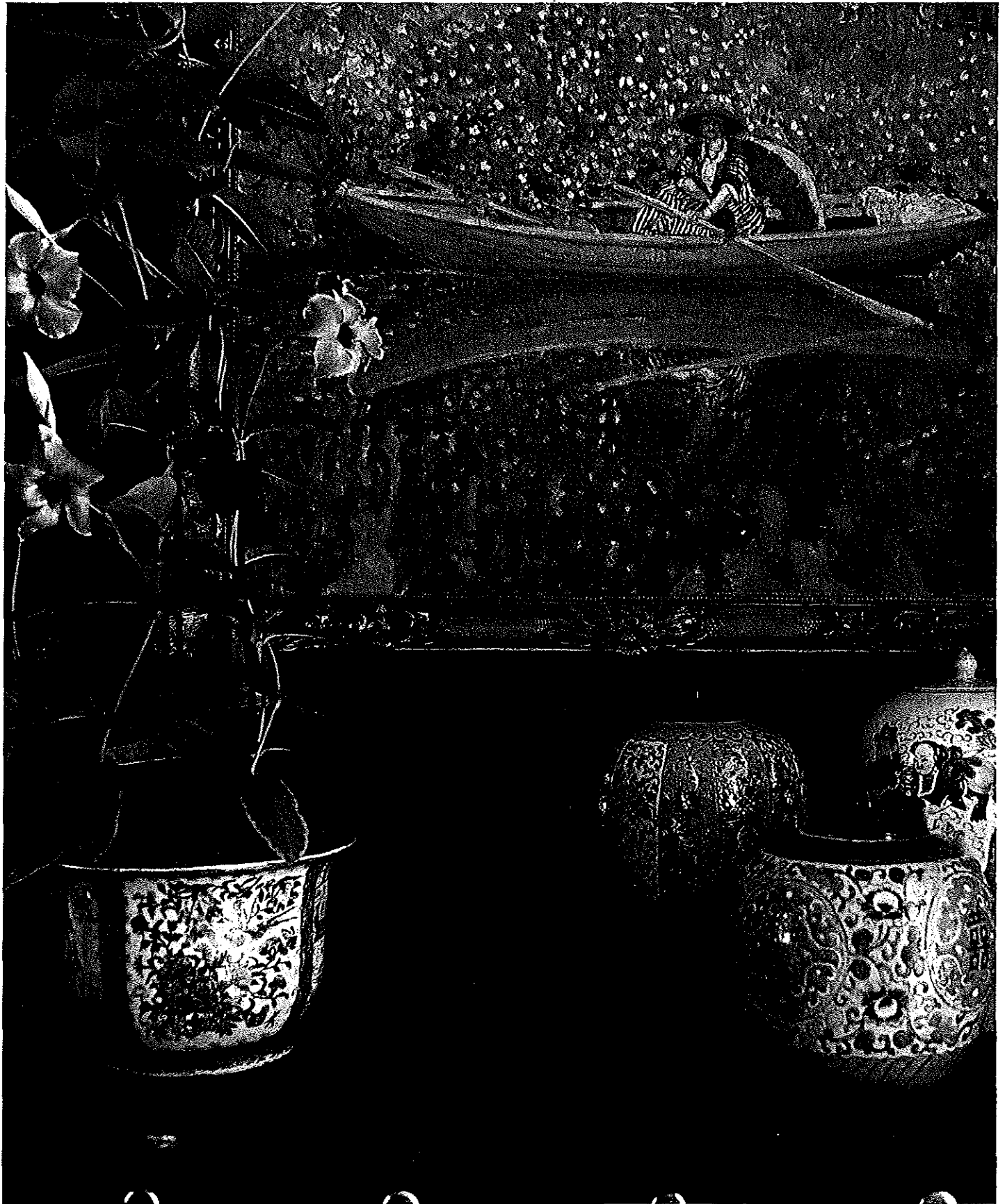
