

Gilded Age Retreat Gets Save America's Treasures Grant

A lavish Italian-style villa on Florida's Biscayne Bay—described as “America's greatest Gilded Age estate”—is one of the most recent beneficiaries of the NPS-administered Save America's Treasures grant program. Vizcaya, a spectacular mansion built between 1914 and 1916 by industrialist James Deering, is a national historic landmark operated today as a museum by Miami-Dade County. It is one of a series of grand estates built by families with names like Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, and Carnegie around the turn of the 20th century when fortunes were being made in oil, manufacturing, and railroads.



THE FOCUS OF THE GRANT—A \$300,000 AWARD TO BE MATCHED FROM OTHER SOURCES—IS VIZCAYA'S OUTDOOR SCULPTURE. WHEN THE ESTATE EARNED ITS NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK DESIGNATION IN 1994, THE STATUARY WAS CITED AS A MAJOR CONTRIBUTING FACTOR, PART OF “THE FINEST ITALIANATE GARDENS IN THE UNITED STATES.”

DEERING'S FATHER ACQUIRED HIS WEALTH MANUFACTURING FARM MACHINERY, particularly the hay-baling machine that launched the family into the ranks of America's industrial barons. The company, which eventually became International Harvester, nearly controlled the market. In 1911, diagnosed with pernicious anemia, James Deering moved to Florida on his doctor's advice. There, he began building his 180-acre estate that included a working farm and orchard.

Vizcaya is one of the most intact remaining examples of what is known as the American Renaissance, a period when the wealthy built estates fashioned after the European example. Today, Deering's estate may seem like a relic of turn-of-the-century excess, a fantasy creation bordering on eccentricity. However, Vizcaya was very much an expression of Gilded Age aesthetics, a treasure in its own right.

Architect F. Burrall Hoffman, Jr., designed the mansion and Colombian landscape architect Diego Suarez designed the grounds. The concept was that of a great Italian villa evolved over four centuries. A central courtyard and corner towers look back to the 15th century. References to the 16th century can be found in aspects of the gardens. Elsewhere are elements of 17th century Venice, with details from the 18th in yet other parts. Interior designer Paul Chalfin shuttled back and forth to Europe to collect the furnishings.

The focus of the grant—a \$300,000 award to be matched from other sources—is Vizcaya's outdoor sculpture. When the estate earned its national historic landmark designation in 1994, the statuary was cited as a major contributing factor, part of “the finest

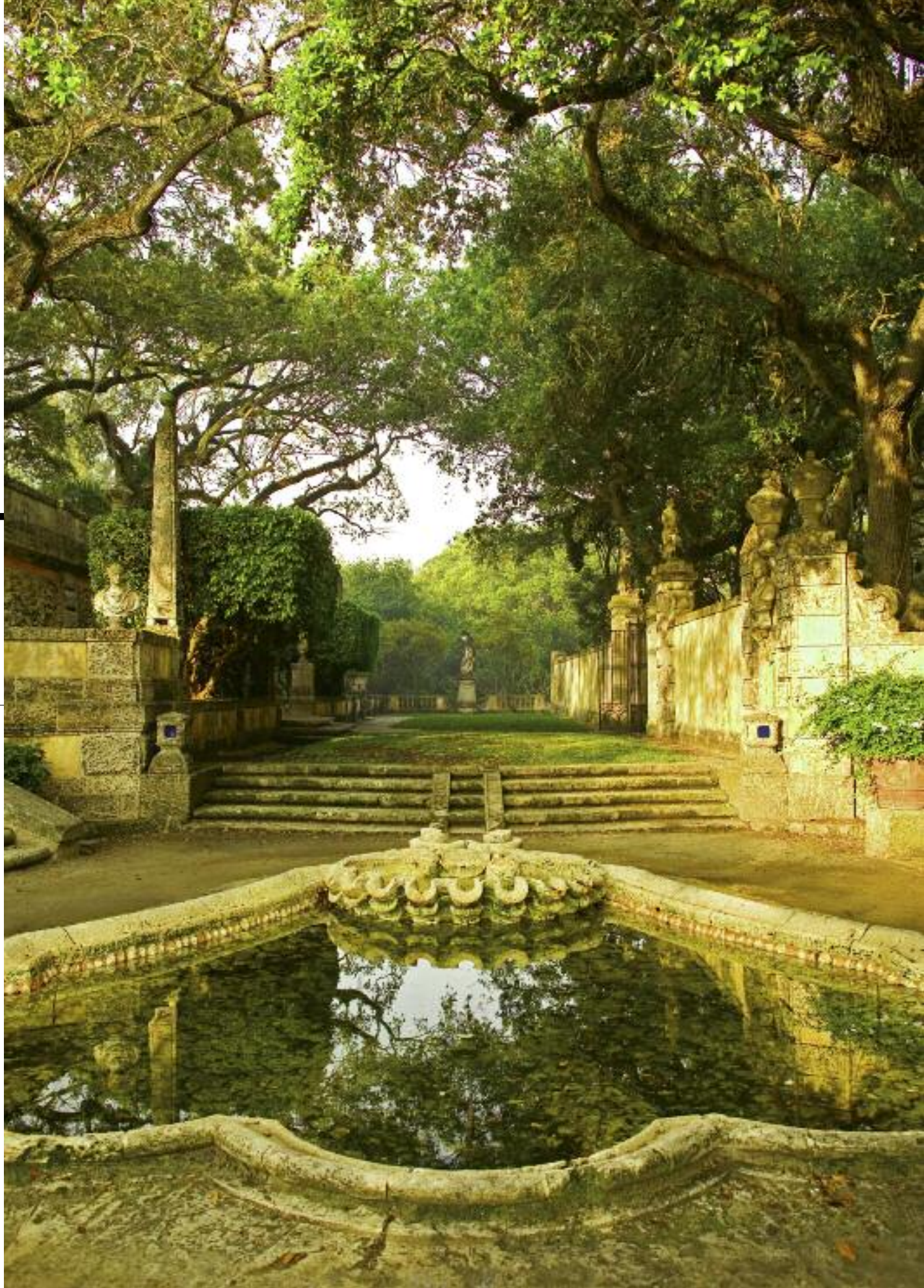
Left and right: The statuary and ornamental gardens of Vizcaya, industrialist James Deering's Gilded Age estate in Florida. The remarkable collection of objects, essentially an outdoor museum, has suffered from dampness, salt, mold, and hurricanes.

Italianate gardens in the United States.” There are some 150 statues, 93 urns, and 21 fountains. The objects range from a 2nd century Roman ceremonial altar to commissioned works by modernist sculptor Gaston LaChaise.

DEERING AND HIS DESIGNERS PROBABLY COULD NOT HAVE FORESEEN THE TOLL taken by the salty, damp, subtropical climate. According to the museum's grant application, the collection is in a state of “severe deterioration,” with limestone, marble, terracotta, and lead artifacts all suffering. Early repairs in some cases made things worse: metal pins intended to hold items together have corroded, expanded, and caused yet more damage. Mold, mildew, and other growth thrive here, accelerating deterioration. Hurricanes dating back to 1926—including Katrina—have also caused damage.

The grant will help repair and clean the statuary. Metal pins will be reinforced or replaced with titanium or stainless steel. Some statues will be relocated out of the path of hurricanes.

Visit the Vizcaya Museum & Gardens online at www.vizcayamuseum.org. For more information on Save America's Treasures, go to www.nps.gov/history/hps/treasures or contact the National Park Service Historic Preservation Grants Division at (202) 354-2020, ext. 1.



LEFT AND RIGHT BILL SUMNER