kitchen to match those in the den.

Now Knollenberg’s cottage “has a strong American iconography running through it,” he says. “I took folk art pieces and gave them a clean and modern backdrop.”

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