

A HISTORIAN'S VIEW OF HEARST CASTLE

VICTORIA KASTNER *as interviewed by* VIRGINIA KEAN



NEED LARGER FORMAT IMAGE

In 1977 a young graduate student took a tour of Hearst Castle that transformed her life. Thirty years on, Victoria Kastner, author of Hearst Castle, the Biography of a Country House and the upcoming San Simeon: The Gardens and the Land, is still captivated by its breathtaking and singular beauty. This article is excerpted from her recent conversation with Virginia Kean.

HEARST HAD AN ARCADIAN VIEW OF California. He was a Westerner, the only child of a pioneer and one of the greatest civic benefactors in American history. Unlike the frozen easterners and sun-starved midwesterners who came to California and built bungalows in the Arts and Crafts style, he was a native Californian who was sent to school in the East and spent two and a half decades working there.

Hearst was always homesick for California when he was away from it. He once wrote, “I long to see our own woods, the jagged rocks and towering mountains, the majestic pines . . . I shall never live anywhere but in California.” He and his architect, Julia Morgan, shared similar feelings about this place. Their collaboration was remarkable for its spirit, its duration, and its seeming implausibility. On the surface, they didn’t appear to be anything alike, but they had a deep mutuality of feeling.

When I came to work here in 1979, Julia Morgan was an unknown woman architect, but then this Rosetta Stone of correspondence between Hearst and Morgan came to light. They wrote each other constantly. Morgan saved all 1,000 letters, which are now archived at Cal Poly at San Luis Obispo. Then in 1985, Sara Holmes Boutelle’s biography of Morgan was published. From the time they met in 1903, Morgan became his major architect. She designed and built many things for him—radio towers, zoo enclosures, houses in Southern California—the swimming pool at his castle in Wales, but Hearst Castle was their magnum opus. They both had such a feeling for art and the act of creation. She was self-effacing, and despite his power and wealth, he was personally self-effacing, with a Victorian courtliness. Theirs was a relationship full of passion and love for this place.



TOP LEFT: Aerial view of Hearst Castle. Photo by Victoria Garagliano, © Hearst Castle®, California State Parks. BOTTOM LEFT: Hearst and Morgan reviewing plans. Photo courtesy of Hearst Castle. © Hearst Castle®, California State Parks. ABOVE: Victoria Kastner at one of the doors to the Roman Pool at Hearst Castle. Photo by Virginia Kean.



“I like the roses in all variety of colors and . . . think a profusion and confusion of bloom . . . would be attractive.”

—WILLIAM R. HEARST
IN A LETTER TO JULIA MORGAN,
NOVEMBER 26, 1928

Hearst’s other major homes included a 12th-century castle with a walled rose garden in Wales, an old 900,000-acre rancho in the north of Mexico, a 30-room 5-story townhouse in New York City, a country house in Long Island on the Hudson, an estate of nearly 100,000 acres of soaring pine forests along a rushing river near California’s Mount Shasta, and a property right on the beach in Santa Monica. All had extraordinary settings, but none featured gardens that were on the scale of this. The siting on 450 square miles—275,000 acres—is what’s just brilliant here, and the way the natural landscape gives way to the created landscape, and the way the created landscape refers to the setting.

At first there were just snakes, oaks, and laurels. Water was brought down from the mountain springs at higher elevations. Hearst was hugely sensitive to what was already here; he didn’t want any oaks uprooted. The initial plan for a very simple bungalow quickly evolved into a scheme of interdependent bungalows with planted areas in between, and a main house, all connected by steps, paths, and terraces. From the start of construction in the fall of 1919 there was always going to be some kind of plantings. Then there was a transitional period when the gardens went from a very Spanish influence into something more sweeping, inspired by Italian Renaissance gardens. As Hearst’s vision grew and as the buildings grew in scope and scale, the gardens took on a much more important role and the garden features and small terraces were scaled up. Larger terraces, balustrades, and ceremonial steps were added. This idea of blending things together into a harmonious whole, which Hearst talks about, comes from his realizing that the gardens needed to complement the fantasy architecture of the buildings.

