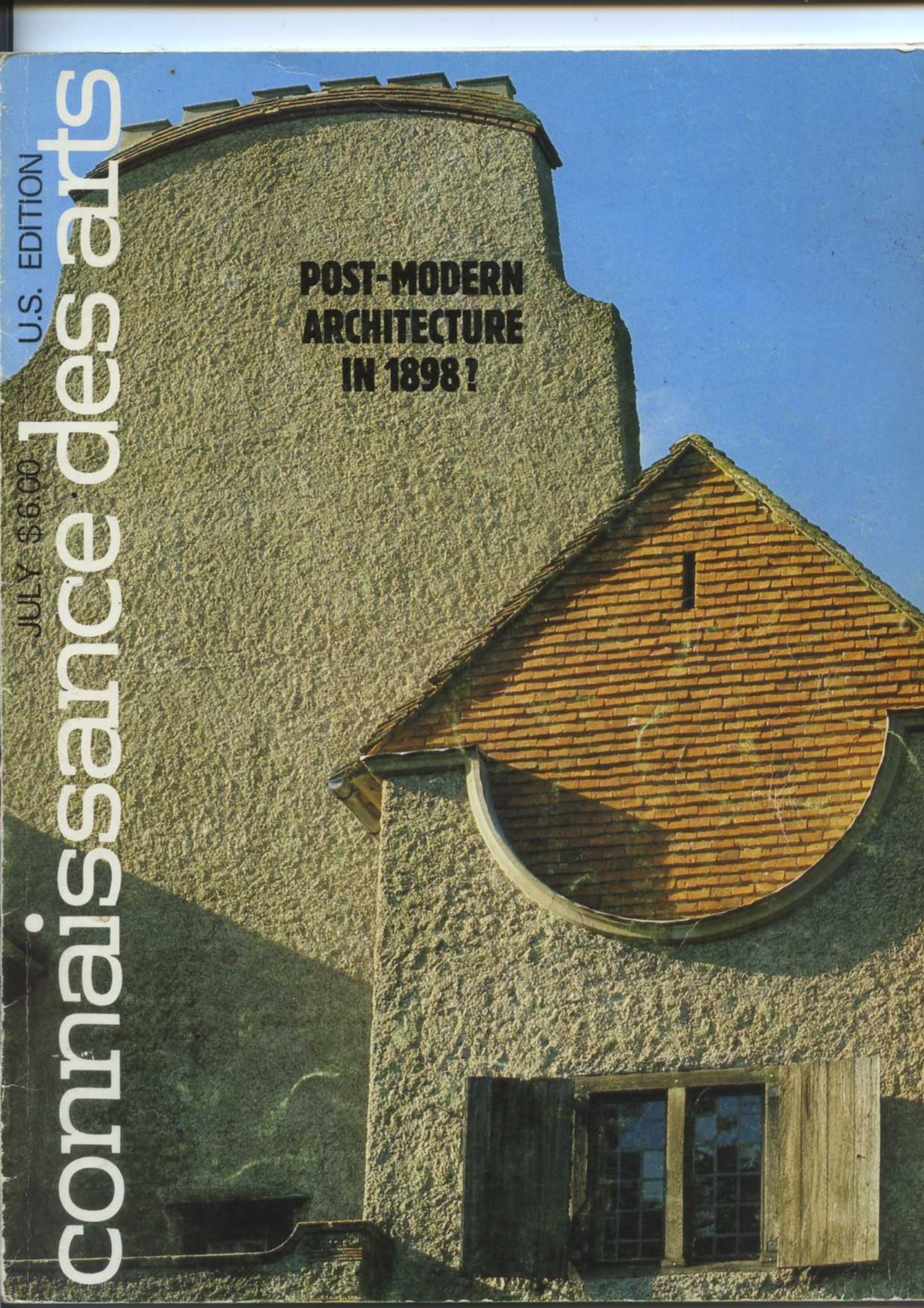


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# connaissance des arts

**POST-MODERN  
ARCHITECTURE  
IN 1898?**





A LUTYENS HOUSE:

