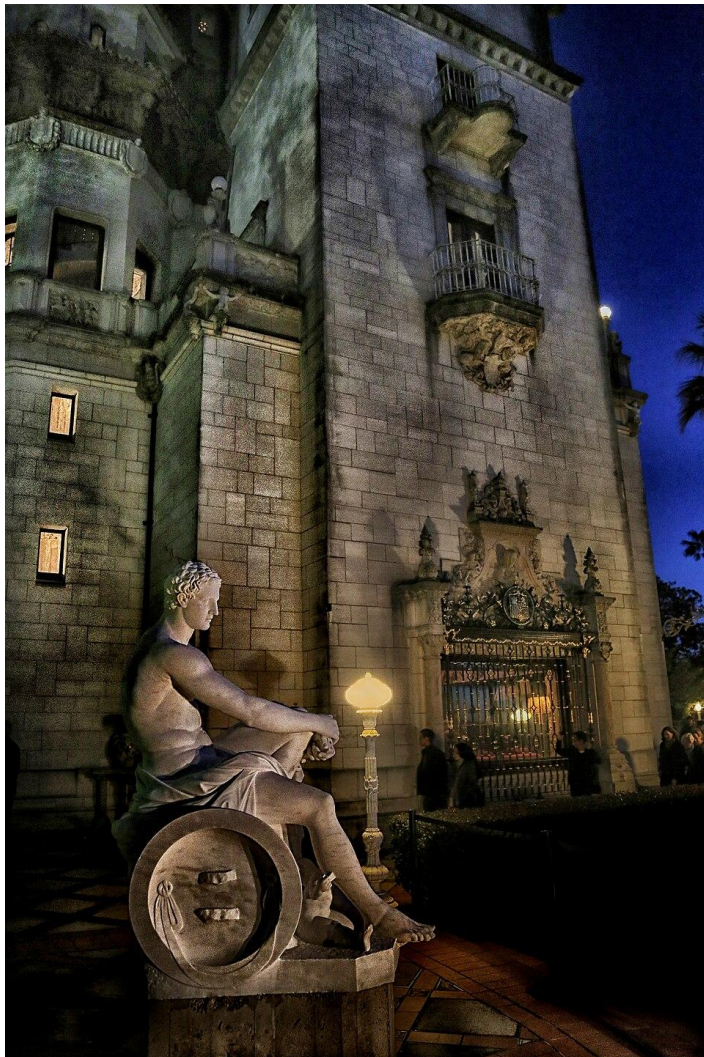


One Enchanted Evening on the Enchanted Hill

Alice Watts



“Hearst Castle at night, San Simeon, California.”

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One Enchanted Evening on the Enchanted Hill

By Alice Watts

Aptly called the "Enchanted Hill," Hearst Castle dominates the skyline as it sits perched on a high hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Tufted palm trees wave in the breeze and the twin towers of the main house rise above the screening landscaping. Seen from the Pacific Coast Highway at night, bathed in the soft glow of antique lights, the Castle does indeed seem to create its own version of Disney's magic kingdom.

Hearst Castle (officially known as the Hearst San Simeon Monument) offers something for everyone. Docents lead three tours of the Castle, each covering different parts of the main house and surrounding bungalow guest houses and gardens. A fourth tour, offered from April to October only, focuses on the Castle's gardens with its many varieties of plants, shrubs, and trees, some native but many imported.

For those interested in the lives of the rich and famous of the 1930s, stories abound of visits from members of the glamorous Hollywood set. Also seen at San Simeon were powerful political figures not only from Washington and major cities of the U.S. but from Europe as well. As a powerful publisher, William Hearst knew and was known by many. Over the years, many well-known people found fun and relaxation at Hearst's hideaway at San Simeon. Afternoons of swimming, tennis, or horseback rides--evenings of dinners or gay parties hosted by Hearst and Marion Davies--these were just a few of the amenities offered by William Hearst for his guests.



Figure 1. Casa Grande, entry terrace, Hearst Castle. San Simeon, California. Wikimedia Commons.

The main house, called Casa Grande, and the three guest houses are themselves a feast for the eyes, for Hearst furnished them with antique furniture, opulent wall hangings, and oriental carpets, as well as the latest in modern conveniences. Electric lights are everywhere, and the bathrooms all have spacious showers (a recent innovation when they were installed, and regarded with suspicion by many), complete with gold fixtures. Colorful tiles reflecting Italian and Persian decorative motifs, paintings, and other fine art objects fill the rooms. The outdoor swimming pool reminds us of faraway Rome, while the indoor pool is made of half a million hand-set mosaic tiles of blue and gold.

But there is much, much more to Hearst Castle. William Hearst was an avid art collector and filled his hilltop retreat with art treasures from around the world. As a result, the Castle offers an eclectic blend of old and new that is sure to fascinate the art enthusiast. The architecture of the Casa Grande combines elements of Spanish and Moorish artistic styles. The guest houses remind us of Mediterranean villas. Coffered ceilings, a favorite in many of the rooms, range from 17th and 18th-century originals (many from Spain and Italy) to copies made by artisans employed by Hearst in the 1920s and 30s. Original Egyptian, Roman, and Greek statues and other artifacts share space with later copies. Authentic Greek vases lend an atmosphere of elegance to Hearst's Library.



Figure 2. "Assembly room, Hearst Castle, California." Wikimedia Commons.

In the main house, a French Renaissance fireplace dominates the Assembly Room and medieval choir stalls can be found in both the Assembly Room and Refectory. Magnificent tapestries hang on many of the walls, covering and decorating the walls much as they did the cold stone ones of castles and homes in olden times. A set of four 16th-century tapestries depicting deeds of Scipio Africanus, the Roman general who defeated Hannibal, hang in the Assembly Room.



Figure 3. “Battle on Plateau, a tapestry of one of Scipio Africanus’s battles, Assembly Room, Hearst Castle.” Wikimedia Commons.

Two rare 16th-century Flemish tapestries with scenes from the life of the prophet Daniel can be seen in the Refectory. And in the Billiards Room is the oldest tapestry in the collection--the rare Gothic Hunting Scene "Mille Fleurs" tapestry made in the 15th century.

Then, on April 21, 1989, Hearst Castle introduced an exciting new program—Evening Tours—designed to recreate the atmosphere of the early 1930s. The tour groups are smaller and more intimate, and the focus of the tour is to give visitors a sense of the atmosphere of the Castle as it was in the early 1930s. Highlighting areas seen in the day tours, visitors are taken through the larger rooms of the Casa Grande, as well as rooms on the upper floors, including Hearst's Library, Gothic Study, and private suite. The exterior patios are illuminated by soft lights. Staff dressed in period costumes walk through the gardens or play cards in the Assembly Room; others serve as members of Hearst's household staff and walk through the rooms carrying trays of food and drink. They mingle with tour visitors, causing them to feel as if they had indeed stepped back in time.

Evening Tours are now part of the Castle's regular schedule and are on most Friday and Saturday nights in spring and fall.

Sources and Image Credits

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hearst_Castle_at_night.jpg, accessed January 26, 2026.

Figure 1. “Casa Grande, entry terrace with wellhead, gardens, and Mexican fan palms, Hearst Castle, San Simeon, California.” Photograph by Proimos, CC BY-SA 3.0, via *Wikimedia Commons*. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hearst_Castle.jpg, accessed January 26, 2026.

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Figure 3. “Tapestry depicting a battle from the life of Scipio Africanus, woven after a design by Giulio Romano, Assembly Room, Hearst Castle.” Photograph by Enroskep, CC BY 4.0, via *Wikimedia Commons*.

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