

# Le Grand Bal de C



# Versailles



What happens when culturally minded philanthropists, art lovers and patrons from France, the United States and beyond gather to support a living work of art, the Palace of Versailles? Join Lance Avery Morgan, royals and aristocrats, for a party-filled week in Versailles, Paris and the environs, with the pinnacle being *Le Grand Gala Extraordinaire* at the Palace.

Photography by Jean-Luce Hurs and Quentin Bacon



The Garden at Versailles Palace

**WHEN THE INVITATION** arrived, it seemed like Christmas Day had come early. *The American Friends of Versailles Request The Pleasure of Your Company For The Most Magnificent Gala Of The Century*, it said. The attire stated *Robe de Bal*. A ball at Versailles. We love international balls at *The Society Diaries* and have been to a few in our time, yet this one was to be different. Steeped in tradition for over a decade, the American Friends of Versailles gala to raise funds for the much-loved landmark was sure to be another triumph . . . and it was.

Of course, Americans have had a close connection to Versailles, more than any secular monument outside the United States. Our forefathers Ben Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson represented the U.S. in the 18th century there, among so many others since then. Fast-forward to the Rockefellers who took it under their wing to help restore it after World War I when, like other great French monuments, Versailles looked particularly hard-hit. Not so much because any fighting that had occurred there, but because the Palace and the estate had been neglected since the country had other priorities at that time in history than the preservation of its heritage.

After a visit to France, American billionaire John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in 1924 offered to help the French government finance the restoration of the palaces of Versailles, its gardens and the park, as well as its Trianon Palace, and also Fontainebleau (as well as the Cathedral of Rheims that was badly damaged by the German bombardments at the start of the war). By this extraordinary generosity, Rockefeller set a precedence for philanthropy both abroad and at home.

The contribution of the Rockefeller's millions was the first large sponsorship of Versailles, and was to be

followed by others including Texans David and Catharine Hamilton. Catharine, of Amarillo, and whose husband David is from Houston, shares her vision, "My personal love affair with Versailles began when I was seventeen years old, upon my first visit with my mother. I was later asked if I would become a member of the board of directors of Les Amis de Versailles in the early 1990's by our good friend Le Vicomte, Oliver



de Rohan, its President." From there her participation was solidified and remains today the only American on the Board of Versailles. "In 1996 Olivier, my husband, David, and I were walking through the gardens when we came upon the Trois Fontaines Bosquet. It had lain in ruin since 1830, and was sad and longing to be restored. We hoped that there was perhaps some way we could help. After meeting with Hubert Astier, the President of Versailles, a seed was planted and the

American Friends of Versailles was born." Catharine Hamilton became the founding chairwoman in 1998 and from there, the fundraising has been epic and has led to six major galas at the Palace, as well as a plethora of events around the world for it. "Our mission is to heighten awareness of this international world treasure and to support restoration projects that would not be funded otherwise," states Hamilton, a vivacious brunette who is a force of nature with the cause. "And, of course, to enhance the historic friendship between the U.S. and France."

Curry Glassell, a Houston philanthropist who attended the festivities, agrees by sharing, "I, too, visited Versailles for the first time when I was young and I still think it is the most gorgeous thing I have ever seen. I became involved in 1999 when Lynn Wyatt connected me with Catharine Hamilton and I've been involved ever since. Catharine is so lovely and is dedicated to making a more beautiful Versailles."

## AH, PARIS

To raise the much-needed funds, the American Friends of Versailles is consistently hard at work year 'round. "Most Texans know exactly how - and do give back with our time, money, energy and expertise," emphatically states Hamilton. "We all have something to contribute. Really, this is a can-do attitude of all Americans, and especially Texans."

Versailles hosts nearly seven million visitors a year. That is, except on one long weekend, every other year or so, when these grand fundraising events recently happened from Wednesday through Monday. Rarefied indeed, the events of Le Grand Gala Extraordinaire with and surrounding events have a limited number of guests who enjoy festivities in support of this UNESCO-designated world monument. Hamilton admits that there is more to the weekend than parties, "Egos are checked



Comte et Comtesse Arthur de Mortemart, Comte Alexandre de Mortemart, Athenias de Mortemart and AFV Board Member Charles-Louis de Mortemart



Curry Glassel and Nathan Roberts



Steven and Kimberly Rockefeller, Vice-Presidents of AFV



AFV Boardmember David Hamilton and Tennessee Alexis Hamilton



Former Ambassador Howard Leach and AFV founder Catharine Hamilton



Vicomte Olivier de Rohan, co-founder of AFV and Madame Anne Marie de Ganay



Cassandra Longoria and AFV Boardmember Jonathan Marder



US Ambassador to France Charles Rivkin and Susan Tolson



Alena Gedesnova, Sean Boyd, Patrick Micheals, Agnes Chaitas, Peta Boyd, and Andre Michaels



Caroline Sarkozy and Pierre Levy



Benjamin Meyer and Nicole Brandt



Comtesse and Comte Alexandre de Mortemart



Nancy Cain Marcus, Dr. Bill Vowell and Rekha Mallya



Federic Odassa, Douglas and Emily Siefert

at the door because everyone who attends genuinely cares. After all, we are an educational organization. We are intent on what we learn over the weekend.”

