

Old World Meets New World



Vizcaya, Miami's Gilded Age Mansion

By Andrea Valluzzo

MIAMI, FLA. — Steeped in opulence and mythology, Vizcaya is a glimpse into a bygone era when Gilded Age millionaires built mansions to entertain their friends in lavish style while proclaiming their social standing to the world. Vizcaya is one such place, built as a winter home by industrialist James Deering upon his retirement from Chicago's International Harvester Company. Hidden within a rockland hammock, a now endangered ecosystem, the house seems to magically appear out of a subtropical forest at the end of a long driveway flanked by tall hardwood trees.

Cover Page: Vizcaya's artistic director Paul Chalfin liked to call this room the "Banquet Hall" to reinforce the grandeur and historical romance of the house.

This elevated area called the Garden Mound, complete with a water fountain in foreground, offers a dramatic view of the north façade of the main house.





Deering chose well this location and deliberately set his house amid the forest at the edges of Biscayne Bay so as to create privacy as well as inspire awe from visitors arriving by car. The baroque mansion looks, upon first glance, to be very old, perhaps lifted from an Italian villa and transported, stone by stone, to Miami. Though that was the very goal when it was designed, the house is a unique blending of European styles, including the many antiques and art mostly sourced from France and Italy, together with American craftsmanship and materials and wrapped up in a distinctive Miami flair.

A bundle of contradictions between antique elements and contemporary craftsmanship as well as Old World

The carved wood mantel in the Library was designed in the Adam style. The jambs are in the shape of Ionic columns with a fluted design while the frieze features classical motifs and a repeating foliate pattern. In the center of the frieze in high relief is a depiction of “Dying Gaul,” with a low relief scene of a temple and amphitheater often referred to as “Dying Gladiator.”

and New World tastes, the 38,000-square-foot home was designed as more of a garden pavilion rather than a house with attached gardens. The 54-room main building (34 decorated rooms are open to the public) is centered by a three-story-tall interior courtyard that in Deering's day was open to the elements (a glass skylight to prevent the art and antiques inside from humidity damage was added later). Most of the 200,000-plus guests who visit every year do not realize this "modern" home is mostly made from reinforced concrete...

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Among the most elaborate in the United States, the formal European-inspired gardens were conceived as a series of outdoor rooms and are set in geometric patterns dominated by low hedges called parterres. Fountains, antique statuary and architectural details gave the gardens a look of age that was enhanced by landscape architect Diego Suarez's use of mature trees.



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