

LINKED BY THE LAND

Hermitage Farm represents the shared passions and pursuits of its owners

Written by Bridget Williams

Photography by Michelle Hutchins



Louisville's preeminent power couple, Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, both spent their formative years in an agrarian setting near the Ohio River. That, Wilson is quick to point out, is where the similarities end. "My father was a dirt farmer while hers was a gentleman farmer," he says with a smile. Decades later when their paths crossed, an enduring love of and deep reverence for the land became one of the bedrock bonds cementing their relationship.

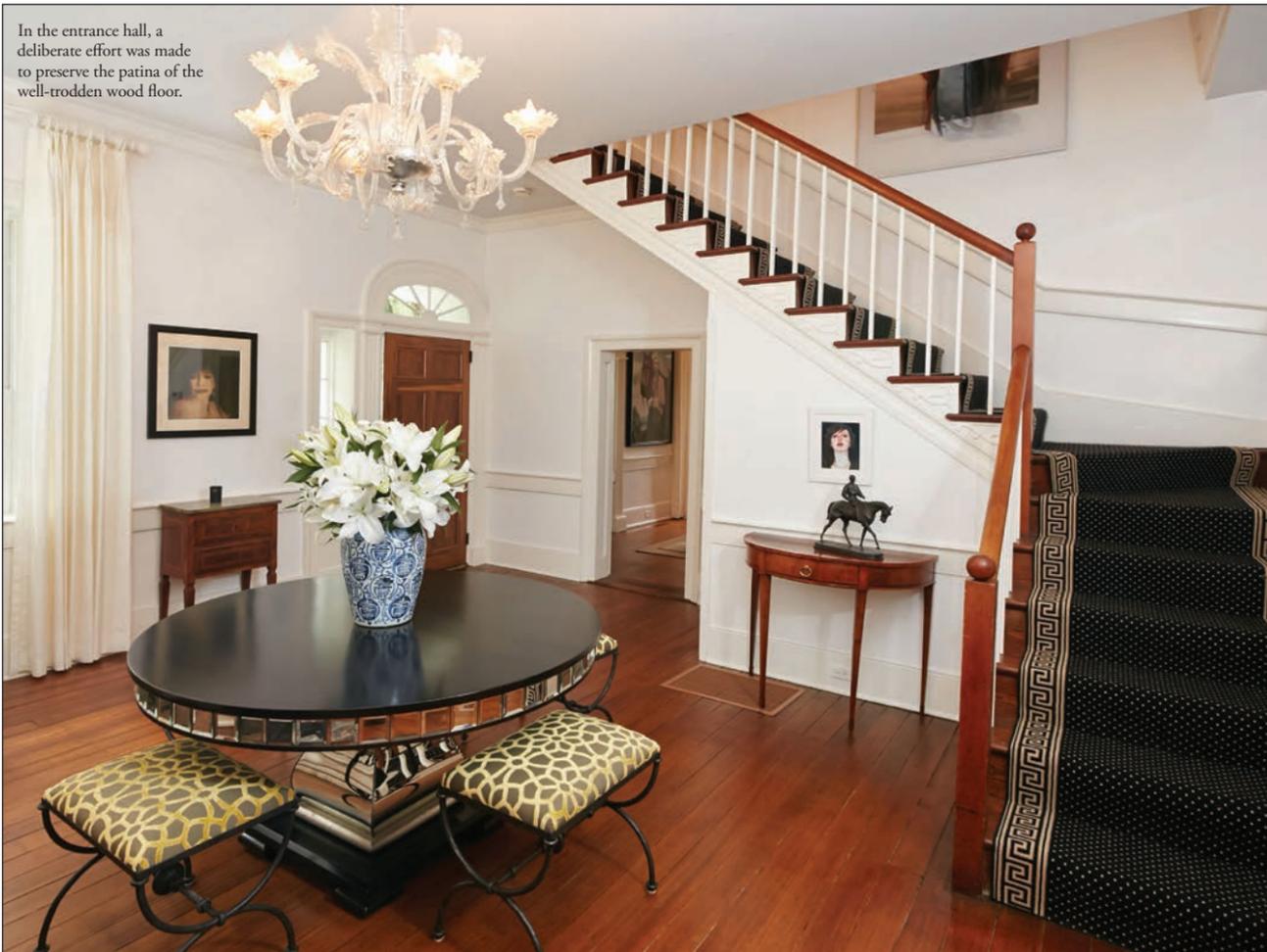
A passion for art and travel is another of their commonalities, which led to the founding of the 21c Museum Hotel brand that now boasts properties in Louisville, Lexington, Cincinnati, Nashville, Bentonville, Durham and Oklahoma City (construction on hotels in Kansas City and Miami is currently underway). "The responsibility is striking," commented Wilson. "When we opened Louisville in 2006 we were told it was a risky thing to do, but our

