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An Ocean of ART

WILLIAM I. KOCH'S STELLAR COLLECTION IN PALM BEACH

Architecture by Bridges, Marsh & Carmo

Text by Steven M. L. Aronson

Photography by Kim Sargent



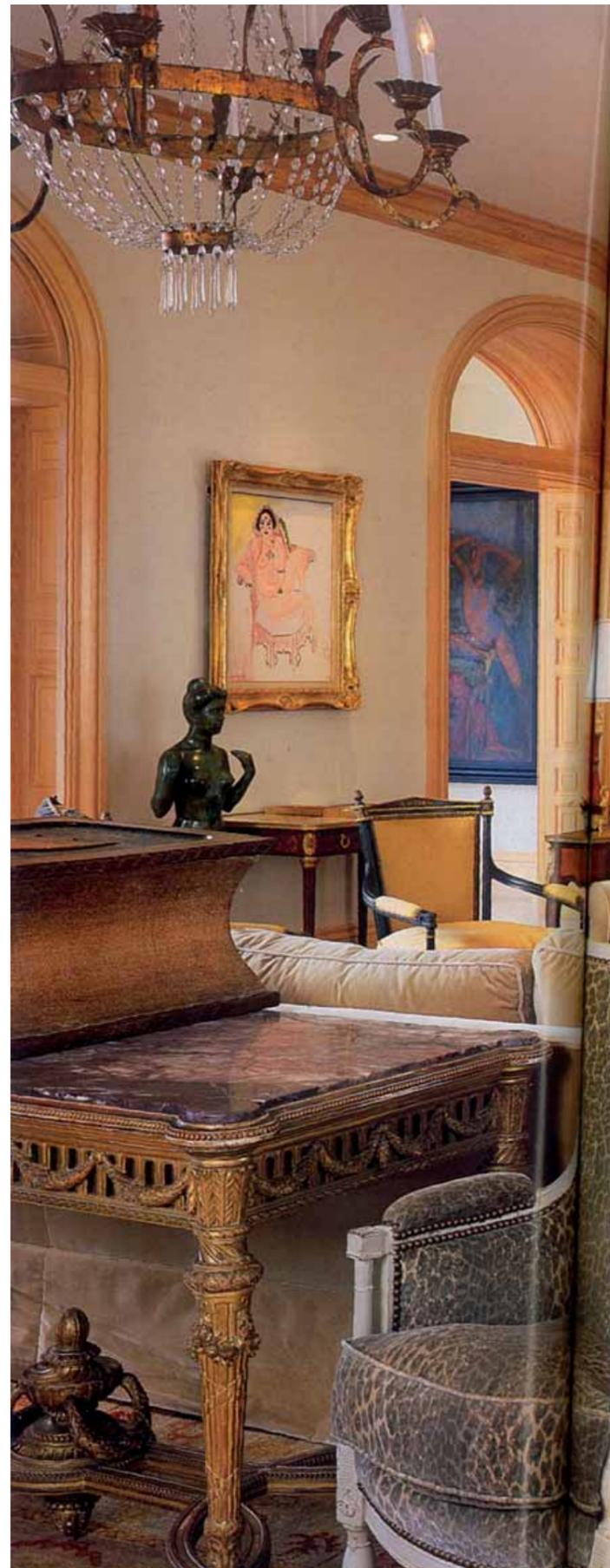
Even when I was a little kid in Kansas, I had a dream of the kind of house I wanted to have," says William I. Koch. The wonder is that its realization eluded him for so long, given that he's the son of the founder of the second-largest privately owned company in the United States, Wichita-based Koch Industries, and that he himself is the founder and CEO of a privately held diversified alternative-energy and technology company the West Palm Beach-based

Oxbow Corporation. "An oxbow," he offers, as perhaps a way of explaining his own trajectory, "is the bow-shaped bend in a river where it changes course, where the water is deep and still and you catch the best fish. It's the pull of the past, but the river's hellbent on moving on. Besides, 'oxbow' is one of those macho western words that I've always liked the sound of."

Koch bucks the odds but invariably gets what he wants – for example, the America's Cup, which is just about the

ABOVE: The architectural firm of Bridges, Marsh & Carmo created an Anglo-Caribbean-style shuttered plantation house in Palm Beach for William I. Koch. Fernando Botero sculptures stand near the entrance.

