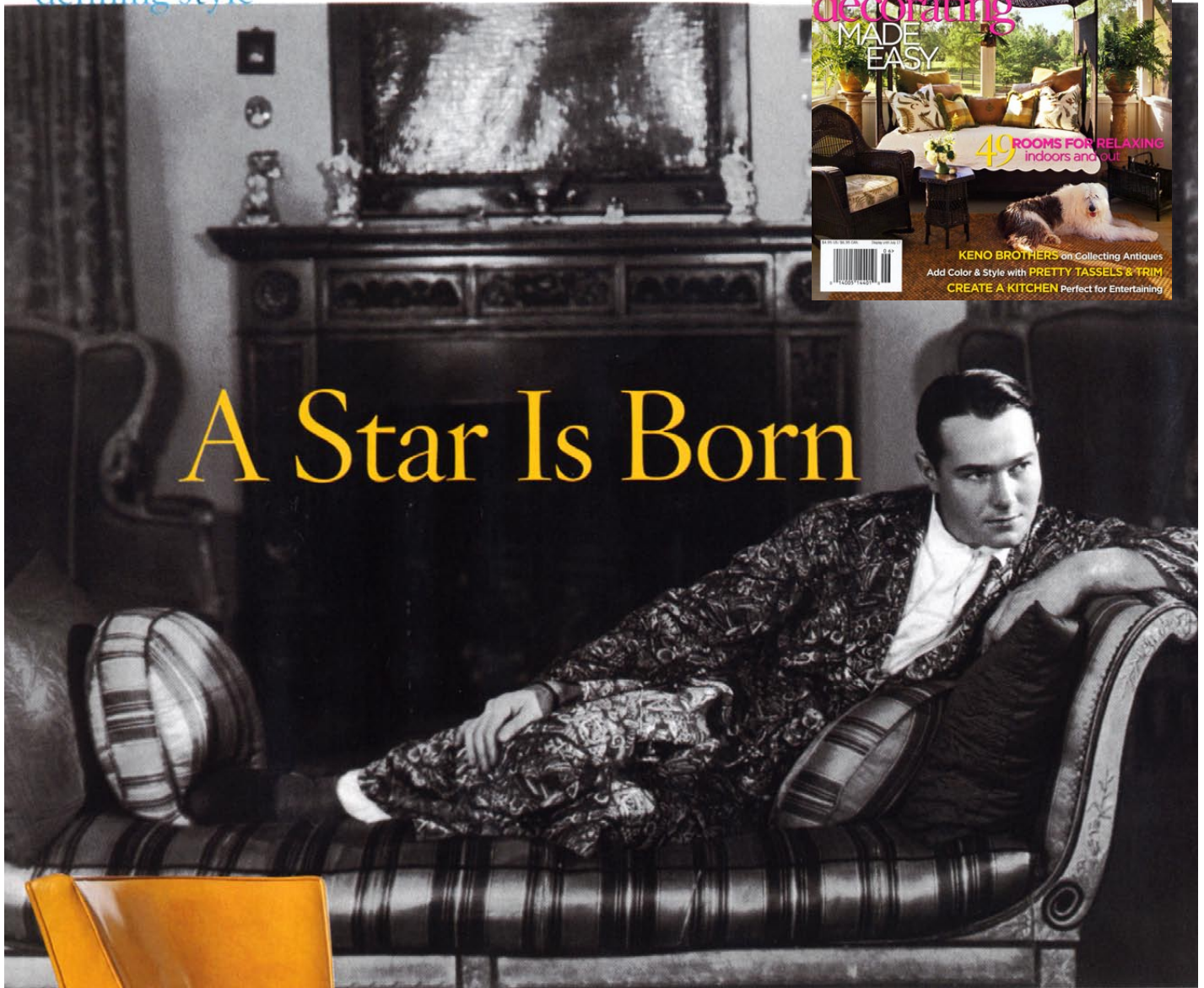


William Haines
designs

Traditional Home
June/July 2007



defining style



A Star Is Born



YELLOW PULLUP CHAIR

The lasting impact of Hollywood actor-turned-interior-designer William Haines BY CATHY WHITLOCK

AND TO THINK ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC DESIGNERS of the 20th century got his start in a talent contest. The year was 1922, and a young William "Billy" Haines arrived in Los Angeles after winning producer Samuel Goldwyn's "New Faces" contest. Soon a star was born.

