

GARI MELCHERS' Belmont



Artist Gari Melchers' legacy preserved both in his art and Belmont estate

BY BEATE ANKJAER-JENSEN

Photographs courtesy of the author and Gari Melchers Home and Studio, University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg

When Gari and Corinne Melchers bought Belmont in 1916, the house and gardens were in decline. The couple undertook repairs and restoration of their country house under the influence of Colonial Revival design concepts. They added modern touches such as bathrooms and electricity, while affecting a more colonial look with the addition of wainscot to the dining room and a pedimented porch on the west entrance.

Gari and Corinne Melchers also improved the gardens, leaving us with a fine example of the Colonial Revival influence on Virginia landscapes. This early twentieth-century style was both organized and relaxed. Formal foundation beds bordered

in boxwood and parterre beds filled with roses and annuals contrasted with vines and other climbers that were allowed to scramble over walls and arbors. The boxwood-lined "Long Walk" and the stone walls that enclose the gardens provided yearlong interest and structure. Their eagle and putto statues are typical of decorative elements that enclose the gardens. The "Summer House" was the couple's last addition to the grounds, completing the setting. The result mixes true colonial parterre motifs with the romantic look of abundant flowers, ivy-covered walls, and rambling roses on arbors and fences.

Numerous letters, accounts, photographs, and drawings document the development of the landscape during the Melchers era. The

gardens have been restored using information gleaned from these extensive archives. Belmont is fortunate to have much original material such as trees, fences, gates, and other structures surviving from the couple's day. Landscape elements including Mrs. Melchers' quaint planters, the eagle and the putto, and plant material culled from plant lists and plans come together to allow visitors to experience the feeling and appearance of what the artist's garden may have been like when Gari and Corinne Melchers were in residence.

Corinne Melchers was a member of the Rappahannock Valley Garden Club, which was admitted into The Garden Club of Virginia (GCV) in 1933. She was active in the first restoration of the gardens of Kenmore

