




A House Called *Albania*

Deep in Louisiana's bayou country, a faded antebellum beauty worked its charms on artist Hunt Slonem—and then the producers of *All the King's Men* came knocking

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Albania, a Greek Revival house outside Jeanerette, La., dates from the mid-1800s and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It features a columned portico with double galleries, or covered porches, along the façade.



In the main parlor, a 19th-century chandelier hangs above two Federal sofas, elaborately carved 1860s rosewood chairs and an early-1800s table. LEFT Artist Hunt Slonem stands next to some of his canvases in a second-floor bedroom where a Gothic Revival chair is juxtaposed with a Federal dresser.

Patrizia von Brandenstein knows a great house when she sees one. “We were driving along a narrow road, and I saw a murky shape through very dense foliage—plus a rusty old gate held together with wire,” says the Hollywood production designer, recalling her location search for *All the King’s Men*, which hit theaters last month. “We stopped the car. I could barely discern something through the thickness of the leaves. And I thought, My God, this is it.”

Albania Plantation, in Jeanerette, La., sits among centuries-old sugarcane fields, nearly dwarfed by live oaks and enormous magnolias despite its hulking size. “It looked ghostly, but it had grandeur,” says von Brandenstein, who won an Academy Award for her work on the 1984

film *Amadeus*. “I could see that the structure was derelict, but it had strength and presence.” Though she couldn’t get inside, she vowed to find the place’s owner.

Enter New York City artist Hunt Slonem, who had bought the dilapidated white elephant in the fall of 2004, a few months before filming began. Known for painting mystical canvases depicting elaborately colored butterflies, parrots and jaguars, Slonem already possessed a 30-room Second Empire pile in New York’s Hudson Valley (in addition, he occupies two spacious downtown Manhattan lofts, living in one and working in another). But something about Albania, with its columned façade, massive porches and 14-foot ceilings, spoke to him.

“I cried when I signed the deal,” says Slonem, who first became smitten with Louisiana in the





Sloneim opted to keep the 1940s-style cabinets, which had been installed in his kitchen for the filming of *Ali the King's Men* (see "Reel Life," opposite). Part of his collection of ironstone tableware lines the counter. The farm tables are made of Louisiana cypress.

1970s, while he was attending Tulane University in New Orleans (for years he kept a copy of *Ghosts Along the Mississippi*, a photographic chronicle of historic river plantations, beside his bed). "This state has the most fabulous old houses. They have a certain smell—cigarettes, bourbon and mildew in the ceilings—that just sends chills down my spine. I feel like I have a mission to bring back the magnificence that's been tarnished by time and lack of understanding."

Soon after purchasing Albania, Slonem undertook a complete renovation of the 12,000-square-foot, three-story house, full of peeling paint, cracked and stained plaster, and electrical wiring that was questionable at best. "It had been leaking everywhere," says the artist, who replaced rotten wood, replastered the front hall and fallen ceilings on the second and third floors, rewired every room, and repainted nearly all the walls—both interior and exterior—with period colors. "The upstairs had never even had electricity, and there were six huge gas leaks."

While his crew was still knee-deep in the hardcore restoration, von Brandenstein and her set decorators started readying the property for the filming of *All the King's Men*, which stars Sean Penn, Jude Law, Anthony Hopkins and Kate Winslet. Ultimately, portions of the main parlor, dining room, kitchen and a bedroom were used, in addition to the exterior. "We were careful to touch only the surface of the rooms," she says. "We didn't want to destroy anything original."

