A Passion to Preserve
Fellows, Will

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Fellows, Will.
A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/8516.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/8516

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=184885
LIKE MANY GAYS WHO CAME OF AGE in the 1950s and 1960s, Roy
Little and Jim Raidl left their hometowns and gravitated to San Francisco.
They met in 1971 at a gay bar in a part of the city that was just beginning to
go gay. Many rundown Victorian houses in that area were becoming avail-
able, cheap, as blue-collar residents left the neighborhood for the suburbs.
What had been known locally as Most Holy Redeemer Parish would become
known as the Castro, after the landmark Castro Theater, a 1922 Spanish
Gothic movie palace.

“I always wanted color,” says Roy Little. “From the time I was three
years old, I knew that I was going to be an artist.” In 1973 he and Jim Raidl
found an outlet for their domophilic artistry: a dreary four-story Victorian on
Hartford Street, in the Castro. “The house was in good condition, but noth-
ing had been done to it since it was built just after the turn of the century,”
Little says. “There were so many possibilities. It was a virgin house with no
fancy stuff about it, and we wanted it fancier. So we worked on making its
presentation better. We started playing with color, restored the textured wall-
papers, added rosettes to the ceilings. We did all the stained glass in it after
we learned how to do that.” Within a few years Little and Raidl’s Queen
Anne house became a showcase of antiques and interior design, and the
couple operated an antiques shop for several years.¹

Roy Little and Jim Raidl were caught up in a crusade of urban revival
that had started years earlier in another part of the city. “In the 1950s and
1960s, an almost invisible movement of middle-class gay men began buying
faded Victorians in Pacific Heights,” writes Randolph Delehanty in his San
Francisco guidebook. “Then ‘Lower Pacific Heights’ (the blocks south of
California Street) drew buyers, then Dolores Heights, then Noe Valley, then
the Castro.” The 1970s saw a renewed surge of restoration in San Francisco,
as newly arriving gays refurbished old houses: “Many young gay men and gay
couples made their living by buying, restoring, and then selling Victorian
houses,” Delehanty writes, “only to buy more faded real estate to propel the
process further.”²
In their books on the Victorian Painted Ladies of San Francisco, Elizabeth Pomada and Michael Larsen document the richly colorful results of this exceptional burst of architectural redemption. Though the books do not mention gays explicitly, they offer coded acknowledgment: Pomada and Larsen describe the city as a shelter for “one of the world’s greatest collections of individualists” and as “a unique and magnificent setting that attracts creative people, people who take pleasure in color and design, as well as artists of all kinds for whom design and color are an essential part of their personal and professional lives.” They dedicate their books to “the legions of the faithful who have fought with words and actions to save the Victorians” and to “the artists, homeowners, painters, and color designers who are transforming San Francisco into the most colorful city in the world.”

Since their construction in the last half of the nineteenth century, many of San Francisco’s thousands of ornate, multicolored Victorians became drab and dilapidated, targets for urban renewal’s bulldozers. Scrap-metal drives during the two world wars stripped away much of their wrought-iron ornament, and many were doused in battleship gray Navy surplus paint or covered with asbestos siding. Gay men have been at the forefront of San Francisco’s colorist movement from its beginnings in the early 1960s. They saved many of the city’s degraded Victorians in distressed neighborhoods, buying them “VOV”—vacant, open, and vandalized—and camping out inside while getting going on rehabilitation. For many, interior restoration proceeded slowly, perhaps one room each year. The exteriors were the first things to be revived, returned to their original polychromatic splendor.

Legions of gay men from throughout the country became acquainted with San Francisco during World War II, and many of them made it their home when the war ended. Gay historian John Loughery states that apartment buildings in various parts of the city underwent “queenizing” in the 1940s. More gays from throughout the country gravitated to the Queen City of the West in the 1950s, seeking refuge during the national homophobic frenzy. It was during the psychedelic 1960s that gay men’s artistic and restoration sensibilities began to burst forth in San Francisco. Local writer Herb Caen told of a little old lady who had been following the progress of two painters working on a Victorian for several days. Seeing that they were starting to apply a fourth color, she yelled, “Now you boys stop dropping acid—you’ve got enough colors up there already!”

