

Fig. 1. View of Vizcaya, Bill Sumner, 2010,  
Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, Miami, FL.

## Commissioning Contemporaries Modern American Artists at Vizcaya

Gina Wouters

Patronage of the arts is one of the countless roles the protagonists of America's Gilded Age embraced in their quest to associate with and emulate aristocracy across the ocean. The design and construction of great estates of the era fostered the role of interior decorator and ensured collaboration between creative trades. This resulted in the formation of a network of designers, architects, interior decorators, art dealers, and artists that worked together on projects. Resulting from the joint effort of several artistic minds, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, now a National Historic Landmark located on Biscayne Bay in Miami, Florida, is a prime example of such an enterprise (Fig. 1). The estate was the winter residence of James Deering (1859–1925), who along with his father William Deering (1829–1913) and half-brother Charles Deering (1852–1927), made a fortune in manufacturing agricultural machinery elevating the Deering family to the ranks of America's first millionaire society (Fig. 2). Vizcaya was Deering's winter haven where he resided from 1916 until his death in 1925.

Referred to as an architectural and design sensation of the late 1910s, the creation of Vizcaya had a reputation that reverberated among artistic circles, which a contemporary publication described as a project that "everywhere everyone seemed to know someone who was doing something for."<sup>1</sup> Paul Chalfin (1874–1959), who Deering met through the celebrated interior decorator Elsie de Wolfe (1865–1950), was responsible for the orchestration and oversight of all aspects of the estates design (Fig. 3). In accord with principles set forth in Edith Wharton (1862–1937) and Ogden Codman, Jr.'s (1863–1951) *The Decoration of Houses* from 1897, the architecture and decoration of Vizcaya play a symbiotic role to one another. In the early 1910s, Chalfin accompanied

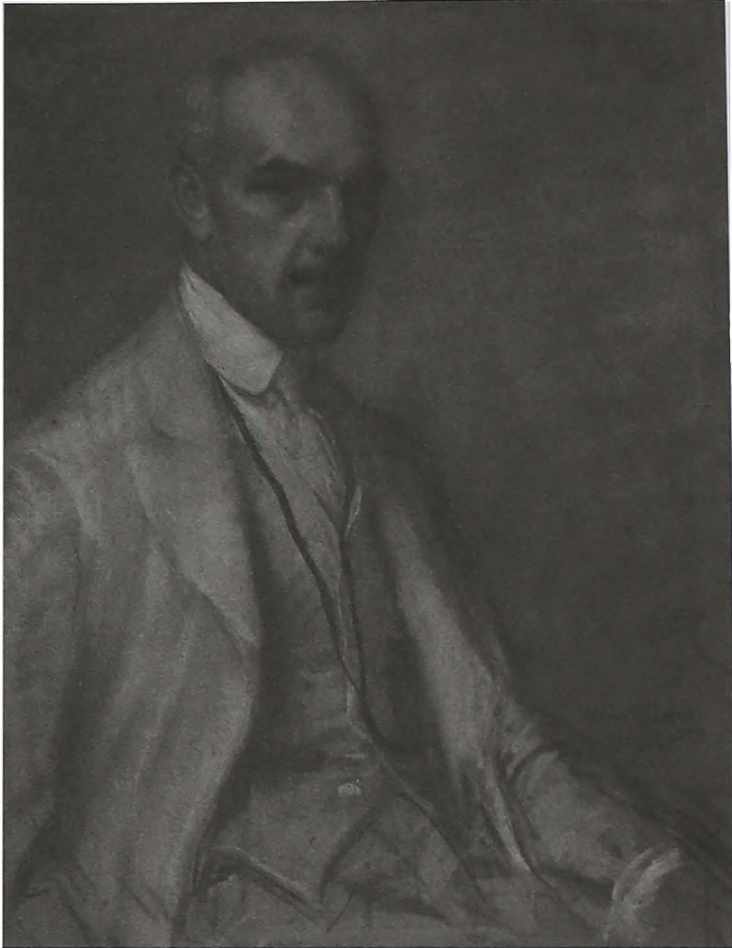


Fig. 3. Albert Sterner, Portrait of Paul Chalfin, pastel on board, 1915. Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, Miami, Florida.

Deering on several tours to Europe. During these trips the furnishings and architectural elements that would decorate the future Miami home were purchased. Upon arrival in New York, boiserie ensembles, painted walls and ceilings, monumental gateways, antique furnishings, and fireplaces were assembled in a stage set fashion, informing the design and dimensions of the house, and dictating its architecture.