By 1930, he was the country's top box office attraction, with a lucrative contract with powerhouse Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio. Haines excelled as the attractive, athletic All-American "smart alec" character (he was often called "the Wisecracker") and enjoyed leading-man status to stars such as Marion Davies, Constance Bennett, and Joan Crawford, who would form a friendship with Haines that lasted more than 50 years. ➤

A house is a shell. The people who live in that house make it come alive, and no designer in the world can do that for them.

—DECORATOR WILLIAM HAINES

While films such as *Tell It to the Marines* and *Show People* made him a popular actor, Haines found his true calling when he opened an antiques store on Hollywood's La Brea Avenue. Frequenting by fellow stars and gossip-columnist Hedda Hopper, the shop was imbued with his innate style. That and his passion for collecting did not go unnoticed. Soon a decorator was born.

Ironically, one of the men who put Haines on the celestial map in Hollywood gave him another career boost—by firing him. Legend has it that MGM studio boss Louis B. Mayer was

not thrilled with Haines's personal lifestyle, and he gave him an ultimatum: Give up the boyfriend or get out of show business. Perhaps Haines summed it up best when he said, "It was the kindest thing he ever did for me."

Self-taught as a decorator, Haines and his aesthetic could not have arrived at a better time. The design profession was in its infancy, and most people used a department store for furnishings and guidance. The former film star offered an alternative to the fashionable interiors then current (made ever trendier by the films of the day), virtually lifting Hollywood's dark and somber Spanish and Tudor bungalows into the sunlight and giving birth to the California style we know today.

Haines was a genius at pairing English and French antiques with custom modern designs, mixing in his signature hand-painted Chinese wallpapers, ceramics, and exotic artifacts to create a look of simplicity, elegance, and restraint. "I always found mixing periods quite normal and exciting," he noted. "I was doing this when to be popular meant having a kind of sameness throughout the decor. Spanish with Spanish chairs. Boring. You can mix anything provided it pulls together." Soon a style was born.

The signature look became known as Hollywood Regency and represented a contrast to the decade's stark minimal looks associated with the Modernist movement.

With its roots in 19th-century England, the style combined English, French, Regency, and Greek Revival styles with the grandeur and glamour of Old Hollywood. Adept at reinterpreting Old World interiors, Haines made rooms suitable for entertaining on a lavish scale that fit the bill perfectly for the business and lifestyles of the film capital's elite.

Haines lived the movie star life to the hilt, complete with a cook, a housekeeper, and a chauffeur. His Virginia-bred charm and wit ▶



"Cranberry"—as Haines affectionately called actress Joan Crawford—was a lifelong friend and client. She is seen here in her living room against a fringed settee. **Right:** European artist Paul Fêher painted stunning gouache mural panels in the hallway of the Haines home. Featured is one of his drawings for a folding screen.





ELBOW CHAIR



BRENTWOOD CHAIR



CONFERENCE CHAIR



Above: Haines today—furnishings updated for the lobby of the Beverly Hilton Hotel in Beverly Hills.

Brentwood chairs flank a leather-wrapped coffee table.

Top, from left: The Elbow chair offered suitable seating for a star wearing an evening gown. ■ The Brentwood's quilted seat is perfect for dining or as a side chair in the living room. ■ This dramatic red leather chair made its debut in 1949.

was magnetic, and invitations to his extravagant celebrity-studded parties in his 18th-century-style manor house were coveted. Soon he was asked to decorate the estates of Hollywood's movers and shakers.

His client list over the next 40 years represented a who's who of Hollywood and business luminaries such as Jack Warner, director George Cukor, Joan Crawford, Carole Lombard, George Burns, Frank Sinatra, Alfred and Betsey Bloomingdale. He also refurbished Winfield House, the showplace London residence of Walter H. Annenberg, then-U.S. ambassador (1969–74) to Britain's Court of St. James's.