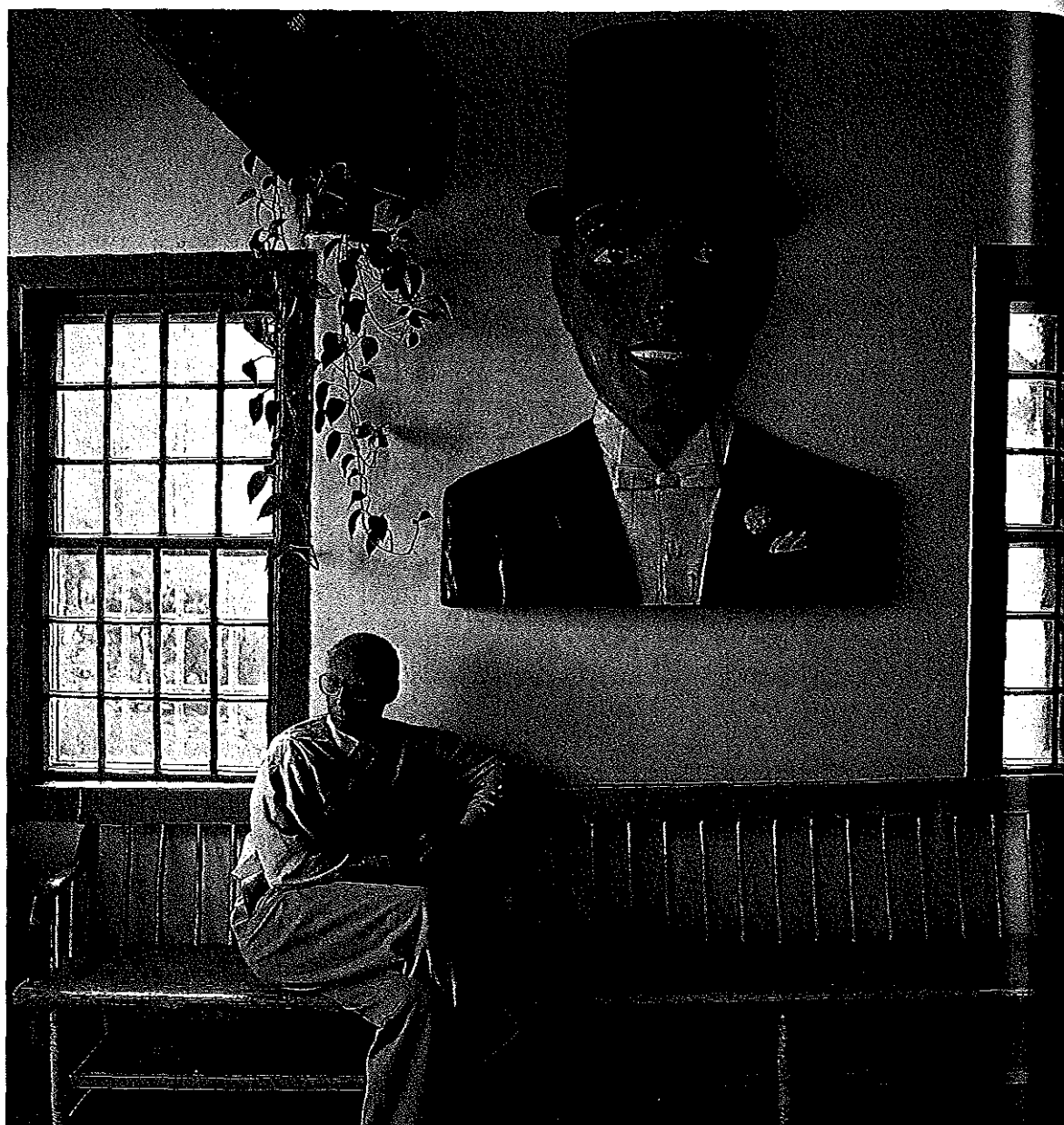


