

# Classical Allusions

Elegance and simplicity, inspired by ancient Greek designs, were the hallmarks of T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, now himself the subject of a revival. By Jeff Book

**D**esigner Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings was a man of disparate—even contradictory—parts: a shopkeeper's son who became a darling of the international beau monde; an Englishman who championed the cause of American design independence; a rarefied snob whose furniture scored with the middle-class masses; a rabid foe of retro styles who led his own Greek Revival; a talented, popular writer in a trade better known for visual literacy. In his life as in his designs, Gibbings resolved these elements into a unified, graceful whole, and left a legacy that is the subject of renewed interest today.

The Gibbings revival was sparked in part by New York decorator Michael Formica, who began selling reproductions of the designer's furniture in 1996. Published accounts state that Gibbings was born in London in 1905 and earned a degree in architecture at the University of London, but despite extensive research Formica was unable to turn up birth or matriculation records. "Gibbings was completely self-invented," he insists. "He was very modern in that way—he made himself who and what he wanted to be." Author Shana Alexander, whose mother, Cecelia Ager, was one of the designer's dearest friends, remembers him as "tall and handsome, very fair—you had the sense he was made of alabaster or some other pale substance. He was obviously knowledgeable and had superb taste. And he probably was largely self-invented—all the best people are."

The story goes that Gibbings—Gibby to his friends—discovered his vocation early on, while designing passenger-ship interiors for a naval architect. He soon went to work for Charles of London: Charles Duveen, who sold

Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings' klismos chair was born of a visit by the designer to the British Museum, where he was awed by the "slow seeping curves" of a bronze miniature chair on the base of a Greek candelabrum. A reproduction (right) is available from Gretchen Bellinger. Above right: a 1945 portrait of the artist.



antiques to the moneyed clientele that bought art from his brother, Lord Duveen. In 1929 he transferred to the firm's New York showroom, returning in 1933 to England, where he was hired

by a posh decorator to design fashionable rooms in what he later referred to as "an indigestible mixture of Queen Anne, Georgian, and Spanish styles."

While wandering through the British Museum one day Gibbings had an epiphany triggered by a bronze miniature chair on the base of a Greek candelabrum.

It was a Greek chair called





a klismos, which he described as “perhaps the most beautiful chair extant . . . rising from the ground in slow seeping curves culminating in a deep elliptical backrest, [possessing] the power to endow the sitter with nobility.”

“Looking at the painted Greek vases with new eyes,” he wrote, “I saw chairs, couches, stools, chests, and tables. It is difficult to describe my excitement.” These, the designer realized, were the archetypes of



Western furniture, perfected over centuries by the craftsmen of ancient Greece. Subsequently, Gibbings examined Greek artifacts in museums across Europe, capturing the designs in scores of drawings.

In 1936 he moved back to New York, in-

tending to design contemporary furniture and interiors based on Greek models. He opened a Madison Avenue showroom that was by all accounts an extraordinary space. Bronze-clad doors and waxed white walls, casts of classical Hellenic art and a mosaic floor copied from one in an ancient Greek villa, formed a superb setting for both his reproductions of classical Greek furniture and his more modern designs. With its blend of classical and contemporary pieces, the showroom was the seedbed for the remainder of his career. It closed when the war intervened, but by then Gibbings had begun designing interiors (and frequently all the furniture) for wealthy clients such as Elizabeth Arden, Doris Duke, Thelma Chrysler Foy, and Walter Annenberg. “The rich,” he declared, “are always with us, so we should learn to enjoy them.”