RIGHT: Hanging in the living room, from left to right, are *Young Woman dressed in Oriental Shawl*, 1929, by Matisse; Modigliani's 1917 *Reclining Nude*; and Picasso's blue-period *Night Club Singer*, 1901;





LEFT: The ancient and the modern coalesce in a hallway vignette composed of *Chair de Poule Rhinocerotique*, 1956, by Salvador Dalí, Maillol's bronze nude *La Montagne* and a late-Hellenistic or Roman marble Aphrodite. A Louis XV-style girandole provides illumination.

most coveted trophy in all of sport. In 1992, only eight years after embarking on big-boat racing, Koch (pronounced "coke") skippered the yacht *America*³ (pronounced "America cubed") to victory over preternaturally seasoned sailors on his very first try. "When he does something," says a friend, "he does it first-class – he set his cap for that cup and he won it. And what he wanted next was a world-class house."

It was past time for an up-grade: Koch was living in an unremarkable two-bedroom rented house in Palm Beach, which could accommodate only a smidgen of what was by all accounts one of the world's estimable art collections. Some 400-odd works strong, it encompassed everything from Greek and Roman antiquities to mid-19th-to-mid-20th-century European and American paintings and sculpture. "Impressionists, Postimpressionists, Surrealists, western artists, marine artists, early modernists," Koch reels off. "I buy art that I respond to emotionally; I guess that's why they call my collection eclectic – I have a lot of different emotions."

He's certainly on heartfelt terms with art history's biggest names. Cézanne and Degas, Matisse and Renoir–Roding, Corot, Dalí, Miró–Léger, Balthus, Arp and Chagall–Winslow Homer, William Merritt Chase and Thomas Hart Benton – are among those

LEFT: The wine cellar, which was laid out by Mark Lessard and Fritz Gruber, was built with 150-year-old bricks and a stone floor salvaged from an Austrian building dating back over four centuries. A computer system allows Koch to locate any of the 35,000 bottles instantly.

