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# A Moderne Masterpiece Revived

PRODUCER JOE ROTH REFRESHES  
CEDRIC GIBBONS'S L.A. HOME



Michael Smith set out to return the Los Angeles house of director and producer Joe Roth and his wife, Irene, "to its most glamorous era," he says. Begun in 1929, it was designed by legendary art director Cedric Gibbons and architect Douglas Honnold for Gibbons and his wife, movie star Dolores Del Rio. ABOVE: A stepped door surround at the front entrance. LEFT: For the rear façade, Gibbons and Honnold were influenced by the International Style.

Interior Design by Michael Smith  
Text by Patricia Leigh Brown  
Photography by Scott Frances



Imagining worlds and concocting them are the special gifts of the Hollywood art director. In the honeyed lore of Tinseltown, perhaps none cast as deep a shadow as Cedric Gibbons, the debonair MGM art director who is widely considered to have been the most influential production designer in the history of American film.

It was Gibbons, parading around town in a Duesenberg and a gray homburg, who brought the decadent visual vocabulary of Art Déco—a look associated with blondes, exotic travel, endless cocktail parties and limitless money—to the American cinema. The son of an architect, Gibbons bestowed Haute Zigzag on much of Hollywood, from Busby Berkeley musicals to the design of the Oscar, the planet's most coveted statuette. Along the way, he profoundly influenced American taste, inspiring untold legions to forsake their ruffled curtains in favor of sleek venetian blinds. Not surprisingly, perhaps, one of the art director's most riveting productions was his own residence (see *Architectural Digest*, April 1992), a streamlined love nest in the Santa Monica Mountains that he designed, with architect Douglas Honnold, and completed in 1930 for himself and his new bride, Dolores Del Rio, the Mexican-born silent-film star and one of the town's most exotic beauties.

"Cedric Gibbons was one of the original geniuses of the movie business," observes the producer and director Joe Roth, the former chief of 20th Century Fox and Walt Disney Studios, who snapped up the residence several years ago after communing with Gibbons *Moderne* for years on the Sony—once the MGM—lot. "You can just feel Gibbons everywhere you go in the house."

Tucked into a cul-de-sac in a terraced canyon with sweeping views of the Pacific, it cap-



ABOVE: A painting by James Brooks hangs above the fireplace in the small first-floor living room. Next to it is the 1986 work *Untitled (Monji)* by Andy Warhol of a French bulldog. Roth (top), who counts among his credits as a producer the films *While You Were Sleeping* and *Mona Lisa Smile*, has two French bulldogs of his own—Charlotte and George.



When Roth found the house, it was in good condition but still "in need of a restoration," recalls Smith. He retained the banquettes and built-in cabinetry in the second-floor living room, and throughout, to preserve the Déco spirit and chose furnishings from the period, including a Donald Deskey table. Joining it are a pair of chairs, one an original Paul Frankl design and the other made for the project.



In the second-floor living room, "we created a variety of textures and subtle colors to make a very large space feel glamorous and warm," Smith explains. To enhance its intimacy, the designer divided the room into separate areas for dining and television watching. He commissioned two Nancy Lorenz screens to flank the fireplace.







ABOVE: George sits in the kitchen. The previous owners installed new cabinets and stainless-steel and marble countertops, but it's Smith's additions of a Déco wall clock and Déco-inspired barstools that "make the room feel very cohesive" with the rest of the house, he notes.





tures the essence of Hollywood glamour, before safe rooms and hidden cameras. Gibbons is believed to have been the only Hollywood designer to have attended the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris, and the residence, arranged unconventionally with the main living room on the second floor, reflects then-avant-garde notions of architecture and design.

Gibbons pioneered the Big White Set, in which gleaming white interiors, thanks to the advent of incandescent lighting, dominated film for the first time. In a sense, his house

was the ultimate white set: camera-ready for *Take One*, in which a sultry Del Rio, whose given name was Lolita Dolores Martinez Asunsolo Lopez Negrette, slowly descends the drop-dead brushed-steel staircase, dramatically backlit by a wall of glass. (Cut to a Saturday afternoon in the 1930s, in which the young Errol Flynn is discovered, so the tale goes, while practicing archery on the Gibbons lawn.)

