

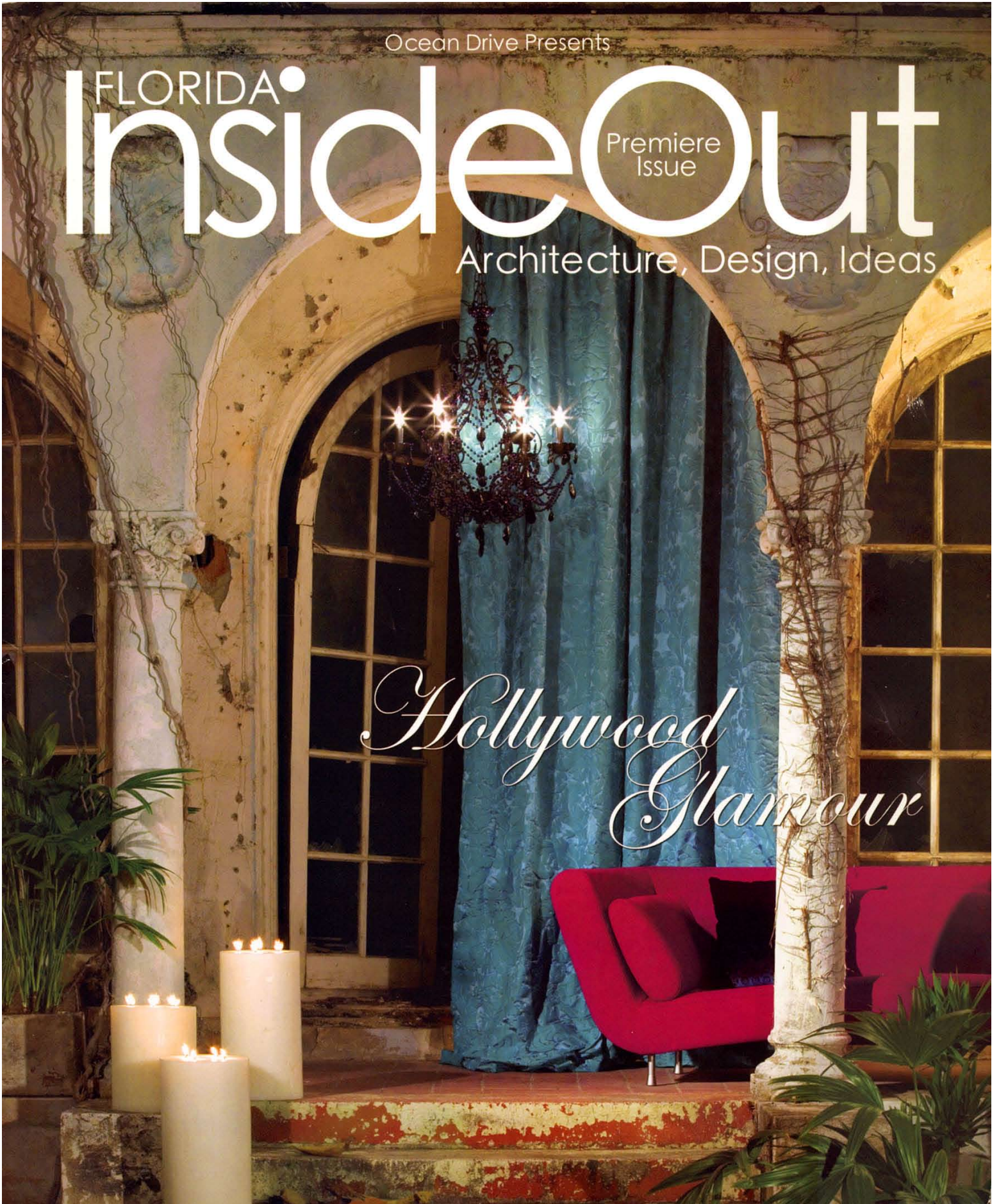
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Premiere  
Issue

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# THE BRENTWOOD

In 1955, William Haines created a low, rounded chair; here it comes around again. BY LINDA LEE

**T**he philosopher Plato asked, "What makes a chair a chair?" For two millennia the simple answer—"something you sit on"—was wrong, because you could sit on a tree trunk, and a tree trunk wasn't a chair. That, of course, was before the antic designers at the Droog design collective came along in 2002, and designed the Tree Trunk Bench.

Perhaps a better question is "What makes a chair a good chair?" Designers from the Romans to the Jacobean, from Thonet to the Eameses, from African tribesmen to American Colonialists have all devised chairs. In fact, it seems hard to believe that anyone could make anything distinctive at all out of a combination of arms, legs, feet, seats, backs, rails, uprights and stretchers.

Perhaps that's why several new chairs seem to look so much alike, and so similar to the Brentwood chair, a low armless upholstered chair, gently curved, that was designed 50 years ago by the decorator William Haines. Suzanne Slesin, editor of *O at Home*, is publisher of Pointed Leaf Press, which is issuing a book on Haines in the fall. It is *Class Act William Haines: Legendary Hollywood Decorator* by Peter Schifando and Jean Mathison. (Schifando is the head of Lindley Associates, in Los Angeles, which reproduces the Brentwood chair, to order, for \$4,920.)



