

Stuart's Versailles Palace Model

Part 1: Overview of the Project

By G. S. Stuart

My love affair with great architecture did not begin with the Versailles Palace but rather in Bavaria southwest of Munich. There at about the age of ten, I vividly recall my first visit to Neuschwanstein. I was thunderstruck. It personified a boy's mental image of a castle. Later Walt Disney made Neuschwanstein the prototype for his Disneyland castle.



Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany

The setting of Neuschwanstein was perfect; everything about this building was pure heaven. I knew nothing of the history surrounding it and it didn't matter, it was love at first sight. For the next eight decades this castle has held a grip on my aesthetic spirit. However, my architectural spirit was won over by another, more historically famous royal site in France.

I believe it was in the early 1930s that I saw, for the first time, the Palace of Versailles, which stands about 12 miles west of Paris. The palace had been the seat of Bourbon rule for hundreds of years, and

essentially the crossroads of European royalty, politics, art, science and economics.

Thanks to my early mentors, I had a budding appreciation of the power and grandeur of Versailles. I was hooked, fascinated by the buildings, their inhabitants and activities.

I have always been singularly blessed with the support and encouragement of a number of remarkable people. My maternal grandmother was an intellectual, very political and widely read. She stimulated my interest in history and politics, and she encouraged my study of painting. During her lifetime, she had supported and promoted a handful of painters. She had no interest in architecture as far as I can recall, but she did introduce me to fine literature at a very early age.

A Village to Make a Castle

All my thoughts were on building Versailles in miniature. It will sound odd to contemporary young American men, with their obsession with cars, sports and girls, to hear of my ecstasies over architecture. But there it was. My parents had no interest in my activities, other than to insist on my focusing on school work. Of course this was a completely lost cause and the source of much despair. For the next fifteen years, my school and social life meant virtually nothing to me.

Luckily I had wonderful supporters, including my grandmother's companion, Dr. Irma Kasten. I refer to her as my "muse," commonly understood to be someone who encourages and inspires creative activity. Dr. Kasten saw my fascination with buildings and sculpture, and encouraged these leanings by seeing to it that I had all the resources I needed to pursue my ambitions. She taught me the metric system so I could read the measurements and helped me choose a scale for the structure.

I hadn't a clue about any of these processes, and was always an abysmal math student, so her guidance was crucial and has stood me in good stead ever since.

I should add, that during this period I



Dr. Irma Kasten

also had an intense fling with oil painting, attending art school and working with a local "master." I was also captivated by theater and was drawn to production and performance throughout the period of high school and college. All these artistic disciplines helped in the Versailles project.

Construction Begins

Although my family's property was no park, I was given a comfortable space in the garden in which to express my boyish desires to build. As an untrained architect, I knew nothing about the construction of anything, but ignorance is bliss!

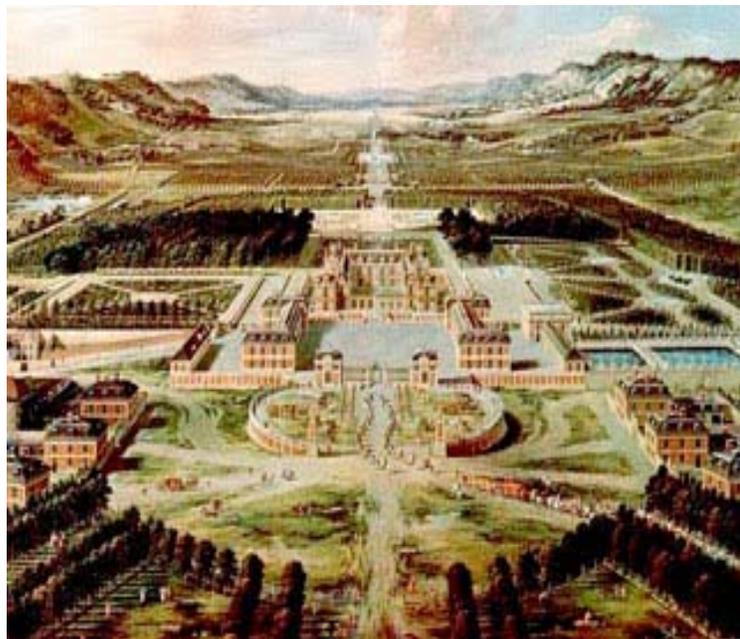
First, I needed to acquire the plans of the Versailles Palace. It was Dr. Kasten who discovered a French source for the architectural plans of the Palace of Versailles.

