

I Remember Caramoor

A Memoir

Steven Key Meyers

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*For Chris, George,
and the real Max*

Thank heaven for the ambivalence of truth.

– Frederick Kiesler,
Inside the Endless House

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CARAMOOR is the estate in Bedford, New York (Katonah post office, fifty miles north of Times Square) famous for its house museum, year-round concerts and summer music festival. Starting in the late 1920s and through the 1930s, Walter Tower Rosen and Lucie Bigelow Rosen, his wife, built Caramoor as their weekend and summer retreat, incorporating in a large Mediterranean villa eight or ten period rooms pried from European manors and palazzi, and filling the place with art and furniture collected over many years. A cultured lawyer, Mr. Rosen was managing partner of the investment bank Ladenburg Thalmann & Co. The equally cultured Mrs. Rosen – descended from the Phelps and Dodge families of copper-fortune fame – toured North America and Europe performing on the first electronic instrument, the Theremin.

What follows are memories of my first job, working – a callow, somewhat callous youth – at Caramoor as underbutler.

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I FIRST STEPPED inside Caramoor's "big house" in April 1970 for my job interview. Mother drove me over. She parked in the lot beneath the West Wing and I walked round to the front and yanked at the bell. Hilton Bailey, assistant to Executive Director Michael Sweeley, stepped out of the house with a severely neutral expression. "Mr. Meyers?" he asked, before opening the courtyard gate and bringing me indoors to the sitting room.

Mr. Sweeley was waiting. He shook my hand and gave me a seat in a Venetian Louis XV chair of tortoiseshell lacquer and green silk. The room was charming, with its bookshelves, reading nook, blue silk brocade on the walls and, over the fireplace, Sir John Lavery's sparkling view of the ballroom of

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Wimborne House, London. Through the windows—some panes bubbled and faintly purple—were glimpses of the Spanish Courtyard. Beside us, Kuan-Yin carved from palest jade stood in intricate balance beneath a boat-shaped, embroidered and fringed silk lampshade on an 18th-century *chinoiserie* table. Mr. Sweeley was a bulky man my father's age—45—with a trim beard, a gaze generally aiming aside from one's eyes and a low, cultivated voice; I immediately knew, homosexual.

What we talked about I forget, but the facts could not have been in my favor. I was tall, articulate and self-possessed, but only 17 years old—a bespectacled, bepimpled high-school dropout with no work history aside from mowing neighbors' lawns and stuffing envelopes for my mother's boss. Mr. Sweeley did perk up at hearing that Daddy was a member of *Fortune's* Board of Editors.

The job I was applying for had just been vacated by one William, whom I'd not met but who had gone to high school with my friend Max, two or three years older than myself. William, a favorite of

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Mrs. Rosen's—so the Clarks later told me—had worked several years at Caramoor, but grown restless since her death in November 1968 and now was moving on. Max told me about the vacancy, and I looked up Caramoor in the phone book, dialed and offered myself for the job. My advantage was that no hiring process had started yet.

In the middle of my interview, Mr. Sweeley was called to the Music Room. He had me tag along. It was, of course, my first sight of that marvelous chamber—vast, lofty, crammed with wonderful things. A tall ladder was set up and Robert Clark—Caramoor's butler and caretaker—was watching his son Ronnie Clark, the grounds superintendent, replace light bulbs in a chandelier, while Ray Mulligan, one of the gardeners, held the ladder. They wished Mr. Sweeley's judgment on some point or other.

Mr. Sweeley introduced me to Mr. Clark and the others as they stood ten feet off. I said, "I've already met Mr. Clark."

Mr. Clark was startled. A big man in black pants and short-sleeved white shirt, 60 years old, groaning at every movement—"Ouch! Ouch!"—and with

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broken veins in his face, he creased his forehead and asked, “Did you go to John Jay?”

“No,” I replied, “but I know George.” George was his younger son.