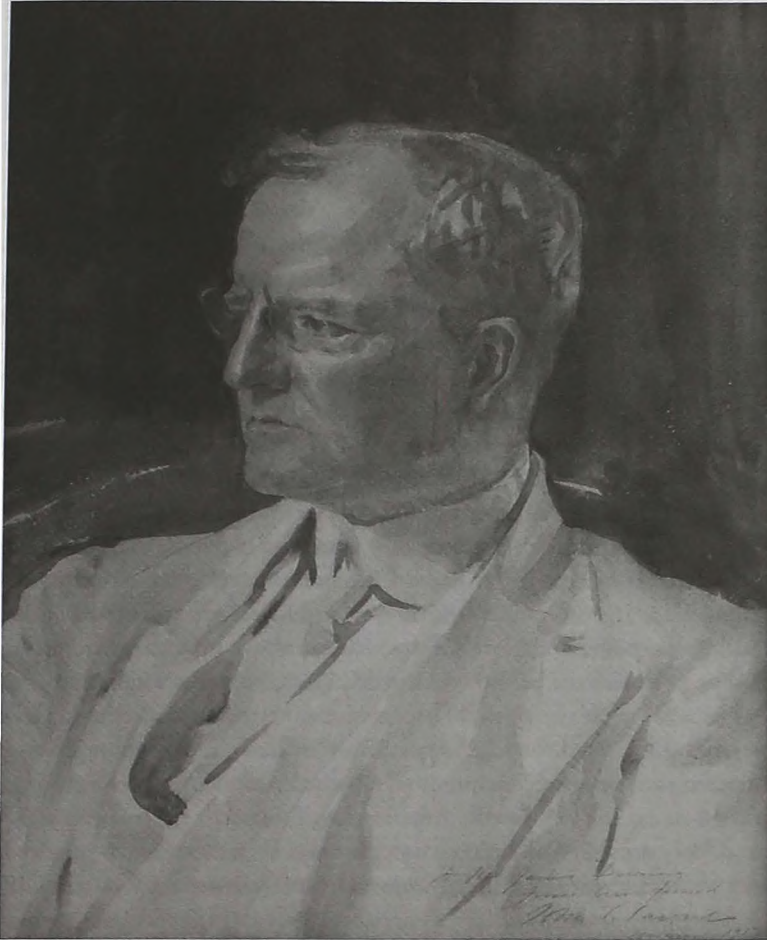


Fig. 2. John Singer Sargent, Portrait of James Deering, watercolor, 1917. Private Collection.

When it came to the design of the house, inspiration was found in Italy. On one of their purchasing trips, Deering and Chalfin identified Villa Rezzonico, a baroque estate in the Veneto region, as a model for Vizcaya. This decision departed from the prevailing beaux-arts architecture dominant in the creation of Gilded Age homes. Vizcaya was designed by the classically trained architect F. Burrall Hoffman Jr.



(1882–1980), who apprenticed in the offices of Carrère and Hastings. In an interesting reversal of roles, in many instances the architecture of the house was dictated by its decoration. Although Deering maintained the role of an informed and engaged patron, when it came to the decoration of the estate, Chalfin was given *carte blanche*. Deering was an ardent Franco-phile, but the design and ornamentation of both the house and gardens reflect Chalfin's love of all things Italian.

By mid-1915 as construction of the house was nearing completion, focus shifted to the gardens. Mirroring trends practiced in estates of the northeast, Chalfin was responsible for selecting a handful of contemporary artists to create site-specific work for Vizcaya. Between 1915 and 1921, works were commissioned from the American artists, Robert W. Chanler (1872–1930), Charles C. Rumsey (1879–1922), and A. Stirling Calder (1870–1945) and the French and Swiss artists living in America, Gaston Lachaise (1882–1935) and Paul Thévanex (1891–1921). The five men all had the dominant Beaux-Arts training possessed by most American artists at the time, but they stood apart due to their espousal of modern art ideals that pushed the boundaries associated with the prevailing academic style. Chanler, Rumsey, and Lachaise participated in the 1913 Armory Show in New York, which introduced the vanguard art of Europe to America. The show featured Cubists, Futurists, Impressionists, and Fauvists while the works of progressive American artists were on view as well. Organized by the Association of American Sculptors and Painters, the Armory Show signified a break from the rigors of academic art and paved the way for the American *avant-garde*.

Other notable American artists, decorators, and craftsmen involved with Vizcaya's creation include the decorative metalworkers Samuel Yellin (1885–1940) and Edward F. Caldwell (1851–1914), and the interior decorators Robert Locher (1888–1956) and Muriel Draper (1886–1952).<sup>2</sup> All these figures are part of a reoccurring cast of characters that were pivotal in the design and decoration of American houses from the early twentieth-century.

Commissioned site-specific work within the private realm is not singular to Vizcaya. Works by many of the artists commissioned by Deering have extant work in former Long Island homes of notable patrons, including Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's (1875–1942) Wheatley Hills mansion, and Mai Rogers Coe (1875–1924) Plantings Fields home in Oyster Bay. In addition to other artists they commissioned, both women

had Chanler embellish their walls with his evocative compositions. Mary Averell Harriman (1851–1932) commissioned work from Rumsey and Chanler for Arden House in Harriman, New York, while Florence Meyer Blumenthal (1875–1930) commissioned Thévarez to decorate the walls of her swimming pool in her New York City home.

Notwithstanding the similarities with these projects, Vizcaya is unique with regards to Deering's role as patron and the amount of autonomy he granted Chalfin when it came to the selection of artists. As patron, he played a distant role and at times was unaware of an artist's participation until after Chalfin had received proposals, as was the case with Robert W. Chanler.<sup>3</sup> On the occasion of selecting an artist to create the work on the Barge, documented in an exchange of telegrams, Deering conceded that he would be willing to accept an inferior sculptor to execute the work if this meant curbing expenses.<sup>4</sup> This was in response to A. Stirling Calder's proposal of \$10,000, which Deering deemed too steep. Chalfin inquired with other artists, among which he strategically included highly reputed academic sculptors of the time, George Grey Barnard (1863–1938) and Daniel Chester French (1850–1931) whose works reached prices of \$25,000 and \$50,000 respectively, allowing Calder to emerge as the more economical and thus favorable choice. Deering believed he was getting a bargain, and Chalfin secured the artist of his choice.

When looking at similar commissioned projects within the private domain, it is notable that the wives of prominent industrialists or financiers instigated the projects. The key disparity between Vizcaya and similar estates is the absence of a female protagonist. With literature such as Wharton and Codman's *The Decoration of Houses* or Elsie de Wolfe's *The House in Good Taste* from 1913, women of social stature were inspired to take up an active role in the design of their homes. Ornamentation and decoration of private homes became a female enterprise, while the art patronage and acquisition of old masters continued to be a male pursuit. In 1924, the author Augusta Owen Patterson published *American Homes of To-Day*, of which Deering owned a copy. The book discusses architectural themes in American houses and devotes a chapter to the "Decorative Room." Surmising the interiors decorated by muralists of the time, in this chapter the author states that the Decorative Room "might become the legitimate playroom of the lady of the house, her retreat from the architect and the interior decorator, where she could try out her own

amusing schemes, with, perhaps, some young artist to help her.”<sup>5</sup> The Decorative Room can be regarded as the folly of the house, where fantasy and experimentation intersect.