Early on I realized I had to trim my expectations considerably. The Palace of Versailles is an enormous structure with vast wings and *Continued on Page 2*

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multiple stories covering more than one-quarter square mile of land. We selected the scale of one-half inch to one foot as our standard, but even then the footprint would have been way beyond the garden area allotted to me.

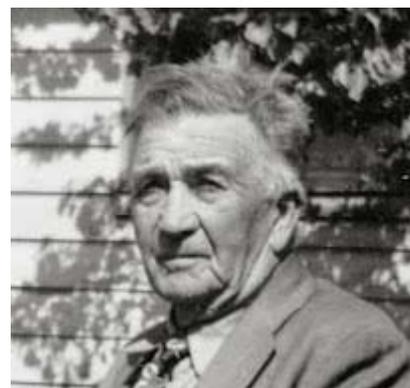
The actual Palace of Versailles went through many expansions, alterations and re-models between the 1660s and 1700. I selected the period of the 1670s for my model, for to me it was the most exquisite form the building had taken. The grander, more imposing additions came later, but they never completely eclipsed the beauty of the 1670s building.



Versailles in the 1670s.

Concrete Solution

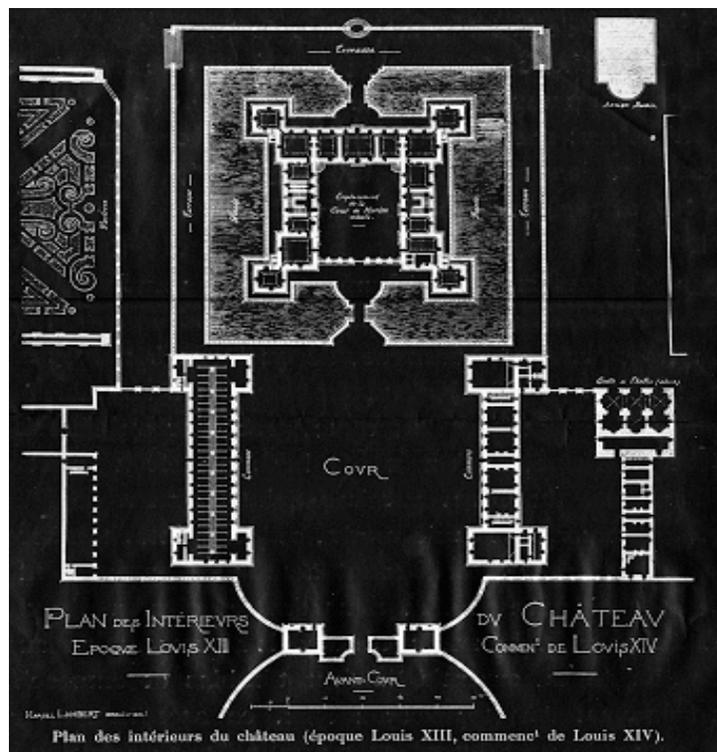
No pasteboard and paperclip castle this time--we were serious! "Our" model was to be constructed of concrete, wood, and some marble. Mixing and casting concrete was my first big challenge. My hands rapidly split and bled from working the caustic mixture. Once more, I was saved from immediate failure by a blessed old gentleman who lived on a tiny property next to our garden wall. His name was



Mr. Cox offered concrete suggestions.