And apparently that clinched it. Remarking, “I’m glad you know George,” Mr. Sweeley walked me out to my mother, waiting in her Citroën DS 21 Pallas, and liked her right away, as people always did. He sent me away feeling optimistic. Mother was curious as to where we might be — I hadn’t said anything — and impressed. Only the weekend before Daddy had sat me down and told me either to get a job, go back to school, or move out, and I’d been glad to tell him I had an interview scheduled.

Mr. Bailey called a few days later and asked me to begin the following Monday.

MONDAY, APRIL 20, 1970 was thus the most important day of my life, marking my liberation from my family; a beautiful, showery spring morning with forsythia blooming brightly along the back way into Caramoor. I dropped off my

cardboard boxes on the screen porch of the "chauffeur's cottage" where I was to live, thanked Mother, walked round into the big house's garage and pounded on the door. Mr. Clark opened it warily and gave me two keys, one for that heavy, balky door and another for the cottage.

This was the first time I met Martha Clark, his wife, George's and Ronnie's mother and Caramoor's housekeeper and cook. She was a short, plump woman of about 50 with curly hair dyed black and a peaches-and-cream complexion she was rightly proud of. From the start she seemed to find me beguiling; around me she usually bore a secret smile.

Right off she handed me a big old ostrich feather-duster and marched me down a dark, winding way through the cellars beneath the Music Room over to the West Wing. I despaired of finding my way back. We passed storerooms, a laundry room, a bathroom (where I was shortly to see Mr. Clark sitting on the toilet with the door open, laughing at my shock), the boiler room, musicians' dressing and shower rooms that stored hundreds of red-velvet folding chairs, and up first a utilitarian

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flight of steps and then a grand marble staircase beneath the straight-backed, aureole-haired gaze of Mrs. Rosen's most stately portrait, to the second floor.

My task was to dust and dry-mop that upstairs—the hallway, the four bedrooms off it, the family room at the far end, and the bedroom at the top of the stairs.

That bedroom—which was where William had lived—looked out over the Clarks' attached caretaker's cottage. It had an antique bed of japanned iron, an armoire and one of the house's many excellent bathrooms. During the Festival a few months later Christopher Parkening stayed there, and later such artists as Marilyn Niska.

The upstairs was beautifully detailed and substantial rather than grand like the downstairs. The other bedrooms were spacious and filled with light, each pair linked by a foyer and sharing a bathroom, one tiled in cobalt blue, the other in purple. Floors were teak, and casement windows overlooked the Spanish Courtyard. Several had floor-to-ceiling ceramic stoves and were furnished in suites of 18th-century Tyrolean peasant

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furniture — cheerful, cartoonish renditions of Louis XV — plus a miscellaneous scattering, like a seaside cottage's, of books and objects. But in the first bedroom stood a magnificent bed lately brought out from Mrs. Rosen's city house.

"Hope it doesn't bother you," Mrs. Clark said, "but the Old Lady died in this bed."

Bothered her. Its huge gilded headboard resembled an altarpiece, and the bedspread, also 16th-century, was of stiff red brocade shot with gold thread. Mrs. Rosen had died in her house at 35 West 54th Street — discovered dead by Freddie, her butler, when he brought in her breakfast tray. Mrs. Clark was sure she'd felt ill in the night and rung for help, but that Freddie declined getting up to respond, and consequently found her body lying half out of bed. Sir John Lavery's 1926 *Mrs. Rosen's Bedroom* makes this bed look as big as an aircraft carrier; Mr. Bailey told me its previous owner had been a Venetian countess who received visitors lolling in it beside her pet leopard.

Mrs. Clark said Mrs. Rosen, 78 when she died, should have lived years longer, but that an accident ten or twelve years previous shortened her life: One

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night her beige-and-black Cadillac limousine with custom raised roof rolled over on a backwoods Connecticut road, and thereafter she was confined to a wheelchair. Mrs. Clark and her husband suspected that, despite his denials, Joe the Chauffeur fell asleep at the wheel. He'd lived in my cottage; hence its name. Mr. Sweeley told me the Rosens had occupied it while building the big house, coming out weekends with picnic hampers.