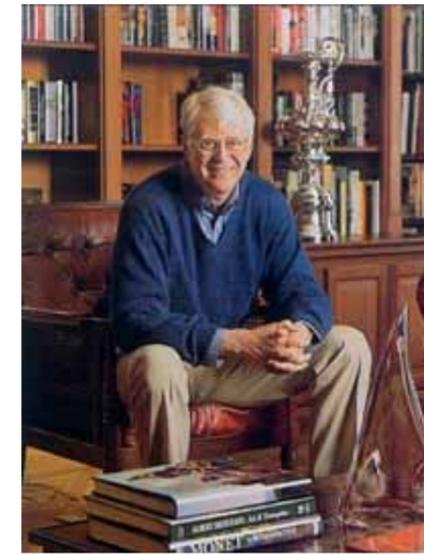
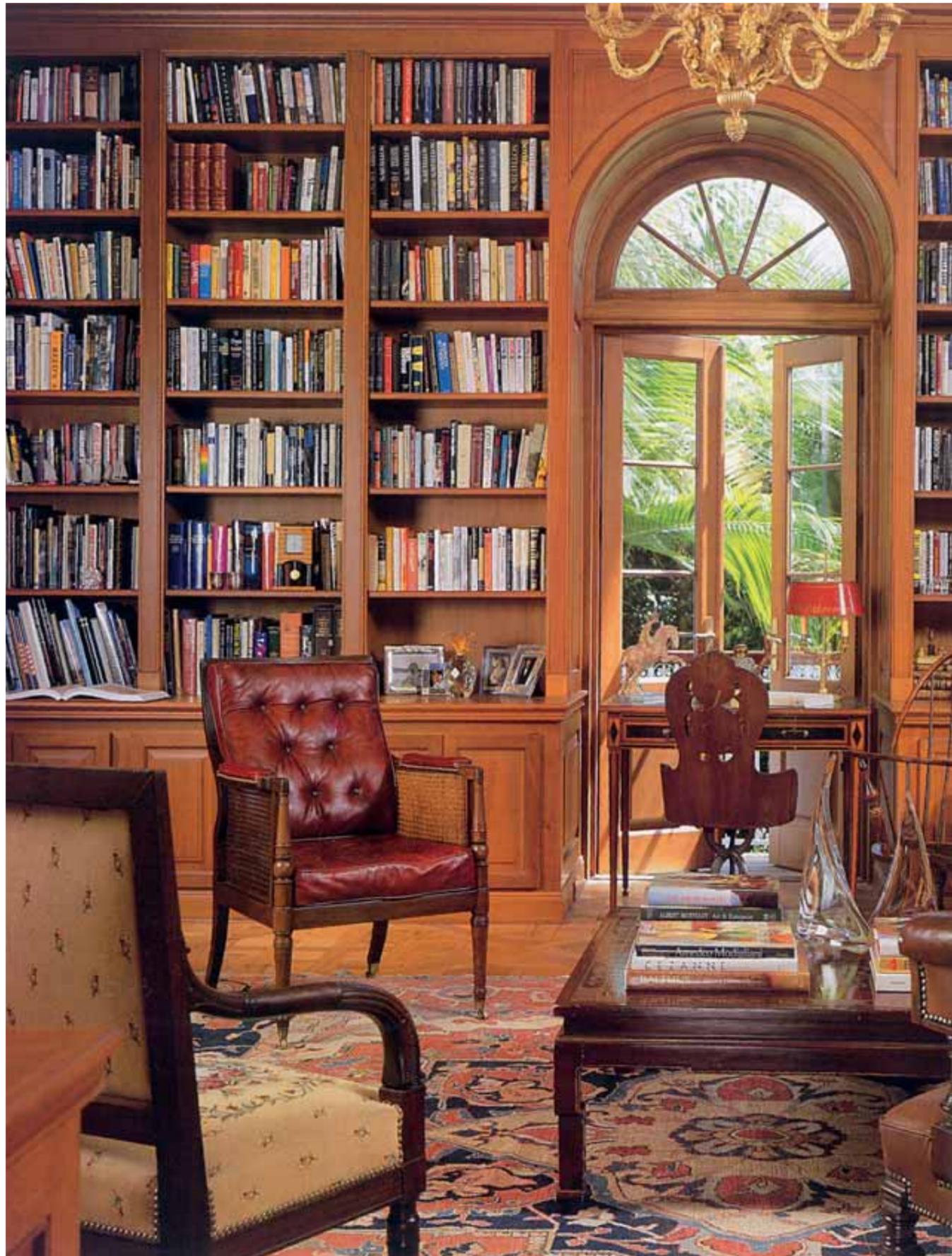


represented in Koch's very personal holdings. As are some (in every sense of the word) signature pictures: Monet's *Field of Oats and Poppies*, Modigliani's *Reclining Nude*, Picasso's *Night Club Singer*, Grant Wood's *Arbor Day*, Frederic Remington's *Eve-*

ning on a Canadian Lake and Fitz Hugh Lane's *The Golden Rule*. For all that, Koch hoped that the house he was planning would have the feeling of a family place rather than of some dry and inanimate private museum. "What I really wanted from the house was for it to

reflect my passions in life outside of business, but then," he laughs, "I went and made the house itself a passion." After purchasing one of the largest parcels of land in Palm Beach – four acres stretching clear from the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Worth -

The dining room's array of maritime paintings includes, from left to right on the bottom row, *The Ship Anonyma Off Liverpool* by Duncan MacFarlane, Fitz Hugh Lane's circa 1850s *The Golden Rule*, and *Confederate Armed Forces Shenandoah*, 1865, by George Alexander Napier.



LEFT: Koch, who is a world-class sailor sits in the library next to a silver replica of the America's Cup trophy. He and his team won the premier race in 1992 while crewing the *America*³. Crystal boats from Bacca-rat. FAR LEFT: Mahogany bookcases flank a George III desk.