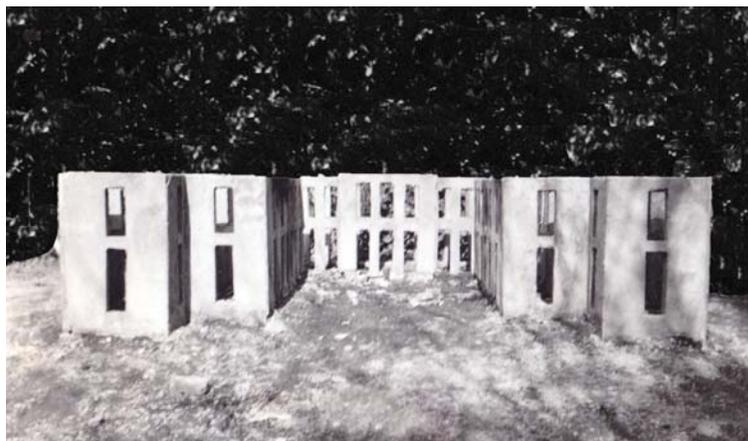
Mr. Cox (I never knew his first name in all the years we were acquainted).

He was a retired concrete builder. He had been involved in building some of the great dams in the west. He noticed my struggles with trying to mix cement, build forms and put things together. He saw my misery when I showed him my poor hands that were rapidly being destroyed by exposure to wet cement. Mr. Cox told me that I should always wear



Actual plan for early Chateau at Versailles circa 1676-80.

gloves and never handle the wet cement bare-handed. When I asked for a cure for my ragged hands, he said, "I know you'll never do it, but it works right off, and will fix you fine." I insisted on knowing, and he said, "Well, you have to do it thoroughly, and you won't like it." "Tell me, please," I insisted. "What you do is piss on 'em" he revealed. "I WHAT!" I sputtered. "I said you wouldn't like it, but it'll do the trick," he said. As soon as I was alone, I did as he advised, and within a day or two my hands were healing over, and a week later, wearing gloves this time, I was back working the concrete. He knew the chemistry – acidic urine neutralizes the caustic lime in concrete. Indeed! So it's always best to pay attention to those with experience! Mr. Cox explained the fundamentals of pouring concrete into forms and constructing the forms so they don't collapse under the weight. It didn't take me long to learn the basics, and pretty soon the walls of the palace began to rise.



Raw concrete walls of our model. Things were moving forward.

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Raising the Roof, Moldings, Statuary . . .

Once the concrete shell of the model was complete, we constructed the mansard roof with pine bracing and a skin of thin mahogany plywood. My father, who was in the aircraft business, supplied the plywood. World War II was on, and the aircraft industry was moving rapidly away from wood-sheathed fuselages to aluminum-covered aircraft, so I had an unlimited supply of plywood.

One of my greatest challenges with the model was how to pro-



Basic mansard roofs are up and some of the exterior decorations have been put in place. Much more has to be done, however.

duce and attach the many intricate exterior moldings, urns, and statuary. We settled on hard dental plaster, which we planned to paint white to allay water damage, or so we hoped. These architectural details had to be cast in this plaster, so Dr. Kasten found a mold maker. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a mold maker! Using the rubber molds he made for us, we cast all the door and window frames and roof decorations. This was a tedious and never-ending process, as you might imagine.

Functional Windows and Doors

In addition to all those details, we were faced with glazing all the doors and windows. I was insistent that we use real glass, and that all doors and windows open and close. Once again Dr. Kasten came to the rescue by finding an architectural firm that would make them for us. This was another project that took many weeks, and I struggled to install the finished products.

And a Million More Details

Anyone who has overseen the building of their home or other buildings can easily understand that there are a million and one things that go into construction besides what I've discussed here. Of course, our palace model was not to be plumbed, thank goodness, but it had to be lighted from within. During the first years, while I was laboring over interiors, we would occasionally light small birthday candles inside the model, to see the effect. Later, when the interiors were finished, we wired it with Christmas tree lights. Miniature light bulbs were just being developed, too late for our palace, what a pity!

Our only method to get at the interiors was to make the roof



View of our progress with glazed windows and doors.



Also, many of the fancy roof decorations, railings and so on, are appearing.

removable. Then we could lift out the ceilings and gain access to the rooms below. I was already frustrated by the one half inch to the foot scale and wishing we had gone at least to one inch to the foot. Bigger would have been better . . . and only cost a few thousand more to construct!

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My enthusiasm overtook my undeveloped sense of precision, accuracy, and historical correctness. Versailles of the 1670s did not yet have the famous Hall of Mirrors, but I included Louis XIV's bedroom, and *oeil de boeuf* (the bull's eye window room) and attempted the Hercules Salon.

