

Casa Casuarina

Historical Site Analysis

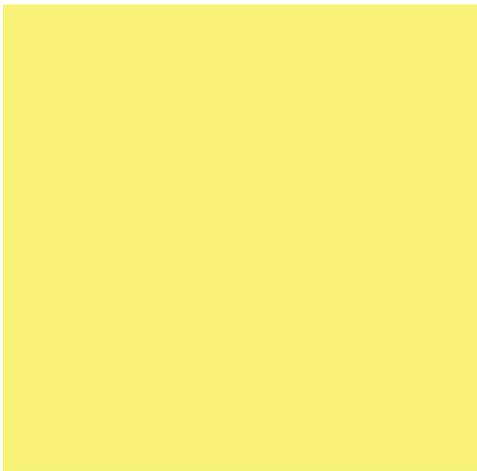
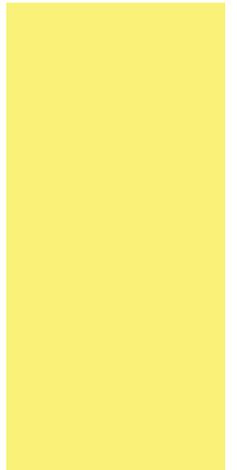
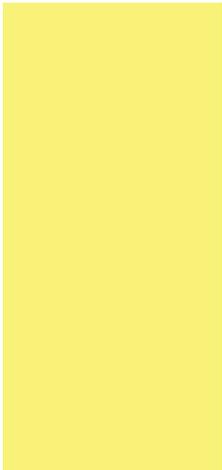


