

# Marble House

**Patrons: William K. Vanderbilt and Alva S. Vanderbilt Belmont**

**Architect: Richard Morris Hunt**

## The History

In 1888, William K. Vanderbilt commissioned architect Richard Morris Hunt to design the finest summerhouse in Newport, Rhode Island. William's wife, Alva, was a very dynamic woman who loved building houses. She worked with Hunt designing the monumental chateau on Fifth Ave. in New York, and a large summer home, Idlehour, on Long Island. Alva wanted the biggest, the best, and the most ostentatious house money could buy. Hunt's plan for the house was a neoclassical design modeled after the Petit Trianon at Versailles.

Extraordinary precautions were taken to keep the building of the mansion out of the public eye. Huge fences were placed around the property and no visitors were allowed on the site. Artisans, stone masons, and carvers were brought from France and Italy to work on the house. They were quartered on the property and not permitted to discuss their work with anyone. It took nearly four years and \$11 million dollars to complete Marble House.

Marble House opened in 1892 with a huge dinner party. At the dinner, William announced to their guests that Marble House was a gift to his wife, Alva, on her 39th birthday. From 1892 to 1898, Marble House was open for 6-7 weeks every summer. In 1898, Alva divorced William but kept the house. (It was a birthday present!) She closed the house and married Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont who also had a house on Bellevue Avenue. Richard Morris Hunt also designed Belmont's home, Belcourt Castle. Alva, of course, had it completely remodeled when she moved in to the mansion.

After Belmont died in 1908, Alva became active in the women's suffrage movement. In 1909 she opened Marble House again for the public for a suffrage fundraiser. In 1914, Alva opened a beautiful Chinese Tea House on the grounds of Marble House. Hunt's sons who were both architects and inspired by temple buildings in southern China built the Chinese Tea House. In 1932, Alva sold the property and moved to France. In 1963, the Preservation Society purchased the house and it is now open to the public. The interior is much as it was when Alva lived in the house.

## The Architecture

The house exterior is white marble with a classic four-column portico. A 20' x 16' ornamental steel entrance grill over thick glass (weighing one and a half tons) opens to a grand entrance hall.

Inside the entrance hall hangs two large tapestries from Gobelins, a famous 18th century tapestry manufacturer. Alva wanted the interior to be bright, full of gold and marble but not in the cold classical style of the exterior. Hunt and the French interior design house of J. Allard and Sons chose Baroque and Rococo styles for most of the interior rooms. Marble, gold leaf, and ormolu accents provide the emphasis on the design of the house. Various types and colors of marble were included in the design of the interior such as yellow Italian marble in the hall and deep pink marble from Western Algeria in the dining room.

The ballroom is a Louis XIV French motif. The walls are covered with gold leaf, crystal lights, gold leaf mirrors and a rich ceiling decoration. The gold chandeliers are fitted for both gas and electricity. The ceiling is decorated with stucco relief panels. The gothic room is very different than the rest of the house. The French Gothic décor has characteristic Gothic arches, figurative carving, and a large collection of Gothic sculpture. Four stained glass windows give the room a cathedral-like coloring. The dining room was inspired by the interiors of Versailles in France. Large portraits of French royalty adorn the walls of black and pink marble. The chairs are gilded bronze carved covered with metallic thread on velvet. Each chair weighed so much that a footman was required behind each chair to assist the guest at dinner.

The kitchen in the basement contains a twenty five-foot long coal burning stove, soapstone sinks and built-in iceboxes. Food was brought up to the dining room by a dumbwaiter.

The Rococo-style library included painted panels and frescos. The two small sitting rooms reflect Mr. Vanderbilt's love of racehorses, and include Mrs. Vanderbilt's collection of white French furniture.

The bedrooms are also Rococo and are relatively small in comparison to the large rooms on the first floor. Each bedroom is decorated with lavish furnishing and wall coverings. No expense was spared in the interior design of the house.

The grounds of Marble House have the same controlled classical order as the house with specimen trees and terraced paths. The monumental design of the house and the large green lawn leave the visitor with a lasting image of luxury.