One afternoon a few weeks later I found Mrs. Clark feeding a shifty-eyed chap in a cloth cap on a stool in the kitchen: Joe the Chauffeur, back for a final visit.

While I dusted, Mr. Bailey, then about 30, a slender, attractive and invariably pleasant graduate of the University of Virginia, was driving Mr. Sweeley and their colleague Miss Renée D'Arcy out from Manhattan in the white Chevy station wagon. Arriving at lunch time, they welcomed me to Caramoor.

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I HAD MET my friend Max (not his real name) at Saturday morning group therapy presided over by a rather likable man of the world. I remember the doctor's account of attending, while on leave during the War, a concert conducted by Leopold Stokowski; at one point the young woman sitting in front of him turned, presenting a profile so perfect it took his breath away—Gloria Vanderbilt, then married to Stokowski. He'd also seen Jacqueline Du Pré perform at Caramoor (as had Max), and remarked on her sexy manipulation of the cello between her legs.

The group consisted of four or five boys. One had witnessed his best friend burning to death after they built a bonfire and the friend swung a gas can's contents onto the flames. Another lived for the day he'd be old enough to enlist and become a sniper in Viet Nam. Max had briefly attended Fordham University, dropping out for reasons I don't know, and had a new car, a green Buick Skylark with vinyl roof. As tall as I but even skinnier, he wore glasses, too, chain-smoked, was smart, funny, frail and effeminate, and I always liked him.

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I took the decisive step in our becoming friends, one day in April 1969 asking if he'd like to go see the David Smith exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. We thereafter spent much time together, in his car and at his parents' house in Katonah—never at mine. We toured Lyndhurst together and went to the movies in Stamford, Connecticut. Also we saw foreign films in the beautiful auditorium of IBM's Saarinen-designed Watson Research Center in Yorktown Heights, where his mother worked.

Max liked going at night to Beaver Dam, a towering stone rampart with a rush of white water at its base, but a particular joy was to park on the deserted, dirt Hook Road and follow a trail through the woods to Caramoor's grounds. It felt deliciously illicit to run past looming shapes and structures gray in the moonlight, including what Max said was called "the Pope's bathtub," a Roman sarcophagus near the Venetian Theater. We also drove in via the back way, though never venturing to circle the big house.

I never introduced Max to my parents, and it strikes me now how trusting (and fatalistic) they were in giving me entire freedom. I had dropped

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out of high school in September 1967, but in the fall of 1968 went back, this time to a school in Mount Kisco that specialized in rich kids expelled from prep school for using drugs, but which had memorably good teachers, class sizes varying between one and four, and (need I say it?) interesting students. I dropped out again in January 1970.

Max was friends from John Jay High School with George Clark. Once we visited him, home from the University of California at Berkeley, where he was a psychology major—Mrs. Rosen having left money for his education, as well as for that of gardeners' children—in the caretaker's cottage. This was the occasion when I met his father, who ignored me as he sat in front of the TV (probably watching *Benny Hill*), not moving save to lift his glass or fill his pipe. The house had the worst ammoniated air I ever encountered, from Mrs. Clark's eight or ten cats. It hurt to breathe.

George had a car, too—an early 1960s four-door Corvair. The summer of 1969 his dad got him a job with Pinkerton's, and every day George went off in uniform, shoulder-length hair tucked beneath his

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visored cap, to an abandoned quarry near Peekskill, where he lay in the grass with his shoes off reading *The Diary of Anaïs Nin* instead of shooing off the boys swimming in the quarry. Max and I visited once or twice.

One day George drove us all the way to Newport, Rhode Island, where we gawked at Ocean Drive's mansions and explored abandoned stables. Also, we drove around Greenwich and Cos Cob, and several times went to New York, seeing *The Movie Orgy* at NYU and a Miles Davis – Thelonious Monk concert at the Wollman Rink. Another time as we were heading for the city the Corvair broke down on the Taconic, and we limped home. George soon acquired a new, powder-blue VW Bug.