# STUDY IN SYMBOLISM

by Axelle de Gaigneron / photos Roger Guillemot

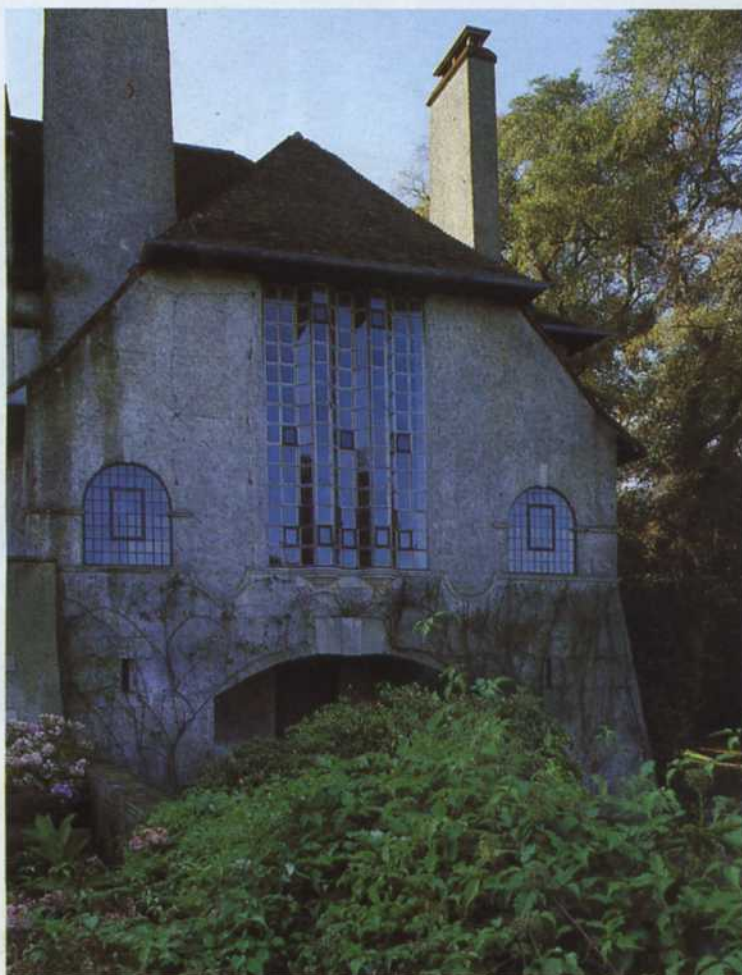
The Bois des Moutiers, high up on the cliff of Varengueville 7 km from Dieppe, is much more than just an example of Lutyens' work (see box) proposed for the scrutiny of the modern observer. It is, in fact, a whole grouping of symbols, circumstances, fates, coincidences and spiritual and aesthetic ideals. This combination of factors, translated into the architecture and the surrounding landscape by means of a rigorous yet multi-

faced symbolism, constitutes a unique portrait in its genre of a certain aspect of the end of the 19th century. It represents a moment of quite exceptional harmony within that short and very hybrid period spanning the end of Orientalism and the beginning of Art Nouveau, the Far-Eastern movement, Naturalism and various other characteristic end-of-century mystical trends. The originality and the importance of the Bois des Moutiers, which has been a

classified monument since 1975, are rooted in this fact.

Why Varengueville? Because in 1898, there was no other place where such a project would have been feasible. From 1880 to 1900, Dieppe was a seaside resort whose popularity rivaled Deauville. However, Dieppe was frequented by a rather different crowd, intellectuals rather than high society.

