

LEISURE & ARTS

Several Beautiful Rooms of Her Own

By JAMIE JAMES

Saint-Saveur-en-Puisaye

Literary figures don't lend themselves well to the museum treatment. The dim, tiny rooms of Dove Cottage tell us much less about the poetry of William Wordsworth than does a solitary ramble around the hills and lakes that inspired him. William Faulkner's typewriter in his little office in Oxford, Mississippi, looks just like any other old typewriter; you will learn more about him by getting your hair cut at his barber shop on the courthouse square. The worlds that writers create exist in the mind, and attempts to explain them by ordinary, didactic museology nearly always fall flat.

Yet a new museum in Burgundy, devoted to its most famous literary daughter, Colette, succeeds brilliantly, by making no effort to explain her. The creators of the Musee Colette have proceeded on the eminently sensible assumption that only people who have read her books, or at least who are interested in doing so, will want to go there. Thus visitors are never told that her reminiscences about her childhood in the little village of Saint-Saveur-en-Puisaye are charming, or that her novels about the scandalous schoolgirl Claudine, the selfish gigolo Cheri and the innocent Gigi epitomized the French *beau monde* of the first half of the 20th century: If they make the pilgrimage to the Musee Colette they surely already know all that.

The museum, which has been installed in a 17th-century stone chateau on a hill overlooking Colette's birthplace, has no words displayed that are not her own. Her bibliography has been inlaid in gleaming brass letters on the risers of the staircase that leads up to the main floor, the title of each of her dozens of books on a step of its own. The first room the visitor enters, called the Salle de Biographie de Colette, is a bright, airy room with 250 photographs of Colette, her family and friends, from her birth in 1873, in Saint-Saveur-en-Puisaye, until her death, 81 years

later, in a little apartment in the Palais Royal, in Paris.

The photographs are hung from eye level almost to the ceiling, in the manner of the *belle epoque* salons that launched the young writer's career. They are not labeled but rather accompanied by a handbook with maps, like the floorplans that come with boxes of chocolates. The room has a discreet soundtrack of music by Colette's friends Debussy, Poulenc and Satie, and passages from Ravel's one-act opera "L'Enfant et les Sortilèges," for which Colette wrote the libretto.

She was an unlikely literary hero for France: The daughter of a one-legged tax collector and an octoroon, she was married when she was just 20 years old to one of the most famous journalists in France, Henri Gauthier-Villars ("Willy"), who was 18 years older. Willy literally forced her to become a writer, by locking her up in her room until she produced a certain amount of copy. The result was the Claudine novels, a series of *romans a clef* about her schoolgirl amours and marriage with Willy, which shocked bourgeois France with their frank, amoral attitudes about sex and love. The books were immediate bestsellers, and they have never been out of print.

One of the most famous images in the Salle de Biographie is that of Colette at 33, on the stage of the Moulin Rouge in the revue "Reve d'Egypte" ("Dream of Egypt"). She had left Willy and now worked as a music-hall mime. In the show's finale, Colette flung herself into the arms of her off-stage lover, the lesbian Marquise de Belbeuf ("Missy"), who appeared onstage dressed as a man, and kissed her. The audience (which included the marquis, Missy's husband) exploded with catcalls, and the authorities forbade a second performance.

Everything Colette wrote and did, it seemed, created a scandal. Her second husband, Henry de Jouvenel, once said to her, "But is it impossible for you to write a book that isn't about love, adultery or semi-incestuous relations? Aren't there other things in

life?" Yet the French love to be scandalized, and in the period between the world wars Colette became a revered literary lioness. In 1936, wearing sandals that exposed her scarlet-enameled toenails, she was admitted to the Belgian Royal Academy of French Language and Literature. Nine years later, at the age of 72, she was unanimously elected president of the Academie Goncourt, the first woman ever to hold the post.

Subsequent rooms of the Musee Colette reveal glimpses of her inner life, such as her gaudy, glittering collections of butterflies and Venetian glass. In another gallery, the curators have reassembled the objects from her apartment in the Palais Royale, where she lived through World War II and until her death, in 1954. It was there that she concealed her third husband, a Jew, during the Nazi occupation. Her final years, a period of almost uninterrupted torment from arthritis, were spent in what she called her raft, a fur-covered divan-bed pushed up to the window, where she could watch the life of Paris flow by.

The second floor of the Musee Colette is given over entirely to her words. In a small theater filled with posters from Colette's days as a cabaret artist, a filmed interview with her by Yannick Bellon runs continually. She collaborated with the filmmaker, dispatching him to shoot the houses and gardens where she had lived, and then reading her own narration over the footage.

The final room, called the library, is the museum's most inspired conception. In this comfortable, well-lit room there are 1,500 extracts from Colette's books, ranging from pithy epigrams that anyone with a year of high-school French can read, to long excerpts. They are bound in false books in pleasant pastel covers; you open the "book," and find the quotation tipped in.

The day I visited the Musee Colette, the library was crowded with people of all ages, reading quietly. And downstairs, the museum's little shop was doing a brisk trade, selling not T-shirts, coffee mugs and key chains, but, of all things, books.

Mr. James is co-author, with David Weeks, of "Eccentrics: A Study of Sanity and Strangeness" (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1995).



Colette