
T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings: Crafting a Modern Home for Postwar America

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ABSTRACT

Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings (1905–1976) was an architect, decorator, furniture designer, tastemaker, and thinker whose innovative ideas on interior design during the postwar era had a formative impact on American domestic culture. Through books, articles, lectures, interior décor, and industrial design, he advanced a singular outlook on the modern home, rooted in Greco-Roman sensibilities, classical principles, and early American domestic culture. By considering his contribution to the emergence of middle-class American style during the formative years of modernism, I propose that although hardly discussed in the literature, Robsjohn-Gibbings had occupied a significant role in steering popular taste away from Art Moderne and from the popular fashion of collecting European antiques and reproductions toward a genuine American modernism. A progressive thinker, he challenged international modernism and the postwar organic language through a scholarly understanding of ancient Greco-Roman furniture and a thorough study of American material culture.

Introduction

In 1965, at the age of sixty, the British-born designer Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings (1905–1976) moved to Athens and settled in an apartment overlooking the Parthenon. This was a fitting final destination for his lifelong journey into the aesthetic essence of classical Greece. In the last phase of a successful career as one of the twentieth century's most innovative tastemakers, Robsjohn-Gibbings reproduced ancient Greek furniture in a line of furnishings that appealed to postmodernist taste. He described ancient Greek furniture, the subject of his informed fascination, as “young, untouched by time,” and similarly sought to create a style characterized, in his words, by “freshness of youth and restfulness of utter simplicity.”¹ These qualities placed “Gibby,” as he was called, in the forefront of design in postwar America.

Robsjohn-Gibbings was a trained architect, reforming decorator, talented furniture designer, progressive thinker, and an inspired writer who influenced the way middle-class postwar American homes were furnished. His most important contribution to modern design was to challenge conventional notions of the modern home and its furnishings by offering what he regarded as an authentic American modernism both in his work as a designer and in his advice writ-

ing. Claiming that “American interiors should be visualized in terms of warmth, friendliness, and comfort,”² he advised middle-class Americans on how to develop a personal taste and “how to judge the modern.”³ He was recognized as an important advocate for simplicity and integrity in contemporary design and was compared to such influential trendsetters as Hattie Carnegie, who dressed the Duchess of Windsor, and John Fredericks, milliner to such Hollywood stars as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Vivien Leigh.⁴

Robsjohn-Gibbings was one of the promoters of the “Good Design” movement, which was at the height of its popularity during the postwar years. “Good design” has been defined by scholars as a reform initiative premised on the progressive modernism prevalent in the postwar age. As design historian Judy Attfield notes, it refers to “an ideal, rational, and self-conscious process of design derived from first principles that accompanied the introduction of design as a profession.”⁵ Robsjohn-Gibbings's version of “good design” was rooted in his mission to formulate an authentic American modernism. Fully attuned to the spirit of his age, he redefined American national, familial, and individual identities through a distinctive vision of the modern dwelling and its attendant lifestyle. Eager to bequeath a legacy of discernment and

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to promote elegance for a mass market, Robsjohn-Gibbings established himself as both a tastemaker and an industrial designer, articulating his message in books, articles, lectures, and appearances. An active and influential designer, writer, and thinker, he has not received commensurate consideration in studies of mid-twentieth-century American design. In fact, decades of scholarly interest in that field, including several milestone exhibitions and monographs, have left Robsjohn-Gibbings's legacy virtually untouched.⁶

Such neglect is particularly ironic in light of his own mastery of public relations: Robsjohn-Gibbings not only believed in the power of the media to affect society but also knew how to manipulate the press to advance his ideas and promote his career. Just as his contemporary, the industrial designer Raymond Loewy, turned his name into a brand, Robsjohn-Gibbings circulated his portrait as a trademark logo. His promotions, advertisements, interviews, and magazine articles featured his svelte six-foot-tall figure, dressed in stylish tailored double-breasted suits, with his hair smoothed back from his forehead and a cigarette perennially propped in his slender fingers.

Notwithstanding the elitist elegance of his personal image, Robsjohn-Gibbings was a true visionary of the democratization of taste that took place in the postwar years as the concept of design became linked with modernity. His vision represents a transitional moment in the history of modern design when Americans began to challenge the tenets of the Modern movement, which had dominated American design since the groundbreaking "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition," curated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932. Designers who presented a challenge to orthodox modernism included those developing a postwar organic aesthetic, the founders of the so-called Studio Movement, and such innovators as Edward Wormley, George Nakashima, Paul Frankl, and Tommi Parzinger who, like Robsjohn-Gibbings, devised industrially produced furniture with the look of high-quality handicraft.⁷

Robsjohn-Gibbings took a personal path, devising an aesthetic profoundly inspired by antiquity, yet rooted in American domestic and visual culture. His designs were restrained, simple, unpretentious, and familiar, evincing a neoclassical sensibility and passionate attention to proportions and detailing. His interiors were characterized by plain spaces, a sense of spaciousness, and luxurious materials, and his furniture displayed a preference for defined forms, flowing silhouettes, and a disdain for applied decoration. Smooth surfaces of bleached birch or plain and grained veneers were coated in shellac polishes, enhancing the natural color of the woods and serving as the chief form of embellishment. Robsjohn-Gibbings often used pilasters and columns extracted from classical vocabulary; yet, rather than merely imitating historical models, his designs drew on an informed and inspired dialogue with a particular past: ancient Greece on the one hand and selected periods in American domestic design history on the other. Producing what he termed a "modernized recasting of Greek forms," he called on American designers to move away from merely imitating historical periods such as Victorian, Georgian, Baroque, and Rococo, or foreign sources such as Chinese, and, instead, to "evolve functional designs for the future."⁸ Only the principles of classical art paired with the local vernacular, he believed, could form the basis of great American modern design. In the final, postmodernist chapter in his career, in the 1960s, however, Robsjohn-Gibbings abandoned this goal, moving directly to recreate ancient Greek furniture forms and designing textiles with neoclassical motifs derived from the façade of the Parthenon. He thus transformed his all-American "good design," with its nationalistic agenda, into a purely Grecian mode, anticipating postmodernism's ascension in the international design arena.

