

# Philip Zea

2009 ADA Merit Award Recipient

by Brittany Good

Philip Zea has been selected as the recipient of the 2009 Antique Dealers' Association of America Award of Merit. Currently the president of Historic Deerfield, Inc., in Deerfield, Massachusetts, Zea has dedicated his career to the preservation of the past and to engaging others in the exploration of history, architecture, furniture, and the decorative arts. Unassuming in person, a gifted writer, and staunch promoter of museums and education, Zea has earned a reputation as one of the most respected authorities in the field.

Zea credits his family for his fruitful career. His maternal grandparents were both museum professionals: His grandfather was the curator of geology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and his grandmother began her career in marine studies at Woods Hole, Cape Cod, later working at the Springfield Science Museum in Massachusetts. Zea's father, Howard, a skilled cabinetmaker, nurtured his son's interest in history, beginning with their hometown of Meriden, New Hampshire, a village within the town of Plainfield. Located along the Connecticut River Valley, the area has a culturally rich past and was once home to artist and illustrator Maxfield Parrish (1870–1966) and landscape architect Ellen Biddle Shipman (1869–1950). Zea often worked with his father on his cabinetry projects, which, says Zea, “allowed me to get interested in the process, how things are put together, how they look.” His father's fondness for auctions and the challenge of “finding the next great treasure,” also rubbed off on Zea.

While attending Wesleyan University in the early 1970s, Zea first became acquainted



with Historic Deerfield when he spent a summer studying early American history and decorative arts in Deerfield's summer fellowship program. After receiving an undergraduate degree in American history in 1974, Zea obtained an N.E.H. internship at Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts and then worked for three years at the New Hampshire Historical Society before earning his master's in early American culture from the University of Delaware and Winterthur Museum. In

1981 he took the new position of assistant curator at Historic Deerfield under Peter Spang and Donald R. Friary.

The Deerfield museum, dedicated to the history, culture, and preservation of the Connecticut River Valley, was a natural fit for Zea. He served as its chief curator from 1987 until 1996, and then as its deputy director. At Deerfield, Zea focused on the furniture of the Connecticut River Valley and was soon recognized as an expert on the region. In 1999, Zea ventured out of his familiar New England surroundings and moved to Virginia, where he acted as curator of furniture at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation for the next two years.

“The beauty of what I do,” Zea says, speaking of his career, “is that [it] is a vocation as well as an avocation.” Possessing a vibrant mind, Zea has published books, catalogues, articles, and book reviews on a wide range of subjects. He has a long-held interest in the regionally specific Hadley chest, with its distinctive tulip and vine carving, which he first studied for his Winterthur thesis thirty years ago. He is also known for his



knowledge of clocks, and, with Robert Cheney cataloged the J. Cheney Wells clock collection at Old Sturbridge Village. One of Zea's talents is his ability to understand the many tiers that comprise the study of objects and their associated history. "Without a lot of records about the objects," he says, "one must go one on one with artifacts and figure them out." The belief that "one must understand the context, not just the thing," is fundamental to his success in his many fields of interest.

Over the past ten years, Zea's professional life has steered away from curating and toward management. As he puts it, "I used to curate furniture, base metals, and clocks. Now I curate budgets and personnel problems." In 2001, Zea began working for the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA), now Historic New England, where despite overseeing multiple



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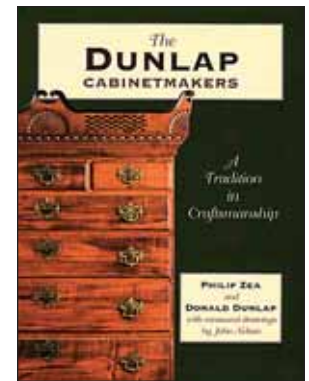
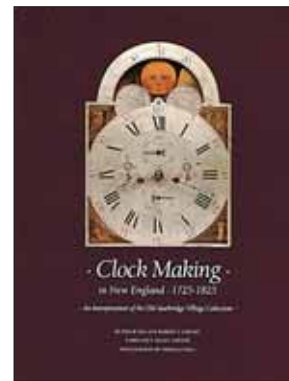
Zea as a member of the 1973 Historic Deerfield Summer Fellowship Program.

Chest with two drawers, inscribed "HD" probably for Hepzibah Dickinson (1696-1761), Hatfield, MA, ca. 1715-1720. Soft maple, chestnut, oak, white pine. Courtesy of Historic Deerfield, Inc.; gift of Dr. Ogden B. Carter, Jr. The chest with drawers was probably made as a wedding gift for Hepzibah, who married Northfield, Mass. resident, Jonathan Belding (1694-1778), in 1720.

Philip Zea and Donald A. Dunlap, *The Dunlap Cabinetmakers: A Tradition in Craftsmanship* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994).

Philip Zea and Robert C. Cheney, *Clockmaking in New England: 1725-1825: An Interpretation of the Old Sturbridge Village Collection* (Sturbridge, MA: OSV, 1992).

Instructing the 2003 Historic Deerfield Summer Fellowship class, thirty years after being a student.



departments and historic properties and managing a multimillion dollar budget, he still found time to write and lecture. In 2003, Zea returned to Historic Deerfield as its president. Although his current role leaves him less time for writing, he has no regrets. "If you get the chance to take a leadership role in an industry, you've got to try to do it," he says. Zea's fondness for his role at Historic Deerfield has only deepened over the years. "The great staff, the collective ability to stabilize finance, and the chance to broaden interest in the area," are all reasons why he considers his return to Deerfield his most satisfying accomplishment yet. @

The ADA Award of Merit is voted on by the members of the ADA (Antiques Dealers Association of America) and is presented to an individual who has made a significant contribution to the field of American antiques. The Award of Merit dinner will be held at the Philadelphia Antiques Show at 8 p.m. on Saturday, April 18. It will feature

cocktails and dinner followed by a variety of guest speakers and friends, including keynote speaker, Luke Beckerdite, editor of the annual journal *American Furniture*. The ADA Award of Merit is sponsored in part by *Antiques & Fine Art Magazine*, *Antiques and The Arts Weekly*, *The Magazine Antiques*, and Flather and Perkins Insurance. Seating is limited; tickets are \$85 per person. For additional information and reservations call the ADA at 203.259.8571 or send your request to: Antiques Dealers' Association of America, Inc., P.O. Box 529, Newtown, CT 06470.

The ADA is a nonprofit trade association. Its major objective is to further professionalize the business of buying and selling antiques. Its membership is composed of antiques dealers who are dedicated to integrity, honesty, and ethical conduct in the antiques trade. All members are required to guarantee their merchandise in writing on a sales receipt that states approximate age, origin, condition, and any restoration of pieces sold.