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**PORTRAIT OF  
THE ARTIST  
AS A WOMAN  
OF MEANS**

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By Hunter Drohojowska

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E L I Z A B E T H  
KECK

By Hunter Drohojwska

**T**he last thing I want to be known as is a lady who collects French furniture and also paints.

"It's hard to be taken as a serious artist in my position. People just don't take you seriously. They don't understand that painting is what I always wanted to do. More than anything. But your life has many quirks and turns in it."

Distractedly, Keck pats her champagne-blond coiffure with a bejeweled and well-manicured hand. She is wearing a silk dress and her rose-lacquered nails are free from paint stains. The studio is furnished in white upholstered chairs and sofa, with a marble fireplace at one end. Windows at the other end frame a view of the swimming pool.

It is not your standard artist's studio, obviously. Elizabeth Keck happens to be married to Howard Keck, whose personal wealth was cited in the 1984 *Forbes* list of the 400 richest people in America as \$260 million. To his wife's frustration, she is better known for being rich than for being an artist.

Ironically, the very assets most artists yearn for — income and recognition — are seen as obstacles by Elizabeth Keck.

Her forehead puckers, her dark eyes cloud with doubt as she explains. A decade has passed since her last exhibition, at the Meredith Long Gallery in Houston. At that time she was painting in the style of the impressionists — slightly blurred Parisian street scenes and flowery provincial landscapes. "Everybody likes impressionist paintings so they are easy to sell if they are any good at all," she sighs. "But about five years ago, I decided I would never amount to anything as a painter unless I did something original and different."

Keck's new paintings are abstract, bold organic shapes in garden colors. She has sold a few — Bela Lugosi, Jr., owns one — but the first public showing is now at the Stella Polaris Gallery in Beverly Hills. Significantly, she has not even invited some of her prominent friends: the William French Smiths, the Armand Deutsches, the Earle M. Jorgensens, the Reagans. "I would rather somebody didn't know me but wanted to own the painting — even if they had to pay it off at \$100 a month — than to have friends buy one because they feel they have to and then hang it in the pool house."

Despite high-placed and influential friends, the Kecks are not often seen in the gossip columns of the

newspapers. Instead they lead the low-key, high-powered social life of the inner circle, who eschew gratuitous publicity as being in bad taste.

They are known best for their generosity to charities through a family foundation established by William Keck, Howard's father. A wildcat driller who founded the Superior Oil Company, William died in 1964, leaving an estate of slightly more than \$180 million. (In 1984, Superior Oil was sold to Mobil for \$5.7 billion.) The Kecks give money to the Music Center, to PBS, to museums and institutions of education and science.

Howard Keck is as dedicated a supporter of science, especially of astronomy, as his wife is of the arts. When you mention the name Keck these days, people often say, "Oh, yes, they gave that telescope..." Seventy million dollars was donated through the W.M. Keck Foundation for a 400-inch optical telescope to be mounted on an extinct volcano in Hawaii. (The telescope, which will be the largest in the world when it is finished, is being constructed by the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena and maintained by the University of California, Berkeley; both schools will share use of it.)

Elizabeth Keck — known as Libby to friends — is not actively involved in the foundation, but she is a trustee of the L.A. County Museum of Art. "Artists will hate me if they find that out," she laments. "I'm deadly serious about my painting. If I were starving I couldn't have worked any harder for this show. I have painted since I was a young girl!"

Described as "introspective" by a friend, Keck reads and writes poetry — a volume of Emily Dickinson's verse lies next to the easel in her studio — and plays the piano. But painting is her overriding passion. Had she not married Howard at 18 and left

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Elizabeth Keck in her library, where, among the many pieces of 18th-century French furniture, there are a pair of Queen Anne tables, rare examples of the "chinoiserie" style applied to English furniture. Also in this room is a clock originally from the palace of Versailles and a painting by 18th-century English portraitist Thomas Gainsborough.





# **H**er infatuation with things French began on her first trip to Paris, when she was twelve.

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the Juilliard School, she might have fallen into an artist's bohemian existence. But as she has said, life has its quirks and turns. Now that her four children are grown, she has the time to make a commitment to her art. When assured that Louise Nevelson wasn't considered a serious artist until she was in her fifties, a pained look shadows her face. "I really wish I were 25 and just starting out," she confides. Keck declines to give her age, but appears to be in her late forties.

In a soft Oklahoma accent, she describes her childhood. Born in Philadelphia, Keck was raised in Oklahoma City, where her father gave up a medical practice to enter the oil business. During the stifling and dusty summer months, Keck recalls, "There was nothing to do but read."

"We had a marvelous library, and by the time I was twelve I had read all the classics: Voltaire, Tolstoy, you name it." Although she had already started drawing and painting, her first aspirations were musical. She wanted to write scores for musical comedies. "I used to correspond with Walter Damrosch, head of the New York Symphony," she recalls. "I'd send him my scores, and he'd send me back a letter saying, 'Keep writing and working because you'll do well.' He was so wonderful to do that."

