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An Unorthodox Look at a President's Home



Xiomáro; Lower-right photos by Barton Silverman/The New York Times

Clockwise from bottom right: The Oyster Bay Historical Society, where the Sagamore Hill pictures are exhibited; a corner of the large North Room; a fixture from the Shower Room (with the bottom knob labeled shampoo); a globe from the schoolroom; a telephone; a portrait detail; the North Room; Xiomáro, left, discussing his photos at the historical society. He took close-ups of rarely noticed details in the 23-room mansion.

By AILEEN JACOBSON
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OYSTER BAY, N.Y. — Early last year, shortly after [Theodore Roosevelt's](#) stately home, [Sagamore Hill](#), was closed to the public for a three-year, \$7.2 million restoration, a photographer who uses the name Xiomáro was allowed into the 23-room mansion to take pictures. Many of the home's 14,000 objects had already been placed in storage or moved elsewhere, and he didn't have to stand behind the velvet ropes that prevent ordinary visitors from getting too close to the elaborate wallpaper, fancy woodwork and handsome fireplace mantels of the house where the 26th president lived from 1887 until his death in 1919 (except when he lived in the White House from 1901 to 1909).

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Now, 20 of those photographs, commissioned as artworks rather than as mundane documentation, are on display at the [Oyster Bay Historical Society](#), not far from Sagamore Hill. Though several are straightforward, showing rooms or parts of rooms, many focus on striking details, like geometric patterns reflected by a sconce's textured globe, a four-knob Shower Room fixture, a shapely telephone on a pantry wall and luggage labels on a trunk.

Titled "How I Love Sagamore Hill," based on words Roosevelt said the day before he died, the exhibition includes a short narrative about Sagamore Hill and the Roosevelt family on the walls above the photographs. It was written by Xiomáro (pronounced SEE-oh-MAH-ro), the pseudonym of a lawyer, Richard P. Dieguez, 52, who lives in Roslyn Heights and is building a creative second career.

"This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take photos of areas that even the staff had never noticed," said Tom Ross, superintendent of Sagamore Hill for the National Park Service, which runs the historic site, where the grounds, the visitor center and a museum remain open while the house undergoes restoration. A colleague from a site in Connecticut where the photographer had done a similar job recommended him, Mr. Ross said. "When I saw the work he had done, I was hooked," Mr. Ross said.

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Xiomáro spent seven days taking pictures, Mr. Ross said. Among the revelatory close-ups he captured are a peacock motif in a wallpaper design and the contrast of brilliant red tile and a turquoise carved mantel surrounding a fireplace in a drawing room used by Edith Roosevelt, the president's second wife, Mr. Ross said. (They had five children; Roosevelt also had a daughter with his first wife, Alice, who died young.)

The images on display, Mr. Ross said, give the public "a different way to experience the house" during the restoration. He contacted Philip Blocklyn, the historical society's executive director, early on so that the exhibition would be part of the project, which he said also fits into a national plan to get artists more involved with Park Service sites. Furthermore, Mr. Ross said, he hopes the staff will employ the photos when the home reopens. "We may use some of these images on an iPad to show people some of the things they can't see on the tour," he said.

Xiomáro said he took up photography seriously after receiving a diagnosis of prostate cancer in 2004, adding that he had recovered and "all is well." He had been pursuing an avocation as a musician with a rock band but sought something he could do solo, he said. (He adapted his pseudonym from a Spanish name, reflecting his family's roots, he said, though he was born in Brooklyn.) He shot photographs while visiting Arches National Park in Utah with his wife and two grown children in 2005 or 2006, he said, and later learned of an artist-in-residence program at the [Weir Farm National Historic Site](#) in Wilton, Conn., home of the American Impressionist painter J. Alden Weir, where he took the pictures that impressed Mr. Ross. (Weir Farm is also partly closed for restoration.)

Though he works for a corporate law firm in Manhattan, Xiomáro said, he hopes his new career will expand. He has won another Long Island commission, to photograph the [William Floyd Estate](#), part of the Fire Island National Seashore, this month and probably next, he said, and the Roosevelt exhibition is scheduled to travel to Harvard University in 2014.

Before photographing Sagamore Hill, he said as he showed a visitor around the exhibition, he read about its inhabitants, "so when I went into these rooms, I had a sense of who these people were." President Roosevelt's character, he said, came through in the dark paneling, crown moldings and hard textures that he favored in his public rooms. Mrs. Roosevelt, he said, preferred brighter colors and more delicate décor, as in the drawing room with the red and turquoise fireplace.

Xiomáro, who shoots with a Nikon D200, used only natural lighting almost exclusively, he said, in part to impart a “sense of mystery, something a little ethereal” in some of his pictures, like a winter sunset blazing through a window of a second-floor bedroom called Mother’s Room.

For a contrast, he added to one of his explanatory texts a reproduction of a photograph of the home’s library taken earlier by [Samuel Gottscho](#). Xiomáro’s image of the room depicts a vast space with gleaming floors and a cavernous fireplace, while Mr. Gottscho’s, from the Library of Congress, is dominated by a bearskin rug, mounted animal heads and clusters of lamps, chairs and tables.

Still, Xiomáro often concentrated on individual items, like the phone and the Shower Room fixture. He also captured a whimsical warning, “Door Locked,” scrawled over a room that belonged to one of the Roosevelt sons. He included a cook’s room and a pair of maid’s rooms, which are considerably smaller than the family bedrooms.

“I’m not trying to recreate what’s in an average tourist’s photo book,” Xiomáro said. “What I’m trying to catch is something that is probably uncatchable, a sense of place, a sense of the spirit of the people who lived there.”

“How I Love Sagamore Hill,” a photographic collection by Xiomáro, at the Oyster Bay Historical Society, 20 Summit Street, Oyster Bay, through June 2, with gallery talks April 14 and May 18. Information: oysterbayhistorical.org or (516) 922-5032.

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