

# HILLWOOD'S GRAND PIANOS

Dr. Wilfried Zeisler, Chief Curator

Earlier this year, a specialist from Steinway & Sons conserved and tuned Marjorie Post's two grand pianos in the Pavilion and French drawing room.<sup>1</sup> Both will be monitored annually so they can be used. The famous historic firm Steinway & Sons, founded in New York in 1853, manufactured both pianos and delivered them to Post's New York residences in 1919 and 1924 respectively.

Pianos have been a key piece of furnishing in the homes of the elite in the nineteenth century Western Society. C.W. Post's childhood home, also Marjorie Post's birthplace in 1887, was in Springfield, Illinois. The family owned the Victorian style house at 541 Black Avenue from 1872 to 1888. Little information is known about its furnishing, besides that the parlor was quite popular because of the player piano that C.W. Post had installed for his wife, Ella who liked music and dance.<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Post also had a piano in her first house, The Boulders in Greenwich, Connecticut. The house was a gift from C.W. Post to his daughter upon her marriage to Edward Bennett Close (1882-1955) in 1905 but sadly partially burned down in 1917. A few years earlier, Marjorie Post had chosen to move her main residence to New York City where she occupied the Burden Mansion from 1915-1925. She would later build her famous 54-room triplex apartment where the Burden Mansion originally stood at 92<sup>nd</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue. Hillwood's pianos were originally bought for the mansion and followed Marjorie Post in most of her homes until she settled in Washington, DC.

The Louis XVI-style piano in the Pavilion (acc. no. 33.185) is painted with colorful oval medallions featuring winged putti and frieze panels with swags of color flowers and vine scrolls enclosing musical instrumentation. On December 3, 1919, this piano was delivered to William Baumgarten & Co. of New York, the firm Post had hired to furnish the Burden Mansion. The family business, which was originally known for the production of Aubusson type tapestry in the United States, had offices in New York, Paris, and Chicago and was "one of the three leading American decorating firms in New York in that era."<sup>3</sup> Initially the piano was installed in the ballroom where its décor matched the Louis XVI inspired wall decoration and furnishing (fig. 1). Later, this piano would be installed in a bedroom in Post's famous New York apartment. The piano is a special model patented by Steinway that gives an extra singing quality to the tone.



Fig. 1. Ballroom in Post's New York Mansion (Burden Mansion). Bentley Library, Post Family Papers, Box 54, Album, "House 2 East 92nd Street 1915-1922"

The Louis XVI-style piano in the French drawing room (acc. no. 33.184) features a checkerboard marquetry pattern with carved decoration, gilt details, and oval painted medallions in grisaille with classical female figures on a blue ground. Bought from Steinway and Sons, New York on February 13, 1924, the piano is of the firm's C. model, which was produced from c. 1874 to c. 1934. When delivered to Post, the piano was

<sup>1</sup> The piano in the Pavillon was previously conserved by Steinway & Sons in 1958.

<sup>2</sup> Nettie Leich Major, *C.W. Post – The Hour and The Man* (Washington DC: Judd & Detweiler, Inc., 1963), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> James T. Mahler, *The Twilight of Splendor – Chronicles of the Age of American Palaces*, Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1975, p. 340.

installed in the drawing room in the Burden mansion (fig. 2) and later in the same room of Post's New York apartment (fig. 3). Post even took this piano with her to the American Embassy in Brussel where it was prominently placed in the palatial drawing room (fig. 4).



Fig. 2. Drawing room in the Post's New York Mansion (Burden Mansion). Bentley Library, Post Family Papers, Box 54, Album, "House 2 East 92nd Street 1915-1922"



Fig. 3. Drawing room of Post's New York Apartment, 2 E. 92nd Street, n. d. [before 1935]. Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens Archives, Scrapbook 2010\_03\_S010-13



Fig. 4. Drawing room at the American Embassy, Brussels, Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens Archives, Scrapbook 2010\_03\_S010-\_0024

The conservation and maintenance of the two pianos already allowed us to have a piece played in the Pavilion and recorded as part of the online event organized for *The Porcelain Flowers of Vladimir Kanevsky* exhibition virtual opening in April 2021.