

Los Angeles Times  
**HOME**

Thursday, October 13, 2005

**DESIGN**

Two longtime devotees of iconic interior designer William Haines carry on his legacy, preserving a glamour-soaked Regency style that defines Los Angeles, then and now.

# HOLLYWOOD REMAKE



JULIUS SHULMAN / J. Paul Getty Trust

**SHADES OF ROSE:** William Haines collaborated with architect A. Quincy Jones on this 1950 home, featuring Haines' long, low couch and Brentwood chairs.



NICHOLAN ACKERMAN

**BOLD LEGACY:** Haines, who died in 1973, put his own distinctively Modern spin on Hollywood glamour.

By DAVID A. KEEPS  
*Times Staff Writer*

**“DESIGN** is an opinion,” declared the opinionated designer William Haines. “Not a profession.”

But Jean Mathison, Haines' administrative major-domo from 1965 until his death in 1973, begs to differ. She asserts that for Billy Haines, the Jazz Age MGM film star who became the premier interior decorator for glamour-hungry movie queens and business barons, design was a profession — and a calling.

“He used to say that if he had been born during the time of Louis XVI, he would’ve decorated Versailles,” she says. Mathison, an ebullient 80-year-old storyteller from Hollywood’s golden age, and Peter Schifando, a 53-year-old L.A. designer still catering to Haines’ clientele, have joined forces and archives. Hers fill a two-car garage, and his consist of thousands of blueprints and renderings. Together they are securing Haines’ legacy with “Class Act: William Haines, Legendary Hollywood Decorator,” which hits bookstores this month as the first major monograph on the designer.

On a recent Friday morning, Mathison pays a visit to Schifando’s Melrose Place studio. She is the histo- [See Haines, Page F8]



BETHANN COVATTA

**HOLLYWOOD GLAM:** Joan Crawford in her living room designed by Haines in 1949 with a biscuit tufted free-form ottoman.

## DESIGN

# The glamour days still reign

[Haines, from Page F1] rian; he is the practitioner carrying on the Haines aesthetic, the touchstone of the current craze for Hollywood Regency design. Schifando painstakingly reproduces 50-year-old Haines furniture designs and does interiors for the original Haines Inc. A-list, dynasties with the names Reagan, Warner, Bloomingdale and Annenberg.

As Mathison alights like a mid-century glamour girl on one of Haines' classics, the low and soignée Elbow chair, Jonathan Joseph, Schifando's business partner at Peter Schifando & Co., enters the studio library. He has just returned from a visit to "Mrs. Reagan's" where, while attempting to replace a tile, he accidentally tripped a security wire, summoning unamused Secret Service agents.

"It's a complete continuum," Schifando says of his role in maintaining the glittering legacy of Haines and of the late Ted Graber, Haines' protégé who redecorated the Reagan White House and whom Schifando worked with in the late 1980s. For the past decade, Schifando has sold Haines reproductions to top Los Angeles decorators such as Michael Smith, who recently redesigned Shutters on the Beach in Santa Monica, and Kelly Wearstler, who put a flashy mod spin on Hollywood glam at the Viceroy hotels in Santa Monica and Palm Springs.

"Haines is one of the great icons of Los Angeles design," says interior designer Antonia Hutt, a Haines devotee who is featured in Mathison and Schifando's forthcoming book. "But there is so little documentation of his work that it will be an invaluable resource."

Jason Stein, the associate director of 20th century furniture and decorative arts at Bonhams & Butterfields, agrees. "The period photographs of his commissions in the original residences cement William Haines' importance," he says. "It's timeless design, wonderful modern Neoclassical pieces that have stood up and work well in many types of environments."

The photographs in "Class Act" (Pointed Leaf Press, \$95) prove Stein's

contention. A 2000 shot in Hutt's West Hollywood condominium features four Brentwood chairs, a 1955 Haines design with 1-foot-high white leather seats that tiptoe over splayed tapered legs.

With its tightly tufted seat and floating backrest, the Brentwood has been endlessly aped. Furniture manufacturer Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams approximates the Haines look with the Astrid chair, \$1,000. Patrick Dragonette's dining chair homage, the Lauren, can be purchased at his Los Angeles store for \$3,600. Schifando's reproduction of the original Haines design is sold to decorators for nearly \$5,000, twice the price Haines charged 50 years ago. Back then, Haines' silver-spoon clientele paid for

quality and exclusivity. "He did not need to seek publicity," Mathison says.