Indeed, it was her interest in music that finally brought her to Juilliard in Manhattan, where she met Howard Keck. They dated for six weeks and decided to get married. Ten days before the wedding, a tremendous fight prompted Howard to say, "Let's get married tomorrow or we'll have another big fight." Elizabeth laughs, "So we flew to Reno the next day." They've been together for 32 years.

After the Kecks' first child was born, Elizabeth returned to college at the University of Southern California, where she studied art history and psychology. Two years later, she started studio classes in painting and drawing at the Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design and at UCLA. Her husband's business interests took her all over the world, and she spent much of her considerable free time in the art museums. "I spent so much time at the Louvre," she says, "I got to know the names of the guards."



She was also a regular visitor to the Palace of Versailles, which inspired her to collect seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French furniture. Today she owns one of the most respected private collections in the country. Her infatuation with things French had begun on her first trip to Paris, with her parents, when she was twelve. "We stayed at the Ritz Hotel, and I'll never forget I walked out in that Place Vendôme and there was not the parking there is now, just gravel. The proportions and the style, it was very severe and austere, but pure. Anything that very pure appeals to me. I like classicism."

She returns at least once a year to France, and she has taken each of her children there in turn to tempt to give them the kind of experience she had. But she could never convince her husband to move here. For business reasons the Kecks commuted between Houston, where they kept a modern farmhouse, and L.A., where they maintained a large country-style house on several acres in Bel-Air.

Ten years ago, Keck decided that if she couldn't live in France, she would bring a little Gallic charm to America. Plans were drawn up by an architect for a seventeenth-century-style stone chateau to be built as her "dream house" in Houston. But in the long run she decided to make L.A. their home. The chateau project was put on hold until 1978, when they sold their Bel-Air home and bought another lot

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in the same area on which to build their mini-Versailles.

Although one might expect such an enterprise to be in questionable taste, the house and its collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French furniture constitute a work of art in themselves.

"I wanted the house to have the same austerity that I felt as a little girl walking across the Place Vendôme for the first time," she explains. In collecting the furniture, selecting the fabrics and creating the interiors, she pursued a level of historical accuracy of which she can say, with pride, "There are a lot of pseudo-French houses in America, but this, I believe, is the only real one."

The black gates open to a chateau built of 18-inch-thick limestone blocks from Austin, Texas, of a type similar to that quarried in France. Mounted atop pillars on either side of the gate are stone stags' heads. Beginning a tour of her home for a visitor, Keck marvels: "The interesting thing is that my friend (designer) Hubert Givenchy, across the world in France, has a chateau in the country, and he put stags' heads on his gates at the same time!"

The chateau is briskly formal, fronted by gravel rather than grass, with neatly trimmed boxwood trees rooted in ivory-colored planters. Carved stone

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**M**embers of the French Communist party burst into the sale wearing heavy work clothes and boots and tossed pamphlets and circulars at the buyers.

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garlands festooning the tall windows were copied, with permission of the French government, from the house of the prime minister near Versailles. "His house was called La Lanterne," says Keck, indicating a brass plaque etched with the name, "and I copied it for ours because it means a lantern, but it also means a house you can see straight through when you open the front door."

From the foyer, where a curved staircase sweeps up to the second floor, the view is direct through the drawing room to draped windows to the backyard. The effect is breathtaking: Nearly every piece of furniture is from France under the Bourbon dynasty.

"I think France in the eighteenth century was the most glorious time in the world for furniture and objets d'art. All the top *ebenistes* (furniture makers who work in ebony), artists and designers came from all over the world to France, because France had the money to hire them. Even in those days, when these things were made, they were extremely, extremely expensive. They were only made for the people who could afford them. Well, at that time, people in France had the money for it, which, of course, is what brought on the Revolution."

Keck compiled her entire collection of furniture during the seven years in which the house was under construction, and though every piece could be considered museum quality, the palatial residence feels like a home. Individual commodes, tables and chairs are modestly scaled, which worked to her advantage at auctions, since one of her chief competitors was Gillian Wilson, curator of decorative arts at the J. Paul Getty Museum, who was seeking the more extravagant examples of Sun King taste.

In the drawing room, light refracts from gilded mirror frames, gold doré wall lights and ormolu mounts on furniture. "In France they would call this room the Grand Salon, but that was too much for me," she says, giving a little shrug. Four narrow vertical wall panels painted by Christophe Huet with scenes of the king cavorting with his court originally came from the Louis XIV chateau of St. Cloud outside of Paris, as did a small side table.

Keck tells a strange story about her acquisition of the panels. Too ill to attend the sale in Paris herself, she sent John K. Smith to bid for the panels. Smith, formerly the French furniture expert at the auction house of Sotheby Parke Bernet, was Keck's consultant when she first started collecting. Ironically, though the bidding was expected to be competitive at the sale, members of the French Communist party came to Keck's rescue. Bursting into the sale wearing heavy work clothes and boots, they tossed pamphlets and circulars at the buyers.