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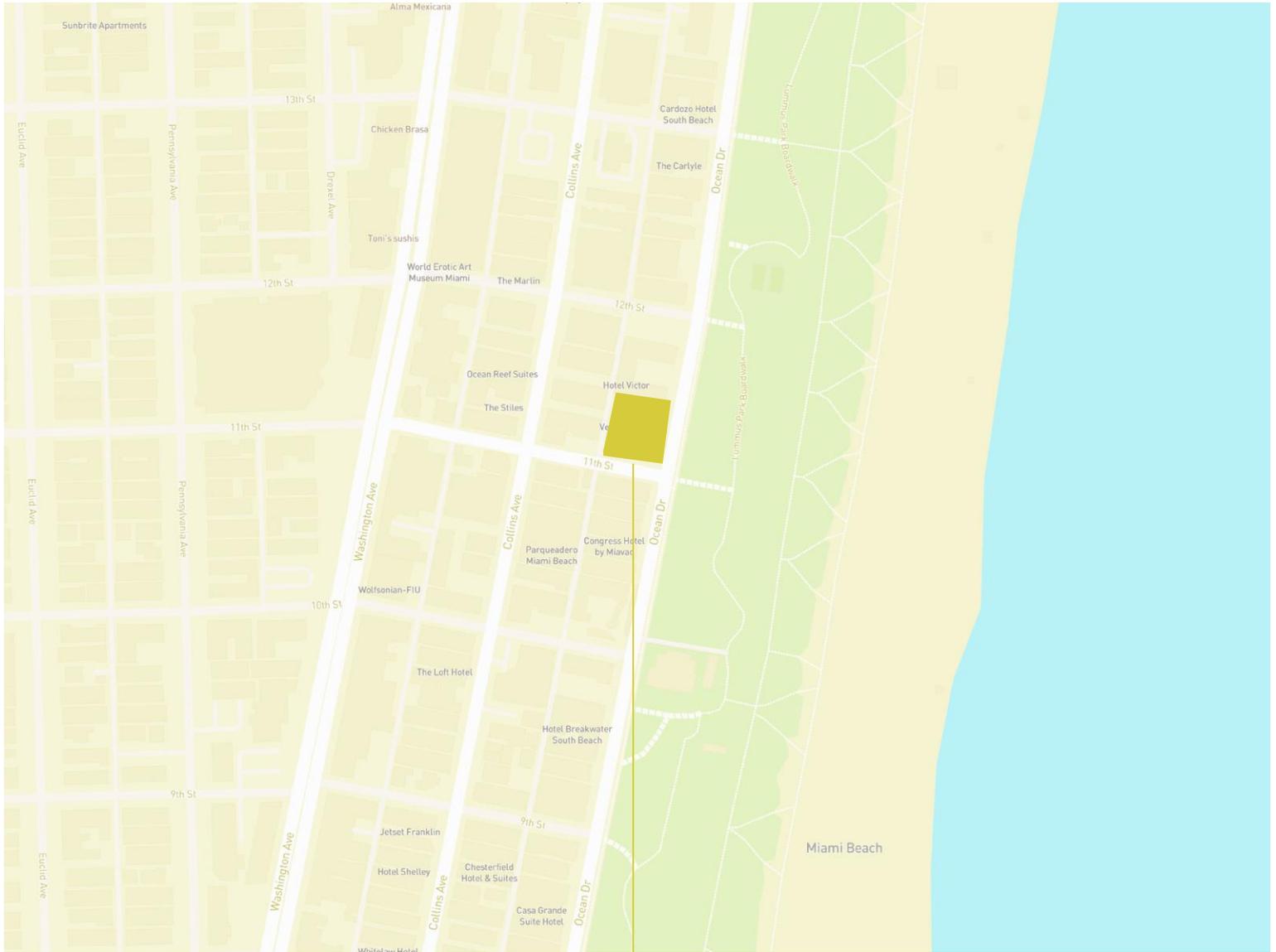
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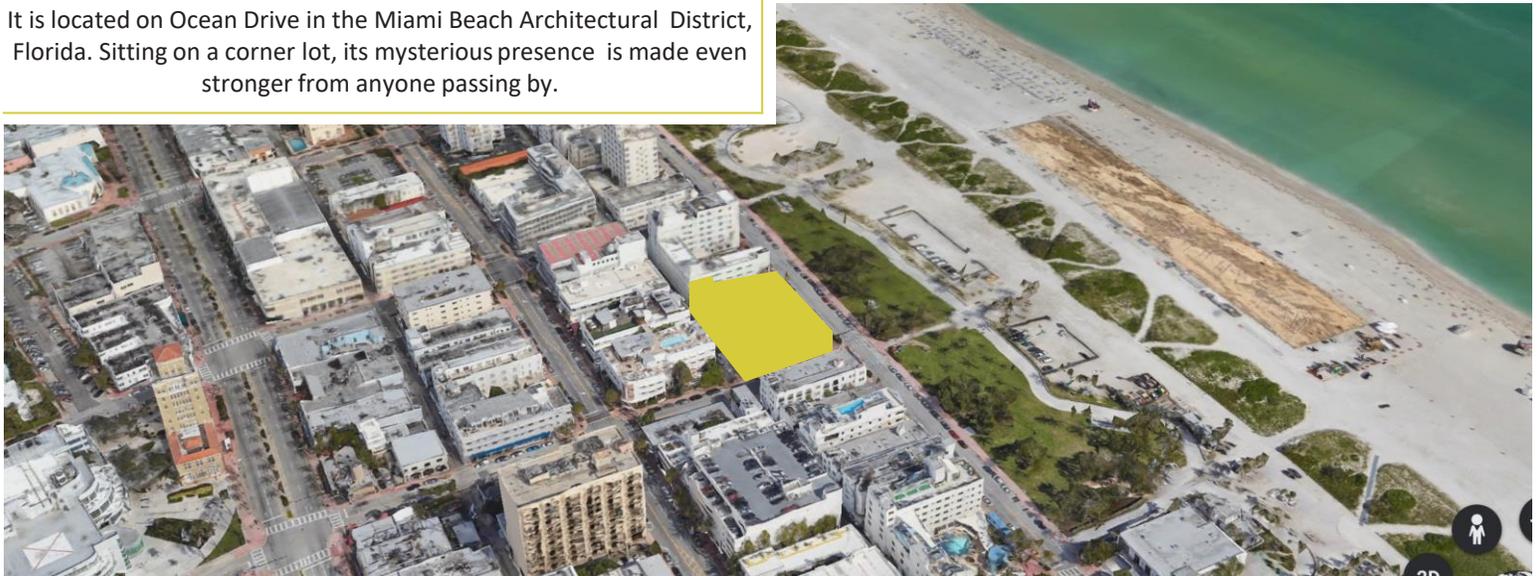


Site Investigation & Contextual Studies

Site Location & Context



It is located on Ocean Drive in the Miami Beach Architectural District, Florida. Sitting on a corner lot, its mysterious presence is made even stronger from anyone passing by.