Some of the other interior rooms were modeled on rooms in other palaces that had caught my fancy over the years. One came from San Souci in Potsdam, another from Windsor Castle, one from a grand English manor house, and one from the Doge's Palace in Venice. See the next newsletter issue.

A Door Closes, Another Opens

Leaving my home and my still-unfinished model of Versailles to go off to college was a difficult transition, to be sure. During my first year away at college I was still making statuary.

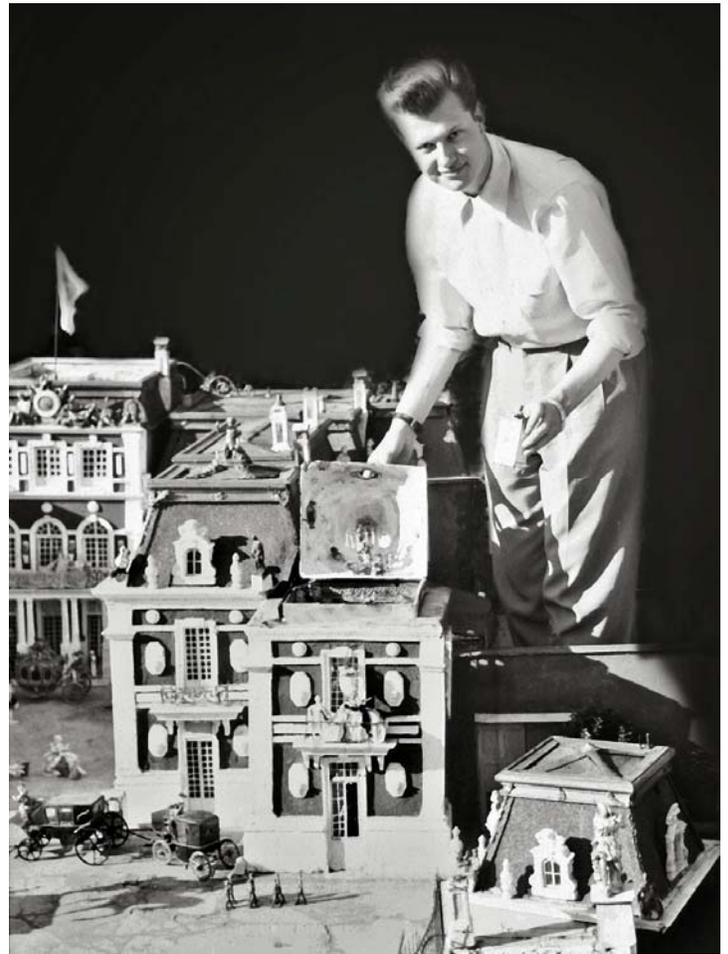
However, by the time of my sophomore year the palace was behind me. It had been covered to protect it from the elements, but work on it had stopped for good. By the 1950s, I had moved to the east coast to finish my studies, and I intended to enter the Foreign Service. Theater, portrait painting, and the palace model were apparently behind me forever.



This is an attempt at the statuary that topped the "guard blocks" at either side of the forecourt grill. This is our best effort at allegory from descriptions and poor photographs.

Reports from home indicated that the palace had not weathered well and was rapidly falling into decay. By the 1970s my parents had moved to another home. My father had tried to have the palace moved with them, but it crumpled into ruin instantly. He did manage to remove all the interior walls and furnishings and store them for me.

It was always a race to keep up with repairs. Water leakage and rodents made quick work of the interiors until they were removed to save them. The exterior walls suffered also. Ah



In this view you see the builder accessing one of the upper rooms.

well, dust to dust! Years later, after moving to Santa Barbara and then to Ojai, my wife and I opened a small gallery in our home for the Historical Figures. It was then that the remains of the palace were brought to Ojai and put in display cases in our gallery.

I have never lost my passionate love of Versailles, but the overwhelming obsession with my building architectural models has faded. Given enough funding, however, Versailles just might return, and result in a fabulous folly in my present garden.

NEXT ISSUE

Second installment will cover the interior rooms.