BELOW: The boat room, which is outfitted with teak like a yacht, displays meticulously crafted models of every defender and challenger to vie for the cup. The trophy is named after the schooner *America*, the victor in the first competition, held in 1851 off the Isle of Wight.



he began interviewing architects. "There's a famous one down here who said to me right off the bat that he likes to take control – tell the homeowner what is good taste and what isn't. I realized I would be spending my money to please him, and I said to hell with that. So I interviewed another local firm – Bridges, Marsh & Carmo. I liked their attitude: The attitude that they had was, 'We'll please you.'" A man who takes a certain pride in not doing things the way everybody else does them, Koch immediately ruled out the idea of building his house in the prevalent Palm Beach style. "He aspired to a lot more than just another Me-

diterranean biggie," says Digby Bridges, who, with his partners, Mark Marsh and James Carmo – all of them working with project manager Carl Lessard – put up Koch's just-shy-of-40,000-square-foot house. The look the owner had in mind was, characteristically, one that would "fit" in Palm Beach "but not exactly belong" there. He pictured it as "Anglo-Caribbean, with kind of a British colonial feeling"; it would have the grace and charm of one of the so-called great houses in a place like Barbados. His, moreover, would be structured around an open-roofed central courtyard that "drew beautiful breezes through the house" and was gir-



LEFT: Degas's *Open Arabesque on Right Leg*, circa 1882-85, rests on a Neapolitan inlaid tulipwood commode in the master bedroom. *Girl in a Black Cap*, circa 1760, was painted by Pietro Antonio Rotari. The Louis XVI bergère is signed by J. B. Boulard. Pratesi bed linens.

ded on all sides by a wide hall gallery. "All of the rooms were to be exceptionally well proportioned, based more or less on the golden mean," adds Bridges. Because the site sloped, the architects were allowed to put in a basement – the result being that while from the ocean side the house looks like a comfortably scaled villa, from the lake side (where the basement surfaces as the first-floor elevation) it looms enormous. Koch wound up using every square foot of extra space that the basement afforded. First and foremost for a wine cellar (his collection is universally regarded as one of the finest). Then for a "boat room" (decorated in yachting style with alternating bands of holly and teak flooring) to harbour a model of every challenger and defender since 1851, when the schooner *America* won the first race, off the Isle of Wight, and with it the cup that would carry its name ever after. Room, to, for an "Africa bar" (boasting native spears and drums as well as some of Koch's father's old hunting trophies), and a fully outfitted gym. And for a movie theatre "with," Koch enthuses, "a lobby like in an old popcorn palace." With an eye to safeguarding his art, he also had a poured-concrete hurricane room with watertight battleship doors constructed directly

LEFT: The architects designed the freestanding beach house, alongside the infinity-edge pool, to give the impression of being on a nautical journey through the Greek Islands. The white stucco structure, which is punctuated with mahogany-framed glass doors, serves as guest quarters.



