

Santa Barbara

MAGAZINE

HOMES +
GARDENS



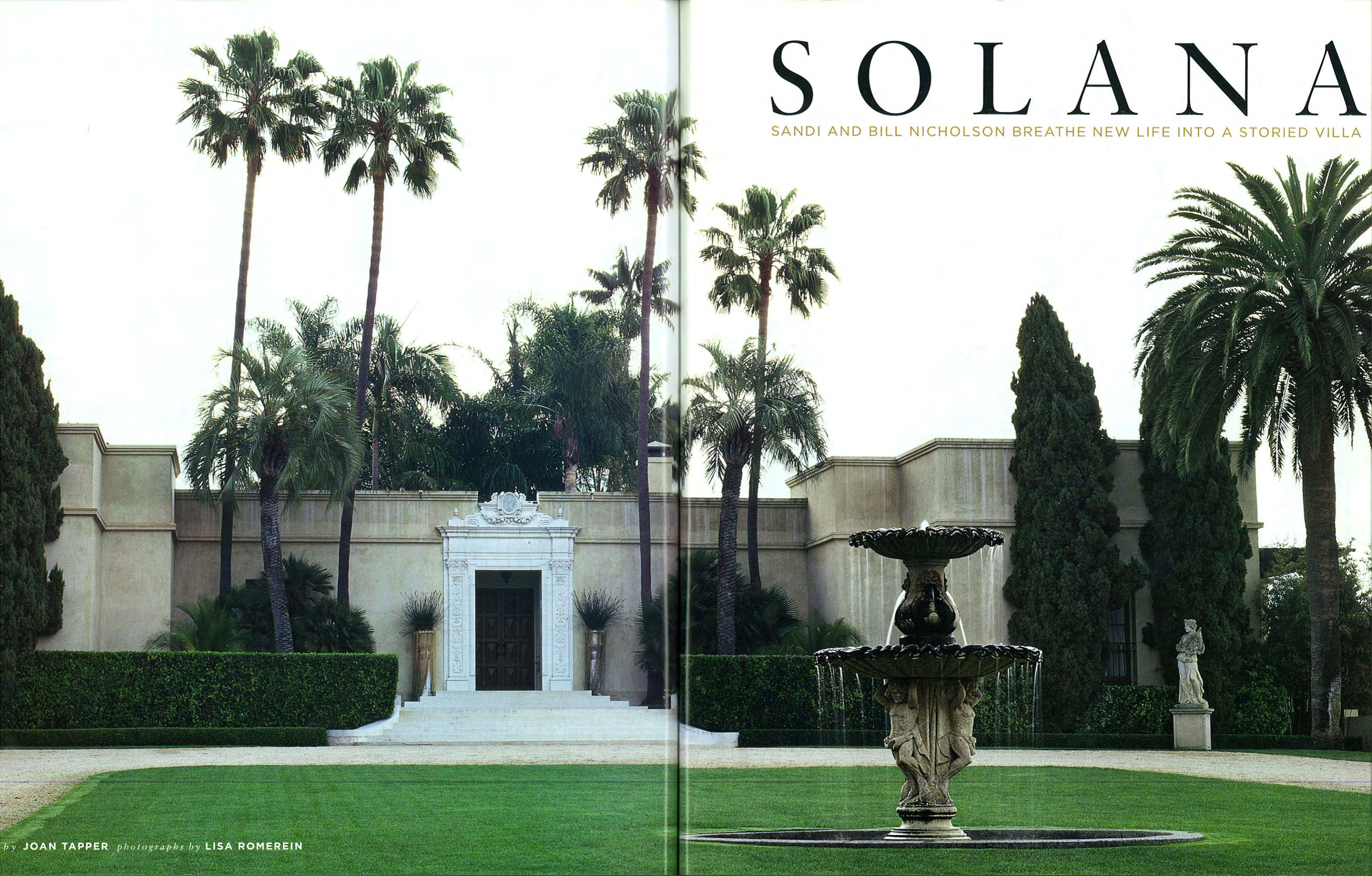
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Finola Hughes
at home

SOLANA

SANDI AND BILL NICHOLSON BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO A STORIED VILLA



Nineteenth-century Chinese emperor's chairs in Solana's foyer echo the classic formality of the architecture and entry (previous pages) designed by Francis Underhill in 1915. The home's furnishings reflect a passion for collecting on the part of the current owners, Sandi and Bill Nicholson. OPPOSITE: Sandi with one of the couple's cavalier King Charles spaniels.



P

erhaps certain properties are built with the heavens in perfect alignment. Sandi Nicholson remembers one of her first small dinner parties after she and her husband, Bill, had finished the renovation of Solana, their hilltop estate. They and their guests were eating in the open-air palm court in the center of the house, and suddenly the moon rose exactly along the axis of the courtyard, bathing them all in silvery light.