Site Investigation & Contextual Studies

Site Historic District



In 1986, the Miami Beach City Commission voted to designate the area bordered by 6th Street to the South, the Erosion Control Line (Beach) on the east, Collins Court on the west, and roughly 16th Street on the north, as a historic preservation district. This is the oldest locally designated district in Miami Beach.

This area is highly representative of a distinct period in Miami Beach's history. The area's development pattern and architecture is reflective of its physical setting, prevalent architectural styles of the 1930's, the aspirations of its original developers, and the changing economic conditions of the nation and the local community. The area was planned and developed as a resort destination and was constructed within a short amount of time. As a result there is a high concentration of distinct resort architecture typical of the 1930s. The hotels from this period were clearly designed to take advantage of their proximity to the beach.



Casa Casuarina became a historic landmark in May 14, 1979.

Status of Historic Designation: Designated at National level: *Miami Beach Architectural District, 1979* Designated at Local level: *Ocean Drive/ Collins Avenue District, 1986*

Area(s) of Significance:
 Architecture
 Community Planning and Development

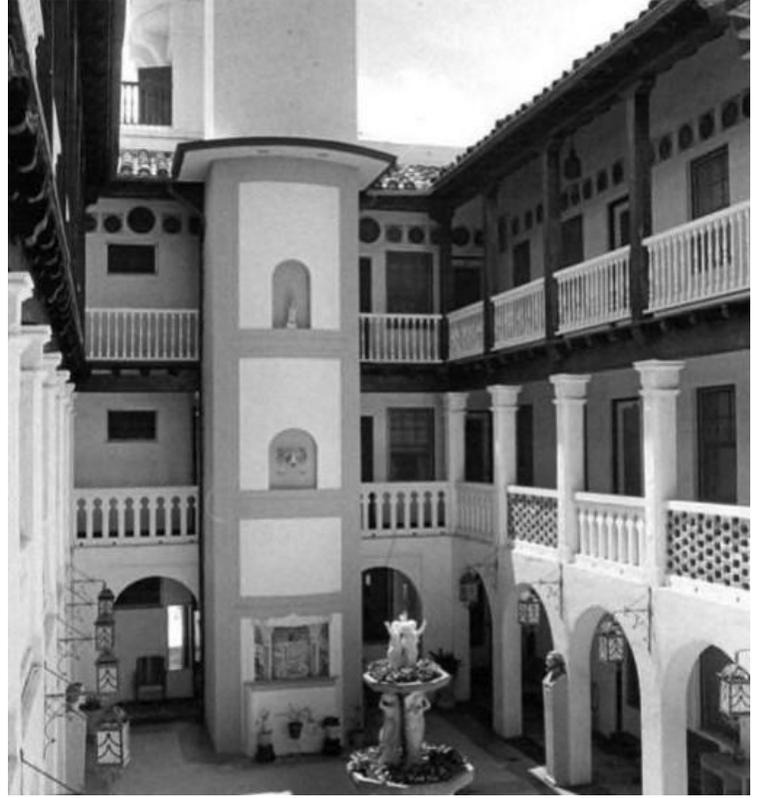


Site Investigation & Contextual Studies

Historical Evolution of Site



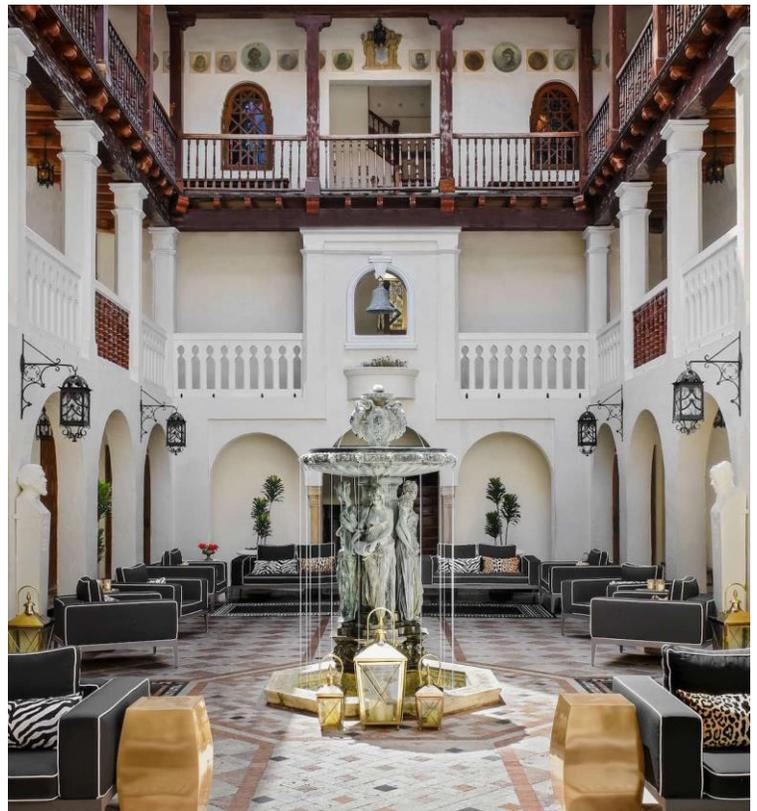
Foyer entrance in 1937



Foyer entrance in 1960



Foyer entrance in 1997



Foyer entrance today

Historical Evolution of Site

Phase 01 1930-1937



Casa Casuarina was built in 1930 by Alden Freeman, whose father, Joel Freeman was Treasurer of The Standard Oil Trust (also known as Rockefeller's Company) and left Alden a fabulous wealth when he passed away. This gave young Alden an opportunity to retire at the age of 27 and was able to travel the world.



Freeman, always well-travelled and very intelligent, loved the adventurous spirit of Christopher Columbus and on one of his many trips around the world, went to visit the Alcazar De Colon in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) which was built by Christopher Columbus's Son). Alden was so inspired by the house that he decided to build his own home in Miami Beach as homage to the Alcazar De Colon and brought back 2 authentic coralline bricks from the house, where one sits to the right hand side of the main entrance. Alden dreamed of living in a bohemian society with all his friends from local areas such as Coconut Grove and Coral Gables. In addition, on his many trips abroad he would meet fascinating people and always invite them to hang out in his beautiful home here in Miami Beach.

Historical Evolution of Site

Phase 01 1930-1937

The property had a total of 24 apartments that Freeman filled with family and friends and were made available to rent.



Approximately, 130 decorative medallions were lined along the perimeter of the second story of in the courtyard, all of which are still existing. The subject matter of the medallions depicts people's portraits, places, and historical events that held historical or personal significance with Freeman.

