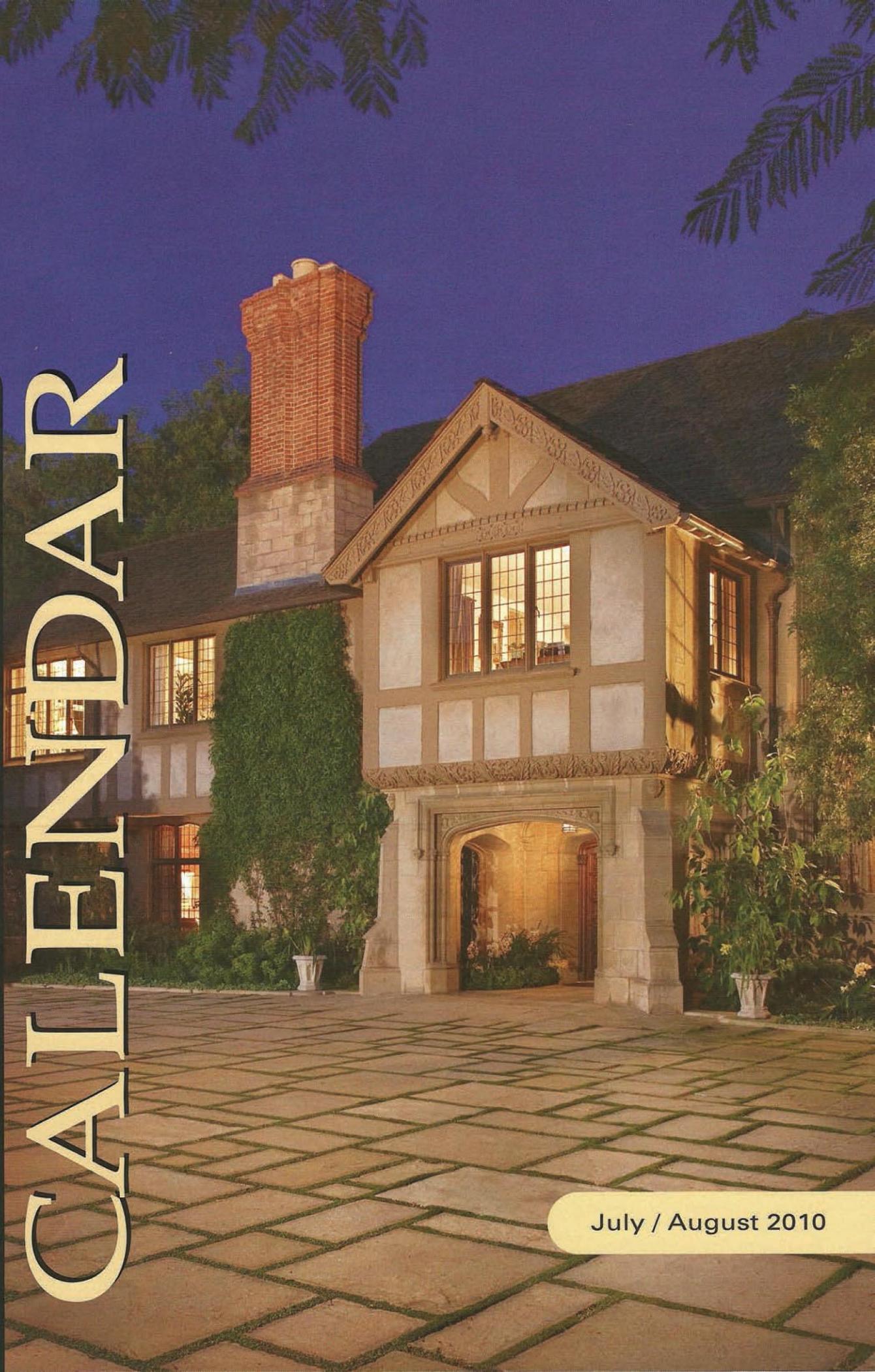


THE HUNTINGTON Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

# CALENDAR

July / August 2010



# Geneva and Charles Thornton to Give Their Historic San Marino Estate to The Huntington

It was a Huntington lecture in the late 1990s that got Geneva Thornton, now a Huntington Trustee, and her husband, Chuck, thinking about saving their home as a historic property. The talk focused on Henry E. Huntington, his collecting acumen, and his aspiration to endow an institution so that his collections could remain a public resource well beyond his lifetime.

"While we are not collectors in the sense that Mr. Huntington was, we did relate to the idea of preserving an architectural piece in its setting," Chuck explained. "We knew that The Huntington residence and our house were two good examples of Myron Hunt architecture, and we felt strongly that both should be carefully preserved. We wanted to make sure this historic property would not be subdivided and the house torn down."

Now the Thorntons have made a major gift that eloquently reflects their own passion as well as the values of Henry and Arabella Huntington. They are bequeathing to the institution their meticulously restored historic residence, designed in the 1920s by Hunt, along with its surrounding gardens. It is the largest residential property in San Marino. The gift comes with an endowment to provide for the property's continued preservation.

While the estate will not become a public destination, the main house may someday serve as a residence for The Huntington's president, and the gardens may become a botanical focal point for researchers. The Thorntons currently are building a

conservatory on the property that will house The Huntington's 2,000-specimen hybrid orchid collection.