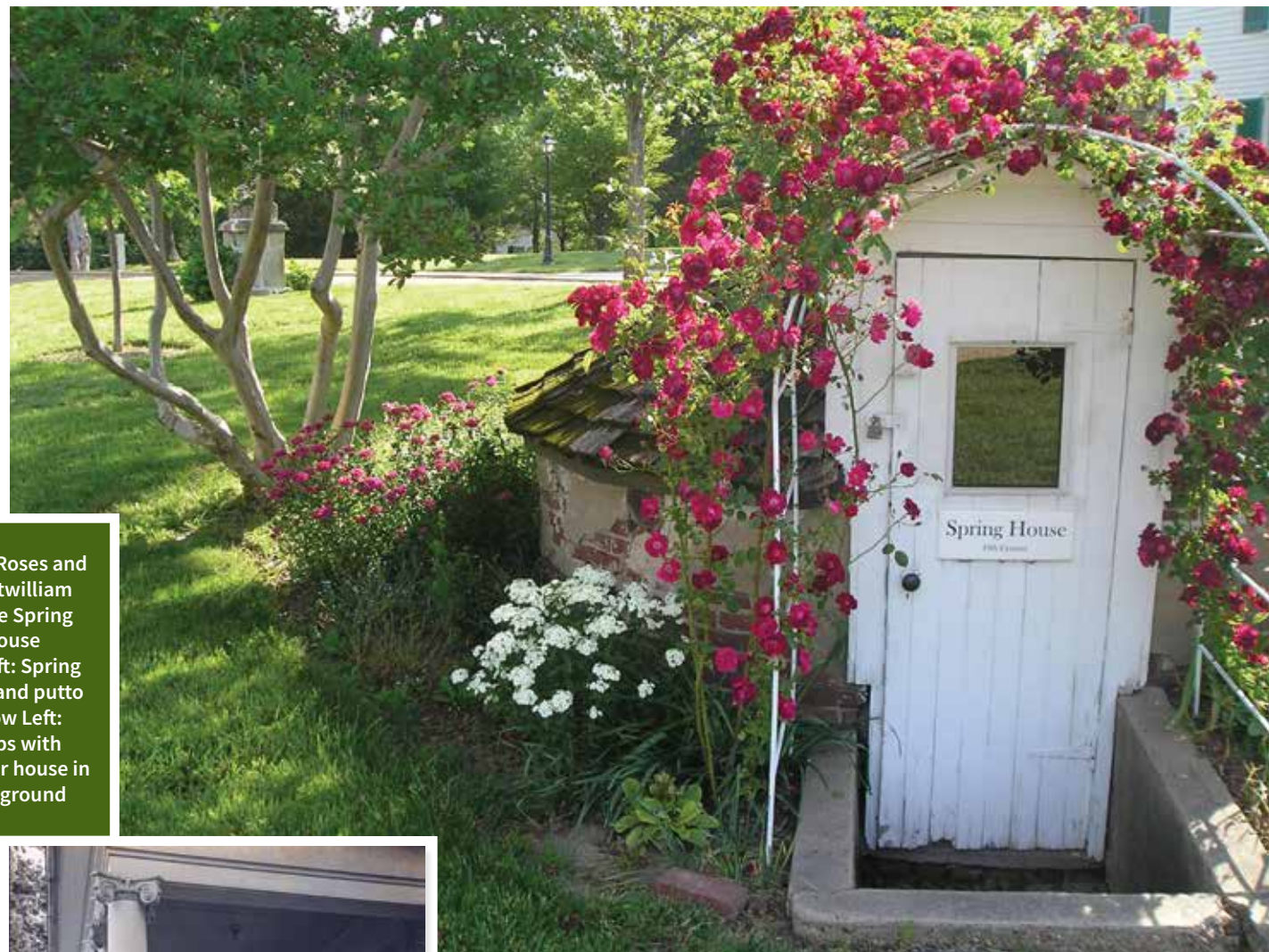


South elevation of the house from the Long Walk rose arbor, circa 1930 (below left) and today (above). South lawn with putto, circa 1927 by Frances Benjamin Johnston (below center), and today (below right). Facing page: Wisteria by the main gate





Right: Roses and sweetwilliam on the Spring House
 Top left: Spring bulbs and putto
 Below Left: Tulips with summer house in background



American painter Gari Melchers at Belmont, circa 1932.

in 1929 and later at Stratford Hall. In 1935, Mrs. Melchers opened Belmont to visitors during Garden Week, and GCV has in turn helped extensively with the restoration of her gardens. It is the first and only restoration of a GCV member's garden. Belmont is very grateful for the ongoing support of the GCV, without which the extensive restoration would not have taken place.

With the gift of Belmont, Corinne Melchers hoped for the creation of a park, and her vision guided the development of a trail network that runs across the estate. Two native-grass wildlife habitats have also been established, serving as a wildlife haven. Indeed, the property is an oasis of open land in area that has seen rapid development. Gari Melchers Home and Studio hosts an increasing number of visitors who enjoy the estate as a place to walk and enjoy the outdoors. The development of these trails has also allowed Belmont to interpret the cultural resources that dot the landscape, from Native American use of the land to agricultural and industrial remnants that remind visitors of the land's varying occupancy over the years. Gardens and grounds that change with the seasons join the home and amazing artistic legacy of Gari and Corinne Melchers to offer visitors a reason to return time and again.

BELMONT HISTORY

Gari Melchers Home and Studio at Belmont is both a Virginia Landmark and National Historic Landmark property administered by the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg. The estate sits on a high ridge overlooking the Rappahannock River across from Fredericksburg. It encompasses the house with several outbuildings, the studio filled with Gari Melchers' paintings, and 27 acres of gardens and wildlife habitat.

The main house was built around 1790. The original plan of the house consisted of a first- and second-floor side passage and four rooms to the north (the present dining room, library, and two bedrooms). Belmont remained unscathed during the Civil War, even though batteries were placed on the grounds in December 1862. The son of German-born American sculptor Julius Theodore Melchers, Gari Melchers was a native of Detroit, Michigan, who at 17 studied art at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Germany. He later went to Paris where he worked at the Académie Julian, and the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Attracted by the picturesque quality of Holland, he settled at Egmond where he founded an art colony with American artist George Hitchcock.

Gari Melchers married Corinne Mackall of Baltimore in 1903, and the couple lived in Europe until 1915, when they returned to the United States. Melchers won many awards and honors during his lifetime, spending his final years at Belmont, where he died on November 30, 1932. Mrs. Melchers remained there until her death in 1955, leaving the house, gardens, studio, and art collection to the Commonwealth of Virginia.

GARI MELCHERS' HOME & STUDIO

Belmont
 224 Washington Street
 Falmouth, VA 22405
 (540) 654-1015
www.garimelchers.org
 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. Nov. – Mar.
 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. Apr. – Oct.

Gari Melchers Home and Studio is administered by University of Mary Washington for the Commonwealth of Virginia.