

FRANCE

Sunbathing With the Masters

On Côte d'Azur, artists from Renoir to Le Corbusier left villas, studios, museums

BY LANIE GOODMAN
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WNice, France
HEN PIERRE-Auguste Renoir moved to the south of France in 1907 to relieve his arthritis, he bought the Domaine des Collettes, an olive grove in the heights of Cagnes-sur-Mer, near Nice. He lived and worked in a house and studio there—capturing the clear air and luminous colors of the Mediterranean landscape—until his death in 1919.

The dry, haze-free air attracted the Impressionists; Matisse, Picasso and Chagall also took up residence. “In the south of France,” said the artist Pierre Bonnard, “everything sparkles and the whole painting vibrates.”

Over the decades, more artists built ateliers here—from Le Corbusier to Hans Hartung to Henry Clews. Many of their homes are now museums—or, in the case of the artist Nall, a working studio open to the public. All are within easy driving distance of Nice; visiting hours are variable or by appointment.

TWO GROUNDBREAKING designers built on the peninsula of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, about 12 miles northeast of Nice, a landscape featuring towering yuccas, lemon and carob trees, pink oleander and a sweeping view of the sea. Eileen Gray, the Irish designer, built Villa E1027 in 1929 at the behest of her lover, Polish architect Jean Badovici. Next door, Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier built a spartan beach hut, Le Cabanon.

A stark white house on stilts, E1027 was highly experimental for its time, with two ground floors, a red outdoor kitchen and a stairway to the roof. Whimsical phrases are stenciled on walls (“Enter Slowly”; “Laughter Forbidden”). Rooms were filled with furniture Ms. Gray designed, including pivoting and folding cabinets, lounge chairs and one of her most popular pieces, the circular glass-and-chrome “E1027 table.”

Le Corbusier, a friend and a mentor, was a frequent guest at the villa—and, in 1938, after Ms. Gray and Mr. Badovici broke up, he moved in as Mr. Badovici’s guest and painted the walls with bold primary colors and erotic figures, infuriating Ms. Gray. The villa was abandoned and was almost in ruins when the French cultural ministry began a restoration earlier this decade. Le Corbusier’s murals remain. The restored E1027 is set to open to the public in March next year.

Le Corbusier remained attached to the site and in 1951 built his single-room studio just yards away from E1027. The studio is open to the public by appointment (33-(0)4-93-35-62-87). Less than 12 feet long on each side and less than 8 feet high, the cabin is an experiment in modular living, with a bed and sculpted wooden pillow, a pivoting table, two cubes to serve as seats, a closet, a desk, a sink—and a yellow floor and green-and-orange ceiling.

There’s also a hidden door leading to a Provençal restaurant, now closed, which was frescoed by “Corbu” and which he and his wife treated as their private canteen. “They weren’t fond of cooking,” says architect Robert Rebutato, son of the restaurant’s owners. Le Corbusier, who died in 1965 while swimming in the sea here, is buried in the Roquebrune cemetery.

About 12 miles southwest of Nice in the hills of Antibes is the whitewashed villa of German-born artist Hans Hartung, another minimalist gem. Mr. Hartung, whose abstract works balanced dazzling color with spontaneous black scratching (often pro-



duced with olive branches from the surrounding grove), lived here with his wife, the Norwegian painter Anne-Eva Bergman, from 1973 until his death in 1989. He calculated each line of the atelier’s design, from the pool where he swam every morning to the bay windows in the living room overlooking a grassy park.

The sprawling property houses more than 16,000 paintings, engravings and photos, including a permanent collection of Ms. Bergman’s minimalist, abstract paintings. The Hartung-Bergman Foundation offers guided tours (33-(0)4-93-33-45 92). A highlight is Mr. Hartung’s paint-splattered atelier, with its array of brushes, styluses, spray guns and rollers.

Nine miles southwest, in the Cannes neighborhood of La Californie, is the villa of the Art Nouveau poster artist Jean-Gabriel Domergue and his wife, Odette Maudrange, a sculptor. Villa Domergue is minutes from Pablo Picasso’s house and studio, which aren’t open to the public.

The couple finished building the villa in 1936, planting the terraced gardens with cypresses and oaks and creating fountains and waterfalls. They filled the stone house and garden paths with Ms. Maudrange’s sculptures and displayed trophies from their world travels, from Etruscan vases to Murano glass chandeliers.

