



a handmade tale

To update a ramshackle house in the Connecticut countryside, a former model adopts a new set of tools of the trade—including a belt sander—and takes hands-on to new heights

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The woman emerging from the vast basement workshop of her rustic Connecticut home is not what you might expect of a self-proclaimed “radical do-it-yourselfer.”

Willowy and blonde, with perfect features, Anne Bannert seems more suited to walking a fashion runway than operating a belt sander. Which makes sense, since she modeled in the 1990s for the likes of Armani and Bain de Soleil and has recently been featured in ads for Lancôme and Elizabeth Arden.

But these days, instead of entertaining in a lavish Manhattan apartment, as she once did, or dallying at benefits, swathed in cashmere, Bannert spends her off time in jeans, combing yard sales and flea markets, throwing unusual and often enormous objects into the back of her trusty 1984 Jeep Wagoneer. She is eager to strip, sand, and refinish them to adorn the former barn in Westport, where she lives with her husband, a Wall Street investment adviser.

“I just love old things, and it kills me when people throw them away,” Bannert says. “This place is filled with purchases I made for \$40, \$50—for 50 cents sometimes. I love figuring out how to bring them back to life. This house was created through Google and wandering the aisles of Home Depot.”

Raised in a tiny rural town in Germany (population: 800), Bannert developed an early appreciation for the patina of age. Her father, a geologist, moved the family to Burma, now Myanmar, for several years, and there they acquired antiques and textiles, many of which remain with Bannert to this day. She blends them boldly and effortlessly with her thrift-shop treasures.

Her eye is unerring, starting with discovering the 3,000-square-foot house itself. The 19th-century barn, situated on three acres, was converted in 1928 into a weekend home with a three-hole golf course, so

Anne Bannert outside the home she shares with her husband in Westport, Connecticut; the 19th-century barn was converted into a residence in 1928. **FACING PAGE:** In the living room, 1960s barrel chairs, bought at the 18th Street flea market in Manhattan, flank a cocktail table by Tucker Robbins made from a slab of 19th-century satinwood; the chestnut beams are original to the barn. The antique rug is Persian, and the walls are painted in Farrow & Ball’s Joa’s White. See Resources.





it is layered with some idiosyncratic history. Only three owners had ever occupied it when Bannert set eyes on the place (the sellers were a fashionable pair of sisters who added their own layer of whimsy: a candy-pink interior). "I made an offer without my husband even seeing it," Bannert says. "Which is probably the only way it would have happened." Each weeknight, he travels home from his office in the city to find his wife knee-deep in major reclamation projects on a property that looks as if it belongs in the Vermont countryside rather than tony Fairfield County. "He's patient, and I am a little relentless," she adds.

To create a canvas for her finds, Bannert oversaw the renovations herself and hand-hewed much of the work, including extricating a set of brass fleurs-de-lis from the dining room floor that couldn't be saved and laying them into the floor tile of a bathroom. She even honed marble ("It's work, but it's not a big deal"). The wood toilet seats? She whipped them up in the elaborate, professional-level shop she seems both proud of and slightly embarrassed by—"A buddy



FROM TOP: A portrait of Bannert and her husband hangs in the dining room, between a pair of 1940s sconces that are original to the house, the table is an 18th-century reproduction of a 16th-century piece, and the pew, which came from a Connecticut church, is upholstered in a mohair by Donghia; the floors are Honduran mahogany, and the walls are painted in Benjamin Moore's Bittersweet Chocolate. The Chinese bench and chest in the living room are flea-market finds, and the rug on the sofa was a family gift; the teak sculpture and lacquer-and-gold-leaf Buddhist prayer book on the walls are from Rangoon, where Bannert lived with her family. **FACING PAGE:** The two-piece sofa in the living room was found on a Manhattan street and reupholstered in velvet, the antique-bronze drum table is Burmese, and the paintings include a portrait by Camilo Cadena (top) and works by Bannert's grandfather, great-aunt, and her husband's mother. See Resources.



The kitchen holds a pair of 1930s chairs, a hand-planed pine table made in Connecticut, and a pine hutch Bannert rescued from a nearby barn; the floor tiles and shades are from Home Depot, and the original pine paneling is painted in Benjamin Moore's Grant Beige. **FACING PAGE:** Bannert made the mahogany top for the kitchen's 1950s wood-fired barbecue grill, the copper hood is from the same decade, and the steel chair was found at the local dump. See Resources.



of my contractor's was selling all this serious equipment, and I was an obvious candidate. It's horrifying how it has sprawled."

Back in the late 1920s, during the original conversion of the barn, two enormous fireplaces were added to each end, and now that Bannert has stripped the stucco from the massive stones, they form the heart of the house's main room. One mantel is a set piece for her

unique journey: The taxidermy head of a deer shot by her 22-year-old son hangs above two Burmese statues. "To me those things in this room are such naturals together—the old look of the wood and metal and the richness of the fabrics," she says.

The hip, global vibe is perhaps best captured in the kitchen, where modern conveniences are gracefully set in a handmade environ-



ment. Warm, eclectic, and suffused with brilliant light, the room has become a favorite of fashion-photographer friends who rent it for shoots. When Bannert found the 1950s indoor wood-fired barbecue grill that now occupies a central position, she knew immediately that it would give her husband, who is from Argentina, a feeling of home. She made a mahogany top for it, and with the leftover scraps fashioned a pig-shaped carving board. On the wall hangs a collection of cast-iron skillets that she has rescued and restored. "There is something about those round shapes that I can't resist," she says.

In the dining room, the scene of many a wine-fueled feast with friends, Burmese teak carvings from the 1920s are affixed to the window frame, and Home Depot shades (expertly doctored by her) let in slivers of light. Guests either sit on 17th-century chairs embellished with dragons or on a long pew found in a local church basement. The pew was a gift from her upholsterer. "He said, 'You're the only person I know who could find a place for this.'" She had him cover it in a remnant of pink mohair by Donghia that she bought for a dollar.

As she boasts about it with a self-mocking laugh, the phone rings. It's a neighbor who needs a haircut. Another of Bannert's unlikely skills, it seems. "My mother used to cut the neighbors' hair back in our little town in Germany, and she taught me how. So now I'm doing it in Connecticut. Why not?" ■

LEFT: A view of the vegetable garden and espaliered pear trees; the color for the home's exterior was computer-matched to replicate the original barn boards, which were found under clapboard siding that was installed in the late 1920s. **ABOVE:** In the master bedroom, the Indian brass four-poster came from Burma, the bedspread and linens are by Restoration Hardware, and the chest of drawers is from the 1940s; the throw on the bed and saddle blanket on the floor are Argentine, and the stool was found at a local yard sale.