When it came to this year’s plethora of 14 events over a week, Hamilton was succinct in her mission. “Versailles has direct historical, political and artistic links to our country where it still so richly captivates our imaginations. It inspires the soul in all facets of the arts, architecture, gardens, and objet d’art,” she confides.

To kick off the stellar events, Wednesday saw a fête champêtre of private visits with the proprietors of some of the most famous and grand châteaux in the world. Through the years, the American Friends of Versailles has been the recipient of the magnanimous generosity from the de Ganay family . . . and especially that of Anne-Marie de Ganay, the dynamic Chairman of the French Board of Directors, who has long been a champion of the organization. Madame de Ganay graciously arranged and hosted the luncheon at her family’s world renown Château de Courances and also a visit to Château Fleury. These visits were unique in that they were hosted by the proprietors themselves, in some of only a handful of grand châteaux that remain privately owned.

Then it was off to Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte for a private high tea greeted by Comte et Comtesse Patrice de Vogüé. Vaux has remained in this family for a century and a half and the château was a quintessential work of architecture in mid-17th century Europe, as it remains today. The geniuses who worked on Vaux were architect Louis Le Vau, landscape architect André Le Nôtre, and painter-decorator Charles Le Brun. Their collaboration marked the beginning of the “Louis XIV style” combining architecture, interior design and landscape design in grandeur and harmony. Vaux-le-Vicomte was, indeed, the inspiration for this world renowned and most influential Palace of Versailles.

## LE JARDINS

On Thursday, on the Left Bank, a private garden tour was arranged of some of the most sublime private garden gems in Paris hidden from the public behind walls on the rue du Bac and rue de Varenne. It was generously organized by the American Friends of Versailles’ French board members, Didier and Barbara Wirth. Didier is one of the world’s great experts on gardens. The unique tour and luncheon was hosted by the Wirths, who also happen to be proprietors of Château de Brecy, a 17th century château in Normandy with a meticulously recreated and restored, richly ornamented Italian style garden. The tour began with His Excellency the Ambassador of Italy to France,

Giandomenico Magliano, for a visit of the remarkable jardin anglais at their magnificent ambassadorial residence, the Hotel de La Rochefoucault – Doudeauville, also called Hotel de Boisgelin. Guests also had the great privilege to visit the private park of the Hôtel Matignon (the residence of the French Prime Minister). The park of the Hôtel is considered to be the largest non-public garden in Paris. Even though entry to the residence is not permitted to the general public, the Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault and his staff shared their warm hospitality.

Onward to the Jardin de l’Institut des Missions Étrangères where the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris was established in the mid-17th century with a beautiful garden located in the heart of Paris. In the 19th century, many flowers and fruit trees were brought to Paris by missionaries after visiting China, including wild roses, culminating with a garden tour and a champagne reception with a delightful grande dame, Madame Audi, in her lovely home. A delectable, buffet

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**Catharine Hamilton, Founding President, American Friends of Versailles**

lunch was then served at the residences of Barbara and Didier Wirth, as well as Sandy and Jean de Yturbe. The Yturbes are founding members of the American Friends of Versailles’ French Board of Directors and have entertained the group in the past in their XVI century, royal residence, Château d’Anet that was built for Diane de Poitiers and Henry II in 1547, and also in their amazing Paris apartment. Dîner de Rêve was at an exceptionally beautiful, one-of-a-kind private residence of designers, Joseph Achkar and Michel Charriere in the Marais district after the day of touring. The former antique dealers and still-great collectors of 18th century pieces dazzled with their entertaining largesse.

On Friday, it was more touring, this time much on one’s own before joining Baron and Baroness Roland de l’Espée, who received the guests for a luncheon in their beautiful Paris apartment, which mixes arts, periods and origins. Espée, the current President of Les Amis de Versailles, the American Friends of Versailles’ sister organization, is himself a much-esteemed expert on 17th and 18th centuries furniture and paintings, and is also a collector of contemporary photographs. He hails from one of the leading families of France and many of them were great collectors, naturally. After time off for good behavior, the group reassembled that evening for a champagne reception and buffet celebrating international volunteerism at a world renowned Hôtel Particulier (this means it was once a grand private family residence and many remain so today). Set among the outstanding décor and a lovely garden on the famed

Faubourg Saint-Honoré, the bubbles of the good champagne set the stage for Saturday night’s enchanting ball at Versailles.