Publicity had a way of finding William Haines, nonetheless. Born Jan. 2, 1900, in Staunton, Va., he was a man of the 20th century, leaving home as a teenager and finding his way to New York City at the dawn of the Roaring '20s, when the handsome, charming and unapologetically gay Haines roared with the best of them. After his friends jokingly submitted his photo to a "New Faces" talent search sponsored by the Samuel Goldwyn Co. and Haines won, he ditched his job as a runner on Wall Street, headed to Hollywood and signed with MGM.

Untrained as an actor, Haines de-

signed a screen persona — brash but immensely likable — that clicked. He starred in silent films with Joan Crawford ("Sally, Irene and Mary") and Marlon Davies ("Show People") and by 1926 was earning enough to purchase a two-story Hollywood home at 1712 N. Stanley Ave. A devotee of English architecture and antiques, he engaged James Doleña, one of the preeminent architects of the era, to transform the Spanish exterior into a Georgian jewel box.

Haines and life partner Jimmy Shields entertained lavishly, leading Tallulah Bankhead to dub their home Haines Castle. In 1930, the year he topped a poll of motion picture exhibitors as the box office's biggest male

draw, Haines and his movie stand-in, Mitch Foster, opened an antiques store on North La Brea Avenue. By then, Haines had begun designing homes for the film colony, notably his greatest champion, Crawford.

It was a provident move for Haines, who had grown tired of being "the oldest living college boy in America." In 1933, Louis B. Mayer, apoplectic over the fact that Haines preferred gentlemen, issued an ultimatum: Haines could leave Shields or leave MGM. Unperturbed, Haines became a full-time decorator.

William Mann's 1998 biography "Wisecracker: The Life and Times of William Haines, Hollywood's First Openly Gay Star" and the subsequent



KEN HIVELEY Los Angeles Times



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

**AGELESS STYLE:** A monkey lamp, left, with its bamboo shade casts a soft light. A 1952 walnut chair awaiting restoration is a Haines original and part of Peter Schifando's collection.

American Movie Classics documentary, "Out of the Closet, Off the Screen: The Life of William Haines," focused on Haines' sexuality. Mathison believes those biographies diminished Haines' four decades as a designer. "I was unhappy with that book, and that movie was horrible," she says. "That was not the gentleman of stature and talent that I knew."

One of Haines' greatest achievements, says Mathison, "was opening up all these dark European houses and letting the California sunshine in." In the late 1930s and early '40s, Haines practiced what Mathison and Schifando call Hollywood Deluxe, a sumptuous amalgam of Deco Moderne and Regency Neoclassicism for such clients as director George Cukor and studio chief Jack Warner.

During this period, Haines developed his stylistic signatures: museum-quality artifacts mounted as lamps, a table with four chairs under a chandelier known as a *gemutlich*, an infinite variety of low-slung tufted and embroidered chairs, and swiveling upholstered stools. "Haines was a master of propor-

tion and scale. When you sat in one of his chairs — cigarette in one hand, martini in the other — you looked absolutely fabulous," says Dragonette, who is mounting a November exhibition and sale of about two dozen Haines pieces at his eponymous La Cienega Boulevard gallery.

"He had spent his early life on film sets," says Schifando, who will display his Haines collection at the Pacific Design Center on Nov. 8. "So Haines understood what looks good. Ted Graber called it soft Modernism — very comfortable and clean-lined, but not hard-edged."

After World War II, Haines launched into a Modernist period, working with great architects such as Paul Williams and A. Quincy Jones. In 1949 he opened a swank, modern Beverly Hills office with terrazzo floors and cork-lined walls studded with retractable brass rods for draping fabrics.

Mathison arrived six years later as a temp, sitting on a kitchen chair at her desk and never thinking that she would stay for three decades. In addition to typing reams of meticulous job esti-

mates, she also attended to clients for Haines and Graber when they were on buying trips in Europe.

"We did Frank Sinatra's office and he was having a terrible time," she recalls. "People were coming in and asking him what was this and what was that, and he didn't know. And I had to go coach him: This is a little Roman head from period so-and-so, and this is a Greek vase."

The Haines treatment, which could prove costly, was wildly creative in the '50s. He would wrap furniture legs in leather to simulate bamboo or create a conversation area around an island of recessed carpeting. He designed elegant outdoor furniture to furnish atriums and lanais, further blurring the line between indoors and out.

