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An early painting by David Hockney hangs above the Biedermeier sofas in the New York living room of Mica and Ahmet Ertegun
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Photograph by Oberto Gil



The façade of Llandra Villa, above, San Jose, California. Right: A wax effigy of widow Sarah Winchester, who acted as her own architect. Far right: The many skylights were thought to have been built to dispel the bad spirits' shadows.



WINCHESTER MYSTERY HOUSE



MYSTERY MANSION

Séances with spirits convinced heiress Sarah Winchester immortality was assured if additions never ceased on what has become a 160-room California landmark

BY JOHN ASHBERY PHOTOGRAPHS BY HENRY BOWLES



A wall of cupboard doors was ideal for quick exits to fool the bad spirits

The eccentric, rambling mansion built by Sarah Winchester stands amid the sun-drenched gloom of a commercial strip on the outskirts of San Jose, California. Hemmed in by a shopping mall, movie theaters, and Mexican restaurants, it has itself become a tourist attraction, though when construction began in the 1880s it stood in open country and was soon surrounded by towering hedges that shielded it from public view. Ironically its popularity with tourists has obscured its importance as an architectural monument. Among my Bay Area acquaintances who are architecture enthusiasts, I found very few who had ever been to see it (two notable exceptions are the poet Robert Duncan and his friend the painter Jess). Most had long ago written it off as an *atrape-nigaud* for large families in Winnebagos, a sort of pre-Disney Disneyland. Yet, by a further twist of fate, this reputation has undoubtedly saved it from the wreck-er's ball or worse. A crumbling near-ruin in the early 1970s, the house is now maintained by a private group of investors that oversees both its exploitation and its (for the most part) thoughtful restoration.

Unfortunately exploitation has brought with it embellishments such as a "museum" displaying waxworks and collections of Winchester rifles, a large souvenir store that dispenses T-shirts and tote bags with the Winchester Mystery House logo, and a snack bar dubbed Sarah's Café. Horrified as she might justifiably have been by these posthumous additions, Mrs. Winchester might also have appreciated the respect shown by the restorers, who have gone so far as to leave unfinished parts of the house which may well have been intended to remain that way. And, all in all, she might be glad that her labyrinthine palace, which was seen by very few people in her lifetime (even Teddy Roosevelt was refused admittance when he came calling unexpectedly), is now giving pleasure to so many people.

Sarah Pardee was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1840; at eighteen she married William Wirt Winchester, whose father manufactured the repeating rifle that helped "win the West." Obsessed by the death of an infant daughter and by the premature death of her husband a few years later, she concluded that the ghosts of victims of the rifle, Indians in particular, were out to get her. Her fears were confirmed by a medium in Boston, who told her she would be safe only if she undertook to build a house on which work would continue eternally, night and day, in which case she could expect to live forever. Such a project was not beyond her means in 1882, when she disposed of a fortune of \$20 million and an income of \$1,000 a day. Accordingly she transplanted herself from Connecticut to the Santa Clara Valley—it is not known why she chose this particular location—and began remodeling an existing eight-room farmhouse, a project that would last until her death in 1922 finally stilled the continual noise of the hammers.

Since no one really knows why Llanda Villa, as she named it, was built as it was, (*Text continued on page 208*)



A custom staircase for the diminutive Mrs. Winchester



A view to one of many unfinished rooms



A small door by a devil-chasing window leads to a closet



Hooks held Mrs. Winchester's robes for séances with spirits



Slats added to prevent a two-story plunge



One of scores of airshafts on the roof



The switchback staircase has seven turns



Stairs to nowhere with a cupboard for crawl space

(Continued from page 151) one is forced to rely on tabloid articles distributed at the house. Sarah Winchester, the story goes, wanted to keep out nasty spirits but encourage friendly ones, and made a number of overtures toward the latter. Among these was the suppression of mirrors in the house (only two in the 160-odd rooms); a "séance room" reached through a secret door in a cupboard, where apparently the friendlier spirits gave her nightly advice on how to proceed with the building; and a belfry whose tolling bell reminded them when to appear and depart. Many of the odder devices are explained by the guides as booby traps meant to confuse evil spirits. These include certain doors too small for anyone but the proprietress (who was four feet ten); others with bars across them to trip up the ghosts; stairs with risers only two inches tall, which mount to nowhere and then descend; and another stairway which rises to a ceiling and ends there. Surely the spirits weren't all that dumb, however, and Sarah, who by some accounts was a sensitive and cultivated person, fluent in four languages, must have suspected this. A more commonsense explanation of the low-rising stairs is the severe arthritis from which she suffered, which made climbing stairs painful (the house also boasts three elevators, one rising but ten feet). This would account also for the accumulation of fireplaces and hot-air registers in a room dubbed the Hall of Fires by the management, since the dry heat there no doubt brought her some relief.