The attractiveness of the surrounding countryside brought in

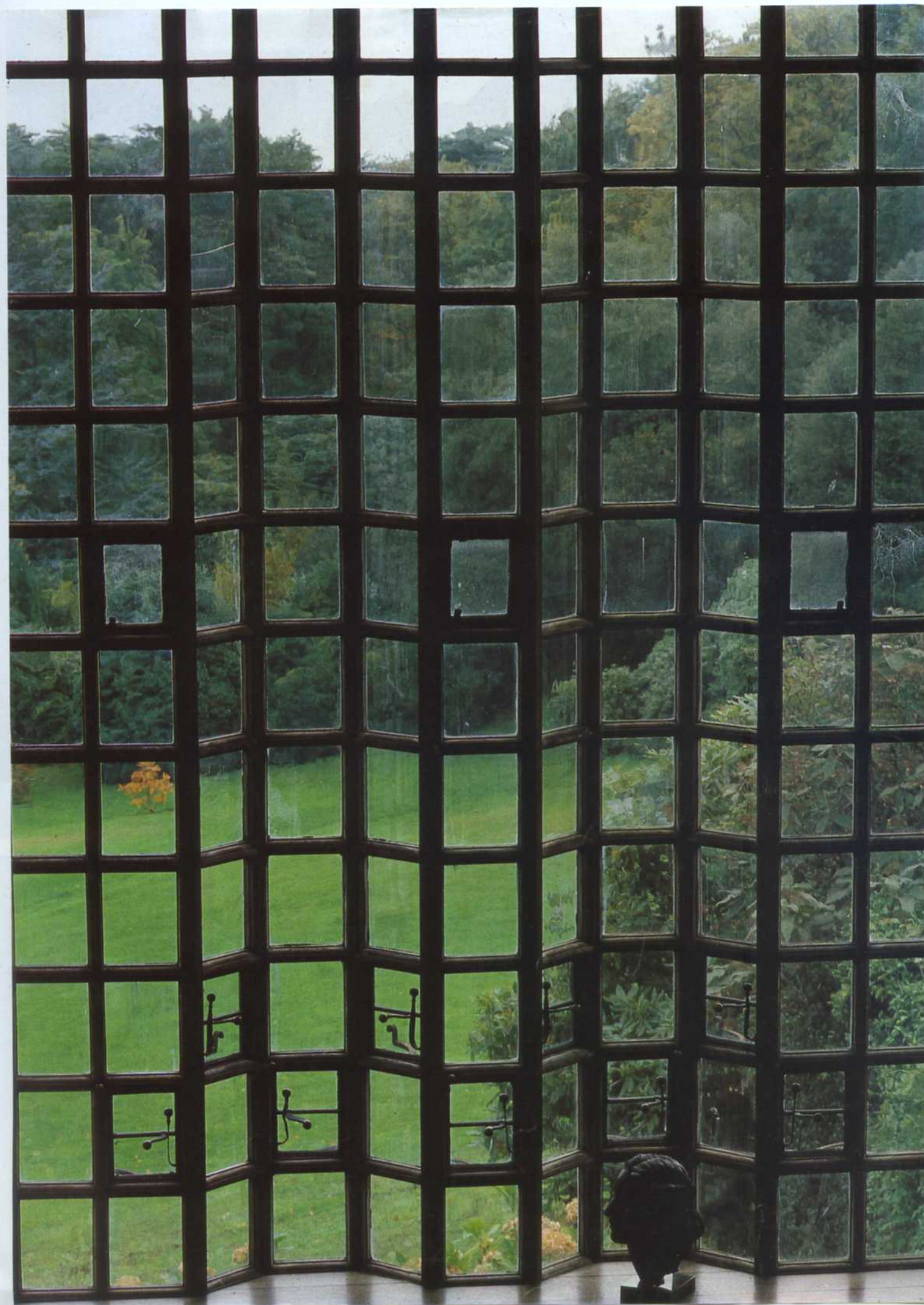


The Bois des Moutiers, an odd private residence at Varengueville near Dieppe, lacks coherent style and has a special place in the body of Edwin Lutyens' work. Even works devoted to this English architect often fail to give this house its due. But it is remarkable in its relationships with symbolic thought as well as in its revelation of the atmosphere reigning there at the end of the last century when numerous artists and writers put Dieppe back in style.