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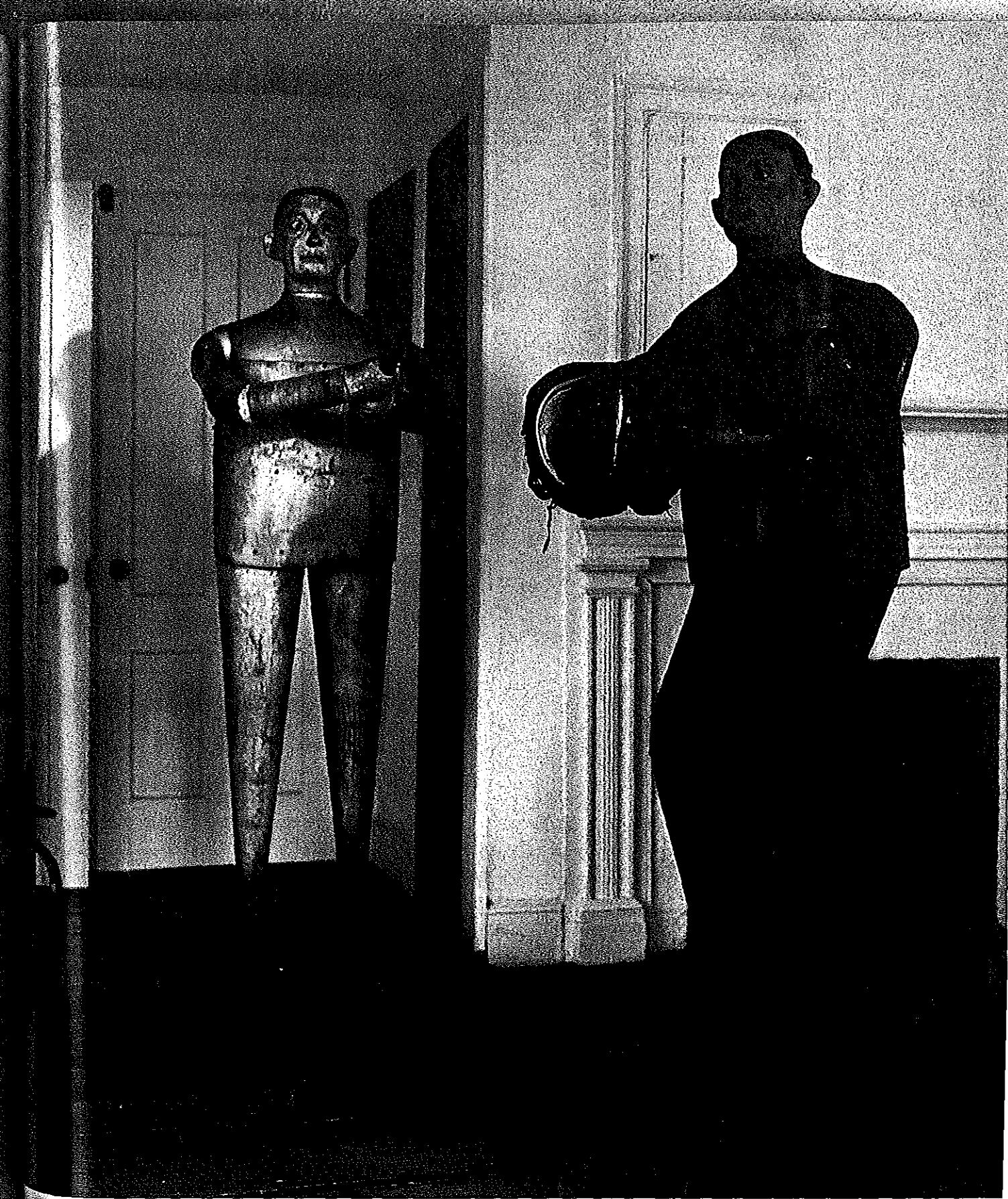