Gibbings’ version of “less is more” was

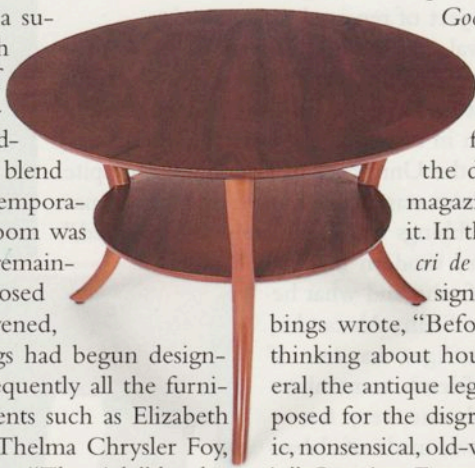
summed up by one writer as “the opulence of understatement.” His elegantly pared-down interiors banished clutter, emphasizing the beauty and presence of custom furnishings that combined clean lines with sumptuous finishes and fabrics. (“I can spend more money in five minutes than any living decorator,” he once boasted.) He loved the elemental, tactile appeal of raw silk, leather, and wood—not for him the tubular-chrome rigor of the International Style. The furniture characteristically displays classical proportions and motifs; it’s been described, simplistically, as “stripped-down Empire.” In some of his more ornate custom designs, Gibbings resorted to winged griffins, lyres, and acanthus leaves, but generally he preferred simpler echoes of antiquity, such as sleek scimitar legs (as in the klismos chair) and arched or columnar table bases.

The acidulous Englishman could have settled for success as a society decorator, but he had bigger fish to fry. His experience in the antiques trade bore tart fruit in

*Goodbye, Mr. Chippendale* (1944), in which he

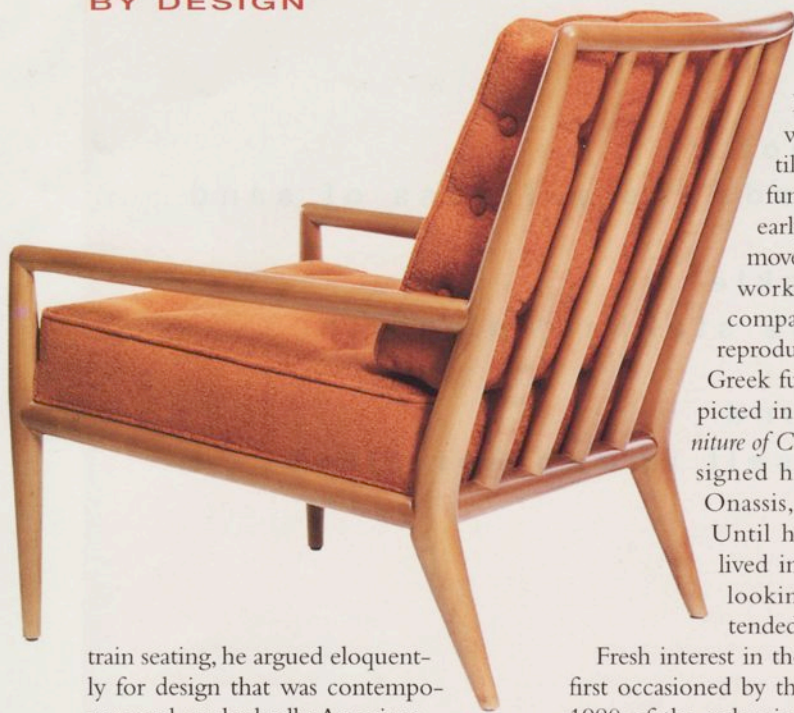
railed wittily against the recycling of old furniture and styles and the dealers, designers, and magazines who perpetuated it. In this best-selling book, a *cri de coeur* for a better-designed postwar world, Gib-

bings wrote, “Before any contemporary thinking about houses can become general, the antique legerdemain must be exposed for the disgraceful, anti-democratic, nonsensical, old-world hangover it really is.” Quoting Emerson (“Insist on yourself; never imitate”) and citing such native exemplars as Shaker furniture, Frank Lloyd Wright, and 19th-century curved-plywood



The interior of the 1938 Bel-Air mansion of Hilda Boldt Weber, designed by James E. Dolena, was an early Gibbings commission. His klismos-style chairs adorned the dining room (above) and recreation room (top). Gibbings’ X-based coffee table (right), inspired by ancient campaign beds, has been reproduced by Michael Formica for Dennis Miller Associates. His two-tier round table with curved legs (center), available from Formica/Miller and the Widdicomb Furniture Company, exemplifies his concept of simplicity.





train seating, he argued eloquently for design that was contemporary and unabashedly American.