## BEAUTY & THE FEAST

At exactly 7:30 PM the guests began arriving in gowns and tuxedos by the dozens and soon, into the hundreds. The Palace of Versailles was the magnificent backdrop for an impressively divine evening that even the Sun King would have found radiant. The guests shared in the sensibility of knowing that the special evening was an exceptional celebration of the history, beauty and friendship that creates such a night. Upon arrival, guests strolled up the majestic Escalier Gabriel and wandered about through the stately and exquisite Appartements du Roi, toward the Hall of Mirrors where champagne was served: a very rare privilege. U.S. Ambassador to France Charles Rivkin and his wife, Susan Tolson also arrived to meet up with guests in the Hall, as well as former Ambassador Howard Leach and his lovely wife Gretchen (and other ambassadors attended this fabulous evening).

The majestic and dazzling Hall of Mirrors, or Galerie des Glaces, is one of the most famous and significant rooms in the

world, where numerous events of the utmost importance have taken place. Construction began in 1678 by Louis XIV and its 17 mirrored arches reflect the 17 arched windows that overlook the breathtakingly beautiful garden vista. The ceiling decoration (recently restored) is dedicated to the military victories of Louis XIV. During the 17th century, the Hall of Mirrors was used daily by the King when he walked from his private apartments to the chapel. In the successive reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI, the Hall of Mirrors continued to serve for court and where family functions, marriages and births were celebrated in this room, as well as Ambassadors presenting their credentials. Every inch of that grandness was felt the evening of this ball. “The Palace has over 700 rooms, 1300 fireplaces, 70 staircases on over 1800 acres. Every European palace has been modeled after it and it has also served as the inspiration for Washington D.C. for a centralized government,” shares Catharine Hamilton. “We strive for an intimate environment and go out of our way to make all of guests happy and to create the atmosphere of international friendship.”

Guests were then encouraged to meander and view the new restoration project, the Queen’s Guard Room, which is the last room of the Queen’s Grands Appartements whose paintings and architectural features have not yet been fully restored, hence its present deteriorated state. In 1680, it became a transition area between the Queen’s staircase and the used as a vestibule in which the officers in charge of the protection of the



Versailles Palace Exterior



Dinner at Versailles



Versailles public spaces



Versailles Gardens



Queen were stationed day and night. Several million people will view this important room annually and the ball's guests are reminded that the American Friends of Versailles is thrilled to help restore the exquisite frescoes and other architectural details to their original beauty.

Drinks on the Terrace of the Palace was the ideal spot to behold the royal garden perspective, with the fountains playing along the Grande Allée as the golden twilight of the evening sparkled on the waters of the Grand Canal. One could have spent the entire evening there, basking in the *soignée* of the begowned and tuxedoed guests illuminated as the sun set.

Who could eat at a time like this, while savoring this magical moment of beauty and history. The guests were then greeted for the State dinner in the Grand Trianon's Galerie des Coteles with its memorizing décor of original

17th century garden bosquet paintings commissioned by Louis XIV, and the cuisine was prepared by one of France's leading caterers. The French know their epicurean place in the world and this evening was no different. Dinner was served in the exact spot where, in 1687 the Grand Trianon, set within its own park, was built at the request of Louis XIV, as a retreat where the King and invited guests dined away from the strict etiquette of the Court. After the Sun King's death in 1715, many Royals lived there for the next 100 years and following the Revolution, Napoleon lived at Trianon with his second wife, Marie Louise of Austria. Today, it is one of the French Republic Presidential residences that is used to host foreign dignitaries. The evening's dinner was in honor of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and representing this family were AFV Board Members Steven and Kimberly Rockefeller. The American Friends of Versailles remains dedicated to maintaining the noble American tradition of patronage to world treasures in its continued service and commitment to restoration and preservation of the Château de Versailles.

After much conversation and then dessert, at 11:30 PM the sky was illuminated by a spectacular display of fireworks, *feux d'artifice*, in the manner of the 18th century, which was an unbelievable feast for the eyes. After the fiery skies subsided, dancing commenced under the marble columned *Péristyle* with its phenomenal view of the gardens and Michael Carney, the well-known and acclaimed U.S. orchestra leader, on the piano. "There is something unique about the American Friends of Versailles, in that we make it a family affair where tickets are available for a lower subscription fee for children and grandchildren of guests. The juniors have a memorable experience. They have so much fun they do not want the music to stop," muses Catharine Hamilton. "We also put husbands and wives on the board – one

vote per family. That way they can both be engaged in the organization and each can participate in a multitude of events we have beyond the ball weekend."