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*In 1898 Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens (1869-1944) built one of the three houses commissioned by Guillaume Mallet in Varengueville, 7 km from Dieppe. The architecture and interior decoration, still intact, may serve as an important testimony to the architect's efforts in the field of private houses. Within the essentially symbolic conception of architecture, every element has its significance. These narrow openings symbolize the individual's relationship with the outside world. In the living-room/auditorium, note the unusual system for opening the window-panes.*









a large number of French and English painters. Subsequently, these painters proved a drawing card for artists engaged in all kinds of activities — composers, writers and poets. This highly eclectic universe gravitated around a central kernel of international "gentry," led by such extravagant personalities as Princess Caracciolo, goddaughter of the Prince of Wales, and Robert de Montesquiou, leader of the "Decadent Aesthetes." Among these personalities were Saint-Saëns, Gabriel Fauré, Reynaldo Hahn, Renoir, Pissarro, Monet, Puvis de Chavannes, Gervex, Helleu, Jacques Emile Blanche, Henri de Régnier, Alexandre Dumas the Younger, Huysmans, Pierre Louÿs, Maurice Barrès, Georges

de Porto-Riche and Marcel Proust. The English colony, which gravitated around painter Walter Sickert (known as the "Dieppe Corot"), included poets Arthur Symonds and George Moore, Smithers, editor of the famous Yellow Book, Blovitz, editor of the Times, and Max Beerbohm, illustrator for Vanity Fair. In 1895, three years before Lutyens built the Bois des Moutiers, Aubrey Beardsley joined this little group of expatriates.

Against this sparkling backdrop of people and ideas, the people who influenced the "esthetic curiosity" known as the Bois des Moutiers emerged quite naturally, as if by osmosis, out of the same social and intellectual conditions as had produced such influential and

seminal figures as Beardsley himself.

The first protagonist in the drama is Guillaume Mallet (1860-1944), descended from a long line of Protestant bankers, a man open to every current of thought who had first been introduced to the science of gardens and landscaping during his English childhood. This erstwhile cavalry officer saw Varengeville as the perfect climate for fulfilment of his ambitions. He wanted to build a house and landscape a park in accordance with his convictions, centered around Symbolistic Naturalism. Our second protagonist is his wife, Marie Adélaïde Grunelius, a théosophist; in the creation of the Bois des Moutiers, her particular







brand of symbolism was to combine with and complement that of her husband.

And now for the rest of the cast, people who played a direct or indirect role in the building of house and garden. First of all, Mrs. Earle, an experienced dendrologist, but even more importantly, the aunt of Emily Lutyens, the architect's wife. Emily Lutyens was a woman of extremely mystical bent, and Bois des Moutiers bears the unmistakable stamp of her influence. Gertrude Jekyll was a determining influence in the composition of the garden. She had revolutionized the art of landscaping in England, and her numerous projects with Lutyens contributed greatly to his career. Then there was Lutyens him-

self: a man of 29 who saw Bois des Moutiers not merely as one of his first private residence projects, but a veritable mission in which architecture and surroundings should both contribute to harmonious development of the human being, and be a symbol of his development.

The actual idea of a symbolistic garden and house was not a new one. However, its size — the park covers 12 hectares — was new, as was the idea of undertaking such a work at that period in Europe. However, its greatest originality lies in the rigorously ordered definition and synthesis of three very different orders of ideas: the taste of the era, symbolist thought, and pure botany. Building materials and vegetation correspond both in terms

of color and of treatment of space. The whole symbolized the different stages in the conquest of the Ego and the relationship among Creator, Creation and Creature.

