

THE TATTOO

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Mischievous words, etched in stone

By **KATIE JORDAN**
The Tattoo

It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the dimness as I stepped from the bright, sunny outside world into a hallway so stark and bare that it might have resembled the entrance to a cave more than the entrance to a museum, if not for the gift shop to the right, the two benches, and the desk where visitors check in.

Many museums try to nab their visitors right away, either with showy displays to catch the eye from the first instant, or with some pushy guide who pounces on you the moment you enter, eager to herd you along while talking a mile a minute.

So for the first instant I was caught off guard by the quiet and emptiness of that first hallway. It actually echoed – or maybe that was just my imagination. But it was the sort of place that looked like it *should* echo, a dim corridor with cold stone walls and cold stone floors. It was a little eerie, actually. I kept expecting that pushy guide to jump out at me at any second and take me by surprise.

It wasn't just the fact that this wasn't what I expected from a museum that bothered me. It was that I actually *like* Mark Twain. I've read some of his books and stories. I know a lot of his funniest quotes. I admire his good-natured humor and the warmth I found in his writing.

So why should the museum dedicated to his life be so cold and dreary?

But then I realized the walls were not completely bare when I caught sight of the first humorous Mark Twain quote engraved across the stones there.

Suddenly, something clicked in my mind.

Like the man himself, the museum has a gruff, no-nonsense exterior. But, like the mischievous twinkle in his eye, the humor and heart is there just below the surface. It's imprinted forever on the walls throughout the museum.

The place didn't seem so cold after I realized that.

In truth, the museum is a very fitting memorial for Mark Twain, in many ways.

Even in building the structure itself, those behind its creation were true to what Twain would have wanted. The museum, which is actually quite spacious, was designed so that it appears small when viewed from outside. So it doesn't appear as a huge eyesore intruding on the place Twain loved and called home for many years.

The exhibits themselves are dedicated to the story of Twain's life, from his birth as Samuel Clemens when Halley's Comet blazed overhead, to his

death with the comet's return.

One of the first things I encountered was a video shown in a dark little room. As museum videos go, this one is actually surprisingly interesting. It tells the story of what Twain called his "vagabond's existence," and the experiences which would become central to some of America's greatest writings later.

In another room around the corner is a permanent exhibit about Twain's life.

The circular room has a sort of timeline all around the walls that details his travels and some of his

most noteworthy experiences. The walls behind the timeline are painted to resemble the various places he lived and worked, including Hartford, the Mississippi River, and Nevada.

In front of the timeline are lit glass cases containing some very nifty gadgets and knickknacks – some people might even call them "artifacts," I suppose – from Twain's life.

There is a letter from Twain to his wife, there are a few dishes and so on. Then there's an invention that Twain created, some sort of game to help people remember important historical dates.

Apparently it never caught on – which isn't surprising, because it looks like it would be about as much fun as memorizing the telephone book.

The Paige Compositor also resides in this room. It was a clever invention which Twain himself did not invent, but suffered a similar fate to that of the historical dates memory device. Unfortunately, Twain had invested all his money in this invention – and lost it all.

As if all that wasn't enough, the center of this circular room has several benches with apparatus for listen-

ing to recordings of selections from some of Mark Twain's short stories and books.

And for the little kids who may not be old enough to find Twain's writings as amusing as I do, there are some hands-on type of exhibits down low enough for younger visitors to enjoy.

For example, they can lay a sheet of paper on a raised picture of Twain's face and make a rubbing from the picture.

Even if they can't yet understand slavery – one of Twain's most serious themes – they can feel the weight of a chain and shackle in their hands.



A side view of The Mark Twain House in Hartford, Conn.

Tattoo photo

Mark Twain's house is an awesome crib

By **JOE KEO**
The Tattoo

Imagine floating down a river on a raft, living by the day, with adventures waiting beyond every bend. That, ladies and gentlemen, is what Mark Twain was thinking when he wrote the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

But the amazing part about it is that he wrote it here, in Hartford, Connecticut.