simple goal of sharing our art collection and helping to revitalize downtown just clicked and caught on."

With art as the heart of each property, Wilson remarked that what has been among the most gratifying experiences is when other respected institutions borrow from the 21c collection, which only adds to the provenance of the artwork involved. Wilson and Brown, along with curator Alice Stites, focus on "the art of today," produced by living artists. Notoriety is not necessarily a factor, nor is speculation. "Some pieces become more valuable, others do not, but it is a thrill when we are able to put artists no one has ever heard of on the map," he said. Adding a sense of place to each property is also important and 21c often shows the work of local artists in tandem with those of national or even international caliber.

Each room at Hermitage artfully balances ancestral with au courant. At left is *Sacrifice*, a 2009 Chromogenic print by Nathalia Edenmont. Surmounting the fireplace is *Red Dress*, 1994-1996 oil on canvas by Arsen Roje.





In the entrance hall, a deliberate effort was made to preserve the patina of the well-trodden wood floor.

The couple's primary residence, the 1000-acre Woodland Farm in Goshen, KY, serves as the embodiment of their shared interests. A desire to save the historic property from being subdivided and developed prompted the couple to purchase it in 1996. Added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1997, Woodland Farm is the single largest Kentucky property on the Register. As a working farm, sustainability is paramount in everything from raising bison to using biofuel in farm machinery. "We started raising bison 20 years ago, and the farm has grown up with the sustainable food movement and allowed us to be responsive to our hotel and restaurant guests' interest in wanting to know the source of their food," Wilson explained. The couple's decision to place an agriculture easement with Kentucky's PACE Program on the farm removes the threat of development in perpetuity.

In 2010 a similar eminent threat of development prompted Wilson and Brown to step in and preserve Hermitage, another Oldham County farm that, like Woodland traces its roots to land grants of the 1800s. Acquired by the Warner Jones family in 1936, Hermitage went on to become one of the most famous Thoroughbred farms in the nation, breeding a winner of the Kentucky Derby, Kentucky Oaks and Breeders' Cup races.

Queen Elizabeth II visited the farm in 1986. Also maintained as a working farm, Hermitage continues as a highly regarded Thoroughbred operation and Sport Horse training facility.

Coinciding with Brown and Wilson's purchase of Hermitage was Wilson's introduction to the equestrian sport of combined driving as part of the World Equestrian Games that were staged in Lexington in 2010. Similar to eventing, the sport has three phases: dressage, cross-country marathon and obstacle cone driving. A physically demanding sport, Wilson jokes that as someone who started competing in his 60's, he's the "oldest and least experienced" of the competitors. His successes belie his modesty as he earned his second consecutive USEF Pair Horse Driving National Championship title this past October when Hermitage served as a picturesque backdrop for the 7th annual Hermitage Classic, a multi-day competition. Dedication to the newest of his pursuits is evidenced by the twinkle in his eye that appears when he speaks of the sport. "I love it. It provides me with an outlet where I don't have to worry about hotels and other business details," he explained. Extremely popular in Europe where the sport originated, Wilson is looking forward to testing his mettle against the world's best who will gather later this year to compete in Slovenia.