Albania, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was built in stages between 1837 and 1842 for Charles Grevenberg, a planter who died not long after its completion. No one knows how the house got its unusual name, but Thomas Kramer, a former president of the St. Mary's Parish Landmarks Society, theorizes that "before the war—and there's only one war, of



Reel Life

Portions of the 2006 movie *All the King's Men* were shot in and around Hunt Slonem's Louisiana mansion. Based on the 1946 Robert Penn Warren novel of the same title, the story parallels the turbulent life and times of Louisiana governor—and later U.S. senator—Huey Long, whose fictional counterpart is populist politician Willie Stark. In the film, Sean Penn plays Stark; Jude Law (above, right) is Jack Burden, a slumming patrician journalist who becomes the powerful Stark's protégé; Kate Winslet (above, left) is Anne Stanton, a former governor's daughter who falls in love with Burden. Curiously enough, the house's previous owner, Emily Cyr Bridges, was the daughter of Paul Cyr, who served as lieutenant governor under Long from 1928 to 1931.

course—it was the custom to name plantations for exotic locations, and Albania was, at least in antebellum Louisiana, an exotic place." (Others of note in the state include Egypt and Patagonia.)

In 1885 Grevenberg's heirs sold Albania to Isaac Delgado, a philanthropist and founder of the New Orleans Museum of Art; he in turn willed the plantation to the city of New Orleans. But by the mid-fifties the house had become run-down, and in 1957 the city, instead of making needed repairs, auctioned it off. Emily Cyr Bridges, a Jeanerette native, paid by check (reportedly \$27,000), and the place was hers.

Miss Emily, as everyone called her, and her husband moved in, fixed it up, and began to give tours. Locals remember her as a beauty with a taste for adventure—an avid antiques collector who drove fast cars and was always turned out



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT A chandelier from the New Orleans shop Karla Katz & Co. shimmers above the main staircase, which was produced in sections in France. Paintings, including a Slonem portrait of Sydney Biddle Barrows (in pearls), hang in the first-floor sitting room. The pale-pink laundry room is the sparest space in the house. The Pink Bedroom boasts a half-tester bed by Louisiana cabinetmaker McCracken; Slonem bought the antique from the estate of Albania's previous owner.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT The second-floor bathroom came with a whimsically painted tub; the chair is late-19th-century Italian. In the dining room, 19th-century decanters, pickle jars and other accoutrements adorn a breakfront from Griffin's Antiques, in Bunkie, La. The second-floor library, also called the Bayou Room, boasts an Edwardian sofa and a Belgian table. An 1860 rosewood half-tester bed by Mallard stands in the corner of a second-floor guest room.





The chandelier in the dining room once hung in another Louisiana plantation house. The English statue of Bacchus in the corner dates from 1830. LEFT Slonem uses the first floor's Red Room as an office. The Gothic Revival chair, which he found in N.Y.C.'s East Village, is covered in a Fortuny fabric.



in gorgeous clothes (she had even been a pioneering aviatrix during World War II). But after her husband died, she became a recluse, trading in her gowns for surgical scrubs—the front pockets were perfect for holding cigarettes—and fretting about the house she couldn't maintain: Albania was slowly crumbling before her eyes. When Miss Emily passed away in 2003, the home and its contents—room after room packed with local vernacular furniture, Audubon prints, lusterware and an unparalleled collection of baskets made by the local Chitimacha Indians—were sold; Slonem bought several choice pieces, including a rare half-tester bed.

"I'm not a decorator," he says modestly, "but I try to re-create a period by assembling what falls into my lap. I haven't put anything in Albania that

couldn't have been there originally." Indeed, most of the furnishings date from 1840 to 1860, with a few items from the earlier Federal era as well as chairs and sofas from his considerable collection of Gothic Revival furniture.

Despite Albania's distance from New York City, Slonem's renovation experience has led in part to his purchase of another gargantuan fixer-upper a few hours' drive away. "I love Louisiana," he says. "I feel a connection to the earth here, being among the magical live oaks, Spanish moss, crawfish nests, and always something blooming: satsumas, camellias and shrimp plants in great profusion. It's like home. It seems like I've lived here for 100 years already." [Want to get the specifics on Hunt Slonem's daring interior paint palette? Turn to the Sourcebook on page 147.] ■