Using the commissioning patterns identified at Vizcaya, the following questions arise: What was the role of the patron when selecting artists? What was the selection criteria among the commissioned artists? Why were these artists specifically chosen? What was the extent of autonomy granted to the artists? Do the commissioning practices exercised at Vizcaya mirror those in other projects of the time?

### The Sculptors

Three sculptors were commissioned to decorate elements of the gardens. A. Stirling Calder was responsible for the monumental statuary ensemble on the breakwater known as the Stone Barge; Charles C. Rumsey adorned an antique fountain on the South Terrace leading into the formal gardens with his lifelike lead sculptures of frogs and lizards; and Gaston Lachaise surmounted a group of eight columns in the Marine Garden with his stone peacocks.

#### A. Stirling Calder

The Stone Barge exemplifies the union of architecture and design. A fantastical component of the project, the Barge was fashioned in drawings and sketches in the preceding two years and by early 1915 its creation began. It was conceived to function as a breakwater and through several design iterations resulted in taking the shape of a barge. In archival documents, Chalfin states that the Barge was fashioned after Isola Bella, situated in the waters of Lago Maggiore in Northern Italy.<sup>6</sup> Although not all materialized, a vast amount of design elements for the Barge were considered, including a swimming pool, fountains and cascades, a planting scheme, obelisks, a tea house, and a monumental sculpture program. The latter would be realized and to achieve this, Chalfin recognized that he would need to engage a professional sculptor, which is where Calder enters the picture.

Born in Philadelphia in 1870 into a family of sculptors, Calder began his formal artistic training in 1886 under the artist Thomas Eakins (1844–1916) at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. In the early

1890s, he studied in Paris at the Académie Julian and would later join the atelier of the French sculptor, Alexandre Falguière (1831–1900) at the École des Beaux-Arts. Throughout his career Calder completed numerous significant public sculpture commissions in America, including *Swann Memorial Fountain* (1920) and the *Henry Charles Lea Memorial* (1911), both in Philadelphia, *George Washington the Statesman* (1916) at the base of the Washington Arch in New York City, and the *Depew Fountain* (1916) in Indianapolis, Indiana. Calder is an anomaly among the group of artists, as Vizcaya appears to be his only work within the private domain, implying that he was not at the forefront of the artistic circles involved with Vizcaya's creation.

In the summer of 1915, while Calder was in San Francisco working on the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, Chalfin contacted him to discuss the design of the Barge.<sup>7</sup> Eight days later Calder promptly replied with enthusiasm for the project. Calder's major contribution to the 1915 Expo was his *Fountain of Energy*, which greeted visitors as they entered the fair grounds. Although executed in different media, the *Fountain of Energy* in faux-travertine staff and the Barge sculpture in native coral stone, both of Calder's orchestrations dealt with an environment and theme that called for the use of aquatic motifs.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, both projects were to fit into overarching architectural plans. Just as the *Fountain of Energy* was a single component within the broader context of the fair, the Barge and its decorative elements were likewise devised bearing in mind the greater architecture of Vizcaya. While planning and constructing the Barge, Chalfin had a specific design in mind.<sup>9</sup> Although Calder was allotted a measure of artistic liberty, Chalfin's ideas closely dictated the iconography and execution of the sculptural work. To maintain uniformity throughout the project, Chalfin requested that the final work of the Barge be executed in native coral stone. The local material was used throughout the property and serves as a unifying element integrating the local environment. It also aided in retrofitting antique elements for installation at Vizcaya.

As one of Vizcaya's most whimsical components, the Barge is a symmetrical structure (Fig. 4). Seamlessly integrated into the design, Calder's statuary consist of four herms, six seated figures, two large designs for the prow and stern, and eight grotesque masks. All the elements reflect the aquatic and geographic surroundings and feature mermaids, mermen, mythical sea monsters, and details including coral and shells. "On the



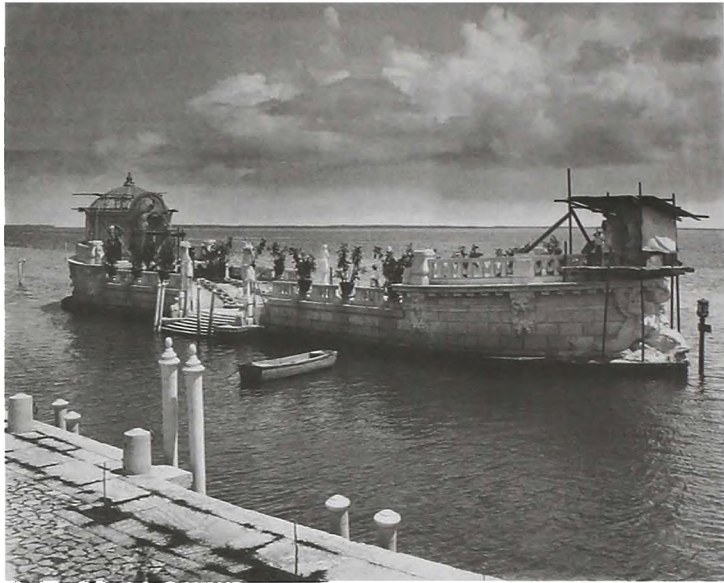


Fig. 4. View of the Stone Barge, 1917 photograph, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Archives, Miami, Florida, (ca09014).

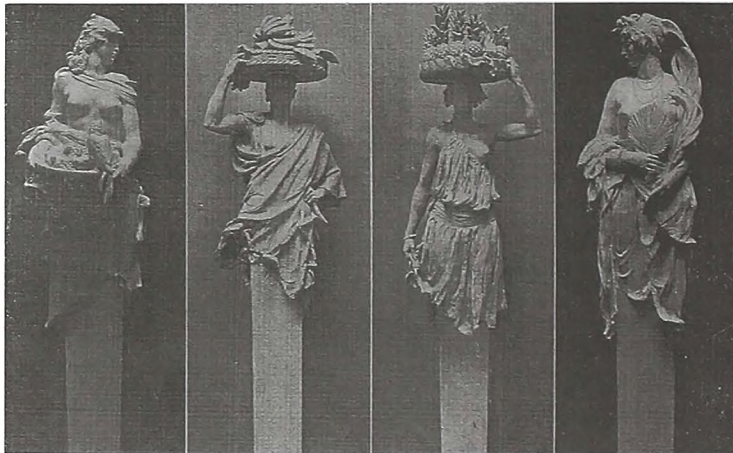


Fig. 5. "Four Gaines – The Island Viscaya [sic] Estate of James Deering, Miami FL." Published in: A. Stirling Calder. "The Relation of Sculpture to Architecture," in: *The American Architect* 118 (December 8, 1920).



