



The former Lalaurie mansion, renovated by a New Orleans doctor with architects Koch & Wilson and interior designer Michael P. Myers.

Mansion's story should include its restoration

Out-of-towners who take the popular horse-and-buggy tour of the French Quarter learn only part of the truth about the former Lalaurie mansion, the imposing French Empire-style home at 1140 Royal St.

The familiar story the tour guides always relate concerns Mme. Louis Lalaurie, a beautiful socialite who scandalized the Crescent City when a fire broke out in her house on April 10, 1834. Neighbors, rushing in to battle the flames, discovered and rescued seven slaves who were shackled in the attic, and who — it was ascertained — had been tortured and starved nearly to death by their elegant mistress.

Mme. Lalaurie managed to escape the angry crowd that gathered outside her house, hastening first to Mandeville and then to Mobile, Ala., from which she set sail for Paris. However, the house was sacked by the mob, who created street fires with its lavish furnishings. During subsequent years, the legend arose that the mansion was haunted by the spirits of Mme. Lalaurie's mistreated slaves.

This, the dramatic story that tour groups invariably hear, certainly enhances New Orleans' reputation as a center of mysticism, exoticism and romance. However, of much greater interest to residents of New Orleans is another, much more recent adventure story, concerning the renovation of the house by a local physician and art collector who acquired the Lalaurie mansion in 1969.



Roger Green

After more than 15 years' work, the house is today one of the handsomest residential properties in this city, preserving important period details while also functioning as a backdrop for its owner's collection of contemporary art. Responsible for restoring the house — an ambitious project that, far from being complete, will continue for several more years — are architects Koch & Wilson and interior designer Michael P. Myers. The owner asked not to be identified.

By the time the present owner acquired the house it had undergone various transformations, serving as a girls' school, a conservatory, a gambling house and — during the 1930s Depression — a social welfare institution, before being subdivided into a number of small apartments. The first task was to create an arrangement of rooms appropriate to the new owner's lifestyle. Today the building's first floor contains commercial space, the second floor two double parlors, a dining room a kitchen and butler's pantry, the third floor two bedrooms, each with bath, and a sitting room.

The Empire style in which the house was designed flourished in Paris during the years of the first empire (1804-15), and was basically a continuation of neo-



A second-floor parlor in the mansion, with its exquisite furnishings and works of art.

STAFF PHOTOS BY G.E. ARNOLD

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Paintings grace walls as a staircase winds its way between the second and third stories of the Royal Street building.

classical style, encouraged by Napoleon's desire for the grandeur of imperial Rome. Yet Empire style architecture, furniture and decorative arts reflected not only Roman but Greek and Egyptian

influences, including motifs of laurel wreathes, bees, sphinxes, lyres, fasces and cornucopias.

The exterior of the rather squat and muscular Lalaurie house, thought to have been erected during the mid 1820s, shows Roman influence in the rows of round-topped openings — reminiscent of the Colosseum and of Roman aqueducts — that surround the first and third stories, and in the decorative frieze that encircles the second. Also typical of the French Empire style is the deep, barrel-vaulted portal on Royal Street, leading to the front door which is decorated in relief with portrayals of urns, flowers and birds, surrounding Apollo in his chariot.

The Lalaurie house, which today culminates in a flat roof and is covered with gray-painted stucco, originally had a hip roof rising above outer walls of exposed red brick. The stucco and the flat roof were retained in the restoration, which is not intended to re-create the house as it was when originally constructed, or at any other point in its eventful, even checkered career.

The same approach to design characterizes the building's interiors, which are taxed with accommodating the owner's contemporary activities, including the collection of contemporary art. Among the period features that were lovingly restored are the elaborate crown moldings and the fluted Corinthian pilasters that flank the doors and windows on the building's second story. Of particular interest is the deep frieze below the molding in the dining room, portraying angels with folded wings holding palm branches.

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Yet the decorative trim and walls were painted in colors — white and pale earthy hues — that depart from the gold, greens and reds demonstrated by paint analyses to have been originally used. The new colors create an impression of spaciousness and tranquillity while also providing a neutral backdrop for the house's sophisticated mélange of artworks, antique and modern furnishings.

Among the artworks are paintings by New Orleans artists George Dureau and Robert Gordy, plus sculptures by Louise Bourgeois, Charles Ginnever and Alex Katz. The surprisingly smooth mixture of contemporary and period styles is particularly evident in the second floor hallway, where a graceful mahogany railed stairway both contrasts with and complements a Cubist sculpture in bronze by Gerald Laing, displayed on a lucite pedestal.

According to Myers, much work still needs to be done on the house before it is completed and fine-tuned to the smallest detail; to cite but one example, the swinging doors that now connect the dining room and butler's pantry need to

be replaced with the original pocket doors.

Restoring the house will likely be a lifetime undertaking for the owner, as for the owners of countless historical residences in New Orleans. The commitment involved in such an enterprise, not the story of Mme. Lalaurie, is what tourists should be made aware of on horse-and-buggy rides.