By considering his role in the evolution of middle-class taste during the postwar years, I argue that as a decorator, furniture designer, and tastemaker, Robsjohn-Gibbings proposed an authentic American modernism. His personal definition of modernism embraced a dialogue between the American past, which he perceived as the purest expression of

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national identity, and the present, enhanced and informed by principles of classical art as the epitome of purity and integrity. He democratized luxury by presenting elegant simplicity, rooted in informed tradition, as the new glamour. Although promoting his individual version of modernism, Robsjohn-Gibbings avoided describing his designs as “modern.” He believed that the term “suffered from the stigma of skyscraper bookcases and vast, low-slung chairs,” and, therefore, was inappropriate to describe his own work.⁹

Robsjohn-Gibbings was among the first to challenge the modernist agenda, finding it unsuited to the daily needs of Americans in the postwar age. He was a true believer in the power of design to shape contemporary life, but while many of his contemporaries sought to detach themselves from historical precedent, he began a crusade against what he saw as a monotonous aesthetic *sans* tradition that dominated the marketplace. By definition, the styles he practiced throughout his long career always had a strong connection to history; yet Robsjohn-Gibbings was among the most outspoken opponents of the fashion of furnishing American homes with English and French antiques and reproductions, which he called a “horror that in normal times would have ended its days quietly and decently in the scrap heap.”¹⁰ An avid and uncompromising critic, he fearlessly took on the giants of the Modern movement, deriding the functionalist approach of Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Marcel Breuer as “lifeless utilitarianism,” and comparing their all-white, minimalist interiors to “waiting rooms in a hospital.”¹¹ The Eames molded plywood chair produced by Herman Miller and admired by millions in the 1950s as a hallmark of American taste he criticized as “cold, and unhomelike.”¹² He believed that dedicating wartime technologies to the new consumer economy had failed to produce good design. The Cape Cod and ranch houses then flooding suburban America were, he proclaimed, “badly constructed, badly designed, and put together by speculative builders without consideration of suitability to climate or locality.”¹³

Robsjohn-Gibbings offered a personal chronicle of the history of design and art in the twentieth century and summarized his own taste in two books. *Mona Lisa's Mustache: A Dissection of Modern Art* (1947) illuminates his preference for particular art movements of the past,¹⁴ and *Homes of the Brave*, his best-seller of 1954, highlights his partiality for selected design styles of the twentieth century.¹⁵ In *Homes of the Brave*, he associates good taste with power and courage. Those who possess good taste, he suggests, are “brave” for not allowing themselves to be swept away by trends and fashion; rather, they arrange their homes to reflect their own spirits and identities. They “don’t feel the need to hide their social insecurity behind antiques and ostentatious display,” he remarks.¹⁶ Like his better-known contemporary the German-born modernist advocate Nikolaus Pevsner, who, in his seminal 1936 book *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, identified his heroes of modern design, Robsjohn-Gibbings offers an alternate list of his own heroes to identify the roots of modern design.¹⁷ He praises Art Nouveau designers such as Henry van de Velde not for their well-known luxurious interiors and precious objects but for democratizing design; admires the Japanese for perfecting their houses over hundreds of years; and esteems the Chinese for their respect for the nature of the wood. He also reveals his admiration for Frank Lloyd Wright, Green and Green, and American colonial furniture as a genuine expression of American national character. Throughout his career, Robsjohn-Gibbings’s sensitivity to historical continuities, the expression of innate national character, and integrity in design informed not only his admiration for the past, but also his own wide-ranging work.

The Couturier: Crafting Homes for America’s Social Elite

The tastemaker who came to advise middle-class America on matters of lifestyle and décor started his remarkably successful half-century career as an upscale decorator. Born in London in 1905, he graduated from the University of Liverpool and from London University with a degree in architecture.

From the very beginning of his career, Robsjohn-Gibbings took on the mission to create a truly indigenous modern style, one that would be recognized and stand out as “American.”

After working briefly for Ashby Tabb Limited, he accepted a position with the renowned antique shop and decorating firm, Charles of London. This appointment truly shaped the professional identity of the young architect, guiding Robsjohn-Gibbings into a thoroughly scholastic approach to the decorative arts and establishing the core of his expertise in design history.¹⁸ It was not until Charles Duveen, the legendary founder of the shop, selected him to launch the company’s New York branch in 1929 that Robsjohn-Gibbings began to fully understand the American passion for collecting European antiques and reproductions. Americans’ nostalgia for European furnishings, which he learned to perceive as a social and cultural illness, became the target of his repeated criticism. His reaction against a slavish adoration of Georgian, Victorian, and French antiques compelled him to develop a modernist approach to design.

By the time Robsjohn-Gibbings started his own New York interior decorating business, in 1936, he had already embraced the classical canon of ancient Greece and started a long journey to develop a local American style. He thereby distanced himself from the mainstream of American decorators, who demonstrated a preference for a cluttered Victorian aesthetic on the one hand and the sleek, streamlined Art Moderne style on the other. Trumpeting his reverence for the classical tradition, he modeled his Madison Avenue showroom after the interior of an ancient villa excavated in the Greek city of Olynthus (Figure 1). From the moment he opened the studio until he closed it in 1944, he enjoyed immense success as a celebrity decorator, creating some of the country’s most publicized homes for such patrons as cosmetics empress Elizabeth Arden, automotive heiress Thelma Chrysler Foy, media magnate Walter Annenberg, and socialite Doris Duke. His clients, he once said, “don’t feel the need to hide their social insecurity behind antiques and ostentatious display.”¹⁹ He designed fashion showrooms and decorated high-end shops, including New York City’s prestigious River Club, always seeking to craft what he later described as “timeless, beautiful, individual, and unique interiors” of an American character.²⁰ In the press, his style was described as

“neither modern nor traditional,” and his interiors as aimed at consumers of “broad tastes and world understanding, with the sophistication [that] comes from travel, from sampling many world cultures.”²¹

From the very beginning of his career, Robsjohn-Gibbings took on the mission to create a truly indigenous modern style, one that would be recognized and stand out as “American.” His first substantial project, Casa Encantada, quickly brought recognition that,

Figure 1. The recreation of a Greek room in the New York showroom of T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings in 1937, with a mosaic floor copied from the floor found at Olynthus, Greece (Photograph by Loomis Dean for Life, reproduced in T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Furniture of Classical Greece*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).