Fig. 6. Nations of the East, 1915. Postcard, The Wolfsonian-FIU Library, Miami Beach, Florida, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection (XB1993.588).



Fig. 7. South prow of the Barge, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, Miami, Florida.

Island, the four herms represent youthful negroes and negresses, symbolizing the parrots, fruits, and golden offerings of the equatorial flora,” Chalfin writes to Deering.<sup>10</sup> In correspondence between Calder’s wife, Nanette Calder, and the couple’s daughter Margaret, Nanette writes “the gaines, “Vizcayads” they are calling them, are to be tropical people.”<sup>11</sup> In their present state, the four herms have lost much of their details. Fortunately, in 1920 the models were reproduced in an article written by Calder, preserving the wonderful attributes ascribed to the figures (Fig. 5).<sup>12</sup> The male herm was repurposed from Calder’s *Nations of the East* monumental sculpture group for the expo, which was part of a larger collaboration with other sculptors. Flanking the symmetrical composition as the second to last figure on each end are two standing muscular males representing Africa (Fig. 6). Sharing many similarities with Vizcaya’s two westward facing herms, the two figures, which were referred to as “negro servitors” in a contemporary publication of the fair, are each dressed in loose draping garments and hold above their heads a large round basket of fruits, which they each support with one of their hands.<sup>13</sup>

For the prow and stern, Chalfin had the following design in mind: “I am going to have, as you see, a mermaid, wing, tail and all, raised with dolphins at the bow, or maybe, more than one, if you like; or maybe a Triton instead of a mermaid.”<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, Calder drafted sketches but states, “I would feel like making the other prow distinctly different, possibly using a male figure for the centre.”<sup>15</sup> Chalfin’s suggestions prevailed and the final product resulted in two mermaids flanking a dolphin on the south side and one large winged mermaid riding two sea creatures on the north end (Fig. 7). The figures and proportions of the work at the south end became a subject of much discord between artist and patron. A guest at Vizcaya in 1917, John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) also critiqued elements of the composition.<sup>16</sup> In their first inception, Deering found the models to be too voluptuous. In particular, the size of their breasts was considered indecent and out of scale with the rest of the composition. Chalfin expressed admiration for the work, with exception to the scale of the anatomy of the women at the south end, who are referred to as “saucy bitches” among “archaic Greek types.” Calder responded, “... as far as my small part is concerned, I have no bitterness. Only the impersonal realization of being a victim – with my enthusiasm mainly to blame! ... Do you not realize that I have given much for \$8000 and now you bargain with me to achieve certain changes



in work done. I am willing even to do this, if when I know exactly what you want, the result is possible and worth while.”<sup>17</sup> Shortly after, Chalfin replied to Calder confirming the changes to come, and summarized to Deering that it would “consist in the reduction of the size of the breasts of the two ladies on the south prow, and the toning down of certain lines and shadows which seem to insist a little pointedly on sexual anatomy.”<sup>18</sup>

In July of 1917, Calder made a concluding visit to Miami and carried out the final details of the ensemble. In a family memoir, Calder’s daughter, Margaret Calder Hayes, recalls correspondence with her mother discussing the criticism of the work. Years later the 1926 Great Hurricane of Miami severely damaged much of the Barge and Hayes writes, “Mother rather reveled in the strength of the elements which brushed aside man’s puny efforts with such ease. Father was chagrined but not surprised – Cruel Nature at work again.”<sup>19</sup>

#### Charles C. Rumsey

Collaborating with Calder years earlier on the 1915 Expo, Charles C. Rumsey was commissioned to do work at Vizcaya in 1917. With training including Harvard and the Julian and Colarossi Academies, Rumsey worked in bronze and preferred animal subjects. In Paris, he studied under the French sculptor Emmanuel Frémiet (1824–1910), who is credited with influencing Rumsey’s lifelong passion with horses. After concluding studies abroad in 1906, Rumsey settled in New York City. He was a world-class polo player, and his fascination with horses resulted in the creation of many equestrian statues including his famous *Pizarro*, which showed at the 1915 fair.

A New York native, Rumsey was commissioned to do statuary work for many prominent private patrons in the state. Among these were the thoroughbred horse breeder and husband of Gertrude Vanderbilt, Harry Payne Whitney (1872–1930), as well as the railroad magnate Edward Henry Harriman (1848–1909). In 1909, Rumsey began a series of sculptural works for Harriman’s residence, the Carrère and Hastings designed Arden House in New York, including *The Three Graces* fountain and a relief panel for the Music Room. The following year Rumsey married Harriman’s daughter, Mary Harriman (1881–1934). The two lived in Wheatley Hills, Long Island, in a house designed by F. Burrall Hoffman, Vizcaya’s chief architect. Hoffman was also involved with the design of



Arden House while working at the Carrère and Hastings firm in the early years of his career. In addition to work in the private domain, Rumsey partook in many public commissions, including the frieze for the Manhattan Bridge. Executed in 1916, the forty-foot bas-relief series of panels depicts a buffalo hunt. While his work has many naturalistic and realistic attributes, Rumsey's later work reflects modern inclinations and serves as a precedent for the Art Deco movement. Highly severe and graphic, his 1921 *Victory* for the Brownsville War Memorial in Brooklyn, New York exemplifies the tendencies of his later work.