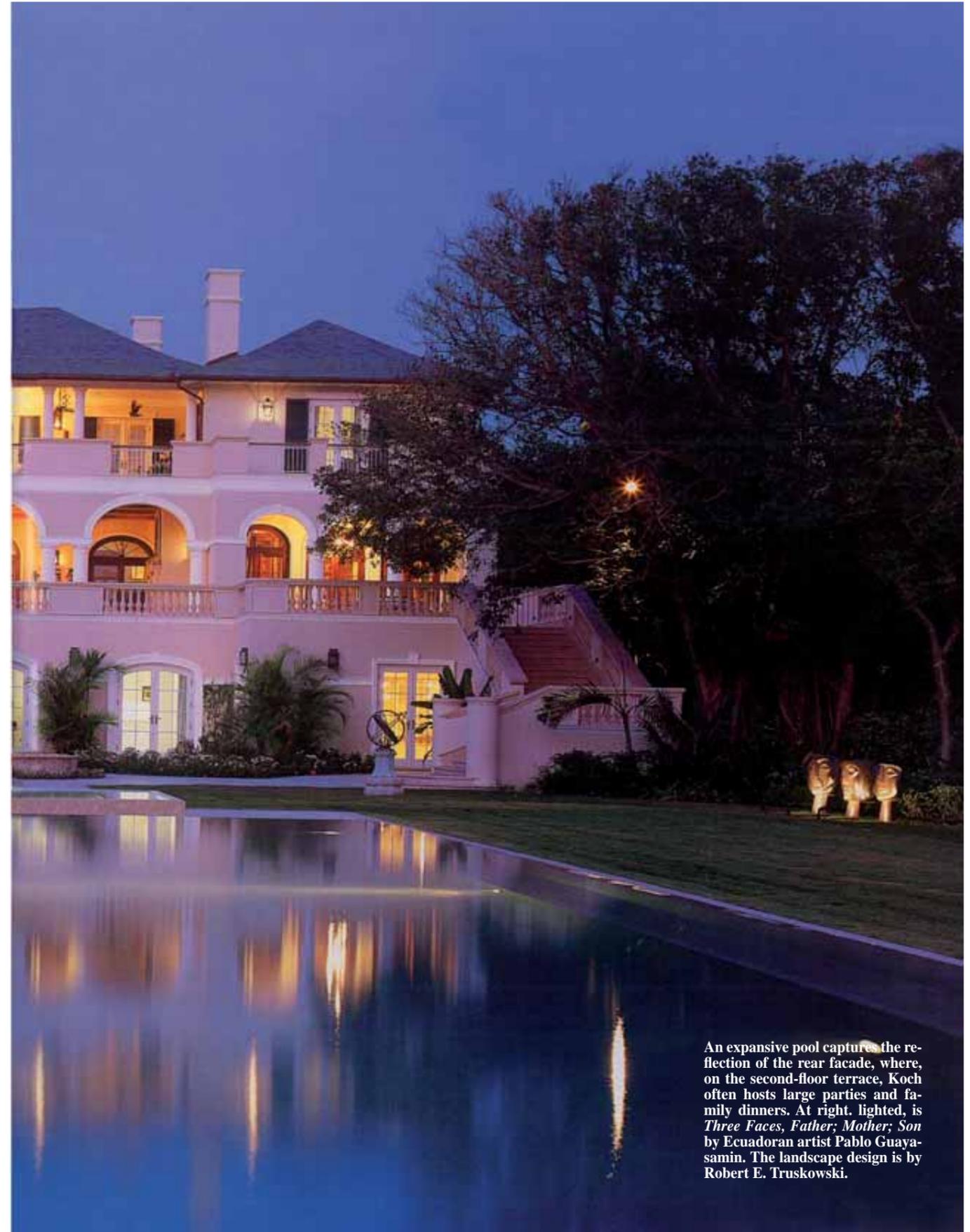
beneath the courtyard (it gets activated the minute storm warnings go into effect). As for the upstairs, he needed "kid-oriented rooms" – he has four children, ranging in age from two to 15 – which necessitated multiple playrooms and nannies's rooms.

Another requirement was a big cypress-beam-ceilinged "cowboy room" (a kind of second living room, where he saw himself and his guests "ending up after dinner, smoking cigars and bragging," he laughs) to corral his frontier-era firearms, furniture, arte-

facts (including the original reward poster for the capture of Billy the Kid) and art. The Remingtons and especially the Charles Marion Russell paintings now clustered there reminded Koch of childhood summers spent

Koch likes to relax and entertain on the second-floor loggia, a West-Indian-and-Mediterranean-influenced space that overlooks the gardens and Lake Worth. Set above the fireplace, which is bracketed with caryatids, is a circa 1950 stone-and-glass-tile mosaic, *Birds*, by Georges Braque.

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An expansive pool captures the reflection of the rear facade, where, on the second-floor terrace, Koch often hosts large parties and family dinners. At right, lighted, is *Three Faces, Father; Mother; Son* by Ecuadoran artist Pablo Guayasamin. The landscape design is by Robert E. Truskowski.

AN OCEAN OF ART

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on his father's 300,000-acre ranch in western Montana, baling hay, mending fences, clearing out stalls and altogether getting the hang of the cowboy life.

"We just kept adding rooms to the house, and somehow we got up to I guess 23," Koch calculates. "And 12 baths." He envisaged each room as having an independent character. "I wanted to be able to go from one atmosphere to another – from the living room, so that's where I put my Impressionists, to the dining room, where I hung all my maritime pictures, into the garden room, where my antiques are, and then down to my African bar, and so on – and have the experience not be jarring." For aesthetic continuity, the transoms above the French doors to the outside were repeated on doors that opened room to room, and only certain subtle woods were used to create transitions between the spaces. Koch, by his own admission, was no pliant client: "I pushed my people really hard." He sent his representative Carl Lessard to take a photograph of a staircase whose cut he admired – a period

beauty that swept him off his feet in the grande-luxe Hotel de Crillon. "Something for my architects to be inspired by," he explains.