in the words of a *Life* magazine writer, he was seeking “to define a singularly American style.”²² A milestone of his early career, this 43-room mansion was created for socialite Hilda Boldt Weber on a hill overlooking Los Angeles in Bel-Air, California (Figure 2). The most ambitious architectural commission of Russian-born Beverly Hills architect James E. Dolena, it was designed and built between 1936 and 1940 and soon became a Hollywood icon, often figuring in press accounts as the palatial backdrop for the social elite of Los Angeles.²³ A majestic accomplishment, Robsjohn-Gibbings’s interiors and furnishings for Casa

Encantada epitomize his artistic oeuvre. He considered the project among his most important works, and the two hundred exquisite pieces of furniture he designed for it have since become blue-chip objects praised by collectors of modern art and design (Figure 3). In a lecture he delivered in Los Angeles while working on Casa Encantada, Robsjohn-Gibbings provided an insight to the nature of his use of the historical sources that inspired him: “We will find ourselves back to the very old, yet always new graceful contours that have made the artists of ancient Greece the marvels of the ages.”²⁴

Figure 2. The Entrance Hall at Casa Encantada, designed by Robsjohn-Gibbings in 1938 (Collection of the Rare Book Department at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California).



Figure 3. The Stairwell Hall at Casa Encantada, designed by Robsjohn-Gibbings in 1938 (Collection of the Rare Book Department at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California).



Casa Encantada is the best example of the first phase in Robsjohn-Gibblings's long career as a classicist—a designer engaged in a vital dialogue with past forms and inspiration in his search for a contemporary aesthetic idiom.

Robsjohn-Gibblings's scheme for Casa Encantada derived from ancient Greek theories of harmony and proportion. His style was praised in the press as "*sans époque*," and the corresponding "Timeless" was the name he chose for his first collection of furniture; with this name he highlighted the foremost principle of his aesthetic, one that defined the role of classical art as an inspiration for his unique interpretation of modernism.²⁵ That interpretation was clearly displayed in his clean, uncluttered interior spaces, where fantasy and neoclassical sensibility merged in schemes of opulent, yet elegant, simplicity, consciously evoking the spirit of ancient Greece. The airy interior spaces in neutral color schemes of earth tones and shades of cream set off the furnishings of exquisite quality and luxurious materials that made reference to high-style colonial American furniture.²⁶ Neoclassical details, which included fluted columns topped by stylized ionic capitals, blown-up pediment doorways, and massive pilasters, simultaneously conveyed warmth and severity, simplicity and sinuousness, and recalled simultaneously the golden age of American neoclassicism and its ancient models. Robsjohn-Gibblings amplified this paradox of variegated effect with a superb sense of proportion rooted in the ideal of the Greek temple, in which empty space and bare walls take on an aesthetic value of their own.²⁷

In the numerous pieces of furniture created for Casa Encantada and crafted by the decorative firm of Peterson Studios, Robsjohn-Gibblings melded a restrained classical sensibility and the exuberance of sculptural colonial furniture to create a refreshing new mode. His key motifs—sphinxes, winged griffins, dolphins, lions'-paw feet, and giant Ionic columns—all extracted from the ancient art vocabularies, were reproduced mid-eighteenth-century American furniture made in the urban cultural centers of Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. When surveying the material culture of early Americana, he claimed that "the old homes of Colonial New England, of Colonial Virginia, of Early America," the subject of his reference, "were magically freed from the spell of invisibility," and therefore, "worthy of emulation."²⁸ His furniture designs were characterized by free-flowing

silhouettes and an emphasis on three-dimensional plasticity and sculptural effects, and they typically were finished with high-grained and burl veneers or carved in limewood in such a manner as to suggest dazzling sculpture rather than functional furniture. This approach is exemplified in the console table consisting of carved, open-winged griffins superbly crafted of maple and ash burl and set, like a jewel, within an airy, single-colored interior (Figure 4). In an interview conducted just shortly after he opened his decorating firm, the designer announced: "Greek furniture has the freshness of youth and the restfulness of utter simplicity. A return to it for inspiration is inevitable."²⁹

Casa Encantada is the best example of the first phase in Robsjohn-Gibblings's long career as a classicist—a designer engaged in a vital dialogue with past forms and inspiration in his search for a contemporary aesthetic idiom. Robsjohn-Gibblings developed his modern design aesthetic, with its luxury and complexity, as a reassuring alternative—equally modern and classical—to current trends in American interior decor. In the next decade, he would move more clearly toward establishing parameters for an American modernism, before eventually returning to a pure Greek neoclassicism that affirmed his belief that "Greek culture has been the most powerful influence in the history of mankind and a recurrence of interest in it is a return to the very source of artistic wisdom."³⁰

The Tastemaker: Mass Culture and the Notion of "Good Taste"

At the outbreak of World War II, at the height of his career as a decorator, Robsjohn-Gibblings closed his Madison Avenue showroom and reinvented his career, this time as a mass-culture tastemaker. In 1944 he issued his first book, *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale*, with publisher Alfred A. Knopf, with whom he forged a close personal and professional relationship.³¹ This "much discussed" book, and the publications that followed it, marked a turning point in Robsjohn-Gibblings's career as the spokesman for a patriotic American domestic culture. His name was already

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Figure 4. (a) Console Table as placed in the dining room at Casa Encantada (Collection of the Rare Book Department at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California). (b) Console Table from the dining room of Casa Encantada private collection, Washington, D.C. (Wright auction, Chicago, May 21, 2006).



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familiar to many consumers from articles by and about him in lifestyle and design magazines such as *Town and Country*, *Interior Design and Decoration*, *House and Garden*, and *Vogue*. These journals represent a genre of domestic-advice literature that flourished during the postwar era.³² Robsjohn-Gibbings's books, in which he attempted to define American culture, belong to the same genre of literature and exploited its popularity to reach American middle-class consumers for whom his earlier celebrity design work was inaccessible but who were hungry for guidance on matters of domestic decoration and taste.