From afar, The Mark Twain House & Museum is an amazing example of

architecture. The brick walls are accompanied by intricate carpentry and earth-toned burgundy-red-brown paint. The roofs jut into the sky at sharp angles.

It was in this house where one man helped changed American literature, and I was about to step inside.

Just outside the front entrance are masterfully carved birds and butterflies that remain suspended in flight by wooden brackets. Two stain-glassed windows welcome visitors with a floral image.

Across the threshold is a dimly lit hall. A metal stand by the doorway held old calling cards left by Twain's guests from way back when. I felt sort of bad because I didn't have a card – I really wanted to leave one.

High on the wall was what I thought was a mirror, but surprisingly, it was a window looking straight to the adjacent room.

I walked into the next room and wow – the walls looked like a page out of a Magic Eye book. Hand-painted and stenciled geometrical patterns decorated the entire room with a hint of silver shine. My eyes were hurting from just being in that room. I wanted to sit down. Behind me was an ornate, pink cushioned chair with padded armrests.

If it weren't for

the museum's restriction, I would have plopped down on it right that second.

It might sound like a boring old house tour, but as I took the time to listen to the guide and observe the house carefully, it turned out to be a pretty interesting experience. As the tour continued, it only got better.

The dining room was a trip. If I were a vegan, I would have had a heart attack over the leather-covered walls. But luckily for all the vegans out there, it was mere textured wallpaper painted to look like leather. It was meant to give the room a wealthy and luxurious touch.

The following room was the Twain children's schoolroom. What got me was a little painting on the wall. Viewing it up close, I saw two figures resting their arms on a counter, but as I walked away I saw a skull. Talk about creepy. I must say I scurried a tad bit faster out of that room than I did the others.

We finally went to the third floor where all the magic happened – that is, Twain's literary achievements.

My hands held onto the thick mahogany rail as I ascended. At the top, the guide stopped and waited for the rest of my tour group to arrive.

When everyone was gathered, we entered the billiard room, the place where Twain spent his time writing. I never thought of Twain as a billiard man, but the first thing I saw was a large pool table.

Just to prove his love for the game, Twain had a painted reflection of the pool table on the ceiling. Etched into the windows, behind the area where he wrote, were a pair of pool sticks and a wineglass, emphasizing that booze and shooting pool were some of his favorite pastimes.

It felt pretty amazing standing in the middle of the room where Twain wrote renowned works like *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and *The Prince and the*



Photo courtesy of The Mark Twain House & Museum

Inside the Mark Twain Museum Center

Pauper. It's just unbelievable that Mark Twain sat in that very room with a pen and paper, scribbling away into American literature a new Realist movement that veered away from the accepted Romanticism of his time. Walking away from my visit to Twain's house left me with a newfound respect for his contribution to American literature.

Twain's work is read in schools and

homes all over. Whether you're an architecture buff who admires the house's beauty, or a bookworm who enjoys the author's skillfully written stories, The Mark Twain House is a great visit.

Not convinced?

I'll leave you with one of Twain's many quotes: "There is no sadder thing than a young pessimist, except an old optimist."



Tattoo photo

Tattoo writers Katie Jordan and Joe Keo outside The Mark Twain House.

Dropping in on Mark Twain

Samuel Clemens, who wrote under the pen name Mark Twain, lived at 351 Farmington Ave., Hartford, Conn. with his family. His house is open for tours, and an adjoining museum offers further information on all things Twain.

Admission, which includes the museum and house tour, is \$12 for adults 19 to 64, \$10 for students, \$11 for seniors over age 65, \$8 for children ages 6-12 and free for anyone under 6.

Visitors should allow two hours or more. Hours are 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily. The Mark Twain House & Museum is open year round, but closed on some holidays, including Dec. 24 and 25 and Jan. 1. It is closed on Easter Sunday, Thanksgiving and all Tuesdays from January through April.

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