Yugoslavian sculptor, Vuk Vuchinich, was additionally commissioned to create a statue for the home. The bronze Kneeling Aphrodite (Greek goddess of love) statue was created in 1928 and has resided in the house ever since.

Legend maintains that Casa Casuarina was the original name given to the house when it was built in 1930 as homage to the only remaining tree in the lot after the 1926 hurricane that hit South Florida. Freeman was forced to cut down the tree to make room for the construction of his new house. *casuarina* is the botanical name of the tropical tree popularly known as the "Australian Pine".



Historical Evolution of Site

Phase 02 1937 - 1993



Alden Freeman died at Casa Casuarina on December 29, 1937. The property was then sold to Jacque Amsterdam for \$100,000, who continued to run the house as an apartment complex that he named the "Amsterdam Palace. In April 1939, Amsterdam did a small renovation of the house in which he installed an elevator shaft, where the current bell is located. Also, in the renovation, the lily pond in the Courtyard was replaced with terrazzo flooring and the kneeling Aphrodite statue was moved to the front terrace to greet guests with love. In the ensuing years, Amsterdam Palace passed through the hands of several owners and hundreds of tenants. For a short time in the 1980's, the house was called Christopher Columbus Apartments. After a while, the building gradually fell into disrepair, but miraculously, most of the original fittings and artworks survived. It remained a multi-residential building for decades, changing ownership several times, until it fell into disrepair. Until one day, in 1992, it was discovered by Gianni Versace.



Historical Evolution of Site

Phase 03 1993 - 1997

In 1992, while on his way to Cuba, Gianni Versace was on vacation with his family in Miami Beach. Versace was walking along Ocean Drive when there was an instant attraction to the unique Spanish architecture of the house after spotting the bronze statue of the “Kneeling Aphrodite” at its front entrance. Obsessed with Greek and Roman mythology, Versace purchased the original house built by Freeman for \$2.95 million and the lot next door, an old art deco hotel called the Hotel Revere. Although this neighborhood was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979 and the strong opposition from the Miami Design Preservation League, Versace bought the Revere Hotel next door for \$3.7 million to

demolish it. He then invested an additional \$32 million in renovations where the original 24-apartment structure was then converted into one single home structure with eight large suites, that included ten additional bathrooms, two kitchens, three sitting rooms, four living rooms, a library, and a bar. The south wing, which houses another two suites, and the pool and garden were added onto the previous site of the Hotel Revere. In the same renovation, the elevator shaft in the courtyard was removed, the fountain was replaced, and the observatory was reconstructed with the new copper dome.