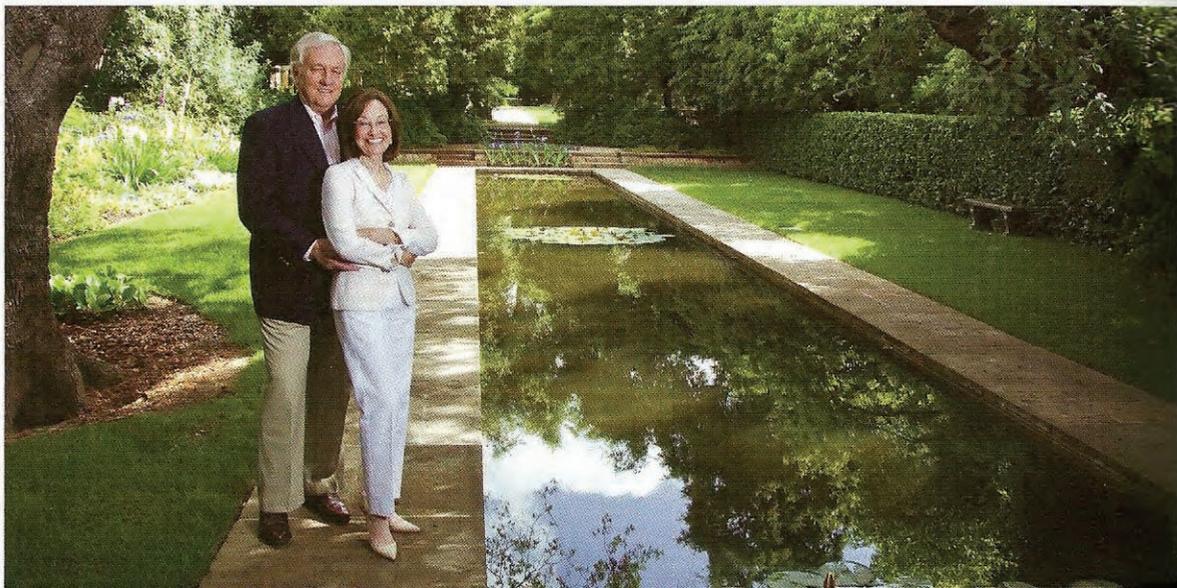
"Chuck and Geneva are known for taking extraordinary initiative in everything they do," said Huntington President Steve Koblik. "During the renovation of the Huntington Art Gallery in 2008, their contributions in terms of vision and expertise to the Thornton Portrait Gallery extended even beyond their financial support for the project. And now, their decision to promise their invaluable estate along with an endowment to sustain it is a major moment in the history of The Huntington."

## A Property of Significance

The 12,000-square-foot Tudor Revival residence was built between 1927 and 1928 by Katherine "Kitty" Emery, widow of wealthy Pasadena businessman Frank W. Emery. It was designed by Hunt (architect of several notable landmarks in Southern California) and Harold C. Chambers.

Close attention was paid to every aspect of architecture and decor, right down to the door handles, hinges, and wall sconces. Hunt dictated that each of the six chimneys be of a unique design. He called for different ceiling heights depending on the size of each room and specified an elaborate pattern of ornamental plaster work for the living room ceiling. The centerpiece of the home, a magnificent staircase illuminated by a 17-foot-tall leaded glass window, features oak balusters that were hand carved, each

*Charles and Geneva Thornton.*



*Thornton house staircase.*  
*Photos by Tavo Olmos.*

with a different pattern inspired by the region's flora and fauna. Other decorative features, handpicked by Emery herself, include an ornate 17th-century Italian fireplace in the library.

After Emery's death, the house was purchased in 1945 by James Griffin Boswell and his wife, Ruth Chandler Williamson, daughter of *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler. After Boswell died in 1952, Ruth married British baronet Sir Charles Crocker, and the property eventually became known as the Crocker estate. In total, Lady Crocker lived in the home for almost 50 years.

### **Comprehensive Renovation**

Chuck purchased the house in 1989, impressed by its architectural significance and integrity. "There are fewer and fewer homes of this era that remain intact, and this one is a superb example of the Tudor Revival style," Chuck said.

He began a comprehensive renovation to restore the original elegance of a home that represented the pinnacle of stately living in the early 20th century. His partnership with Geneva proved particularly fruitful in that sense; an interior designer by background, she has helped guide decisions on nearly every facet of the project. They were married in 1993.

Respect for the original design and materials has guided the Thorntons' every decision, whether on ornamental details or elements of infrastructure. Instead of replacing the original heating system, for example, they searched for vintage parts or had parts manufactured to maintain it. And the Thorntons still enjoy the gleaming O'Keefe and Merritt stove purchased by the Boswells in 1945.

### **The Grounds**

Myron Hunt took great interest in the grounds that were to surround the homes he designed, and the Thornton home was no exception. He laid out considerable structure in the form of an ashlar—or stone—parking court with balustrades, and a traditional English "long walk" across the back of the house connecting a rose garden at one end with a stunning 90-foot reflecting pond at the other end. He brought in landscape architects Florence Yoch and Lucile Council as consultants on the planting of the landscape, some of which has survived to the present. A



rose garden with 360 specimens is partitioned in a classical formation by Yoch's original Myrtus hedges.

As they have purchased adjoining properties to reunite the original estate, the Thorntons have worked to revitalize and expand the landscape with the help of garden historian Barbara Paca. They have created a street garden to share with the community, pulled the irrigation water away from the many mature oaks to properly protect them, and built a formal vegetable and cut-flower garden.

"We made a hobby of visiting historic properties and studying how different features sat in the landscape," Geneva said. "Our plan is inspired by places like Filoli in California, Monticello in Virginia, and Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., where there are no frilly gardens directly surrounding the house. Instead we have special gardens that draw you across the grounds."

The orchid conservatory under construction is a dignified limestone-clad structure slated to receive the first of The Huntington's important orchid collection this fall.

"The orchid house gives us an opportunity to work with Huntington collections and experts right away," Chuck said. "It's exciting to begin sharing what has been our obsession for years."