**A LOOK OF REAL HOLLYWOOD:** William Haines (at left) went from acting to designing. His 1955 Brentwood chairs (above) were reupholstered by Kelly Wearstler.

with its "bare midriff," he said, "was inspired by the glamour of 1950s Hollywood." Another designer who has fallen for the look is Jacques Garcia, the superstar who has just designed the Hotel Victor in Miami Beach. His glamorous Victoire Chair, for Baker, is in showrooms now. It too has the low, curved feeling (and bare midriff) of Haines's Brentwood chair.

Kelly Wearstler, the Los Angeles-based doyenne of the Hollywood Regency style, reupholstered four Billy Haines Brentwood chairs in loosely woven ivory linen, and used them in her redecoration of the Trousdale Place estate in Beverly Hills. Schifando, who has sold his versions of the Brentwood chair to Wearstler, said that the ones for Trousdale are the real deal. A good guess would be that they could be traced back to the Jack Warner estate. In 1990, when David Geffen bought the Warner estate, he emptied it of all the old furniture, including many pieces by Haines.

Low, upholstered lounging chairs like the Brentwood have their Florida adherents as well. Susane Ronai, a designer with Susane R.,

HAINES, COURTESY OF CLASS ACT; WILLIAM HAINES; LEGENDARY HOLLYWOOD DECORATOR ROOM, COURTESY OF MODERN GLAMOUR; THE ART OF UNEXPECTED STYLE

her own boutique in the Design District, said she intentionally copied Haines's design with her Hug chair, which she sells upholstered in white cotton chenille, or in the customers' own fabric, for \$800. "The glamorous 40s is my specialty," she said. With the Haines chair, she said, all she had to do was "freshen it up, reinterpret it."

Even Alison Spear's custom-designed slipper chair, \$1,000, from the Spear Line, seems like a first cousin of the Brentwood chair, made for easy lounging and elegant indolence.

Joseph Rosa, the Helen Hilton Raiser Curator of Architecture and Design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, was the curator of *Glamour: Fashion, Industrial Design, Architecture*, a show at SFMoMA that closed in January and that contained a Brentwood chair borrowed from the Lindley collection.

Rosa estimates that a real Brentwood chair could run as much as \$50,000 today, if you could find one. Even more rare would be a Brentwood chair with Plexiglas legs. "There are some," Rosa said. "Plexi is a very critical material to the 30s and the 50s in the luxury realm."

His voice practically glows as he lovingly describes the attributes of a classic Haines Brentwood chair: The open structure of the chair's backrest, the heavily controlled tufting, "almost like a leather-tufted couch," he said.

"The back is completely revealed," he said. "So it's padded for where you rest."

"That's the element that so many designers miss," he said. "When you enclose the back, the chair changes."

Rosa, who is writing the introduction to *Class Act*, said that it is time for a reappraisal of William Haines, who went by the nickname Billy. "Elsie de Wolfe being rediscovered is a sign of that," Rosa said. "Elsie de Wolfe and Billy Haines are resurfacing almost better than before."

Part of the reason for that is a renewed hankering for luxury and lounging.

"The Brentwood is for women in couture clothing," Rosa said. "It's low, there are no arms to trap her. You almost can't see a person in a Paco Rabanne or a Jacques Fath dress sitting in a Barcelona chair."

And so the star has risen on the Brentwood chair and its cousins, from Kelly Wearstler reupholstering real Brentwood chairs, to Mitchell Gold's success with the Astrid chair, which has had a starring role in showrooms like those at ABC Carpet & Home, both in New York and in Delray Beach.

"That's how the shift happens," Rosa said. "It goes from a rare commodity from people who commissioned Billy Haines interiors, to a mass production to the aesthetically included masses." ■



**THE ORIGINAL HAINES:**  
The 1955 Brentwood chair, from the collection of Lindley Associates in Los Angeles. Note the deep curved shape, the low profile, the button-tufted seat and the open "midriff" back. A new version of the chair from Lindley is \$4,920.



**A SALUTE TO HAINES:**  
In the Design District in Miami, Susane Ronai has paid homage to Hollywood glamour with a custom-made chair that is modeled on the Brentwood by William Haines. The Hug is available at the Susane R. boutique for \$800.



**SOME LIKE IT PINK:**  
Mitchell Gold's Astrid chair is seen here upholstered in an Erin-Chalky Pink linen/cotton blend. His company defines it as "a midriff chair with a button back—a great Hollywood glamour look!" Suggested retail is \$795.



**A FLAMBOYANT COUSIN:**  
Jacques Garcia, the designer of Hotel Victor in Miami Beach, did the Victoire, saying it was modeled on the ancient klismos chair, although it probably owes more to T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings's klismos and the comfort of the Brentwood. It starts at \$3,500, plus upholstery, and can be ordered from Baker.



**SLIGHTLY SIMPLIFIED:**  
Alison Spear, a Miami architect and designer, has a slipper chair, \$1,000, in her Spear Line that is low, tufted with a single button on the back and seat, but has no midriff.