

Hearst Castle's Cloister #1

A Room Fondly Recalled

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THE CENTERPIECE of the Hearst Castle complex is Casa Grande. By itself, that twin-towered, cathedral-like mansion is more often called the Castle. Or the main building or main house—or sometimes the big house. Regardless of the term, that imposing structure has roughly 100 rooms within its central section and its flanking wings. Virtual hotel that Casa Grande could be in W. R. Hearst's era, at least 20 of those rooms were guest bedrooms (plus they had baths and often sitting rooms too). Those ample quarters weren't filled with people all the time. Yet they were constantly filled with art objects and antiques. They still are, hence the public museum that Hearst Castle has been since 1958.

It wasn't until 1964 that visitors got to “go upstairs” in the main building. That's where Casa Grande's guest rooms can be found. One such bedroom, a favorite of mine, is Cloister #1. There are four rooms like it forming the Cloisters, as they're collectively called. The quartet so-named is on the second floor, right above the big Refectory dining room.

But why Cloister #1 in my case? That's because as a young park aide, new to Hearst Castle in 1972, I drew security duty; this meant being a kind of theater usher, someone who adjusted the protective tour mats along with doing other tasks. Back then we were assigned just two stations each day. For instance, we could be on the Main Ter-

race in front of Casa Grande (by far the best spot, weather permitting) for as long as four hours without going anywhere else. Another station was the Library Lobby, on the second floor of the big house. Right next to that lonesome outpost was Cloister #1. The small upstairs tour groups walked past it en route to the Library.

The south windows of that partly ocean-view bedroom were always wide open, thanks to a covered passageway alongside. The visitors could peer in quickly as they went by—much too quickly to get a good look. But with half a day to kill, we park aides on second-floor detail could gaze into Cloister #1 all we wanted. I soon knew that room by heart. I can still see it clearly in my mind's eye, more than 40 years later.

As part of the museum that Mr. Hearst wanted San Simeon to be (his goal from back in the 1920s), the four Cloister bedrooms added to that vision, mostly along Spanish lines. Cloister #1 is typical in having a wooden ceiling, as old as Christopher Columbus or maybe a bit older. The room has other things, too, for Hearst was much given to variety in his decorating, through which he imparted some spirited contrasts. So-called eclecticism—the blending of styles for a novel effect—was standard in his approach. In less knowing hands, eclecticism could make for a jumbled mess. However, with Hearst and his California architect, Julia Morgan, such blends and mixtures came off successfully as a rule. An informal, lighthearted touch was also part of their method.

Cloister #1, though mainly Spanish (and partly Italian too), has a fireplace mantel that's by no means Southern European or Mediterranean. In fact, the item in question isn't even a mantel. It proves to be some kind of altar frontal, intricately carved from alabaster with figures of saints in niches, possibly English and as old as the 14th century. Hearst and several others who played the collecting-decorating game in the 1920s weren't overly concerned with textbook correctness.

Whether he knew he was buying a church relic on that occasion isn't on file. Alterations and reinventions like the altarpiece-mantel in Cloister #1 are prime examples of how ingenious these people could be.

Along with having paintings and other works, the room has antique walnut furniture—a San Simeon staple—found throughout the four residential buildings on the hilltop. Cloister #1 has two matching beds, a decorative pair. One is 16th-century Italian. The other one is from the 1920s, a skillful reproduction made by an Old World artisan recruited by Miss Morgan. The last I knew, many years ago, the northern of the two beds was the original; it had taken me a while to distinguish it from its look-alike counterpart in the inventory work I was doing.

That was after my early stint as a park aide. I'd gone on to become a tour guide that same year, 1972. I spent the next few years learning the Castle ropes, a long process for anyone seeking expertise in that challenging subject. By 1976 I was ready to tackle research on a higher level, specializing in Hearst's art collecting and, at the same time, in his book collecting. I've been in and out of those fields ever since. In 2012, for example, I started a new project stemming from the "ex-Hearst" items at the Saint Louis Art Museum, one of the best collections in the Midwest. That museum has about two dozen items once owned by William Randolph Hearst. Some of them, such as Spanish tiles, are similar to what's still at San Simeon.

More recently I've gone back to a Hearst-related project I began in the 1970s but then set aside, only to resume it when new archival information turned up. This one's concerned with the book market, as well as the art market, in the San Francisco of the 1910s through 1930s. Hearst was a native of that city, so this resonates perfectly.

In so many ways my early years on the Enchanted Hill, despite their youthful innocence, were how I got my education, how I found

my way as a researcher with a strong antiquarian bent. In that sense I'll always remember Cloister #1, which I peered into all those times. I got to step inside it when the housekeepers were close by. That room became "my room," perhaps more so than any other on the hilltop. As those who know Hearst Castle and its charismatic charms can attest, that's saying a lot.

The author left the Castle in 1983 but is still involved in "Hearstiana." He welcomes your questions or comments at taylorcoffman@aol.com. See also his website posting, www.coffmanbooks.com.