Originally a landscape painter, Mr. Domergue made his fortune with portraits of swan-necked models and dancers, often the mistresses of his moneyed Parisian clientele; he claimed to be the inventor of the sexy pinup. His ads for the Côte d’Azur, featuring towering palms, sylphs in oversize hats and slinky gowns and minimally dressed bathing beauties, were reproduced as postcards and sold everywhere on the Riviera, contributing to the area’s glamorous image. Among the large canvases hanging in the former atelier are two nudes of Josephine Baker, Mr. Domergue’s frequent guest. The villa, maintained by the city of Cannes since 1979, is today a frequent party site during the film festival and is open by appointment (33-(0)4-97-06-44 90).

Mr. Domergue’s neighbor was Henry Clews, a largely self-trained painter and sculptor who was one of many eccentric expatriates on the Riviera in the freewheeling 1920s. A Wall Street banker-turned-artist, Mr. Clews and his wife, Marie, had moved from New York to wartime Paris in 1914. Three years later, when their young son fell dangerously ill with influenza, they headed south to a warmer climate. They learned that an abandoned castle was for sale and launched a resto-

ration that would last 18 years.

The Clewses designed and rebuilt (with the help of 12 Florentine stonecutters) the Château de la Napoule, a turreted seaside castle built on Saracen ruins in Mandelieu La Napoule, just west of Cannes. Today, the château offers guided tours of the castle and a cloister, replete with Mr. Clews’s bizarre carvings—bigbellied stone demons inspired by pre-Columbian art; laughing gnomes in blocks of pink, gray

and green porphyry; and a life-size bronze Christ-like figure, which Mr. Clews modeled on himself, in the castle courtyard. The property’s orange groves and labyrinths are now used as an exhibition space for sculptors-in-residence; the terrace restaurant has a dreamy sea view. The château is open daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. (33-(0)4-93-49-95-05).

To see an active studio, head inland about 12 miles to the N.A.L.L. Foundation on a nine-acre estate



Clockwise, from left: The villa of Art Nouveau artist Jean-Gabriel Domergue; Hans Hartung’s atelier; the artist Nall’s studio. **Bottom left:** Works of Henry Clews in his atelier at Château de la Napoule.

white sparrows, a pop painting commissioned by Christian Dior of giant lipstick tubes doubling as the Twin Towers. The studio is open to the public by appointment (33-(0)4-93-58-13-26).

Nall, 60 years old, is best known for his combination of the baroque and a Dali-esque surreal tone. The foundation operates an artists’ residence for a dozen American students, who receive drawing lessons and who trim the olive trees in the lavender-scented gardens. “Art should not be separate from life,” says Nall. “There must be complete harmony between the two.”

WSJ.com

See a slideshow of works by some of the artists inspired by the landscape of Nice, at WSJ.com/Lifestyle.

TRIP PLANNER

Fly into Nice, rent a car at the airport and make Nice your base. Most of the ateliers discussed here are within 20 miles of Nice, roughly along the E80 motorway. Expect crowds in July and August, but it’s quieter up in the hills. September is the loveliest month in which to visit.

WHERE TO STAY

The **Hotel Windsor** is a charming, artsy, family-run hotel in the heart of Nice’s shopping district. The 57 rooms, decorated by internationally known artists, range from minimalist to whimsical, but all are comfortable. Breakfast is served in the palm-shaded garden, near a small pool (\$189-\$275; ☎ 33-493-88-59-35; www.hotelwindsornice.com). Another option, near the contemporary galleries, is **la MOMA**, a two-room guesthouse run by designer couple Valérie Arboireau and Peter Larsen



(\$142; ☎ 33-660-57-49-59; www.moma-nice.com). If you prefer staying inland, book well in advance for a room at **La Colombe d’Or**, the renowned artists’ hotel (16 rooms, 10 apartments) at the entrance of St. Paul de Vence. You don’t have to be a guest to dine on the big-shaded terrace, surrounded by works of Miro, Braque and Léger; a highlight is the dreamy black-tiled pool flanked by Calder mobiles (rooms \$449-\$598, dinner about \$103;

☎ 33-493-32-80-02; www.la-colombe-dor.com). Other stylish guesthouses include **La Maison du Frêne** (\$220; ☎ 33-6-88-90-49-69; www.lamaisonduffrene.com); **La Toile Blanche** (\$393; ☎ 33-493-32-74-21; www.toileblanche.com); and **La Forge de Hauterives** (\$205; ☎ 33-4-93-89-73-34; www.maison-dhauterives.com). Aspiring artists or small student groups may opt for a weekly rental of Matisse’s former home, **Villa Le Rêve**, where the great master lived in 1943. Run by the Vence Tourist Office, the villa sleeps up to 15 and has an atelier workspace (\$3,934 per week; ☎ 33-493-58-82-68; www.villalerevevence.com).

—Lanie Goodman