An attack on the fashion for collecting antiques, *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale* was more than just a book published by a decorator, but an attempt to revolutionize American domestic culture. In it, Robsjohn-Gibbings promoted the notion that domestic interiors should grow from both national and personal identities and should reflect the cultures and societies that produce them. He proposed to "say good-bye to the long reign of tired European snobbery [and to invest in] the development of an intelligent, contemporary American design."³³ He attacked those he believed were responsible for the backward state of the modern American home for disguising its true American identity under décor indebted to French, Italian, British, Spanish, and other national and historical styles, notably decorating-doyenne Elsie De Wolfe, whose signature style included densely patterned wallpapers, heavy velvet draperies, dark woodwork, and French antiques.³⁴ The satirical drawings in *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale* by illustrator Mary Petty, who was known for lampooning New York high society, included one captioned, "She dotes on ruffles and frills": the lavish, overornamented bedroom filled with laces, ruffles, and antiques epitomized a style typical of many homes in America at that time, one that Robsjohn-Gibbings derided as "Crystal Palace and Brighton Pavilion, remote from comfort, simplicity, and 'chic' in the modern sense" (Figure 5).³⁵

The publication of *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale* instantly turned the upscale decorator into a mass-culture tastemaker, a celebrity advising middle-class

Figure 5. "She Dotes on Ruffles and Frills," from *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale* (1944), 54.



Americans on matters of furnishing, hosting, manners, dress, and style. It proposed a multifaceted modern American style inspired by documented early American homes. For consumers who had been living through wartime strictures, encouraged to buy wisely, live economically, and value simplicity rather than ostentation, Robsjohn-Gibbings's message appeared strikingly patriotic and current, and his book became an immediate success. Aiming to recover the roots of the American design tradition in the domestic sphere, he drew inspiration from the colonial era as a time when Americans first asserted an independent cultural identity. In the postwar period, his name became

Translating luxury designs into affordable products in lines of mass-produced furniture sold in department stores nationwide and exhibited in mainstream shows, Robsjohn-Gibbings introduced an alternative aesthetic to that of the plastic, tubular chromium, plywood, and metal furniture that flooded postwar America.

synonymous with the “good life” now within reach of the masses striving to achieve domestic gratification in newly developed suburbs and the American dream of home ownership. Critics praised the book, hailing the author as a pioneer who came to rescue “the American home out of the snobbish hands of Fifty-Seventh Street and its Grand Rapids imitators, and give it back to the American people.”³⁶

Notwithstanding its resounding popularity, *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale* stirred controversy by criticizing the American fashion for antique collecting, which the author labeled a “degenerated fashion,” and a “social disaster.” The American home, he proclaimed, had long been “tortured” by foreign aesthetics, particularly those represented by English antiques, which were incapable of addressing the needs of modern Americans.³⁷ Chief among his targets was Elsie De Wolfe, whose books, magazine articles, and radio broadcasts promoted the aesthetics of eighteenth-century domestic culture for middle-class twentieth-century Americans. De Wolfe’s interior schemes, he claimed, overtly expressed her own identity rather than those of her clients. He particularly criticized her promotion of French antiques—“antiquana in chintz and toile de Jouy.”³⁸ At the same time, he denounced some of America’s favorite modernist furniture types, such as skyscraper bookcases, low-slung chairs, and sofa beds, and objected to the modernist taste for open floor plans, counters used to separate kitchens from living spaces, and other contemporary features. A home, he concluded, “need be no less sweet and no less home because it is truly modern.”³⁹ Rejecting equally the extremes of the historicism represented by De Wolfe’s designs and the antihistoricism of consciously modernist decoration, he encouraged middle-class Americans to arrange their homes to reflect both the realities of their lives and their aspirations as genuine Americans of their times. As he commented elsewhere, “nothing should be allowed in a room which does not have a close personal relationship to the inhabitant; everything in a room should be a true reflection of people living in it.”⁴⁰ In *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale*, Robsjohn-Gibbings established himself as the reformer who

would turn the American home into a true modern, local expression, in opposition to those who promoted a reactionary wholesale assimilation of foreign influences, both traditional and modernist. With this controversial stance, Robsjohn-Gibbings distanced himself from the community of interior decorators and, as one reviewer noted, risked “the ire of the group from which come his wealthy customers, by treading on the corns of some of their close friends and respectable exploiters.”⁴¹

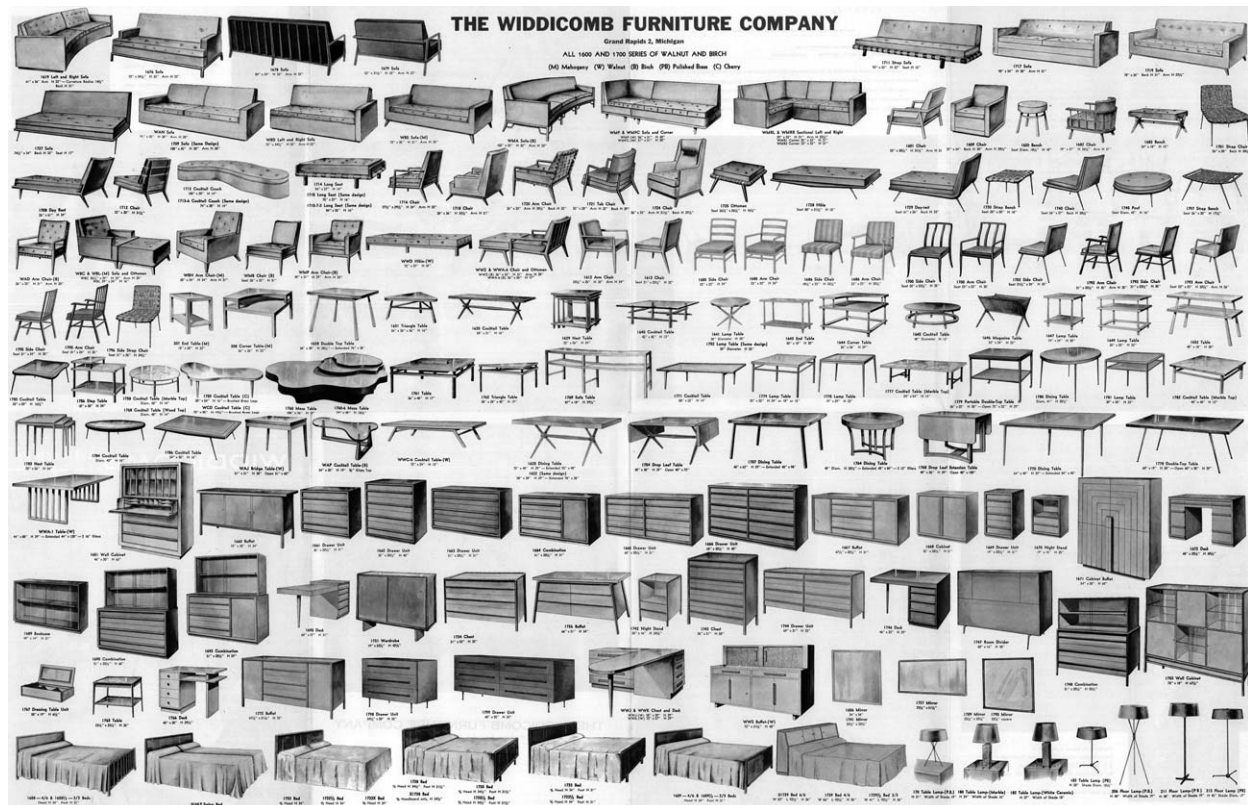
The Industrial Designer: Defining a New Postwar American Home

