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Daily Closeup

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THE HOUSE OF NUANCES

SONNENBERG

There are few private residences in this stainless steel and glass city in which a visitor can feel totally transported into an era of 19th century elegance, of tea and valets, parquet floors, wood paneled rooms and wall-to-wall antiques of such extraordinary perfection that their duplicates may be found in Buckingham Palace.

Such is the home—a good 40 rooms worth at Gramercy Park S. and Irving Pl.—of Benjamin Sonnenberg. A pioneer in public relations, he is as well known for his Edwardian attire and his opulent parties, to which all manner of great and near-great seek to be invited.

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Sonnenberg, now 70 and retired a few years from the profession he developed into sort of an art form, still holds court at 19 on the Park. The pace is slower but the resplendency undiminished. His interest in people is unabated. He still enjoys lunching, or having tea, or dining with anyone interesting. While his wife of 40 years summers on the Cape, he only weekends there, preferring not to lose touch with where the action really is.

The Pierpont Morgan Library is currently exhibiting (through July 30) some 60 drawings of artists and writers from the Sonnenberg collection spanning the 19th and 20th Centuries but concentrating on the owner's favorite period—the Edwardian, "Silver Age" of English Art (1890-1925). Yet to see this exhibit, as fine as it might be, is a bit like seeing the mustache without the

Sonnenberg face. The art, furnishings, house and man are one.

And the man—short, balding, rotund, the height of urbanity—finds no greater pleasure than giving the cook's tour to a new visitor. He walks through carpeted bathrooms, muraled hallways, over needlepoint rugs. He points out his famous collections of brass that require a full-time polisher, reveals his predilection for wine coolers, admires the fine grains of the woods, tours the fifth floor ballroom with its connecting movie projection room.

"Some guy once said your home is your castle," Sonnenberg says. "It's true. My story is that of one man's obsession with a house. In order to do a house you have to put something of yourself in it. It's like raising a family"—he has a son and daughter and several grandchildren—"it must be done slowly, painstakingly, you must savor it and have it ready made.

"What you purchase only indicates how you spend money. It's how you arrange it that counts. Nothing has to be major. In a house, like in life, there are small nuances. In a woman it may be the timbre of her voice or how she twirls her finger.

"Now, as you can see, I happen to have an ample bottom so I don't like spindly things. Everything is meant to be set on and used. I always liked the 18th century, Sam Johnson, Pope, Hazlitt, the Age of Reason of Gibbon. It was a civilized way of life. Everything was nicely turned out, beyond the crude and before the fancy."

Sonnenberg finds nothing astonishing in his own success story and in his purchase and refurbishment of the 1831 Struyvesant Fish house from which Mrs. Fish reigned socially supreme in

the '80s and '90s. "If you immigrated to his country," Sonnenberg notes matter-of-factly, "it was always implicit in your arrival that you'd shed your poverty. That's what America was all about."

And that's what Sonnenberg did—with style. He arrived here from Russia—his father became a Grand St. clothier—61 years ago and soon became one of the favorites of Lillian Wald of the Henry Street Settlement where he also met his future wife, Hilda Caplan.

He gained a scholarship to Columbia but gave up his studies for earning money, worked for a few papers, sold portraits in the Midwest, wrote press releases for the Joint Distribution Committee and then distributed food in the Ukraine for Hoover's American Relief Administration. After six months in the Ukraine, he blew his savings on a tour of Europe.

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He returned home in 1924 to marry and to become a press agent, starting with Broadway, hotel and fashion clients and switching in the '30s to corporate giants. Since 1931, the house at 19 on the Park has been his refuge. "You know," he says, leaning back on his big pillowed sofa, "I did a lot of *raznataz* in my day, gave consequence to a great many careers, built legends. I was very persuasive, I had a kind of style with a pinch of maverick and a pinch of irreverence. But at home I would take off the Madison Av. collar of my drum-beating business and be alone, read . . . I always remain disassociated."

At one point, Sonnenberg worries out loud that all he has said will sound "so fatuous, so stuffy, so old age" but then he laughs it off. He doesn't like to look back too much anymore, says that he realizes now "that I built better than I knew" and has no plans to write a book. "I could give you a lot of gossip," he says with raised eyebrows, "but I'm not a kiss and tell guy."