One of San Francisco’s pioneers in the Painted Lady revival began in 1963 with a combination of intense blues and greens on his Italianate house. Some of his neighbors loved it, some detested it, but before long many of them were repairing and repainting their own houses. “It only takes one good flower to make everyone want to fancy up,” commented another early
Lee Liberace was another craver of color and renewal, and in the earliest years of San Francisco’s Victorian revival he was working similar redemptive magic in Los Angeles. Beneath Liberace’s flamboyant show-business facade beat the heart of a quintessential gay preservationist: “I feel that all these beautiful things I live with have been placed in my care to look after,” the popular musician wrote in the 1970s. “They don’t really belong to me; they belong to the world . . . somewhere, somehow, they had been abandoned or not cared for. Then I came along and saw a broken chair or an unwanted dog or a forgotten antique that cried out to be saved. The reason I have so many dogs—I have fourteen altogether—is because the majority are animals that no one else wanted.”

Liberace claimed that all his homes were structures that would have been torn down if he had not rescued them: “Anyone can build a house if they have money. But to take something that is going to be destroyed and is dying, and make it live again—that is a very special thrill for me.” His third Hollywood dream house, for example, was a badly deteriorated mansion built in the 1920s and long uninhabited before he purchased it in 1960. Liberace biographer Darden Asbury Pyron writes that “the deterioration actually pleased him. He loved redeeming the unlikely, mending the broken, reclaiming the forgotten, recovering the abandoned.”

“Liberace always loved the shoddy, the secondhand, the unpolished, the unfinished,” Pyron writes. “He preferred things the world rejected—run-down houses, broken furniture, stray dogs, and, not least, human flotsam. He told a reporter, ‘I’ve always liked to take something that is ready to be destroyed, decadent almost, and prove that it can have another life by
restoring it.’ The reporter observed, ‘He has saved houses, pianos, vintage automobiles, old movie props. He has saved a pound’s worth of canines. . . . If, you find yourself thinking, he’s had his occasional troubles with people, it’s probably because he’s wanted to save them, too.’”

“I admire beautiful things, obviously, but I admire even more seeing some ugly duckling things become beautiful,” Liberace wrote. “Sometimes it’s very difficult to help people in such a direct way, most of them are very sensitive to change. But you can always help a piece of furniture.” Lee Liberace exemplified the close vocational relationship between religion and preservation, a deeply rooted calling to rescue diminished things and make them whole and beautiful again. “I once thought I ought to become a priest,” he wrote.

Growing up in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, Kent Warner found his calling in the glorious, glamorous world of music and costume, stage and screen. As a child Warner collected 78-rpm records, phonographs, telephones, and radios. With the advent of long-playing phonograph records, his love of musical theater led him to buy original cast albums. He would listen to them over and over, building miniature stage sets complete with lighting and costumed figures, moving and changing them as the record played.

By twenty-one Warner was in Los Angeles and working for Berman’s Costume House. When Berman’s purchased the old RKO studio wardrobe and decided to discard most of it, Warner moved quickly to save what he could, including garments worn by Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. At Berman’s, Warner developed his knack for locating seemingly unfindable old costumes and his reputation for “liberating” some of the choice things he found. He was known as Lana Lift among some of his friends, and the mid-1960s was a prime time for Warner’s lifting: movie studios were being bought by corporations that had no particular interest in the vast accumulations of the old wardrobe, prop, and publicity departments. Costumes, script drafts, key books, musical scores, press books, and publicity photos were being incinerated or buried in landfills. Warner salvaged as much as he could.

A connoisseur of movie memorabilia, Warner was most drawn to preserving clothing from the best movies of the 1930s, Hollywood’s golden age. He studied his favorite movies so that he knew which costumes to look for. Because he adored Ginger Rogers, he worked especially hard to find her costumes. Judy Garland was another of Warner’s idols. When he went to work for the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer auction in 1970, a year after Garland’s death, she was very much on his mind, especially in her role as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*.

MGM had just been sold, and decades of warehoused props and costumes were about to be liquidated. As the designer of displays for the MGM
star-wardrobe auction, Warner scavenged among the hundreds of thousands of costumes to help the liquidators prepare for the sale. More than anything, he wanted to find Garland’s ruby slippers. “I think The Wizard of Oz was the ultimate representation of home, family, solidarity, well-being, security,” Warner said. “At the same time there was this madness and fantasy of Oz. All I can think of is the heels clicking and Judy saying, ‘There’s no place like home, there’s no place like home.’”