In the 1940s, his new mission of shaping popular taste and advising Americans “how to live well but inexpensively” prompted Robsjohn-Gibbings largely to move away from upscale commissions for luxurious interiors and to focus, instead, on domestic advice and on bringing affordable modern furniture to a broad public through economical, efficient systems of mass production for quality home furnishings.⁴² On furniture for America, he commented: “we, Americans, like comfort, solidity, lightness, and mobility.”⁴³ Committed to mass production, he declared that “standardization of design has already given us the most beautiful bathrooms and kitchens, the best automobiles, the best planes, the best-dressed women, and now is going to do the same thing for your entire house and make your life a better one to live.”⁴⁴ In addition to his position as chief designer for the Grand Rapids firm of Widdicomb Furniture Company, Robsjohn-Gibbings designed other affordable mass-produced products: floor lamps for George Hansen, flatware for Towle Manufacturing Company, television cabinets for RCA, and a collection of modern furniture for Baker Furniture. Translating luxury designs into affordable products in lines of mass-produced furniture sold in department stores nationwide and exhibited in mainstream shows, Robsjohn-Gibbings introduced an alternative aesthetic to that of the plastic, tubular chromium, plywood, and metal furniture that flooded postwar America (Figure 6).⁴⁵ He gave mass-produced furnishings a new identity, borrowing the principles that

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Figure 6. The full range of furniture designed by Robsjohn-Gibbings for Widdicomb Furniture Company, illustrated in their trade catalogue of 1954 (The Widdicomb and John Widdicomb Companies Records, in the collection of the Grand Rapids History & Special Collections Center, Grand Rapids Public Library).



shaped his couture work for his new pret-a-porter lines of furnishings (Figure 7). Avoiding synthetic materials in favor of local, inexpensive woods coated with dark or pale sparkling finishes, he endowed his industrially produced furniture with a well-crafted appearance (Figure 8).

This transition from luxury to the arena of industry was not unique to Robsjohn-Gibbings. Several designers of his generation who had worked predominantly on upscale commissions in the interwar period sought the role of cultural reformers in the postwar era. Idealistic practitioners and those who believed in design as a powerful agent for expressing the spirit of its times, notably Donald Desky, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Paul

Frankl, tended to move into the mass-production arena in order to make their products accessible for the middle class. Like Robsjohn-Gibbings, Frankl, a Vienna-born emigre who worked in the United States beginning in the 1920s, began designing furniture for the Johnson Company of Grand Rapids; his particular skill, notes design historian Christopher Long, “lay in assembling and summarizing what others were writing and saying, and in finding ways to popularize and disseminate those ideas.”⁴⁶ Robsjohn-Gibbings joined Frankl and others in a shared search for a vital expression for modern life. Although sympathetic to the popular, however, he distanced himself from the mainstream; in his own mass-produced designs he sought to provide an identity for the middle-class consumer through a language that

Robsjohn-Gibbings was particularly interested in the broad spectrum of indigenous furniture forms and style that shaped the character of the vernacular American home, which, to him, was a clear expression of genuine identity.

Figure 7. Display of a model dining room with furniture designed by Robsjohn-Gibbings for Widdicomb Furniture Company, as illustrated in a sales catalog, 1953 (The Widdicomb and John Widdicomb Companies Records, in the collection of the Grand Rapids History & Special Collections Center, Grand Rapids Public Library).



clearly stood apart from that of his contemporaries. His unconventional, individual, and often controversial ideas testify to the diversity of American postwar modernist design, which was not a unified monolith but the product of individuals of diverse approaches, philosophies, and styles.

As a mass-market designer, Robsjohn-Gibbings surveyed the state of American home design.⁴⁷ In the mode he termed “Modern Americana,” he sought a genuine American modernism, one that exemplified American identity, based on period styles he believed expressed

integrity and originality, particularly the Arts and Crafts and colonial eras.⁴⁸ He examined the national culture from a variety of perspectives with the aim of deepening his understanding of what was truly, genuinely “American.” His favorite saffron-finished walnut, for example, was as “indigenous to our scene as corn or Coca-Cola.”⁴⁹ Likewise, the so-called “Gibby Chair” of 1946—the most popular of his Widdicomb pieces and the designer’s own favorite—epitomized Robsjohn-Gibbings’s idea of modern American identity in the informality of its simple open-arm form; characterized by clean, useful, and comfortable design, it exemplifies the designer’s translation of familiar American traditional furniture forms into modernist idiom.⁵⁰ Robsjohn-Gibbings was particularly interested in the broad spectrum of indigenous furniture forms and style that shaped the character of the vernacular American home, which, to him, was a clear expression of genuine identity. He admired the deliberate neat plainness and restrained nature-inspired ornamentation in the work of American Arts and Crafts designers and Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as the classical proportions of eighteenth-century colonial furniture. In his efforts to develop a “true” American furniture idiom, Robsjohn-Gibbings studied the craftsmanship, construction, dimensions, and materials of chairs, boxes, chests, and cupboards that, to him, reflected the heritage of the American home. In his publication *Homes of the Brave*, he honors such American practitioners as Greene and Greene for their ability to adapt historical traditions to present conditions and expresses a particular appreciation for Mission-style furniture as “one of the first signs of American independence in furniture.”⁵¹ He admires Frank Lloyd Wright for his “organic unity of form and material.”⁵² Wright, he proposes, can be credited for formulating the first modern home, which he did by taking “the rich, sprawling Victorian house, peels away the heavy shell, and lays bare the core.”⁵³ When an exuberant strain of modernism introduced biomorphic forms into American commercial design and triumphed commercially in the 1950s, Robsjohn-Gibbings produced his own version of organic design that was personal, powerful, and distinctive. The best-known example of his use of such vital forms is the Mesa Coffee Table of 1952, a remarkable, now-iconic

Robsjohn-Gibbings was among the first to clarify a new direction in design being taken at the same time by the promoters of postmodernism in architecture.

