

Mizner, Addison

(From an article appearing in the August, 1965 issue of American Heritage entitled “The Bubble in the Sun.” by George B. Tindall.)

[The largest land boom in American history was underway in Florida during the early 1920s.]

“Palm Beach was to be wooed and won into the heart of the boom by one of the great charlatan-geniuses of the Twenties, Addison Mizner – painter, woodcarver, miner, interior decorator, prize fighter, writer, architect. Born in California in 1872, Mizner had gone to Guatemala with his father in his teens and there had fallen in love with Spanish art and architecture. This love had later grown during a brief stay at the University of Salamanca in Spain. Over the years he had pursued his offbeat career as an exotic and romantic dilettante on four continents.

Mizner’s first brush with fame had been as co-author of *The Cynic’s Calendar*: ‘Where there’s a will, there’s a lawsuit’; ‘Many are called, but few get up’; ‘The wages of gin is breath’; ‘Be held truthful that your lies may count.’ He was working in New York as a society architect and designer of Japanese landscapes when ill health carried him to Palm Beach in 1918.

There he fell in with a kindred spirit, Paris Singer, whose inheritance from his father’s sewing machines gave him the time and the money to pursue both the arts and Isadora Duncan. Soon the combination of the Florida sun and Singer’s generosity had helped Mizner recover to the point where he was busily designing a hospital – financed by Singer – for convalescent World War I soldiers. But the war was completed before the hospital was, and it was transformed into the Everglades Club, displacing Flagler’s Breakers as the *ne plus ultra* of Palm Beach. The Everglades was the first of many architectural triumphs that established Mizner as the supreme master of the Florida Spanish motif. It led to a commission to build a villa for banker Edward T. Stotesbury, the first of dozens of rich patrons – including G. Rodman Wanamaker II, Drexel Biddle, Jr., and a pride of Vanderbilts – who were eager to pay for the privilege of being insulted by a great architect and of living in the gigantic pleasure domes he created for them.

The architecture of these latter day Xanadus has been summarized by Alva Johnson in his book, *The Legendary Mizners*, as the Bastard-Spanish-Moorish-Romanesque-Gothic-Renaissance-Bull Market-Damn-the-Expense Style. Their central theme was inevitably Spanish, but Mizner, a versatile antiquarian, sometimes threw ten centuries into one structure. ‘Most modern architects,’ he said, ‘have spent their lives in carrying out a period to the last letter and producing a characterless copybook effect. My ambition has been to take the reverse stand – to make a building look traditional and as though it had fought its way from a small unimportant structure to a great rambling house that took centuries of different needs and ups and downs of wealth to accomplish. I sometimes start a house with a Romanesque corner, pretend that it has fallen into disrepair and been added to in the Gothic spirit, when suddenly the great wealth of the New World has poured in and the owner has added a very rich Renaissance addition.’

“To get the all-important appearance of antiquity Mizner inflicted the wildest vandalism on his masterpieces. He deliberately smudged up new rooms with burning pots of tarpaper, took penknife and sledghammer to woodwork and statuary, used ice

picks and air rifles on furniture, hired inexperienced help to lay roof tiles awry, and once had men in hobnailed boots walk up and down a stairway before the cement set to get the effect of centuries of wear. One of his original contributions to architecture was the discovery that worm-eaten cypress gave the desired effect of age; thus pecky Cyprus, formerly considered almost worthless, suddenly became the mahogany of Palm Beach.

The one talent Mizner lacked was that of making conventional plans and specifications. Everything was done off-the-cuff. Plans for one house were drawn in the sand on the beach; a window in another was copied from a photograph of a house on Minorca. When one client asked for a blueprint, Mizner replied in amazement, 'Why, the house isn't built yet.' Occasionally, this resulted in oversights, such as the failure to include a staircase in one mansion; a staircase was eventually added – but outside, so that it would not spoil the perfection of the interior.

His landscaping experience gave him a distinct feeling for the setting of a house. To one admirer, the journalist Ida Tarbell, he seemed 'to have a veritable passion for utilizing all the natural beauties of the place,' an ability 'to make a typical Florida thing.' Vistas of the ocean, the blue skies, the tall palms, all figured in his craft. Large windows and cross drafts let the balmy air into his rooms. He noticed that the prevailing winds were from the southwest, so his kitchens were invariably in the northeast corner of the house. As an artist he understood the dramatic effects of color – he preferred pastels. He looted Spain and Central America of tile roofs and furnishings and set up his own Mizner Industries, Inc., to make the latest thing in 'antiques,' wrought iron, artificial stone, stained glass, terra cotta, tiles, urns, pots and fountains.

Not far from the Everglades Club were the Via Mizner, the Via Parigi and the Worth Avenue Arcade, where Mizner created Old World alleys of little shops and sidewalk cafes with bright pink, blue and cream-colored fronts. Up and down Palm Beach his talent ran riot, spawning a city of palaces with great watchtowers and thick walls, cloistered arcades, high galleries, vaulted ceilings, and tiled pools. These edifices have been called by some the work of a quack, by others, including Frank Lloyd Wright, that of a genius.

Addison Mizner soon had a million dollars, he claimed, salted away in government bonds, but it was inevitable that he would be drawn into the subdivision madness that swept up from Miami. His scapegrace brother, Wilson, a latter-day Sir John Falstaff who had come down from New York in 1921 to manage the Mizner Industries, joined him in that adventure. He was a master of the pulverizing phrase and was credited by some with the quip, 'Never give a sucker an even break.'"

"As the boom roared into fantastic excesses, Wilson found himself more and more at home in the Florida wonderland. The Mizners got a late start, but they made up for it by projecting the most ostentatious sub division of all at Boca Raton (Rat's Mouth), a little stop on the Florida East Coast Railroad south of Palm Beach. The plans featured El Camino Real (The King's Highway), a highway 219 feet wide and only 12 times as long (one half mile), with twenty traffic lanes and a 'Venetian canal' with powered gondolas running down its center. There was to be a hotel, an airport, a polo field, two golf courses, a yacht basin and a church that was to be a memorial to Mama Mizner and a source of satisfaction to the Mizners' other brother, an Episcopal priest – the white sheep, as it were, of the family. Unfortunately, little of it got off Addison's mental drawing boards. 'Beaucoup Rotten,' the rival realtors labeled it, and so it turned out to be, for it

got under way as the boom roared to a collapse. The only structure completed was the hotel, the Cloister, one of Addison's masterpieces.

By July 1926, the Florida land boom had collapsed. The world's greatest poker game, played with building lots instead of chips, was over.

The Mizners' Boca Raton was never finished, and the brothers, when they died in 1933, were both financially ruined. But Addison left behind more than a score of houses that are among the supreme artistic artifacts of the twenties.