In July 1969 when I went to Chicago to visit an elder brother and his wife, George kindly drove me to the airport. A dedicated marijuana smoker – aficionado, as well, of LSD, peyote, mescaline and hashish – he shared a joint with me on the way to LaGuardia; I'd tried pot with him and Max but failed to feel much effect. He wanted me to take off high, and perhaps I did feel something.

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From Chicago I flew to Tulsa to join another brother and his wife in a drive through the West. Their friend who joined us at a commune near Taos recounted meeting Jack Kerouac a year earlier: “like a drunken truck driver.”

My plan was to fly home from Denver on the eve of the Woodstock Music & Art Fair, to which, very excited, I’d bought a three-day ticket with the proceeds of piecework—folding informational materials into packets—for Mother’s boss at a Mount Kisco engineering firm. George had offered me a seat in his car for the drive upstate. Accordingly, when I got home—exactly when I’d told him I would—I called to ask what time he was picking me up next day, and he said that, not having heard from me in weeks, he’d given my place away. And that was that. I was not consoled later by hearing his and Max’s accounts of their rainy, muddy, sleepless, miserable experience; my heartsickness at missing Woodstock has never ebbed, nor did I ever quite forgive George.

Unfortunately, though it was he who told me about the Caramoor job, Max dropped me as soon as I was hired. The night before I started he told me

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over the phone that he was tired of me: “tired of your—” (ignorance? intensity? cluelessness? I forget). It was a painful shock; it had been a life-saving friendship, however limited.

Painful, and a nuisance, too, as until I got a driver’s license and car I was pretty much stranded at the chauffeur’s cottage. Oddly, I don’t remember whether Max kept up with George during my time at Caramoor.

In 1971 George Clark had some kind of breakdown, left college and took up a very quiet life at home. He stopped driving, saw psychiatrists, was given medication and—briefly committed to a psychiatric hospital—shock treatments, too, after which he seemed but a whisper of himself. He occasionally came over to watch my snowy black-and-white Panasonic portable TV or listen to music and solicit my help in killing himself.

I TOOK TO my duties immediately.

My day generally began with Mr. Clark’s good-natured wake-up call at 9:00 a.m., when I was

supposed to be bringing Mr. Sweeley his breakfast. I'd throw on my clothes and rush over, coming through the garage. Mrs. Clark, waiting in the pantry, would pour hot coffee into a silver carafe and place it on an 18th-century Venetian tray of japanned *papier-mâché*, next to a pink half-grapefruit whose segments Mr. Clark had carved out that no untoward squirting might occur, while from the warming oven he retrieved a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast and jelly, and covered it with a silver dome.

Off I would whisk the tray, greeting in passing Miss D'Arcy and Mr. Bailey at breakfast at the glass-topped table two steps up from the dining room proper, beside French doors to the terrace never used in my time. Taking the short way, up steep spiral stairs, I would knock at Mr. Sweeley's door, await his answering grunt, go in saying, "Good morning, Mr. Sweeley," and set the tray on the bureau beside his big oaken 16th-century bed, opposite the mantelpiece bearing bronze John Harvard bookends and an inscribed photograph of Gina Bachauer.

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Shutting his door on him, I would find feather duster, dust mop and dust rag in a hallway wash closet and begin cleaning the office. Mr. Sweeley occupied the bedroom of the Rosens' son, Walter Bigelow Rosen, a graduate of Harvard and Yale Law School who joined the Royal Canadian Air Force before America entered the War, became a bomber pilot and in 1944 was shot down and killed. Mr. Clark said he was engaged at his death to the Miss Coit who later married Lloyd George's grandson. The son's beamed sitting room served as office. Its window seat and row of latticed casements—with stained-glass and bottle-glass inserts—overlooked the Spanish Courtyard. The overhead light fixture was a bronze-girdled painted globe, a reminder the room had been built for a teenager.

