

ART & DESIGN | ANTIQUES

Resurrecting Laurelton Hall

By EVE M. KAHN AUG. 5, 2010

Collectors descended on the wreckage of Louis Comfort Tiffany's Long Island country estate, named Laurelton Hall, soon after it burned in 1957. Marble columns, ceiling tiles, stained-glass windows and a little woodwork were deemed salvageable. Hugh and Jeannette McKean, collectors from Florida who had known the Tiffany family, took away chunks of the 84-room house.

The McKeanes shipped the early 1900s artifacts to a museum they had founded, the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art, in Winter Park, Fla., which is named after Mrs. McKean's grandfather and specializes in Tiffany. The museum is now spending \$5 million on a new wing with about 6,000 square feet for pieces of Laurelton Hall.

This summer, eight columns from Tiffany's terrace were bolted vertically for permanent display for the first time in 53 years. The columns, which have long-stemmed glass daffodils wrapped around their capitals, had been temporarily re-erected four years ago for a Laurelton Hall show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (which owns mosaics and floral columns from Tiffany's loggia). When Morse staff and board members saw the 2006 installation, said Laurence J. Ruggiero, the museum's director, "we decided we can't just put it all back in boxes."

The recreated terrace will have glass on three sides, a river of glass tile on the

floor and views of palm and citrus trees; the scenery is meant to evoke Tiffany's fountains and beds of petunias, phlox and wisteria. Adjacent galleries will display living and dining room antiques, including cream enameled chairs, iridescent light fixtures, a glass mosaic fireplace, windows depicting wisteria and flamingoes and a 1914 menu from Tiffany's Peacock Feast at the estate.

But the spaces will not be full-blown period rooms. "There is a suggestion of context that helps to spur a kind of memory, almost as if you were remembering a visit to Laurelton Hall from your childhood," Mr. Ruggiero said.

Tiffany's architectural components have been cleaned and patched for the new wing. "Years and years of water leaks" and mud wasps' nests had damaged them, said John Griswold, the head of Griswold Conservation Associates in Culver City, Calif., which is supervising the reinstallation.

Stains on the fragments actually helped the conservators; the lines showed how to reassemble pieces that had become somewhat jumbled in the salvaging process. "Everything becomes a clue," Mr. Griswold said.

At the Morse, the terrace columns and skylight panes in pear-leaf patterns will conceal climate-control equipment and metal supports bolted into the floors and walls. "It can be unbolted, disassembled and taken out," Mr. Griswold said, "but I think this one will stay home."

A Webcam on the museum's Web site (morsemuseum.org) shows construction progress on the wing, which is scheduled to open in February.

A BOOK-BURNING DEBATE

Christian scholars battled in the early 1500s over whether all Jewish texts should be burned. Johannes Pfefferkorn, a Jewish-born theologian in Cologne who had converted to Roman Catholicism, petitioned Emperor Maximilian I to have Hebrew books declared dangerously blasphemous. The emperor sought a second opinion from Johannes Reuchlin, a linguist in Stuttgart, who decided that Hebrew was a biblical tongue worth preserving.

Besides, Reuchlin wrote, if Hebrew texts were all erased, “the Jews might well write much stranger stuff from scratch, far more objectionable.”

From the 1950s to the 1990s, Frank L. Herz, a German-born leather-goods merchant in New York, collected books related to the 16th-century controversy by prominent authors like Erasmus and Martin Luther. Mr. Herz’s heirs have donated the collection to the Leo Baeck Institute, a library focused on German-speaking Jewry at the Center for Jewish History on West 16th Street in Manhattan. The staff is now repairing and digitizing the books and planning for exhibitions later this year.

Mr. Herz, whose family had escaped the Nazis, was fascinated by Reuchlin’s lucid arguments against anti-Semitism and his and Pfefferkorn’s efforts to attract publicity by circulating pamphlets and attending book fairs. The idea of using printing presses to mold public opinion “was very new, very modern at the time,” said Renate Evers, the institute’s head librarian.

The institute will put commemorative Herz bookplates on protective cardboard cases for the 63 books; the plates will each have an image of eyeglasses copied from one of Reuchlin’s title pages. The linguist used spectacles, Ms. Evers said, to symbolize scholarship and insights into the heated debate.

MARTIN COLLECTION SALE

Alastair Bradley Martin, an art and antiques collector who died in January, did not collect quietly. He and his wife, Edith, used their names when lending and donating works to institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum. They arranged for numerous catalogs documenting a collection that they called Guennol (after a Welsh word for martin, the bird).

It ranged from Mayan jade and Melanesian woodcarvings to Mughal jewelry, Egyptian faience and Albert Pinkham Ryder paintings. “Guennol had no overall plan, no house flag, no device, no motto, no hunting magic,” Mr. Martin, a tennis champion and heir to a steel fortune, once wrote in a catalog essay. “I buy, therefore I am!”

The Martin family only rarely sold off their well-documented acquisitions. In 2007 Sotheby's in New York auctioned the object that had appeared on the cover of a catalog for a Guennol show at the Brooklyn Museum: a three-inch-tall Iranian limestone lioness made around 3000 B.C., which brought \$57.1 million. (The estimate had been about \$16 million.)

This fall, in five sales, Christie's will include about 170 pieces from the Martins' collection. An Americana auction on Sept. 29 will have 52 woodcarvings, including two whalers harpooning prey and a centaur brandishing a spear (each estimated to sell for \$20,000 to \$40,000).

A few pieces can be attributed to particular artists, like Schtockschnitzler Simmons (\$40,000 to \$80,000 for a tree full of songbirds) and Wilhelm Schimmel (an eagle with a yard-long wingspan, \$60,000 to \$100,000).

The Martins also focused on anonymous, mysterious folk art. On a 19th-century wooden plaque (estimated at \$1,000 to \$1,500), tiny metal and wood outlines of houses, trees and rowboats are inlaid around a gray stone that looks like a woman's face. An essay in a Brooklyn Museum catalog of the Guennol collection speculates that the piece was a sailor's carving, "occasioned by a longing for home."

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