

The Patina of Old Paris

Princess Raspoll's *le Saint-Louis Apartment*

as a vital residential neighborhood begin to lose their cachet when more modern areas, better suited to new lifestyles, are developed. Over the last ten years in Paris, however, the process has been reversed. The sixteenth arrondissement, long considered the most elegant part of the city, has become noisy and crowded with expensive apartment buildings. The more sensitive residents are making their way back to older neighborhoods—to the Faubourg Saint-Germain, the center of fashion for over two hundred years, and to the Marais which has recently been invaded by a host of small shops.

The Marais, on the right bank of the Seine, was built for the most part in the seventeenth century and includes the *le Saint-Louis* in the river itself. Its magnificent old houses, happily saved from demolition, have been turned into lovely apartments. In fact, even the simplest sort of house here has undergone astonishing modernization. There is no doubt that the *le Saint-Louis* is the most exclusive section of the Marais and the best to have been restored exteriorly by the wealthy—by the Baron de Hilde, Hélène Rubinstein and former French president Georges Pompidou, among others.

To live on the island is a rare privilege. Tall houses, dating from the age of the Sun King and art among lovely trees, are built around its shoreline. There are seventeenth-century houses on all sides, nobly proportioned buildings, many with historical tablets, wrought-iron balconies and tall brick chimneys. Behind the massive paneled doors studded with nails are inner courts where ancient paving stones and creaking blocks have remained the

same since the days of the horse-drawn carriage. Little has changed since the days when Baudelaire and his friends gathered in the *Hôtel de Launay* to discuss poetry and smoke hashish.

The rue Saint-Louis cuts lengthwise through the island and is crowded with small shops such as you might find in towns like Rion or Sarlat. But there are art galleries, too, and the best ice-cream maker in Paris. The atmosphere is provincial, and you have the feeling that everybody knows everybody else.

Lunch on the *le Saint-Louis* is always a special treat for a Parisian—more so, if he is fortunate enough to be invited to her home by Princess Claude Raspoll. Cross the Pont Marie in good humor and walk toward her apartment. Push open the old gateway leading to the building in which she lives and notice the courtyard paved with enormous antique stones. Her apartment is on the third floor, and no elevator disdains the staircase.

Princess Raspoll moved to the *le Saint-Louis* long before it became the chic thing to do. She is one of those rare women who follow the dictates of fashion more for their own amusement than from any sense of obligation. From time to time her constant good taste is suddenly "discovered" by those who follow the trends of the moment. Her great-grandfather was Charles Haas, a formidable man of the world and one of the tastemakers of his own generation. In fact, Marcel Proust and him as the basis of one of the most memorable characters in *The Remembrance of Things Past*. Princess Raspoll has two sons who are descended on their father's side from the Marquis de Lafayette.

Despite the charm of her apartment,

one is immediately drawn to the windows overlooking the Seine. In the distance are the rooftops of the Marais, the dome of Saint Paul and the towers of the *Hôtel de Sorel*. Along with the *Hôtel de Clugny*, the *Hôtel de Sorel* is one of the only great medieval private residences to have survived in Paris. It was bought by the city government in 1911 and extensive restoration began at that time. Below are magnificent poplar trees and, through their branches, glimpses of the river. Above the splendid view the eye is drawn to the blazing fire in the living room. It burns in a handsome Louis XVI fireplace and emphasizes the antique rose and lemon tones of the room. Forming a group around the fireplace are chairs of many different shapes and styles, as much at home as the guests themselves, pleasant and comfortable no matter what their origins. There are several late-Victorian armchairs covered with flowered velvet in the Rottenschild manner, there a couple and some upholstered banquettes under the windows. Lighting comes from several Empire lamps with rose-colored globes and from a pair of Victorian, one containing coal and the other rare stones. Scattered on small tables are objects that attract and reflect light: tortoise shell and marble, for example. At the back of the room a large tortoise-shell chest gleams like velvet in a darkened berth.

Embrace that evens visitors unwittingly, providing the sort of v-chamber experience. Various cultural notions of beauty, like a ribbon and a pair of plumes at the Empire period, add a depth of interest to the architecture. Rottenschild, Louis XVI ornate and Rottenschild-Rottenschild were not missing facing walls leading toward the living room.

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