After emptying ashtrays and wastebaskets, I dusted everything, working from top to bottom, ceiling to floor—ostrich feathers are magically effective at knocking dust aside without disturbing objects. I ran a dust mop sprayed with Endust over the floorboards, and as needed vacuumed the rug. Meanwhile I would scan any papers exposed to view on the refectory table used as a desk; never saw

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much of interest, save for statements from Ladenburg Thalmann showing the assets of the Walter Tower and Lucie Bigelow Rosen Foundation for the Arts to be ever dwindling. (Mother was shocked to hear that Mr. Sweeley's salary was \$25,000, a large sum for the day.)

Eventually Mr. Sweeley would progress in silken dressing gown from bedroom to bathroom to office, but by that time I was cleaning the sitting room downstairs, where my first task was to clean out the previous night's ashes and lay a new fire; Mr. Sweeley enjoyed a fire the year round. Mrs. Clark showed me how to set layers of kindling, line the grate with crumpled newspaper—a twist sticking out for the match—and position a big back log and smaller front one.

Emptying ashtrays and wastebaskets, I dusted and swept the sitting room, adjoining stair hall and the staircase, with its Cecil Beaton watercolor of an elongated Mrs. Rosen in yellow.

Ashes and trash I carried to the boiler room beneath the Music Room, where ash cans lined the floor sloping up to double doors, above the pit where lay enormous boilers like recumbent missiles.

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As I came through the pantry Miss D'Arcy would be in conference with Mrs. Clark in the kitchen, ordering the day's meals—a lengthy process, involving much gossip, and clearly the highlight of her day. Mrs. Clark's deference washing over her, Miss D'Arcy would dance about beside the butcher-block table in front of the kitchen range, something puppet-like and deeply uneasy to her movements: "Oh, that's *marvelous*. And I think perhaps lentil soup, Michael *so* loves your lentil soup." Menu planning focused on the weather and, consequently, on what might not be too "heavy" to eat, and of course on Mr. Sweeley's preferences.

Meanwhile, Ronnie Clark would drop off the *Times* and mail (fetched from the post office) on the pantry counter, and I'd carry them up to the office. Early in the week Vito, the Italian longtime head gardener (I never knew his surname), would lay his flowers across the pantry's stainless-steel center table, whose scratches always looked circular in the overhead light. There were snapdragons, asters, marigolds, chrysanthemums, gladioli and often orchids. Mr. Clark would line up his dozen vases and, concentrating deeply, arrange each and tell me

where to take it. Vases went always to sitting room, office, bedrooms, Music Room, and several to the dining room; after the house-museum opened, West Wing rooms also. It amused me that this Tennessee native who never lost (or wanted to lose) his Southern accent pronounced *vase* with a posh broad A. Often the old flowers were still beautiful and I'd take them home.

A quiet murmur emanating from Mr. Sweeley *et al.* at work in the office, I would make their beds and clean their rooms, bathrooms and hallway, even unto the candle sconces. Mr. Bailey had the double-bedded room over the sitting room, with windows overlooking both courtyard and the front of the house, and Miss D'Arcy the small maid's room (as Mrs. Clark said it had been) next door, with a window over the courtyard, a narrow bed and lovely little prizes arrayed on shelves.

My mornings were thus occupied until 11:30, when I knocked off and returned to my cottage. Generally I took a nap and showered, returning refreshed to the big house promptly at 1:00 o'clock.

Lunch at the glass-topped table just starting, Mrs. Clark would lure me into her kitchen to show

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what she was leaving for me, and suggest I eat while it was hot. I'd protest I was too busy to eat just then, but she prevented me from getting to work by launching into *talk talk talk* while serving up plates.

Mrs. Clark was a talker with a keen sense of the drama and mystery of her life. Taking up a defiant stance, with flashing eyes she would declare, "You don't know me very well, Steven," and tell stories of the hard early years when the Rosens' European staff snubbed her and her husband, stories also about the Old Man and the Old Lady.

"She would have liked you," she said frequently (Mr. Clark chimed in with agreement). The Old Lady was beautiful, she told me, aside, of course, from that sharp nose, thin hair, problem with body odor and the pallor that prevented her from wearing her favorite color, yellow. Impatient with rivals, the Old Lady tended to avoid high society ("had to be queen bee"). Her best friend had been Lady Ravensdale, Lord Curzon's daughter. One former cook (Elsa?) ate jelly all day long and on her frequent trips to the toilet left trails of shit across the floor. Oh, the criticisms heaped on her when Mrs.