Warner discovered at least five pairs of dust-covered ruby slippers on the third floor of one of seven costume-crammed buildings. He put them all in his duffel bag and took them home to examine. He determined which had been worn for dancing (they were quite battered), which were used in medium and long shots, and which had been worn by Garland’s stand-in (they were a different size). The pair that had been kept in pristine condition for use in close-up shots was the pair that Warner kept for himself, the take-me-home-to-Kansas pair. Eventually he displayed them in his home on a spotlighted pedestal. “He took them out of the case and showed me the bottoms,” said one of Warner’s boyfriends. “He showed me where Judy tapped her heels together. They had little, circular scuff marks. He said they were worn only in that scene. I almost fainted.”

Kent Warner died from AIDS in 1984. While Hollywood burned and buried much of its history through the 1960s and 1970s, Warner was among the first to work for its preservation. “Kent was the greediest person I ever met,” said a fellow collector. “I was always grateful he was stealing. He certainly saved costumes that would have been thrown away. But his greed got the better of him. He would steal a dress and sell it to buy a chandelier. But a lot of things were saved like that.”

In San Diego, Jeffrey Shorn and Charles Kaminski were among the first to be concerned with preserving the area’s modernist buildings. Natives of New York, Kaminski was born in 1946, Shorn in 1944. Both worked as architects in the Peace Corps before they met in New York City in 1974. The couple were lured to San Diego from their Central Park West brownstone in 1975, when they were informed of a vacancy in a Rudolph Schindler–designed complex of beach cottages. So began their protective relationship with El Pueblo Ribera, the beautiful twelve-unit complex of concrete and redwood cottages from the 1920s, designed by the Viennese architect. Within a year of moving in, they attempted to protect the site from insensitive changes by getting El Pueblo Ribera designated as a historic district. This controversial venture sparked in the couple an even deeper interest in the area’s historic architecture.
“For all the architects there were in San Diego, no one gave a damn about historic preservation,” says Shorn. “It was just being born as a movement here. The Historic Sites Board had just been created. There was no preservation consciousness, only developer consciousness: level everything as quickly as you can, just for the land. The landlord who had called us so nicely in 1975 did not want El Pueblo Ribera designated historic and ended up throwing us out. But just recently I got to rebuild one of the units there that had been completely destroyed by fire. So we’re still fighting little battles for Pueblo Ribera.”

“We’re not necessarily involved with the Victorians or the Craftsmans, which most people associate with preservation, especially in San Diego,” says Kaminski. “We’ve tried to get people interested in the early modernists, like Schindler and Richard Neutra and the later modernists like Louis Kahn. I’ve called Jeffrey the chaperone for the Salk Institute, designed by Kahn in 1961. It was a very young building, but it needed to be designated historic because there was a proposal to expand it.”

Jeffrey Shorn established the first historic preservation course in San Diego and has been involved with the city’s Save Our Heritage Organization, its Historical Resources Board, the Balboa Theater Foundation, the La Jolla Historical Society, and the California Preservation Foundation. Charles Kaminski has been his steadfast collaborator. “By our natures we find value in the past and would like to be part of preserving it,” says Shorn. “We seek to learn from the past in order to create for the future, while sustaining the historic fabric of our cities in the present.” Still, Shorn says, “Southern California is the automobile’s world. Even San Diego’s downtown is not yet a real downtown. Chuck and I want a sense of space and place, walking amongst buildings. We’re thinking maybe we would like to live in an older culture, go to Europe for a while.”

“We want a smaller scale, more intimate spaces that are tangible and touchable and have a touch of history,” says Kaminski. “Maybe it’s a gay gene that makes that happen: We’re the ‘between’ people. Think of Jackie Kennedy and Philip Johnson joining together to save Grand Central Station—the ultimate queen and the ultimate queen’s queen.”

The “between” people whose stories follow carry out their culture-keeping missions in a state noted for its attraction to things new. At home since 1965 in his painstakingly restored Victorian row house, Nebraska native Richard Reutlinger contends that “if a bunch of auslanders like myself hadn’t moved into San Francisco, none of this would be left. The basic native San Franciscans didn’t care.” Gerry Takano’s twenty-five years as a preservation architect have led him to hold a similar view: “Seeing the potential of old
buildings to be attractive, gay men are not afraid to go into marginal areas and fix them up. I have found that this gay sensibility is very much out there, in every community.” Architect and planner Jeffrey Samudio got involved in city planning at eighteen, when a block of historic buildings in his Los Angeles community was threatened with demolition. Within the next several years Samudio declared a dozen city landmarks. “Of the people that I got to know who were early into preservation here in L.A., most were misfits . . . eccentrics,” says historical consultant Jim Wilke. “I was fortunate to develop friendships with a lot of gay men who liked old stuff.”