Connecticut Folk Tale

*Allan Katz's Astonishing Collection
Enlivens His 1770 House*

TEXT BY NICHOLAS FOX WEBER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DERRY MOORE

WHEN ALLAN KATZ discusses the folk art figures and advertising art that animate his Connecticut farmhouse, he gives a veritable course in American history. These are not just cute objects, and their owner is no ordinary collector. Katz provides a wealth of information about where each piece is from as well as the role it played in people's everyday lives. Standing in a sweatshirt and sneakers in his living room as he points out the subtleties of a barbershop pole, he sounds more like an expert on nineteenth-century Viennese porcelain discussing the nuances of Meissen than the outspoken



OPPOSITE: Allan Katz, a collector and private dealer in American folk and advertising art, sits on a circa 1880 New England church bench in his 1770 farmhouse in Connecticut. The painted relief trade sign above is circa 1915. "The sign is clearly recognized by everyone who sees it as early-twentieth-century Pop art," he says. "It's way ahead of its time."

ABOVE: The keeping room plays host to metal figures made in the 1920s by the Strike 'em Out Baseball Company of Boston. "The figures were electrically automated," Katz says. "When a plate in the catcher's mitt was hit, his eyes lit up and steam emerged from his nose and mouth. They remain incredibly strong examples of minimal design."



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collector of tin and wood he really is.

Allan Katz is, in fact, a former New Yorker who attended the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut before joining his college roommate to start an electronics business in a suburb of New Haven. His relationship with folk art began when he acquired a few pieces in his spare time; today it is his abiding passion. He sold his business, and in 1982 he bought a 1770 house not far from New Haven that he has enlarged and modernized as a showcase for his collection. Katz is also a private dealer—working primarily through three antiques shows a year and on an individual basis with a small group of clients.

Commenting on a life-size cast-iron advertising figure that he calls the VegaCal man, Katz reveals the knowledge and vision that underlie his pursuits. The VegaCal man stands behind the house in the garden amid neat gravel paths and flowering shrubs. It has two opposite faces, like the ancient Roman deity Janus, and it is emblazoned with raised letters that read VegaCal Gets the Bile on one side and VegaCal for the Liver on the other. "VegaCal was one of those internal hooches meant to give people vitality and strengthen their livers," says Katz. The company developed these cast-iron men as "a free gimmick" and distributed them to farmers in Alabama for use as scarecrows. But few are known today. "During the Depression, the iron was worth money," he adds. "Then there was the scrap bucket. I'm told it was really something: The scrap bucket went down the street, and you threw all your metal into it—for the war effort."

Like many of Katz's prize possessions, the VegaCal man fits in perfectly with a modern aesthetic. He feels that it would do as well with a few other pieces in a streamlined glass-and-steel house as it does here. "I like

things that transcend the time period they were made in," he remarks. "I have this goofy rule: If you walked into the Museum of Modern Art this morning and saw one of these pieces, it wouldn't look out of place. People would just say, 'That's neat. Who made it?'"

Katz is most attracted to the sort of folk art that inspired modern painters and sculptors. "A lot of folk art formed the roots of what we see today. This material was discovered forty years ago, but only now are we realizing how much it influenced what contemporary artists are doing." He mentions sculptor Elie Nadelman, who collected folk art and who was strongly influenced by it. The VegaCal man, in fact, could easily be a cousin of the man in Nadelman's *Tango*. Katz values pieces of this sort—"things that are lean and mean and minimal." These are the objects, he maintains, that will dominate the collecting of Americana in the future.

Katz applies his knowledge of purpose and his eye for quality to most everything he owns. Pointing to a circa 1845 trade figure in the garden, an imperious cast-zinc lion with one paw atop a large anvil, he says, "That lion was in Petersburg, Virginia, on the roof of Charles Leonard's Hardware House—the biggest hardware store in the South—and it witnessed bloody battles when Lee and the Southern troops fought the Union troops." He provides vintage photos of the store to prove his point; nothing is hearsay.