For the house, Lutyens relied on the principles he had learned from his teachers: Philip Webb (1831-1915), a Neo-gothic architect who had worked with William Morris, and Norman Shaw (1831-1912) a specialist in private homes; however, these influences do not rule out traces of the Far-Eastern movement then popular, or certain mock-Tudor aspects. Every feature is significant: pagoda-shaped roofs, folding circular or rectangular doors and windows, the alternation of building material — brick, stone, oak and wrought-iron combinations — and the furniture itself, which may have been executed in William Morris' workshop. In the same way, the park testifies to a myriad of different influences. The cypresses and the vaulted spaces have a mystical character. The so-called Darjeeling spaces, the Jungle areas, the Tea House, the magnolias, the bamboos, the Chinese camellias, the Himalaya rhododendrons and the Japanese maples all bear witness to the Far-Eastern trend.

The mind roams amongst these spiritual emanations of the decorative art of William Morris, Burne-Jones, Beardsley, Gallé and Eugène Grasset. We think of illuminated Gothic landscapes, Zen gardens, Alice-in-Wonderland country, the realm of Rousseau, Renoir, Gauguin and Monet; of Zola's marvelous flower descriptions (*La Faute de l'Abbé*) and Huysman's "A Rebours." But perhaps the strongest and most enduring impression which this strange architecture and extraordinarily lush vegetation evoke is the half-concealed, wind-and tide-bound rhythm of Igor Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring."

A.G.



*Projection of a metaphysical East-West context with neo-Tudor influences from P. Webb and N. Shaw and a certain borrowing from Japan. This is Lutyen's work. A 12-hectare park surrounds the house like a kind of initiatory course, alternating closed (opposite) or open areas of meditation. This is one of Europe's most remarkable botanical gardens because of the variety of its species and flowers from Europe, the Americas and Asia. The staircase is dominated by the Adoration, a tapestry probably woven in William Morris's workshop from a sketch by Burne-Jones.*





# POST-MODERN IN 1898?

by Philip Jodidio

Le Bois des Moutiers seems to be a most curious mixture of styles. Despite the unusual semi-circular windows of the entrance facade, its style may be termed neo-Tudor, with references to the English architects Shaw, Stevenson and Devey. The side of the house which projects into the garden, however, confounds all expectations. Leaded windows with oak shutters lead down to a circular window opening into the cellar. There is humor and a delightful mastery of spatial contrast here which can be called Mannerist. The main garden facade returns to a calmer pace, but is nonetheless pierced by one of Lutyens's most surprising inventions, a two-storey-high window whose undulating surface presages a use of glass which would be an important point of Bauhaus designs twenty years later. Who was Edwin Lutyens? David Watkin of Cambridge University replies, "one of the two or three most brilliant architects England ever produced." Yet one need not turn to the standard histories of modern architecture to learn more about Lutyens. He is hardly mentioned. From his numerous country homes to monuments such as the Viceroy's House in New Delhi (1922) Lutyens left a mark which does not easily fit into the idea of progress in architecture. He quite simply never conformed to the perceived Zeitgeist. This is precisely why Lutyens has recently been rehabilitated, at least in the minds of those who have participated in the evolution of post-modern architecture. The American Robert Venturi divides architects into the "either/or" and "both/and" schools. The strict dogma of Mies van der Rohe places him in the either/or category, while architects who embrace complexity such as Michelangelo, Vanbrugh, Ledoux, Louis Sullivan or Lutyens are key figures of the both/and. Lutyens can be described as a Mannerist architect because of his vocabulary of surprising forms, and Le Bois des Moutiers, because of its accelerated pace of stylistic shifts, may be a height of complexity in his oeuvre. In any case, Lutyens, together with Gaudi, is today important as a source of inspiration to post-modern architecture, notably through the action of Robert Venturi and Robert Stern. From an admiration for the simple and clean, architecture has turned to a preoccupation with complexity and contradiction. □



*The entrance and side facades are accompanied by a paved and arcaded garden. The arcades are decorated with symbols of the sun's rays making a whole set of little courtyards planted with different species of trees and bushes. This ambivalence of design gives the Mallet house its esoteric character, an architecture where the blend of Oriental and Western traditions with which the 19th century was so much in love found a home. Note the play of shapes, particularly the windows and that of the outline inscribed in the window pane.*



