
This is the biography of a house – the Casa del Herrero – commissioned in the early twentieth century by the St. Louis industrialist George Fox Steedman and his wife Carrie, and realized by the California-based architect George Washington Smith. The pairing of Steedman, a Hispanophile, and Smith, a proponent of the Spanish architectural style, made perfect sense. The result was this elegant interpretation of an Andalusian structure, punctuated with varied Mediterranean influences. Built between 1922 and 1925 in Montecito, the Casa typified the Spanish idiom so well-suited to the climate and landscape of Southern California. However, Steedman’s passionate vision, his insistence on quality and authenticity, and his collaboration with Smith make the narrative an appropriately narrow but rich slice of architectural history that is anything but typical.

One thread which seems to tie up all the others is the circle of people and places that inspired Steedman’s vision. Chief among these were Steedman’s study trips to Europe and to other parts of the U.S.; his “shopping trips” to Spain to seek out furnishings for the Casa; and the couple Arthur Byne and Mildred Stapley Byne who, respected for their knowledge and refined taste in Spanish art, guided Steedman and acted as conduits for the acquisition of numerous Spanish antiquities, several from former monasteries. As a side note, the Bynes also served as purchasing agents for William Randolph Hearst’s San Simeon.

Descriptions of the Casa are woven into the narrative rather than set apart. This approach works well, mostly thanks to the comprehensive photo documentation consisting of both black and white historical prints and contemporary color images, in both full page and double page formats. A three-page fold out shows Steedman’s workshop, his favorite place in the compound. Other significant illustrations include original structural and landscape drawings, floor plans, and designs for ornamental tiles. The book opens nicely to a flat position so that pictorial elements do not collapse into the gutter.

The author Robert Sweeney is President of Friends of the Schindler House in Los Angeles and has written about Frank Lloyd Wright as well as the contemporary architect Wallace E. Cunningham. For this book, he mined a broad range of primary sources for illuminating information, particularly correspondence contained in the George Washington Smith papers and the archives of the Casa del Herrero. A chronologically arranged bibliography, covering 1903 to the present, is also helpful. This book can serve students at all levels and would be enjoyed by general readers.

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