Chalfin engaged Rumsey to embellish a fountain to be placed on the South Terrace of Vizcaya's gardens. An example of the liberties Chalfin took when it came to reinterpreting antiquities, the fountain is a marriage of historic and modern elements. The eighteenth-century marble basin was purchased in 1914 from Galleria Simonetti in Rome, while the outer perimeter and fountain pool were carved on site from native coral stone (Fig. 8). Rumsey was commissioned to ornament the basin with his figurative sculptures of animals, or what are referred to as "monsters" in correspondence, which would function as spouts spewing water into the basin. The commission resulted in a pair of frogs placed on the outer edge of the antique basin and a pair of lizards on the perimeter of the coral stone border.



Fig. 9. Detail of frog on South Terrace fountain, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, Miami, Florida.



Fig. 8. South Terrace fountain,  
Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, Miami, Florida.

The plaster models were completed in February 1917, at which time they were sent to Edward F. Caldwell & Co. in New York City, who cast them in lead. Rumsey's lead creatures unify the entire fountain composition, and make three very diverse materials, namely marble, lead, and native coral stone, from two different centuries appear as a single unified work of art. His skills in capturing the natural tendencies of the animals are successfully attained in this creation (Fig. 9). The oversized creatures crawl up the basins adding to the exotic and wild nature of the location. Compared to the works of the other commissioned artists, Rumsey's sculpture required the smallest budget, only costing \$400 for the models. Soon after he completed the Vizcaya project in mid-1917, Rumsey joined the war and was sent to France as a captain in the cavalry division. Upon his return to the United States he continued to partake in public sculpture commissions. Tragically, Rumsey's life was cut short in 1922, when he was killed in a car accident on Long Island at the age of 43.

#### Gaston Lachaise

Gaston Lachaise was applauded by his friend E. E. Cummings (1894–1962) as “new and fundamental.” The poet likened Lachaise to sculpture as Paul Cézanne was to painting.<sup>20</sup> Lachaise was a major figure in modern sculpture. The last of the sculptors to be commissioned by Chalfin, the French sculptor joined the project in mid-1920. Lachaise created sculptural work on top of decorative columns in the Marine Garden, which served as the entrance into the former Lagoon Gardens. The area had a theme that Chalfin and Deering wished to convey. The following is how it was described in the 1934 Handbook: “The gateway you have just passed through leaves Europe behind, for at the end of this property, rich in the natural tropical beauties of South Florida, Mr. Deering desired to accent the oriental and tropical note. Thus you will observe that peacocks – symbol of India – surmount fine encircled twisting oriental columns, supposed type of those of the Praetorium in Jerusalem. ...”<sup>21</sup>

Academically trained, and having worked in the atelier of Gabriel-Jules Thomas (1824–1905), Lachaise worked for a number of reputed masters. While studying in Paris he met Isabel Dutaud Nagle, an American woman who would become his future wife and lifelong muse. When Nagle returned to America, Lachaise vowed to follow her and was able to pay his way by working for René Lalique (1860-1945). Arriving





Fig. 10. Marine Garden Bridge with peacocks atop columns by Gaston Lachaise, 1935 photograph, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Archives, Miami, Florida.



in Boston in 1906, Lachaise was reunited with Nagle and soon after found work with Henry Hudson Kitson (1865–1947) working in his studio on military monuments. An assistantship to Paulanship (1885–1966), famed sculptor of Rockefeller Center’s Prometheus followed, and in 1913 Lachaise participated in the Armory Show with his piece *Nude with a Coat* from 1912, a small clay statuette inspired by Nagle. When Lachaise and Nagle married in 1917, Mananship hosted the wedding supper. Immortalized in much of his work, Nagle continued to be the artist’s primary inspiration. Steering away from naturalistic influences, Lachaise’s forms are highly exaggerated and gravity defiant as is the case in *Elevation*, from 1912. Attesting to the pivotal role Lachaise played in modern sculpture, the Museum of Modern Art exhibited his work in 1935 in its first ever retrospective of a living artist. In addition to several notable works in the MOMA collection, Lachaise’s work is in major collections in America including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Phillips Collection.

In June 1920, the artist sent an estimate for the work costing \$1000 per model, of which there would be two, and \$400 for the onsite work. Chalfin accepted and agreed to pay one-third up front, one-third when half completed, and the balance when approved and the work entirely completed.<sup>22</sup> Chalfin’s instructions on the design of the peacocks were as follows: “Ask him to make them recognizably distinct in gesture one from the other, and say to him that the delicacy of the problem to me seems to be to keep them at the same time simple as we agreed they should be, but not at all oriental—merely stoney—and practical for a soft stone at that. If they would look Roman—ancient Roman—so much the better—if not, they can look like a negligent bit of Italian garden detail—but not oriental.”<sup>23</sup> In addition to Chalfin’s requests, the artist’s designs were to surmount previously designed spiraling columns, another factor that guided Lachaise’s artistic sensibilities. The layout of the garden featured eight columns, each terminating with a peacock. Chalfin approved the peacock models in December 1920 and Lachaise sent his plasteline models to the Menconi Brothers who would pack and ship them to Miami. The completion of the Marine Garden statuary coincided with the finalization of all construction work on the gardens in 1922 (Fig. 10).

## The Painters

In the so-called Decorative Room that was discussed earlier, it was essential to have walls adorned with paintings, textiles, or stonework. The most successful rooms according to the author, are those in which the background is supplied by an artist, and is a venue for experimentation.<sup>24</sup> The author includes Robert W. Chanler and Paul Thévez, artists that painted walls and ceilings of Vizcaya, as contributors to the creation of the Decorative Room. In a context such as Vizcaya it is almost unnecessary to have exotic rooms, since the natural surroundings already provide such a setting. Nevertheless, both artists' works transport the viewer to a different time and place. Chanler decorated the ceiling of the Swimming Pool grotto and created a screen titled *Vizcayan Bay*.<sup>25</sup> The ceiling of the Garden Mound Casino loggia is where the work of Thévez can be found surrounded by eighteenth-century Venetian panels.

