

A large, two-story yellow house with a balcony and palm trees, situated behind a pond with two swans. The house features a dark roof, white columns, and a balcony with a decorative railing. The scene is set in a lush, green environment with several tall palm trees in the foreground. The water in the pond is calm, reflecting the house and the sky.

Bonnet House Museum and Gardens

The art of gracious living
Jan Fiore

When Hugh Taylor Birch purchased the pristine Bonnet House site in 1895, it was destined to become one of the first oceanfront estates in what is today known as Fort Lauderdale. However, a shell midden left by the Tequesta people indicates that the area had already witnessed 4,000 years of Florida history.

Like many house museums, Bonnet House tells the story of the people who lived in the house and used it, as much as the estate itself. It is a unique museum, full of original furnishings, lovingly restored and rich in ecology, art and incredible natural surroundings. In its heyday, this tropical estate was the heart of Florida's bohemian art world, and today, its creative energy lives on.

The early years

While the hordes of visitors attending the 1893 Chicago World's Fair drove nature-loving Hugh Taylor Birch to the South Florida wilderness, the fair's outstanding art exhibits had the opposite effect on Frederic Clay Bartlett; they inspired him to forsake his family's hardware business and become an artist. When Birch's daughter, Helen, married Frederic in 1919, Birch gave them 55 acres of land on the Atlantic Ocean in Florida as a wedding present. The following year, Frederic and Helen began the construction of Bonnet House, impatient to have a winter haven where they could pursue their artistic gifts. A talented and recognized artist in his native Chicago, Frederic painted mural and easel art, while Helen composed music and poetry. Unfortunately, their joy was short-lived, and Helen died from breast cancer in 1925. Distraught by his loss, Frederic spent little time at Bonnet House for several years. Following his marriage to Evelyn Fortune Lilly in 1931, however, the couple began a 21-year journey to reclaim and embellish the house that enchants visitors today.

Tropical tranquility

According to legend, the house's name stems from a particular type of lily that grows on the property: When alligators surfaced from the water, the lilies would catch on their heads, making them appear to be wearing flowered bonnets as they foraged for food. Bonnet House sits on a sand dune that was created by

the ocean centuries ago and with the exception of a few areas, the contour of the property represents what the Florida coastline looked like before concrete and cement changed the landscape.

The house and outbuildings are located on 35 acres on a barrier island, between the Atlantic Ocean and the Intracoastal Waterway, with seven different ecological habitats that are native to Florida and extremely rare in Broward County. Unlike the extravagant lifestyle the Bartletts enjoyed at their extensive Massachusetts estate, they lived a relatively simple life in their pristine tropical paradise, surrounded by native trees and shrubs, panthers, macaws and manatees. In an interview taped a decade before her death, Evelyn recalled seeing the eyes of wild animals as she and Frederic walked through the property at dusk, adding that Frederic always carried a gun after a panther was killed there.

What evolved over the years was a tranquil enclave; a temperate haven to escape the hustle and bustle, yet designed for intense creativity. Frederic's ingenuity is apparent in his architectural designs and furnishings, as well as his and Evelyn's art work and lifestyle. The house was built around an open courtyard featuring fountains, palm trees, and a medieval-style aviary. Inside his tropical oasis, Frederic found an endless source of inspiration. He painted numerous ceiling murals in loggias that connected the rooms, including a wood ceiling in the style of Gauguin, and provided architectural detail around door frames with delicate and intricate shell inlays. Always self-sufficient, Frederic's on-site carpentry shop was used to build tables, benches, and other architectural detail he designed to adorn the house.

The property remains virtually unchanged since the 1920s and 30s, when Frederic built the main residence; 12 outbuildings, gardens, nature trails and a canal. These historic structures are composed of Florida materials and their construction by Florida crews is well documented in photographs. They include a shell museum; an island theater; and a Seminole-style chickee bridge – an elevated bridge across the lagoon, with a palm-thatched roof and open sides to catch the breeze.



Courtyard, © Bonnet House Museum & Gardens.



Drawing room, © Michael Kitei.



Master bedroom, © Bonnet House Museum & Gardens.

Frederic was an avid art collector, but despite his genius in collecting, he was often heard to say his greatest artistic discovery was the distinctive and natural talent possessed by Evelyn. With little formal training, Evelyn began painting in 1933. For five years she painted prolifically, and although Bonnet House is aware of only one painting that was sold (*Smelts* to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1937 for \$212.50,) her work was well-received and featured in popular gallery exhibits in Boston, New York and Indianapolis.

The Bartlett's studio offers an unexpected glimpse into their daily life; Frederic's paints, palette and an unfinished work sits at his easel, while natural light spills in from a two-story window nearby. Numerous examples of his work hang on the walls, including charcoal on paper sketches of people from around the city of Munich Germany, created by Frederic at the age of

19. The studio also holds portraits of family members including Hugh Taylor Birch, Frederic's first wife, Helen, and their son, Clay Jr. In a whimsical touch, Frederic painted giraffes around the room to amuse and entertain his son on his frequent visits. In the gallery, Evelyn's flair for the creative is evident in her portraits of friends and her studies of still-life, as well as her vast collection of animal art. Between them, they produced a collection of 629 paintings, many of which were created in Florida.

Elaborate entertaining

Despite their seclusion, the Bartletts enjoyed hosting dinner parties and they often entertained a dozen family members and friends for several weeks. The house was designed for elaborate entertaining, and guests would often meet in the cozy bamboo cocktail lounge before touring the circular shell museum, filled with hundreds of shells and

other marine objects collected during their travels, or Evelyn's passion, the orchid house, where thousands of specimens bloomed.

The butler's pantry was stocked with 24 sets of china, including Evelyn's treasured 24-piece dessert set, purchased from England in the early 1800s, and full sets of Spode and Wedgewood, causing Evelyn to boast that guests would never eat off the same plate twice.

In the temperate climate, breakfast was the only meal served indoors. Dinner was usually served in the courtyard or on one of the porches overlooking the slough - a freshwater lake inhabited by swans. During stormy weather, evening meals would take place in the cypress-paneled dining room decorated with polished blue and yellow mounted fish. After dinner, guests could watch home movies in the island theatre, relax and enjoy an evening of music in Helen's music room or simply admire the

numerous works of art.

Although Frederic died in 1953, Evelyn continued to spend winters in Bonnet House until shortly before her death, two months before her 110th birthday in 1995. Evelyn donated the property to Florida Trust, believing it important to preserve what was left of the original Florida coastline, and today it continues to serve as a gathering spot for artists with frequent concerts and exhibitions.

Bonnet House is more than a historic structure; it offers insight into the unique Floridian lifestyle of the past, and has the distinction of being the only home of two American artists with original furnishings that is open to the public. The history of the Bartlett family personifies the intrepidness and creativity of one of Ft. Lauderdale's founding families.

Bonnet House Museum & Gardens, 900 North Birch Road, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33304. www.bonnethouse.org/contact-us/



Music room, © Michael Kitei.



Bonnet House, © Bonnet House Museum & Gardens.



Studio, © Michael Kitei.