Demolition of Hotel Revere, adjacent to Casa Casuarina

Inspired by Greco-Roman antiquity, Versace expressed a vision of his heritage throughout the house as he did in his designs. The pool is perhaps the best symbol of Versace extravagance, inlaid with thousands of 24-karat gold tiles, all imported from Italy. The mosaic garden in the courtyard is made from the same 24-karat gold mosaic tiles. A Milanese tiling company designed the Italian mosaics seen throughout the home, including the famous medusa face that holds center stage of the garden.



The second floor of the courtyard was Versace’s area of the house. His personal bedroom, adorned in baroque Trompe-l’œil frescoes by Miami-based artist Allyson Krowitz, featured a drawing room attached to his apartment (now one of the hotel’s restaurants). All of Versace’s fabrics were upholstered on furniture, murals painted on ceilings. Picassos hanging on the wall, and classical antiques affixed in all of the rooms. When looking at the facade of the mansion, Versace’s balcony centers directly above the main entrance, overlooking the entire front of the property onto Ocean Drive. In addition, the house was also used by his many close friends and family members. His brother Santo’s bedroom is now called the Venus room, his sister Donatella’s bedroom is the Signature suite. Various guest rooms were situated in the wing of the home that overlooks the impressive mosaic pool

Historical Evolution of Site

Current

Three years later, Gianni Versace was shot to death in his own footsteps. The house sat empty for about 3 years and in September of 2000, Donatella finally sold the property to Peter Loftin, a telecommunications magnate for

\$19 million. Loftin used this house as a private residence as well as a hotel, membership club and private events venue from 2001 to the end of 2009. Some contents from when Versace lived there were auctioned in New York City in April 2001. What remains from the Versace era are the richly decorated walls, floors, ceilings, and windows, as well as the pool, garden, and the entire south wing.

In December of 2009, Events impresario and restaurateur Barton G. Weiss leased the property and took over the Mansion, imprinting his own signature style on the storied house and reopened as The Villa by Barton G. In September 2013, Florida business connected to Jordache Enterprises bought the Mansion at auction with a winning bid of \$41.5 million.



Today, the Versace Mansion is a boutique hotel called The Villa Casa Casuarina. The Hotel kept as close as possible to Versace's vision. Furniture was reproduced, murals were retouched, and details were copied from archive photos. Interior doors were sealed, (they used to be like secret doors, going from one room to another. Its design is intact, and all that was done to the property was just adding the modern electronic conveniences that hotel guests and restaurant customers expect. Anyone can stay at the hotel or dine at the restaurant.