Undoubtedly fortune was smiling on Solana once again. The classical Roman villa from 1915—after three decades of terrible neglect (see “Roman Revival,” page 199)—was in the hands of a couple with passion, imagination, and the resources to bring the house brilliantly back to life.

Spanning 12.5 acres, Solana enjoys a giddy view that sweeps from the Montecito valley past Santa Barbara's downtown waterfront. Inside, finely wrought furniture from around the world sets off an unusual collection of art in a setting that blends historic architecture with contemporary living. The overall effect is stunning and an expression of extraordinary personal tastes.

Known for their philanthropy with Lotusland, Girls Inc., local firefighters, and many other groups, the Nicholsons are a striking couple. She's a petite blond with riveting brown eyes; he's a strapping 6'6" with a trim white beard. Far more notable is their energy, intellectual curiosity, and creative approach to their residences. “Homes and gardens are our passions,” says Sandi. “We've restored a lot of homes, never any two alike.” Those include a Federal townhouse in Washington DC (redone by Bill years ago), a century-old ranch near Yellowstone, and half an old town—20 buildings they're working on in southwestern Montana.

They weren't even in the market for a house when they first saw Solana in 1998, a virtual wreck with a half-constructed third story covered in tar paper. “It looked like a Russian VA Hospital,” says Bill. Yet even in its poor

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An ornate *bargueño* (Spanish traveling chest) anchors the foyer. OPPOSITE: Antique embroidered bed linens, made for a daughter's wedding, hang in the living room, an example of women's artistry that complements the surrounding paintings, also done by women.





A partial canopy graces the Spanish-theme guest room. OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Objects found on travels have become starting points for decor such as the powder room's French fountain and the master bedroom's wallpaper, made in China and painted in France.

condition, Solana had appeal. "We like historic houses," he says, "and we loved the view."

They loved it enough to buy the property and embark on a three-year project of rebuilding and restoration.

Santa Barbara already had a special place in the Nicholsons' personal history. "My first trip here was Christmas 1980," remembers Sandi. "We stayed at the Biltmore in a cottage and became engaged." Bill promised then that one day they'd live here. Eight years after their wedding in 1984, they bought a house on Mountain Drive as a part-time winter getaway.

Meanwhile, they maintained a principal residence in Houston and several other homes that accommodated their careers and lifestyle. Sandi had a thriving tile and marble business in Texas. Bill, a college basketball player, much-decorated Vietnam War pilot, and former appointments secretary to President Ford, was a successful businessman in industries that ranged from high-speed boats to multilevel marketing to the use of radioisotopes for medical research, with offices in Texas, Montana, Michigan, and New York.

The design by architect Francis Underhill was the starting point. "It's an intellectual house," notes Sandi, "almost minimalist considering the times."

The couple also frequently spent time abroad. "When we travel, we go to museums and antique galleries," says Bill. "We collect. It's a way to extend the experience."

Solana could someday be a wonderful place, they thought, to house their collections. But it would take many talented people to bring it back to a semblance of its original self. The design by architect Francis Underhill was the starting point. "It's an intellectual house," notes Sandi, "almost minimalist considering the times. Most houses then were wood construction, but Underhill had an early interest in stucco and concrete." He also organized the space in a very livable way. The north side had bedrooms, the east side was all about entertaining, and the south side included the kitchen and other living areas. His placement of the courtyard anticipated the indoor-outdoor approach so dear to Santa Barbarans today. And though the architecture was streamlined, a terra-cotta frieze of acanthus columns—the work of the Northern California firm of Gladding, McBean—added the lovely detailing around the front door.

"What was unusual was the beauty and perfection of the concept of the house," remembers Santa Barbara architect Don





An 18th-century candlelit chandelier from Belgium brings crystalline sparkle to formal dinners in a grand dining room with gold silk walls. On Solana's east side, the rooms conform to the architect's original footprint.



The renovation also incorporated some rather unusual pieces that the Nicholsons owned—an entire paneled room, for example. “In the mid-’80s, Bill gave me a Christmas present,” Sandi recalls, “a box with a large iron key.”

Nulty, who worked with the Nicholsons on the renovation. “It was obvious that it was a gem in the rough. Everyone felt the responsibility of doing it right, but no one was prepared for the things we needed to fix.”

For one thing, the 14-foot-high foundation walls needed to come out. “It was delicate and expensive surgery,” Nulty says. And though they were all aware that Solana had suffered a fire around 1960, “when we opened the attic, the smoke damage was much greater than we knew.”

“In the end,” Bill says, “every wall except for the front and two sides was taken down.”