Art with a commercial association is another area Katz has long been interested in. He has one of the largest collections in the country of advertising art printed on tin from stone lithographs. These are a rarity—there were only half a dozen places in the country that did this sort of work between 1872 and 1895 "in the shop guild system," he says. Katz also has a

The low ceiling in the living room was removed to open up the space. A circa 1888 oil-on-canvas sign for Beamish Faultless Night Robes, which probably served as a shade for a factory window, was found in San Francisco. The rare cigar-store Indian princess with crossed legs, which is signed "S. A. Robb," is also from about 1888. The birdcage inspired by the U.S. Capitol is thought to be circa 1876. Over the mantel is a circa 1875 tin advertising sign. The drop-leaf table is Hepplewhite.



A circa 1880 soldier trade figure stands at attention in the dining room. On the wall is a circa 1875 lithographed-tin sign advertising Green's malarial medicine. "These signs correspond to the folk images of the day," notes Katz. The rare late-19th-century carved eagle is by John Haley Bellamy. The Heinz crocks and firkins are from about 1883 to 1906.

"I like things that transcend the time period they were made in," Katz remarks.



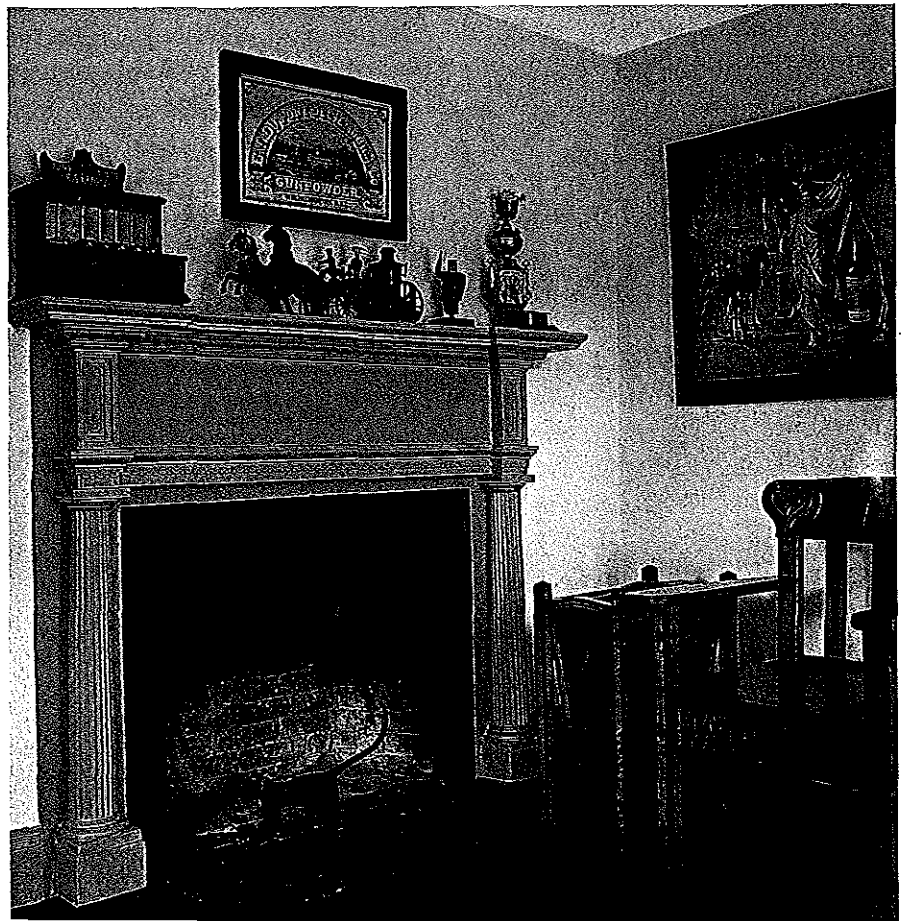
ABOVE: The office contains furniture created between 1918 and 1931 by Norwegian-born artisan Chris Moe. "He made the suite from over one hundred thousand pieces of wood," says Katz. "Everything has an American history theme." The Indian tobacco figure is circa 1875.

