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Lover's Discourse: Villa Santo Sospir

A visitor who arrives for dinner, paints the walls and stays for 11 years is unlikely to receive another warm welcome—unless that visitor is artist Jean Cocteau. Once host to Picasso, Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, Villa Santo Sospir now stands as a living monument to the Dionysian excess of 1950s France.

If only the walls could talk. Fortunately, at the Villa Santo Sospir they actually can. In 1950, painter, filmmaker and bohemian all-rounder Jean Cocteau came for dinner. He ended up staying 11 years. The white walls of the newly built villa weren't to his taste, so he proceeded to fresco nude Greek mythological dreamscapes above the fireplace. Over the next decade Cocteau simply carried on "tattooing" (to use his term) the entire edifice. More fortunately still, the villa's owner didn't mind.

That's because Cocteau's host was Francine Weisweiler. An extraordinarily well-connected Parisian socialite, she was among the first patrons of Yves Saint Laurent, and artists like Raoul Dufy and designers like Cristóbal Balenciaga attended her regular salons. Coco Chanel was a pal. It

was the age when artists and aristocrats of any persuasion could drop in at the Villa Santo Sospir to shoot movies, daub canvases, wine and dine. And so they did. The mansion at the end of Cap Ferrat, a sun-licked peninsula on the Côte d'Azur, was simply the perfect place to party.

Amazingly, that carefree post-war epoch has been preserved in situ. Visitors today will find casual snapshots of Pablo Picasso wedged above the mantelpiece. Notes written by Cocteau in the 1950s tacked up beside his bedroom mirror. An invitation to attend an exhibition in the company of President Charles de Gaulle tucked into a bookshelf. It's like Cocteau and Weisweiler were discussing Picasso's latest muse over a bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé—then just up and left.

The property's guide and caretaker is Eric Marteau. He's a genial host who worked as Weisweiler's nurse beginning in 1982, becoming a trusted friend to both Francine and her daughter, Carole, the villa's current owner. "It's a living museum," says Marteau. "There are few like it in the world." The walls of the main salon are so densely decorated it's like gorging on a private Cocteau gallery. Bamboo loungers invite guests to flop down—where Picasso and his lover Jacqueline Roque would have—and gaze across the room. Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo once ate at the salon's dining table. Both guests broke the carefree code that still suffuses the Villa Santo Sospir by chatting only to Cocteau (Marlene Dietrich) and refusing to say a word (Greta Garbo).



Eric's tour leads to the bedrooms on the villa's lower story. The staircase down is playful: A life-size drawing of a sleeping angel glides above the walkway. The steps are carpeted in leopard print. "The villa decor was styled by Madeleine Castaing," the doyenne of interior designers who introduced the animal print into elegant society, explains Eric. At the bottom of the stairs, a giant dislocated finger points to the word "DORMIR" and a discreet artist's signature reads "Jean, 1950."

Carole Weisweiler's bedroom is first up. She was eight years old when, on the wall opposite her bed, Cocteau drew a vast mural of Dionysus, the god of wine, sleeping

off a party. As a testament to the artist's place as an intimate invitee, he slept in the bedroom next door.

Like every other room in the house, Cocteau's bedroom is a time capsule of paraphernalia from six decades ago. Tacked on the wall is a fading postcard of Cocteau's portrait by Modigliani (he was also painted by Raoul Dufy and photographed by Man Ray). A letter alongside could have been jotted yesterday, but was in fact written in 1958. The principal fresco here witnesses the Greek god Pan feeding bread to two unicorns. "The unicorn's horns form a pyramid—a Freemason symbol—while the bread represents the Cor-

pus Christi," explains Eric. The motif sums up the mythological, spiritual and religious medley that preoccupied Cocteau's work. "And because Pan loved both men and women, the character was a gay symbol in the 19th and 20th centuries."

Cocteau was perfectly open about his own sexuality. The bedroom of his lover, the impossibly handsome Édouard Dermitt, shares the simple bathroom next door. Dermitt, who Cocteau affectionately called "Doudou" and who became his adoptive son—therefore his sole heir—was decorated with a Narcissus and Echo painting across all four walls. As Carole Weisweiler once told *The New York Times*: "Cocteau

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CAROLE WEISWEILLER





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liked to say that he learned from Matisse that once you paint one wall, the other three look bare.” On Dermot’s bookshelf sits an ancient tourist guide to Madrid’s Museo del Prado, plus some comic books—a graphic novel combination of which inveterate wordsmith and doodler Cocteau no doubt approved.

A second set of stairs leads back to the airy main salon. This capacious space is like a breath of air after the art-filled cacophony downstairs. From the salon, the Villa Santo Sospir’s garden terrace tumbles to the sea. Butterflies bumble around bougainvillea. Cap Ferrat’s famous parakeets cheep-cheep near the water, each green bird the offspring of a local dilettante’s

abandoned menagerie. Cocteau the auteur shot avant-garde movies in these subtropical grounds. These include *La Villa Santo Sospir*, a 35-minute montage filmed in 1952 that guides viewers around the Weisweiler home. (Spoiler alert: The villa looks exactly the same then as it does today.) The terrace view also sweeps a mile across the Mediterranean to Villefranche, where Cocteau had previously lived at the Welcome Hotel. In Villefranche, he frescoed yet another masterpiece, the interior of the Chapel of St. Pierre (also open to the public), with more muscle-bound Greek dramas. When he slacked off from his prodigious work habit he would row his friend Picasso back across to Cap Ferrat.

Back inside the villa there are countless portraits of the polymath, ever dandified in a suit and tie. There is Cocteau in Oxford, where he received an honorary doctorate in 1956. Plus Cocteau in Cannes, where he served as president of the Film Festival in 1953. But the artwork that best sums up his 1950s existence is another wall mural of Pan. The playful god is holding a local *fougasse* loaf above two tasty sea urchins, of the kind plucked from the warm waters below the villa.

Such simple sun-kissed pleasures are what this charmed house is all about. “It was like death to be taken too seriously,” Cocteau once said. The walls of the Villa Santo Sospir certainly agree.