### APRÈS BALL

On Sunday, the gala atmosphere weekend was far from over. A champagne reception at 7:30 PM hosted by Monsieur and Madame Benjamin Steinitz in their world renown antiques galerie, showcasing works of several Chinese artists, in partnership with Kimberly and Steven Rockefeller, Vice Presidents of the American Friends of Versailles, as well as founders of the Rose Rock Culture Group. The Rose Rock Culture Group seeks to establish businesses that create credible channels for art exchange and increase awareness and understanding of the many currents of Chinese culture. This international cultural exchange evening was followed by

dinner and dancing in the exquisite Parisian residence of Vice Presidents of the Board, Monsieur Juan Pablo Molyneux, the acclaimed international interior designer along with his wife, Madame Pilar Molyneux.

The Molyneux couple are charming, delightful and accomplished and they entertain with delectable innovation, warmth, fun and are the pinnacle of great style. The Hôtel Claude Passart with its lovely garden, is the magnificent 17th century private residence in Paris of the Molyneux. The Michael Carney Orchestra entertained again like the night before. The guest of honor this evening was Her Royal Highness, Princesse Béatrice de Bourbon des Deux Siciles, mother of Their Imperial Highnesses Caroline and Jean Christophe Napoleon. She is a direct descendant of the Bourbon kings and queens who reigned throughout Europe and had a tremendous influence throughout the world. She is very charming and an acknowledged historian and philanthropist. We just love a woman whose pedigree is as esteemed as she is chic.

Meanwhile, back at the palace, guests gathered again at high noon for a glass of champagne in the magnificent Trois Fontaines Bosquet. The re-creation and restoration of this extraordinary treasure was the first restoration project by the American Friends of Versailles. A plaque honoring all of the major contributors was placed at the lower entrance of this grove. Le Nôtre's masterpiece was designed along with the Sun King in 1677, it was laid to ruin by 1830, and reopened to its original splendor in 2004. During this visit, the exquisite fountains cascaded with water reaching to the sky and is a lasting symbol of American French history and tradition, much like that of the Statue of Liberty. The American Friends of Versailles extended a heartfelt toast to all the donors, volunteers, the committee, and

artisans for making this important restoration a dream come true.

Still glowing from the night before's festivities, an elegant picnic followed, taking place in the Petit Trianon, which Louis XVI gave to his queen, Marie-Antoinette, for her to enjoy private time away from the royal court. The Pavilion Frais, the Pavilion Français, Marie Antoinette's theater (*un bijoux*), and le Petit Trianon, were open to the guests - the ultimate! Wow! They were encouraged to wear their favorite hat to add to the fun. In addition to many gifts, the American Friends of Versailles has thus far given over \$1.5 million to the restoration of the Pavilion Frais. It was originally used on warm spring and summer days as a private dining room for Queen Marie-Antoinette, ladies of the court and often included the King.

Wrapping up the weekend's glam merriment, a buffet dinner was served in the beautiful embassy

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### Curry Glassell

of Chile, as guests of Ambassador Jorge Edwards in Paris, who returned to the diplomatic service as Ambassador to France under the present government of President Sebastián Piñera. The Chilean Embassy was built in 1907 by architect René Sergent, who also built several other hotels particuliers and châteaux, and in particular, the Hotel de Marlborough (now the Indian embassy). The Chilean Ambassador in Paris is also the Chilean representative to UNESCO and the mixed-emotion gathering was a fitting splendid farewell to the spirited multi-faceted assemblage of high society and high culture. "Versailles is UNESCO-recognized as a world treasure and I felt so fortunate to be at the ball this year with other like-minded people in this internationally-known masterpiece," confided Houstonian Curry Glassell.

This palace treasure has been bestowed over six million dollars since its founding by the American Friends of Versailles. The heart of the organization, Catharine Hamilton, best summed up the extended week fundraising gala by saying, "I have been inspired, humbled, honored and I consider it a great privilege to be part of this extraordinary international endeavor. Our works could never have been accomplished without the extraordinary chairmen, co-chairmen, friends, hosts, supporters, and contributors. Hand in hand the French and Americans unite across the Atlantic in support of our allies and this great museum in true friendship. The American Friends of Versailles would cherish and ultimately appreciate your participation in this noble international endeavor."

*For more information on how you can enjoy supporting the American Friends of Versailles, visit [Americanfriendsofversailles.org](http://Americanfriendsofversailles.org) or by contacting [info@americanfriendsofversailles.org](mailto:info@americanfriendsofversailles.org)*



Laurie and James Bay



Sharon Oeschger and Renee Holman



Pablo Edwards, Marianne Carey Edwards, AFV Board Comtesse Serge de Bedoyere and Pascal Clement



Madame Andree Audi and AFV board member Didier Wirth



Mademoiselle Ondine de Rothschild, Vanessa Gou and Madame Arianne Dandois



Princess Beatrice de Bourbon des Deux Siciles, Bonnie Kausal Deutsch and Joseph Kinnebrew



Katie and Grey Stream