### Robert W. Chanler

Known for his fantastical decorative work that embellished interiors of prominent New York homes and clubs, Robert W. Chanler was perhaps the most progressive artist to work at Vizcaya. Having participated in the 1913 Armory Show as well as its antecedent, the Paris Salon d'Automne of 1905, Chanler belonged to a small group of modern American artists. Described by a contemporary as "eccentric and almost bizarre," Chanler's reputation preceded him and contributed to establishing him as a figure and personality of his time. In 1915 while discussing the design of the Swimming Pool and adjacent recreational rooms at Vizcaya, Paul Chalfin expressed apprehension in moving forward with plans due to the participation of Chanler, who he described as a wayward genius.<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding Chalfin's reservations, Chanler's involvement resulted in the creation of two singular decorative elements for Vizcaya both in accord with themes that permeate through the estate, namely the marine environment and the twin topoi of exploration and discovery.

The scion of an important New York family who were traditionally involved in the political sector, Chanler's professional ambitions deviated from that of his family. He pursued an artistic career and obtained the majority of his training in Italy and France, and although initially trained as a sculptor, Chanler quickly recognized his preference for painting and drawing. He was classically taught like most young American artists in Paris, and trained in the ateliers of Alexandre Falguière (1831–1900) and Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904). The latter also taught Chalfin during his time in Paris. Upon his return to the United States in 1902, Chanler accepted commissions from prominent New York families and perhaps completely out of character, engaged in a brief diversion into the political realm, leading to his appointment as Sheriff of Dutchess County. He settled in New York City and bought a townhouse in East Greenwich Village, which he aptly dubbed the House of Fantasy. Functioning as his personal residence, studio, and an artist's commune, Chanler decorated the entirety of the walls with his fanciful creations.

Chanler's work is in public and private venues throughout America. His *Porcupines* and *Nightmares* screen from 1914 is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while his mural work has been partially replicated at Long Island's Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park, where the former estate of Mai Rogers Coe is located. Mai Coe was one of Chanler's greatest patrons. The work that she commissioned for the estate includes the murals in her bedroom and in the breakfast room, subsequently named the "Buffalo" room in reference to the subject matter adorning the walls. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney was likewise an avid patron of Chanler's work. After becoming acquainted while studying in Paris, the two remained close friends. A significant advocate for Modern American art, Whitney was the founder of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Chanler was commissioned to decorate the interior of Whitney's studio as well as rooms in her Long Island residence. In addition, Chanler decorated interiors of Arden House, and the New York Colony Club.

Chanler's was commissioned due to his favorable reputation as a muralist and as a result of various commissions he completed for high profile patrons. Additionally, Chalfin and Chanler were neighbors for a time in New York and floated in the same artistic circles, so it was logical that Chalfin invited the artist to participate in the project. Chanler had a repertoire of clients and properties he worked for and Chalfin cer-

tainly wanted Vizcaya to be placed within the same context as these estates. In November 1915, Chanler writes Chalfin discussing the project, which in that iteration was to include forty framed panels, a much more elaborate project than what would ultimately be realized. Chanler lists his fee as \$35,000 and the duration of the project lasting between six to nine months.<sup>27</sup> His price was clearly out of budget. Given Deering's mounting reservations with regard to the project's expenditures, the final cost for Chanler's commission was considerably reduced, also partially credited to artistic rivalry with fellow artist Howard Gardiner Cushing (1869–1916). Deering agreed to purchase one of Chanler's screens for \$6,000 and set a limit of \$5,000 for the execution of the Swimming Pool decoration. Considering that the amount was substantially less than what Chanler initially quoted, a simpler version would have been anticipated. According to a letter from Chalfin to Deering, Chalfin writes "...that \$5,000, which you and I agreed was our limit in that, will have nothing to do with the elaboration of the final result, and that he expects to make a matter of pride, and even of emulation, out of this ceiling, because his most fashionable rival, Howard Cushing, is now doing a swimming pool for Mrs. George Blumenthal. Bob wants to knock spots out of Howard Cushing, and he says he will give \$10,000 worth of work to it."<sup>28</sup> Cushing was a close contemporary of Chanler and likewise studied at the Académie Julien in Paris. Ironically, it was not Cushing who worked on the Blumenthal swimming pool, but Thévenaz. On August 31, 1916 seven crates containing Chanler's mural were shipped to Vizcaya and all were installed by the end of the year (Fig. 11).

Once capable of being filled with both fresh and sea water, Vizcaya's Swimming Pool is located on the north axis of the main house. It was designed to be half outdoors and half indoors, with the covered area extending underneath the house. From the outdoor pool area, two arched openings lead to the grotto, which is where Chanler's ceiling mural was executed. The walls in this area are almost entirely encrusted with shells that were collected from the Florida Keys and the Caribbean. Chanler's elaborate ceiling design is an undertaking of mixed media. Composed of painted plaster, the main scene is rendered in various gradations of light blues and greens, mimicking the colors of the ocean. An assortment of underwater elements including a variety of fish, marine plants, and coral are depicted in a dazzling design rendered in shallow relief. In a tradition akin to that practiced by the Renaissance artist



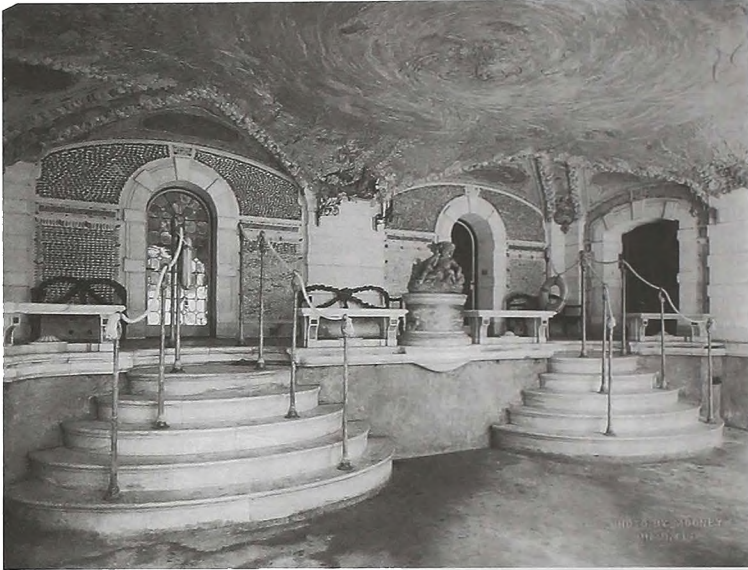


Fig. 11. Swimming Pool grotto with Robert W. Chanler ceiling mural, 1916 photograph, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Archives, Miami, Florida.

