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Wiltshire manor's refreshed classicism, curtain up on Bakst in Baltimore, Devon cabin of Tarka the Otter author

DECORATION SPECIAL
This page: above the drawing-room mantel is Léon Bakst’s 1915 portrait of the mistress of Evergreen House, Alice Garrett. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a glass and patinated-bronze canopy at the entrance to the house is attributed to Louis Comfort Tiffany, son of the founder of the jewellery store; the original entrance to Evergreen, which was built as a country retreat in 1857; four Corinthian columns from the same entrance; a Tiffany Studios black-and-gold wrought-iron gate in a grape-leaf pattern enclose the former main door.
Baltimore was bemused by the shock of the new when Alice Garrett, châtelaine of staid Evergreen House, introduced works by Picasso and ‘imported’ Léon Bakst – the chief designer at Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. Bakst’s innovations included an avant-garde theatre, where Alice performed in costumes evocative of those he created for Nijinksy and Pavlova. Text: Carol Prisant. Photography: Simon Upton
In the space of the former gymnasium, the theatre is lit by Bakst's oak-tag-and-pine hanging lanterns. The artist designed the stage curtain and the folk-art stencils on the walls and painted one stage set as well.
Top left: connecting the lobby to the theatre, a vaulted passageway is decorated with folk-art motifs taken from a book in the Garrett library – *Peasant Art in Russia*. Top right: the lobby incorporates wicker chairs, a stencilled ceiling light and a sheepskin rug. Above left: at the opposite end of the lobby is this salvaged marble mantel. Above right: backstage stands a ‘Spanish street scene’ set, along with a painted wood panel ornamented with ‘firebird’ motifs, both designed by Léon Bakst. Opposite: the stylised stencil imagery on the ceiling and columns includes peacocks and roosters. Of the theatre, James Abbott – Evergreen’s present director – notes: ‘This was really Baltimore’s first modern room’
Top left: the mosaic floor in Evergreen's entry hall is inlaid with symbols from the Medici coat of arms. Three Tiffany ceiling fixtures light the corridor. Top right: Bakst 'painted out' the skirting boards and cornices to update the dining room, using shocking-yellow paint on the existing grasscloth walls. Above left: over the fireplace in the lime-green print room, where Alice taught art to local students, hang eight botanical drawings by Bakst. Above right: local architect Laurence Hall Fowler converted the bowling alley into the Far East Room in 1928, to display the Garretts' Oriental fine-art collection. Bakst devised the soft-red colour scheme and designed the lamps and vitrines
Top left: fire-resistant walnut panelling lines the walls of the Great Library, which houses important works including early bibles, Renaissance atlases and rare broadsides from the American War of Independence. Top right: a lunette by the Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias tops a doorway in the Reading Room, an anteroom to the library. Above left: the teak shelving and panelling in the Reading Room were designed, like the panels in the Great Library, by Laurence Hall Fowler. Also visible is one of several painted wall panels in the room by Covarrubias. Above right: a Tiffany table lamp, oversized Louis XV bergère and Modernist bronze statue share this corner of the Reading Room.
This page: the famous 'gold bathroom' was added to the house in the mid-1880s, with input from Baltimore architect Charles L. Carron. At one end of the room stands a Thébès stool, the seat of which is decorated with relief hieroglyphics. The floor, walls and ceiling of the room are sheathed in Roman-inspired ombre mosaic tiles of gold, marble and coloured stones. The pipework and medicine cabinets are solid brass. Opposite: although Carson designed the space, the interior decoration itself was carried out by Herter Brothers of New York. The bath has a brass tub surround. Next to it is a sitz bath, which abuts the gold-leaf toilet. The window frame is also covered in the same material.
IN 1920, when diplomat John Garrett and his wife, Alice, moved into Evergreen House, his childhood home, it was already rather splendid. John's father and grandfather, after all, had successfully vied with Morgans and Vanderbilts for Evergreen's extensive collections of rare books, paintings, European porcelains, Asian objects and coins. There were surprising little extras, too. The bowling alley, for instance. And the state-of-the-art gymnasium. But none of this meant much to Alice, who infinitely preferred her native Washington. Baltimore was just too provincial. In fact—possibly after she fell on him and broke his leg in two places—it's reported that she urged Baltimore-born designer Billy Baldwin, her (subsequently wary) dance partner to 'get out of there' straight away.

But over the 32 years in which the couple resided at Evergreen, Alice turned it into one of the city's cultural ornaments. Initially, by introducing the locals to their first Picasso; more creatively, by 'importing' Léon Bakst. Baltimoreans, naturally, thought she was kooky.

That might have been because of Bakst, the famous artist and set designer whom she'd more or less adopted during John's wartime Paris posting. It was Bakst who'd opened the whole world of modern art to her, who helped her develop her eye. In return, Alice not only underwrote a season of the Ballets Russes, but after his final break with Diaghilev she invited her disconsolate Russian friend to Evergreen—to be his confidante, to mother him and to distract him, perhaps, with small decorating projects. Such as turning the old gymnasium into a private theatre.