In the late '60s, the Anglophile designer redid Winfield House, the 144-room Georgian mansion in London for Walter Annenberg, the newly appointed American ambassador to the Court of St. James's.

Through it all, Haines maintained a devilish wit. He joked that an interior designer had to be "a sociologist, a psychologist and a proctologist."

"Haines had absolutely no compunction about telling people they had bad taste," says Scott Roberts of Modern One, a Los Angeles store known for its Haines-era designs.

"We'd fight like cats and dogs over some of his ideas," Crawford is quoted as saying in "Class Act." "He always won because of his excellent taste and knowledge and my lack of both."

Haines died of lung cancer on Christmas Day, 1973. His partner, Shields, took an overdose of sleeping pills two months later. Says Mathison: "Jimmy was not prepared to live in the world without Billy."

Mathison stayed on, working with Graber. "At Haines Inc., we were a family," she recalls, adding that Haines' sister, Anne Haines Langhorne, lived in an apartment on the grounds of Mathison's West Hollywood home, a two-story residence filled with Haines designs and memorabilia including Chair No. 13, the Seniah ("Haines" spelled in reverse). Mathison retired in 1985, shortly before Schifando came to work for Graber.

By the time Graber retired in 1989, Haines had all but passed into obscu-

riety, known only to old money matrons, silent film buffs and midcentury furniture dealers. In 1990 David Geffen purchased the Warner estate that bore the Haines imprint from 1937. Christie's shipped the estate's antiques to the company's New York auction house. The other lots — all Haines custom pieces — were consigned to A.N. Abell Auction Co. in Los Angeles.

At the time, recalls Abell's Howard Zellman, "nobody on the East Coast cared about his contemporary work. It just looked like Hollywood Modern, except that it was 10- and 12-foot sofas."

Peter Loughrey of Los Angeles Modern Auctions was at the Abell sale. "I don't think I paid more than \$200 for anything," he recalls. "I had a store back then and put on a show called 'Bel-Air Modern' with pieces by Haines, Paul Laszlo and Samuel Marx. I didn't sell a thing."

The Haines market has ripened considerably. Some collectors who snapped up mass-market Eames and Saarinen pieces a decade ago have grown weary of the look. To stay ahead of the stylistic curve, trendsetters have moved on to rarer made-to-order pieces by architects and designers.

As the comforts of the 21st century home have come to include tailored furniture and shiny accessories that tip a top hat to Old Hollywood, Haines' distinctively elegant sensibility has been appreciably burnished.

Loughrey notes that a pair of Haines chairs he couldn't sell for \$1,200 in 1990 recently changed hands for \$15,000.

"The celebrity factor has a lot of appeal to people who may not be crazy about Modernism or decorator-designed furniture," he says. "People want things that belonged to a taste maker. One big price begets another, and there are not a lot of original Haines pieces on the market. A lot of his pieces, such as the Hostess chairs, were widely imitated, but they did not copy the quality, only the shape."

As a result, Los Angeles Modern Auctions will accept only consignments with "a nice strong documentation of ownership." Haines never signed or marked his work, says Schifando, but it was all done on a custom basis, so "provenance can absolutely be established."

In fact, for every object Haines designed, there is probably a photo in "Class Act," a drawing in Schifando's office or an invoice in Mathison's garage — neatly typed, no doubt, by her.

David A. Keeps can be reached at [david.keeps@latimes.com](mailto:david.keeps@latimes.com).



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

**FINE DETAILS:** In Peter Schifando's library, left, a bronze equestrian lamp occupies a table top alongside a vase-like Lucite cigarette holder. Above, Haines and studio designer Michael Morrison incorporated an antique Italian fresco into a modern coffee table with slender brass legs that resemble bamboo. At right, the often-imitated Hostess chair with its simple curves and custom designed upholstery.



KEN HIVELEY Los Angeles Times



KEN HIVELY *Los Angeles Times*

**GOLDEN ERA:** At far left, Haines and architect Roland E. Coate transformed Jack Warner's mansion into a Georgian palace. The screening room had classical columns and a rotating sofa. Jean Mathison, left, and Peter Schifando are coauthors of "Class Act," documenting Haines' design work. Below, Haines furnished the terrace of a Bel-Air house with Regency-style iron chairs.