The house seems to have gone unnoticed by architecture historians except for Susana Torre in her *Women in Architecture*. Ms. Torre makes a laudable attempt to demystify the house and its designer, suggesting for example that the dead-end stairs were eventually destined to lead to rooms for nieces who never came to visit. But she offers no more evidence for her assertions than the promoters of the house do for theirs, and in the absence of any testimony from Mrs. Winchester it is unlikely that we shall ever know what she had in mind. Like the character Orlando in William S. Wilson's novel *Birthplace*, Sarah could have said of herself: "I feel that I belong to a secret society of one, and that the secret is all too safe with me."

Meanwhile, paradoxes abound in the house as it survives today. (At one time there may have been as many as 750 rooms: since the workmen had to be kept busy, destruction, or perhaps de-construction, was as important an activity as building.) Columns are installed upside down, perhaps to befuddle further those easily confused evil spirits. Accretions of thirteen occur throughout: thirteen steps here, thirteen palms lining the driveway, thirteen skylights in the greenhouse, and so forth. But at least in the case of a sink drain with thirteen drainage holes arranged in the form of a daisy, Mrs. Winchester could have satisfied her penchant for symbolism at the local hardware store, since the drain was a common model frequently found in homes of the period.

Today the highest point of the house is an observation tower four stories high. But old photographs show a forest of minaretlike towers, some as many as seven stories high. This was before the 1906 earthquake, which did extensive damage to the mansion and apparently caused Mrs. Winchester, who was trapped by debris in one of the bedrooms for several hours, to rethink her construction plans. We are told that she viewed the earthquake as a personal admonition from the good spirits, angry that too much money was being lavished on the front of the house. On the other hand, it is possible that having realized the site's potential for earthquakes, she altered her project accordingly. At any rate, she sealed off the elaborate front door with its Tiffany panels and devoted her energies to expanding the back, prudently directing this stage of building from a houseboat anchored in San Francisco Bay.

The maze as it stands today (viewed from the air, it looks like a late-Victorian village) seems a purposeful hodgepodge. One visitor described his tour of the place as "like wandering through the corridors of a schizophrenic mind." This is perhaps true of some of the gloomier parts, where windows give directly on walls, and doors open on cupboards barely an inch in depth. But elsewhere there is a strange joie de vivre: in the conservatory, for instance, with its ingenious devices for watering plants and recycling the water for the garden; in the "grand ballroom," with its dazzling marquetry

and daisy-patterned stained-glass windows set with "mysterious" quotations from Shakespeare. One of the pleasantest, brightest spots is the back door of the original farmhouse through which one perceives an airy vista of cozy and quite ordinary domestic interiors; any weirdness is the result of their random, seemingly effortless proliferation.

It is too bad that Robert Harbison didn't include the Winchester house in his marvelous book *Eccentric Spaces*, for it certainly belongs there. But his remarks on the space in paintings by the late-Baroque painter Francesco Solimena precisely evoke the mansion's air of lugubrious comedy. "For a number of reasons it is almost impossible to remember afterward what the subject of a Solimena is," he writes. "It is almost impossible to remember this when one is standing in front of it. They are indecipherable not because they are so crowded . . . but because they are deliberately decentralized and unfocused." The impossibility of orienting oneself in the Winchester house is, improbably, part of the charm. Another element is the lack of strong color. Such notes of it as there are come mostly from the exotic woods buffed to a steely glitter and combined in elaborate marquetry patterns whose effect is often one of simplicity, like the heringbone-paneled walls of the ballroom—run-of-the-mill Victorian board-and-batten gone sybaritic and slightly berserk. The impression one retains is of a strong absence of color, or a color like that of ectoplasm: even the Tiffany windows are mostly restrained and pale, while certain other windows made of large sheets of Belgian optical glass slightly magnify the palms and shrubbery outside and draw into the rooms what can only be described as an intense pallor.

The exterior of the house is now painted a rather stifling combination of olive green, ochre and tan (Victorian colors, the guide assures one). Perhaps the colors chosen by Mrs. Winchester were similarly lurid. In any case the multiplication of forms, stately at first but increasingly frenzied as one circles the house, upstages the paint job. The front façade is close to traditional Queen Anne and the isosceles fronts of San Francisco with their "Palladian" and bull's-eye windows, their balco-

nies and oriels for surveying the scene below. The two main gables overlap slightly, and this perhaps accidental "mating" produces strange progeny: two large turrets on either side and between them a jumble of minarets and belvederes whose inspiration seems by turns Hindu or Greek or a combination of both. Behind these the profusion of towers, skylights, and ridgepoles, all without apparent aesthetic or functional *raison d'être*, is staggering. The grandiosity of "paper

buildings" like Brueghel's Tower of Babel, Boullée's funerary temples, Piranesi's prisons, or Sant' Elia's futurist power stations has been realized, and by an amateur, a fanatically motivated little lady from New Haven whose dream palace was crafted with Yankee ingenuity.