Above the sofa is *Lucas II*, 1987 oil on canvas by Chuck Close.

A proclivity for highlighting local artists is prevalent at Hermitage. At left is *Self-Portrait as Lady Devonshire and her Horse*, a 2008 Pastel on Paper by Gaëlle Erwin. Rounding out the equestrian-themed art is a pair of photographs by Elena Dorfman: *Pleasure Park Jockey 4* and *Pleasure Park Horse #8*.





The bison head mount pays homage to the couple's Woodland Farm, which has been sustainably raising American Bison since 1996.

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Serving as the centerpiece of the farm, construction of the estate house at Hermitage was completed in 1835. Today, the handsome five-bedroom home with a separate one-bedroom cottage in a refurbished smokehouse is host to private functions and weddings. Brown and Wilson called on Douglas Riddle, President and COO of Bittners, to orchestrate a comprehensive overhaul of the home's interiors that was mindful of its history while serving as a fitting backdrop for a varied and variable array of contemporary art. "Douglas was ideal for the project because he isn't looking to put a stamp on a project," Wilson explained. "He is very attuned to how a room needs to function in a larger context."

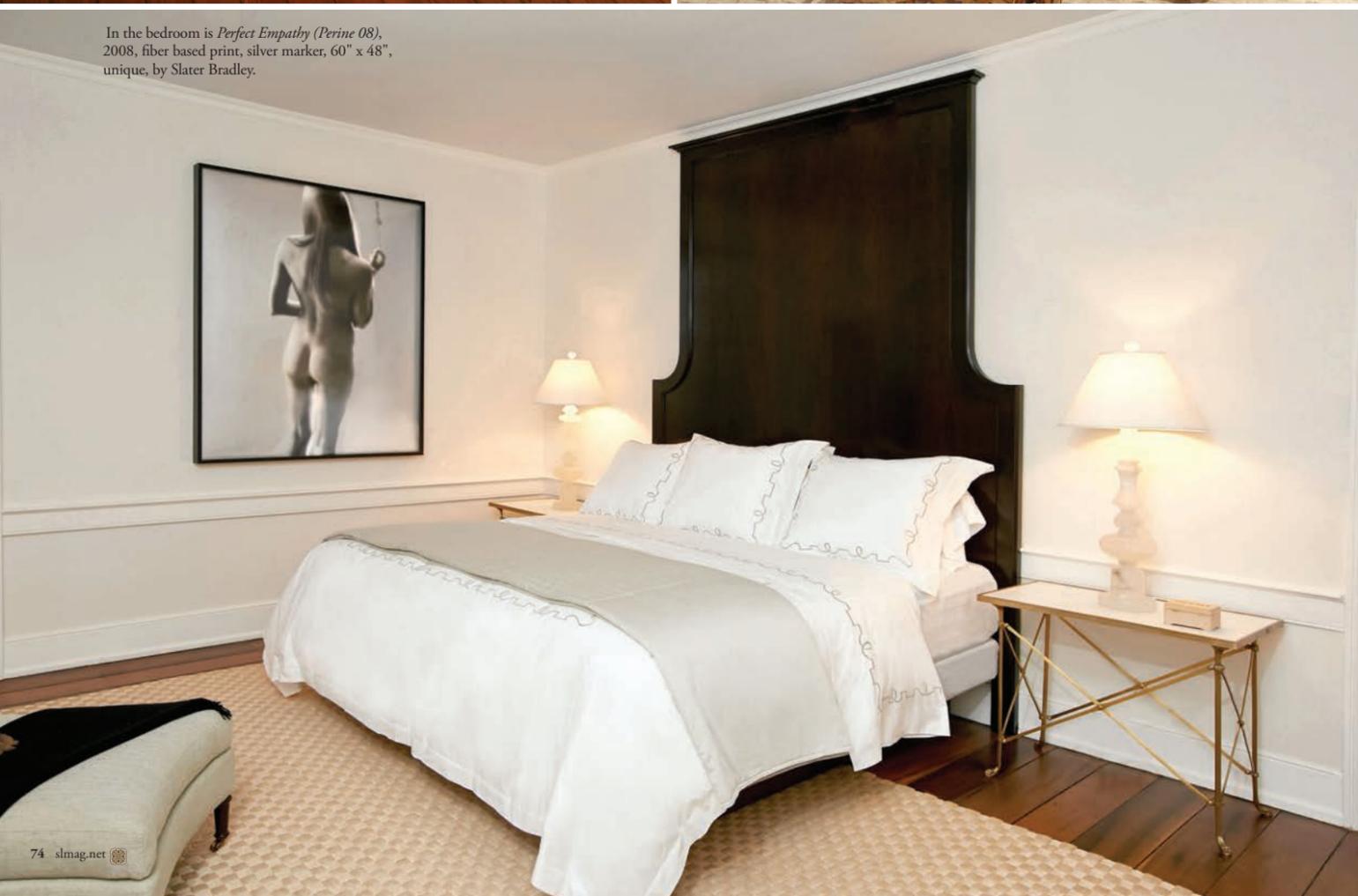
Rising to the challenge of creating a non-static environment that was adaptable to the evolving needs of the farm, Riddle