Gibbings reserved some of his harshest words for the U.S. furniture industry, calling it "rotten to the very core [from] decades of reproducing the antique furniture of Europe and Colonial America. . . . Not a single piece of furniture has come out of this hotbed of vulgarity, sterility and ignorance that would indicate that its so-called designers have seen anything in the contemporary architecture of America as an inspiration for new and fresh furniture." Taking up the gauntlet, in 1946 the Widdicomb Furniture Company asked him to create a collection. Over the next 12 years he designed over 200 pieces for the Grand Rapids company. Like Edward Wormley's designs for Dunbar Furniture, Gibbings' Widdicomb line translated modernism into well-made furnishings the middle class found appealing and affordable. The mostly blond-wood pieces were simple, unembellished, and comfortable, marked by what *House & Garden* called "structural harmony." Their stylishness was enhanced by the designer's reputation as an arbiter of taste.

Gibbings continued to design for well-heeled clients, from private homes to up-market stores such as Neiman Marcus and Lilly Daché. He contributed to various magazines and penned *Mona Lisa's Mustache*, a dissection of modern art, and *Homes of the Brave*, another style critique. Recalling his trademark double-breasted suits and cigarette holder, Alexander says, "Gibby dressed beautifully and lived beautifully, in

a wonderful house on East 72nd Street. He was an adorable punctilious man, enormous fun to be around." In the early 1960s the designer moved to Athens, where he worked with the Saridis company to create faithful reproductions of the ancient Greek furniture he loved (depicted in his 1963 book, *Furniture of Classical Greece*) and designed houses for Niarchos, Onassis, and other tycoons. Until his death in 1976 he lived in an apartment overlooking the Acropolis, attended by the Attic muse.

Fresh interest in the designer's work was first occasioned by the sale at Sotheby's in 1980 of the voluminous contents of Casa Encantada, the fabled Bel-Air mansion he designed in the late '30s for L.A. socialite Hilda Weber (kept intact by its next owner, Conrad Hilton). "Prices for his custom designs have risen fivefold since then," says Barbara Deisroth, Sotheby's senior vice president and head of its 20th-Century Decorative Arts department, who owns a couple of Gibbings chairs. "It's great design, very chic." (Among other buyers of vintage Gibbings are Karl Lagerfeld,



"Gibby," as the designer was known to his friends, believed that "simplicity in a house means rational thought." And what could be more simple yet sophisticated than his Gibby chair (top), a classic spindle-backed lounge, and the X-profile magazine table (above)? Both signature pieces are available from Formica/Miller and the Widdicomb Company.

## Getting Gibbings

### Vintage Gibbings

**ALAN MOSS** 436 Lafayette St., New York, NY 10003; 212-473-1310; fax 212-387-9493.

**DONZELLA** 17 White St., New York, NY 10013; 212-965-8919; fax 212-965-0727.

**DOWNTOWN** 719 N. La Cienega, Los Angeles, CA 90069; 310-652-7461; fax 310-652-4916.

**L.A. MODERN AUCTIONS** 8057 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90048; 323-904-1950; fax 323-904-1954.

**LIN-WEINBERG GALLERY** 84 Wooster St., New York, NY 10012; 212-219-3022; fax 212-219-1034.

**LOBEL MODERN** 207 W. 18th St., New York, NY 10011; 212-242-9075; fax 212-242-9078.

**LIZ O'BRIEN** 800A Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10021; 212-755-3800; fax 212-755-3810.

**MAL MAISON ANTIQUES** 253 E. 74th St., New York, NY 10021; 212-288-7569; fax 212-577-7652.

**MODERN ONE** 7956 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90048; 323-651-5082; fax 323-651-1130.

### Gibbings Reproductions

**DENNIS MILLER ASSOCIATES** Michael Formica Collection 306 E. 61st St., New York, NY 10021; 212-355-4550; fax 212-355-4495.

**GRETCHEN BELLINGER** Saridis Collection Box 64, 31 Ontario St., Cohoes, NY 12047; 518-235-2828; fax 518-235-4242.

**BEXLEY-HEATH LTD.** Widdicomb Collection At ABC Carpet & Home, New York; Limn, San Francisco; and other dealers. For information: 800-847-9433.