The finished product must have rocked society, for the gym had disappeared. It became very black and gained a mirrored foyer. Leading into the 'black box' theatre was a vaulted passage patterned all over in a riot of Russian folk-art motifs. (Bakst oversaw the painting and stencilling himself.) The proscenium arch on the stage virtually leapt with stylised sturgeon, which may have symbolised Alice's late-in-life artistic bloom. Or, possibly, caviar.

On that jewel-box stage, in front of Spanish, Chinese or Irish sets, in costumes evoking those Bakst had created for Nijinsky and Pavlova, his 48-year-old patroness performed for invited guests. Shades of Florence Foster Jenkins? Perhaps. But since Alice believed that the arts couldn't be truly appreciated unless one had tried them oneself (she had once studied voice, ballet and theatre), it seemed only natural that, reinforced by the impressive talents of Léon Bakst, on her very own stage the mistress of Evergreen would all alone—sing folk songs and dance for an audience that might at one time or another have included George Bernard Shaw, Linda and Cole Porter, Douglas Fairbanks, George Grosz and Anthony Eden. Everyone, well... clapped. Sometimes she'd bring in an exotic dancer or a professional string quartet. Billy Baldwin remembered going after work to sit 'in that wonderful theater with comfortable wicker chairs, a breeze coming through the windows and [hearing] divine music'.

The dining room, another Bakst project, was similarly transfigured, becoming an electric-yellow and red homage to the Sleeping Princess sets that he had once produced for Diaghilev. The finished effect was très moderniste, très chic, although some of the guests weren't entirely thrilled about dining there. Billy Baldwin, once again, reported that 'Alice didn't care one thing about food... and [she] made me learn how much more I valued a delicious piece of meat on a bad plate than a lously-cooked chop on a beautiful Sèvres one.'

Well, Alice wasn't perfect. In fact, she turned out to be a far better artist's agent than she was a cook, regularly scaring up American exhibitions and commissions for her brilliant protégé—although despite all her efforts on his behalf, Bakst was ultimately never to get over the loss of his theatrical career. A niece recalled seeing him one steamy summer afternoon, still in his dressing gown and perspiring so profusely that the henna rinse in his hair fairly streamed down his face.

Among Bakst's final projects at Evergreen was the Far East Room, formerly the bowling alley. It is now almost Zen-like, and a quiet tribute to the magic of the lamps and vitrines and damped-down reds he designed. By the time Bakst died in 1924, his patroness and loyal supporter had almost managed to secure him, at long last, a commission to design a Broadway theatre.

Ambassador Garrett was unusually supportive of his wife and her redecorations. He had drawn the line at his boyhood den, however, and seemingly also at his late mother's luxurious bathroom: a drop-dead creation that was known locally as the 'gold bath'. Designed by Herter Brothers of New York, the room's pale luminescence is set off by stone and marble tiles, and its window frame, cistern and toilet seat are 23-karat-gold leafed. Every ordinary pipe is shiny, lacquered brass, as are the sash bath, the embossed door, the Dutch cabinets, the mirrors and the loo-paper holder. The senior Mrs Garrett's spectacular bathroom makes today's beige, crisp-and-clean WCs seem a wrong-headed waste of marble.

Unlike John Garrett's off-limits den and his mother's extravaganzas, Evergreen's stately Great Library had already been altered several times. The last occasion was in 1941, when Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias was invited to paint the panelled walls and overdoor lunettes of the adjacent Reading Room with folkloric depictions of the ambassador's diplomatic postings—which included Argentina, the Hague, Paris, Rome and Berlin. Beyond the room lies what James Abbott, Evergreen's director and curator, refers to as the 'heart of the house'. Here, along with priceless books and cushy chairs, a Chinese bowl full of water was once kept for John's small terrier, Boston Baked Beans. There's still a water stain on the parquet floor, but the room remains sublime.

When the childless couple died in the mid-20th century, their home was bequeathed jointly to the Evergreen House Foundation and Johns Hopkins University. Today, it's everything that John and Alice had intended it to be: a sensitively restored and meticulously preserved house museum, still growing, as they had hoped it would, and— as John had stipulated in his will— always hospitably open to lovers of music, art, and beautiful things. Like the Garretts. Like you.
Top left: glass-and-brass wall lights from Tiffany Studios flank the mantel, which is framed with a marble edge. On the rear wall hangs a Federal-style mirror. Top right: the bathroom door is made of brass and embossed. The mantel above the open fireplace is capped by a mosaic panel. It depicts a dolphin-borne putto wielding a trident, with a companion swimming alongside. Above left: the brass mirrors and cabinets are Dutch. Even the radiator has an ornamental pierced ‘gold’ cover. The theme of dolphins and tridents is picked up in the mosaic frieze. Above right: this close-up shows the all-brass tub-surround, with a switch for waste water, separated by a marble shelf from the sitz bath.