

Mapping Vizcaya

Written by Anne Tschida
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In his latest work, Cuban artist Ernesto Oroza navigates the famed estate's history, both real and imagined



Visiting Vizcaya Museum and Gardens is a quintessentially Miami experience. The view of Biscayne Bay is spectacular. The gardens are lush and tropical. And the interior design of the faux Italianate villa is so over-the-top, so wannabe A-list as to be, well, so Miami.

The house was built by one of South Florida's first transplanted tycoons, a product of the Gilded Age, James Deering. He wanted his mansion to look as though it had been around for centuries, like a real Old World landmark. So in 1916 he had his designer, Paul Chalfin, appropriate a mish-mash of styles from the 16th to 20th centuries for the new structure.

In 1953 this quixotic specimen of grandeur and excess -- really, a Disneyfied version of a European castle, years before anyone had even heard of Uncle Walt -- became a museum, run to this day by Miami-Dade County.

This history, simultaneously real and imagined, organic and borrowed, captivated Ernesto Oroza, a Cuban-born artist who spent a year walking the museum. The more he walked, the more he noticed the quirky secrets of the villa -- on the floors, the walls, and even in the mix of visitors flowing in and out. Oroza eventually came up with *Archetype Vizcaya*, the latest in the Contemporary Arts Project series commissioned by the museum.

Oroza has literally mapped out the normally unseen highlights of Vizcaya in an artful brochure, which includes a legend with numbers and symbols. On a sunny, cool day, he points out some of his explorations.

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When he first started making his rounds, he says, he noticed what was constantly under his feet: the floors made of marble, terrazzo, wood, tile, different styles all shoved together, sometimes in a single room.

In particular it was the marble that really caught his eye. It is, he explains, the ultimately “contaminated” material. Over thousands of years, minerals and weather have infected the stone, imposing on it that unique quality of veins running through it. “To mineralogists, these shapes that we consider beautiful are, in fact, impurities that invaded the rock,” Oroza explains. “Any piece of marble in Vizcaya may be considered the diagram of a similar process of contamination that has occurred during the life of the building.”

And, he adds, marble shouts out wealth, another central theme of Vizcaya. From ancient times until today, marble columns, sculptures, and especially floors have signaled to visitors that money and power inhabit a space. And Vizcaya is *covered* in it.

Modeled on 17th- and 18th-century Venetian floors, the marble layerings in the villa were imported, likely from North Africa, another way for moguls like Deering to flag wealth “and worldly experience,” says Oroza. “It was from the beginning meant to be a *showroom*.”

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