**FULL UPRIGHT POSITION** Box 42528, Portland, OR 97242; 800-431-5134; 503-228-6190; fax 503-228-6213.

**PROPS FOR TODAY, INC.** 330 W. 34th St., New York, NY 10001; 212-244-9600; fax 212-244-1053.

Gucci's Tom Ford, and interior designer Jacques Grange.) The custom pieces now fetch five figures at auction, though the Widdicomb and Saridis pieces that were manufactured during his lifetime are less expensive. Gibbings pieces can be found at many midcentury-modern shops (see Getting Gibbings); New York dealer Paul Don-



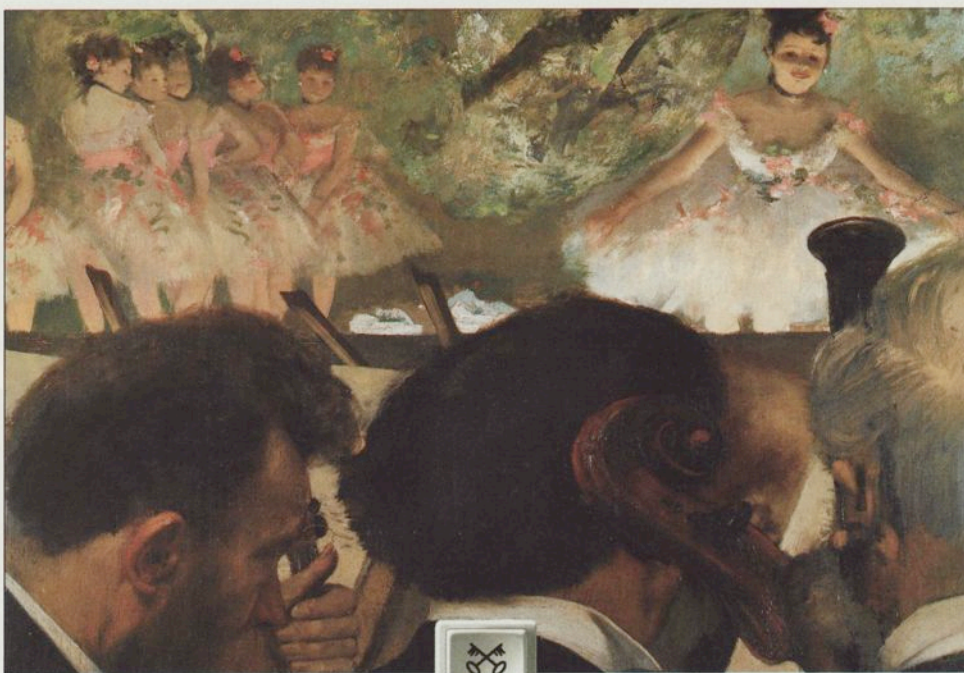
## BY DESIGN

zella and others note that publicity has brought more of them on the market. This, along with the availability of reproductions, has kept prices stable in recent years. "Gibbings' designs are very modern, but at the same time they are steeped in classical design," comments Peter Loughrey of L.A. Modern Auctions. "They have a wryness and an ability to hold people's interest—sometimes more than the flashier design icons."

In addition to the 11 Widdicomb reproductions offered by Michael Formica through Dennis Miller Associates in New York, the revived Widdicomb Company has recently brought 18 Gibbings pieces back into production through its Bexley-Heath division. Both lines focus on the most distinctive pieces and have in common a few signature designs, including the X-profile magazine table, a two-tier round table with curved legs, and the classic spindle-backed lounge chair. Among other noteworthy examples are Formica's X-base coffee table (which is reminiscent of ancient campaign beds) and various tables and chairs with the curved klismos leg, and Bexley-Heath's table with a biomorphic glass top (Gibbings' nod to the Japanese-American sculptor and designer Isamu Noguchi), as well as its long sofa and webbed bench, which evokes leather-strapped Greek seating. Available through Gretchen Bellinger are the 26 Greek pieces the Saridis company has continued to produce.

Gibbings was acutely conscious, as he wrote, that "'modernity' has always been one jump ahead of the design thrift shop." Referring to his popular lounge chair, he noted, "Perhaps I have designed one chair that may live. That is the most a furniture designer can hope for." He would be bemused to see many of his designs cropping up today in fashion ads and film and TV productions. In 1963 Diana Vreeland's *Vogue* published shots of Gibbings' Greek furniture, pronouncing the fifth-century-B.C. designs "completely now." In today's era of unfussy elegance and romantic minimalism the same could be said of much of his work—a fitting tribute to a man who tempered modernity with classicism, simplicity with sophistication. ■


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