"This was five years ago," Keck says, "and everybody in Paris was a little scared of the Communists. Hardly anybody stayed, except my man and two or three others. So I got everything I wanted at a very good price. And that doesn't happen too often, I can tell you."

Other pieces of furniture are rich with history. The bronze clock on the marble fireplace is signed by the eighteenth-century sculptor Caffieri. Mirrors on either side of the drawing room, dated 1645, were recently established to be from Versailles. The gold doré wall lights in the foyer and the paneling from the dining room came from the Edmund Rothschild Collection in London. Another pair of wall lights once graced the boudoir of Marie Antoinette. The late-seventeenth-century designer Charles Andre Boulle created the small table of brass inlaid with lapis lazuli and mother of pearl in a Chinese-inspired scene of pagodas and men fishing in junks.

"I try to look for things that are off the beaten track," Keck explains. In isolating unusual pieces, her special emphasis has been on chinoiserie, furniture and tapestries influenced by France's newly opened trade with China and Japan. She has accrued Chinese porcelains to which the French added gold ormolu mounts and furniture by *ebenistes* who incorporated Japanese black lacquer scenes into ebony pieces with added ormolu.

One such ensemble is an eighteenth-century commode and secretaire signed by Adam Weisweiler. Only two other such ensembles exist: one is in the collection of the Hermitage Museum and the other belongs to the Queen of England.

Keck chose her textiles with care, having sofas, chairs and drapes done in materials copied from the same periods as the furniture. "All the fabrics were made in Lyons by the same families who made them for the kings, and they all have a provenance a mile long. I tried to do everything authentically."

The drapes with the lovebird pattern in the drawing room were originally designed for Catherine the Great of Russia. An envious Marie Antoinette had them copied for her quarters. Even the hardware — the door and window latches — has been designed in keeping with the period of the room.

Keck selected nearly every piece of furniture by previsualizing where it would be according to a blueprint of her house. "The thing that astounds me is that it all fitted exactly as I'd planned." Her melding of colors demonstrates an artist's eye, as does the slate blue, apple green and rose Savonnerie carpet in the drawing room, which pulls together the room's diverse elements. Her only help was from the French firm of Didier Aaron, which designed the interior architectural details.

Keck's devotion to historical accuracy stops with the fine art. Modern paintings by Helen Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell hang above the staircase, where they balance a pair of eighteenth-century tapestries. In other rooms, there are paintings by the eighteenth-century English portraitist Thomas Gainsborough and by impressionist painter Alfred Sisley.

"I like all kinds of art," she says. "It depends on how good it is. For me it's not a hobby but a passion. Once you get to see the best of everything, your eye rejects other things. My eye rejects my own

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Keck says her husband did not initially trust her

collecting impulses. "I begged him years ago, when prices were fairly low, for impressionist and Flemish paintings. But he didn't trust me and I didn't have the money to do it. Now I would like to, except they've gone so far out of sight in price." Keck proved the worth of her instincts with her French furniture collection; she estimates that it has tripled in value since she began collecting in 1978.

Toward the end of her tour, Keck's voice grows bored with the glories of French furniture. "The last thing I want to be known as," she confesses with exasperation, "is a lady who collects French furniture and also paints. What I love about the furniture is its wonderful sculptural qualities, but I've always loved contemporary art. And as time goes on, I love it more."

When Keck abandoned her own impressionist style of painting, she plunged rather than waded into abstract art. She bought acrylic paints, which she had never used before, and several large canvases. Her first attempt, enigmatically titled "Apocalypse," is so accomplished it is included in her exhibition. "I'm mad about this abstract art," she says. "I think there is something so exciting about it, you can really tap into the inside of yourself and bring out something that is truly unique, that nobody has done before, that is more exciting than drawing a

beautiful bowl of flowers. There is something that appears on a primitive level in abstraction, something that speaks to us with no words."

Turning suddenly pensive, Keck leans against an eighteenth-century desk in the library and, all in a rush, confesses, "I've wanted my whole life to be able to do these things, but this is the first time I've had the time. I'm thrilled to death. Great art is something that is never accomplished quickly, but rather it is a sensibility that is refined, a new way of seeing and improving upon what has gone before.

"For 28 years, my husband was working all over the world and I would often be here alone. I had to reach inside myself to find interests and things that give me joy. I loved my family and sought to develop my own resources, and in doing that, I've grown a lot.

"Everyone has to do that," she concludes. "I think that's what makes you happy in the end." ■

Elizabeth Keck's paintings can be seen at the Stella Polaris Gallery, 445 South Beverly Drive, in Beverly Hills, from October 18 to November 16.

Hunter Drohojowska writes frequently about the arts for the Herald.

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