Figure 8. Display of a model bedroom with furniture designed by Robsjohn-Gibbings for Widdicomb Furniture Company, as illustrated in a sales catalogue, 1950 (The Widdicomb and John Widdicomb Companies Records, in the collection of the Grand Rapids History & Special Collections Center, Grand Rapids Public Library).



walnut-veneered table with a stepped surface of three irregular layers, produced in two different sizes (Figure 9). The Mesa, like the coffee tables designed around the same time by sculptor Isamu Noguchi, introduced a sculptural dimension to mid-century American design, merging art and design. Its voluptuous abstract-organic design was a departure from the restraint of his usual slender forms, including those inspired by early American styles.

Robsjohn-Gibbings was among the first to clarify a new direction in design being taken at the same time by the promoters of postmodernism in architecture. The modernist attack against any return to historical reference or quotations was advanced by architectural critics Nikolas Pevsner and his follower Reyner Ban-

ham, who were fiercely opposed to the historicism they found in the work of young architects in the 1950s.⁵⁴ Toward the close of that decade, however, a new impetus toward neoclassicism formulated by postmodernists such as Philip Johnson and Robert Venturi made Robsjohn-Gibbings's scholarly approach newly relevant. Banham's most famous student, the architectural theorist Charles Jencks, was the first to articulate a theory of postmodernism in the field of architecture, identifying neoclassicism as a central force behind the new movement.⁵⁵ With Philip Johnson breaking away from Miesian pure geometry and using neoclassical quotation in his 1956 design for the Kneses Tifereth Israel Synagogue in Port Chester, New York, and Robert Venturi attaching neoclassical decorative moldings to such early buildings as the Vanna Venturi house in

Reinventing himself with a move to Athens, the epicenter of classical Greece and the long-standing subject of his fascination, he set aside the mission of crafting the ideal American modern home, distancing himself from his postwar work.

Figure 9. (a) An advertisement for the Mesa Table and other furniture designed by Robsjohn-Gibbings for the Widdicomb Furniture Company (The Widdicomb and John Widdicomb Companies Records, in the collection of the Grand Rapids History & Special Collections Center, Grand Rapids Public Library). (b) The Mesa Table (Wright auction, Chicago, May 21, 2006).



the Chestnut Hill neighborhood of Philadelphia, neo-classicism gained a visible foothold among avant-garde architects. The time was ripe for Robsjohn-Gibbings to reintroduce neoclassical forms in interior furnishing, drawing on three decades of scholarship.

The Classicist: From Modernism to Postmodernism

In the 1960s, as most designers of his generation went into retirement and the era of postwar modernism came to a close, Robsjohn-Gibbings began a new chapter in his multifaceted career. Reinventing himself with a move to Athens, the epicenter of classical Greece and the longstanding subject of his fascination, he set aside the mission of crafting the ideal American modern home, distancing himself from his postwar work. Settling in Athens was the realization of his Greek dream, one begun three decades earlier when he first encountered ancient furniture in the British Museum. Described in 1938 in *Harper's Bazaar* as one who “feels that the modern should stem direct from the very ancient,” Robsjohn-Gibbings had never disconnected his practice from classical principles.⁵⁶ Yet, it was not until he moved to Athens that he could devote himself fully to forging a new direction based on a close interpretation of ancient furniture forms informed by the scholarship he demonstrated in *Furniture of Classical Greece*, coauthored with Carlton W. Pullin in 1963.⁵⁷ In the book, he acknowledged such sources as directors and curators of museums, and particularly the archaeologist and art historian Gisela Richter, whose *Ancient Furniture: A History of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Furniture* he proclaimed “the outstanding source of knowledge” in the field.⁵⁸

Ensnared in Athens, Robsjohn-Gibbings partnered with Susan and Eleftherios Saridis, owners of Saridis of Athens, one of Europe's finest cabinetmakers. For the next fifteen years, the three collaborated to produce replicas of ancient Greek furniture, bringing these forms into the mainstream of contemporary design. Three decades of studying Greek artifacts in some of the world's leading museums enabled Robsjohn-Gibbings to reproduce accurately the forms of ancient furniture, using

His signature style of restrained waxed, stone-beige interior schemes using undecorated walls advanced his goal of contextualizing the essence of the Greek legacy in recreations of the ultimate Greek domestic sphere.

local walnut, leather, and bronze fittings according to the materials and methods used by Greek artisans thousands of years earlier. He and the Saridises organized an exhibition, presented at the showroom of the company, featuring replicas of ancient Greek furniture dating from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE, of which the originals were documented in his illustrated *Furniture of Classical Greece* (Figure 10).

Athens received Robsjohn-Gibbings as a celebrity, and he was warmly embraced as the favorite interior decorator of the social elite. His signature style of restrained waxed, stone-beige interior schemes using undecorated walls advanced his goal of contextualizing the essence of the Greek legacy in recreations of the ultimate Greek

domestic sphere. His high-profile commissions were often illustrated in American magazines, where he had been regularly featured for several decades. His remarkable E. Athinotakis Jewelry shop in Athens and the Hotel Atlantis on the Greek island of Santorini were featured in *Interior Design & Decoration* in 1966 and 1972 respectively, and the summer home he designed for Nicholas Goulondris, a ship magnate and a connoisseur of Greek antiquities, was featured in *Vogue* in 1963 under the title “A Lost Greek Look Retrieved” (Figure 11).⁵⁹ With schemes of blue, rose, and beige—colors copied from a Sicilian vase in the

Figure 11. Loggia at the summer home of Nicholas Goulondris in Athens: photograph for *Vogue* (February 1963): 56.

Figure 10. Furniture for the exhibition “Furniture of Classical Greece,” as photographed in the courtyard of the House of the Dolphins, ca. 110 BCE, on the island of Delos (photograph by Loomis Dean, reproduced from *Life* 1961 in *Furniture of Classical Greece* (New York, 1963), 3.