Using the original footprint as a guide and keeping the house’s history in mind, Nulty and contractor Rick Heimburg adapted Solana to today’s needs. Since it had been designed “as a summer house,” the architect notes, “you had to walk outdoors to go from the living quarters to the bed-

rooms.” Nulty borrowed 16 feet from the courtyard to enlarge the front entry, then glassed in the open side galleries. He also enlarged the family and kitchen area, adding rooms and a loggia below. “We needed to expand it in a manner that reflected the hand of the original designer,” he says. “And that created new energy for the architecture.”

Some might say fate played a role in lucky finds along the way. Sandi located the Royal Danby marble from the East Coast that had been used in the original foyer, so the new entry floor perfectly matched the old. And it turned out Gladding, McBean still had the original ink-on-vellum drawings for the façade’s frieze, which badly needed restoration. The venerable firm re-created parts and replicated the design for a new guest cottage.

The renovation also incorporated some rather unusual pieces that the Nicholsons owned—an entire paneled room, for example. “In the mid-’80s, Bill gave me a Christmas present,” Sandi remembers, “a box with a large iron key.” The key opened a centuries-old library of French oak boiserie that had belonged to William Randolph Hearst and that Bill bought at auction. For a decade it was stored in a warehouse, but it was perfect for Solana—after two expert carpenters spent two and a half years adapting the paneling to the space and hand-carving matching pieces to fit.



Paneling defines the original library, where religious processional figures from Portugal flank the stately fireplace. OPPOSITE: The French oak boiserie walls, refitted to a cozy study off the entry, were once part of William Randolph Hearst's estate.

Classical garden statuary sets a timeless tableau. Says landscape architect Sydney Baumgartner, "The formality of the house needs the formality of some plantings, which allows the rest to be exuberant."





Blossoms of the climbing French tea rose 'Sombreuil' cascade over a columned gazebo in the terraced garden. OPPOSITE: The flowers bestow a flight of petals on the garden's avian statuary.

For the home's interior, the Nicholsons worked with the Los Angeles-based designer Joan Behnke in a complex process that relied on "binders and binders" of art and furniture. "We shuffled the images like a deck of cards," Behnke remembers, adding, "the house is Italianate, very stark. It's a wonderful backdrop for the kind of design we did."

They warmed the pared-down architecture with color and a combination of styles. "When you have pieces of quality—great pieces chosen from the heart—you can mix it up," says Behnke.

The entry, for example, has symmetrically placed antique Chinese emperor's chairs and an ornate traveling chest from Spain. Guest rooms include a Spanish bedroom with a canopy bed, a French "blue room," and a Chinese room with a lacquered chest, while one powder bath showcases a French marble fountain used as a vanity and another, a Florentine chinoiserie mirror. "You fall in love with a piece," Sandi says, "and then find a home for it."

At the east end of the house, the enormous living room harkens back to Underhill's design, with a curving wall of five sets of French doors that open to the terrace. From there, the stunning view extends beyond a lily pond and a marble statue of Winged Victory to Montecito and the ocean. "This is a great entertaining room," says Sandi, for everything from a small charity concert on the 1906 Bechstein grand piano to a fund-raising dinner party for 60. The library to one side is balanced on the other by a formal dining room with gold silk walls and an 18th-century candlelit chandelier from Belgium.

Along Solana's southern wall, there's now a huge open kitchen and family room, highlighted by blue and white tiled panels from an old Portuguese inn and another ocean-view terrace. Farther along the south gallery is the Nicholsons' own suite, with silver wallpaper made in China in 1820 and then handpainted in France. "There are no repeats," marvels Sandi, of the scenes of flowering branches and delicate butterflies.

"Each room has a character," says Behnke. "But the wild card was Bill's art collection."