designed rooms exuding quiet confidence that support, rather than compete with artworks encompassing a variety of mediums. "Each space was designed to be secondary to the architecture and the history of Hermitage," explained Riddle, adding that he considers it a high compliment when someone says a space he designed doesn't scream "I'm decorated." Using thoughtful introductions of color and texture, Riddle successfully brought elements indicative of the surrounding farmland indoors. The supple leather of a chesterfield sofa recalls a saddle; leather and galvanized chairs in the dining room are reminiscent of buckets once used in the stables; and, the original grey color used on the front porch makes an appearance in everything from bathroom tile to accent pillows.



Above the fireplace is *peeled 1*, a 2009 dye sublimation on aluminum by Letitia Quesenberry.

In the bedroom is *Perfect Empathy (Perine 08)*, 2008, fiber based print, silver marker, 60" x 48", unique, by Slater Bradley.



The on-site master craftsmen at Bittners fashioned the dining room table from wood reclaimed from the farm.

Nods to history and Kentucky tradition are everywhere. In the entrance hall, a deliberate effort was made to preserve the patina of the well-trodden wood floor. The centerpiece of the dining room is a table fashioned by the craftsmen at Bittners from wood reclaimed from the farm. Founded around the same time the house at Hermitage was completed, the legendary French house of Hermès, whose history is rooted in saddlery and fine equestrian leather goods, provided inspiration for the design of the library.

With Steve, the wheels of creation and reinvention are always turning, and he is presently working on ambitious plans to transform Hermitage into a destination for a quintessential Kentucky experience, combining bourbon, horses and farm-to-table cuisine—all with a core mission of farm preservation and instilling the importance of greenspace. “Agriculture is the glue that binds it all together,” he explained.

Plans for the three-part project read like a love letter to the Commonwealth, celebrating all that the couple find endearing about the Bluegrass. A restaurant inside an existing dairy barn will utilize produce grown onsite and a processing kitchen will allow surrounding farms to preserve fruits and vegetables for sale in the off-season. A “ground-to-glass” bourbon experience will showcase multiple brands and the great variation found in Kentucky’s native spirit. An equestrian experience will allow visitors to get close to retired horses and learn about the history and heritage of racing at Hermitage and throughout Kentucky.

It is certainly a monumental project, but Wilson is not one to shy away from a challenge. “Steve is a creative genius and deserves even more credit than he gets,” said Riddle. “He never gets in the box so he doesn’t have to worry about thinking outside it.” [sl](#)