Haines redefined the way Hollywood royalty would live, giving his clients instant prestige in a movie-star setting that evoked money, allure, and sophistication. Actress Joan Crawford became one of his very first clients (they starred together in three films for MGM), and he managed the special challenges of designing and redesigning her Brentwood home through three divorces. "Cranberry," as he affectionately called her, had a collection of more than 200 dolls and black velvet prints of dancing women that had to be gingerly disposed of. Haines also decorated ►

In His Own Words

Classic quotes from the Wisecracker himself

When you do a home, you must do it with the feeling that it has been lived in for years. The rooms must look as if there might be carpet slippers beside a chair and a pipe or two on the table.

You can gussy up and hide things behind veils and ruffles and suedes, but when you come to simplicity, the truth comes out. You had better know what you are doing.

Who is to say what is good taste and what is bad? I don't know what taste is. It's like a fog—you can see it and feel it, but you can never touch it.

I contend there's no decorator in the world who can make a house good if the architecture is bad.

The only real freedom we have is our home. Only there can we express anything we want.



the Manhattan penthouse she shared with husband and Pepsi-Cola CEO Alfred Steele. The 1,800-square-foot apartment was so luxe that he nicknamed it “Taj Joan.” And yes, lore has it that the fastidious Crawford covered her furniture in plastic and required guests to wear booties over their shoes.

The centerpieces of a Haines interior were his custom collections. No doubt influenced by the studio design environment, where Rome was literally built in a day, he acquired top artisans and upholsterers to create his unique furnishings. His iconic collection includes the Tufted sofa, the perennially popular Seniah (Haines spelled backwards) chair, and the charming Elbow chair (a smaller-scale slipper chair that allowed a woman dressed in a ball gown to sit sideways). Other Haines hallmarks included touches of chinoiserie, museum-mount lamps with objets d’art, one-of-a-kind lamps for each client, and distressed leather table surfaces.

Before his death in 1973, Haines passed the baton to associate Ted Graber, who designed one of the firm’s most important commissions, the private White House quarters of Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

The Haines legacy continues today through the efforts of Peter Schifando and J. Jonathan Joseph of Lindley Associates of Los Angeles. Schifando (a former associate of the late Ted Graber) and Jean H. Mathison (former longtime assistant to >

Above: Actress Carole Lombard—shown in her elegantly tailored Hollywood dining room—was another devotee of the Haines aesthetic. **Right:** The Tufted sofa is one of the hallmarks of the collection and is available in three sizes.



BISCUIT TUFTED SOFA

both Haines and Graber) wrote a visually stunning chronicle of the life and designs of their mentor—*Class Act: Williams Haines, Legendary Hollywood Decorator* (Pointed Leaf Press, 2005; pointedleafpress.com). Lindley Associates boasts an archive of more than 2,000 original drawings, plans, and finishes from the Haines collection. The firm has reissued his furnishings, using the same manufacturer over the past 50 years. Among their offerings, the Brentwood, Hostess, and Elbow chairs remain some of the firm’s most popular items.

The freshness and glamour of Haines’s work has sparked interest among a new generation of designers and collectors. There are a finite number of vintage pieces available, but originals can still be found at auction houses and through reputable dealers. Jason Stein, vice president of 20th Century Decorative Arts and Design at Christie’s in Beverly Hills (310/385-2600) advises collectors to look at the quality of construction, unusual surface treatments (such as tortoiseshell-spotted leather), and low-slung upholstered seating.

Luxury is not cheap—a recent auction drew \$28,000 for a set of four Hostess chairs, originally estimated at \$8,000 to \$12,000.

One of the largest Haines collections in the world can be found at Dragonette Ltd. (310/855-9091) in Los Angeles. Dealer Patrick Dragonette feels strongly that Haines’s work is a “legacy worth protecting” and that “provenance is everything.” He attributes the popularity of the pieces to “Haines’s sense of proportion, the simple geometry to all of his designs, and the fact that everything is built for comfort and luxury.”

Anyone fortunate enough to snag a Haines piece—original or reproduction—can easily imagine a more glamorous time, when ball-gowned women perched on Elbow chairs, languidly dangling their cigarette holders as tuxedo-clad men, martinis in hand, looked on with admiration. And all in the luxurious splendor of a room designed by Billy Haines. ■

For information on William Haines furnishings being produced today, call Lindley Associates at 310/289-0280 or visit williamhaines.com.