Some have suggested that the incongruities of the house are due to Sarah's ineptitude as an architect. How else account for skylights built where the light of the sun would never strike them; for

doors that open on blank walls or a sheer drop; for a chimney, connected to several fireplaces, that rises four stories and stops just inches short of the roof? Perhaps. But in my opinion neither the ghostbuster nor the hopeless-amateur theory can account for the house: one senses immediately on entering it that Sarah Winchester, with all her peculiarities, was an artist. For her house is an enchantment, and that could be exactly what she intended all along. □ *Editor: Marilyn Schaffer*

A PASSION FOR HISTORY

(Continued from page 122) Perhaps it is the busts of Washington and Franklin above the doors or the great Houdon bust of Franklin in the antechamber or simply the proportions. It is fitting since Jane Engelhard was educated in France and lived there for many years. Although she insists, and rightly, that her collection is more American than French, many works and authors have a French connection.

"Actually it's only in the past seventeen years that I have collected in the sense of having a collection," Mrs. Engelhard explains. "Before that it was bits and pieces from people I loved, and I kept their books. All my life I've loved reading. I don't have any books from my childhood, I admit. But don't forget, I went through the war. When we left Europe for Buenos Aires in 1940, we had nothing with us except our passports and our personal belongings. That's where I met Victoria Ocampo. I thought she was just magic. And when I left the Argentine, she came and stayed with me at the Waldorf-Astoria. Hence I have letters and inscribed books from her. James Michener lives right next door to me in New Jersey and comes to stay with me in Florida. I have every one of his books and, as you know, he is a very prolific writer. Alan Moorehead was another great friend. I had been introduced to him in South Africa by Field Marshal Montgomery. I invited him to come to the States, but by the time he came we were in Florida. So he came to our house in Boca Grande and there he wrote *The White Nile*. Then about a year and a half later he came back and wrote *The Blue Nile*."

Letters and books by Martin D'Arcy, Basil Hume, and Jerome De Souza reflect both her friendship with these Catholic intellectuals and her concern for the church. Public service has brought still more friendships, and through these friendships many more books, letters, and manuscripts. She served on the Trust-Fund Board of the Library of Congress from 1966 until 1985 and came to know the present Librarian of Congress, Daniel J. Boorstin. "So I set out to collect first editions of every one of his books, and I have them all except one, *America and the Image of Europe*. We advertised for it, but you can't find it, at least in fine condition. That gives you even more courage to pursue your collecting."

When she began in mid-life to collect rare books and manuscripts seriously, Jane Engelhard started with a few favorite authors: English, French, and American. In a short time she had corralled practically all of W. H. Auden's publications in presentation copies. Soon afterward she completed her T. S. Eliot collection, which includes his *Poems* (1919), hand-printed and hand-bound by Virginia and Leonard Woolf.

In a few years she began to concentrate on Americans. "After my husband died, I had more time. He liked to collect silver, china, and horses, and I had collected five children in the meantime. I decided I would do something we hadn't done too much together. That was American literature."

One American writer with a special appeal for her was Ernest Hemingway. "I lost three friends in the Spanish Civil War. Hemingway was very important

to me because he was saying what I was thinking but couldn't say. So I've tried to collect everything he did. They're fine copies—all first editions and most of them signed." Her collection also contains works ranging from Hemingway's high school newspaper, *The Trapeze*, to an eight-page preliminary sketch for *The Old Man and the Sea*—the novel for which he received the Nobel Prize—as well as an important group of autograph letters. She has a presentation copy of his first book, *Three Stories & Ten Poems*, printed in Paris in 1923, and her copy of *In Our Time* is inscribed in his typical manner: To Harry Sylvester, the big plain-clothes Jesuit and molder of champions from his old pal E. (One Punch) Hemingway, Heavyweight Champion of the Bahamas, Key West 1931.

F. Scott Fitzgerald is well represented by all of his publications in presentation copies, as is William Carlos Williams with, among others, his rarest publication, the privately printed *Poems* (1909). And there is a series of letters from Robert Lowell that could inspire a poem: "Lives of great men remind us of letters we ought to burn!"

Also in the collection is the recently discovered Henry James rarity "Daisy Miller: A Study. Four Meetings." This is the very copy in which James had made numerous manuscript revisions and which was used by Ford Madox Ford in his study of James.

American literature, however, does not have the only claim on Jane Engelhard's collecting energies. They are as much if not more directed toward original documents in American history.