A DAIRY FARM’S STORY OF SURVIVAL
In spite of the fact that we are seldom satisfied with what we see in our mirrors, looking glasses have always fascinated us—even before they were invented.

In Greek mythology, the hunter Narcissus fell in love with the image he saw in a reflecting pool, failing to realize that it was not some other hunk staring back at him but his own face. Once metallurgy was invented, early women polished copper and stones like obsidian to get a glimpse of themselves when there wasn’t a body of still water nearby. While these reflective materials weren’t as clear as a pool’s, at least you could view yourself on the vertical and not fall on your face.

Mirrors as we know them—clear glass with a metallic backing—are believed to date from the first century AD in Lebanon. Later, Venice became the center of mirror making, and it held its technology so dear that when a craftsman had to travel away from the city, his family was held hostage until he returned, lest he take trade secrets elsewhere. Since then, we’ve turned our attention instead to how they’re framed—as the view doesn’t change that much no matter which mirror we gaze into.

Winterthur Museum’s 175 furnished rooms aren’t exactly halls of mirrors, though a brief tour of a few of them finds looking glasses catching your eye and image around practically every corner.

Josh Lane is curator of furniture at Winterthur, and Ann Wagner is curator of decorative arts. Both are perfect guides for an hour or so of disappearing through the looking glass. They explain that “looking glass” was the common term used until the mid-19th century, when “mirror” became common.

Lane notes that most early mirrors were small and difficult to transport, so they were often purchased separately from the frame. As a result, several in the Winterthur collection—like those sold in antique stores—consist of two or more panes of adjoining glass housed within a single frame to make a larger mirror.

“Mirrors—especially large ones—weren’t used just as looking glasses, but also as sources of lighting,” says Wagner.

Mirrors pick up and magnify light, whether from windows, a fireplace or artificial sources. As there was no electricity in colonial and post-colonial times, mirrors often had sconces attached to their frames to reflect and magnify candlelight. Of course, this only occurred in grand homes, as many people couldn’t afford framed mirrors.

Most early American mirrors were made in England or, later, in France. One can only imagine how difficult it must have been to ship them unbroken across the ocean through rough seas, then have them transported by ox carts into the interior of the new country. American-made mirrors didn’t become common until well after the American Revolution.

The frames of most antique mirrors are generally reflections of the furniture style of the period in which they were made—Queen
Anne or Chippendale, for example—but many draw their names from their backstories. As mirrors were expensive, if an owner had the bad luck to break one, rather than trying to replace it, he might build a frame to fit the largest piece. These were called “make do” mirrors. They’re fairly common, but also fairly expensive to purchase.

"Then there were ‘courting mirrors,’ often coming in a pine box,” Lane says. “They were from Scandinavia, and scads of them were made.”

They were small, often decorated, and given as gifts by suitors in the early 18th century. Once unboxed, they could be hung in a hallway for a quick glance at how one looked before answering the door.

Freestanding mirrors that can be tilted were called “cheval glasses” and came into popularity, Lane says, during the early 1800s. “Early mirrors usually lasted only a generation or two,” he notes, before they began to lose their reflective qualities.

Originally, an amalgam of tin and mercury was used for backing clear glass. Later a silver process was used. Resurfacing a mirror still goes by the term “silvering.” In old mirrors, mercury, a very toxic metal, can actually drip out of it—and Wagner warns that laying the mirror flat doesn’t help. Winterthur is currently using a new scientific tool called an XRF spectrometer to examine its mirrors for mercury without having to deconstruct them.

H.L. “Skip” Chalfant has several antique mirrors at his shop on Paoli Pike east of West Chester, most of them in the Chippendale style. Chippendale frames are generally flat wood with decorative touches carved into the edges, although some may have a finial or a bird at the top.

“Every collector needs a Chippendale mirror,” Chalfant says.

And they are affordable. Some are signed by the person who made them, and many found locally are signed by Philadelphia cabinetmaker John Elliott. These mirrors can be purchased for a few hundred to a few thousand dollars, depending on their maker and their condition.

Several of Chalfant’s pieces, like many antique mirrors, are losing their silvering. But it’s better for a trader in antiques to leave them that way. “They’re worth more if you don’t repair them,” Chalfant says.

He displays a handsome mirror that appears a little warped around the edges. “Pine was often used as the backing, and it was covered with walnut or another wood,” Chalfant says. “But the woods age differently,” causing the warping.

How many faces have gazed into these mirrors since they were manufactured two or three centuries ago? How many balls, parties and liaisons have they witnessed from their wall-side perches? □