In his effort to create an alternate vision of modernism, distinctive and unorthodox, Robsjohn-Gibbings challenged the aesthetics of high modernism, especially its hostility toward historical precedent.

collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art—the interiors of Goulandris's home fully manifested the classical sensibility that Robsjohn-Gibbings sought to revive; he considered it “the first recreation of a fifth-century setting in some twenty-five hundred years.”⁶⁰ White Pentelic marble floors, bare terra-cotta-colored waxed walls, walnut furniture, and an indoor marble fountain with a lion's-head spout all served as a backdrop for Goulandris's superb collection of Mycenaean pottery and Cycladic figures. What followed this influential accomplishment was a commission to decorate the Athens home of the financier Aristotle Onassis. Robsjohn-Gibbings's final task was the remodeling of the Hotel Atlantis on the Greek Island of Santorini, originally built fifteen years earlier. He completed the project in 1972, just four years before his death at the age of seventy-one. In this final achievement, the classicist designer celebrated the indigenous spirit of the island by incorporating the legendary Spring of Santorini as a key theme.⁶¹ It was a fitting conclusion to the career of a designer who had always put local and national identity at the forefront of his considerations: Robsjohn-Gibbings created a modern Greek language of design just as he had crafted “modern Americana.”

Conclusion

The design work of T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings is significant as an expression both of a transitional moment in the history of modern design and of the diverse character of American postwar modernism. While such contemporary industrial designers as George Nelson and Florence Knoll concerned themselves with the most advanced manufacturing technologies available, turning furniture factories into laboratories of international style where ideas were continuously refined and adapted to produce furnishings on an industrial scale, Robsjohn-Gibbings focused on formulating a local expression, merging American tradition and neoclassical principles. His notion of a genuine American modernism was founded on a return to early furniture forms and domestic culture as an assertion of local identity. Throughout his career, the innovative tastemaker addressed the relationship between individual taste, modern needs, and national culture to

redefine the modern home, which, he maintained, was “a new individual kind of beauty, a more honest kind of beauty.”⁶² In his effort to create an alternate vision of modernism, distinctive and unorthodox, Robsjohn-Gibbings challenged the aesthetics of high modernism, especially its hostility toward historical precedent. He pioneered what he perceived as a timeless modernism, one based on traditional forms and values, as an alternative to the work of many of his modernist contemporaries, who distanced themselves from tradition in their mission of creating a new lifestyle for mid-century middle-class America.

Robsjohn-Gibbings struggled to introduce classical principles extracted directly from ancient Greek furniture forms into modern design at a time when scholarship on furniture of this era was in its infancy. The resolution he offered to the conflict between historicism and modernity positioned him at the forefront of the American design world. He saw his two roles—decorator and philosopher—as interdependent and used both to advance his ideas, moving fluidly from handcrafted pieces to mass-produced furniture lines, from evoking pure ancient Greek design to crafting a genuine American style. Robsjohn-Gibbings found his individual vision by glorifying an ancient heritage and America's own cultural traditions. His dictum “to be simple is to be great” summarizes his diverse legacy. Robsjohn-Gibbings regarded taste as central form of identity: not a quality one was born with but a facility one could, and should, acquire; not “a mere social asset, an aesthetic bone for hostesses to chew on,” but “a power that does not come easily, a power that requires unwearied dedication to develop and passionate devotion and great wisdom to sustain.”⁶³

Notes

¹T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings and C. W. Pullin, *Furniture of Classical Greece* (New York: Knopf, 1963), 14.

²Mary Roche, “Period Decoration Held Outmoded,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 1945.

³Robsjohn-Gibbings, “How to Judge Modern,” *House Beautiful* 86 (August 1944): 52.

- ⁴Frances T. Heard, "The Showmanship of Simplicity," *House Beautiful* 90 (October 1948): 152.
- ⁵Judy Attfield, "Good Design," in *Bringing Modernity Home: Writings on Popular Design and Material Culture*, ed. Attfield (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 46.
- ⁶The exception to the dearth of scholarship on Robsjohn-Gibbings is James Buresh, "Mid-Century Arcadia: Modern Classicism and Timeless Modernity in the Designs of Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings" (Masters Thesis, Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, 2007). However, Buresh focuses on Robsjohn-Gibbings's contribution to the emergence of classical design and his scholarship in that area and not on his modernist work and vision.
- ⁷Brooke Kamin Rapaport, ed., *Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age, 1940-1960*, exh. cat. (New York: Brooklyn Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001). On Paul Frankl see Christopher Long, *Paul Frankl and Modern American Design* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); on Edward Wormley, see Judith Gura, ed., *Edward Wormley: The Other Face of Modernism* (New York: Lin Weinberg Gallery, 1997).
- ⁸Robsjohn-Gibbings quoted in "Meet Robsjohn-Gibbings," *House Beautiful* (April 1946): 108; Robsjohn-Gibbings in a speech at the meeting of the Fashion Group's Home Furnishings Division, as quoted in "Designer Urges Us to Break with the Past and to Evolve Functionalism 'That Works'," *The New York Times*, November 17, 1942.
- ⁹Robsjohn-Gibbings quoted in "Meet Robsjohn-Gibbings," 108.
- ¹⁰Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1944), 7.
- ¹¹Robsjohn-Gibbings quoted in "Hello, Mr. Robsjohn-Gibbings," *House and Garden* 91 (June 1947): 157. Marcel Breuer in turn found Robsjohn-Gibbings' work aesthetically and functionally "unsuited to its purpose," referring to a brass lamp designed by Robsjohn-Gibbings for Hansen. See Marcel Breuer, "Problems of Lamps," *The New York Times*, September 25, 1949.
- ¹²Robsjohn-Gibbings, "This Is What I Mean," *Better Homes & Gardens* (June 1944): 15.
- ¹³Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Homes of the Brave* (New York: Knopf, 1947), 81.
- ¹⁴Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Mona Lisa's Mustache: A Dissection of Modern Art* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1947).
- ¹⁵Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Homes of the Brave* (New York: Knopf, 1947).
- ¹⁶Robsjohn-Gibbings quoted in Heard, "The Showmanship of Simplicity," 152.
- ¹⁷Nikolas Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936).
- ¹⁸A promoter of "Olde English" style, Charles Duveen pioneered the study of English decorative arts, tracing their development from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries in his *Old English Interiors* (New York: John Lane Company, 1919); and *Elizabethan Interiors* (London: G. Newnes, Ltd.; New York: F. Greenfield, 1911).
- ¹⁹Frances T. Heard, "The Showmanship of Simplicity," *House Beautiful* 90 (October 1948): 152.
- ²⁰Robsjohn-Gibbings quoted in "Robsjohn-Gibbings," *Interior Design and Decoration* 32 (May 1961): 127.
- ²¹"At Home Anywhere," *House and Garden* 99 (June 1957): 100; Heard, "The Showmanship of Simplicity," 157.
- ²²"Three Decorators," *Life* (October 3, 1949): 54.
- ²³Born in St. Petersburg in 1888, James E. Dolena immigrated to the United States at the age of 17 and graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago. Before moving to Los Angeles in 1925, he practiced architecture for the Canadian government. Known for some of Hollywood's most ambitious mansions, he employed Robsjohn-Gibbings for several projects, including his own home in Brentwood. On the iconic status of Casa Encantada see "Modern 'Sans Époque': A New Creed for Decoration," *House and Garden* 77 (January 1940): 34-35. The mansion garnered further fame when Conrad Hilton, founder of the Hilton Hotels chain, acquired it in 1952. The next owner, David H. Murdock, chief executive of Dole Food Company, sold most of its furniture shortly after acquiring the mansion from the Hilton estate in 1980. Since 2000, it has been owned by Gary Winnick, who commissioned the decorator Peter Marino to restore the home to its original look.
- ²⁴Robsjohn-Gibbings quoted in "An Interview at the Beverly-Wilshire: Architecture Fads Waning," *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1938.
- ²⁵"Modern 'Sans Epoque'," 34-35.
- ²⁶Barbara Hill, "Streamlining the Past," *Country Life and the Sportsman* 73 (November 1937): 76.
- ²⁷*ibid.*
- ²⁸Robsjohn-Gibbings, "America Creates," *House and Garden* (April 1941), 31.
- ²⁹Hill, "Streamlining the Past," 102.
- ³⁰*Ibid.*, 104.
- ³¹The full correspondence between Robsjohn-Gibbings and Alfred and Blanche Knopf can be found in the Alfred A. and Blanche Knopf Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 37, folder 17.
- ³²Postwar domestic advice literature has been the subject of study by Designing Domesticity, a project undertaken by iVAD, an interdisciplinary research group supported by the Design History Society. Designing Domesticity contributes to knowledge and understanding of domesticity from 1945 to the present by analyzing domestic advice literature as part of a broader category of instructional consumer discourse. The project subjects domestic advice literature and related domestic and consumer discourses to close textual and visual analysis. On the projects and the various articles, see http://item.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/tvad/desdomesticity.html
- ³³Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Good Bye Mr. Chippendale* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1944), 40.