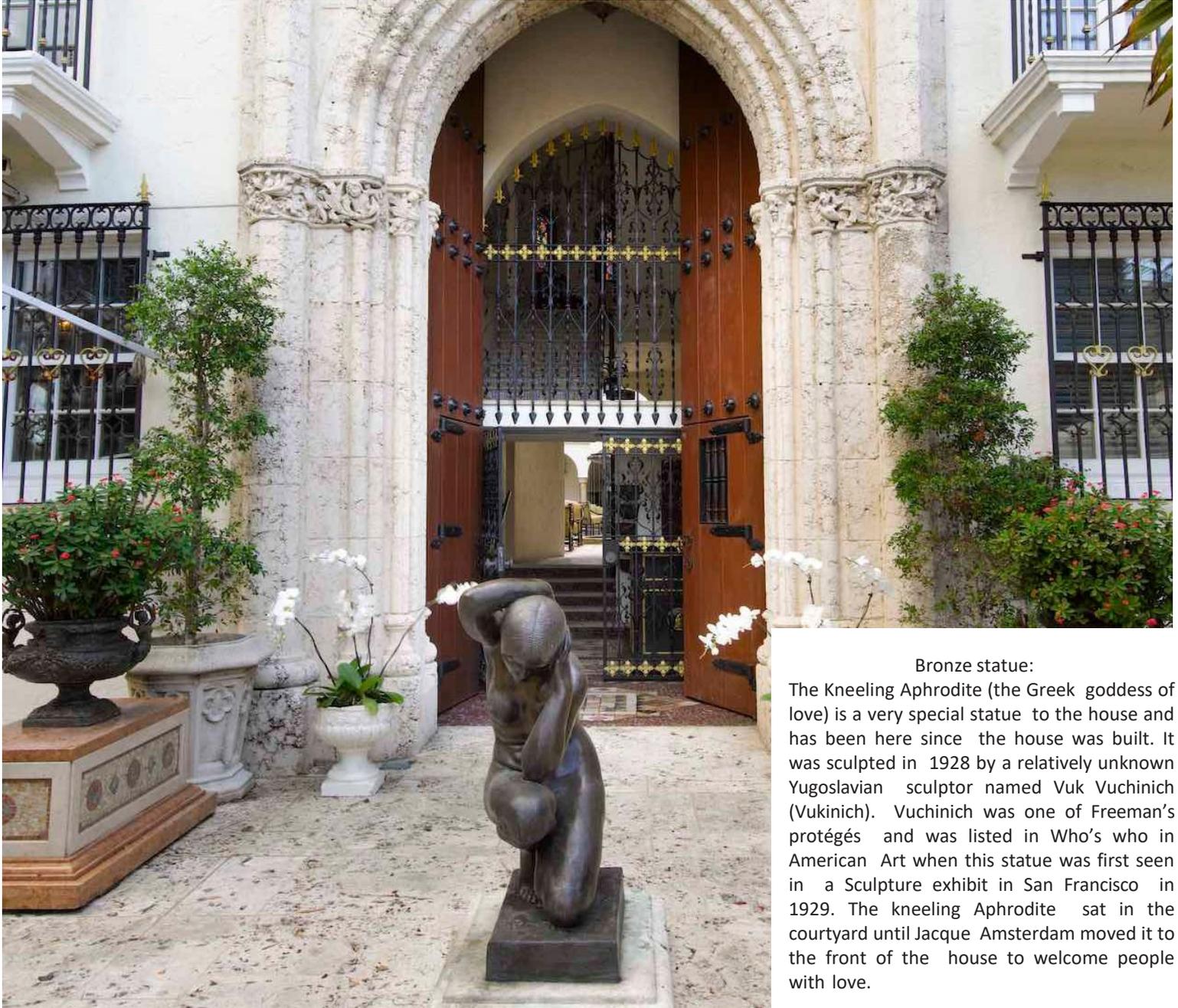
One thing does remain though. Versace Mansion continues to be the third most photographed house in the United States, perhaps because of its opulent Mediterranean Renaissance architecture.

Perhaps it is because of its association with one of the most famous fashion brands in the world. Regardless, it has spectated the eyes of many, and continues to be as extravagant as Versace envisioned almost 30 years ago.



Important Motifs

The Kneeling Aphrodite



Bronze statue:

The Kneeling Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love) is a very special statue to the house and has been here since the house was built. It was sculpted in 1928 by a relatively unknown Yugoslavian sculptor named Vuk Vuchinich (Vukinich). Vuchinich was one of Freeman's protégés and was listed in *Who's who in American Art* when this statue was first seen in a Sculpture exhibit in San Francisco in 1929. The kneeling Aphrodite sat in the courtyard until Jacque Amsterdam moved it to the front of the house to welcome people with love.

It was this Grecian statue that first drew Gianni Versace.

Upon seeing it and the complex, Versace said that he wanted to buy the place right away. He did and left the statue out front to capture the interest of every passerby. The statue may also be a big reason why the mansion has such a mythological foundation and theme throughout.



Important Motifs

The Four White Pillars



These 4 white pillars that surround the courtyard are called the **“pillars of democracy”** and were designed by Ulric Henry Ellerhusen. These 4 pillars represent the 4 continents along with the 4 characters that Freeman felt most influenced the new world:

1. **Europe (Columbus)**
2. **Asia (Confucius)**
3. **Africa (Frederick Douglas)**
4. **America (Pocahontas)**

The pillars shown in the original building in the 1930s.

