

# If Walls Could Talk: Hawthorne and a House From China

By FRED A. BERNSTEIN

**S**ALEM can't decide whether to be serious or silly. Just look at its newest attractions: In 2003, a 200-year-old Chinese merchant's house, disassembled in a remote village southwest of Shanghai and shipped across the ocean in thousands of pieces, went on view at the Peabody Essex Museum. A year later, Salem unveiled a life-size bronze statue of Samantha Stevens, the character played by Elizabeth Montgomery on the sitcom "Bewitched."

The site of the famous witch trials of 1692, Salem is obsessed with the occult. Among the city's attractions is the Witch History Museum, not to be confused with the Salem Witch Museum, the Salem Witch Village, the Witch House or the Witch Dungeon — among others.

Not all of Salem's witchiness is silly, though. The Salem Witch Trials Memorial is a stirring monument. And the play "Cry Innocent: The People Versus Bridget-Bishop," in which the audience may question the accused, is educational and beautifully performed.

But unless you want all witchcraft all the time, stay away from Salem in October. As Halloween nears, the town becomes a ghosts-and-goblins theme park. Picture the demeanor of Times Square on Dec. 31, packed into a small New England port.

Then November comes, and it's possible to see the other Salem. From the early 17th century until the early 19th, this city 16 miles northeast of Boston was a prosperous seaport. Its merchants created one of the finest collections of residential architecture in the country, and they filled their houses with art and artifacts from the Far East.

In 1799, they began displaying the most arresting objects at the East India Marine Society, whose building is now part of the Peabody Essex Museum.

The museum contains thousands of works of Asian art, but perhaps none is as affecting as Yin Yu Tang, a two-story house with 16 small bedrooms around a stone-floored courtyard. The building, which the owners planned to sell, and which would have probably been demolished if the museum had not acquired it, is now Salem's crowning glory.

Yin Yu Tang (Hall of Plentiful Shelter) was occupied until the 1980s by members of the Huang family, descended from a wealthy pawnbroker. Nancy Berliner, the museum's curator of Chinese art, who supervised the house's relocation, decided to keep it as it was to show the changes in Chinese family life over eight generations.

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**NEW AND OLD** Statue of the character Samantha Stevens from "Bewitched" and a room at Yin Yu Tang, a 200-year-old house from China, at the Peabody Essex Museum.

There is much antique furniture, but the room once used for ancestor worship was stripped of most of its religious accouterments during the Cultural Revolution. And there is a bright red loudspeaker that was installed by Mao's government so residents could hear official announcements, whether they wanted to or not.

You can also look for items that fit perfectly in Salem: the house is full of talismans, including small red bags filled with grain, hung on columns to ensure prosperity.

Thanks to Yin Yu Tang, it's possible, during an easy day's outing, to view the domestic architecture of 19th-century China alongside that of 19th-century New England. Houses in both societies were the domain of women and children. In Anhui province, where Yin Yu Tang was, men left at around age 12 to do business in cities like Shanghai. They generally returned to visit every few years, Ms. Berliner said. In Salem, men left for the sea and didn't return for months or years — if ever.

Until Salem began to decline in importance as a port in the early 19th century, its merchants built block after block of stately houses. Several are now on the grounds of the Peabody Essex; others are part of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site, operated by the National Park Service. One, the Nar-

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bonne House, was built in stages.

At Yin Yu Tang, by contrast, the basic layout lasted two centuries, despite vast changes in the family's circumstances. Around 1900, the family sank into poverty and was forced to turn over four rooms in the house to a creditor. And during the 1949 revolution, two rooms were confiscated by the government for use by peasant families. Perhaps it was the Acoustiguide I carried with me, but the house is so redolent of history, it's as if the walls really could talk.

From Yin Yu Tang, it's a short walk to the curiosity called the House of the Seven Gables, for Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1851 novel of the same name. Hawthorne grew up in Salem, and his book was inspired, in part, by the home of his cousin Susana Ingersoll, which the author described as "a rusty wooden house, with seven acutely peaked gables" that has "always affected me like a human countenance."

In 1908, a philanthropist named Caro-

line Emmerton realized she could raise money for charity by opening Ingersoll's house as a tourist attraction. No matter that, at the time, the house had just three gables; Ms. Emmerton and her architect restored the house, in accordance with Hawthorne's description, and arranged its contents to simulate life in the novel. That makes the house inauthentic, except that my guide, who gave her name as Kayla, was candid about the building's history, providing an authentic look at artificiality.

Behind the artifice, there are plenty of fine examples of interior design from around 1800, much of it reflecting Salem's then-burgeoning China trade. The dining room is fitted with pagoda-themed wallpaper and paintings of the ports of Canton and Macao.

To the west is Emmerton Hall, where money raised at the House of the Seven Gables is used to help children and the elderly. To the east is a garden dramatically placed at the edge of Salem's har-

bor. Over the years, three other historic buildings have been moved to the Seven Gables property, including the Georgian-style house in which Hawthorne was born in 1804.

Like Hawthorne, who often described the pleasures of walking the streets of Salem, I had spent the day on foot. But at the end of my Seven Gables tour, I hailed a pedicab. It didn't take long for the driver, a talkative 21-year-old named Steve, to tell me that he practiced witchcraft. When I murmured my surprise, he explained that "it's not about flying brooms or turning people into toads."

I hadn't seen any brooms or toads in Salem. But I had seen a Chinese house preserved with authenticity, an American house restored with artifice and dozens of other significant buildings, crowded together in a vibrant downtown. Witchcraft aside, if you love architecture, history and culture, you may succumb to Salem's magic.