

HYÈRES – In the heights of Hyères in the south of France sits an extraordinary modernist villa known for its weighty programme of cultural activities such as the annual International Festival of Fashion and Photography. On permanent display is the memory of the legendary art patrons Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles who, from 1924, started erecting the house as “a small, interesting home to live in”. Together with the architect Robert Mallet-Stevens they ceaselessly extended and transformed the villa and by 1932 it covered almost 1,800m² including fifteen master bedrooms, guest houses, and the first indoor pool in France. Lisa Rovner talks to Raphaële Billé, art historian and co-curator of Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles – A Life As Patrons, about a building that became a hotbed for artistic encounters between some of the most luminous artists, writers, designers, musicians and filmmakers of the 20th century.

RAPHAËLE BILLÉ

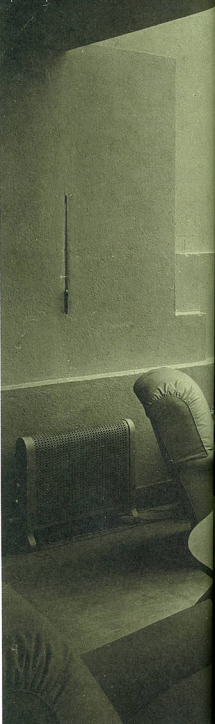
Interview by Lisa Rovner

Lisa Rovner: Who were Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles? **Raphaële Billé:** Marie-Laure came from a family of bankers. She inherited a considerable fortune, along with a significant collection of paintings belonging to her grandparents. She grew up surrounded by the arts, due to her family's longstanding interest in culture. She met Cocteau at a very young age. She fell madly in love with him, who wouldn't? He was instrumental in introducing her to the avant-garde artists of the time. There was wealth on both sides, Charles was an aristocrat. When young, he lived in Rue de la Baume close to the Galerie de l'Effort Moderne. We think that very early on he was exposed to contemporary decorative art, the works of Fernand Léger, Henri Laurens, the De Stijl movement. It was on their shared passion for the arts that their relationship was formed, and in February of 1923, they married. In our research of the Villa's history, we went beyond the socialite aspect of their lives and discovered that they had in fact been key actors in the emergence and survival of avant-garde artistic and intellectual life of the 20th century. Music, cinema, art, literature, dance, their patronage mirrored their total involvement and investment in all of the arts. They were much more than just collectors. **LR:** When they decided to build a house they first turned to Mies van der Rohe, then to members of the Bauhaus and also Le Corbusier, but to no avail. “Je cherche une maison infiniment pratique et simple où chaque chose serait combinée au seul point de vue de l'utilité”, wrote Charles de Noailles in 1925 to the architect Mallet-Stevens, who

was entrusted with the project. Above all, he wanted a practical house. **RB:** Yes, and the Noailles wanted to be involved in the creative process. Le Corbusier's personality made that impossible. Robert Mallet-Stevens had never built anything and was willing to accommodate his vision to the Noailles' demands. The modernity is very formal. Luxury was found in function. It was completely different from the show-off aspect of the houses that were being built at the time. While the bedrooms were very small, they each had their own bathroom. The villa is one of the most revealing examples of the new techniques developed by modern architects in the interwar period, in France. **LR:** They were the first to build an indoor pool in France? **RB:** Yes. The ceiling is made of glass bricks, forming a geometric composition. The south façade of the poolroom has sliding picture windows that are very impressive, still today. **LR:** The villa is much more than “an infinitely practical simple house”. It's a manifesto of new times. The interiors also reflect this. **RB:** The majority of the interior designers were recommended by the architect, Mallet-Stevens, who conceived the Pink Salon and also designed the pool deck chairs. The Pink Salon is entirely furnished with metal furniture; notice Marcel Breuer's first editions. Modernity is also apparent in the use of materials. The floors were terrazzolith powder mixed with wax. They acquired and commissioned Djo Bourgeois, Eileen Gray, Pierre Chareau, the artists of the Stijl, Theo van Doesburg, Mondrian.

Continued on page: 171

Interior view of the Pink Salon at Villa Noailles in 1927, first published in *Art Deco*. The walls were painted pink.



Metal table by Roneo, atelier lamps by Gras, seats by Marcel Breuer and Smith & Co