Important Motifs

The Bell

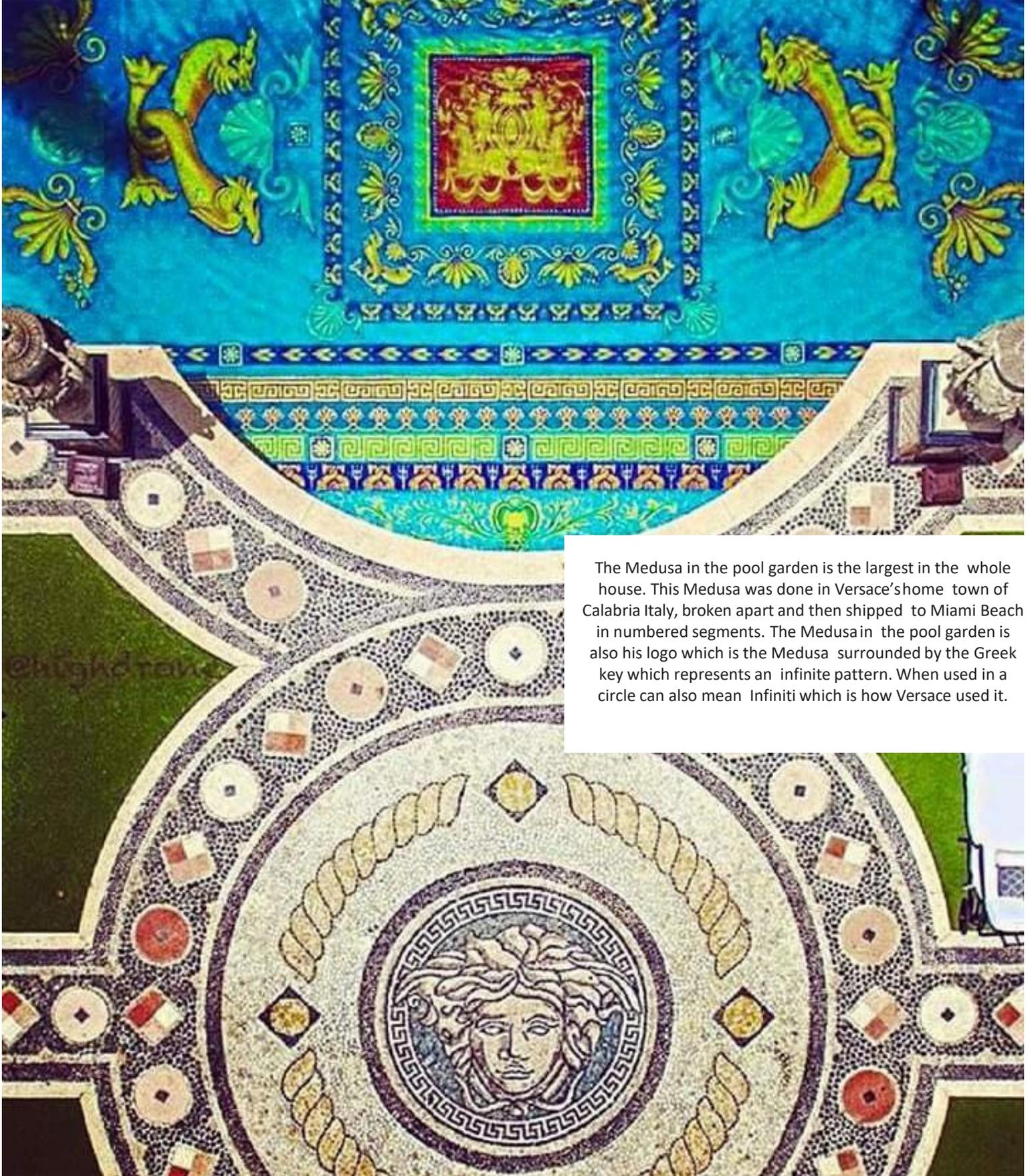


A mission bell from California also decorated the Courtyard when Freeman lived in the property. The original bell was later replaced by a different bell made in Philadelphia in 1851 during Versace's renovations. Because it was replaced instead of being removed completely, indicates its high significance it provides to the are. It's location of sitting and overlooking the courtyard, gives a sense of protection over the space.



Important Motifs

Mosaic Garden



The Medusa in the pool garden is the largest in the whole house. This Medusa was done in Versace's home town of Calabria Italy, broken apart and then shipped to Miami Beach in numbered segments. The Medusa in the pool garden is also his logo which is the Medusa surrounded by the Greek key which represents an infinite pattern. When used in a circle can also mean Infiniti which is how Versace used it.