



A Dream among the Ruins

Robert E. Smith's
Unnaturally Correct Restoration
of a Creole Weekend House

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In an old house in Saint Martinville, Louisiana, that was covered with vines, Robert Smith spotted fragments of a vanished culture. Anyone else would have seen just collapsed rafters and rotted floorboards, which were there in greater abundance. But Smith, a restoration consultant and antiques dealer, is a descendant of Louisiana's early French settlers. For this Creole manqué, the culture is a reality, as well as a memory and a dream. Among the ruins he saw a pair of French doors, beaded ceiling beams, and a massive iron hook and eye. "I thought, 'Oh, I want to have this,'" Smith says.

A year later, he did. Smith moved the little house—all 784 square

feet—to a nine-acre property near Breaux Bridge. There it joined several other buildings under the live oaks, including a larger residence, a pair of two-story pigeon cots, and a pair of privies. All have been restored to resemble a Creole plantation such as those that once commanded Louisiana's waterways. The little house, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is home to Smith and his "highly realistic fantasy" of nineteenth-century French life in the New World.

The original owners were probably a Creole plantation family of the 1830s, residents of Saint Martin Parish. They would have been well educated and well traveled, Smith says, and "would have kept up with

LEFT: The salon mantel has a faux marble finish with a diamond-within-a-diamond motif that is *Directoire* in origin. The doré mantel clock shows Napoléon's son studying.

ABOVE: Robert Smith's love of things Creole extends to dress of the early 19th century. **PRECEDING PAGES:** In the midst of venerable live oak trees draped with Spanish moss, Smith's antiques shop, surrounded by white picket fencing, is a restored Louisiana Creole-style weekend residence. To the left stands his Creole house.



French taste in clothing, furniture, and fabrics." A little house in the parish seat of Saint Martinville would have been a "necessary convenience." The couple might strike out for town on Friday night, "go to the opera on Saturday evening and Mass on Sunday, then back to the country for the rest of the week," Smith says. "They'd leave this house locked up."

The French floor plan sets a salon and a bedroom side by side, sharing a central chimney, while wide

porches flank both the front and the back of the house. Like early French residences in the West Indies, this small home is deliberately open to prevailing breezes. "Louisiana French architecture is not just pretty," Smith says. "The salon is wonderfully lit from three sides, and the fourth side has a mirror. It's a *lanterne*. There is always change. It's a wonderful environment to live in continuously."

Smith set three goals for the restoration. He would use the best insu-

lation, air-conditioning, alarm systems, and so on, keeping it all hidden. In short, he'd "have the twentieth century but not see it." Next, the finished house would look mature, not brand-new. "You wouldn't want your grandmother to have the hair color or the skin surface she had when she was eighteen years old," he says. "She'd scare you to death." The goal was "the illusion of a wonderfully cared-for existence." But more important, Smith would base his choices on physical



OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: The table in the salon is set for a fruit and nut course, with linens pressed and knotted in the French 18th-century style. Crystal, silver, silver plate, and porcelain are from 18th-century France. The plates, in a strewn flower pattern, are from Count D'Artois's factory.





This is where Louis XVI meets the bayou, where rough cypress floorboards give way to waxed mahogany bedposts and turned table legs.

LEFT: A portrait of Alexandre De Vins Bienvenu II, a noted housebuilder in Saint Martin Parish, hangs above the bedroom mantel. At left is a circa 1810 cherry armoire inlaid with Bienvenu's initials.





OPPOSITE: The bed, whose delicate posts are almost 10 feet tall, was made in 18th-century Louisiana of inlaid mahogany. Its melon-shaped headboard symbolizes the rising sun.

ABOVE: The cypress tall case clock was made for Jacques Dupré, who served as governor of Louisiana in 1830–31. At right is a rare Louisiana inlaid cherry and cypress chest of drawers.



evidence from the structure itself when possible. He also consulted nineteenth-century paintings, legal and commercial documents, Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, and even *The Tunica Treasures*, the catalogued contents of Louisiana Indian burial mounds. The last was a rich source of information about objects such as tableware, tools, and utensils.

The little house's two cypress mantels provided several cues. A previous owner stripped them to "Cajunify" the place, "but they were painted gray, at least, and I would think were *faux marbre*, since they are so sophisticated in form." The salon mantel's diamond-within-a-diamond pattern was favored by Di-

rectoire taste; this and its vertical channeling are echoed throughout, from the mantel clock and mirror to seat furniture.

The finished interior is based on a series of contrasts: light and dark, rough and refined, dry texture and polished brilliance. This is where Louis XVI meets the bayou, where rough cypress floorboards give way to waxed mahogany bedposts and turned table legs. Smith is proud of the Louisiana-made furniture in cypress, cherry, mahogany, and mulberry. "Our wood was far superior to the wood they were generally using in France," he says.

One thing the little house doesn't have is adequate storage. Smith

stashes books, linens, and stereo components in armoires. "For my personal use, I have twelve," he says with a laugh. "That is normal, you see, for a Creole of my period."

"A restoration project like this is partly a memory," Smith says, "of my childhood and of my ancestors' lives. The reality is that we can sit in the salon today and hear this crystal clinking and see the light shining on the silver and feel the texture of the fabric. The dream is that I came along to save this house when nobody else would have; therefore it will go on beyond my lifetime."

"I have the taste of an early nineteenth-century Creole. That's just as plain as it can be." ◇



OPPOSITE: A glassed-in back porch looks off to a stand of ancient live oaks on Smith's nine-acre property.
 ABOVE: The little house, built circa 1830, was probably a Creole plantation family's weekend house in Saint Martinville, seat of Saint Martin Parish. The French floor plan sets a salon and bedroom side by side. Both rooms open directly onto the deep front porch through glazed double doors and are served by the central chimney.