

HIGH FLYING
An 18th century diptych by Italian painter Paolo de' Matteis was so large that it was mounted on the ceiling



L.A. HOME DESIGN

CASA

VIDAL

IN HIS NEWLY RESTORED
HOLLYWOOD HILLS HOME, ESSAYIST,
PLAYWRIGHT, NOVELIST, AND
ONETIME CONGRESSIONAL CANDIDATE
GORE VIDAL SURROUNDS HIMSELF
WITH A LIFETIME OF MEMENTOS
AND A MUSEUM'S WORTH OF ART—
WHILE CONTEMPLATING A CITY THAT
DEMANDS INVENTION
BY ANDREW MYERS

Photographs by NOAH WEBB

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THE 1920s SPANISH COLONIAL REVIVAL

high in the Hollywood Hills has been owned by Gore Vidal—he of the erudite roar only slightly muted by age—for more than four decades. During most of those years Vidal and companion Howard Auster resided in Rome and at La Rondinaia, a cliff-hugging villa in Ravello, Italy, while the L.A. house was turned over to a series of renters. Some, like Nicolas Cage, who put solar panels on the roof, Vidal describes as “very good caretakers.” Others, such as the “lady tenant” who damaged the house and left owing \$40,000, garner other descriptors.

The couple moved back in 2003; Auster died later that year. A recent seven-month renovation, which focused on the first floor and back terrace, was completed in time for the writer’s 86th birthday in early October. Now, when Vidal isn’t in New York preparing for the Broadway revival this spring of his 1960 play, *The Best Man*, he savors the flea market finds,

the auction house finery overlooked by eyes less curious, the presents from pals that fill the rooms. Among them is a herd of 17th-century drawings of war-horses that gallop and rear in the entryway, a gift from Count Edward von Bismarck—“Eddie, the grandest dandy,” says Vidal.

Perhaps most precious are the family treasures. In the living room hangs a small piece of colored glass, a Swiss crest showing VIDALL with two *Is*, dated 1589, what Vidal calls the most valuable glass in the city. On the upstairs landing is a portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence of actor William Linley, a relative who married the actress Sarah Siddons’s daughter. Next to it is a rendering of a gentleman who, it’s pointed out to Vidal, looks not unlike Abraham Lincoln, the subject of his acclaimed historical novel. “From a certain angle everyone does,” he says. “Don’t lose any sleep over it.”

Peering across the living room’s low sofas, marble tables, and bronzed writing awards, and photos of friends (Joanne Woodward, Paul Newman, Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins) is a young Prince of Wales, the future Edward VI, son of Henry VIII. The painting gleams from the ministrations of Zoltan Papp, who was also charged with restoring the legion of Italian 18th-century oils, estimated at \$15 million and destined for the Huntington—none of which cost Vidal more than \$200.

Vidal wheels his chair into the dining room, which, like much of the house, harbors a

cool solitude; the thick stucco walls and sturdy windows block out the heat and noise. Several of his favorite pieces reside in this room, including two ornate mirrors hanging near the doorway that were owned by film director Luchino Visconti; one was pulverized during shipping and flawlessly repaired. He lingers briefly by the ram’s-head chairs from the 1959 movie *Ben-Hur*—Vidal was one of the screenwriters—before declaring his affection for a floor-to-ceiling, elaborately carved 18th-century mirror that barely fits over an equally fantastical table. “It’s a kind of medieval camp, totally Italian, 19th century,” he says of the table. The mirror, on the other hand, once belonged to Mario Praz, “the greatest critic of Anglo-American literature.”

Vidal insists he is not a collector. At the least, he’s an accumulator, and to call his house and possessions a palimpsest, to borrow the title of his 1995 memoir, would be wrong. Rather they form a rich composite. Perhaps that’s one of the reasons he has cottoned to the place, making clear that after the opening of his play he’ll return not to L.A. but to the house. As for the city itself, about which Vidal has long been ambivalent? “Of all cities, the one where you can most think yourself into somewhere else is L.A. It’s waiting to be invented. It’s to be made up.” ■

MELLOW YELLOW
The view of the house from the rear terrace



TAKE A SEAT

The copies of **ANCIENT ROMAN CHAIRS** (right) that had been crafted for the *Ben-Hur* set in the mid-1950s traveled with Vidal to his Italian homes, thus sparing them from renter abuse. But the brass strips—plated in silver and gold and mounted on the chairs as decorative elements—had loosened with age. Zoltan Papp of L.A.’s Artisan Restoration Centre reattached them and polished the surfaces by hand. Age had also *crystallized the glue joining the legs to the seats*; Papp removed the old glue from the affected joints, heated it, and then reapplied the revitalized solution. The seats’ Italian-made fabric, Papp says, came through five decades without a rip or a stain.

HOME AGAIN
The chandelier, mirrors, console, table, and chairs also resided in Vidal’s flat in Rome and villa in Ravello



“I just accumulated them. I didn’t collect. Collect? Never!”

GRAPHICS: EVE CHU; ICONS: BYRON REGEI



"I don't like to go to bed all that much, now that I'm exploring a new profession—illness."



SAVING FACE

For the 17TH-CENTURY PAINTING (below) of Edward VI, Papp first removed a heavy coat of varnish that had trapped dirt on the surface. A solution was then applied to the back of the canvas to prevent further drying. Paint in danger of flaking was softened with a heated, forklike tool used in applying gold leaf. Peeling paint was replaced with pigments from a Dutch company whose paints are matched to those of the period.



BIBLIO CENTER
The desk at which Vidal did most of his writing holds pride of place in the library

1925

A PRODIGY'S PROGRESS

MORE ON GORE

Practically from birth Vidal has put into words the American fascination with people in power

Eugene Luther Gore Vidal is **born in West Point, New York**, where his father teaches aeronautics. He later shortens his name in honor of his maternal grandfather, Thomas Pryor Gore, a Democratic senator from Oklahoma.

1946



Vidal's first novel, *Williwaw*, **written when he was 19**, is published.

1948

The New York Times refuses to review Vidal's third book, *The City and the Pillar*, because of its depictions of homosexuality. Vidal **turns to writing mystery novels** to support himself, using the pseudonym Edgar Box.

1958



Under contract to MGM, Vidal **helps rewrite *Ben-Hur*** but is not given screen credit.

1960

Vidal announces his **candidacy for Congress** to represent the 29th District in upstate New York, employing the campaign slogan "You'll get more with Gore." He loses the election but makes a strong showing among the largely GOP constituency.

1964



Julian, about 4th-century Rome, **tops the *Herald Tribune* best-seller list**, beating out Leon Uris's *Armageddon*.

1968

Vidal and William F. Buckley Jr. engage in TV debates at the presidential conventions; during one broadcast, **Buckley calls Vidal a "queer."** The two trade barbs in *Esquire*, leading to Buckley's filing a libel suit. Buckley settles for \$115,000.

1982



Governor Jerry Brown and Vidal vie to be the **Democratic nominee** for the U.S. Senate.

1993

A collection of Vidal's writing, *United States: Essays 1952-1992*, wins the **National Book Award**. Among his other literary successes is *Lincoln*, which was released in 1984 in a remarkable 200,000-copy first printing.

1998



Vidal puts his **L.A. house on the market** for \$2.1 million, but it fails to sell.