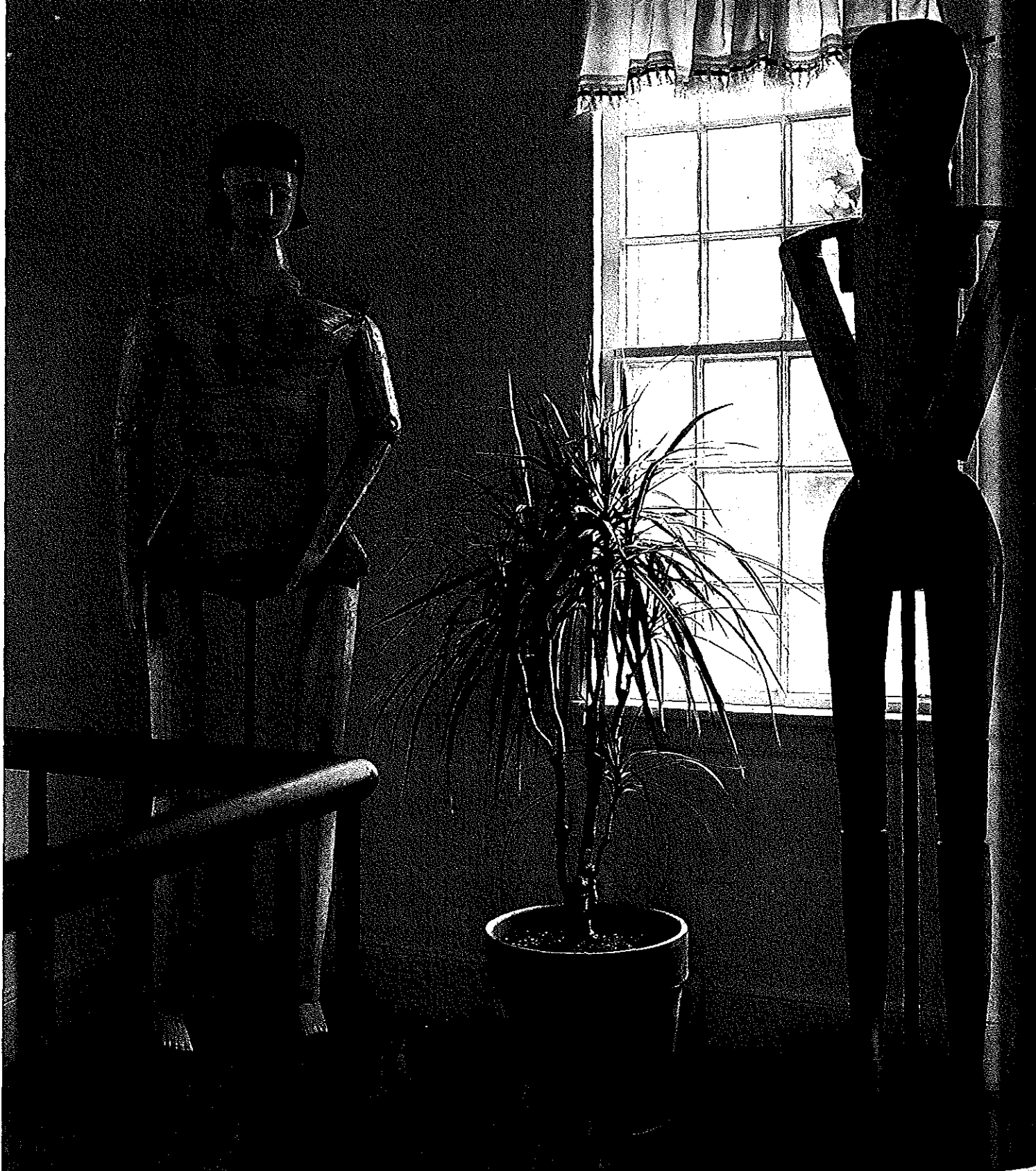
number of pieces printed on tin by screen lithography, a technique first used at the turn of the century, "when the need for quantity changed the process," he explains. But the pieces made from stones are unquestionably superior, showing a richer color and a greater visual depth. One stone litho on tin in Katz's dining room was an advertisement for Hinckel Lager Beer made between 1875 and 1880. It is a vivid scene of a rescue at sea. "The concept is that the people in the lifeboat are getting off of hard liquor, which is represented by a large sailing ship labeled *Old Bourbon*," he says. "*Old Bourbon* is in disrepair, ready to sink. In the distance, you can see the

