

T. H. ROBSJOHN-GIBBINGS

With one eye on ancient Greece and the other on the contemporary American home, this designer crafted classics for a new age

BY TIM McKEOUGH



T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, c. 1947, with chairs of his own design.



Side tables, 1937.

and proportions. “He’s kind of an odd figure, and seemingly goes back and forth, very vocally, between classicism and modernism,” says James Buresh, who is writing the first comprehensive book on the designer’s career, due out from Acantus Press next year. Of course, “this was never conflicting to him,” Buresh adds.

In the early 1930s, Robsjohn-Gibbings discovered ancient Greek furniture at the British Museum and was moved to sketch the details. “On Greek vases I saw furniture that was young, untouched by time,” he recalled in his 1963 book, *Furniture of Classical Greece*. “Vitality, surging through the human figures on the vases, surged through this furniture.” Inspired by his discovery, and with the objective of establishing his own timeless look, Robsjohn-Gibbings opened his first showroom in New York in 1936. The sparsely furnished, uncluttered space had plaster walls rubbed with white wax and a copy of a mosaic floor from Olynthus, Greece. It showcased a small collection of furniture the designer had created from his museum sketches; these pieces, and others from the same time, were given the label *Sans Époque*—literally, without period. From the beginning, he offered his version of a *klismos*—a classic Greek chair with dramatically curved legs and backrest—which would become a signature piece that he revisited time and again over the following three decades.

“One of his objectives was to pare it down, and not get too fussy,” says Paul Donzella, a New York dealer who has collected and exhibited Robsjohn-Gibbings’s work since the 1990s. “The idea was to take the things >

Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings never had a problem expressing what was on his mind. “American houses have become the rubbish dumps of Europe, and the maudlin, morbid preoccupation with the decaying refuse of the past, a part of American thinking,” he wrote about our country’s passion for European antiques in his 1944 book, *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale*. “Today we stand confronted with the piled-up debris resulting from this folly and madness.”

A champion for the development of a uniquely American strain of design, he was also a man full of surprises. Although he made his name as an interior designer in New York, he was born in England and originally studied architecture. He attacked revered decorators such as Elsie de Wolfe and Dorothy Draper, and modernists such as Le Corbusier. And though he railed against European antiques, he had a lifelong passion for ancient Greek design, creating contemporary furniture with classical silhouettes



A 1950s tripod floor lamp still in production.



A living room designed by Robsjohn-Gibbings, c. 1949.

that have lasted throughout time, and reinterpret them in a way that makes sense for contemporary life.”

It didn't take long for Robsjohn-Gibbings to become one of the country's top interior designers, attracting a string of enviable commissions. “He had amazing taste, was always well dressed, and was in all the right social circles,” says design historian Daniella Ohad Smith. His most high-profile job was Casa Encantada, socialite Hilda Boldt Weber's 43-room estate in Bel Air, California, for which he designed more than 200 pieces of furniture, including table bases depicting griffins and sphinxes.

However, the social and economic shifts of the time altered his career path. After the outbreak of World War II, he closed his Madison Avenue showroom, began writing books and magazine articles about design for the general public, and changed his focus from top-tier custom interiors to furniture for mass production. He designed everything from lamps for George Hansen to television cabinets for RCA, but his most notable partnership was with Michigan's Widdicomb Furniture Company, for which he spent 10 years creating a range of clean-lined sofas, chairs, tables, beds, and cabinets. Today, one of the most sought-after pieces from that period is the Mesa table, an enormous biomorphic cocktail table with boldly undulating curves that has more in common with the sculptures of Isamu Noguchi than ancient Greek artifacts.



A 1940s torchère.



A dining room at Casa Encantada, 1939.

In 1961, he shifted focus again. Returning to his passion for ancient forms, he collaborated with the Greek furniture manufacturer Saridis to create a collection of reproduction furniture based on Greek designs from about 600 to 400 B.C. (the pieces are still in production today). Robsjohn-Gibbings was so in love with the culture of Greece that he decided to relocate to Athens, where he took on more top-level interior design commissions, including private homes and public projects such as the Hotel Atlantis on Santorini, before his death in 1976.

For today's collector, “it's important to understand the different tiers” of furniture that Robsjohn-Gibbings created, says auctioneer Richard Wright, who has watched the designer's stock rise over the past decade. “There's his really over-the-top custom work, most famously for Casa Encantada, which is a tour de force of craftsmanship,” he says. “On the other end, you have his furniture for Widdicomb, which was produced in quantity.” Even though Wright sold a console from Casa Encantada for \$96,000 in 2006, it's still possible to find many of the Widdicomb pieces for a few thousand dollars each.

Just don't get so carried away with collecting the past that you forget to consider what's new—Robsjohn-Gibbings wouldn't approve. “Wouldn't you enjoy the feeling that you are at one with the contemporary life,” he wrote, “that your house is tuned in to this moment in time?” ■



A console with griffin motif at Casa Encantada, 1939.



Saridis's reissue of a c. 1930 table.

WHERE TO FIND IT

Most of Robsjohn-Gibbings's pieces for manufacturers like Widdicomb and Saridis are labeled. A few of his rarer custom creations are unsigned, making the expertise of dealers important.

- 1stdibs.com
- Donzella 20th Century Gallery, New York City, 212-965-8919; donzella.com
- Dual, New York City, 917-749-6423; dualmodern.com
- Eric Appel, New York City, 212-605-9960; ericappel.com
- Wright, Chicago, 312-563-0020; wright20.com

A chair from the 1950s.