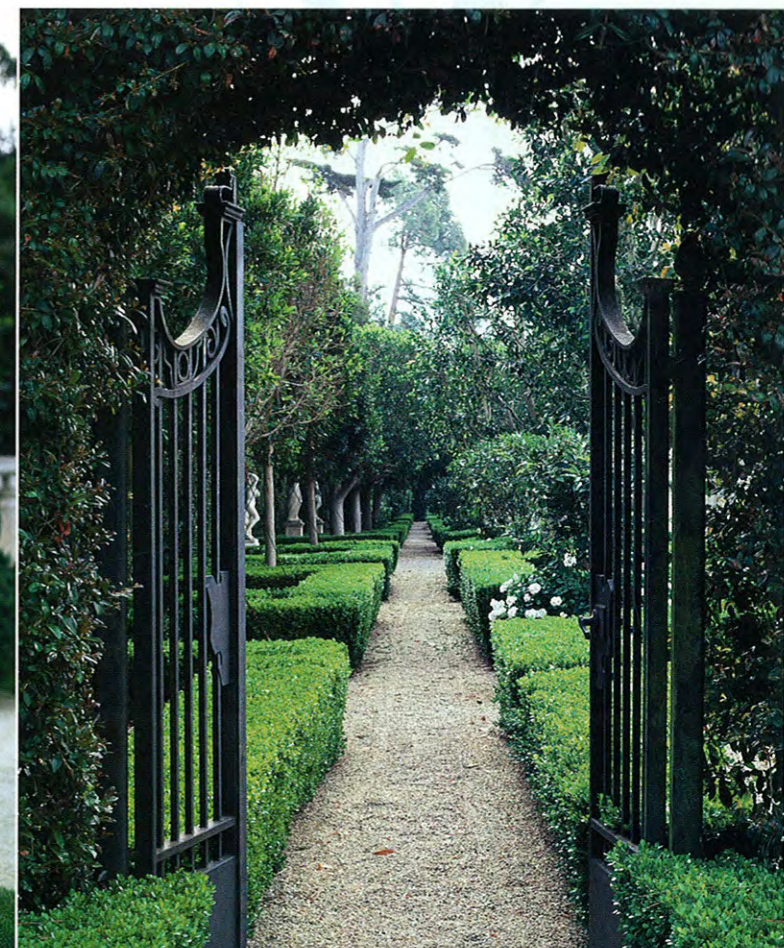
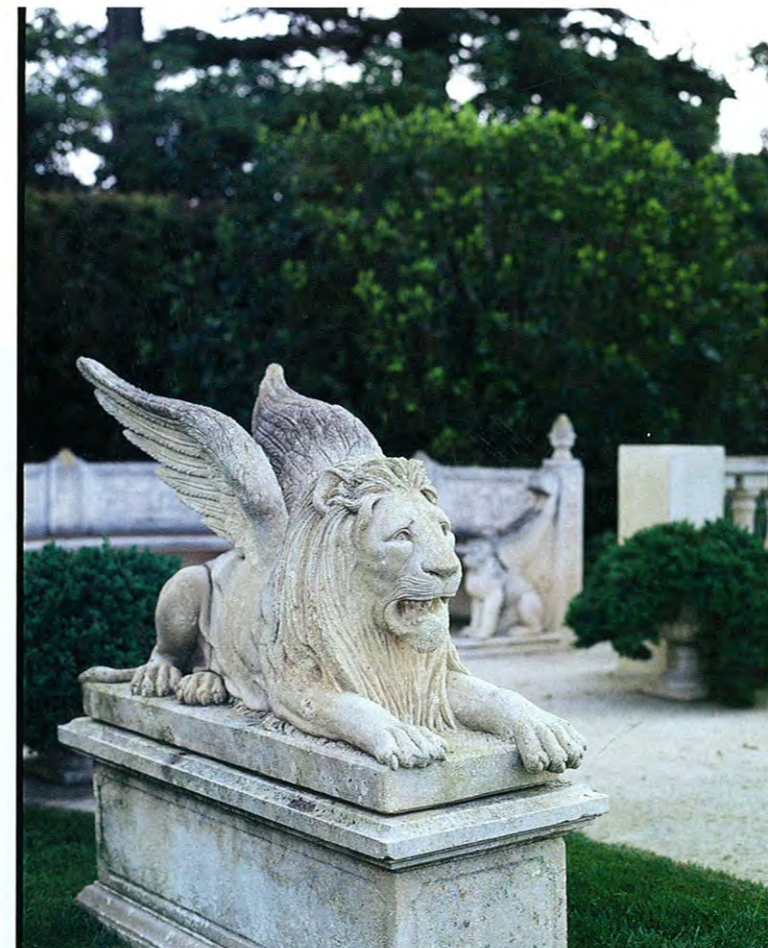
About 10 years ago, Bill says, he and Sandi were in Europe and "going to galleries and museums with a fellow who had a PhD in art history. I realized I hadn't heard a woman's name mentioned on the entire trip. So I said, 'Europe has such a history of art, surely there must have been women painters.' He rattled some names off but said they're hard to authenticate. On the spot I decided to put together a great collection of art by women."

He did just that, with work by women painters, photographers, and crafters—along with *Continued on page 199*



Nine months of the year, the cutting garden is a riot of color and, at the height of the season, the delicate white petals of 'Sombreuil' shower the area like fragrant snowflakes.

The heart of Solana lies in its palm court open to the sky, opposite, clockwise from top left: A stone lion in a side garden; the entrance to the precise allée; classical figures along the walkway; and the blue and white garden along the north veranda.





Earthbound yet exhilarating, a statue of Winged Victory edges the lily pond, adding focus to an unparalleled panoramic view from Montecito to Santa Barbara.