



Designing Woman

Step into history at a New Orleans estate designed by a trailblazing landscape architect

BY JESSICA FENDER

As he exits an extravagant bedroom that is adorned in airy whites and blues, Longue Vue House and Gardens tour guide Rhett Ortego turns and pauses. Behind him, the next room is a study richly paneled in oak. “When this is closed,” he says, gesturing to the study’s dark wooden door, “it doesn’t match the bedroom on this side. And so ...”

With a flourish, he reveals a second pocket door from the same jamb—this one painted white.

It’s one of hundreds of *just-so* details—from windows etched with roses that match nearby wallpaper to a sweeping 500-foot sight line stretching down a live oak allée through the house to a lawn beyond—that the estate’s interior designer and landscape architect, Ellen Biddle Shipman (1869–1950), built into this New Orleans landmark.

Now, thanks to a Save America’s Treasures Grant, administered by the National Park Service, the team at this masterpiece-turned-museum is

putting Shipman’s life as a trailblazer on full display.

“Her personal story is so inspirational,” says Stella Baty Landis, Longue Vue’s executive director. “And we have an exciting opportunity to tell it.”

To call Shipman an unlikely icon is an understatement. Abandoned by her husband, the mother of three began working as a landscape architect at the age of 42 with the help of architect Charles Platt, who became her mentor. Eventually she opened a design studio in New York City that prioritized hiring women and counted luminaries like Vanderbilts and Fords among her clientele.

In total, she completed more than 600 gardens and approximately 10 interior designs. Longue Vue is the only site in the country where the public can experience one of her interiors. Visitors have long flocked to the 8-acre property for programs on gardening, design, and art, and to take walks through bursting arrays of blooms.

With the grant, staff are unearthing archived letters and hand-drawn mock-ups of the property, as well as offering Shipman tours. They’re also organizing a symposium March 25–28 called “Shipmania: In the Spirit of a Pioneering Woman.”

As Ortego leads guests out through the site’s 16 garden rooms, it’s clear that even on everyday tours, Shipman’s legacy is inescapable. Pointing out circular patterns of slate, brickwork, and river stones in the Walled Garden, he says simply, “Shipman designed that.” It’s a phrase he could repeat over and over in places like the Overlook Pond, which she planned as a reading nook, and the Portico Garden, with its boxwood parterres. Shipman’s indelible fingerprints are everywhere in this pleasing place.

If You Go

For more information, call Longue Vue at 504-488-5488 or visit longuevue.com.

New Orleans-based travel writer **JESSICA FENDER** won’t say no to snooping around someone’s house, especially if it’s historic.

COURTESY LONGUE VUE HOUSE AND GARDENS