

GREAT HOUSES OF THE CARIBBEAN

A fascinating insight into the history, style and architecture of some of our finest buildings.

Interview: **Judith Baker**

In his latest beautiful book, *Caribbean Houses: History, Style & Architecture*, Decorative Arts scholar Dr. Michael Connors highlights characteristics of architectural styles that can still be seen on buildings throughout the region as testimony to its rich history. The five European powers that colonized the Caribbean – **Spain, England, France, Holland and Denmark**, each brought their own influences to the islands so that there is no single definitive Caribbean architectural style. What is common to all is, however, their use of native materials – exotic hardwoods like mahogany and indigenous stone such as coral limestone. Over the next few pages Dr Connors highlights some of the finest examples of architecture that can be found throughout the Caribbean and offers some unique insights into the fascinating history that accompanies them...

ENGLISH ISLANDS: COLONIAL PLANTATIONS

“Alone among the colonists, the British brought their own ways and styles from English country houses to the tropics. All the other nationalities who came here adapted to a tropical lifestyle – but the British transplanted the same fashions, whether in diet, dress or architecture that they would have enjoyed at home to retain their mother country’s styles in the heat and humidity of the Caribbean. St Nicholas Abbey on Barbados – not an abbey at all, most likely an affectation – was built about 1650. It recalls English manor houses of the 17th century with a formal approach garden. The design was probably influenced by early Anglo Dutch trade – the Jacobean Dutch style being popular in England at the time.”

Every Wednesday from mid-January to mid-April, The Barbados National Trust offers an open-house programme where both historical and modern private homes are open for public viewing including St. Nicholas Abbey
* Tel: 246-426-2421. ↗



ST LUCIA

"The residence of St Lucia's governor general is one of the islands' few remaining examples of 19th century architecture. Its cast iron ornamentation including a crown and its Palladian windows make it unique."

Open to the public: Tues. and Thurs. 10-noon and 2-4, by appointment only tel: 758/452-2481

La Fregate, Martinique



The finely crafted balustrade and balusters that make up la Fregate's staircase are crafted from island mahogany

FRENCH LESSER ANTILLES: CREOLE ESTATES

"Habitation La Fregate, built in 1704 near le Francois, is one of the oldest houses on Martinique and has the rustic elegance characteristic of French colonial island architecture. One of its most prominent features are the orange fish scale tiles on the roof. These were produced in nearby La Poterie, where the soil has the desired clay content. Similar tiles were used throughout the French islands and shipped to other Caribbean countries. Established in 1694, La Poterie is one of the few

WHIM PLANTATION MUSEUM - Tours are available of the original early 18th century plantation buildings and the great house. * See www.stcroixlandmarks.com



remaining tile and brick factories that continues to function today La Fregate is painted a pink-orange, the color of the surrounding bougainvillea flowers, and the shutters borrow their blue from the sky and the sea – the colors being taken from the surrounding tropical environment."

Also in the area of Francois, The Habitation Clement is the only plantation open entirely to the public from 0900 to 17.30 every day except in September.

* www.habitation-clement.fr

DANISH VIRGIN ISLANDS:

The Danes bought the islands now known as The US Virgin Islands from the French in 1735. As the last conquering Europeans to come to the region, they added their own architectural style to the islands - with extravagant great houses and sugar estates not found elsewhere. During the mid-18th century the Danish planters (especially those in St Croix) gave fanciful names to their plantations. These names, such as Wheel of Fortune, Anna's Hope, Betsy's Jewel and the Whim, expressed their vanity and pride. The Whim Plantation was founded in the 1740s, and the great house is one of the most distinctive in the Caribbean. Owned by Christopher McEvoy, son of a Scottish immigrant and one of St Croix's wealthiest and largest landowners, it was built of cut coral and is unique in design, with semicircular curved ends



Whim Plantation. Top right: Whim Plantation's original cookhouse/kitchen retains its series of Dutch style ovens



Alcazar de Colon, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

BELOW: A portrait of Christopher Columbus and his son Diego hangs in the library



SPANISH ANTILLES: THE EARLY COLONIAL ERA

“The Spanish were the first rulers of the New World and so their buildings show styles from much earlier periods than those built by the French, English and Dutch. Renaissance and even Romanesque influences can be seen in the graceful

arcades, facades and columns of their lavish houses. Alcazar de Colon was built to impress as the headquarters of the Spanish Court. Sometimes called the Columbus Palace, it was constructed of massive blocks of coral limestone for Diego Columbus, son of the explorer. It was built in 1510, reputedly by 1,000 Amerindians under the supervision of 48 Spanish master builders. Many of the construction techniques used by the Spanish in the Caribbean have a mixture of Spanish and Moorish styles (Mudejar) and Alcazar’s Italian style façade has both Mudejar and Gothic influences.”

Alcazar is open to the public Mon to Sat from 09:00 AM to 05:00 PM, Sun from 09:00 AM to 04:00 PM.



Caribbean Houses: History Style and Architecture by Michael Connors is published by Rizzoli, New York * www.rizzoliusa.com



ABOVE: Villa Maria, Willemstad, Curacao. **LEFT:** The entrance hall of Villa Maria has mahogany doors and a series of double doors, originally louvered to

DUTCH LEEWARDS: CONQUEST OF COMMERCE

“Dutch merchants established trading towns on the islands and grew exceptionally wealthy throughout the 19th century. The architecture in Willemstad, Curacao is unmistakably Dutch, recalling that of Amsterdam. Villa Maria was built in the 1880s in the neo-Greek style, thought to be the purest interpretation of the neo-classical style. Among the characteristics of Greek temple architecture is the portico with Doric columns. The bright colours of houses in Willemstad give the town its distinctive look. Rumour has it that in 1917 the colonial governor general of Curacao, Albert Kikkert, found the sun’s reflection on the whitewashed buildings gave him migraines and decreed that all buildings be painted ‘any colour