

Vizcaya

Behind the Scenes of a National Historic Landmark



VIZCAYA IS THE FORMER WINTER RESIDENCE of Chicago industrialist, James Deering. Today this Italian-inspired villa and gardens are owned by Miami-Dade County and operate as a museum, receiving 185,000 visitors annually.

Designated as a National Historic Landmark, Vizcaya appears to be in excellent condition considering that it is only a few years shy of its centennial anniversary. This is thanks in part, to the hard work of a small dedicated army of architects, landscape architects, donors, researchers, contractors, volunteer guides, gardeners, and custodians who continuously maintain and preserve the property. Today, a number of crucial conservation and restoration projects are taking place under the supervision of Executive Director Dr. Joel Hoffman.

When work began in 1914, Deering employed nearly 1000 artisans and laborers. To complete his vision of the house and gardens, he enlisted the help of architect F. Burrall Hoffman, Jr., landscape architect Diego Suarez, and New York painter Paul Chalfin. The result was a 34-room main house with formal gardens, a subtropical rockland hammock and an adjacent village containing a farm and livestock. The palatial home was decorated with art and antiques from a period spanning 2,000 years. Many of these items, including a number of wall panels, fireplace mantels and ceilings, were handpicked by Deering and Chalfin on their travels throughout Europe.

Over the years the property has endured the ravages of time, hurricanes, and well meaning repairs. With assistance from Miami-Dade County's Building Better Communities bond program, a \$500,000 grant from the Tiffany & Co. Foundation, and \$300,000 from the federal government's Save America's Treasures program, Vizcaya recently begin conservation treatment of its outdoor sculpture collection. **Conservation Solutions, Inc.** is the contractor chosen to carry out the first \$1.5 million phase of the delicate restoration effort. Phase one's focus is on Vizcaya's outdoor Italian sculpture — the largest collection of its kind in the United States. In the past, Conservation Solutions, Inc. has worked with a number of prestigious American institutions including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the New York Public Library. At Vizcaya, their task is to restore the fountain garden along with its centerpiece, the Sutri Fountain. This fountain was designed by the architect Filippo Barigioni in 1722 and was purchased in Rome by James Deering in 1914.

Another crucial part of Vizcaya's garden restoration efforts is the creation of the Cultural Landscape Report. This comprehensive report, authored by Vermont-based firm Heritage Landscapes with input from Miami landscape architecture firm Falcón + Bueno, was commissioned to research and document Vizcaya's landscape history while providing guidance for current maintenance, rehabilitation and preservation, as well as future management of the grounds. Perhaps the most visible of Vizcaya's restoration efforts is the renovation of the two Gate Lodges by R.J. Heisenbottle Architects, P.A. and contractor Trigram, LLC. Once completed, the Gate Lodges will house museum staff. This should open up additional portions of the Main House for visitors.

Phase 1 of Trigram's construction work also includes the restoration of Vizcaya's basement areas containing the Café and Shop (destroyed by Hurricane Wilma in 2005), electrical and utility upgrades for the main house and surrounding grounds, and improvements to the native rockland hammock. Though phase 2 has not started yet, it is expected to include the restoration of the exterior and interior of Vizcaya's main house and parts of the formal gardens.

Restoration of the remaining buildings in the Vizcaya village are expected to occur in Phase 3, and if appropriate funding is in place, the construction of a new visitor center and parking garage will take place in Phase 4 . Also contingent on available funding is the development of an alternate solution to the glass canopy over Vizcaya's central courtyard. The existing structure was installed in 1986 as a climate control measure and is not original to the house.

With ongoing financial support from the David A. Klein Foundation and a grant from Miami-Dade County's Capital Development Grants Program, Falcón + Bueno has redesigned Vizcaya's orchid garden on the north side of the main house. According to Juan Bueno, "the gardens of Villa Vizcaya comprise a variety of garden types that include medieval, Renaissance, and baroque elements. Among these was the North Lawn. The North Lawn was later lost and redeveloped as an orchidarium. Unfortunately, the new expression was neither a historically distinct contemporary design nor a historic reconstruction of the original design."

"Our approach was twofold: Historic reconstruction of the original garden and rehabilitation as orchidarium with the introduction of historically distinct minimalist elements. Archival drawings and photographs were analyzed to determine the original layout of the garden, alignment of its paths with the main house stairs, plant palette and

pavement treatment,” added Bueno.

Orchids were a part of Deering’s original vision for the gardens and remain a permanent fixture in today’s landscape. In fact, Vizcaya actively conducts programs that engage volunteers in activities and training related to orchid care and other garden projects under the supervision of orchid curator Carol De Biase.

Volunteers are critical to the success of many of Vizcaya’s programs such as the guided tours and environmental cleanups. While Vizcaya’s 100+ volunteer guides provide tours of the main house, another volunteer led effort is focused on the maintenance of the mangrove and hammock areas. 70% of the exotic species throughout Vizcaya’s estuary system have been successfully removed as part of this effort. Volunteers have replanted native vegetation in key natural areas and native trees are being relocated to more appropriate places in the hammock and garden in order to better preserve the existing ecosystems. Additionally, Vizcaya’s landscape maintenance staff recently replaced over 800 plants and established a fertilization program to ensure the health of the museum’s living exhibits.

Vizcaya’s curators are working with equal enthusiasm to preserve the museum’s extensive collections. This includes the scanning and digitization of the historic architectural drawings, blueprints and photographs. In fact, the original architectural drawings were recently moved to an offsite, climate-controlled location to ensure their proper storage and preservation.

“Overcoming immense obstacles to its building and ongoing challenges, Vizcaya has indelibly imprinted itself upon the history and culture of South Florida,” said Dr. Joel Hoffman. “Vizcaya has endured many challenges from its creation through to its ongoing preservation. We are now the stewards of this local treasure and National Historic Landmark and we are pleased to have the opportunity to share the story of James Deering’s extraordinary estate with people around the world,” added Hoffman.

Vizcaya Museum and Gardens is one of the most well attended museums in south Florida. It is located at 3251 South Miami Avenue and is open from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Check website www.vizcayamuseum.org for days open and admission price.

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