Hinckel Lager schooner, coming to rescue the people from the throes of whiskey. On the lifeboat there's a French sailor, an Irishman doing a jig, an English sailor, a Portuguese or a Spaniard in a peasant outfit, a black man and Uncle Sam—all meant to appeal to the population of upstate New York, where Hinckel Lager was brewed. The origin of Uncle Sam was said to be upstate New York, and this is one of his earliest representations in advertising."

To Katz, the future of the folk art market is in connoisseurship. "People will be paying for age, surface and integrity," he says. Katz himself has striven to assemble a collection that reflects these qualities. He has one piece that he believes to be the only carved wood trade soldier sign in existence, remarkable because of the detail of its back as well as its front. "It actually belongs in the realm of sculp-

BELOW: A chair and a magazine rack by Moe are in a corner of the office; above them is a tin advertising sign from 1904. A tin sign from circa 1875 is over the mantel, which is lined with such objects as a circa 1890 token dispenser and a circa 1880 cast-iron toy fire engine.





Carved and painted pine mannequins from about 1920 highlight a stair landing. "They came from a dress shop in upstate New York," says Katz. "The owner probably decided to make his own rather than buy them. They're truly transitional pieces in that they're from the twentieth century yet they were done with a real nineteenth-century spirit."

Katz has one of the largest collections of advertising art printed on tin from stone lithographs.



nineteenth-century lithographed-tin containers used for tea and cough drops and other comestibles. It is difficult to find so many in good condition since most deteriorated, rusted or were thrown out, or else the ink, which was laid on heavily, popped off. Katz sometimes discards certain objects, periodically culling the collection to make room for other pieces. Similarly, rather than having many examples of redware, he has only three, but they have extraordinary decoration and are in mint condition.

He also has a nineteenth-century molded copper weathervane that might easily win "best in show." In pristine condition, it depicts a chief of the Nipmuc tribe about to shoot an arrow. He is standing on a larger arrow that is itself the vane's directional pointer. "You see the tension in the bow—there's strength and power