Bernard Palissy (ca.1510–ca. 1589), the shell and plant shapes were cast from nature. Palissy created a grotto, unfortunately no longer in existence, for Catherine de' Medici in the Tuileries Garden in Paris, where he used molds cast from nature. Some of the cast sand dollars that make up part of the pool decoration have the artist's name, "R. W. Chanler" inscribed on them (fig. 12). Larger compositions molded in high relief include families of sea turtles, octopi, and crustaceans surrounded by a context of ocean life.

The unique location of the ceiling, exposed and vulnerable to the natural elements, has taken a toll on its condition. In 1992, along with the forces of Hurricane Andrew, was a storm surge that saturated Chanler's mural. In 2005 damage caused by Hurricanes Wilma and



Fig. 12. Detail of Swimming Pool grotto ceiling, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, Miami, Florida.

Katrina forced staff to seek immediate stabilization of the ceiling. The ceiling is stable, although missing a large amount of painted surface. Plans are underway for conservation at which time the museum will also consider how visitors might better view the work.

#### Paul Thévarez

Another figure who decorated the walls of influential patrons was the Swiss artist Paul Thévarez. In addition to his work as a muralist, Thévarez painted portraits including those of Elsie de Wolfe, and Florence Meyer Blumenthal. Thévarez was commissioned to create the center panels for the Garden Mound Casino loggia ceiling located in the



Fig. 13. Garden Mound Casino loggia ceiling, Bill Sumner, 2004, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, Miami, Florida.



formal gardens. Atop the artificial mound sits the rectangular garden pavilion flanked by an enclosed room on each end and an open loggia in the center. In the summer of 1914, Chalfin and Deering purchased an eighteenth-century “Tiepolesque” ceiling from the dealer Dino Barozzi in Venice. To facilitate installation for its new home in Miami, the panels were retrofitted and Chalfin created additions to fit the loggia ceiling. Although Chalfin was capable of filling in the center void as he did in many instances in the house, he collaborated with Thévez who recently immigrated to the United States in 1917.<sup>29</sup> An avid Rhythmist, Thévez believed in the symbiotic relationship between music, dance, and art and throughout his career was influenced by the composers Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950) and Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky (1882–1971). A contemporary article states that “Thévez [sic] believes that an artist should try to express in paint what he has learned in dancing, and, conversely, try to express in dancing what he has learned in painting.”<sup>30</sup>

Work commenced on the ceiling in the fall of 1920, with a budget set at \$2000. Letters of the period indicate the struggles Thévez was encountering. In January he writes, “I know now why artists do not paint ceilings anymore, it is because it is too difficult.”<sup>31</sup> Arriving on site in March 1921, Thévez was adamant about altering his colors once the ceiling was in place. His reason was because only once it was installed could he observe and thus correct colors based on the natural light conditions. Another likely reason was so that he could match the colors with the eighteenth-century panels and ensure that the works were in unison. Tragically, the Vizcaya ceiling would be one of Thévez’s last creations, as he died later in the year from a ruptured appendix.

The collaboration between Thévez and an eighteenth-century Italian artist makes for an interesting work of art (fig. 14). The ceiling is rectangular in shape and is entirely framed by the wide antique border depicting mythological figures. The scenes are framed by an architectural border and in between are putti. The central component is framed by these borders and is where the Thévez panels were installed. Already a



confusing mix of inaccurate perspectives, Thévanéz continued this by adding a balustrade at each end of the scene from which exotic onlookers peer down.

The composition has been restored many times due to its vulnerability from continuous exposure to the elements of South Florida. Plans are being developed to restore the entire Casino Mound, including the ceiling.

### Conclusion

The artists' works were strongly shaped by Vizcaya's overall design. Chalfin emerges as the architect of the commissioned works, and even though each artist exercised his artistic identity, the final creation was strongly directed by Chalfin. As was the case with Calder, Lachaise, and Rumsey, their work went through various iterations as a result of Chalfin's criticism of the models. Moreover, Chalfin provided Calder with very specific models on which to base his Barge sculpture, and through the aforementioned dialogue arising from the anatomy of certain sculptures, Calder's artistic license was molded by the desires of his patron. Additionally, Lachaise was provided with a very clear description of what his peacocks should look like, "a negligent bit of Italian garden detail – but not oriental." When it came to painters Chanler and Thévanéz, Chalfin was equally involved with the final product. Considering Thévanéz had an entire antique border to work within, formal factors like color and scale shaped his work. Chanler's project was majorly scaled down from how he initially conceived it. A project that was first estimated at \$35,000 consisting of forty framed panels was lowered to accommodate a budget of \$5,000 and resulted in the decoration of a ceiling.

Given almost full autonomy over the initiative, Chalfin was responsible for the selection of artists, choice of themes and iconography, he provided models on which to base work, selected the materials to be used, and heavily critiqued all the models. While he minimizes his role to a "buffer" between artist and patron in correspondence with Calder, he was anything but that. Chalfin was the catalyst for bringing these artists to Vizcaya. On the other hand as the patron, Deering played a distant role, which is peculiar as he was a man well acquainted with con-

temporary artists such as John Singer Sargent, Anders Zorn (1860-1920), Gari Melchers (1860-1932), and Walter MacEwan (1858-1943). The nature of the works, which were chiefly decorative, has to do with the matter. The artist's creations were crafted either to accompany an architectural element of the estate or to retrofit an object acquired abroad. None is a stand-alone work of art; all are dependent on surrounding elements.

