



THE MUTINY AND THE BOUNTY

'Park Avenue Cubists' George Morris and Suzy Frelinghuysen were a defiantly nonconformist presence in the conventional world of Forties Massachusetts. The ample fruits of their aesthetic rebellion – their own Abstract frescoes and pieces by celebrated artist friends – can still be seen in the couple's newly restored home, as Carol Prisant discovers. Photography: José van Riele





Previous pages: the banister was designed by George Morris to complement the swirling lines of his stairwell mural. The sculpture at the foot of the stairs is also by Morris, who was taught by Gaston Lachaise. These pages: the dining room is decorated with Suzy Frelinghuysen's frescoes, including an African-inspired head above the golden fireplace





Above: the living room has an Argentinian-leather floor and furniture that was formerly upholstered with zebra-stripe fabric. Below: the glass-topped coffee table is typical of the late Thirties. Opposite: Morris's murals have embedded glass to reflect the landscape outside



In 1942, when George Morris and Suzy Frelinghuysen moved into their new house, they – like all aristocrats, even American ones – didn't need to buy their furniture. They simply recycled what they'd inherited from their very prominent families (George descended from a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Suzy from a former Secretary of State). After that, they seem to have driven over to the local department store for a few sofas, chairs and Alvar Aalto tables, and filled in the blanks. In their case 'local' probably meant New York, since picturesque Lenox, Massachusetts, site of their newly restored house, is a long way – in several respects – from the mall.

The furnishing of their Bauhaus-ish home, with its attached replica of a Le Corbusier-designed studio, has to have been one of the few conventional things this extraordinary couple ever did. In 1943, a magazine story about the house was titled 'Mutiny in the Berkshires', and aptly so, since Suzy and George were aesthetic mutineers. Both were Abstract painters when Abstraction was still warm, if not hot. (Today, their newly appreciated works are, yes, newly appreciating, bringing many thousands more than the \$75

price tag still on a small 'Suzy' in the dining room.) The couple were central, too, to that upper-crusty little group known as the Park Avenue Cubists, and between the Thirties and the Fifties, they traded works with colleagues and pals. This is why their house is home now to paintings and sculptures by (among others) Picasso, Lachaise, Léger, Mondrian, Cézanne, Arp and Miró, and several by George's particular friend, Ben Nicholson.

George didn't just paint and buy, however. As art critic of the *Partisan Review*, he expounded and critiqued. Kinney Frelinghuysen, Suzy's nephew and manager of the foundation that currently maintains the property, adds that despite George's critical chops, 'He didn't try too hard to explain his art to his friends. While his family didn't understand his work, he was still quite comfortable in their milieu, collecting the odd tennis trophy and enjoying dinners with old classmates and friends. It was through his art, nevertheless, that he transcended his background.'





Above: Frelinghuysen's bathroom has a semi-industrial feel, due to the Thirties glass bricks at the window and in the entrance. The sink's legs are also made of glass. Opposite: in Morris's bathroom, one of his Bakelite bas-relief compositions is situated over the tub





The atelier contains works by Miró, Braque, Léger, Naum Gabo and Ben Nicholson, among others. Below the mezzanine (above left) is a bust of Morris by Gaston Lachaise; to its right is Morris's *Waterskiers, AM*. A David Smith sculpture (opposite) stands on a green pedestal

Yet Suzy's the dazzler. Not only was she pretty, funny and privileged (like so many American girls of her background, she was presented at court; but she also listed her Pekinese in the Social Register), she was even good enough at tennis to play with Wimbledon champ Alice Marble. Still, it wasn't until after she married George that she became an artist, and an opera star, to boot. Yeah, yeah. Anyone can be an 'opera star'. Sheryl Crow's sung with Pavarotti. But Suzy – as Suzy Morris – sang opposite no less a Voice than Jussi Bjoerling, and for four glorious years in the late Forties, during which she suffered so badly from stage-fright that George had to push her out on stage, she was highly acclaimed as a soprano. Her blue-nosed Dutch ancestors, she once told interviewers, would be turning in their graves if they knew the 'ladies of dubious reputation' she'd played, but the *New York Times* compared her voice 'with the most celebrated of the present century'. The supremely talented George and Suzy were – shall I say it? – soul mates: she had his art; he had her music; and they both played a mean game of tennis.

Actually, in one corner of George's cathedral-like studio, there's a Gaston Lachaise bronze of *George, Attractively Buck-Naked with Tennis Racket*. (My title.) It shocked Suzy so, that she insisted it be hidden in a corner, quite unlike all the other, equally terrific, but far less realistic works by David Smith, Alexander Calder, Ad Reinhardt, Naum Gabo etc. This studio of George's was accessible through his bedroom, where, above an upright piano, his 1929 oil *Battle of the Indians* hangs in naïve, yet grisly, splendour. Above his bed there's a second *Battle of the Indians*, painted after he'd studied with Léger. In this version, the Indians (whom I know I should be calling 'Native Americans', but there's something about the *Battle of the Native Americans...*) have metamorphosed into biomorphic shapes, still vaguely 'native', but lacking lurid gore. His third, wholly abstract *Battle* is a graphic fresco on the garage wall.

Both artists painted frescoes in the house. Suzy got the dining room and her bedroom; George got the living room (two murals, plus a marble bas-relief) and the hall (up the staircase wall). That staircase had no banister originally. Their architect claimed the natural tendency would be to hug the wall, but after a few months and a few martinis, George and Suzy thought better of that idea, and George designed a wrought-iron railing.

Kinney opines that George's living-room murals are 'gentle giants' that 'make you feel relaxed', but a guest or two lounging around would improve the décor immensely, since the murals sort of overwhelmed, not just this visitor, but much of that unassuming furniture (although it was once covered in zebra print, which probably helped). In the dining room, Suzy's murals on either side of the fireplace are gentler, bluer, more humane. Between them, she painted an exotic, quasi-African 'head': her Cubist take, possibly, on the usual overmantel ancestor portrait.

George once owned Picasso's *The Poet*. Needing some money to construct this house, he decided to sell it to Peggy Guggenheim for \$4,500. 'I thought I made a great deal at the time,' he once recalled ruefully. But it happens to have been a good deal all round. *The Poet's* still in Venice; while in Lenox, there's this marvellous house ■ *Frelinghuysen Morris House & Studio, 92 Hawthorne St, Lenox, MA (001 413 637 0166)*