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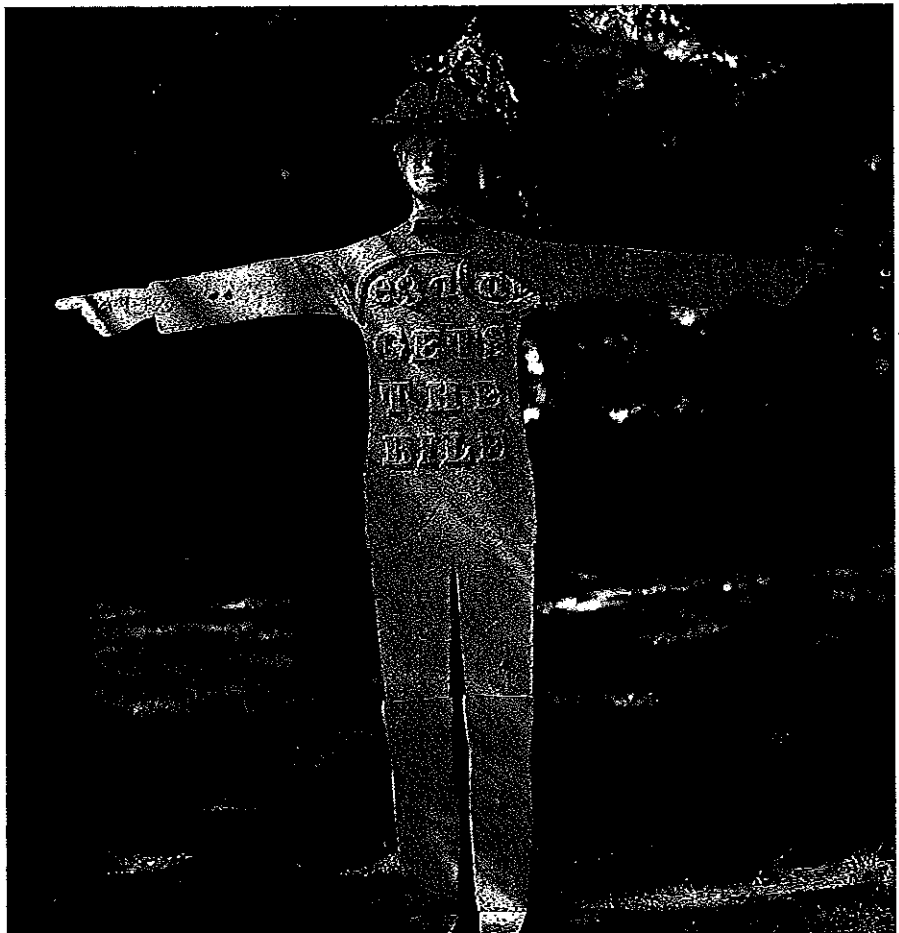
BELOW: A life-size circa 1915–20 advertising figure in the garden extols the virtues of Vega-Cal. "Naturally, during both the Depression and World War II many cast-iron pieces were stolen and melted for scrap," Katz explains. "Three or four are known to have survived."

ABOVE: The banjo chair and the tambourine stool in the master bedroom are from about 1875. "They're wonderful conceptual folk pieces," Katz says. Painting is from 1874. The circa 1830 painted blanket chest is from Vermont. On the mantel is a circa 1830 redware jar.

ature," he says, as opposed to being one of those shop signs he likens to "a Texas chain-saw murder."

Sometimes what enables a commercially intended object to exist as sculpture is, above all, the way it's displayed. In the keeping room off the dining room, arcade game figures of a batter and a catcher made by the Strike 'em Out Baseball Company of Boston in the 1920s do indeed qualify as anthropomorphic sculptures. "They transcend what they are," says Katz. "They're very strong twentieth-century sculptures."

Katz has worked hard at refining his collection. He spent about twenty years amassing his fifty or so late-



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there," Katz explains. "There's a relationship between the two arrows; it can be judged as a work of art, with artistic criteria." He has no pretense of modesty about having a piece from a major collection that was once a record breaker at auction. "Weather-vanes are one of the most abundant forms of folk art," he says, "but there is only a small group of masterpieces at the top of the pyramid, and this is one of them."

Katz also looks for what he calls "accidental art." One example is in the living room—a painted window shade, some twelve feet high, that advertises Beamish Faultless Night Robes. Without consciously having set out to produce an artistic masterpiece, its creator made one. "It's a real painting, but it's an accident that it was done in the accomplished manner it was. Given its purpose, it could have been made more cheaply, with a lot less art content. It was up in the air—perhaps on an upper story of an industrial building—and then unrolled at night as a window shade for an ad. But the sign company hired to paint it did a masterful job; they used gold leaf, they gave the letters dimensionality and they included the man's shadow." And Katz, by installing it as he has, has completed its transition into the realm of art.

The same metamorphosis is apparent in the way framed examples of tin advertising art are hung around his house. A tin sign from 1904–5 for Breinig's Oil Paint suggests the origins of Pop art. Elsewhere, in paintings and objects, there are parallels to Surrealism. And a fly chaser—an extraordinary concoction with colored celluloid ears that rotate—presages Alexander Calder's work.

But it isn't only art that Katz has sought: "It has to be fun," he says. "I like works that make you smile." And whether it's a tool for cutting out perfect thick slabs of ice cream for an ice cream sandwich or the painted store mannequins that dominate a stair landing, the pieces in Allan Katz's collection do just that. □