Vizcaya is a place of passively competing dualities, including architecture and design, land and sea, the natural world and the manmade world, where each plays a symbiotic role to the other. Adding another duality to this list is patron and designer, and the push and pull between the needs and desires of each. While Deering was the figure who made Vizcaya financially viable and can be credited as being the instigator of the enterprise, Chalfin was the mastermind behind every inch of the estates design. Fundamentally for Chalfin, Vizcaya was a project, for Deering, Vizcaya was to be a home. Chalfin wanted to engage contemporary artists in the project; he did not need to. Engaging artists who worked on similar projects and incorporating their work into the decorative fabric of Vizcaya places the house in a context of house design in early twentieth-century America and on par with comparable estates of the Northeast. Deering's impetus was to create an evocative environment within which he would live. Both needs were met.

The artists created contemporary components amid an ensemble that consists of antique elements originating from various palaces and country estates from abroad. The choice of integrating the work of contemporary artists in addition to modern technologies the house boasted are some of the only factors that are characteristic of the era in which Deering was living and thus add a modern element to the story of Vizcaya's creation and its union of the old and the new.

## Endnotes

- 1 August Owen Patterson, *American Homes of To-day* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), 262.
- 2 Locher designed the panels of James Deering's dressing room and Draper designed the elaborate chinoiserie tassels of the bed canopy in the second

- floor bedroom Cathay. See George Leland Hunter, "Trimnings: Gimps, gallons, braids, borders, cords, tassels, tufts and other upholstery and drapery ornaments," *Good Furniture* (1917), 250.
- 3 Letter from James Deering to Paul Chalfin, July 6, 1915, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Estate Records.
  - 4 Letter from James Deering to Paul Chalfin, January 9 and 11, 1916, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Estate Records.
  - 5 Patterson, *American Homes of To-day*, 393.
  - 6 Now a popular tourist site, the island is the site of the Borromeo Palace and gardens, built in the seventeenth-century for the powerful Borromeo family of Milan. In a version of the 1934 Vizcaya Handbook, Chalfin writes, "a motionless vessel, this island bark recalls in miniature the great Borromeo garden on Lago Maggiore."
  - 7 See Witold Rybczynski and Laurie Olin, *Vizcaya: An American Villa and Its Makers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2007), 163. Ralph Calder, the elder brother of Alexander, was working as chief draftsman for Vizcaya which may have played a role in the commission.
  - 8 Eugen Neuhaus, *The Art of the Exposition: Personal impressions of the architecture, sculpture, mural decorations, color scheme and other aesthetic aspects of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition* (San Francisco: Paul Elder and Co. 1915), 27. The travertine staff was manufactured by Paul Denneville and was the material of choice throughout the exposition.
  - 9 Letter from Paul Chalfin to A. Stirling Calder, October 5, 1915, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Estate Records. Chalfin writes: "I am hoping that the whole island will have a character of the middle Sixteenth Century, Venetian sculpture of the type of San Sovino's [sic] pupils invented, and which Longheni [sic] perpetuated."
  - 10 Letter from Paul Chalfin to James Deering, March 27, 1917, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Estate Records, 5.
  - 11 Margaret Calder Hayes. *Three Alexander Calders: A Family Memoir*. (New York: Universe Books, 1987), 160.
  - 12 A. Stirling Calder, "The Relation of Sculpture to Architecture," *The American Architect* 118 (1920), 730
  - 13 Neuhaus, *The Art of the Exposition*, 36-37
  - 14 Letter from Paul Chalfin to A.S. Calder, October 5, 1915, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Estate Records.
  - 15 Letter from A.S. Calder to Paul Chalfin, December 7, 1915, from Vizcaya

- Museum and Gardens Estate Records.
- 16 Letter from James Deering to Paul Chalfin, March 23, 1917, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Estate Records.
  - 17 Letter from A.S. Calder to Paul Chalfin, April 22, 1917, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Estate Records.
  - 18 Letter from Paul Chalfin to James Deering, May 4, 1917, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Estate Records.
  - 19 Hayes, *Three Alexander Calders*, 160.
  - 20 E. E. Cummings, "Gaston Lachaise," *The Dial*, vol. 68 (February), 194-204.
  - 21 Paul Chalfin. Handbook of the House, 1934. From Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Archives, 14.
  - 22 Letter from P.H. Ogden to W. Lauderbeck, July 14, 1920, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Estate Records.
  - 23 Letter from P.H. Ogden to Gaston LaChaise, July 14, 1920, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Estate Records.
  - 24 Patterson, *American Homes of To-day*, 387-388.
  - 25 The screen will not be addressed since the focus of this essay is the decorative work that was incorporated into the architecture of the exterior spaces.
  - 26 Letter from Paul Chalfin to James Deering, July 1, 1915, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Archive, "... I should still have much hesitancy in definitely fixing on the character of the room because of the participation of Mr. Chandlet [sic] in it. You know how fearful I am that in participating with a genius as wayward as Mr. Chandler's something should be done down there which might get beyond me, so that I wanted therefore to know very definitely before inviting him to come in just what I should do..."
  - 27 Letter from Robert Chanler to Paul Chalfin, November 8, 1915, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Archive.
  - 28 Letter from Paul Chalfin to James Deering, March 7, 1916, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Archive.
  - 29 Once such case is visible in the painted canvases that are placed above the windows and doors of the Lady Hamilton room. Four antique canvases depicting classical scenes in grisaille were purchased, while five were required. A highly accomplished painter himself, Chalfin created the fifth in perfect harmony with the existing four. Chalfin studied mural painting when he was in the American Academy in Rome.



- 30 Marie L. Van Sannen, "Paulet Thévenas, Painter and Ryhtmatist," *Vanity Fair* August (1916), 49.
- 31 Letter from Paul Thévanéz to Paul Chalfin, January 17, 1921, from Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Archive.