

Take a look at a different type of cultural property

Going to Graceland

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On August 16, 1987, Elvis Presley had been dead for ten years. In death, as he was in life, Elvis is a phenomenon. The rock star who became the single most popular entertainer in American history has become an international cult figure. And the focal point for this posthumous adulation is Graceland, Elvis' home in Memphis, Tennessee.

With more than 500,000 visitors annually, Graceland is one of America's most popular historic homes. Although the White House and Mount Vernon are currently drawing just over a million visitors per year, other sites such as the Abraham Lincoln home, in Springfield, Illinois, and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello each receive about 500,000—approximately equal to Graceland. The dwellings of the presidential gods have a formidable rival in the home of the "Hillbilly Cat."

Elvis bought Graceland when he was only 22 and enjoying an early success that must have been especially sweet. A 1953 graduate of Memphis' blue collar Humes High School, he had been an ordinary student—not one of the popular class leaders—and had faced ridicule when he adopted his greasy duck tails and sideburns. But soon Elvis rocketed to cosmic fame and fortune as a rock-and-roll sex symbol: the wild one, Marlon Brando with a guitar, titillating millions of virginal squealers and striking terror in the hearts of mommies and daddies across the land.

Elvis moved from the brilliant spontaneity of his early recordings made while still a skinny kid, through his army years and a dreary movie career. He made his great on-stage comeback in 1968 as a leather-clad rock-and-roll stud knocking his fans stone cold dead. In his last years his shows drew record-breaking crowds in Las Vegas, and his satellite special from Hawaii in 1973 was viewed by an audience estimated at perhaps more than a billion people. But in 1977, obese and bloated from drug abuse and an unhealthy diet, Elvis died alone on his upstairs bathroom floor at Graceland.

Today, at peak periods, as many as 24 minibuses per hour disgorge tourists at Graceland's white-columned front porch. The public is not allowed upstairs; they see only four rooms on the main floor and two in the basement. (Elvis' Aunt Delta Mae still lives

in the house; the smell of a pot roast or some other kitchen delight often permeates the air, giving a pleasing sense of life to the place.)

People who visit Elvis' home pay for the experience. About 65 percent of the visitors buy the \$12.00 "combination" ticket that gets them into Graceland, Elvis' two airplanes, his tour bus, and a small museum. Others buy the \$7.00 ticket just to see the house and grounds, the centerpiece of this remarkable shrine.

Highlights of the house tour include the blue-curtained dining room with ornate white table and chairs beneath a large chandelier; the mirrored, all-white living room with a 15-foot sofa; and beyond that an alcove, its entryway framed by stained glass panels featuring brightly colored peacock figures. In the alcove is enshrined Elvis' gold-leafed grand piano.

Mirrors abound, intended to give the ordinary-sized rooms a larger appearance. The stairway to the basement has mirrors on both sides and overhead, making a small tour group look the size of the Ohio State marching band. Downstairs are the blue and yellow TV room and, across the hall, the game room, its walls and ceilings covered with several hundred yards of pleated paisley cloth. Back on the main floor and at the rear of the house is Elvis' green-carpeted "jungle room," crowded with heavy Polynesian-style furniture.

Critics often sniff dryly and delicately skirt the subject of Graceland's interior decor—or else salivate as they launch a slathering attack on its "vulgarity and tastelessness," exposing to the world what they believe Elvis (and rock-and-roll for that matter) really was—a Hound Dog: "Well they said you was high class, but that was just a lie."

Granted, the rooms do look somewhat like the interior of a full-sized Buick, but what should be expected of a rock-and-roll star? Hepplewhite or Chippendale?—the familiar, comforting pieces with delicate curves and pineapple finials? Those who crave the proper, conservative decor of the Newport mansions should wait until they are invited there, or else go to Williamsburg or any of a thousand other places and thrill to the predictable, high-style look-alikes.

Graceland was the home of Elvis Presley, whose familiar, rich, rhythmic

voice, exaggerated sexual posturing, and primitive ballet performed in white jump suits bejeweled with Aztec sun or American eagle designs with matching capes made him the premier rock-and-roll star of all time. Why should the place look "proper"? At best shouldn't it remind us of Elvis? Graceland was where the "King" lived—a young man who spent his money wildly and whose home reflected his desire to have a good time. Enjoy the place.

And don't fret about the changes Priscilla (Elvis' ex-wife and co-executor of his estate) has made to the interior. She returned it to the way it was when she lived there, replacing red curtains and red upholstered furniture with softer blues. The reds dated from the era of Linda Thompson, Elvis' live-in girlfriend after Priscilla.

Priscilla's changes may have reflected a desire to remove traces of Linda's involvement; but careful now—don't be cruel—there were other good justifications. Priscilla's replacement furnishings are *original*, the very pieces used most of the time Elvis occupied Graceland. She simply retrieved them from a warehouse. And a sampling of the red furniture from Linda's era is exhibited in the museum across the street from Graceland. Please note: furnishing historic houses to their peak period is a strategy employed at hundreds of historic places, from Mount Vernon to Monticello—to mention a couple of high-status sites. So just which side of the tracks is Graceland on anyway?

In back of the house one sees some of Elvis' cars, including his pink 1955 Cadillac and two sleek Italian-made Stutz Blackhawks. Next comes the trophy room, with a display of Elvis' 120 gold records, many of his favorite costumes, a replica of his six-tiered, five-foot-high wedding cake, his gun and badge collection, his huge red Harley-Davidson, and more.

Fittingly, the final stop on the Graceland tour is the gravesite, where Elvis, his parents and grandmother are buried. Hard-core Elvis fans find this to be the emotional peak of the tour. Accommodating public interest, Graceland's management allows direct access free of charge to the gravesite in the early morning. Mementos, notes, remembrances are often placed at Elvis' grave, at the head of which burns an eternal flame. Here one may contemplate the pain and pleasure of a lifestyle for which there was no preparation—and consequently little control.

Across the street from Graceland is a small shopping center where tickets

are purchased and minibuses loaded. Here also, after the tour, the buses are unloaded—at the far end of the shopping center. Only the most determined can make their way non-stop past the many Elvis shops and back to the parking lot the size of Rhode Island.

Those who don't stop may miss an extra treat. In a special alcove of the record shop sits Elvis' uncle, Vester Presley, in his 70s, wearing his good-old-boy cap, and ready to talk. A genetic link with the King himself, Uncle Vester passes the time answering questions and reminiscing about

the golden days of yesteryear—when the fabulous fame and fortune of his nephew must have been dizzying to those around him.

A visit to Graceland makes it apparent that, like Elvis himself, Graceland has become an institution and difficult to judge: only a passing fad?, only a bit of "popular culture" without real historical importance? In fact, there is nothing else quite like Graceland. It is a new and different kind of shrine in that it commemorates a different kind of public figure—not a revered politician or a celebrated

author, but a rock star whose music still threatens or offends segments of American society. Both Elvis and the enormous popularity of Graceland are important reflections of public values held during the last half of the 20th century—regarding our musical taste and what part of our past we choose to commemorate.

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