The most wonderful letters Hearst wrote to Morgan are the garden letters. The most fanciful of these were handwritten and may have been composed in the gardens. The fact that he wasn’t a plant expert was no impediment. He wanted plants that earned their keep. But what he really wanted were wonderful effects, fragrance, and gardens with both a day and night aspect.

Roses were the first flower he mentions in the letters, and a frequent subject. You could say that the gardens started out as suggestions for the roses. At one point Hearst even wanted to have a maze of climbing roses on lattices because that way you “couldn’t cheat.” He wanted fragrant, repeat-blooming roses and ordered the new Hybrid Teas that were just coming onto the market. Color was important. For the three cottages he suggested pink and white roses around one, red and yellow roses around another, and yellow and orange roses around the third.

In the early 1920s, Hearst brought Bruce Porter in to consult and later hired Isabella Worn, a San Francisco floral designer. She had an excellent sense of color and would go round the garden with him. Hearst got ideas from her but also bargaged Morgan with clippings from some of the 14 magazines he owned, among them *House Beautiful*, *Town and Country*, and *Connoisseur*. Charles Platt is another influence in that rather than a Mediterranean garden with mostly greens and citrus, these gardens have a preponderance of colorful, old-fashioned flowers. This was to be a garden of memory, planted in a simple garden style with a real profusion and confusion of flowers. The other big influence on Hearst was his grandparents’ garden in Santa Clara, California.

When I first came here, Hearst was considered the genius behind everything, but the letters and Boutelle’s biography of Morgan countered that. Hearst is the



LEFT: Mme Édouard Herriot. Photo by Ron Robertson. BELOW: A parterre at Hearst Castle. Photo by Mary McDonald. © Hearst Castle®, California State Parks.



generator of ideas and Morgan is creating for him to his taste. The suggestions are nearly always his, but she is responding with her design inspiration. In her designs she's giving him not just what he wants, but what she knows he would want. That's the dynamic between them. It is a rare kind of collaboration that can go on as long as this one did, where the client is of such changeability of mind and yet the architect doesn't take umbrage at that.

Hearst was trying to improve on the past by superimposing this idea of a European landscape that had the best aspects, the cultural beauty and grandeur that he had seen ever since his first trip abroad at the age of ten and that Julia Morgan had also seen. He takes the one deficiency in the California landscape, the lack of culture, and superimposes this European lifestyle of grandeur in architecture. He



Statue of Europa surrounded by roses in a parterre at Casa del Mar, Hearst Castle, December 2007. Photo by Virginia Kean.

takes this rough, unfinished landscape, tends it, makes it self-sufficient, but keeps the unspoiled beauty and the personal freedom of the West.

It's extraordinary that everything now looks the way he envisioned it would look. It's all grown to a level of maturity where the *Washingtonia robusta* palms are dusting the tops of the bell towers. Although there is not the same abundance of plants as in Hearst's time, at the last inventory the gardens contained 1,041 roses. And the views that Hearst so treasured are pretty much the same, despite the enormous pressures for development from the 1960s on that have been resolved with the successful agreement championed by Stephen Hearst, one of Hearst's great-grandsons, and the American Land Conservancy, which will preserve the ranchland from further development.

When I came here in 1979, people laughed with derision that I would come to what many considered a dark, gaudy, horribly excessive place. It was as if I had said I was going to be narrating the jungle ride at Disneyland. Modern architecture, the international style, had been enshrined as the only architecture. There was an anti-Hearst sentiment and nothing had been published about this place. So I was fortunate to arrive when I did. Julia Morgan, who never wrote or

lectured about architecture, thought her buildings would speak for her.

We confer meaning on individual objects because they come freighted with a whole series of extended associations. That's what this house did for Hearst, who was two years old when his father bought the property. The one constant in his childhood was this place, and he was attached to it at the deepest level. I think it was the longest love affair of his life. Hearst was completely unrealistic and quite an exasperating employer. His politics were often controversial and not admirable. But when it comes to the way he felt about the land and landscape, about gardens, art, architecture, and hospitality, he was tremendous. And I think this is the greatest single work by a female architect in the world. With Hearst Castle, Julia Morgan was at the top of her game.