It was in the entrance hall stairwell that Koch himself was inspired – to "mix things that don't conventionally go together: Picasso with Grant Wood with Monet with Maillol...." He makes it a point to install his own art. "That's where the engineer in me comes out," says Koch, who holds three degrees in chemical engineering from MIT, including a doctorate. "It's a problem you have to solve in a matrix fashion – you want it to work geometrically but also by color. And logically too, by subject matter."

He arranged the furniture in the house himself as well. For 15 or so years he'd been amassing a trove of Italian, English and French (predominantly Lois XVI) pieces in addition to several by the Giacometti brothers, Diego and Alberto. "Again, I love the combination of the geometry and the colors and what fits and what doesn't, and being eclectic – the fun

of putting different things together from different periods and having it work out."

One of the marvellous prodigalities of the house, not to say pleasures of the life savoured there, is the wine cellar. Astonishingly, its treasures include 29 bottles of 1929 Romanée-Conti, 130 vintages of Chateau Latour and four bottles of 18th-century Bordeaux purchased by Thomas Jefferson, whose initials are etched in the glass, when he was serving as minister to France. For wine such as this, Koch has constructed nothing less than a subterranean shrine. "He wanted you to feel transported to another time, to an old castle or chateau," says Carl Lessard's brother, Mark, the cellar's designer.

The ceilings of the 36-by-52-foot room are groin-vaulted; its columns and walls were fashioned by Austrian masons from imported 150-year-old bricks, as were its floors from 400-year-old stones; even the cast-iron racks and storage bins were hand-built. The collection itself is remorselessly organized: wine storage raised to the level of science. A system of graphics-

Impressionists, Postimpressionists, Surrealists, marine artists, early modernists, "Koch reels off. „I buy art that I respond to emotionally.“

rich maps installed by Mark Lessard allows Koch at the touch of a couple of computer keys to locate (and putatively soon consume) any of the 35,000 bottles in his cellar.

"Just as I tried to create a different atmosphere in each room of the house," Koch says, "I wanted every part of the property to feel particular, too – starting with a big front lawn for my family." By "family," he turns out to mean not only his four children but the five large-scale bulbous bronze Botero sculptures – Cat, Dog, Girl, Woman with an Umbrella and Man with a Cane – which he assembled over the course of a decade to represent a unified group and then playfully arranged in a smile-inducing line by the front door to greet guests. (Inside, on a marble table in the living room, rests a 275-pound guest register with 126,500 spaces for names. Made in 1876 and still the largest

blank book ever produced, it once did duty at fabled hostess Marjorie Merriweather Post's Adirondack camp, Topridge; among the hundreds of signatures it already contained when Koch bought it were those of Cornelius Vanderbilt "Sonny" Whitney and Joe DiMaggio. Koch jokes that he hopes to fill it.)

A 67-foot-long tunnel runs under South Ocean Boulevard from the lawn to the beach – waiting there, with a swimming pool that has its own waterfall, is a simple white stucco three-room guesthouse that could pass for a dwelling on some enchanted Greek island. The lake side of the house has a wealth of pleasures also. A dock. A boathouse whose upper-deck exposed-beam ceiling and cedar-shingle roof evoke whimsical Key West rather than Palm Beach. Another, more capacious swimming pool. Then, from what can only be called a greensward, two rows of

balustraded steps seven feet wide ascend to terraces the full width of the house. Behind columns and arches languishes a loggia with a cypress-beam ceiling, a raised fireplace and an onyx-and-marble mosaic floor – not to mention mosaics by Braque, Picasso and Léger.

"I've lent so many works to so many museum shows that now what I try to do is just keep it all at home; I don't want to live without it," the eclectic collector reflects. "Every single sculpture and painting I have is on view here." In the face of that old admonition about the emotions – "Always show less than you feel, don't let it all hang out!" – here is Bill Koch letting it all hang out by letting it all hang. "I haven't closed the book on collecting yet," he declares, "but I'm closing it – I'm running out of wall space."

In a 40,000-square-foot house?!

Well, even the Louvre has its limits.