"It's such a cinematic residence," says designer Michael Smith, who has worked with Roth on a dozen projects over the years.

In the press release for *Our*

*Dancing Daughters* (1928), starring Joan Crawford—not to be confused with its follow-ups, *Our Modern Maidens* and *Our Blushing Brides*—MGM heralded Gibbons's "modernistic" effects, including "weird beds" devoid of conventional legs. He shrewdly realized that Moderne interiors, with their high-contrast geometric solids and voids and elaborate stepped recesses, were custom-made for movies in black and white.

"The house makes me think of German Expressionist films that are all angles, with isolated lighting, like *M*, with Peter Lorre," says Roth, who shares the residence with his wife,

**OPPOSITE:** Photographs by André Kertész, left, and Horst are in the study, along with a Jacques Adnet table. **ABOVE:** Gibbons and Hornbold incorporated lighting into the dining room's stepped ceiling. Smith anchored the room with an English Déco carpet from Keshishian.

Irene. “I love the lighting, the angles, the sparseness of the house—the high drama. It feels a little melodramatic.”

Over the years, the place had been stripped down. Although the built-in furniture and lighting remained intact, “the house didn’t feel rich in the way that it should,” Smith explains. “It needed more evocative materials, to return to being a little bit more of a movie star.”

Smith preserved the original Moderne details, such as all-black fixtures with metal floor pedals in the bemirrored movie-goddess bath. “Gibbons had clearly seen the best and most advanced of everything,” observes Smith. “He combined iconic style with highly advanced machine-for-living technical details.”

The residence is “strangely upside-down” in plan, Smith points out, with three bedrooms. Visitors enter a smallish living room, then proceed up the Moderne staircase to a massive living room with high ceilings and large windows overlooking the swimming pool, tennis court and terraced gardens. “You don’t expect it,” he remarks. “It’s a very effective architectural device.” It’s rife with other touchstones of the era—especially the dramatic flight of stairs and the bold embrace of built-in furniture. A preponderance of mirrors was also, of course, a requisite design element when dealing with a star of Dolores Del Rio’s wattage. “Moderne in the movies predated life

*continued on page 240*



ABOVE: Enoc Perez’s 2005 oil *Normandie* hangs in the master bedroom, near a 1930 Adnet torchère. Silk wallcovering from Donghia. BELOW: From a second-floor balcony, the pool-house, with detailing similar to that of the main house and containing the gym and spa, can be seen. OPPOSITE: The Los Angeles-based firm Inner Gardens was responsible for the renovation of the house’s landscaping.

“Every once in a while I’ll be watching a movie, and I’ll look closely and think, Wait a minute, that’s my house.”





## MODERNE MASTERPIECE

*continued from page 182*

by about 15 years," notes Smith. "Those glamorous New York penthouses didn't exist yet. Gibbons and his movies created the taste for it."

Smith's delicate mission was to infuse the residence with lost luxury while at the same time not parodying the past. The designer subtly introduced lush materials like mohair mixed with silk on the sofas and Chinese silk on the walls, also commissioning paintings in mother-of-pearl and silver leaf to rekindle the house's original glittering aura. Designer and client scoured auctions, purchasing key pieces by Paul Frankl, Donald Deskey and others and Daum glass from the '30s. "It needed furniture that had the same voice as the house," Smith explains.

Befitting its origins, the house comes with riveting backstories. "Legend has it that there was a trapdoor from the master bedroom closet that led to the closet in the downstairs bedroom," Roth says. "The story goes that Gibbons slept downstairs, Del Rio slept upstairs, and that he would climb the ladder." (The two divorced in 1941, and Del Rio famously went on to have an affair with Orson Welles, among others. Marlene Dietrich called her "the most beautiful woman in Hollywood.")