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Clark put the child Ronnie out in the yard in a harness on a rope!

One of her refrains was, "I hope you don't think of yourself as a *servant*." ("No, no," I assured her.)

Getting away was difficult; I developed a slow backwards walk that would eventually take me into the pantry and freedom. This at least prevented Miss D'Arcy's finding me at an unauthorized free lunch when she brought Mr. Sweeley's extensive compliments to the chef, though I suspect everybody knew Mrs. Clark fed me.

After lunch, Mr. Clark would plop on his hat and take out the station wagon to do Caramoor's marketing. Early on, just once, he took me with him. After shopping at the A&P, we went into Halstead's Hardware Store. They greeted him familiarly and he introduced me to everybody. There was a display of deerskin gloves. They asked me, Would you like a pair? No, thank you. No, that's all right, go ahead, take a pair — no charge. I chose one, trembling at this unveiling of the world's corruption, while Mr. Clark *laughed*.

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MY AFTERNOONS WERE devoted to cleaning. One day I would “do” the West Wing downstairs, another day the upstairs, the Music Room another, the Rosens’ bedroom and dressing rooms yet another. (A standing joke was how I faithfully left undisturbed on Mrs. Rosen’s bedside table the hairbrush and bobbie pins that happened to be lying there when she died.)

An almost daily chore was washing windows and French doors; Mrs. Clark showed me how hot water, vinegar and newspaper make for a bright shine.

I cleaned as the Clarks taught me: dusted everything with cloth or feather duster (Mr. Sweeley lamented that Abercrombie & Fitch, the storied Manhattan outfitter of exotic expeditions, was phasing out its feather dusters), dry-mopped the wood and terrazzo floors, vacuumed rugs, scrubbed with Bon Ami. I did my best, took pride in the results, and it seemed easy.

All the while I looked at and studied the things that surrounded me. The Rosens had assembled an enormous collection of choice, rare things.

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Everything was old, the very lamps wired from Renaissance bronze candleholders; nothing could have been more congenial to someone like me who finds time to be a kind of jelly that does not in fact flow.

I liked everything, but my favorites included the 15th-century Florentine ivory carving of a nude youth courting a girl in a tower, and the Henri II desk and chairs whose affinities to modern Scandinavian design astonished me, and the graceful lacquer chairs that sat in the sitting room until banished to the stair hall, replaced by blue-velvet Adam club chairs. The Canaletto of Venice's *SS. Giovanni e Paolo* (never mind that it's now *school of*) is beautifully composed and colored, with an animated little grouping of people and marvelous sky. I overheard Mrs. Stern, the Rosens' daughter, say that, standing in front of it during his mid-1950s stay, the Duke of Windsor had sighed, "I used to have fifty-four of these." (The Windsors slept in what we called "the Monkey Room," for its 18th-century Chinese jungle wallpaper.) Also I admired the great Chinese eight-fold jade screen, a full-page color photograph of which appeared in the

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Burgundian Library's set of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

The Rosens' taste was very good, but didn't seem to extend past about 1800. I expect that both consciously rebelled against the Victoriana they were raised amidst, but from there their tastes went backwards, not forwards. Even then I observed that the monetary value of the collection—which according to 1920s inventories had cost the Rosens well over a million dollars, back when (as Mr. Clark loved to repeat) “the dollar was a *dollar*”—would have grown more (today, immeasurably more) had they bought art of their own day. Possibly it's a shame they didn't forgo buying yet another period room and choose instead two or three Picassos.

By contrast, their tastes in music and fashion were decidedly up to date: Mrs. Rosen wore Fortuny, commissioned music from such modern composers as Bohuslav Martinů, and of course the Rosens' support of the Russian inventor Dr. Léon Theremin—his financial backing, her concertizing on his electronic instrument—placed them in the front lines of the *avant garde*.