- ³⁴Ibid., 67.
- ³⁵Mary Petty (1899–1976) began her career as an illustrator for the *New Yorker* magazine and illustrated all Robsjohn-Gibblings's publications.
- ³⁶*The Nation* (May 13, 1944): 574.
- ³⁷*Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale*, 89.
- ³⁸*Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale*, 44.
- ³⁹Robsjohn-Gibblings, "Rooms Designed about Art Works," *The New York Times*, July 22, 1948.
- ⁴⁰Robsjohn-Gibblings quoted in Heard, "The Showmanship of Simplicity," 157.
- ⁴¹Kenneth Reid, "Perspectives: from Oscar Wilde to Buffalo Bill: T. H. Robsjohn-Gibblings," *Pencil Points* 25 (July 1944): 63.
- ⁴²Robsjohn-Gibblings, "How to Live Well But Inexpensively," *House Beautiful* 94 (June 1952): 123–125.
- ⁴³"At Home Anywhere," *House and Garden* 99 (June 1957): 100.
- ⁴⁴Robsjohn-Gibblings quoted in "Art," *Time* (September 7, 1942): 100.
- ⁴⁵Robsjohn-Gibblings's furniture was on display in such exhibitions as "Decoration 1952" at New York's Waldorf Astoria Hotel and in the 1954 "Good Design," sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art and shown at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago that year.
- ⁴⁶Long, *Paul T. Frankl*, 171.
- ⁴⁷Robsjohn-Gibblings, "America Creates," *House and Garden* (April 1941): 91.
- ⁴⁸Robsjohn-Gibblings, "American Idiom," *The New York Times*, September 24, 1950.
- ⁴⁹As he noted in some of the trade furniture catalogues of Widdicomb Furniture Company, published throughout the 1950s.
- ⁵⁰"Robsjohn-Gibblings," *Interior Design and Decoration* 32 (May 1961): 127.
- ⁵¹Pevsner, *Pioneers*, 24.
- ⁵²Robsjohn-Gibblings, *Homes of the Brave*, 8.
- ⁵³Ibid., 11.
- ⁵⁴See, for example, Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (London: Praeger, 1960). On Banham's and Pevsner's shared stand on historicism, see Nigel Whiteley, *Historian of the Immediate Future: Reyner Banham* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2002).
- ⁵⁵Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).
- ⁵⁶"I Don't Like a Dog That Wags Its Tails," *Harper's Bazaar* (February 1938): 136.
- ⁵⁷See n. 1 above.
- ⁵⁸Robsjohn-Gibblings and Pullin, *Furniture of Classical Greece*, 5.
- ⁵⁹"Hotel Atlantis: T.H. Robsjohn-Gibblings Updates Greek Tradition on the Island of Santorini," *Interior Design & Decoration* 43 (March 1972): 98–101; "Shop in Athens," *Interior Design & Decoration* 37 (April 1966): 212–213; "A Lost Greek Look Retrieved," *Vogue* 141 (February 15, 1963): 57–60.
- ⁶⁰Robsjohn-Gibblings quoted in "A Lost Greek Look Retrieved," 121.
- ⁶¹Carlton W. Pullin quoted in "Hotel Atlantis," 98.
- ⁶²Robsjohn-Gibblings quoted in "Hello, Mr. Robsjohn-Gibblings," 157.
- ⁶³Robsjohn-Gibblings quoted in "The Elsie de Wolfe Award Winners," *Interiors* 121 (March 1962): 10, 201, 206, 213. The quote is taken from Robsjohn-Gibblings's acceptance speech as a recipient of the Elsie De Wolfe Award. The article offers full transcriptions of the speeches given by him and fellow recipients Edward Wormely and Mary Hamman, the editor of the "Modern Living" column in *Life* magazine.