Having nurtured the careers of Julia Roberts, Bruce Willis and other stars, Roth is a bit of a legend himself. His affinity for the piece of Hollywood history in which he resides runs deep. "Every once in a while I'll be watching a movie, like *To*

**"I love the lighting, the angles, the spareness of the house—the high drama."**

*Live and Die in L.A.*, and I'll look closely and think, 'Wait a minute, that's my house,'" he says. "I'm not a huge believer in ghosts," he adds. "But you can definitely be transported back."

At night, Roth enjoys soaking in the outdoor spa and gazing at the residence, luxuriating in Gibbons's cinematic eye. "What you see is the rectangular outline of the house offset by palm trees and lit by the moon," Roth says. "You don't have to be a genius to figure out that it's a nice shot. It's kind of like living in a movie." □

## TORTUGA BAY

*continued from page 199*

vard. "Frank and Ted were selling two things," says Jake Kheel, "natural resources and human resources—friendly Dominican smiles."

"Jake makes sure we practice what we preach," says Ted Kheel, and de la Renta has designed furniture—even patio and beach lounge chairs—that not only can be manufactured in the Dominican Republic but can also be made from local woods and fabrics. Beds are constructed of wicker, for example, and chairs of sea grass. "The materials are very simple and

**"We wanted a small jewel of a hotel. We wanted something that would be comfortable, that people would come back to."**

fresh," says de la Renta. On the walls he has placed pictures of tropical flowers and plants. At Tortuga Bay, nature is inside as well as out.

The designer has a house nearby, furnished with the same simple elegance, and when he is in residence, he keeps a close watch on Tortuga Bay. "The pace is slower here, so I wanted to give each villa the feel of a private home," he says. Adds Vincenzo Calcerano, the hotel's much-traveled, multilingual manager, "He's involved in the day-to-day, and he notices everything. He doesn't like anything moved. 'You moved that banquette,' he will say. Or, 'Why isn't a picture there?'" It soon is.

Today 747s stretch in a long row at the Punta Cana airport, one of the busiest in the Caribbean, and admirers congratulate Ted Kheel on his remarkable vision. "I didn't have any vision," he responds. "If somebody had predicted our success, I would have said, 'You're dreaming. It would be wonderful, but it's not going to happen.'" Peter Minuit probably would have said the same thing about Manhattan. □

### Tortuga Bay

PuntaCana Resort & Club  
809-959-2262  
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## A TROPICAL OUTLOOK

*continued from page 237*

they travel regularly to Indonesia to have furnishings made by local craftspeople.

The house's generous proportions posed no dilemma for the designers. "People get a little afraid of those kinds of gestures, but to Cassandra's credit, when she was shopping, she knew she was going to want big things," says Durkin. Among them was a slab of antique ironwood that now serves as a tabletop in the living room. He balanced it with a Chinese elmwood cabinet and low tables he and Elich had made of reclaimed teak. Says Elich, "Not only is it beautiful wood, there's a spirituality around something with a history."

They also designed beds based on Balinese pavilion posts and beams. "In the master bedroom, we floated the bed in the middle of the room," Durkin says. "The ceiling elements there are quite robust, so anything less robust underneath just wouldn't feel up to the architecture."

All the spaces are connected through materials and palette. Recalls Durkin, "Cassandra had found a very beautiful, very old Kalimantan mat done in black and

**"The hallmark of our projects is the use of natural materials," says Shay Zak.**

golden-color straw, and she asked, 'Can we use this?' And I said, 'Why don't we take the designs and blow them up onto the carpets?' The rooms have a very subtle geometric design running through them. They're done in silk and wool, so they're very comfortable on the feet."

And rather than purchase batiks in Indonesia, the designers opted for cotton fabrics custom-printed in India. "We used them from room to room, superimposing these light batik-style fabrics on more intensely colored upholstery fabrics," Durkin notes.

Cassandra Hazen and her husband have plenty of reasons to return to their Hawaiian home: Three years ago she bought 30 acres of coffee plants and started the Brazen Hazen coffee company.

"As soon as I come into the house, the combination of hearing the ocean and the breeze through the trees puts me instantly into a Zen mode," she says. "Being here is like meditation—it's very peaceful." □