

The Travanti house has been in the Christmas spirit since 1889. So don't be surprised if a watchful spirit joins in the holiday fun.

The east side Victorian home owned since 1981 by artists **Carolyn White-Travanti** and Leon Travanti is the sort of joyous setting that might have inspired Charles Dickens to write the happiest scenes in "A Christmas Carol." For Carolyn, who led the Milwaukee Art Museum/Milwaukee Public Schools' art satellite program, and Leon, a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor emeritus of art, this is a home, studio, private gallery and holiday house.

Every year since 1981, the couple have held a tree-trimming party and, one, maybe two - OK, up to five - Christmas parties in the home. And lucky are the guests invited to join the celebrations. At least 50 will be at the biggest soiree this year.

A national treasure

Built by Northwestern Mutual Life vice president Willard Merrill, the 19th century house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The home seems to cast its own warm light, from its Cream City brick exterior to its original golden oak woodwork. A Scottish artisan probably carved the grand staircase, perfect for Victorian ladies in their holiday silks to sweep down for servings of punch.

These days, other lights also make the house glow. Like the fish light. And the hamburger light. And the shotgun shell light. All hang on the couple's 12 foot-tall live Christmas tree at the bottom of the staircase.

"We have so much fun with these tree trimmings. My son Scott started the tradition of bizarre tree lights, and he comes every year to put up the ornaments," says Carolyn, pointing out a crèche-in-a-sardine can decoration. (Her other adult son, Patrick, lives on the West Coast.)

But the "bizarre" ornaments must compete for guests' attention in this 3,000-plus square-foot duplex (they live on the first level). Another tree in the library boasts glass ornaments brought from as far away as Turkey. Yet another tree in the dining room shines with white lights. A dining room chandelier decoration designed by artist Stephanie Drake combines clear ball ornaments with white twigs from the Travanti backyard.

And the artwork on permanent display would wow a museum curator.

International flavor

What Leon calls his "rogues gallery" collection of puppets from France, Thailand, Malaysia and other lands dances across the shelves in his downstairs office.

"I had a puppet and magic show when I was little, so the collection is a natural," he says.

The couple also collect West African masks, and other pieces from Nepal and Cambodia that watch over visitors in the downstairs "ladies' parlor," now used as a TV room. A 16th century portrait of a Venetian gentleman hangs on another wall there.

"We like to mix everything," Leon says.

The Travantis have brought back art from across the world that not only warms the house, it protects it. A fabric hanging from Turkey "reflects out evil spirits," Carolyn says. A silver Milagros votive folk charm designed to gather healing powers for hands, eyes and other ailments, "is always with us."

And a Kurdish bridal headdress with a cascading silver face veil doesn't seem to need a human head inside to make it come alive. It stands guard over the house all by itself.

Various themes repeat themselves in the art the Travantis create themselves. Carolyn often uses images of the moon and of the Statue of Liberty in her installations - a symbol of artistic freedom.

Recent paintings by Leon re-imagine ancient symbolism from China and other Asian lands. He also designed the jaw-dropping stained glass windows that combine elements of Art Nouveau and Déco to bring light to the stairwell and the holiday gatherings at its landing.

Q. Carolyn, how did you come to own this house?

Carolyn: I was looking for a house that had a spot for a studio, maybe in a coach house. I found this house and I loved the stairway, and the woodwork that had never been painted, and the coach house in back and it all seemed to work. At that time it was owned by the Missionary Association of Catholic Women, and the ladies interviewed me, and I made them an offer and they laughed. Later, when I had a bit more money, I made them another offer, and they took it.

Q. Leon, you and Carolyn weren't yet married the first time you saw the house. What did you think of it?

Leon: I looked at the staircase, and I was overwhelmed by the graciousness of it. Carolyn said, "Stop gawking at the staircase!"

Q. Explain the home's conversion to a duplex.

Carolyn: I was sure I couldn't afford all the mortgage and the heat for the house, so I had it made into a duplex. I met a good designer who designed all the plans.

Q. Describe the layout of the house.

Carolyn: The foyer is downstairs with the entrance hall where the tree is. The missionary ladies said that when the original family held parties, the band was on the balcony and the open space at the bottom of the stairs would be cleared for dancing there.

Downstairs there's a powder room, the ladies' parlor, Leon's office, which we think was originally Willard's office, the library and the dining room, the kitchen, two pantries, a back hall that has the original ice box in it. Upstairs is a large landing we use as a second TV room, three interconnected bedrooms and a Jack and Jill bathroom with two doors.

Q. How did you start the tree-trimming tradition at your house?

Carolyn: I was working at the Art Museum, and in 1981 one of the teachers said, "You must have a tree in this house."

Q. Why do you celebrate Christmas in such a big way?

Leon: Because Christmas is special in both our memories. We both lost our families when we were 5, and we have nostalgia for when the family came together. My family had big Italian dinners for Christmas.

Carolyn: I love the magic of a lit-up tree. We have three trees from when I lived here myself with my two sons.

Q. The dining room Christmas tree has all white lights, but something else . . .

Carolyn: There's a pair of red shoes that came from an artist friend beneath the tree. At the tree trimming, people would bring ornaments that they made. They're from the Yellow Brick Road. It was about having an adventure. We put them out every year.

Q. What about the house color scheme?

Carolyn: When I bought it, every room in the house was some shade of green, except the kitchen was cream. I don't have to live with green. We've repainted most of the rooms warm colors. No cool-color rooms.

Q. What's the back story to the red dining room ceiling?

Carolyn: Well, you have two artists in this house trying to agree, and the ceiling has been numerous colors, all of which weren't so good. We stripped wallpaper off the dining room walls and we found some red underneath, so we repainted the walls that color. We hired other artists to do the ceiling colors with a faux finish.

Leon: The artists put up with us beautifully.

Q. The main piece of furniture in the dining room breaks from the Victorian theme.

Carolyn: It's a Déco bar, with ingrained wood. We thought that it was perfect for the house.

Q. What are some of the surprising vintage features the house holds?

Carolyn: The house has pocket doors and other doors in every downstairs room that always can be closed to put doors between guests and the kitchen when entertaining.

Leon: We've closed off the old servants' stairs and that's now a walk-in closet. And there's a coach house in the back that used to have two horses in it. I use it as my studio now.

Q. What's your favorite room?

Carolyn: The balcony area at the top of the stairwell is a great joy.

Q. What was your most recent remodeling project?

Carolyn: We had an architect put in a "Jack and Jill" two-entrance bathroom with a shower and a stone countertop. We kept the old wainscoting and redid the radiator heat.

Q. I understand you and Leon may not be the only inhabitants of your home.

Carolyn: We have a wonderful ghost - I don't know who it is - who takes care of me. One time I was in a room and something told me: "You have to go to the kitchen and get a cup of coffee right now," and just as I walked out of that room the ceiling in it collapsed.

The second time I was about to walk in the house, and something told me, "Be careful when you open the door," and I opened it very slowly, and when I did I smelled gas from a leak. I took a deep breath and ran inside without flicking the light switch on and opened all the doors and everything was all right.

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